



essay

Rushdie: Feeling the Earth Beneath His Feet

by Salahuddin Akbar

British crime-writer has recently gone so far as to suggest that, if Salman Rushdie had looked like cricketer Imran Khan, he could not have written *The Satanic Verses*. Well it means ugly people write ugly books! Once there ran a humour that London was full of Salman's ex-friends. Rushdie's novels feature many characters with startling attributes too. Saleem in *Midnight's Children* with his bat-quality hearing, poor Moor in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, who matures physically at twice normal speed. In his new novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* we meet rock star Ormus Cama, who is apocalyptically bifocal — who can see a subtly different version of history through eye. By coincidence Rushdie is speculated to have freakish eyes! Before a recent operation at 51, Rushdie couldn't help looking down his nose at people — writers fond of metaphor might well have pointed out.

Anyway the authors are not judged by their covers. As a bright boy of 13 when Rushdie first travelled to England from Bombay his head was full of cricketers! But he was shocked back then to discover that the was "foreign." (How could I be foreign? I knew Christopher Robin) 30 years later when the fatwa landed, he was to make that painful discovery all over again: you can speak and write English better than any Englishman, but the rules of Englishness itself are almost impossible to master.

Impossible, self-obsessed, bullying, clever, great company, courteous, rude, chauvinist, brave, aggressive, blinkered, oblivious to other people, intolerable to criticism, witty, ambitions — are a few of the words from the people who know him — present and ex-friends! In a recent interview Rushdie said, after the operation: I had my head bandaged, so I couldn't see. May be now that I can open

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my eyes properly, people won't think I am arrogant. Now the blinkers are off and the giant living storyteller can gaze wide-eyed at a world that increasingly seems more fantastical than anything he could make up. Although Iranian governments, \$2.5 million price tag on his head was removed last September Rushdie seems to remain seriously playful with an uncanny ear — he feel about the fatwa exactly a line from his new book: 'It would be funny, if it were not so unfunny.' But looking back at *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie feels there was a failure of imagination on his part — the failure of an atheist to be respectful enough to wards the idea of a religious offence? He admits that there are all kinds of failures he might be guilty of, but not being respectful is not a failure of the imagination. But he persists — "What would have I done if I could have anticipated the reaction? I hope I would have written the book anyway?"

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notoriety brings, a novel about disorientation — loss of the East. An epic love triangle with rock music at its heart the novel has been hyped for its pop angel, but in truth, it's not the music biz stuff that stays with us, rather than Dickensian shading and cross-hatching of character. There is Sir Darius, the venerable Indian gent who worships England so fiercely that his humiliation at Heathrow immigration brings indignant tears to our eyes: there is Pilo Dhoodwalla, the mighty goat magnate with his recklessly broken English. And more amazingly there is Salman Rushdie himself: The unwary young student on his way to a miserable four years in an English boarding school.

Unlike the portrayal of damaged love in *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie's new novel depicts passionate love in a modern world when we are all cynical. But in doing a contemporary novel about a great passion Music played the key role — most songs are love songs. That connected in his head with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. And allusively the band VTO formed by Ormus and Vina are Indian and Indian American. Ormus, who is a Bombay Parsi, may well be assumed as late Freddie Mercury who was also a Bombay Parsi. Mercury concealed or did not draw attention to the fact that he was Parsi. His decision — may be he wanted to be a mainstream star. People who loved his talented mu-

sic came to know that he was a Parsi only after his death. George Michael also did not want others to know he is Greek. But all his fans already know it. The novel begins in Mexico in 1989, then backpedals to post-Partition Bombay, London in the sixties, and New York in the seventies and eighties. Ormus, who has the echoes of Elvis, hears his dead twin singing future hit songs — commercially distorted, and: The Orphean underworld underlies various levels of meanings — the earth-quake-underworld as cataclysm, lying below your feet is history; when you dig down, you find the past and the meaning of your life what is meant as foundations, where you build the future. On a simple level, it refers to death and destruction, and to the orpheus story about the love that goes beyond death, and the underworld to retrieve what is lost — and the underworld is an accumulation of all those meanings — Rushdie told in a recent interview. Religion does feature in the novel. The characters are concerned with both moral and ontological questions: Where do we come from, and how should we live? But like the character Rai, who goes to religion for the answers, Rushdie says clearly he would rather read Stephen Hawking than the Bible or the Quran to know where we come from, and to know how we should live, the last person he would ask would be a Priest or a Mullah. So for him, that

has always been one of the central subject of literature: the moral and ontological questions — does profess Rushdie that we live in and age of great spiritual confusion — it's the mishmash of Eastern and Western spirituality that captures people's minds, particularly in the West.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet which is believed to be heavily autobiographical — all the characters are him at different moments even begins with an earthquake on 14 February of 1989, the day the ground opened up beneath the author's feet. Like the Quake that kills Viana Apsara (she was already passing into myth, becoming a vessel into which any moron could pour his stupidities). The fatwa left Rushdie with a life that was "like a picture post-card torn up by an angry child." It is the sense of him struggling to put that broken world — that leaves you shaken and broken — back together. The book is about a world in which people are uncertain, in which the ground is not fixed but shifts. This is a world in which John Lennon sings *Satisfaction*.

"Wogs Go Home" — a boy scrawled on Rushdie's study wall when Salman was at Rugby. English fiction may owe that elegant young critic a debt of thanks: Rushdie has been inspired to write back at English ever since. And his bold obvious reaction to them! When his *Shame* lost to Coetzee at 1983 Booker

Prize, he famously "went bananas." Yes lots of people are upset when they don't win Booker. But Rushdie was misconstrued for his reaction after having felt annoyed at Fay Weldon's speech: "We were not necessarily looking for the best novel, but the novel best suited to win the Booker Prize." As a little boy Rushdie won all the prizes there were to win. So he didn't like not winning the Booker was not all true. Writers do grow up! Winning prizes is not what matters to him now. Being passionate about one's own work should be prime concern of a writer. Rushdie's expectations do not look life rocketing skywards: He finds it fantastically satisfying that after 18 years of its publication, people still read *Midnight Children*. And he considers it a prize. Yes courteous indeed.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet — this newly philosophical Rushdie at this world is already hot favourite for the Booker Prize this year. He is definitely far too tricky a character to be summed up in a single unified theory. But he openly has admitted very recently "to construct a coherent self." For many years, the boy who had been torn up from Indian soil found the ground beneath his feet is England too icy to put down his roots. He presently seems to feel tuned up with Simon and Garfunkle's *El Condor Pasa* — I'd rather fell the earth beneath my feet/Yes I would/if I only could/I surely would — when Rushdie says "May be now that I can open my eyes properly, people won't think that I am arrogant and bored, I'm never going to stop being a person who was born and Indian and brought up as a Indian and was completely shaped by it I'm not going to stop being me."

(The writer is an official in the External Publicity Wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

book review

Bourdieu on European Market

by Dina M. Siddiqi

Pierre Bourdieu *Acts of Resistance Against the Tyranny of the Market*. New York: The New Press, 1998. 108 pages

It may come as some surprise that Pierre Bourdieu's latest book has much to say to Bangladeshi intellectuals. The French sociologist is best known for his reflections on practice theory and his dissections of French cultural practices. *Acts of Resistance* follows up on some of these earlier themes, but in an explicitly political vein. Aimed at a general audience, this is a call to arms, a collection of brief essays, interviews and talks "written or spoken as contributions to movements and moments of resistance." Spanning the period from 1992 to 1998, this slim volume takes on the implications of a unified European market that is remaking itself in the image of the United States economy.

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The author's contentions center around the increasing inequality and suffering within France and other European nations generated by IMF style liberalization. It is unusual to hear such critiques of globalization emanating from Europe; after all, the reigning wisdom among leftist critics is that the new global economy has hurt the South and benefited the North. In a timely fashion, Bourdieu reminds us that social inequality and exploitation of disadvantaged groups everywhere is fundamental to the functioning of global neo-liberal policies. A unified financial market does not imply a homogeneous market anywhere.

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The costs of liberalization are borne disproportionately by the lowest strata of workers as so-called "flexible regimes" of labor push more and more workers

into temporary jobs, with low job security, higher stress, and fewer benefits. At the same time, there has been a steady collapse of the European welfare state — the abandonment of its social functions in providing education, health, and other social services, and its regression into a penal state. In this respect, Bourdieu sees the United States as an ominous forerunner: as he notes, the prison budget in California in 1994 was greater than the entire budget of all the state universities together (p. 32).

Bourdieu suggests several courses of action, in addition to calling for a new internationalism, especially new solidarity among trade unions. The first is to

marshal facts about the effects of globalization. To get at the facts, however, one needs also to analyze the production and circulation of neo-liberal discourses, for this vocabulary presents market ideology as a universal message of freedom and liberation. As he states, "economism forbids responsibility and mobilization by cancelling out politics and imposing a whole set of unquestioned ends... (50, emphasis added)." Bourdieu challenges this "neo-liberal fatalism," which has taken on the status of a myth. The neo-liberal world view, he contends, has been naturalized and made self-evident "as a result of a whole labour of symbolic inculcation in which journalists and ordinary people partici-

pate passively, and above all, a certain number of intellectuals participate actively (29)." Journalists and academics collude or collaborate by accepting certain "lexical tricks," for the very language of liberalization hides the costs for those involved: flexibility is a euphemism; for part-time and insecure employment, plans to retrench labor are recast as bold social plans, deregulation stands in for the dismantling of the welfare state. The task of intellectuals, then, is not to provide programmatic alternatives but to interrogate the symbolic labour of inculcation.

Bourdieu is careful to distinguish his position from a defense of nationalism. In fact, he suggests political commenta-

tors take more seriously the connection between the rise of right wing nationalist groups such the Front National in France and the dominance of the IMF. I hasten to add he does not advocate a return to a Soviet style command economy. He calls rather for the unmasking of false universalisms. In his words, "One is still defending reason when one fights those who mask their abuses of power under the appearance of reason to consolidate or justify an arbitrary empire (20)."

Acts of Resistance should give some pause to those concerned with the future of Bangladesh. Here donors, NGOs and the government as well as the media — with a few exceptions — all seem to have taken for granted the merits of free market liberation. It's time that journalists and academics alike reflect critically on "unfettered" liberalization as the exclusive path to a better future.

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poems

Love, What Art Thou?

by Arifa Ghani

Love, what art thou?
A mystery that haunts the minds of men;
A puzzle that entangles the consciousness;
A cipher that none dare solve;
A riddle that cannot be answered.

Love, what art thou?
An impossibility unless two-sided;
A paradise when attained through struggle;
A grossness when extreme;
A grave when unrequited.

Love, what art thou?
That so much be written for thee;
That so much be said of thee;
Yet thy mystery is impenetrable;
And thou remaineth a subject for poets, lovers and lunatics.

20-10-95

If You Love Me

If you love me, give me a life
Free from pain and free from strife,
If you love me, give me dreams
As pure and clear as brooks and streams.



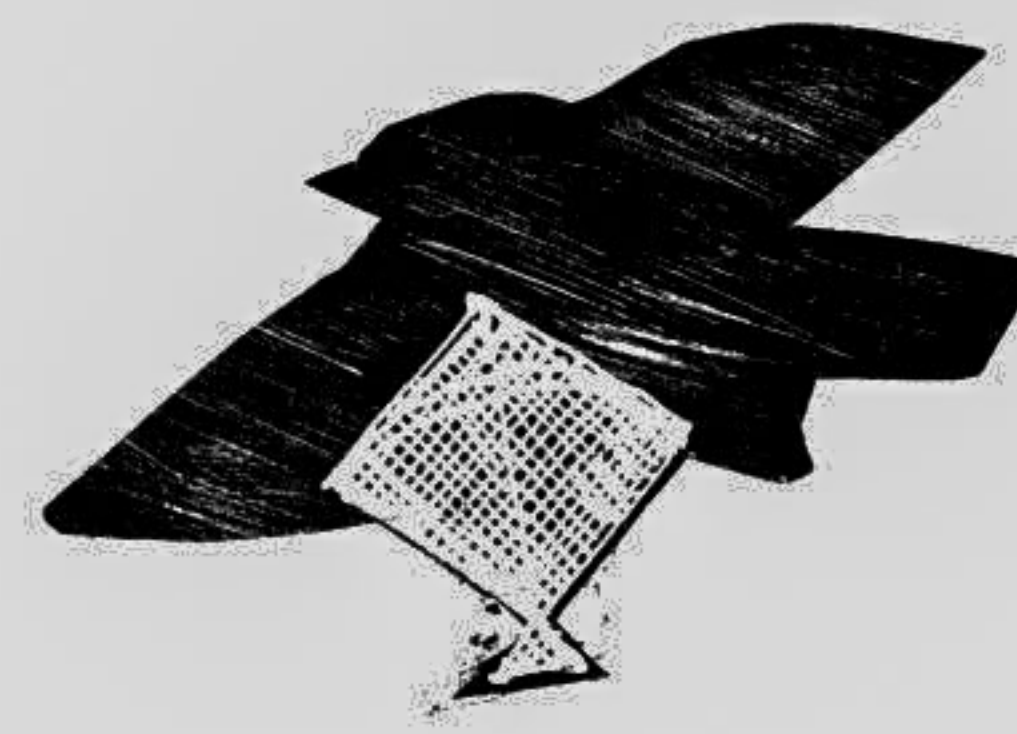
If you love me, give me hope
That with life I may fairly cope.
If you love me, give me peace
That I may know what true bliss is.
If you love me, give me trust
To help me live when at times I must.
If you love me, give me grace
That I can bravely calamities face.
If you love me, give me verse
To free the world of all curse.
If you love me, give me love
That I may the whole world improve.
If you love me as I love you,
Come help me with all I want to do.

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At the Mercy of Existence

by Rashad Ullah

I am a leaf in the forest called World,
falling and swirling
as the winds of Fate
pick me up and move on
if I am not entirely
diminished and gone,
tumbling and twirling
from branch to branch,
some toss me back



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to the sky, and
the bark of Sadness
scratches and hurts,
judgements, decisions
right or wrong,
millions they are,
one leaf lost
in the cold forest
twisting and turning,
Existence is never felt,
nor heard or wanted,
amidst and among
A forest cold and full of many a leaf.

I am the pebble in a beach
rolling near the waves,
never quite within
the right ocean,
following the sands
of Time wherever
they carry, and
nothing beyond
a speck of
misunderstanding
and erroneous
judgement
rolls this pebble
into the wrong sea,
an ocean of
forgotten memories and
unwanted dreams in the pit of Oblivion.

Rashad was 13-year-old when he wrote this poem. He is now 20 attending Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.