

REVIEW

Salman Rushdie's Cacophonous Creativity

John McLeod

Stadtler, Florian, ed. *Salman Rushdie in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. xviii + 387. ISBN 9781316514146. Hb. £88.

It says something about the significance of a writer when a new book of scholarly essays spanning over five decades of their career already appears out of date on the occasion of its publication. Salman Rushdie's fifteenth novel, *Victory City* (2023), appeared in the same year as *Salman Rushdie in Context*, too soon to receive critical attention from the collection's contributors; and as this impressive edited collection went into production, in July 2022 Rushdie suffered the horrendous attack on his life on stage at the Chautauqua Institution, New York. Indeed, few if any writers approaching the age of eighty have remained as busily productive and globally newsworthy as Rushdie. It is a testament both to the quality of his writing and his worldwide renown that he has been regarded as a novelist of international significance since the publication of his landmark second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), when its relatively unknown Bombay-born writer was aged but 34. Rushdie's reputation would undoubtedly have been secured by his remarkable literary output alone. Yet his notoriety beyond literary circles worldwide was grimly guaranteed by the *fatwa* issued in the wake of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) that forced him into hiding in fear of his life, and which played a part over thirty years later in Hadi Matar's attempt on his life that blinded Rushdie in one eye and permanently affected his mobility. The photograph taken before the attack that appears on the cover of *Salman Rushdie in Context*—the relaxed author looking at us through smilingly healthy eyes—soberingly underlines how much has changed since 2022. Rushdie's most recent book, *Knife* (2024), tells a grim tale of his near-death experience, while a new collection of stories, *The Eleventh Hour*, is scheduled to appear in November 2025. Pity the poor editor of a fresh publication of Rushdie scholarship—how on earth to keep up?

Postcolonial critics of my generation grew up with Salman Rushdie. I read *The Satanic Verses* not long after its publication, wrote on Rushdie's early novels as a doctoral student, and have followed his career ever since. For some, Rushdie is the postcolonial artist *par excellence*, chronicler of the ugly fortunes of South Asia's post-independence period, ardent enthusiast

of the hybridizing energies kaboomed by migrants in the melting-pot of the metropolis, ebullient champion of the city as crucible of reinvention and newness—nothing less than a veritable “chronicler of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (1) as Florian Stadler describes him in his useful editor’s introduction, whose novels, I have no doubt, will be read for decades to come. But for others, Rushdie encapsulates a kind of vulgarity of excess: his rhetorical wizardry and breathless hyperbole leave some cold, as does his representation of women; others decry his bourgeois cosmopolitanism and postmodernist self-referentiality, his breezy, sometimes dismissive rendition of the political and experiential particulars of life’s less fortunate as he writes modishly about Bollywood actors, popstars, and photographers. His keen embracing of his post-*fatwa* celebrity, appearing on stage with the rock band U2 or taking a cameo role in the film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), has also done little to endear him especially to Marxist postcolonialists.

Amidst these cross-currents of critical perception, *Salman Rushdie in Context* mounts a primarily positive engagement with Rushdie and his work, featuring scholarly contributions in the main by Rushdie enthusiasts many of whom—Joel Kuortti, Stephen Morton, Jenni Ramone—have been writing expertly on Rushdie for years. Even those critical approaches where one might expect more skeptical or censorious attitudes tend to bend kindly: Treasa De Loughry’s scrupulous reading of three novels in the context of “World-Historical Capitalism” concludes sympathetically when pointing to Rushdie’s “growing and forceful articulation that the political instabilities and social inequities of the present are cyclical, and that we would do well to attend to the echoes of the past” (275). Sir Salman Rushdie, millionaire sage of New York’s glitterati, enabling a critical consciousness of the unevenness of the contemporary world-system—who knew?

The collection’s twenty-seven chapters collectively range across a wide horizon of Rushdie’s creative endeavors up to 2022 and deal with one of five headline contextual areas: “Life,” “Literary and Creative Contexts,” “Historical and Cultural Contexts,” “Critical Theoretical Contexts,” and “Reception, Criticism, and Adaptation.” As such, the book is not arranged chronologically; readers will not find a progressive narrative of Rushdie’s writerly evolution readily to hand. Instead, anyone who works through the essays in sequence is constantly sent back and forth across time-periods, texts, incidents, and themes. There are both disadvantages and advantages to this mode of organization. One problem is the repetition of information:

we are told by four separate contributors that Rushdie's debut novel *Grimus* (1975) is influenced by Farid ud-Din Attar's twelfth-century Persian poem known in English as *The Conference of the Birds* (1177). Another is the muting of a more readily holistic sense of the development of Rushdie's writing, from the era-defining 1980s novels to fantastical fables such as *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) or the Americana of *Fury* (2001), *The Golden House* (2017), and *Quichotte* (2019). On the other hand, in rejecting a more mechanically diachronic approach, *Salman Rushdie in Context* frees the reader to trace connections and synergies between Rushdie's works and across the essays themselves, zig-zagging cheerfully over the tidy borders of time, place, and genre—a characteristically Rushdie-esque endeavor, of course. Indeed, Rushdie's habitually playful, intertextual, often self-referential aesthetic is wittily captured in this collection's design (but also subtly prompts one to wonder if Rushdie's literary vision has changed all that much across the years). For example, Pavan Kumar Malreddy's opening essay, also the first essay in the "Life" section, deals not with Rushdie's biography *per se* but its textualization, as Malreddy articulates the author's life in relation to his life-writing, primarily *Joseph Anton* (2012), and in light of the biographies concocted by others especially in the wake of the *fatwa*. At times the collection's vacillating eclecticism means that new readers of Rushdie may have to work quite hard to get a grip not only on Rushdie's literary milieu but also on the many critical approaches that one might take. But the rewards of this intellectual challenge are several and help make *Salman Rushdie in Context* an introduction-level book which goes beyond the usual remit of introductory materials.

As editor, Stadtler ensures that the expected bases are covered in his assemblage of germane contexts. Individual essays successfully deal with Rushdie in relation to postcolonialism, postmodernism, diasporic identities, history, the city, globalization, secularism, and more besides, and often illuminate their significance by looking closely at a select clutch of texts rather than ranging more generally. Indicatively, Harish Trivedi's fine essay, "Salman Rushdie and Postcolonialism," focuses primarily on the early triumph of *Midnight's Children* while referencing what he calls the other "subcontinental novels" (298) such as *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). This is a wise strategy—encouraged, one presumes, by editorial advice—but at times such selectivity can feel a little like narrowness, given that the contexts invoked are so big (the fact that the essays are usually quite short, around ten pages on average, also plays a part). As these particular contexts have been well-covered in scholarship for

many years, I especially enjoyed those essays which frame Rushdie anew in relation to more recently emerging ones. Robert P. Marzec's "The Anthropocene and Ecological Limits in Rushdie's Works" offers an ingenious exploration of Rushdie's representation of the environment in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Two Years . . .* Stephen Morton's essay on terrorism in Rushdie's work takes us through *The Satanic Verses*, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), and *Joseph Anton* with diamond-sharp intelligence and clear-eyed critical acumen.

I also highly valued those essays which situated Rushdie's writing in relation to other art forms, and not least because Rushdie's enthusiasm for the arts more generally (especially the cinema) is as important to his creativity as is his encyclopedic knowledge of world literature. Stadler contributes a fine essay on Rushdie's cinematic sensibility which ranges across his childhood film-viewing in Bombay, Hollywood cinema, and Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Ana Cristina Mendes straddles cinema and painting in her analysis of visual art and culture in Rushdie's fiction. Meanwhile, the essays which describe Rushdie's particular relations—simultaneously close and displaced—with the cultural specifics of India, South Asia, and faith cultures bring a great deal to the collection, as in Amina Yaqin's essay, "Salman Rushdie and the Urdu Tradition," and Anshuman Mondal's "Salman Rushdie and the Fatwa"—the latter should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand for the first time the so-called *Satanic Verses* affair. For me, the collection's most impressive contribution is Dan O'Gorman's stylish, intellectually vivacious essay concerning Rushdie's sonic sensibility, "Rushdie, Sound, and the Auditory Imagination." In declaring that "Salman Rushdie is a noisy writer" (118), O'Gorman joyfully pursues the significance of music particularly in *The Satanic Verses* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* while reminding us that Rushdie's cacophonous creativity may bring less palatable impacts for those "vulnerable communities" (128) prejudicially represented as tin-eared when confronted with music's permissive, pluralizing, composite catchiness.

O'Gorman's essay, like Mondal's and many others, invites readers to think through the problems and weaknesses of Rushdie's literary achievement even as they value the significance and technical accomplishment of his work. This sustaining of a firm critical edge throughout *Salman Rushdie in Context* makes it much more than scholarly fan-mail, and encourages those researching Rushdie for the first time *not* to be taken in or overwhelmed by his many writerly attributes (his command of form, linguistic dexterity, ludic sensibility, delivery of dialogue, artfulness

with history, and so forth). Consequently, this all makes for a big, bright, busy book; but one which also frustrates from time to time. As many of the high-quality essays it contains could be readily expanded and published in major peer-reviewed international journals, there emerges the sense on occasions that one is reading scholarly materials that have been maddeningly abbreviated in order not to transgress the inevitably shorter word-length required by Cambridge University Press's "Literature in Context" book series.

Nonetheless, readers of Rushdie old and new will be quickly persuaded to pursue the many lines of enquiry which this valuable collection opens up with intellectual generosity and rigor; and for this, its editor and contributors must be congratulated.

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