

Offspring Fictions: Salman Rushdie's Family Novels

Matt Kimmich

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Critics of Salman Rushdie's fictions have struggled to find a legitimate means of dividing his now substantial corpus into approachable categories for analysis. They have also struggled to find a viable means of defining exactly what it is that appears to unite the quartet of novels (*Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*) published by Rushdie between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s. Matt Kimmich, in his study *Offspring Fictions: Salman Rushdie's Family Novels*, proposes an interesting solution to such problems. These four novels, he argues, may be classified together, in partial distinction from Rushdie's other works, as "offspring fictions": fictions in which "the notion of family, as motif, structuring device and metaphor" is central, and in which the core narrative and thematic dynamic of the texts revolves around the relationship between children and parents (7-8). This proposal is persuasive. Rushdie is clearly a purveyor of dynastic fictions, and in each of the novels discussed there is a strong family narrative that centres upon the relationship between a protagonist who is a son (Saleem Sinai, Omar Khayyam, Saladin Chamcha and Moraes Zogoiby) and his various mother and father figures. In each case, moreover, the figure of the son is involved in both actual and imaginative resistance to his parent figures, and so conforms to the model of the rebellious child as described in Kimmich's principal conceptual source, Sigmund Freud's seminal essay "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker" [translated freely by James Strachey as "Family Romances"]. In unravelling these complex relationships, and in giving them a conceptual dimension courtesy of Freud, Edward Said and Gérard Genette, Kimmich performs a valuable service for scholars of Rushdie's fictions; he offers an interpretation of the significance of family in Rushdie's work that does not resort to the easy autobiographical readings that have dominated earlier analysis in this area.

Kimmich's study also reveals the extent to which Rushdie's is a relentlessly analogical body of writing. Family may be at the centre of each novel, as Kimmich contends, but because the family is in fact (to borrow a phrase from the Medievalists) a "microcosmic analogy", it connects with almost everything else in the complex thematic tapestry of the text. Thus the son/father relationship, which Kimmich anatomises exhaustively, becomes for Rushdie paradigmatic of the relationship between individual and state, man and God, migrant and host nation, rebel

and tyrant, colony and coloniser, text and intertext, novelist and influence—all of which are also analogies for each other. In tracing these convoluted architectural patterns in Rushdie's writing, Kimmich effectively demonstrates the extraordinary degree of conceptual coherence that is apparent in these mid-career novels; he also helps the reader to understand how the representation of the domestic sphere in Rushdie's oeuvre intersects with the various other spheres with which he is concerned—personal, national and cosmic.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle Kimmich has to face in this study is the need to persuade his readers that the isolation of only four of Rushdie's novels as "offspring fictions" is viable, and not a matter of mere convenience. Repeatedly in reading this study one experiences doubts. Why, for instance, is *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* not included in the category? It is of course different from the other fictions because it is aimed primarily at children, but it is also a novella about fathers and sons that would benefit enormously from the kind of reading that Kimmich proposes. Likewise, later novels such as *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, despite Kimmich's claim that the shift to the United States offers Rushdie a "clean slate" (14), seem to be deeply invested with precisely the same concerns that preoccupy Rushdie in the fictions that Kimmich investigates. The fact is, of course, that the concerns of Rushdie's novels, in his own memorable conceit, blend into one another like flavours in cooking, making it difficult to discuss his books in terms of definitive analytical categories. Rushdie's work, almost by definition, is defiant of borderlines and absolutes, making the job of the critic who seeks to divide his fictions into discreet units a perilous one. Kimmich's proposal that he has identified a distinct "tetralogy" within Rushdie's writing persuades to some extent, but it is also evident that the walls of this tetralogy are as permeable as all the various "lines drawn across the world" that populate Rushdie's imaginative world.

It is one of Kimmich's contentions in this study that Rushdie criticism worked itself into a conceptual rut in the late 1980s and early 1990s, becoming dominated by either "facile celebration[s] of the subaltern's counterdiscourse" or punitive reprimands of Rushdie for his perceived ideological failings (245). More recently, Kimmich argues, there has been a species of miniature renaissance in the analysis of Rushdie's fiction spearheaded by critics who have either contested the existing arguments or "taken different approaches, reading the works in a new light and in different frameworks" (245). If this is an accurate account of the critical scene in Salman Rushdie studies then Kimmich's own book is indisputably part of this renaissance, since it offers several fresh ways of reading Rushdie's work: it allows us to look in a more concentrated way at Rushdie's representation of the domestic sphere; it demonstrates that postcolonial themes, whilst relevant to an understanding of Rushdie's

work, are not the only, or even the major, framework through which his writing can be interpreted, and it is the first study of Rushdie's fiction to date that is substantially informed by Freudian theory. *Offspring Fictions*, in all these respects, is an innovative and engaging addition to the expanding but not always harmonious family of Rushdie criticism – and if it behaves after the model of Freud's rebellious sons on occasion, then at least it shows that Rushdie criticism is growing up.