

Review of *Midnight's Diaspora: Critical Encounters with Salman Rushdie*
Ed. Daniel Herwitz and Ashutosh Varshney
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When Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini declared a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for his publication of *The Satanic Verses* on February 14 1989, a firestorm of questions arose in both the Islamic world and the secular West concerning the limits of free speech, Islamic law, and the intersections between literature and politics. The *fatwa* elicited frenzied responses from people across the world, and transformed Rushdie into one of the most contentious literary figures of the modern era. Many Muslim communities, Edward Said notes, were disturbed to see Islam "portrayed irreverently . . . by a Moslem who writes both in and for the West" (*The Rushdie File* 176); and in response, Rushdie was asked repeatedly to justify his actions. In *Midnight's Diaspora: Critical Encounters with Salman Rushdie*—a timely collection of essays and interviews published twenty years after Khomeini's edict—a group of scholars and writers, with Rushdie himself conspicuously among them, attempts to grapple with the rights and wrongs of "the Rushdie affair." Rushdie, perhaps predictably, rushes to a defence of *The Satanic Verses*: he writes, in his conclusion to the collection, "I never set out to insult anybody" (139).

Midnight's Diaspora, edited by two professors from the University of Michigan (Daniel Herwitz and Ashutosh Varshney) makes a significant contribution to the existing body of scholarly work on Rushdie. The collection offers a retrospective look at Rushdie's career both as writer and as public intellectual, and is divided into two main parts: interviews and scholarly essays. The interviews address vital issues, ranging from the writer's responsibility and freedom of speech to Rushdie's audiences and his use of language; however, the manner in which the editors divide Rushdie into "The Political Rushdie" and "The Literary Rushdie" seems simplistic. Moreover, it obfuscates the fact acknowledged in the collection that the literary *is* always political. The second part of *Midnight's Diaspora* brings into dialogue diverse scholars and writers who engage with the political and cultural questions raised by Rushdie's work. Insofar as extra-literary aspects of fiction often remain overlooked in strictly literary studies, the collection underscores the importance of literary studies outside English departments. At the same time, however, the collection's interdisciplinary approach renders it rather disjointed, and at times almost too varied.

The title of the collection (*Midnight's Diaspora*) suggests that the volume will deal with post-Independence diasporas, but the contributors

do not engage critically with the concept of diaspora or with the lived experience of diasporic communities. The collection is thus much more useful for Rushdie scholars than for scholars interested in diaspora studies. It offers crucial insights into the social and political contexts from which Rushdie's fictional texts emerge. Ashutosh Varshney, for example, explores the political history of Pakistan, a state that Rushdie famously claimed has been "insufficiently imagined"; Thomas Blom Hansen attempts to explain Rushdie's divergent representations of Bombay in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* by examining the shifting socio-political history of the city; and Shashi Tharoor explores "the womb of [Rushdie's] imagination" (123)—India's diversity—which he understands through the overused and now clichéd metaphor of the Indian *thali*.

Akeel Bilgrami's "Twenty Years of Controversy" is perhaps the most compelling piece in the volume. Defending *The Satanic Verses* using an "internalist" critique, Bilgrami argues that Rushdie's sympathies lie with moderate, non-fundamentalist Muslims who are "against fundamentalist conceptions of Islam" (45). He goes on to suggest that if the liberal Western state looked "for values *within* the Muslim populations" it might realize that "free speech may after all be primary" (49). Bilgrami's insistence on the heterogeneity within the Islamic community usefully contradicts Manichean understandings of the West as progressive and the Islamic world as rigid and archaic. Like Bilgrami, Herwitz also defends Rushdie in his introduction to the collection, but does so in a distinctive way. He argues that "Rushdie is a writer, not a theologian" (2) and that what he has done in *The Satanic Verses* is merely to "sketch the way fictional characters lose homeland and home story" (2). In spite of the collection's stated emphasis on the intersections between literature and politics, Bilgrami and Herwitz paradoxically return to the familiar defence of Rushdie's novel as just a book. Husain Haqqani's piece shifts the focus away from *The Satanic Verses* almost entirely and suggests that the state of Pakistan is responsible for instigating a number of protests against Rushdie, which subsequently led to the Ayatollah's *fatwa*. Haqqani's bold claims are intriguing but largely speculative.

As a whole, *Midnight's Diaspora* reads less as a critical engagement with Rushdie than as a celebratory tribute to his career. Tharoor labels Rushdie "one of the best and most important novelists of our time" (122); Sara Suleri Goodyear's piece is a sympathetic reading of Rushdie's fiction as subversively conflating genre and gender; and Bilgrami, Haqqani, and Herwitz labour to defend Rushdie's publication of *The Satanic Verses*. What is missing from the collection, then, are the voices of those who have argued that Rushdie acted irresponsibly—that he deliberately provoked the Islamic world, or pandered to Western ideas about Islam. Without these voices of dissent, *Midnight's Diaspora* reads as a one-sided analysis. It is Rushdie himself who seems to shape the celebratory tone of the book. Insisting on his own innocence, on the fact that what he did was

“the opposite of ‘offensive’” (139), Rushdie makes certain that he emerges from the collection with his reputation firmly intact.

Works Cited

Appignanesi, Lisa and Sara Maitland, eds. *The Rushdie File*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990.