

Chronicler of turbulent times: Salman Rushdie's THE GOLDEN HOUSE

Salman Rushdie, *The Golden House* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 370 pp., ISBN (hardback) 9781787330153
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The Golden House is Salman Rushdie's thirteenth novel and eighteenth book. The Indian-born, today US-resident writer was aged 70 when he published it, and it is now almost three decades since the global polemic over *The Satanic Verses*, his fourth novel, marked him down as controversial for life. The new novel catapults him into the Trump era and finds him engaging novelistically with a number of the critical issues of our time.

It would be a mistake to see the Rushdie of today as an 'Indian writer': he has been too long out-station. His more recent work is the product of globalisation and cultural hybridation, of a chronicler of our epoch who 'belongs' in no single place. *The Golden House*, while set mostly in New York, reaches back in part to Rushdie's origins, narrating the chequered fortunes of a wealthy, Manhattan-resident migrant family, the Goldens, originating in Bombay/Mumbai (as it happens of Muslim background, though religious issues play almost no role in the novel).

Generically, the new novel is notable in its author's canon for totally eschewing magic realism, the genre of which *Midnight's Children*, his second novel, is considered a textbook exemplar to rival Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. Rushdie's more recent efforts include the fantasy-imbued *The Enchantress of Florence* (2010) and the *One Thousand and One Nights* pastiche *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), both magic realist and neither of them among his most successful creations. I have argued elsewhere¹ that *Shalimar the Clown* from 2005, which uses magic realism only sparingly, may actually be Rushdie's best, or at least best-written novel. In *The Golden House*, it is realism that rules. The novel is narrated in the first person, not by a member of the Golden family but by a neighbour and associate of Belgian origin, named René and aspiring to the status of film director (though other characters get to speak in the first person via the device of embedded monologues).

Meanwhile, the most prominent characteristic of Rushdie's writing in this novel is allusiveness: much as in his rock-era novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1997), whose photographer narrator, Rai, René in some ways resembles, the text is imbued with quotation and allusion from multiple cultural sources, indiscriminately of high-culture, low-culture and hybridated provenance, drawing on literature, visual art, comic books, Indian epics, popular music - including, as I have noted elsewhere², a fair crop of Bob Dylan references - and, above all and with an intensiveness without precedent in the Rushdie canon, cinema. Indeed, there are passages bristling with allusions to the likes of Federico Fellini, François Truffaut or Luis Buñuel that look like nothing if not the monthly programme of the onetime Cambridge Arts Cinema, a venue avowedly oft-frequented by Rushdie in his days as a King's College undergraduate. Among other things, this novel must surely be read as its author's tribute to the cinema, a *summa* of the seventh art - and be it added, not in exclusively Eurocentric or Western-oriented fashion, for among Rushdie/René's cast of directors we also find Japan's Akira Kurosawa and Bengal's Satyajit Ray.

¹ <https://rollason.wordpress.com/2005/12/22/salman-rushdie-shalimar-the-clown-an-everlasting-battle> - blog entry of 22 December 2005

² (<https://rollason.wordpress.com/2018/01/14/bob-dylan-and-salman-rushdie-dylan-allusions-in-rushdies-the-golden-house/> - blog entry of 14 January 2018

The narrative is structured around the lives and deaths of the three adult sons of the protagonist, the fugitive ex-Mumbai businessman known as Nero Golden. Those sons (all given Greco-Roman names which they later distort) are, respectively, Petronius (Petya), diagnosed with high-functioning autism, Apuleius (Indianised, in a Satyajit Ray allusion, as Apu), a fashionable painter, and the youngest, Dionysus, who reduces his name to D. All three Golden scions come to a problematic end, Apu on a visit to India and Petya and D in Manhattan. Apu is eliminated by Mumbai gangsters; Petya falls at the hands of irrational violence in its American guise, victim of a mass shooting by a crazed gunman. It is D's fate, however, that lies closest to a preoccupation at the heart of this novel, namely its author's response to a number of the controversial cultural and ideological issues currently facing Western society.

The issues evoked include extremisms of both right and left. On the right, Rushdie tackles the gun lobby, the 'Gamergate' scandal, and above all, the rise of Donald Trump, thinly disguised as 'the Joker', whose campaign rumbles in the background. René laments apocalyptically: 'after the election the Joker – his hair green and luminous, his skin white as a Klansman's hood, his lips dripping with anonymous blood – now ruled them all' (p. 348). On the left, the novel weighs in on identity politics, including transgender issues and their impact on language, and on the trend towards campus censorship.

D's partner, Riya, works at a (fictional) Museum of Identity, herself as an Indian-Swedish American having no one identity. The narrative charts in detail how D becomes gradually aware of his transgender identity and eventually commits suicide under multiple pressures, as well as Riya's ambiguous reaction to his death and partial forswearing of identity politics as she resigns from her job. The portrayal will not necessarily please the transgender community, but this is a novel, not a tract, and there can be no doubt of Rushdie's openness to engaging with the issue. Rushdie also wrestles – and directly so, as writer – with the controversial question of transgender pronouns. An associate challenges D: 'You should think about pronouns ... If you're giving up *he*, who steps in? You could choose *they*' (p. 111). Rushdie/René chooses the strategy of referring to D in his earlier stages of transition as parenthetically masculine ([he], [his]) and at a more advanced stage as italicised female (*she*, *her*); nowhere is resort had to invented pronouns like *ze*, though their existence is mentioned. Thus we have sentences like: 'I still used the male pronouns when I thought about [him], though that felt increasingly wrong, and so as a gesture towards [his] ambiguity I put them in square brackets' (p. 246). The chosen strategy may work on the page, but would not be reproducible should the novel be read from live.

Rushdie said in 2015 that 'we are living in the darkest time I have ever known'³, specifically with censorship in his sights. His new novel appears at a time characterised, notably but not only in the US and the UK, by increasing rejection in 'liberal' circles, especially academic, of that very free speech of which Rushdie has been an icon for three decades, and also by the practice of 'sensitivity checking' (i.e. novelists submitting their manuscripts for ideological approval by presumed representatives of minority groups), a trend which we may presume he has not followed. *The Golden House* engages with the campus censorship issue only once, but in an eloquent paragraph whose examples could all or nearly all be shown by research to refer to real cases.

The paragraph revolves around René's parents (who would both be killed in a car crash), old-school academics who find themselves shocked at the new student generation's rejection of free speech. The examples include cancelling a performance of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* because it might offend transgender students, banning of Pocahontas costumes at Hallowe'en, no-platforming of apostate Muslims because 'their views were offensive to non-apostate Muslims', and 'their colleague on TV with a twenty-year old female student screaming abuse into her face from a distance of three inches because of a disagreement over campus journalism'. The 'apostate Muslims' allusion might appear to target Rushdie himself, but in fact relates less to him than to other lapsed Muslims like Ayaan Hirsi Ali who are not welcome on campuses. In terms that might recall Winston Smith's

³ <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2015/07/salman-rushdie-we-are-living-in-the-darkest-time-i-have-ever-known>

recoiling from Oceania's totalitarian generation of children in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, René chronicles how his parents note with despair that young people have become 'pro-censorship, pro-banning things, pro-restrictions': 'how did that happen ... we're beginning to fear the young' (pp. 28-29).

With almost three decades having passed since the outbreak of the so-called 'Rushdie affair', *The Golden House*, and indeed all of its author's work, stands as an emblem of intellectual and artistic freedom. Now as in the past, Rushdie is not afraid to tackle difficult issues head-on. Meanwhile it is not easy to be sanguine about the prospects for writers and the arts. If one looks back from 2018 to 1989 and the fatwa, yes, it may be concluded that Rushdie himself survived (and went on to build up a massive oeuvre), and so did *The Satanic Verses* (no Western country has banned it). As to whether artistic freedom will survive, the jury is out.