Salman Rushdie, East, West

Biography

Sir Salman Rushdie, knighted in 2007, was born June 19, 1947 in Bombay, India now Mumbai. He is a surrealist, a philosopher, and a historical author, who utilizes a broad range of humor and poetic license to touch upon subjects others might shy away from, and his willingness to broach topics of a political and religious nature have brought him, along with his beautiful writing, to the forefront of the public's eye. Rushdie, educated at the University of Cambridge, was the son of Anis Ahmed Rushdie, a well to do Muslim and Indian businessman. He received his degree in history in 1968, and began work in London as an advertising copywriter.


Personal Life
Rushdie has lived in New York City since 2000 and has married four times. He was married to Clarissa Luard, his first wife, from 1976 to 1987 and with her had his first son Zafar in 1979. He later would leave her for Robyn Davidson. Next he married Marianne Wiggins in 1988, whom he divorced in 1993. His third wife was Elizabeth West, with whom he had a second son Milan in 1999. He and Elizabeth were together from 1997 to 2004. In 2004, however, he married Padma Lakshmi. Lakshmi ended the marriage in 2007. In 2008, the Bollywood press romantically linked him to his friend, Indian model Riya Sen who famously responded with "I think when you are Salman Rushdie, you must get bored with literature."  

East, West

General Summary

Rushdie's *East, West* is a book of short stories separated into three sections East, West, and East/West. Its stories, both compelling and thought provoking, are perhaps the best representation of Salman Rushdie's complicated and prominent place as a literary fixture between two rich worlds. Like the difference in cultures, each section seems to have a radically different feel. East sets the frame as if this will be a series of interesting tales from India with a reminiscently classic feel. Things are strange but to a certain extent, this is to be expected from fantastic tales from a foreign world. As we approach the West section, however, such preconceived notions are shattered by the absurdity of our own culture. In fact, Rushdie’s West is as unusual, if not more so, than his East. In *East, West* Rushdie reminds us that while other cultures may seem foreign, familiarity is the only factor that can make human absurdity seem normal.

In *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*, Rushdie writes of how the Western emphasis on pop culture has become a kind of idolization. He forces the reader to question whether or not our obsession with movie magic is that different from the religious devotion seen in *The Prophet's Hair*. The *Harmony of the Spheres* is perhaps the most direct confrontation between the two cultures, and Rushdie leaves us with the dark but somewhat bonding impression that we're all mad no matter what culture we grew up in. While this may seem a grim message, it is in a way encouraging to think that as he hid in the West from his Eastern death threats, Rushdie wrote not just of Eastern absurdity, but of the absurdity in all of us.

East

- **The Prophet's Hair** - In this story, a relic that contains the prophet Muhammad's hair was stolen out of the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir, and the city is thrown into disarray at the loss of the great prize. Suddenly, a moneylender named Hashim finds this relic while walking through the city. Despite admitting to himself that "having found it by a stroke of great good fortune... the hair must be restored to its shrine, and the state to equanimity and peace," he keeps the prophet's hair. He justifies his decision by saying that he's not a religious man but a "man of the world, of this world," and that he sees "it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty." Soon, however, Hashim no longer behaves as a purely secular man. He begins to berate his son for failing in school, he accuses his daughter of being lascivious for not veiling herself in public, and he tells his wife she shall receive no more of his estate after his death than required by Islamic law. He begins to pray "five times daily for the first time in his life, and his wife and children were obliged to do likewise," and burns the family's books, except of course for the Qur'an. One day Atta, his son, attempts to steal away the prophet's hair, as he begins to suspect along with his sister, Huma, that it is the corruptive influence on their father. He fails, however, and his father, enraged, beats his wife and son for disobeying him, eventually even disowning his daughter. This drives Huma to seek out a professional criminal to steal the hair, the notorious criminal Sheikh Sin. She promised Sin great riches if he can steal the hair, and the man accepted so that he may recapture the wealth of his youth and retire with his blind wife. That night, Huma let Sin into her home, and just as he stole the vial out from under Hashim's pillow, her brother Atta, sick from the injuries his father had given him, shouted in a fever stricken panic, "Thief! Thief! Thief!" and died on the spot, most likely dreaming not of Sheikh Sin but of his own father. This caused his mother to scream in agony, and Hashim awoke. Sin hid himself away in time, as Hashim unsheathed a sword and stabbed blindly into the night, only to find he had stabbed his daughter Huma, who had awoken from all the noise. The mother, though still living, was driven mad and eventually committed to an insane asylum. Huma, to protect herself as she approached the criminal's den, had left a note with the police informing them of her actions, so that Sin might be arrested if he were to betray and kill her. As she was no longer able to prevent the letter from taking effect, the police began investigating, and eventually came upon Sin's home. Sin, who still held the prophet's hair knew the police would come and was attempting to leave with his wife when the Deputy Commissioner himself shot him dead. All of India rejoiced as the prophet's hair was returned to Hazratbal mosque, but not before the hair could perform one more miracle. When Sin brought the hair into his home, it restored wife's sight and his son's crippled legs, which he had broken so that they might be able to live off begging. Supposedly, in restoring their health, the prophet's hair ruined them, as they would no longer receive the generosity they would need to survive as beggars.
• **Analysis / Themes** - This story was fascinating, and a wonderful example of Salman Rushdie’s ability to squeeze every drop out of the Eastern escape trope, to an almost comic degree of excitement and misfortune. Interestingly, in reality the mosque Rushdie mentions claims to have this relic to this day. While many, if not the majority, of the elements in this particular story are outweighed by relying on themes recurrent in Eastern literature like the harsh muslim moneylender or the epic criminal Sin, he tether’s the tale to reality, or at least literary reality, in a way that makes the short story very enjoyable and perhaps reminiscent of Arabian Nights. In reading this, my thoughts were consistently brought to the difference between the culture of this society and that of it’s Western neighbor, and surely this was one of Rushdie’s central themes within East, West. Hashim’s corruption by the prophet’s hair is startlingly reminiscent of Sméagol’s corruption through the ring in Lord of the Rings. To me, this connection serves to suggest that obsession with sacred objects to the point of insanity is not simply a facet of Eastern ideology, but rather one inherent to humanity (a concept Rushdie later strengthens in At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers...). Despite the universality of the story, however, I think it is interesting to note that elements of the tale are uniquely Eastern. Hashim’s fury at Humra’s refusal to wear the veil reminded me of France’s recent law prohibiting one from covering his/her face in public, a measure that was allegedly passed for public safety, but has come to be known more coloquially as the ‘burqa-ban’.

When an enraged Muslim woman fought the law, eventually taking it to the European Court of Human Rights in the last few months, the law was even upheld. The stark contrast between a culture where a father could disown his daughter for not veiling herself versus one where to do so would be illegal, is to me a poignant example that though some themes are pervasive around the globe, there exists to this day a prominent religious and cultural disparity between the East and the Wes

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**At The Auction of the Ruby Slippers**

- This story is told from the perspective of a nameless narrator, seeking to buy along with the ruby slippers from the Wizard of Oz the affection of his love, his cousin Gale. The narrator goes on in length describing the auction itself, beginning with the chilling statement that “teams of psychiatrists of varying discipline have been installed in strategically located neo-Gothic confessional booths, to counsel the sick at heart.” With this he sets the theme of the story as one of Western excess and melodramatic psycho-analysis. The narrator begins to describe the type of people present at the auction, beginning with the film aficionados dressed as wizards, lions, and scarecrows, though not many “Tin Men on account of the particular discomfort of the costume”. Among the bidders are movie stars, whose “auras, developed in collaboration with masters of Applied Physics, are platinum, golden, silver, bronze.” There are also the “memorabilia junkies”, whose obsession with the slippers lead them to repeatedly kiss the slippers’ glass container, which “pumps a hundred thousand volts of electricity into the collagen-implanted lips of the glass-kisser” in a “suicidal act of devotion.” Perhaps the most odd presence in the auction room are the so-called exiles, the homeless tramps, that the narrator says have fought through war zones to be in attendance, and are promptly removed from the scene by SWAT teams with rubber bullets and sedative darts. “Conspirators, deposed monarchs... bandit chieftains,” even orphans, all come to see the magical ruby slippers because of their imagined powers, with the hope that they could restore them to their lost homes. Religious fanatics come for the sole purpose of burning the slippers if they win them, enraged by the group’s obsession with a false idol. The “liberal Auctioneers” allow all these groups to coexist saying that “Money insists on democracy,” and that “anyone’s cash is as good as anyone else’s.” The insanity reaches a tipping point even for the narrator when he notices the “presence of imaginary beings in the Saleroom,” from “Children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings” to literary characters. The narrator is present at the auction because his lover Gale, cheated on him with a “fairy escapee from a caveman movie” many years ago. One day he sees Gale weeping while watching a tv show about a Martian singing songs from The Wizard of Oz, and he has the idea of buying the ruby slippers so that she might teleport to Mars and bring the spaceman back to Earth. As the bid begins, he recalls once being asked by the “widower of a world-famous and much-loved pop singer” to attend the movie of a very famous and much-loved pop singer, “Wizard of Oz”, many years ago. One day he sees Gale weeping while watching a tv show about a Martian singing songs from The Wizard of Oz, and he has the idea of buying the ruby slippers so that she might teleport to Mars and bring the spaceman back to Earth. As the bid begins, he recalls once being asked by the “widower of a world-famous and much-loved pop singer” to attend the auction of rock memorabilia, to get “a pair of edible nice-paper panties in peppermint flavouir,” which played a part in the widower’s wife’s act. Ultimately, the narrator loses his nerve and says “I’m out.” However, the man just asks what the final price was and laughs saying that “That’s all right then, I’ve got three hundred thousand of those.” During the bidding the narrator realizes that all anyone in that room wants to be is somebody, he drops out and feels refreshed and free.

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• **Analysis / Themes** - At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers is an intentionally ludicrous story. A line that to me well captured the essence of Rushdie’s intent was when the narrator is bothered that fictional characters were also present at the bidding, saying that “this permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture. Heroes step down off cinema screens and marry members of the audience. Will there be no end to it?” Rushdie seems to suggest that the Western obsession with popular culture bleeds into our lives, influencing our day to day perception. This theme is consistently driven home by the narrator’s obsession with his cousin Gale. Is the narrator’s Gale literally the Dorothy Gale from the Wizard of Oz? Or is she simply an allusion, and the narrator’s obsession with recapturing the feeling of home he found with Gale has perverted his perception into combining the two characters. Undoubtedly, the auction itself is a foil to Western society, as the narrator claims that “most of us nowadays are sick... we have witnessed the auction of the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, the Alps, the Sphinx.” He seems to be
sickened by the capitalist exploitation of human culture, and yet he acknowledges that he is a central part of that exploitation. He seeks to justify society's obsession with the ruby slippers, which it is interesting to point out were actually silver in the original novel, perhaps a subtle note emphasizing TV's dominating influence over literature in Western culture. The narrator justifies the obsession with the ruby slippers by saying that "we do not know the limits of their powers. We suspect that these limits may not exist." Certainly the narrator hopes that these limits do not exist as his rationale for acquiring the ruby slippers is so that his Gale might go to Mars and bring back a spaceman who sang songs from the Wizard of Oz. This crazy statement, however, is more understandable if interpreted as a metaphor for Western TV culture's very real influence on people's behavior.

East, West

• **The Harmony of the Spheres** - This story is about the relationships between two friends, Eliot and Khan, and their wives, Lucy and Mala. Khan, the narrator, describes Eliot as the "author of a scholarly two-volume study of overt and covert occultist groups in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, entitled The Harmony of the Spheres," after which the story is named. The story begins with Eliot's suicide when the madness he encountered in the last years of his life finally overpowers him. Eliot, who would always tell his friends he was working on "the Owen Glendower book," had begun to behave rather oddly, referring to his friend Khan as an alien and believing that Lucy his wife was listening in on him through technology hidden in his butter. Perhaps the onset of his madness was when he finished The Harmony of the Spheres, when Eliot had what he believed to be an encounter with the devil. He awoke in the middle of the night, naked, shouting "Apage me, Satanas!" To Khan, Eliot's "immersion in the dark arts was more than merely scholarly." Khan describes Eliot as a tortured soul, his mind victim to the many brilliant voices he reads, saying "Harmony? You never heard such a din as the ruckus in Eliot's head." Khan goes on to describe to the reader the first time he met Eliot's wife Lucy, whom he realizes he had actually met years ago when they kissed on a beach. Despite Khan's close friendship with Eliot, he becomes romantically involved with Lucy. Khan's wife warns him that Eliot is bad for him, but Khan pays her no heed, and the four continue to behave as though the only thing wrong was Khan's occasional fits of madness. After Eliot's suicide, Lucy asks Khan to look through Eliot's writings to see if any of it was usable. Khan is surprised to find that there is no "Owen Glendower book" but rather that Eliot has written a kind of semi-fictional diary about his friends. He wrote of his vitriolic relationship with Lucy and of a romantic relationship with Khan's wife Mala. Khan thinks nothing of it, until he tells his wife about the mad man's writings and her silence confirms their veracity.

• **Analysis / Themes** - This, the first story in the join East, West section of Salman Rushdie's short stories, is fascinating in its portrayal of madness. Despite the title, the relationships between these four entangled souls is all but harmonious. Khan acknowledges this, saying "When I met Eliot I was a little unhinged myself – suffering from a disharmony of my personal spheres." Certainly his relationship with Eliot's wife is "a little unhinged," as they attempt to recapture the romance they began years before on Juhu beach. Lucy's cryptic repetition of "Madness, love" with Khan, leaves room for interpretation. Is their relationship madness, or love itself? Perhaps Khan's central emphasis of Eliot's madness is a kind of dramatic irony, as he is the truly mad one, able to maintain the facade of sanity despite cheating with his closest friends' wife. Khan's madness, which Eliot believes derives from his brilliance, more likely derives from his guilt at cheating on his best friend. As Khan reads about Eliot's strained relationship with Lucy and his romantic affairs with Mala, the reader comes to realize that the true insanity is Khan's refusal to acknowledge the very present disharmony of his social relationships. Underneath these complex layers of relationships, lies the heart of Rushdie's East, West. Khan and Mala, literally aliens to Eliot, are truthfully aliens to the Western society they appear to live in. Any analysis of The Harmony of the Spheres would be remiss to neglect mentioning that this phrase is an ancient philosophical concept referring to the musicality of the proportions in the movements of celestial bodies like the Sun, Moon, and planets. In reading Rushdie's tale, there is no question that these four friends have a kind of alien, and somewhat broken, brilliance. Like the planets
themselves, the movement of one has
great gravity on the lives of the rest. Knowing Rushdie’s love of Star Trek, as shown in his later tale Chekov and Zulu,
Khan might be the namesake of Captain Kirk’s legendary opponent, a similarly brilliant but deranged character.
Perhaps this is Rushdie’s subtle nod to the reader that the man we assume to be our protagonist and narrator is in
reality the disharmonious element in this social sphere.

Popular Culture

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