East, West - Hannah Smati

"East, West"

About the Author

Early life

Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, two months before the country gained independence. His mother, Negin Bhatt, was a school teacher in Bombay, and his father, Anis Ahmed Rushdie, was a businessman who had attended the University of Cambridge in England. As early as age five, Rushdie said he remembers aspiring to be a writer. When Rushdie was fourteen, his parents sent him to boarding school at the Rugby School in Warwickshire, England. Meanwhile, his family relocated to Karachi, Pakistan like many other Muslims in India due to rising tensions between India and Pakistan. Rushdie went on to attend the University of Cambridge like his father, and received a Master's degree in history in 1968.

Early Writings

After finishing school, he worked briefly as a copywriter for Oglivy & Mather, an advertising agency. It was during this time that he wrote his first published work, *Grimus*, a sci-fi novel that included elements of Norse mythology, Sufism, Renaissance-era Italian epics, and the American Gothic novel. While *Grimus* did not sell many copies, it received a mostly positive critical response. His second novel, *Midnight's Children*, a fable about a child with magical powers born just as India gained independence, was released in 1981. With *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie gained international acclaim—the book won several awards, including the Booker Prize in 1981 and The Best of the Booker twice in 1993 and 2008. After *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie published *Shame* in 1983, which drew from Pakistani politics, as well as a short non-fiction narrative about Nicaragua, based on his travels there, in 1987, *The Jaguar Smile*. 

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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
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<td>Form</td>
<td>Collection of short stories</td>
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<td>Published</td>
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Controversy over *The Satanic Verses*

Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1988, sparked controversy from those who were offended by its portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad. In addition to public demonstrations, book burnings, and bombing of bookstores selling the book, *The Satanic Verses* was banned in thirteen countries, first in India and finally in Venezuela. On February 14, 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of Iran, issued a fatwa against Rushdie, calling for his execution and the executions of any publishers and editors of the novel. Rushdie went into hiding for nine years, with occasional public appearances, and during this time continued to write. It was during this time that he wrote *East, West*, published in 1994.

Return to Public Life

Rushdie returned to public life after the Iranian government announced that it would no longer support the fatwa against Rushdie in 1998. Since then he has written several novels and collections of essays, such as *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Step Across This Line*. In 2007, he was knighted for his services to literature.

Historical Context

Indian Independence and Post-Independent Religious Conflict
The British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act on July 18, 1947, which effectively divided British India into the two independent nations of Pakistan and India on August 15. While the passing of this act was a victory for India’s independence movement, which had been steadily gaining support since the beginning of the 1900’s, religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims resulted in hundreds of deaths in just the first few days of independence. The drawing up of the new borders for Pakistan, a Muslim nation, and India, a Hindu nation, left millions of Hindus and Muslims in the country where they were a religious minority. The situation was particularly damaging in Punjab, whose Eastern and Western regions had been partitioned into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu Indian provinces, but left significant Hindu and Muslim populations on the wrong side of the border. As displaced Muslims left India for Pakistan and displaced Hindus left Pakistan for India, tensions only increased and an estimated more than half a million refugees died, including Mahatma Gandhi who was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist. Between 1947 and 1950, an estimated 12 to 18 million people migrated between India and Pakistan.

Indian Immigration to the United Kingdom

Even after India gained independence, Indian immigrants were considered citizens of the British commonwealth and were able to enter the United Kingdom without any restrictions until the British Commonwealth Immigration Acts were passed in the 1960’s. Influenced by the U.K.’s post-World War Two labor shortages, a large influx of both skilled and unskilled workers migrated from India to the U.K during the 1950’s and 1960’s. Even between 1970 and 1996, an average influx of 5,800 Indian immigrants came to the U.K. every year.

The majority of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent were middle-class Punjabi males who mostly worked low skill jobs in the U.K.’s textile and service sectors and resided in industrial cities like London, Birmingham, and Leicester. After the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed in 1962, most workers brought their families over and settled in the U.K. permanently.

Plot Summary

East, West is divided into three sections, each containing three short stories:

East

- "Good Advice is Rare Than Rubies"
- "The Free Radio"
- "The Prophet’s Hair": Hashim, an affluent and secular moneylender, stumbles upon the famous relic of the Prophet Muhammad’s hair, which was had been stolen from the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir. Rather than returning it, he decides to keep it as a “secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty” that should not be the subject of idol worship. Under its influence, he transforms into a religious extremist who abuses his family. Huma, Hashim’s daughter, enlists the help of Sheikh Sin, a thief, to steal the hair from her father. He sneaks into the family’s house at night, but in the process wakes up the entire family. Mistaking Huma for an intruder, Hashim stabs and kills her in the dark. When he realizes what he has done, he kills himself and his wife goes mad by the whole ordeal and is committed to an asylum. Sheikh Sin is eventually apprehended by the police with the relic in his pocket. He is shot by the police, and on the morning of his death, his crippled sons are miraculously cured and his blind wife regains her sight. The relic is recovered and brought back to the mosque.

West

- "Yorick"
- "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers": Narrated by a man in love with his cousin Gale and determined to win her back, the short story describes the auction of the original pair of slippers worn by Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz. The auction brings all sorts of people, from movie stars and fans dressed up as fictional characters to “homeless tramps” and political refugees to religious fundamentalists and even aliens. The narrator specifically notes the presence of fictional characters out of paintings and literary works, and laments that the “permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture.” The narrator continues to bid higher and higher to win the slippers for Gale, but eventually he feels a sudden loss of gravity after so much bidding. The detachment from the earth makes him forget his attachment to Gale, and he drops out of the bidding to go home and sleep.

- "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Sante Fé, AD 1492)"

East, West:
• "The Harmony of the Spheres": The story begins in media res with Eliot Crane, a writer with paranoid schizophrenia, committing suicide and his wife Lucy finding his dead body in the middle of the night. The story is told from the point of view of Khan, who is a close friend of Eliot's. Khan is an Indian immigrant to England and is married to an Indian doctor, Mala, although he cheats on her with Lucy. Khan is fascinated by Eliot's obsession with the occult. He believes that Eliot's knowledge of the occult could allow him to reconcile his inner conflict between his identification as both Indian and British, as he describes that "in that world of magic and power there seemed to exist the kind of fusion of worldviews, European Amerindian Oriental Levantine, in which I desperately wanted to believe." Khan is however disappointed after looking through Eliot's writings after his death, only finding the ramblings of a mad man. He also discovers through the writing and Mala's later confession that Eliot had an affair with Mala, at the same time that he himself had been having an affair with Lucy.

• "Chekov and Zulu": The story revolves around the friendship of Chekov and Zulu, two Indian spies who refer to themselves as the two iconic Star Trek characters, Chekov and Sulu. Chekov and Zulu are in the middle of a mission to find the organizers of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, who was the prime minister of India. After completing the mission, Zulu quits, explaining to Chekov that "no Congress workers have been indicted" for the assassination despite "all the evidence of complicity" and chides Chekov for remaining a government employee. Zulu settles in Bombay with his family while Chekov continues to rise in government. While accompanying Rajiv Gandhi, who took office after his mother Indira, Chekov is killed in service when Rajiv is assassinated. Right before his death, Chekov has a vision that he is on the Starship Enterprise with Zulu and the rest of the crew from Star Trek, who are resigned to their deaths.

• "The Courter": Told from the perspective of a young boy whose family immigrated to London from India when he was a child, the story centers around Mary, the nanny who took care of the narrator and his siblings, and the porter of the building where the family lives. Mary has trouble pronouncing English words, often swapping the p for a c, and hence calls the Porter "courter." As Mary and the Porter begin courting, the narrator grows jealous and tries to date other girls without success. Eventually, Mary becomes too homesick to stay in England and moves back to India. As the narrator describes his distress over her leaving, he also feels that he can relate to her inner conflict: "I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose." To draw connections between the East and the West, Rushdie constantly changes the narrative style in East, West. In "At The Auction of The Ruby Slippers," much of the narrative is detached description, as "The Prophet's Hair" is told like a fable, relying on an oral storytelling structure incorporating elements of magic realism. In "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Sante Fé, AD 1492)," Rushdie remains in the present tense and lapses into stream of consciousness. The stories not only differ in tone, but in the literary form itself; in "Yorick," Rushdie inserts stage directions and turns the story into a theatrical play script while "The Porter" is autobiographical, a fictional memoir of Rushdie's childhood experiences. Through the employment of such different styles of narration one after the other, Rushdie creates a postmodern medley of literary techniques that emphasizes the mixing of Eastern and Western cultures in the short story collection. By going back and forth between genres, he depicts the unstable, dynamic aspect of these cultures—constantly in flux and influencing each other.

Themes

While the short stories in East, West vary in style and genre, there are a few themes that run across the narratives.

Religious Fanaticism

Although religion itself is not the main focus of the short stories, it does play a central role in the collection. In "The Prophet's Hair," Rushdie references elements of Islam repeatedly. Although Hashim, the moneylender and patriarch, is not a "godly man," he becomes ultra-religious after obtaining the hair relic. Among other things, he critiques his daughter for walking “barefaced, which was unseemly for any good Muslim girl to do” and forces his family to pray and read passages from the Qur'an for at least two hours every day.

It is important to note, however, that Hashim does not completely adhere to Islam. After one of his debtors stops by to remind him of the "Qur'an's strictures against usury," Hashim becomes furious and beats the debtor. Rushdie's insertion of such an incident suggests a critique of corrupted religious fanatics who use religion for political and economic gain, not fully practicing what they preach. This corruption comes out in Hashim's physical transformation, as "his eyes bulged even more than they already had, they were red-rimmed, and his knuckles were white."
In employing this contradiction, Rushdie does not seem to critique religion itself, but rather growing religious fanaticism. Perhaps this is best summarized in Hashim’s ironic initial justification for keeping the hair: “the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship. He abhorred the idea of being deified! So, by keeping this hair from its distracted devotees, I perform — do I not? - a finer service than I would by returning it.” Hence, Rushdie points out the problematic reduction of an entire religion to a mere relic.

Rushdie does not just focus on Islam; however; the flawed materialism is mirrored in the story “At The Auction of The Ruby Slippers” in the “West” section. The participants in the auction drool over the ruby slippers, attaching just as much importance to the Hollywood prop as the characters did to the hair in the “East” section. In the Orwellian nightmarish setting of the auction, Rushdie seems to satirize the capitalist, money-obsessed aspect of Western culture taken too far as a form of religious extremism. By using such specific cherished relics in both the “East” and “West” sections, Rushdie suggests that fanaticism is not purely a product of religion or culture, but something universal that transcends geographic boundaries.

Incomplete Identity

The struggle to define one’s identity is interwoven through several of the stories, particularly in the “East, West” section. In “The Harmony of the Spheres,” Khan, the narrator, is a British immigrant from India. Although the central focus of the story is on Eliot Crane, Khan alludes to his own inner turmoil that parallels Eliot’s schizophrenia: “When I met Eliot I was a little unhinged myself - suffering from a disharmony of my personal spheres. There was...a number of difficult questions about home and identity that I had no idea how to answer.” Khan refers to himself as “unhinged;” giving the image of incompleteness and alienation despite being tied to more than one country. Khan’s personal conflict between his country of origin and his current country of residence, which he describes as his “double unbelonging,” is characteristic of post-colonial literature.

In “The Courter,” the last story of the collection, Rushdie frames the identity crisis experienced by immigrants as an almost oppressive construct. Certainly-Mary, a woman whose name implies certainty and a whole, intact identity, seems to embody cross-culturalism as she retains her Indian accent and mispronunciations of English while courting the porter who introduces her to Western pop culture. Yet, she too experiences real physical suffering because of her dual identity, and is forced to move back to India. The narrator asks, “Was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked?” He tries and fails to form a relationship with Rozalia, a Polish girl, who works on “Faiman’s shoe shop on Oxford Street” and then with Chandni who trains to be an Indian classical dancer. Perhaps mirroring Rushdie’s own ties to both the U.K. and India, in the ending of the story, the narrator declares that he refuses to choose between India and the U.K.: “I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both.” With this paradoxical closing, Rushdie seems to resolve the issue of unfinished identities by highlighting the possibility of a hybrid identity that incorporates aspects of both East and West.

Language and Dialogue

While Rushdie manipulates language in his short stories, the issue of communication and language is a central issue to many of the characters. In “The Courter,” difficulties with communication and language are part of the immigrant experience. Mary’s mispronunciation of English words prevents her from fully integrating into her new country of residence. At the same time, it is her mispronunciation of the word “porter” as “courter” that sparks her relationship with the porter, who gently exposes her to English pop culture and allows her to appreciate English culture. Although Mary returns to India at the end of the story, language is, temporarily, a way to cross the boundaries between East and West.

In “Chekov and Zulu,” Rushdie also explores the role of language in cross-culturalism not just through mispronunciations, but through the actual mixing of Eastern and Western languages in conversation. When Chekov visits Zulu’s wife at the start of the story, he begins the conversation in a mixture of English and South Asian languages, a sort of Hinglish: “Fixed the place up damn fine, Mrs Zulu, wah-wah.” While he initially calls Zulu “Zulu-foo,” he switches his manner of speaking abruptly in the conversation to echo one that is more English: “We’re old comrades-in-arms, your husband and I.” The change in dialogue shows the extent of the Western influence in the East, permeating Indian culture with not just sci-fi TV shows but with modes of communication. However, the influence in language is not just in one direction; in Zulu and Chekov’s exchanges, they frequently mix Punjabi words into their English sentences, calling each other as “What-ho, Zools!” and “Hullo, ji.” Zulu and Chekov are able to manipulate their communications into a hybrid of Western and English languages. Language becomes not just evidence of the West influencing the East and the East influencing the West, but a way for the characters to reconcile the two cultures they are part of.

References to Eastern/Western Pop Culture

On the title of the collection, Rushdie disclosed in an interview: “I said to people when I started thinking of calling the stories, East, West; that the most important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma—or at least I live in the comma.” To capture his ties to both East and West, he makes many references to pop culture throughout the short stories. For the West, he makes references to cultural icons like The Beatles, Lord of the Rings, The Wizard of Oz, Star Trek, and The Flintstones. In his references to the East, he echoes the dramatic style of Bollywood films and even cites Shashi Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan in “The Free Radio.” By inserting these modern pop cultural references, Rushdie depicts the trend of globalization and poke fun at how the East and West are fascinated and influenced by stereotypes of each other through their respective exposure to Hollywood and Bollywood.

Connection to The Arabian Nights
In *East, West*, Rushdie adapts the symbolism and style of *The Arabian Nights* to the modern, realistic setting of his short stories in the “East” section. “The Prophet’s Hair,” for example, incorporates sacred relics, oral storytelling, and even fairy tale-like miracles with the restoration of the Sheikh’s widow’s eyesight at the end of the story. Indeed, even Huma’s bruises are reminiscent of the injuries suffered by the sisters in “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies.” However, Rushdie does not completely adopt the style of *The Arabian Nights* in his writing, as he incorporates elements of modern twentieth century reality. This mixing of oriental imagery with realism is apparent in “Good Advice is Rarer Than Rubies.” In the opening of the story, Miss Rehana is described as a beautiful mystery, her bus “pushing a cloud of dust, veiling her beauty from the eyes of strangers until she descended.” Such a description sharply contrasts with the reality of her mission: to obtain a permit from the consulate to go to London. By mixing the magic and mystery of *The Arabian Nights* with realistic, modern settings, Rushdie parodies the West’s orientalist stereotypes of the East that still influence its perspective of that region in modern times.

Critical Reception

*East, West* received generally positive reviews when it was published. Kirkus Reviews lauded Rushdie for “build[ing] a safe passage over the seemingly unbridgeable with generous insight and wry humor.” Robert Coover, who reviewed *East, West* in *The New York Times*, praised the diversity of the collection: “sometimes poignant and intimate, sometimes boisterously inventive, sometimes gently provocative collection of short stories.” However, Coover acknowledged that “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” was “a bit over the top at times.” David John Taylor, who reviewed it for *The Independent*, also expressed mixed feelings over the stories in the “West” section, saying that they were “perhaps less successful.”

The majority of critics agreed that the most successful part of Rushdie’s work were the stories in the “East, West” section. Taylor wrote that these three stories in the final section are “excellent” and where the “promised oppositions of the title are finally vouchsafed.” Publishers Weekly wrote that “the full reach of [Rushdie’s] brilliant speculation and glancing wit are revealed in the stories in which East and West meet,” and in particular cited the story *Chekov and Zulu* as “terse, hilarious, with a sinister edge and a stunning denouement.”

References