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**Review: *Salman Rushdie and the Genesis of Secrecy* by
Vijay Mishra, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).
264 pages. ISBN: 9781350094390, Hbk £95.00,
Pbk £29.99, e-book £26.99.**

Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy, University of Cambridge, UK, ok223@cam.ac.uk

This is a book review of *Salman Rushdie and the Genesis of Secrecy* by Vijay Mishra. The review is by Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy.



Salman Rushdie remains one of the most prolific and prominent writers of Indian origin, whose first novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), won the Booker of Bookers on the 25th anniversary of the Booker Prize. Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) is perhaps one of the other most popular novels due to the Fatwa against Rushdie which the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini instated. Having lived in the UK for a long time, he now resides in the USA. Most recently, Rushdie wrote *Quichotte* (2019), his fourteenth novel, which is a rewriting of the popular Don Quixote. The latter also won him accolades and a shortlisting for the Booker Prize, though he did not win it this time. Rushdie's life and his writings are often connected, and it is this particular angle that Vijay Mishra proposes to develop and theorize in *Salman Rushdie and the Genesis of Secrecy*.

Mishra's book is the first monograph centring on Salman Rushdie the man and the genesis of his oeuvre as seen through the Salman Rushdie archives at Emory University in Atlanta. Mishra's book is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, with six chapters each investigating a specific aspect, including the biographical, the unpublished manuscripts, the multiple lives of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's 'affective turn', the cinematic adaptations of the novel, and the role of modernity in his works. Mishra's book is original in its conceptualization insofar as it brings together intuitive and assiduous research on the writer, critical and theoretical analysis as well as an elaborate conceptual framework. Mishra undertakes 'a complete and thorough reading of all available material' (xii) while some material remains embargoed, including photographs. The prologue is a sensitive exploration of Rushdie's early life, his aspirations, his initial career in advertising, and the beginnings of the writer. His notes reveal a meticulous process of writing and thinking which situates Rushdie as one of the great analytical minds as he interrogates his own writing and the ways that narration is conducted. Though Rushdie himself asserts that 'the process [...] is not interesting', Mishra's book demonstrates that the opposite is true, and purposes to 'flesh out diverging narratives that throw light on the other archive, the already edited and therefore already censored archive which constitutes the writer's published corpus' (30).

The book asks whether the archive can be a form of autobiographical narrative as it includes discarded pieces of Rushdie's own life, including old glasses worn when he accepted the Booker prize, 'a necklace with "Salman" written on a grain of rice inside a liquid-filled bulb' (5) and countless other trivia which would interest fans and scholars alike for what they might signify. Mishra's book offers insight into Rushdie as a reader, scholar and writer and also a man who lives with his memories of India which he cannot reconcile with the India he finds on his repeated returns. The Prologue reminds us that Rushdie also grappled with iniquities and was torn between Islam and atheism. Mishra's discussion of this aspect of Rushdie's life, his deemed pusillanimous reversion to Islam

due to fearing for his own life, remind us that Rushdie is also a man who wants to live, even if he has to give in to do so. His dual heritage, raised with significant Western influences, while living with conservative Kashmiri values are well documented. The 'spectres of Western modernity' (21) are underlined, even as Rushdie's turn to realism, to the structure and forms of the novel are stressed. The 'formalism of writing' (56) Mishra identifies are discussed alongside a generous exploration of Rushdie's curatorial process and the ways in which he fashions his own persona in the archives.

In his chapters, Mishra pays attention to the well-known *Midnight's Children*, enables us to reinterpret some of the earlier and lesser known of Rushdie's works such as *Fury* (2001), and critically engages with the unpublished novels 'The Book of the Peer', and 'Madam Rama' amongst others, to understand the extent to which they inform the narratorial process and the writing of *Midnight's Children*, and others, forming 'precursor texts' (60). The struggles to find his voice, the influence of Hindi cinema in the mid twentieth century, the documentation of these in his notes allow us to understand how the early unpublished manuscripts were a 'valuable source for an understanding of the making of a writer' (79). The chapter dealing with *Midnight's Children* specifically is a meticulous deciphering of the writer's writing process, the difficulties he experiences with voice, with facsimiles of the archival material enabling us to visually understand these processes. Mishra's book permits entry into Rushdie's mind as he considers every word and plot manoeuvres. Interestingly, Mishra's analysis does not stop at the book itself but also delves into the film adaptation of *Midnight's Children* for Deepa Mehta and the 1997 translation of the text into Hindi. For the critic, this doubling of 'native informant' and 'monolingual speaker' at play in Rushdie's writing is 'critical, for his postcolonial discourse' (119).

Sensitive to the 'affective turn' which he observes in Rushdie's works, Mishra envisages the body as a 'meaning-making system' wherein emotions, language and sounds are deployed to variegating ends. Examining sighing and the racial rhetoric in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), the soundscapes affecting characters, the sounds of the city, the music being played, the shame evoked by extraneous circumstances, dancing as a body language, amongst other things in texts such as *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (1999), *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), *The Satanic Verses*, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* (1983), Mishra carefully underlines Rushdie's aesthetics. This notion is developed further in the next chapter dealing with Rushdie's fascination with cinema. The list which Mishra finds, includes well-known avant-garde ones, 'made during a very short period between Bergman (1957) and Godard (1965) and includes only one Indian filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, whom Mishra reminds us 'never entered the popular imagination, at least not in states outside of Bengal' (147). The archives reveal a methodical approach to cinema

and the ways that the novel might take on the techniques of cinematography, or feature a 'camera-obsessed character' (150) such as Saleem Merchant in *The Ground Beneath her Feet*. Bollywood, too, becomes a source of inspiration as Mishra details Rushdie's observations about the 'narrative capaciousness' of cinema (152) and the references to *Filmfare* (magazine and awards) that recur in the narratives. The last chapter, centring on 'archival modernism' examines the ways in which Rushdie draws on 'medieval Islamic and European archives' (175), the Orphean journey, Virgilian aesthetics and concerns and Rushdie's 'direct engagement with the myth' (196).

Mishra's epilogue sets up parallels between Edward Said's humanism and Rushdie's own, as well as Pascale Casanova's understanding of 'World Literature'. For Mishra, Rushdie decentres European paradigms in his own writings, even if at times he remains 'trapped' in them (207). According to Mishra, although Rushdie is an outsider 'who knocks on the doors of world literature having mastered all the texts of the Western canon' (224), he is 'no longer the marginalized or excluded entrant' and we must acknowledge that while 'the world of letters is also unequal with its privileged centres of power', Rushdie remains 'a great writer' (224). Mishra's book does underline the problematics of authorship and centre-periphery dialectics at play even in the category of 'world literature'. His work is an enjoyable journey into the life, dreams and imperfections of a writer who straddles an uncomfortable position between the East and the West, between his Kashmiri Indian background and his life in the USA and still has been able to call both home.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

