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Is Rushdie the Voice of a Billion?

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NEW DELHI -- The relationship between Salman Rushdie and India is consecrated in the adjective "Indian-British," which he is, including the hyphen between. It is a feeble, almost spectral bond, but circumstances have given it a depth that has benefited Mr. Rushdie.

It is indisputable that he was born in India, in what was then known as Bombay, and that he was raised in an affluent portion of the great city. Then, when he was still a boy, he left for England and felt the stinging discomfort of yet another wealthy Indian migrant who was suddenly not on the top of the human pyramid. As a young writer in England on the brink of accepting fatal failure, Mr. Rushdie has written in his memoir, "Joseph Anton," which was released this month, he took a gamble and used India as material for his second novel, "Midnight's Children." His success, and later notoriety, made Indians claim him as their own. It was inevitable that the Western literary system would appoint him as the pre-eminent interpreter of the Subcontinent. Like Jake in the Hollywood film "Avatar," Mr. Rushdie was a white man in a native's body who went into the area of darkness and emerged with intelligence, often couched in excellent prose.

What Mr. Rushdie has derived from India and used successfully in his works is a melodramatic strain of story-telling that is alien to British and American literary traditions, where restraint is considered a superior art. In India, the entire nation is melodramatic, as is evident on the streets, on the floor of Parliament, at funerals and weddings and, of course, in cinema. In English-language literary fiction, Western critics observe any hint of melodrama with contempt, but they usually make an exception for writers of foreign origin.

A British translator of the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk once described his prose as a "trance," evidently deriving this compliment from the swirling dervishes of Istanbul's tourist lanes. I asked her, if an Anglo-Saxon writer from London employed an identical style of narration, would she still have called it a "trance"? She said with a chuckle that it would then be "probably purple prose." Mr. Rushdie, too, is a beneficiary of hailing from a distant, alien land.

Most Indians learned of the existence of Mr. Rushdie not after he won the Booker Prize in 1981, but after the publication of "The Satanic Verses" in 1988, with the violent protests that followed and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's fatwa in 1989 calling for his death, which sent him into hiding. That was also how most Indians learned of the Booker Prize.

Mr. Rushdie has written in his memoir that for many years after the publication of "The Satanic Verses" he believed that a review of the book in the magazine India Today, probably the first review of the book, was "the match that lit the fire." The magazine had broken the "traditional publishing embargo" and printed the review nine days before the book's official release.

According to Mr. Rushdie, the journalist Madhu Jain, whom he "thought of as a friend," met him in his home in London. "When she saw the thick, dark blue cover with the large red title she grew extremely excited, and pleaded to be given a copy." The headline of the review was "An Unequivocal Attack on Religious Fundamentalism."

Mr. Rushdie writes: "The last sentence of the article, "'The Satanic Verses' is bound to trigger an avalanche of protests,' was an open invitation for those protests to begin."

Ms. Jain told me that she remembers the episode a bit differently. She had met Mr. Rushdie at his home and as she was leaving she saw "a motorized wheelbarrow stop in front of his home." The wheelbarrow carried several proof copies of "The Satanic Verses." Mr. Rushdie, she said, picked up a copy, signed it and gave it to her.

India, where the protests against the book began, was the first country to act against the book. This was done not through an official ban, but through a government order making it illegal to import copies of the book.

As Indians could not read "The Satanic Verses," they bought or borrowed "Midnight's Children." The impact of this novel on a generation of young writers was extraordinary. In Madras, now Chennai, where boys were preordained to become engineers and literature was considered the refuge of the handicapped or the effeminate, the news of a rock star "Indian" writer made literature suddenly look respectable.

The first burst of Indian pride in response to the fame and infamy of an Indian-born writer erupted in a simpler age. Over the years, even though Mr. Rushdie has said several times that he does not need a visa to visit India, the writer, who continues to create political storms and needs state protection whenever he visits the country, has come to be considered a high-maintenance foreigner by the very people who once claimed him as their own. He has also become a reminder of that uncomfortable question: Among migrant artists, is identity actually a euphemism for branding?

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