

Beneath His Feet

Grounding Rushdie for the Twenty-First Century

Review of Florian Stadler (ed.), *Salman Rushdie in Context*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023)

JÚLIA TAKÁCS

DOI: 10.53720/VFLQ7658

Salman Rushdie is one of the best-known contemporary authors, owing his reputation not only to his literary prowess but to his simultaneously secretive yet highly publicised persona as well. He has lived his life under constant scrutiny from the public and literary scholars alike as evidenced by the many volumes written to dissect his life, works, and opinions. The new addition to Cambridge University Press's Literature in Context series, *Salman Rushdie in Context*, succeeds in providing a new outlook on Rushdie as a person, as an author, and as a thinker thanks to the diverse array of scholars and topics it involves in the conversation.

In the Literature in Context series, each book focuses on one artist and examines their legacy and *oeuvre* from many perspectives. As *Salman Rushdie in Context* is part of this series, several of its practical characteristics originate from conventions established by preceding books, but in many respects, it differentiates itself due to its subject matter and its editor's decisions.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the book, which is often a hallmark of the Literature in Context series, is its diversity. This diversity is manifold: Florian Stadler, the editor, compiled a volume of essays penned by scholars from various fields of study and foci from around the world. In the "List of Contributors," every author received a short biography, mentioning their other projects and

writings, which not only showcases their expertise, but also serves as recommendation for further reading. This is supported by the “Select Bibliography” chapter, as well as an “Index” at the very end of the volume, cataloguing recurring persons, themes, and motifs discussed in the essays. Both sections are useful tools for scholarly study, which results in a volume well-suited for students and researchers alike. Due to the lack of space, I am only able to discuss a few select chapters from the collection.

Florian Stadler, who is simultaneously the editor and a contributor of the work, is a renowned scholar of Postcolonial and Migration Studies. In his introductory essay, entitled “Rushdie’s Contexts—Contextualising Rushdie,” he establishes the primary goal of the volume as providing a reading of Rushdie that is as thorough and diverse as possible. However, what is important to note about the “Introduction”—which can even seem counterintuitive to the book’s objective—is its perhaps intentionally limited scope. Several essay collections in the Literature in Context series refrain from relying too much on the author’s biography at the beginning by adding a preliminary chapter of Chronology, but in this volume, the foreword is mostly a very detailed history of the author’s life. While Florian Stadler’s preface is highly accurate to its title of “Contextualising Rushdie,” as a lead-in to the whole volume, it contains little information regarding most sections of the work, and seems to favour Part I, which engages with biographical contexts. The question arises: if *Salman Rushdie in Context* considers Rushdie’s works from many different perspectives, why is this not reflected in its introduction? The answer might lie in Rushdie’s signature writing style and his tumultuous public perception. Rushdie’s books often showcase first-person narration and rely on biographical details, which can muddy up the conversation around the author’s real-life persona. The editor might have chosen to start the volume with an elaborate biography to establish the biographical truths that the following essays build upon.

The book is divided into five parts, each consisting of essays of different thematic blocks, including biographical, literary, historical-cultural, critical-theoretical, and aesthetic-receptive contexts. The work seems to favour historical-cultural analyses over others: there are in total thirteen essays in Part III: Historical and Cultural contexts, as opposed to the three essays of Part IV: Critical Theoretical Contexts. This inequality showcases that, rather than providing a general overview, the volume is more interested in a closer look on the particularities of Rushdie’s writings.

Part I: Life considers biographical approaches to Rushdie’s evaluation. This section serves as a useful starting point to the volume by analysing Rushdie’s identity

as a thinker and writer through others' and his own biographically inspired works. The first chapter, "Salman Rushdie, Biography, and Autobiography" by Pavan Kumar Malreddy, explores Rushdie's representation and self-representation. Comparing an (auto)biography to a Bildungsroman, Malreddy analyses the fictionality of both genres, thus emphasising (auto)biography's consciously and unconsciously thwarted truthfulness. This essay, by highlighting the controversial nature of objectivity, establishes an important cornerstone of scholarly analysis for all following writings in the volume, but especially for other biographically inclined articles, like Anshuman A. Mondal's "Salman Rushdie and the Fatwa."

Mondal's insightful chapter considers the fatwa, which is a monumental part of Rushdie's evaluation, from personal, religious, and societal perspectives. It aptly criticises the simplified assessment of the fatwa, while reminding readers about political performativity on all sides of the conversation. It is important to note, as is stated in the "Addendum" of the volume, that *Salman Rushdie in Context* was in an advanced stage of production at the time of the 2022 attack; therefore, the event is not part of the contributors' consideration, yet Mondal's analysis does not lose any of its complexity without this added context.

Ana Christina Mendes' essay in Part II: Literary and Creative Contexts describes Rushdie's diverse artistry, depicting his multimedia approach to storytelling. In "Salman Rushdie and Visual Art and Culture," Mendes explores Rushdie's use of visual narration, stating that "through the palimpsestic overlapping of trajectories and drawing on the visual to accentuate this imbrication of cultural multiplicities, the novel [*The Moor's Last Sigh*] points towards understanding the Indian postcolonial self as hybrid" (106). Mendes points out the way visual descriptions are used in *The Moor's Last Sigh* as well as in other works by Rushdie, to emphasise the intricacies of intermingling storylines, similarly to the layers of paint mixing and melting together on the canvas in the eponymous painting.

This chapter does not only provide a unique analytic perspective to Rushdie's works, but also demonstrates another noteworthy characteristic of the essay collection: Mendes, as well as many other contributors to *Salman Rushdie in Context*, chose to focus on Rushdie's lesser-known books or projects. Rushdie is mostly known for and even found his way into celebrity territory with *Satanic Verses* and its subsequent fallout. This naturally resulted in a boom in writings on the book's reception and the fatwa, which, although important conversations, oversaturated scholarly study on Rushdie. This is yet another task for an essay collection on Salman Rushdie to tackle, and

due to the diverse writing cast, *Salman Rushdie in Context* succeeds in creating a volume that strives for a more holistic view of Rushdie's *oeuvre*.

Part III of the book is devoted to the historical and cultural contexts of Rushdie's work. "Scheherazade and Her Cousins: Rushdie's Women Handcuffed to Contexts" by Feroza Jussawalla examines Rushdie's archetypal female characters and their inherent connection to storytelling. This essay demonstrates one of the greatest strengths of the volume, which is that its writings are in conversation with other considerations of Rushdie's work. Scholarly analysis does not exist in a vacuum, and by quoting, reacting to, and reflecting on other feminist criticisms, Jussawalla's essay is a balanced and layered approach to the subject matter. For students of English literature, Jussawalla's writing is a particularly noteworthy example of incorporating other critics' knowledge into one's own work.

Many parts of the essay collection are useful guides to students of literature, and most representative of this are essays in Part IV: Critical Theoretical Contexts. The three chapters in this section all elaborate on common theoretical frameworks in which Rushdie's interpreters place his narratives. In Harish Trivedi's "Salman Rushdie and Postcolonialism," staple figures and issues of the framework—Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, mimicry, hybridity—are mentioned, granting easy access to students who seek to learn more about the topic. Trivedi's essay recalls the idea of representation elaborated on by Malreddy in the first chapter, now examined through the lens of postcolonial studies. He astutely criticises the literary world's imposed characterisation of Rushdie as the quintessential postcolonial writer, while sensitively addressing the topic of liminality and otherness both in Rushdie's works and his life. Despite the complexity of the topic, Trivedi's descriptive approach helps in understanding the essay for readers of all levels of knowledge, resulting in an engaging read. In addition, the inclusion of essays from all critical positions is yet another testament to the book's diversity since several works do not (only) praise, but often problematise Rushdie as an author or thinker.

In Part V: Reception, Criticism, and Adaptation, Ursula Kluwick examines Rushdie's image as a postcolonial writer from the perspective of the literary market. In her essay, "Salman Rushdie's Audiences, Reception, and the Literary Market," she explores Rushdie's works from a quantitative perspective with the help of sales figures and publishing records. The topic of representation once again comes up in this chapter, especially through the data gathered from reader reviews on websites including Amazon and Goodreads. Readers' opinions show how the denominator

BENEATH HIS FEET

of a “(modern) classic” is allocated to Rushdie’s works, making a case for their inclusion into modern canon, thus appearing as books that are “important to read.” Phrases like this can also be observed in both positive and negative reviews, in which Rushdie is either praised or criticised for the complexity of his language—with reviewers referencing it either as an intellectual exercise or as mere self-importance. These opinions bring up the question of accessibility, and whether its presence or lack thereof can positively influence the popularity of an author. The creation of an atmosphere of intellectual exclusivity, either in an affectionate or derogatory sense, seems to be an important contributing factor in Rushdie’s perception in both academic and non-academic circles.

As it can be deciphered from this short overview, there are some common themes in the essays of *Salman Rushdie in Context*, including reflections on postcolonialism, canonisation and self-canonisation, objectivity and subjectivity. The recurring topics work to the book’s advantage by showcasing the varied methodology and writing styles of the contributing writers, thus truly providing an interdisciplinary experience. Salman Rushdie is a writer about whom much has been written over the years; however, this does not mean that there is no place in literary criticism for a work like this one. An author’s image continuously changes and evolves throughout their life and even after their death; therefore, the discourse around them does so as well—and this book, thanks to the work by its editor and contributors, showcases how we read and understand Rushdie in today’s day and age.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Júlia Takács graduated with a Master’s degree in English Studies from ELTE Eötvös Loránd University. Her MA thesis paper was concerned with Salman Rushdie’s work and its connections with postcolonial and privacy studies.