

## Closet Classics

# Joseph Anton: An Essential Companion to Understanding Rushdie

Balwant Bhaneja

A couple of generations from now when Salman Rushdie's name will be mentioned, it will remind people of the controversy that his novel *The Satanic Verses* generated in the 1990s. The storm over the book, that it blasphemed Islam led to a decade long fatwa on this Indo-British author's head by the Iranian theocratic regime. The book was banned in many countries. While Rushdie was on the run, in hiding from his opponents, the novel's Japanese translator Hitoshi Igarashi was murdered by a fatwa supporter at the University of Tsukuba near Tokyo.

Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton, a Memoir*, is a detailed account of those 11 years, most of it in hiding under the protection of British intelligence MI 5 team.

Rushdie does not want to fall into "forgettary" pointing to his tumultuous life while he can still remember incidents he jotted in his diary with dates, factual details and mixed feelings for those involved. He regrets the hurt he caused to those closest to him - his family and friends. Matters of world politics and publishing and how they affect writers and their creative process are drawn meticulously to develop a credible argument for the choices Rushdie had to make. The book also throws light on his prodigious literary output, especially the motivation and conditions under which the novels written while underground. They reveal his ability to concentrate under stress taking on the big questions of love, politics, and death with sardonic humour and insight.

Joseph Anton is the code name chosen by Rushdie for MI 5 intelligence security team. The name comes from his two literary favourites - Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekov. The members of his protection team however prefer to address him by monosyllable nickname Joe. The book's third person narrator Joe's voice is like that of an American detective in crime thrillers of Mickey Spillane, the protagonist fighting with undeterred resolve to turn around the wrong done to him. The third person narrative lends itself well in alleviating author's self-absorption that often creeps in memoir writing.

Rushdie's prose is crisp and direct. An example is the scene near the end of the book. His two MI 5 protectors who accosted him throughout his years in hiding, announce the lifting of his protection (632):

"Then there was nothing more to say. 'So what happens now?' he asked. How do we go about this? Bob and Nick stood up. 'It's been a privilege. Joe, excuse me, Salman.' Bob Sait said, and stuck out his hand. 'Good for you, mate, ' said Nick. He shook their hands, and they turned, and left. That was it. "

The announcement ending his 11 year predicament so abruptly with such a matter of fact statement makes Rushdie chuckle, informing the reader that a person can triumph adversity if one has persistence to fight long against a misfortune.

Rushdie defence campaign was started in 1989 by the London-based human rights organization ARTICLE 19 named after the free speech article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 12000 people signed his "defence campaign world statement", it became later the International Rushdie Defence Committee whose primary goal was to engage world politicians and governments to fight against the "armed censorship" with the support of PEN, National Union of Journalists, the UK Arts Council, the Society of Authors and Guild etc., making the issue of freedom of expression beyond his personal fight as an important cause worth fighting for. His alliance building with top European and North American literary and political figures shows him as a skilled tactician.

Rushdie's battle for survival was reinvigorated when he found that the calls for his public apology were becoming vociferous within the UK itself and echoed by fellow British intelligentsia. His critics were angry at the special protection accorded to him for so long and paid by the British tax-payer. The Guardian and The Telegraph newspapers of the time had eloquent op-eds and letters for and against him. Rushdie's literary friends Christopher Hitchens, Bill Buford, Martin Amis, Melvyn Bragg, Harold Pinter and Fay Weldon championed his cause while John Le Carré, William Shawcross, Germaine Greer, and John Berger criticize him as irresponsible, describing his writing of the Satanic Verses an act of public mischief.

Though initially British and American publishers decide to pull the Satanic Verses from stores and delay its paperback edition, this as they describe is in order "to protect their employees", Rushdie's indefatigable well-orchestrated fight leads his publishers' to withdraw the ban. Consequently, Rushdie is able to negotiate the book's international rights on his terms and makes for an interestingly story. Peter Meyer, a senior executive at Penguin on the importance of Rushdie's case, comments (201) : "How we responded to the controversy over the Satanic Verses would affect the future of free inquiry without which there would be no publishing as we knew it but also, by extension, no civil society."

Joseph Anton is a book of stories within a story like the Arabian night fables he grew up reading. This is consistent with similar non linear narrative structures of his other books; however in this case with the fear of death hanging over him and his intense desire to uphold the principle core to his vocation, Rushdie's elegant but sometime self-derisive tone describing the run from his unseen killers reads like a macabre fantasy.

Joseph Anton is about the zeitgeist. Rushdie's determination to use history as an important basis in his writing comes early in his search for a unique perspective for his fiction. Soon after graduating from Cambridge he realizes (55): "He was a historian by training and the great point of history, which was to understand how individual lives, countries, nations and social classes were shaped by great forces, yet retained, at times the ability to change the direction of those forces, must be also the point of his fiction."

Early Rushdie novels are written from the perspective of an émigré caught in the history of his partitioned homeland or escaping from it. He doesn't want to write in "cool Fosterian English" (referring to E.M. Foster's *A Passage to India*). To him, India is "hot and overcrowded, vulgar, and loud, it needed a language to match that he would try to match to create in his fiction." (56)

The novels are historically chronological -- *Midnight's Children* starts in the British India and takes us to and beyond the Partition of the sub-continent. Its two male protagonists Saleem

and Shiva are interchanged on the day of their birth, the day of India's Independence from British Rule and the creation of India and Pakistan in August 1947. Their lives however are like the two nations' uncomfortable relationship, unable to escape their intertwined historical and cultural roots. Pakistan's story of its military rulers is told more fully in Rushdie's next novel *Shame*. In the *Satanic Verses*, Rushdie moves on to explore the topic of immigrant experience through his two protagonists Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha the ill-fated victims of Air India mid-air bomb explosion who end up in the UK as refugees.

*The Moor's Last Sigh*, the fifth novel he wrote in hiding, Rushdie takes us back to India. The novel's over arching frame however is set in Andalusia Spain told in flashback through an Indian émigré Moraes Zogoiby passing his last days reminiscing about a country that was once his home. Pressures of globalization on the ruling nepotistic Indian Congress Party point to the emergence of right-wing political and economic elite providing Rushdie space to create strong characters like Moraes' socialite charismatic mother Aurora Zogoiby, symbolising Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, or the menacing Hindu nationalist, Raman Fielding, a former cartoonist who leads a gang of criminals and a political party with fascist hand in Mumbai. Rushdie's biting humour helps him to create larger than life characters unforgettable caricatures, that enable him to lift the veil on prevailing societal hypocrisies, and at the same time mask his pain and disillusionment at the erosion of secular Independent India that its founders envisioned.

The novel lays the ground for his next work - a post- modern novel, *The Ground Beneath her Feet* which is also written away in hiding. Set in the UK and the US, it is a story of the Mumbai born globe-trotting heroine Veena Apsara who metamorphoses into a mega international rock star giving Rushdie an opening to create rebellious characters once uprooted from their homelands discard the notion of conventional identity defined by one's gender, nation, and religion. Rushdie wants us to recognize that the *raison d'être* of an émigré is survival.

Women play a significant role in Rushdie's life - his mother, his former wives, and girl friends. There is a standoffish insensitivity and insecurity in the descriptions of these relations. His literary ambitions trump everything else. The author is intrigued by the marriage of his parents, Anis and Negin Rushdie, both previously married with children. He writes: "The mystery at the head of other peoples' intimacy, the incomprehensible survival at the heart of lovingness, that was a thing he learnt from his parents' lives." (567) Then he makes a profound connection of their unloving marriage with state of his own marital relationships:

"if both your parents had been previously divorced, and then lived unhappily 'loving' lives, you grew up with a belief in the impermanence of love, a belief that love was a darker, harsher, less comfortable, less comforting emotion than the songs and films said. And if that was true, then he, with his broken marriages - what was the lesson he was teaching his sons?" (567-8)

A friend tells him that remaining in an unhappy marriage is the tragedy, not the divorce. He laments the pain he caused the mothers of his children - "the two women who loved him better than anyone else, haunted him." He admits it was his own doing and his own responsibility: "Whatever wounds his life had inflicted on him, the wounds he inflicted on Clarrisa and Elizabeth were worse. He had loved them, his love had not been strong enough."

These are more or less the words he chooses for the dedication page of the book. A powerful confession from someone so self-absorbed. Writing about his fourth wife Padma in *Joseph Anton*, he confides (631): "And in the end he lost her, yes, but it was better to lose one's

illusions and live in the knowledge that the world was real and that no woman could make it what he wanted it to be. That was up to him.”

Alluding to the fanatic Ayatollahs, Rushdie is amused at the irony of those who demanded his death dying before him. In a valedictory speech he gave to the graduating class in Annadale on the Hudson New York in 1996, he proclaims: "Kneel before no man, stand up your right." (47) That is Joseph Anton's spirit and that of its author. Ultimately for him, "free speech is the whole ball game, free speech is life itself."

Sick and tired of mullahs, politicians, media and literati imputing motives to his actions, Rushdie rightly chooses in Joseph Anton to tell his story. His conclusion on his decade long fight is aptly summed up in four simple words: "Love humour, Hate religion". About his political shrewdness, Rushdie writes (355): "He became, having no alternative, in part an ambassador for himself. But politicking did come easily to him. He made his speeches and argued his cause and asked the world dignitaries to set their faces against their new and remote control terror... and to understand that if terrorism by fatwa was not defeated it would surely be repeated."

Rushdie with his magical realism prose has already set a very high standard for modern English fiction. With Joseph Anton, he sets the same high bar for creative non-fiction. It is an essential companion to understanding Rushdie's life and work.

*Balwant Bhaneja is author of six books including *Troubled Pilgrimage: Passage to Pakistan* (2013); *Quest for Gandhi: A Nonkilling Journey* (2009); and collaborating with Vijay Tendulkar, *Two Plays: The Cyclist and His Fifth Woman* (2006). He can be contacted at [billbhaneja@rogers.com](mailto:billbhaneja@rogers.com)*