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Review:

Casual readers, unfamiliar with Salman Rushdie, might expect East, West, to give them insights into cultural differences and divides. They will be disappointed. Rushdie is a writer who rejects the prosaic, refuses the predictable and resists convention. So my advice to the uninitiated is to set aside any expectations that the book will easily reveal the mystery of the proverbial dichotomy of East versus West. Instead succumb to the magic of Rushdie's prose and enjoy his inimitable, inventive and impish style as he takes you through a constellation of distinctive stories.

The section titled “East” is introduced by the story, “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies.” Reminiscent of the great Indian short story writer R. K. Narayan, the narrative moves quickly with a colloquial idiom. From Miss Rehana eating her chili pakoras and Mohammed Ali peddling his advice for would-be visa seekers to the ever-suspicious British consulate sahibs, Rushdie sketches an evocative cameo in quick, broad, calligraphic strokes as the plot hurries to its O. Henry climax. “Free Radio” continues this style and presents some of the horrors of the suspension of civil rights in 1970s India through the figure of the handsome fool.

Rushdie’s political reputation as the target of death threats often precedes his literary one. Readers looking for some kind of reference by the author on religious fundamentalism will find it in the “The Prophet’s Hair.” Narrated as a fable with archetypal characters such as the good daughter, the greedy merchant, the notorious king of thieves, we get a cautionary tale of the destructive power of obsessive faith and misplaced tradition. But Rushdie will not allow us to come to any easy conclusions about the corrupting force of fundamentalism. Rather, he offers “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers,” in the “West” section, which similarly castigates secular modernity. If the prophet’s hair is a symbol of religious extremism, then the ruby slippers stand as icons of a consumer fetishized society. Taking a dystopian view of the post-industrial, high capitalist west, Rushdie writes, “we may mortgage our homes, sell our children, to have whatever it is we crave” (102). Using the image of the ruby slippers, again a rich, mythic symbol, Rushdie mutes his ironic humor to give us rather sad, reflective comments on the arid materialism of our postmodern world.

“West” is further represented by a burlesque of Hamlet and an imagined love affair between Columbus and Queen Isabella. In contrast to the “East” stories, Rushdie employs his signature style of magical realism here. Elements of myth and fantasy mingle with historical, political and literary allusions. In “Yorick,” Hamlet, one of Western literature’s most recognized protagonists, is portrayed as a demonic, vicious and insecure child. With a nod to both Shakespeare and Sterne, Rushdie delivers a rambunctious, irreverent tale that has the bite and punch of absurd theater. Similarly in “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella,” he takes two prominent historical figures and engages them in an imagined relationship of passion, ambition and sadism. There is a savage satire in reducing the grand narrative of the discovery of the New World to the banality of an unconsummated relationship.

Most of Rushdie’s writing explores the politics of identity and culture through extravagant, prolific prose. The three stories in the concluding section, “East, West,” are vintage Rushdie. Each contests the boundaries and categories that attempt to contain East/East; First World/Third World; Self/Other; Here/There and Us/Them. As a postcolonial, migrant writer who himself has crossed borders and experienced cultural collisions, Rushdie’s fiction is populated with characters who are caught between cultures. For example, Dr. Simba, in The Satanic Verses, says “African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladesh, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans... we have been made again: but I say we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top” (Rushdie, 1992). Similarly, the narrators in “The Harmony of the Spheres,” “Chekov and Zulu” and “The Courter” are all migrants who are forced to negotiate their identities and re-think their location in the world. Rushdie’s greatness as a writer lies in his ability to consistently explore the larger themes of globalization and migrancy through the varied prisms of schizophrenic ravings, international terrorism, and the tender flirtation between a Russian porter and an Indian ayah (nanny). The young narrator in “The Courter” sums up the impact of crossing cultures with this emphatic statement: “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…I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose” (211).

The challenge in reading *East, West* is its protean style. Rushdie seems determined to use style itself as a metaphor for the multiple ways in which East and West engage each other and it takes awhile to orient oneself to the cadence and movement of the collection. Once, the reader recognizes that Rushdie revels in showcasing his encyclopedic knowledge and can go along for the ride, the power of his prose is irresistible.

For readers familiar with Rushdie, *East, West* comes as a bit of a surprise. *Midnight's Children, Shame, Satanic Verses and Moor's Last Sigh* are all luxurious, labyrinth-like tomes with layers of copious detail. In contrast *East, West* offers carefully circumscribed vignettes that demonstrate the author’s varied and prodigious sensibility. For readers unfamiliar with Rushdie, *East, West* will whet the appetite in preparation for the full course of the more substantial, epic-like style of his novels.

**Works Cited**


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