

Sound and *Fury*

Fury

by Salman Rushdie

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In an April 1999 interview with Charles McGrath, Booker prize winner author Salman Rushdie expressed the view that the subject of India seems to have temporarily departed from his mind in favour of puzzling over Western experiences. This preoccupation comes to fruition in his latest novel *Fury* released in the first week of September 2001. Rushdie's earlier novels tended to be allegories about a particular set of historical circumstances. *Midnight's Children* explored the story of its hero's spiritual decline as a parable of Indian history since independence in 1947, and *Shame* could be classified as a baroque incarnation of the history of a country that was 'not quite Pakistan', and *The Moor's Last Sigh* was a metaphorical display of India's recent political turbulence. *Fury*, like *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, focuses on the fevered triviality of contemporary life. *Fury* is very much an American novel, a satirical picture of a cluttered but vacuous American society in the opening years of the twenty-first century.

This novel contains diverse elements, delving into the dark side of human nature and concurrently focusing on a compelling bitter-sweet love story. The protagonist of *Fury* is Professor Malik Solanka, an historian of ideas and a doll-maker par excellence. He abandoned his wife and three year old child, Asmaan, in England because he found himself standing over them in the dead of night wielding a knife. Engulfed by fury and fear, he believes that he presents a danger to those he loves and arrives in New York City hoping to dissolve in the great metropolis, seeking above all the juxtaposition to his feelings of fury. Needless to say this is the most unlikely destination to find tranquility and he discovers that New York City is the melting pot for every degree of fury. There is a metaphoric fury raging in the city engulfing all its inhabitants – a fury of lust, greed and viciousness. Cab drivers are

consumed with fury, spewing out entertaining expletives. A serial killer or killers are at large, murdering women with a lump of concrete. Meanwhile Malik Solanka has a love-hate relationship with New York City. He is charmed by the vibrancy of the city, but, at the same time repelled by its decadence. His romantic liaison with the mega-beautiful Neela, whose roots lie in the far side of the world and whose serene exterior belies the deep-seated fury within, draw the Professor towards a different fury.

Rushdie weaves several plot genres together; a mystery, a romance, a satirical portrait of millennial New York, and a sci-fi revolutionary fantasy. However, this frenetic syncretism can at times disintegrate into a disappointing thinness. The mystery of the killer's identity perfectly epitomizes this. Rushdie skillfully presents a scenario that has the hallmarks of an exciting Hitchcockian suspense thriller with Malik Solanka believing that he could be the killer as he cannot recall his whereabouts on the nights of the killings. He has previously found himself wielding a knife over his sleeping wife and son and he is asked to leave restaurants after bursting into torrents of expletives that he is not aware of. This is further accentuated by the fact that it is reported that the killer was wearing a panama hat, something that is part of the Professor's *outré* attire. Sadly, this entire mystery plot falls to pieces when the perpetrators are summarily identified. Although Rushdie typically displays the artifice of plot structures this kind of anti-climax smacks of mishandling rather than post-modernist irony.

Fury is not one of Rushdie's best novels and this is most evident in the characters that are secondary to the city which is the impetus for the novel. While this makes an obvious point about the thinness of contemporary psychic life, characters appear to be vague biographical sketches rather than compressed ciphers. Solanka is the exception to this and we explore New York, which epitomizes the Western World, through his sensibility. Although Solanka's observations of American life might seem facile, Rushdie succeeds in drawing attention to such issues as America's selfish disregard of the consequences of its policies, its unresolved race issues, and the narcissistic reveling in consumer capitalism.

Rushdie is known as a master wordsmith and in this regard *Fury* does not disappoint. However, insistently prosaic references to renowned writers, films and singers feel superimposed and hamper the thrust of the narrative. *Fury's* attempts at slapstick humour are also uneven. Men bumping into things while looking at the beautiful Neela is funny the first time but misfires through repetition. The ending of the novel is lacklustre and contrived, as we are transported to the South Pacific, where a thinly disguised Fiji and the *coup* it experienced recently becomes a pivotal event in the denouement of the story. On the positive side, Neela's martyrdom in the end extols the significant role of the woman in fighting oppression. But Rushdie's

pastiche on the permanent ephemerality of consumer capitalism risks succumbing to the very hollowness that it seeks to represent.
