

Salman Rushdie's Cities: Reconfigurational politics and the contemporary urban imagination, Vassilena Parashkevova, Bloomsbury 2013, 256 pages, ISBN: 978-1-4725-2726-4, £22.99 (paperback).

Salman Rushdie's Cities: Reconfigurational politics and the contemporary urban imagination departs from other literary and urban theory critiques of the renowned author's works by examining the urban worlds within his novels in relation to one another instead of in isolation. This Parashkevova has managed successfully, by interrogating the cities and people in Rushdie's novels and the ways in which they create, change and interact with one another. She offers three ways of looking at cities: as tectonic, catoptric and specular configurations. These refer, respectively, to literally and metaphorically disruptive events, mirror- or illusionary effects, and the deceptive and seductive influence of these reflections. The weaving together of a coherent narrative built upon these urban configuration themes is the book's greatest strength, as well as a weakness. The refreshing originality of these critical paradigms is marred somewhat by technical or specialist terms she uses to label them and their lengthy and almost confusing descriptions. At some points in reading the book, it was necessary to return to the section explaining the various terms in order to understand what the author was saying.

Rushdie is perhaps chosen as the subject of the book just as much for himself as for his prodigious work. As with the cities in his novels, it is difficult to pigeonhole Rushdie's cultural identity and his influences. Parashkevova highlights the novelist's multifaceted character and work through previous efforts to situate him within particular boundaries, such as Asian writers on Britain. She also sprinkles throughout the book personal tidbits about the author and snippets from interviews and his various writings, so that as one progresses through the book, one is reading as much about the novelist and the contexts in which he wrote and placed his stories, as about the cities themselves. The insights into Rushdie add wonderfully to the reader's understanding of why and how he produces these urban landscapes, and the effects that these stories have had on the real world.

The opening scene of the book takes the reader to the city of Abbottabad in Pakistan, the hiding place and ultimately site of death of Osama bin Laden. Parashkevova skillfully describes how the assassination of bin Laden catapulted Abbottabad into complex geopolitical configurations, binding it henceforth with other cities – the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, as well as New York, London and Madrid, which experienced terror attacks traced back to bin Laden. Through the act of bin Laden's assassination, Abbottabad has become imbricated in ongoing narratives of those other cities, as well as of terrorism. This introduction sets the precedent for other chapter openings by placing Rushdie's writings into the wider context of real-world events and issues that influenced, or emerged from, or are reflective of his novels.

Fictionalised versions of real-world cities, such as Bombay and London, make repeated appearances in Rushdie's novels. Rushdie places and displaces them in the worlds within his stories, so that the cities are both identifiable and similar to their real counterparts, and alien and different from them. Parashkevova gives equal attention to the 'made-up', phantasmal cities, like Jahilia, which is nevertheless a recognizable subversion of cities such as Bombay, Mecca and London. These cities, teeming as they are in Rushdie's novels, are generated and regenerated by and from one another. The resulting effect is of mirror distortions, of seductive illusions and of explosive places.

In total, the book discusses seven of Rushdie's novels, although it also includes references to his other works. Each chapter focuses on one or two novels, and uses a literary device to anchor the discussions on Rushdie's cities. So, for instance, the chapter on *The ground beneath her feet* examines the use of the figurative and literal urban ground as shaky boundary between here and there, above and beyond, light and darkness. Parashkevova convincingly argues that the ground is meant to represent the divisive line between developed and developing worlds, between now and then, and that the ground's gravitational force is symbolic of ties, forced belonging and entrapment. Framing and partitions meanwhile describe Bombay's depiction in *Midnight Children* in the second chapter, where the Indian city is described as providing both the structure and the setting of, as well as a character in, the narrative. In these chapters and

throughout the book, Parashkevova draws on a wealth of literary and other sources, so the result is a rich and nuanced expedition into Rushdie's urban landscapes.

Readers do not have to have read and be familiar with Rushdie's novels to read this book. Parashkevova gets her points across through concise and adept description of plots, narratives and characters, so that non-Rushdie readers can follow and appreciate Parashkevova's arguments. Those who have read the novels, however, will benefit from a different perspective on the worlds within, and the ways in which the cities are made to reflect and to allure both the characters and the readers, and to cast them into upheaval and topple the order of things through tectonic configurations.

On the whole, the book's writing is smart and densely packed, and its pace fast and unrelenting. Perhaps the easiest and most engaging chapter is the one on Rushdie's most controversial novel. *Satanic Verses* was published in 1988 and its reception had been explosive, which ironically mirrors the nature and magnitude of some of the fictional events in the novel. The Rushdie Affair, as it has become to be known, set off widespread ire, especially from many Muslims worldwide, and sparked waves of violence in many cities, which Parashkevova notes as a case of life imitating art. Not all chapters receive equal attention; chapters 5 and 6 are considerably shorter than the others, while some, especially the first and third chapters, contain lengthy expositions.

Salman Rushdie's cities provides a critical lens into the portrayal and evolution of cities and its inhabitants in Rushdie's novels. It masterfully combines literary criticism, urban theory and political commentary, but this interdisciplinarity may also be a flaw. By attempting to cater to diverse groups, it may have fallen short of pleasing everyone. Technical language and jargon may appeal to literary types, while brief interjections of urban theory may mollify but not completely satisfy those interested in urban studies. Nevertheless this is an enlightening and interesting read, and provides a new, alternative approach to studies on urban representation and writing.

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