The Ground Beneath Her Feet Short Guide

The Ground Beneath Her Feet by Salman Rushdie

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Social Concerns

Although the fatwa, an injunction by the Ayatollah Kohmeini which demanded Salman Rushdie's execution, was partially reversed by the Iranian government in the fall of 1998, Rushdie still cannot travel with complete freedom and is always attended by armed guards. As a result, Rushdie has not been able to visit India for more than a decade. This, combined with his lengthy residence in the British Isles since he left the Indian subcontinent to enroll in the prestigious Rugby public school at the age of 13, has made him see himself as a kind of exile for the length of his writing life. In retrospect, he has observed, "I think actually there are certain things about me that just inescapably, 100 percent, will always be Indian." Because of this feeling, he has "spent a great deal of my life trying to understand and write about the world from which I came originally." In The Ground Beneath Her Feet, even as the central setting of the novel shifts from India to the United States, the city of Bombay—always a factor of fascination in Rushdie's work—remains as an image of an extraordinary place where "the golden glow of childhood" has grown in memory to provide a "solid ground" from which a creative exploration of the universe can begin.

Umeed Merchant, the photographer who functions as the primary narrative voice of the novel, and Ormus Cama, the singer/ songwriter of the rock group VTO, are both from families based in Bombay. Vina Aspara, the elusive/available consuming love of Merchant's life, the ultimate artistic and erotic partner for Cama and the most dynamic, captivating woman-as-celebrity in the world of the novel, spends the years in transition from childhood to womanhood there as well. The city is like a fourth musketeer for this trio, a living entity which Rushdie recalls from the 1950s and 1960s as "a very different place than the city that now exists—a very exciting town to grow up in. It was a very cosmopolitan town, much more so than other Indian towns. Like any great city, it acted like a magnet, and so people came to Bombay from all over India."

Midnight's Children (1981), Rushdie's widely lauded novel commemorating the emergence of an independent India after centuries of British rule, set a twin-track direction for Rushdie's writing, in which his hopes for a "plural, hybrid nation" clashed with the political and cultural forces of repression and intolerance. In The Ground Beneath Her Feet, mid-twentieth-century Bombay contains both the positive and negative elements which Rushdie associated with the evolving Indian nation. In a continuation of this dynamic, Bombay becomes a fixture of memory, while late twentieth-century New York is presented as an emblem of urban opportunity as well as a hellish carnival of grotesque and vicious combat.

Merchant, speaking for Rushdie's generation, says that "surfeit and claustrophobia made me leave" Bombay (which he also calls "Wombay"), but feels impelled to acknowledge that he grew up "in a great city, during what just happens to be its golden age," interspersing many exuberant descriptions of the city amidst the first two hundred pages of the novel. He invites the reader to: Imagine, if you will, the elaborately ritualised (yes, and marriage-obsessed) formal society of Jane Austen, grafted on to the stenchy, pullulating London beloved of Dickens, as full of chaos and surprises as a

rotting fish full of writhing worms; swash and rollick the whole into a Shandyand-arrack cocktail; colour it magenta, vermillion, scarlet, lime; sprinkle with crooks & bawds, and you have something like my fabulous home town. I gave it up, true enough; but don't ask me to say it wasn't one hell of a place.

Cama, who regards Bombay as "always something of a hick town, a hayseed provincial ville," is drawn to a New York which Rushdie sees as a great energy source as well as a site of mega-corruption, where a galaxy of bizarre types parade before jaded, rich, burnt-out hedonists frantically searching for a new thrill to enliven their narcotized lives. While celebrating the infinite possibilities available in Manhattan ("America below Fourteenth Street, looseygoosey and free as air, gave me more a sense of belonging than I'd ever felt at home") Rushdie also presents "the rusting decadence of the city at ground level" where the streets are teeming with "shoulder-barging vulgarity" that evokes "a third-worldfeel" due to the poverty, the traffic, the slo-mo dereliction of the winos and the cracked-glass dereliction of too many of the buildings, the unplanned vistas of urban blight, the ugly street furniture.

Joining a tradition of idealistic vision exemplified by Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, Rushdie yearns for "the dream America everyone carries around in his head" while decrying the "hard hand" of American might which he holds responsible for the debacle in Vietnam, the assassinations and riots of the late 1960s and an epidemic of apparently random violence running rampant through the world in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Connected to but not directly caused by misuse of American power is a pervasive contamination of the social sphere, characterized by symptoms he identifies in Great Britain ("This England, addled by mysticism, mesmerized by the miraculous, the psychotropic, in love with alien gods, has begun to horrify him") or epitomized by the destruction of the town of Tequila in Mexico due to a massive earth tremor. The literal instability of the earth's surface—the ground beneath the feet of all the world's population—is Rushdie's encompassing image for the social dysfunction that permeates the cosmos of the novel.

Techniques

The literary scholar James Wood has described Rushdie's books as "international language lakes," noting that "the pun is central to Rushdie's metamorphic and metaphoric vision" and that "punning is the engine" of The Ground Beneath Her Feet as it encourages the reader to make connections between the cross-cultural currents that flow through the narrative. Rushdie himself has said that the novel is about "cataclysms in people's lives" and the ways in which Rushdie dissects, divides, resurrects and reconstructs words and sentences is an act of unraveling and reassembling similar to the changes wrought by ruptures in the social fabric or in the earth's surface. To put it in another way, the syntactic and linguistic strategies of the novel are an analogue for the actions of the central thematic idea.

Rushdie has observed that "in terms of rock and roll music," he "found a new and very liberating and rich language to write in" and the various voices of the rock realm are like separate melodies in the full orchestration of the novel. Punning toward double meaning is at the crux of this method. For instance, one of the VTO songs is called "At the frontier of the skin," and it deals both with the separation of lovers and the difficulty of crossing national boundaries.

Another, which reoccurs throughout the narrative, "It's not supposed to be this way," is both a lament for the obstacles lovers face and a commentary on the blighted history of the last decades of the twentieth century.

The "Quakershaker" songs are "rants in praise of the approach of chaos" and evocations of the clash of emotions in a volatile relationship. The song of the book's title is a lyric profusion of worship ("What she touches, I will worship it.") and a prophetic vision of impending doom. "Tongue Twistin"'—which is described as a "simple song of teenage disappointment"—is also addressed to India and the problems of separation from home ground. Reviewers like Wood have stated that on the evidence of the lyrics Rushdie provides, he "should cleave to his day job," but in his own defense, Rushdie has Merchant say, "Set down on the page without their music, they seem kind of spavined, even hamstrung," and the lyrics are not meant to operate as climactic moments but as a part of much larger linguistic/musical matrices, rife with allusions.

The name of the group VTO is a representation of (among other things): Vertical Take Off Vina To Ormus V (for peace); T (the two of them); O (love, their love) V ... T ... Ohh.

Victoria Terminus Orchestra (a building in Bombay) Vina is a version of the goddess Venus; Ormus is not only Orpheus but, from Cama, an emblem of the Kama Sutra. There is an intricate pattern of cultural doubling with songs so that Merchant thinks "Hang on Sloopy, come on come on" when Aspara asks him to wait for her. An Aspara imitator is called a "sad-eyed lady of the broken lands." Cama and Aspara are likened to John Lennon and Yoko Ono when agencies of the government attempt to deport him ("the white elephant of an apartment on the Upper West Side" recalling the Dakota; the album known as the Peace Ballads).

The most famous books of the era have been written by their main characters, as in Nathan Zuckerman's (not Philip Roth's) Carnovsky; Kilgore Trout's (not Kurt Vonnegut's) science fiction; Sal Paradise's (not Jack Kerouac's) "odes to wanderlust;" Charles Citrine (not Saul Bellow) writing a hit movie called Caldofreddo (a multiple pun on The Godfather and its characters). Dope peddlers in Merchant's neighborhood are named for the Damon Runyon characters in the musical Guys and Dolls (Harry the Horse, Sky Masterson, Nathan Detroit).

When Merchant escapes from a particularly perilous photographic assignment, his thoughts are rendered in an imitation of Molly Bloom's concluding soliloquy from James Joyce's Ulysses. Merchant's photographic mentor is named Hulot for the protagonist of Jacques Tati's famous film, and the impresario Yul Singh, a blind man, is accompanied by his optician Tommy J. Eckleburg, a reference to T. J. Eckleburg whose name and eyes appear on a sign near the road between the fashionable estates of West Egg and the Manhattan of The Great Gatsby. What Merchant has called "my runaway bus of a narrative"—replete with references to a melange of epochs, cultural movements, religious systems, bizarre personages and wild wordplay—has too many tracks to be easily contained and cannot be said to be unified or completely coherent, but this is as much a strength as a limitation. Rushdie is ready to follow his imaginative inclinations in whatever direction they seem to be moving, and the gain in energy and interest may be said to exceed the moments of confusion and ambiguity that inevitably occur in the course of the 575-page novel.

Themes

Rushdie has been described as the man who "redrew the literary map of India."

The enormous ambition required by a project of those dimensions is evident in the complex intermixture of themes in The Ground Beneath Her Feet. His vision of the human universe at the end of the twentieth century is one of chaos and instability verging on the edge of cataclysmic, even apocalyptic occurrences. Using the recent prevalence of major earthquakes as a sign of psychic disorder, Rushdie laces the narrative with literal, graphic descriptions of tremors rocking the deceptively placid surface plane upon which people unknowingly walk with confidence, leading toward a pervasive feeling of unease as the foundation structure of society is revealed as rotten and unstable.

Significantly, Rushdie has described his ordeal during the darkest days of the fatwa as "terribly bewildering. I had to find my feet again," and explains that after this shattering of his life's frame, he "had to learn to fight back. I had to find the strength to get back to writing." In a classic sense, Rushdie wrote to control chaos, using art as a means of re-establishing the order of his life. Similarly, the protagonists of The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Cama, Aspara and Merchant, employ their artistic attributes in an effort to resist the terrestrial uncertainty of their lives, a task complicated by the freedom and the free forms of their chosen professions.

Characteristically capitalizing on the multiple meanings he relishes, Rushdie has cast Cama and Aspara as the core of an exceptional rock band so that they are actually both contributing to and seeking to control the rocking and rolling of the milieu in which they operate by gathering, absorbing and focusing the wild impulses of energy flowing around them. Rushdie has called rock music "the first globalized cultural phenomenon," spoken of it as "the soundtrack of my life" and maintained that during the Vietnam War music was "simply affirming love during a time of death."

These comments indicate the importance of rock music as a crucial social construct during the second half of the twentieth century, but Rushdie is also interested in music as a primal artistic impulse which expresses a person's "heart's truth" and which can open the doors of perception for an avid audience. Speaking as an omniscient commentator, Rushdie remarks: Our lives are not what we deserve; they are, let us agree, in many painful ways deficient. Song turns them into something else. Song shows us a world that is worthy of our yearning, it shows us our selves as they might be, if we were worthy of the world.

Rushdie makes his meaning clear shortly after this paean by positioning his narrative imagination at "the gate of the inferno of language" thereby locating song, with speech, at the threshold of human consciousness. On many occasions, Rushdie has emphasized his life-long commitment to a language-driven view of existence, mentioning that "when I was growing up, everyone around me was fond of fooling around with words. It was certainly common in my family, but I think it is typical of

Bombay, and maybe India." In The Ground Beneath Her Feet, the construction of a song becomes an analogue for the arrangement of words in a sentence, the grouping of units of meaning to reveal some important versions of truth about the world.

In citing Bob Dylan as one of his earliest influences, Rushdie talks about Dylan's music in terms of its "strange phrasings" and "the extraordinary surrealism of his lyrics," and he accepts the challenge of Dylan's well-known songs as a standard by frequently presenting Cama's songs not only in their final form but also in their preparatory stages. The songs grow out of his response to the phenomena of the world and the signals from his subconscious mind. In addition to claiming that rock is an international language, Rushdie has also asserted that "Rock is the mythology of our time" and that he found it "interesting to contrast it in the novel with that older mythology." The story of the love-relationship of Cama and Aspara is drawn from the Orpheus/Eury dice myth, including particu larly prominently the power of Orpheus' song to inspire creatures to vivid wakefulness; to draw light from darkness; to arouse jealousy among the Gods (who are reduced to corporate manipulators); to continue on into eternity after Orpheus' death. "You can destroy the singer, but you can't stop the song," Rushdie insists, as Orpheus/ Cama follows Eurydice/Aspara toward Hades' realm after she has vanished during the earthquake in Mexico.

The mythic parallel is also the basis for a wider doubling motif as Cama is born after the death of his twin brother. He is led into a shadow world where he "hears" songs not yet composed on earth and is contacted by entities from another world set at an oblique angle to the "reality" of the novel.

The realistic detail of the corporeal world in The Ground Beneath Her Feet is built on a series of familiar figures and references, often set slightly askew. For example, John Kennedy survives the assassination attempt in Dallas, but is killed with his brother—now President—Robert Kennedy by one bullet in 1968. As Rushdie observes, "I may have pushed it to the limit with two sets of twins, and indeed, a twin world, an entirely parallel world as well as the real world."

The intricate interweaving of the central themes of The Ground Beneath Her Feet—what Rushdie has called "the full orchestra"—required the creation of a clear narrative consciousness to give the reader a fixed position amidst the strains of the story.

Umeed Merchant, who functions as an involved and a semi-omniscient narrator, and the singing spirit of VTO, Ormus Cama and Vina Aspara, are all developed with Rushdie's fondness for massive descriptive detail, for elaborate scenes of characters in action, for extensive examinations of internal psychological motivation and with a solid grounding in terms of family history and environmental/cultural forces. As usual, their characterization begins with their names, carefully, even lovingly chosen in accordance with Rushdie's response to Uma Chandhuri in an interview in 1983: It is impossible to overestimate the importance of names. I think they affect us much, much more profoundly than we think.

You know, people become their names or change them if they seem not to fit. Why do you think it is that Hollywood made people change their names? It was in order to provide names to which people could then fit. Norma Jean had to become Marilyn, you know, because people wouldn't swoon over Norma Jean. So you see that naming has always been understood as being something absolutely crucial to perception. So that's why I've very interested in naming and I take enormous amounts of care about naming.

Following the pattern of doubling, Umeed Merchant is the only son of parents both coming from families named Merchant.

Vasim Vasqar's family was originally named Shettys, before his grandfather "Englished it up, standardized it," and the "V" is a phonetic adjustment from the "W" of its Urdu linguistic origins. His mother Ameer (called "Ammi" by Umeed in his version of mommy) Merchant carries the kind of surname that in India denotes an ancestor's occupation, as in the Cashondeliveris of Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh (1995). As a member of the generation that came of age as the British Raj ended (Umeed is born in 1942), his name expresses his parent's goals, Umeed = Hope, a feminine noun. Now he is called "Rai," Vina's pet name for him which means "Prince," but also carries the meanings of "Desire" ("a man's personal inclination") and "Will" ("the force of a man's character"), and, in the United States ("that mighty democracy of mispronunciation"), "Ray," as in "Hey, Ray." Sharing Lee Smith's sentiment that "All the characters are always you and not you," Merchant is designed to reflect many of Rushdie's own ideas, especially when his personality is submerged into the philosophical excursions that occur throughout the narrative.

In his profession as a still photographer, he is trying to capture, or eternalize, a crucial instance of reality. "A photograph is a moral decision," Merchant says, "A photographer can generate new meaning." The seriousness of his enterprise is reflected in his opinion that the photographer takes from his subjects "their light and their darkness too, which is to say, their lives." He recognizes his responsibility to a kind of "truth," insisting that he is attempting to achieve "clarity, of the actual, of the imagined" and that his images are "gestures of respect."

His earnest goals are immensely complicated by the fact that he is deeply in love with Aspara and very sympathetic toward Cama.

"I am trying to set down the true-life account of the life of a man," Merchant insists, and his mixture of skepticism and idealism makes him a reliable and generally appealing narrative voice. Like everyone else who knows her closely, as well as the mass of people who see her from the distorting distance that a celebrity superstar's life directs, Merchant is unable to escape the power of Aspara's galvanic and dangerous aura of force.

Aspara is the most dynamic character in the novel, a great fire source emitting light and heat that can electrify a milieu or incinerate it. Rushdie is unrestrained in his descriptions, likening her to a supernova, a redeeming angel ("Our Lady of the Stadiums, our arena madonna"), the first bacchante ("as female Dionysus"), Helen of

Troy and other fantastic figures from history and mythology. As a heroine of the postmodern age, her background is crosscultural: born in India, raised in an upcountry "holler" in the Virginia hills, then back to Bombay, London, New York and international acclaim. Born Nissy Shetty, then altered to Nissy Poe, she refashions herself as "Vina" from the Indian word for lyre; "Aspara" from "apsaras, a swanlike water nymph." As Merchant sees her, she has constructed, using "her incredible will, her fabulous hunger for life, and her voice," a new being who has refused "the customary marginalized role of the exile," thus creating a persona who epitomizes classic virtues while projecting the essence of the contemporary. To avoid making her a too-perfect paragon of feminine attributes, Rushdie has given her a down-toearth and often profane vulgarity. "Vina's smart mouth, her lippiness" counteracts the image of "the goddess, the Galatea with whom the whole world would fall, as Ormus fell, as I fell, in love." This does not reduce her attraction, but makes her more approachable and reinforces her strengths as an independent woman. Declaiming on the elusive quality of rock lyrics: What do they know, nobody ever gets rock lyrics right, anyway. For years I thought Hendrix was a faggot. You know, 'scuse me while I kiss this guy.

Or berating Merchant for his preoccupation with photography: Look at your life, Rai, where you go, what you do. You dive with your camera into the cesspit of the human race, so obviously you think we're all made of shit. Then back home with the flat-chested knickerless clothes-ponies, that's hardly an improvement, is it.

Or dismissing a new group: Will you listen to the low-grade grumpiness in this grouchy kid. Man, we had high octane. We had rage. To whine about guys?, to complain about mom 'n' pop?, just wasn't in it.

This technique gives Aspara a bracing immediacy that balances all the descriptions of her as a celebrity/Goddess transforming the lives of her fans. Still, while Merchant is a fully-formed character, Aspara is seen almost entirely from the outside, removing her from the center of the narrative focus, and Cama is placed almost beyond it, as befits a man who is often located near the membrane separating the world of the novel from a parallel or alternative reality.

Rushdie has conceived of Cama as an incarnation of the mythological heros Orpheus and Prometheus, a human blessed/ cursed with a gift so extraordinary that the "Gods," or mysterious forces of the universe, feel threatened and conspire to destroy him. As a man, he is awed and exalted by the discovery of his powers; as a sort of superman, he is alienated and lonely in the human world, yearning for some other realm where he ("the recluse; the silent one") might find serenity. His exceptionality is apparent from birth. He emerges unexpectedly after "the still-born corpse of Ormus's elder brother Gayo, his non-identical, dizygotic twin." He is described as "making the strange, rapid finger movements with both hands which any guitarist could have identified as chord progressions" moments after his appearance.

Throughout his life, his brother Gayomart operates as a kind of dark shadow, seemingly beckoning him to follow into another "reality," a region where Cama gains access to all the songs of the rock era, whether they have actually been written yet or remain in the

future. His life is marked by reversals—sound into silence; public acclaim and introspective retreat; celibacy or erotic ecstasy—as his singing at the age of five ("so sweetly that birds had woken, thinking it was dawn" in accord with the Orpheus myth) is shut down for fourteen years when his older brother Khusro (called Cyrus) tries to smother him. The "pent-up melodies" in his body cause him to sway and twitch as he walks until Aspara sets them free when they meet. As Merchant remembers him: If I say that Ormus Cama was the greatest popular singer of all, the one whose genius exceeded all others, who was never caught by the pursuing pack, then I am confident that even my toughest-minded reader will readily concede the point. He was a musical sorcerer whose melodies could make city streets dance and high buildings sway to their rhythms, a golden troubadour the jouncy poetry of whose lyrics could unlock the very gates of Hell.

Rushdie is delivering an apostrophe to the powers of Art here, and he works in the body of the novel to use his own language to support and effectuate his claims for Cama.

As befits a novel of such epic dimensions, there is a sizeable gallery of subsidiary characters, many of them vivid but few of them developed beyond their functional traits. Rushdie spends some time with Cama's parents, depicting them as protoIndian Anglophiles, and writes intense caricatures of Aspara's parents and foster parents. Various figures in the rock world— promoters, exploiters, supporters, detractors-—make effective targets for Rushdie's satiric wit. Since he is delineating a social matrix that is determinedly unconventional, the grotesquely and exaggeration of characteristics is appropriate and intriguing.

Several "characters" are designed as parodic projections of familiar types or actual people slightly displaced, such as the rock critic called Madonna, or the cultural studies professors in thrall to the celebrities they endlessly analyze and bitterly envy and resent.

A number of sympathetic minor characters remain little more than victims of the wreckage, decent people destroyed by the massive forces unleashed by natural, supernatural and supernal powers.

Key Questions

When an author achieves international acclaim, there is bound to be a counterreaction to the general chorus of praise. In Rushdie's case, given the controversial nature of his work and the number of political figures (Ayatollah Kohmeini, Indira Gandhi, Bal Thackeray) who have attacked him, critical reactions have been primarily aimed at the ideological component of his writing, or in the case of some British writers (Roald Dahl, John le Carre, Germaine Greer) at supposed defects in his character.

More recently, however, literary critics in India and in the United States have offered some strong opinions about weaknesses in his work. George Steiner, for instance, called The Ground Beneath Her Feet "retro in every sense of the word" because it required "a lot of reading to achieve what those geniuses [of early modernism] achieved earlier and better." This is relatively mild compared to the denunciation delivered by the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra who accused Rushdie of leading Indian writers in English to discard "such considerations as economy, structure, suspense, irony, plausibility of events, coherence of character, psychological motivation, narrative transition—in short everything that makes the novel an art form." A consideration of how each of these crucial features operates in The Ground Beneath Her Feet would be a useful way to look at the novel as a whole.

On extra-literary terms, Mishra also indicts Rushdie for being "the colonial child who has had to reinvent himself for the West," a point possibly too involved with parochial Indian politics for a Western reader to assess. But Mishra's accusation that Rushdie has disregarded what some might call the classical English novel form in favor of approaches like those of Gunter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez is echoed by more sympathetic critics like Wood, who has observed that "Allusion is elusive in Joyce, but it is only allusive in Rushdie."

The implication is that Rushdie's references aren't effective beyond their immediate associations. Rushdie addressed this point to an extent in discussing his work when he was asked, "Do you ever worry that using so many culturally specific references will leave many readers unable to understand what you're trying to say?" He replied that he uses them "as flavoring," and elaborated, "It's fun to read things when you don't know all the words," adding that for the curious and attentive reader "weird words excite them" and lead to a "whole new weapon in her arsenal." In addition, he has maintained that he does not use linquistic virtuosity as "acrobatics" or "fancy footwork" but "because it seems to me to be a way of saying something truthful." The "truth" he is seeking is often personal and a line of inquiry that attempts to reconcile his individual perceptions with important elements in the novel could be profitable.

1. Umeed Merchant, discussing his feeling about India, says, "I am trying to say goodbye, goodbye again, goodbye a quarter century after I physically left." His sense of displacement is somewhat ameliorated by his notion that "Indians get everywhere, isn't it? Like sand." What aspects of Indian cultural life are placed in other parts of the world in the course of the novel?

2. The novel begins on Valentine's Day, 1989, the last day in the life of Vina Aspara. This is also the day on which Rushdie went into hiding after the declaration of the fatwa. Why might Rushdie have decided to use that day as the starting point?

3. There are some incidents in the novel which are drawn directly from the plot outlines of classic films, including Luis Bunuel's The Exterminating Angel, Jean- Luc Godard's Breathless and Francois Truffaut's Jules and Jim. Merchant's mother Ameer is a builder whose projects include the renovation of a Bombay cinema, and there is a passage which lists the original names of many film figures who are well known by their screen name (i. e., Frances Ethel Gumm, a.k.a. Judy Garland). What is Rushdie trying to achieve with these and other cinematic references?

4. Bono of the rock group of U2 has set the title song to music. If the recording is available, consider how effectively he has captured the spirit of the lyrics. In light of the nearly universal dismissal of Rushdie's lyrics by reviewers, how well do they work as poetry without any musical accompaniment?

5. Rushdie states that "rock and roll is a thing that came from America." How successful is he in accurately capturing life in the United States in his chapters on Aspara's childhood in Virginia, and in his evocation of various neighborhoods and social milieus in New York City?

6. A number of reviewers have pointed out that Vina Aspara's death and the public response to it parallel the death of Princess Diana of England. Rushdie mentioned that he wrote the passage prior to Diana's fatal accident, but then decided to "actually rewrite it on a bigger scale." There are many familiar historical events either presented slightly at a slant or altered more extensively. How do these manipulations contribute to the development of the social fabric of the novel?

7. Rushdie has created a series of flawed "fathers" in his work, and although he had a kind of reproachment with his own father just before the elder Rushdie died, his depiction of the fathers of the protagonists is hardly flattering. Consider how each man is presented and what Rushdie is trying to accomplish in each case.

8. While discussing The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Rushdie stated "I'm writing a novel about cataclysms in people's lives, about earthquakes, about the fact that the world is provisional." Almost all of the most prominent characters are victims of violence. What is the effect of this much human destruction?

9. How well does the extended metaphor of the earth's instability work to inform the central themes of the novel? How effectively is it linked to the Orpheus/ Eurydice myth?

10. Rushdie has summarized his intentions by saying that he "wanted to write about the music I grew up with. But mainly, you know, what I set out to do was write a love story." How successful is he in The Ground Beneath Her Feet?

Literary Precedents

In an interview with Una Chaudhri, Rushdie mentioned that the three novels "quoted most often as lying behind Midnight's Children are Tristram Shandy, The Tin Drum, and One Hundred Years of Solitude," and added, "as for other influences, well, Joyce, for a start. And Swift and Sterne," while including Henry Fielding's Tom Jones for its impressive plot. The combination of relatively realistic narrative elements with scenes and characters that stretch the conventional definition of "reality" in the novels that Rushdie identifies as predecessors for his great early work are evident in The Ground Beneath Her Feet. Rushdie's description of Tom Jones as a novel with "this enormous edifice which seems to be so freewheeling, rambling" seems like a general model for his structural approach.

Joyce remains a significant influence on Rushdie "because Joyce shows you that you can do anything if you do it properly," a goal that may be difficult to achieve but which sets a high standard for an author who also wants to combine the multiple details of everyday life, as Joyce did in Ulysses, with an extended field of allusive elements presented with an exuberantly digressive sense of linguistic possibility. In addition, Joyce—exiled from Ireland and Dublin—brought his country to life in Ulysses, as Rushdie does for Bombay.

Among more recent authors, James Wood has identified Robert Calasso as an important influence, citing Calasso's work on Greek and Indian myth which Rushdie has championed, while Wendy Steiner, in a critical essay, compares Rushdie to Thomas Pynchon and T. S. Eliot as part of a "brotherhood" which devised a kind of metafiction dependent on what she calls "esoteric 'in' jokes in order to see the meaninglessness of modern experience."

Wood feels that in spite of the postmodern attributes of The Ground Beneath Her feet, "the tradition from which Rushdie gains most inspiration, though it might seem to be modernistic, is in fact the eighteenthcentury novel, with its buoyant, cheerfully external, picaresque profusions." Like Lawrence Sterne, Gunter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rushdie is original in ways that make his writing precedent-setting rather than the continuation of any particular literary tradition.

Related Titles

The Ground Beneath Her Feet is a transitional book for Rushdie. In Midnight's Children, his narrator expressed the feeling that he was "floating in the amniotic fluid of the past." Rushdie's books since that time have dealt with his origins in and subsequent exile from the country of his birth, culminating in the probing, long-range account of the history of the subcontinent in The Moor's Last Sigh.

At this point in his writing life, Rushdie stated that he had the "feeling that I've done enough, if you like, or enough for the moment," and that he wanted to write about "the same movement that I've made—that's to say, migrate into the West." This is actually a continuation of one of his abiding concerns, the theme of trans-cultural migration as a prominent feature of late-twentieth-century life, and The Ground Beneath Her Feet emphasizes the hybrid mix of characteristics which Rushie regards as one of the most admirable aspects of the Bombay milieu he celebrates in many books. When he calls it "his first American novel," he is referring to the vital past/present, local/ international, high art/pop culture fusion that he has offered in previous works, as well as to the specifically "American" elements he is introducing.

The short story collection East, West (1995) challenged what Rushdie regards as artificial and illusory walls of separation between regions, and the story "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers"—its title derived from the reference to The Wizard of Oz which Rushdie once called his first literary influence—anticipates the rapacious market economy of the rock world in The Ground Beneath Her Feet. While it is less directly politically focused than books like Shame (1984) or The Satanic Verses (1988), there are still a number of sharp commentaries on political corruption and repression in contemporary society.

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Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
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