

# B O O K

OF THE FORTNIGHT

## The Moor And I

*Rushdie's splendid egoism surfaces once again*



There is a genus of submentals that has consigned Salman Rushdie to the same fate as his *Satanic Verses*. These critics, these Khattam Shuds to his sea of stories, would have it that ever since St Valentine's Day six years ago, when Teheran sent him a distinctly unromantic message, the writer himself had somehow cooperated in his own imprisonment. And, they say, in its rather convenient fallout.

His publishers and translators round the globe have been stabbed to death, 70 Iranian intellectuals in exile who supported him are living in fear for their lives, and Britain has had to cough up a million pounds yearly on his security, but Salman? What's he got to beef about?

There is history, politics and religion mixed with autobiography in Rushdie's latest book. But he is a writer first, with a writer's contempt for mere reportage

The picture they present is of a Rushdie emerging from his exerciser, his lazy games of Nintendo, concerts by the Rolling Stones, and august lectures in fatwa-free zones in the European Union, to dash off the occasional story usually starring himself.

And the stories? Why, they're only simplistic fables in disguise, from behind which the writer makes sly feints at the powerful families of the subcontinent just because that is no longer home. And the attacks come from the mouths of characters who are really no more than *baniyas* with attitude and an imperfect grasp of English.

Such a frivolous man this Salman is, no? And not getting killed even for six years also!

It's a situation that Rushdie, with his huge enjoyment of human absurdity, would probably relish, were it also not a complete denial of what literature, especially his, is all about.

What *The Moor's Last Sigh* is all about is coming to terms with the knowledge that "in the end, stories are what's left of us, we are no more than the few tales that persist". The realisation comes to the last of the Zogoibys at the behest of his mother ("Face facts," Aurora Zogoiby tells him, "just thinkofy"), but





only after he comes to understand a complicated series of paintings she spends a lifetime doing.

Aurora, heiress to a Christian family of spice merchants and married to a Spanish Jew, is also a gifted painter, and it is art she resorts to when communicating with her son. In a series of images of Boabdil, the tragic figure of the last Moorish ruler of Granada, she mirrors the hero's own chronicle of degradation, but it is only after her death that he realises how closely art imitates life.

There is much autobiography in Rushdie's latest book, much history, much politics, as also the occasional dissertation on religion, but he is a writer first, with a writer's contempt for mere reportage, and he never fails to pull himself

## EXCERPT

**T**he Moor paintings were a myth around a hybrid nation, my mother's attempt to use Arab Spain to reinvent India

up: "Please. This is no time to discuss theology!"

Indeed not. Rushdie chose long ago to stay on the side of the profane, and in the end *The Moor's Last Sigh* can be appreciated at the level of pure literature.

Well, all right, the literature of politics, then. The inclusion of characters such as the cartoonist-turned-politician who is named after a writer of 18th-century England, and the references to Battering Rams and famous Nordic armaments houses are hardly veiled, and anyone looking for trouble in this book is going to find it.

But Rushdie is half in love with this "magic race" he makes fun of, and surely, loving something gives you the inalienable right to criticise it. Besides, there's no reason why "nowhere-and-no-community men" like the Moor Zogoiby and Rushdie himself should soft-pedal on issues that they have devoted significant time and trouble to.

Zogoiby has, after all, discovered the secret about fear: "It's an absolutist. Either, like a bullying tyrant, it rules your life with a stupid blinding omnipotence, or else you overthrow it, and its power vanishes in a puff of smoke."

What else has Zogoiby-Rushdie learnt? That there are no horoscopes determining our lives, that's just human vanity. "Our fates are here on earth. There are no guiding stars."

And so, no tragedy either. Rushdie is never lugubrious. There is laughter in even the Moor's sigh as he turns for a last look at his kingdom, to the accompaniment of much berating from his mother for not being man enough to keep it.

There is magic, too, and always the element of the fabulous. "Life is fantastic," Zogoiby's artist friend exhorts him to believe. "Forget those damn fool realists!"

Just thinkofy, maybe we should. •

**Prita Maitra**

**The Moor's Last Sigh** by Salman Rushdie. Published by Jonathan Cape. Price: (Rupa) 6.95 pounds.

## SHORT TAKES

### The trouble with MPs



Why do Indian MPs perform so dismally in Parliament? How much does it cost to get to Parliament? Do MPs misuse their privileges? In this fairly exhaustive work, A. Surya Prakash turns the spotlight on India's Parliament, examines the dilemmas of MPs and shows them up for what they are, warts and all.

A former bureau chief of *Indian Express*, the author has had a ringside view of national politics and Parliament for over a decade. He critically examines the role and functions of MPs and suggests remedial measures to enhance the relevance of Parliament in a country like India.

**What Ails Indian Parliament? An Exhaustive Diagnosis** by A. Surya Prakash. Published by HarperCollins. Price: Rs 395.

### Philosopher's tome



Writer, politician, diplomat and philosopher Karan Singh's new collection of essays reflects his views on such diverse subjects as tourism and world peace, integral education and the crisis in Hinduism.

Releasing the book at Delhi's India International Centre, Dr Singh related that in the course of his travels he is often asked why a country that gave birth to thinkers and philosophers of the calibre of Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi is in such a sorry state today. He confessed that he doesn't have an answer, but these essays take a look at the problems we face as we draw to the end of the 20th century.

**India And The World** by Karan Singh. Published by Har-Anand. Price: Rs 250.

### State of the island



This collection of 19 short stories out of Sri Lanka looks at the contemporary political situation in the island state. Arasanayagam's writing has been described by Michael Ondaatje as containing "some of the most powerful and truthful stories to come out of Sri Lanka". But political correctness apart, these stories do what a thousand news despatches cannot: convey the horrors of civil war and the surreal mess that a nation of Buddhists has been reduced to.

**All Is Burning** by Jean Arasanayagam. Published by Penguin. Price: Rs 125.