THE EMPIRE KNIGHTS BACK?: REFLECTIONS ON SALMAN RUSHDIE'S KNIGHTHOOD

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On 16 June 2007, Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning monarch of Britain and head of the Commonwealth, named the recipients of her 80th birthday honours, and among them was – honoured for his 'services to literature' - Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay to Indian parents, today a resident of New York City and, by a twist of colonial history, a British citizen (see: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Knighthood_for_Rushdie_another_NRI_in_CBE_list/articleshow/2127693.cms).

As the Times of India pointed out, the monarch also honoured a clutch of other non-resident Indians, but it is Rushdie's that will prove the most controversial. Officially, he is now Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie, a Knight Bachelor, and his wife Padma is now Lady Rushdie.

Rushdie has had two waves of fame in his career, for two different novels and for totally different reasons in each case. In 1981, in the literary world, 'Midnight's Children' catapulted him to prominence and instantly became a canonic work, enshrined as such by both general readers and postcolonial critics, of the wave of postcolonial literature that is often placed under the heading 'The Empire writes back' (indeed, that very phrase was coined by Rushdie himself). Seven years later, in the wider and non-literary world, 'The Satanic Verses' brought him a very different kind of fame, for the reasons that the whole world knows, or thinks it knows (including that part of it that doesn't read literature).

Unusually so for even a controversial writer, Rushdie is the subject of polemic on both right and left. To some on the right, he is an ungrateful troublemaker who, by attacking Margaret Thatcher or institutional racism in Britain, has bitten the hand that fed him (notably with police protection). To some on the left, he is, with his acerbic comments on issues such as Islamic dress or press freedom in Denmark, a traitor to the new absolutes of cultural relativism and 'respect for religion'. To others still, he has become an icon – if not THE icon - of secularism and free speech in the contemporary world.

The knighthood seems to mark an outbreak of peace between Rushdie and the British establishment, but some of those who admire 'Midnight's Children' must surely be asking if it is really appropriate for a post-colonial, post-imperial writer to accept accolades from that establishment. Rushdie's last novel, 'Shalimar the Clown', centred on Kashmir, which attacked, about equally, authoritarian and dehumanising attitudes in India, Europe and the US, certainly found him recovering the restless, radical edge that had been lost in its immediate predecessors, but whither now for Sir Salman?

There is a significant, and perhaps disturbing, precedent in the annals of British knighthood, and it concerns another major name in Indian literature, indeed none other than Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath, whose main language of expression was not even English but Bengali,

is still the only India-born and India-resident writer to have been awarded the Nobel, well before the first flowering of Indian Writing in English and long before postcolonial studies had (or could) be invented. A subject of the British crown in India, Tagore too was knighted - in 1915, by King George V. However, in 1919 he returned his knighthood in protest against colonial repression in India. The Tagore precedent should surely remind us that a British knighthood is not an innocent honour. Yes, the Queen's decision represents high official recognition for the merits of Indian Writing in English. But will there be a price to pay, and have we seen the last twist in the story?

One thing does appear certain: the British establishment, by honouring Rushdie, has come down on the side of freedom of speech. We may, meanwhile, expect harsh words on Rushdie and his knighthood in the next weeks from that section of the British left which today all but rejects that freedom as a tainted relic of 'universalist Western values'. Amid all these complexities, if there is anyone I am missing today to make sense of all this it is the late Edward Said. No-one could doubt the anti-imperial and postcolonial credentials of Said, the author of 'Orientalism', founder with Daniel Barenboim of the transcultural East-West Divan Orchestra, and arch-defender of the Palestinian cause. Said was, however, also an arch-defender of Rushdie and an unshakeable believer in free speech and secularism. If anyone's remarks on Sir Salman would have been worth reading it would have been his, but, alas, leukemia took him from us when he was still in his prime. May some young and rising intellectual step into Edward Said's shoes and begin now on the task of understanding what exactly imperial recognition of the postcolonial does and does not mean in our ever more complex globalising world. Meanwhile, of course the world also awaits Sir Salman's own thoughts on the Empire that Knights Back.