A glib satire of contemporary life in the US

Fury by Salman Rushdie

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12 September 2003

Fury, Salman Rushdie's latest novel, is an abysmal work. The book purports to explore the personal demons or "furies", such as alcoholism, drug addiction, murder, rape, incest and other social ills, which Rushdie claims torment and sometimes inspire various individuals in New York City.

The book's main protagonist is Malik Solanka, a 55-year-old ex-academic of Indian descent with a serious drinking problem. Solanka, who lives in Britain with his English wife and four-year-old son, is the creator of Little Brain, a highly popular mechanical doll that quotes philosophy.

One night, after a particularly heavy bout of drinking, Solanka suddenly finds himself standing over the sleeping bodies of his wife and son with a carving knife in his hand. Confused and alarmed, he decides to leave his family and head to New York where he hopes to escape the inner demons that he believes drove him to almost murder his family.

Fury contains numerous subplots, including references to a series of murders in which the victims—wealthy young women in New York—are raped and scalped. The disoriented Solanka fears that he may have committed these grisly crimes in one of his drunken rages. The murders, it turns out, were carried out by the girls' boyfriends. It is not clear what readers are supposed to make of these events.

In the US he is befriended, reviled and persecuted by his and other people's inner demons. Mila Milo, an incest victim and young Internet entrepreneur, seduces Solanka and then creates a new line of dumbed-down Little Brain dolls. The dolls supposedly embody the contemporary obsession with celebrity and are a huge commercial success.

Other characters encountered by Solanka include an anti-Semitic plumber whose life story, for some unexplained reason, has been bought by a major film studio, and a cunning and smarmy Polish housekeeper who does little or no housekeeping.

Then there is Neela Mahendra, a traffic stopper whose beauty causes chaos: people walk into trees, dogs backtrack, cars and buses crash and all manner of other ridiculous mishap occur in her presence. Mahendra falls in love with Solanka but the story never makes clear why she finds him—twice her age and neurotic—so irresistible. Mahendra also happens to be politically committed to the Lilliput-Blefuscu national liberation movement, a fictional South Pacific island fighting for independence. The ridiculous name and the smug allusion to *Gulliver's Travels* typify the novel's cynical and self-reflexive style.

Solanka visits the island and is kidnapped by the insurgents. Mahendra intervenes to secure his release but she is killed in the process. Solanka returns to the US somehow calmed by her martyr-like devotion to the cause and to him. There is a fleeting allusion to paedophilia, but it is as arbitrary as numerous other issues depicted in the book. Finally, as Solanka watches his son playing in a park, he wonders whether his demons have been exorcised. The novel does not say, but one assumes that his mental condition has stabilised to some extent.

While Rushdie is attempting to satirise the greed, insensitivity and depravity of various celebrities and individuals in New York City, his observations are glib and not designed to encourage readers to investigate the underlying causes of the dysfunctional behaviour the novel describes. There are numerous references to "fury" but the phenomenon is never actually defined or made cogent.

Early in the novel Rushdie writes: "Life is fury, he'd thought. Fury—sexual, Oedipal, political, magical,

brutal—drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths. Out of furia comes creation, inspiration, originality, passion, but also violence, pain, pure unafraid destruction, the giving and receiving of blows from which we never recover. The Furies pursue us; Shiva dances his furious dance to create and also destroy". This sort of semi-mystical description appears with regular monotony throughout and together with manufactured horrors, unconvincing plot and grotesque characters makes the book tedious and pretentious.

In many ways, *Fury* is the apotheosis of the weaknesses in Rushdie's previous work. While the subject matter of his best-known novels is interesting—*Midnight's Children*, a rambling tale about the partition of India, and *The Satanic Verses* his controversial satire of Islam—the material is often lost in complex meandering plots and his highly stylised version of "magic realism". This genre, which was popularised by Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, experiments with form and content. It combines realistic portrayals of ordinary events and people with elements of the fantastic and mystical. Distinctions between the tragic and comi,c horrible and ridiculous, and serious and trivial are blurred for dramatic effect.

Some critics claim that Rushdie's "magic realism" and his tinkering with language and narrative form are groundbreaking and subvert the "linear historiography" of traditional western fiction writing. But Rushdie's approach is more often than not an exercise in literary experimentation in which stylistic contrivances dominate over character and plot development.

Rushdie has also been praised as a great satirist. But the best satire is animated by a profound understanding of character and society and imbued with a deep-seated revulsion for the social ills depicted. There is little of this in *Fury*, much less any understanding or concern about the extraordinary growth of social inequality, one of the fundamental factors producing the breakdown in personal and social relations.

Rushdie has veered increasingly to the right in the last decade. No doubt the 1989 *fatwa* (death sentence) issued by Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist regime in Iran against him over his writing of *The Satanic Verses* had a debilitating impact. But instead of trying to understand the political, social and economic factors fueling the rise of religious fundamentalism, he seems to have concluded that the struggle for democratic rights must be ceded to the armies of the major imperialist powers.

Rushdie supported the NATO bombing in Serbia in 1999 and denounced the Austrian poet Peter Handke as a "moron" for opposing the intervention, labelling his stance as "half crazy, half cynical fellow-travelling with evil."

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, he posed for a French magazine draped in the Stars and Stripes and, since then, has fulminated in the *New York Times* and other journals in support of the US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US, according to Rushdie, is the "best guarantee" of freedom against "tyranny, bigotry, intolerance, [and] fanaticism".

This sort of disorientation cannot help but find expression in Rushdie's work, which studiously avoids exploring issues that are desperately crying out for incisive satire—the Bush administration and its backers in the mass media, academia and the Christian fundamentalist milieu, to take just a few examples. It is also manifested in the lack of compassion or sympathy for the characters in *Fury*—they are one-dimensional, lifeless literary constructs, manufactured according to Rushdie's half-baked impressions about contemporary American life.

Professor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke provides a perceptive description of Rushdie's general approach in Macmillan's *Modern Novelists Series*. Goonetilleke writes: "Rushdie does seem too ready to present his compatriots of yesterday as mindless, illogical, brutal and boorish. There is hardly any attempt to communicate *understanding* to the reader. The figures are violent, picturesque; their motives cannot be shared; they are not 'equals' of the writer or the reader."

Rushdie has described *Fury* as "ultra-contemporary, smack up against the daily headlines." Unfortunately he is right. The book has all the subtlety and depth of a tabloid newspaper headline. Instead of challenging the status quo, *Fury* simply reinforces it.