

Andrea Stuart on Rushdie's imaginary homelands

Another Country

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt,' says Salman Rushdie in the first essay of **Imaginary Homelands** (*Granta*, hbk £17.99), a collection of writings that deals with those themes of identity and displacement which have preoccupied his literary life.

It is a statement that is both poignant and curiously disingenuous. Poignant for the obvious reason that no career demonstrates better than Rushdie's quite what dangerous terrain these issues represent. And disingenuous because nobody is more aware than Rushdie himself that these concerns, this sense of loss are concepts that permeate and dynamise all contemporary literature.

Whether a writer chooses to embrace or to turn away from these issues is strangely immaterial. The search for 'imaginary homelands', Rushdie's 'Indias of the mind', only *seems* more imperative for some writers than it is for others. The truth is that even if we have avoided articulating our displacement and dislocation as finely as Edward Said does in the interview in this volume, we have *all* lost the security of 'home'.

'The modern world lacks not only hiding places but certainties.' And by positioning himself and writers like him as the exception, Rushdie cleverly ends up proving the rule: it is not just those of us who are 'landless' who are in mourning. We are all outsiders, noses pressed silently against the glass of contemporary life.

As befits a collection so preoccupied with issues of place and displacement, it divides its 400-plus pages into sections that are connected to specific national identities: India and Pakistan; the experience of migrants in Britain; and sections on writers from Africa, Britain, Europe, South America and the US. The final part of the book concerns the furore that surrounds *The Satanic*

Verses.

Some of the pieces are touching, like the achingly sweet tribute to Raymond Carver or the affectionate accounts of wandering with Bruce Chatwin. Others are divinely wicked critiques of the like of Sir Richard Attenborough, ('Mahatma' Dickie), and David Lean, the latter of whom deserves an award for one of the most presumptuous statements of modern times. Rushdie gleefully allows Mr Lean to hang himself, when, with blithe and complete disregard for the biggest film industry in the world, he remarks, 'I haven't seen Dickie Attenborough's Gandhi yet, but as far as I'm aware *nobody has yet succeeded in putting India on the screen*'.

Underlying much of his work is the novelist's search for a place and a role in modern society. Can the novel be political? Can the novel not be political? That may be The Question, but even when he is 'recommending the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanely possible', Rushdie is large enough to acknowledge that this is not the only answer. There is an optimism, an ebullience, a generosity in the works collected here that is in danger of being overlooked as he becomes enshrined as a 'historical moment'; it is nice to be reminded.

There has - on both the Left and the Right - been much criticism directed at prominent writers who persist in voicing their disquiet. (It is regarded as almost churlish to point out the inequities of a system if you have prospered in it.) Of course it is precisely these people who must stand up and be counted; not least because they will be listened to. And in the 10 years which this collection spans, Rushdie has been persistent and consistent in his role as agent provocateur. He is the outsider, the dissenting voice in all of us, which continuously challenges and therefore helps to define, create, and perhaps ultimately even transform what is inside our society. •