Decentering Rushdie

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Looking Back

Postcolonial Indian literary and cinematic texts, like many others around the world, have often concerned themselves with the question of “looking back.” The processes of postcolonial capitalist modernity—urbanization, industrialization, globalization—have pushed and pulled Indians from villages to cities, from the nation to the wider world (and back), creating a wide spectrum of experiences ranging from forced expulsion to voluntary emigration. In this light, many different kinds of texts, whether produced from within India or by artists linked to India through various cultural and ethnic ties, have sought to represent and define postcolonial subjects in relation to what they and many of those in their audiences have left behind. Of course, postcolonial migrations have only continued the move-

O jaane-vaale! Don’t go, leaving your home behind
Your mother is calling you back, with folded palms
These towns are yours, these streets and settlements are all yours
Where are you going, leaving all of these behind?

—Radha in Mehboob Khan’s Mother India (1957)

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. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

ment and dispersion of South Asians already underway for centuries; the negotiation between “the home” and “the world,” as Rabindranath Tagore famously described it, has been in full swing all along.\(^1\) But political independence from Britain in 1947 added a crucial element: Indian artists and intellectuals since then have imagined “home” in a changed material context, one shaped by the policies, institutions, and ideological maneuvers of a nation-state claiming to be run by the people for the people. Postcolonial intellectuals and artists, within the nation or in the diaspora, have been shaped and constituted by these historical and ideological contexts. Postcolonial narratives of looking back, likewise, have often referred explicitly to the nation in the process of telling their stories about individuals, communities, and the prospects of freedom.

It goes without saying that different texts look back in various ways and for divergent purposes. Consider the two quotations cited above. There is a world of difference between the “home” that is imagined by Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957), the classic Bollywood production that ties home to land and nation through the figure of a hardworking peasant mother/goddess (Radha), and the “imaginary homelands” of Salman Rushdie, the writer of magical-realist novels, whose fictional depictions of India are hardly concerned with rural life or beholden to “national progress.” *Mother India*, a nationalist text par excellence, devotes all of its narrative energies—structure, characterization, voice, plot, music, symbolism—to persuading its viewers that the path to rural uplift runs through the policies of industrial development being pursued by Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India from 1947 until his death in 1964. At the heart of the movie is Radha’s song “*O Jaane-vaale,*” illustrating her attempts to persuade her in-text audience—peasants fleeing famine and poverty—to return to their land/mother/nation. The close-up shots of Radha’s dirt- and sweat-stained face aim to deliver the message directly to the various members of its real audience, too—whether they are peasants, urbanites, or NRIs (“Non-Resident Indians”), whether they are *jaane-vaale* (“those who are going”) or those who have already left.

The quotation from Rushdie, in contrast, is from a 1982 essay that argues for the productive potential of those who have left, whether “exiles or emigrants or expatriates.” In Rushdie’s fiction and nonfiction, the in-betweenness that produces “imaginary homelands” has a positive value, for it is precisely the space from which the (emigrant) novelist does her/his work. The essay anticipates Rushdie’s oft-cited comment on his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), prescribing a vision for (postcolonial) literature: it “celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation
that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure” (“In Good Faith” 394). The difference between Mother India and Rushdie’s work, then, appears to be that the one is nationalist, privileges linearity and didacticism, and is oriented toward fixed notions of home, while the other, valuing border-crossing and indeterminacy on all levels, demonstrates a “new cosmopolitanism” that, as Timothy Brennan puts it, is “at home in the world.” Rushdie’s lampooning of Mother India in his novel The Moor’s Last Sigh (1995) underlines, as it were, the differences between these two modes of relating to the nation, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Let’s pause for a moment to recognize the larger significance of juxtaposing these different orientations toward the nation. By and large, a “cosmopolitan” position such as Rushdie’s is commonly recognized as “postcolonial,” a term that has become associated with postnational and postmodern ways of seeing. However, like much else that is not produced for English-language audiences, and like much else from the early decades of the Indian nation-state, the representations of Indian life in nation-oriented texts such as Mother India have not been worked into contemporary theories of postcoloniality. The “hybridity” and cosmopolitanism of a director such as Mehboob Khan—a Gujarati Muslim who left his village for Bombay to become a pioneer in late colonial and early postcolonial Indian cinema—are scarcely considered. Indeed, literary texts and criticism in the vernacular languages are given no real status in Anglo-American Postcolonial Studies; preposterously, we can become scholars of non-Western literature without knowing or studying non-Western languages. These are the sorts of critical aporias that resonate beneath Harish Trivedi’s claim, made in 1996 but still poignant today, that “[p]ost-colonial discourse as at present globally constituted hardly begins to address either the post-colonial situation in India or its post-colonial literature except perhaps in some incidental and tangential ways” (243). How would our concepts of postcoloniality change if we included a larger group of post-independence works in our considerations? What are the consequences of implicitly excluding texts that may not be immediately accessible to Western readers?

Decentering Rushdie draws out the limitations of postcolonial discourse by examining alternative representations of postcolonial society. However, I remain as interested in points of convergence and continuity between celebrated and marginalized texts as in their points of divergence. For the inclusion of the latter group of texts illuminates the former in new
ways; hidden aspects of “Imaginary Homelands” emerge when we read it against “O Jaane-vaale.” Despite Rushdie’s overall project in the essay to establish migrancy as an Archimedean site from which to view the nation, the cited passage exudes a nostalgia for India that is distinctly modernist and mournful rather than postmodernist and celebratory. As in a palimpsest, to use one of Rushdie’s favorite metaphors, the nation both constitutes and emerges from beneath Rushdie’s postnational scripts. Creativity and imagination are grounded upon a fundamental loss that cannot be overcome: “we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost [. . .] we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” “Looking back” is thus heroic and necessary—writers must do it “even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.” But “profound uncertainties” are triggered by the recognition of alienation.

Indeed, the passage problematizes efforts to interpret it strictly within the paradigms of postmodernist epistemology. First, Rushdie’s allusion to the Abrahamic tale of Lot’s wife—who is turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, against God’s orders, to her home, the burning city of Sodom—challenges the notion that “looking back” is inherently reactionary or conservative, and that only “rootlessness” leads to greater understanding. Rather, by placing the writer in the position of Lot’s wife, Rushdie associates looking back with three of his favorite tropes: the writer’s courage in defying authority, the risky but necessary processes of mutation and metamorphosis, and, in terms of the allusion itself, the need to reinterpret and rethink the injunctions of (scriptural) tradition. The modernist sense of a lost wholeness is further generated, second, when Rushdie uncharacteristically asserts the materiality of the body over artistic volition, emphasizing that even heroic acts of “looking back” are insufficient given the emigrant writer’s “physical alienation” from the nation. By emphasizing the expatriate writer’s inability to reclaim the “actual” India and by counterposing this real, tangible India to “Indias of the mind,” Rushdie implies not only that reclamation and representation may be possible for writers situated within India but also that perhaps the “fictions” created by displaced writers are, in the last instance, derivative and inferior. The postmodernist notion that there are no originals but only copies appears very strongly in much of Rushdie’s work but is not apparent here. This mourning for India’s “actual cities and villages” acknowledges, at a deep symbolic level, the logic of Radha’s argument about the home/nation and the need to return: “These towns are yours, these streets and settlements are all yours / Where are you going, leaving all of these
behind?” The geographies of home in “O Jaane-vaale” and in the passage from “Imaginary Homelands” are thus strikingly similar—though they are admittedly articulated from different times, in different languages and genres, and, ultimately, with different orientations toward the nation.8

Reading texts from across the postindependence period together in this way opens up new ways of considering postcolonial literature and culture. On the one hand, we find that even known quantities such as Rushdie exceed “Rushdie”—the sign that functions as shorthand for the idea that the postcolonial and the postmodern are one and the same. On the other hand, paying attention to marginalized texts—often realist, nation-oriented texts from before the 1980s—reveals that they are also more complex than they may appear at first glance. Mother India, for instance, diligently strives to corral within the framework of the nation Radha’s narrative of steadfastness in the face of poverty. The core story is told in flashback through the memories of an aged Radha, asked to preside over the ceremonial opening of a dam in the town that sprouted up after the jaane-vaale heeded her call and came back. But the brief return to the narrative present at the end of the film is insufficient to eradicate the overwhelming sense of tragedy that constitutes the bulk of the plot, which ends with Radha deliberately shooting her eldest son dead after he abducts a young woman from the village. Whereas Radha is depicted as heroic for choosing to be the mother and protector of the village/nation at the expense of her own son’s life, the camera does not allow us to look away from her pain, dwelling on her face before returning us to the postcolonial present of tractors and dams and electrification. From Radha’s perspective, the water that gushes forth from the dam is full of blood: there is no easy closure here.

Plan of the Book

Informed by an understanding of the complexities of postcolonial (Indian) literature and film as they have developed over time, Decentering Rushdie aims to illuminate the multiplicity of postcolonial representations of Indian society and identity as they are expressed within a specific genre of writing: the Indian novel in English. I am particularly interested in drawing out the genre’s “multiple cosmopolitanisms”—its various articulations of elite/middle-class subjectivity and cosmopolitan identity.9 On one level, Indian English novels across the board often foreground cosmopolitan-elite characters and voices in their depictions of postcolonial life, meditating
on their relationship to the postcolonial nation and its people. On another, since the very use of English by Indian novelists is embedded with their middle-class status, the production and consumption of the Indian English novel generate cosmopolitan spaces, in which authors who are linked to both India and the West communicate with other English speakers, whether they are Indian elites or foreign readers. The novels themselves can be read as manifestations of cosmopolitan practice: their diverse and multiple explorations of Indian life from an elite standpoint are at once self-representations and communiqués, demanding that their English-educated readers also reflect on their own identities and relationships to the nation (especially if they are Indian, too) and consider the difficulties and complexities of “looking back” to the nation from a cosmopolitan-elite perch.

But the cosmopolitan identities forged by Indian English novels across the postcolonial period are far from unitary. Decentering Rushdie demonstrates that the genre is much more heterogeneous in terms of its narrative strategies, its orientation toward the nation, and its ideological positions than is usually allowed for by the critical paradigms that dominate the field. I read seven Indian novels in English published from across the first five decades after decolonization—including three texts by Nayantara Sahgal, a prolific writer whose virtual invisibility in Anglo-American Postcolonial Studies exemplifies the limited nature of our literary canon. Juxtaposing well-known and little-read novels and/or novelists, I take up Sahgal’s *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffeen Dams* (1969), Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow* (1971), Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980), Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (1985), and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). All of these novels are attentive to questions of class position and identity formation, especially as produced by categories of nation, gender, class, and/or sexuality. However, they take up different orientations toward the nation, make use of different aesthetics and narrative strategies, and/or articulate different ideological positions in identifying postcolonial problems and resolutions (if any). The fact that all but one of these texts are by women—a direct consequence, in fact, of highlighting early postcolonial novels—allows us to extend observations about the ideological and aesthetic diversity of the Indian English novel to postcolonial women’s writing as well.

In reading such texts together, enabled by a historicist method, my analysis interrogates theoretical assumptions about postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism that associate these terms with postnational perspectives,
magical realism, and postmodernist epistemology—that reduce “postcolonial (Indian) literature,” in short, to “Rushdie.” Drawing out the multiple cosmopolitanisms of the postcolonial Indian English novel and explaining their conditions of emergence serves to decenter “Rushdie” by 1) revealing the specific contexts in which Anglophone, postmodern, postnational novels have come to define the category of “Postcolonial Literature”; 2) recovering the nation-oriented texts and authors from the early decades of postcolonial India that have been effectively set aside; and then 3) rereading contemporary writing through the lens of this earlier literature and bringing it back into a larger literary history. In the process, Decentering Rushdie offers a methodology of reading that is attentive to broad shifts in the Indian English novel over time even as it draws attention to the limits of periodization and categorization.

On one level, thus, I describe a general movement from novels that associate themselves with the national project, however critically, to those that explicitly turn away from it—and I suggest that this shift occurs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency (1975–77). In the early decades of independence, Indian English novels often exhibited and encouraged in their audiences what I call “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism,” a cosmopolitanism that remained “true to its salt” in that it was oriented toward and committed to the nation as a potentially emancipatory space. In the context of an intellectual environment, from the 1930s to the 1960s, that was charged by the cultural and political radicalism of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association and the Indian People’s Theater Association, this “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism” expressed a worldliness and rejection of parochialism that was, at the same time, “salt of the earth.” It is only after the Emergency and the crackdown on democracy and popular struggle conducted by Nehru’s daughter, under the aegis of “secularism” and “socialism” no less, that we see English-novelists look away from the nation as a potential site for fulfilling the promises of decolonization. The ongoing inequalities in postcolonial India since then, brought about by the neoliberal strategies of development, communalist politics, and heightened militarism that were engendered in the early 1980s, have only served to deepen the postnational turn among Indian novelists working in English.

The transition from namak-halaal to postnational orientations that I describe corresponds to Neil Lazarus’s characterization of postcolonial Anglophone fiction from sub-Saharan Africa as it moved from the time of “great expectations” of the early independence years to “the mourning after” from the 1970s on (Resistance 1–26). It is from observing these
same trends that K. Anthony Appiah calls postcolonial Anglophone novels of the 1970s and 1980s the “novels of delegitimation”—rejecting “not only the Western imperium but the nationalist project of the national bourgeoisie” (“Is the Post” 353). While I show that most early postcolonial Indian English novels are less naïve about the problems of mainstream nationalism than Appiah suggests, he describes accurately the turn away from the nation that becomes prominent in Anglophone postcolonial fiction in later decades. Indeed, what Appiah depicts as a corresponding turn away from realism also fits with my discussion about the emergence of psychological realism and metafictional texts in the Indian English novel—although, once again, my readings problematize such strict pairings of aesthetics, ideology, and orientation.

Rather than directly assigning “realism” to early, namak-halaal texts and “magical realism” to postnational ones, I find it more useful to think about how changing orientations toward the nation relate to broad shifts in the narrative projects of the Indian English novel. Namak-halaal novels are marked by “concordant” relations between the implied author, the narrator, and the implied audience, aiming to produce in the reader a sense of ethical and activist commitment to the nation as a site of potential emancipation, to the truth of oppression and resistance. Postnational works, however, tend to turn away from coherence and the telos of the nation through narrative strategies that produce discordant relationships and disrupt processes of knowing. Both strategies seek to develop a critical consciousness, but namak-halaal texts point to the need for solidarity, whereas postnational ones question its possibility. In the former, agency (for characters and for the readers) emerges out of the ability to identify the processes of hegemony and dominance, and then to manipulate subject positions effectively in order to forge spaces for change. In the latter, subjectification and the processes of hegemony are confronted through a paradoxical move: History and Power are portrayed as so overwhelming and transcendent that only the solitary, migrant, protagonist/storyteller/writer can have agency. As namak-halaal texts are far less recognized in Postcolonial Studies, most of the book is devoted to drawing out the presence of this alternative articulation of cosmopolitanism, one that pursues “the empowering effects of constructing a coherent identity” (Parry 42–43). I do not simply valorize such texts but bring them more clearly into discussions about postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism.

Chapter 1 builds the case for this diachronic narrative, establishing the historical and ideological contexts that influenced middle-class intellectuals and writers, and tracing shifts from namak-halaal to postnational
orientations and strategies. The chronological organization of chapters 2 through 5 duly supports this narrative. However, I am not simply interested in plotting literary developments on the map of history or in reading Anglophone novels as mere mouthpieces for expressing the ideology of a globalized elite. Rather, I operate through a Marxist critical methodology that refrains from overdetermining the relationship between cosmopolitan-elite location, political ideology, and narrative strategies. I track the dynamic and dialectical interplay between historical contexts and literary forms, between class position and cosmopolitan identity, between general orientations and specific ideologies as they develop over time. Therefore, my close readings of the novels themselves complicate the diachronic narrative and produce a more synchronic narrative of the genre—revealing both sharp differences between texts sharing a common orientation to the nation and commonalities between texts published across the divide of the Emergency. Each chapter explores the specific and relatively unique narrative strategies by which Indian English novelists have represented postcolonial life, mapping out the various configurations of nation, cosmopolitan location, ideology, and narrative. In the process, I sequentially take up pertinent theoretical questions around modernity, identity, gender, class, and political criticism, revealing that a broader and more inclusive understanding of the field of postcolonial cultural production forces us to develop more nuanced categories of analysis than those currently on offer.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I juxtapose a more celebrated novelist and/or novel with a text by Sahgal, whose namak-halaal and nationalist visions provide a backdrop against which we can gauge developments in the genre—not to speak of those within Sahgal’s own writing. Let me take a moment to explain the prominence of Sahgal in this book. I am certainly interested in foregrounding Sahgal’s work for the way that she has attempted to negotiate, for over five decades now, the relationship between historical and political questions and those of gender, sexuality, and family. Methodologically, furthermore, the steady presence of Sahgal throughout the book is valuable because it allows me to develop more precisely the diachronic and synchronic narratives. First, her novels provide a counternarrative to the one implicit in limiting the postcolonial to “Rushdie.” The early texts of Sahgal, one of Nehru’s nieces, show the prominence of namak-halaal writing—and her consistent commitment to the nation even after the Emergency confirms that the turn towards magical realism and the postnational was not absolute. Second, the aesthetic and ideological shifts that do occur in Sahgal over time reveal that changes in historical and intellectual contexts leave their mark in differentiated ways. The map
we draw of the Indian English novel, then, cannot simply show the dominant trajectories but must account for detours, countermovements, and literary innovations other than magical realism.

Chapter 2 explores the sharp ideological differences around Nehruvian modernity and notions of elite responsibility in Sahgal’s *A Time to Be Happy* and Markandaya’s *The Coffer Dams*—even though I mark the texts as sharing a *namak-halaal* orientation toward the nation and being concerned with similar problems of postcolonial, middle-class subjectivity. I differentiate, thus, the “orientation” that emerges in a given historical moment, analogous to Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling,” from the more directed term “ideology,” the worldview that can be derived from the way that a text organizes its themes, dramatic tensions, and resolutions. The euphoria of decolonization in Sahgal is contested and tempered by the sober critique of postcolonial capitalism in Markandaya. Furthermore, their very different representations of cross-cultural identity formation question the usefulness of the category of “hybridity” except as a very general description of the complexity that haunts all identities.

Chapter 3 interrogates the intersections of gender, nation, and narration in two *namak-halaal* texts emerging from the tumultuous 1970s. I juxtapose Sahgal’s social-realist *The Day in Shadow* with Desai’s psychological-realist *Clear Light of Day*, examining how these women-centered texts experiment with interiority and voice. Contesting narrow, gendered oppositions between “political novels” and “psychological novels” as well as theories that automatically counterpose nationalism and feminism, I describe how each text offers “feminist resolutions to the national question,” interrogating their female protagonists’ experiences of oppression in postcolonial society even while seeking to reconstruct gender-egalitarian models of nation and family.13

Chapter 4 seeks to complicate our understanding of the post-Emergency novel in a number of ways. Evaluating the class politics of *Midnight’s Children* and Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*, I demonstrate that these novels converge in elite-centered representations of Indian postcoloniality despite crucial differences in terms of national orientation and narrative form. In fact, not only does this chapter question the radical oppositionality of postmodern, postnational novels, but it shows how more recent *namak-halaal* texts also engage with metafictional forms. On the flip side, the clear presence of a national longing in *Midnight’s Children* suggests its organic links with *namak-halaal* novels, past and present. The newness of *Midnight’s Children* can be better particularized, I contend, when its commonalities with very different novels are not ignored. Even as we can
trace, through these three chapters, the broad movement toward metacritical narratives, the development of interior voices, and the shift away from the nation and the subaltern, we can also see that neither historical location nor class position nor cosmopolitan cultural identity overdetermines these narratives in any linear or simple way.

My study of Roy’s *The God of Small Things* in chapter 5, in a sense, ties together many of the aspects of the book in its attempt to pursue an antideterministic strategy of Marxist literary criticism. Against leftist critics who have denigrated the novel as “bourgeois” and “romantic anti-capitalist,” I suggest that its narrative strategies, its representations of elites and subalterns, its dialectic of suffering and redemption, and its fierce commitments to concepts such as truth and justice in the age of neoliberal globalization hearken back to early postcolonial texts’ namak-halaal orientation. Marking the novel as “anti-Communist” takes us away from recognizing that Roy’s postmodern aesthetics and cosmopolitan-elite subject position do not translate into a postmodernist epistemology and elitist politics. By reading this magical-realist, post-Emergency novel as namak-halaal, even though it is penned by a fierce critic of postcolonial modernity and mainstream nationalism, I challenge not only deterministic tendencies in Postcolonial Studies but also the temptation, in analyses such as mine, to interpret form as a sign of ideology or epistemology, to make middle-class subjectivity itself the final arbiter of literary interpretation, to judge the politics of a text by its reception, or to produce a periodizing narrative that is inattentive to detours from the larger trajectory. All in all, *Decentering Rushdie* seeks new ways of conceptualizing postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism so that we can better speak to the complex and uneven relations of orientation, ideology, and aesthetics in postcolonial literature and culture.¹⁴

**“Rushdie” Versus Rushdie**

*Decentering Rushdie* comes neither to bury Rushdie nor to praise him. Paradoxically, indeed, I have developed a greater appreciation for Rushdie’s fiction, especially the novels from *Midnight’s Children* to *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, over the same period in which his explicit political positions have moved away from my own. Since early 2001, when I completed the dissertation that became the basis for this book, Rushdie’s political trajectory has been decidedly rightwards. His defense of the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001, his support for the Iraq war in 2003, his inability and/or
unwillingness to separate, in the public sphere, his secular-liberal ideas from the right wing’s open Islamophobia—all of these have alienated me from Rushdie’s opinions as a commentator on public affairs. Rushdie’s quiet acceptance of knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2007 evoked feelings of both betrayal and amusement: could this really be the author whose early fiction brilliantly mocked the figure of the chamcha, the sycophantic Indian? And yet, each revision of Decentering Rushdie has moved toward what I consider to be a more nuanced approach to Rushdie, one that is more firmly aware of the Anglo-American academic and pedagogical contexts in which I find myself.

In a word, I have found it important to integrate my scholarly assessments of Rushdie with my pedagogical practice, for teaching Rushdie’s fiction to undergraduates in the United States has been an overwhelmingly positive experience. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I have faced a set of difficult questions as a South Asian American professor, openly socialist and antiwar, teaching about postcolonial and world literature in Staten Island and central Ohio. How do I negotiate the fact that I physically embody the Other of the “war on terror” with the need to do right by my students, regardless of their knowledge of the themes being covered or their political positions on them? How do I maintain a democratic classroom environment while teaching critical thinking—especially when dealing with texts and approaches that put forward very different worldviews from the ones inundating the mainstream media? In both private and public institutions, I have found that even the basic forms of multiculturalism and international awareness, for all their limitations, have had a transformative potential on students open to learning more about the world. Rushdie’s fiction has proved to be incredibly valuable in this regard, as a tool for opening up critical and democratic discussions—for conveying something important about the value of art, about the politics of narrative, and about the importance of speaking truth to power.

And so I have attempted to convey in this book the sense that Rushdie’s move away from his resolute anti-imperialism of the 1980s has been a great loss for those opposed to war and empire—and that this is a phenomenon to be thought through carefully for what it teaches us about history, politics, and literature. For whatever Rushdie’s current ideas and however problematic his canonization, his novels, especially the early ones, remain crucial contributions to the political and pedagogical projects of Postcolonial Studies as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century. This applies just as well to the postmodernist standpoints that I have critiqued in this book, not to speak of my debates with Marxists and
other critics of empire. As my inbox continues to log case after case of colleges and universities unfairly denying tenure to or refusing to extend the contracts of professors in Postcolonial Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and related areas, it seems more important than ever to keep a clear understanding of our basic commonalities even in the midst of healthy and rigorous debates about literature, culture, theory, and politics. *Decentering Rushdie* operates, therefore, with due respect for what Rushdie has achieved and for the progressive visions and desires that motivate various theories of cosmopolitanism, postnationalism, and postcoloniality—even as I argue that there is much more to postcolonial literature and thought, especially around the question of the nation, than what has been presented to us under the sign “Rushdie.”