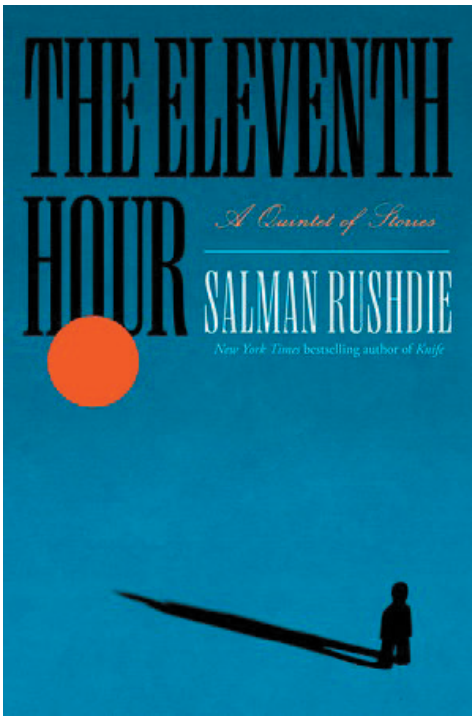
The Eleventh Hour
by Salman Rushdie



Review by Ramlal Agarwal

Salman Rushdie is a renowned novelist of our era. His writing is full of exuberance, buoyancy, irreverence, and playfulness. It elevates readers above the heavy seriousness of modernist literature and has won both the Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers.

His most famous novel, Midnight's Children (1981), is a story of a Kashmiri Muslim family's unbridled downslide from the lush pastures and quiet-flowing rivers of Kashmir to the hustle and bustle of Bombay's smoking factories and chawls. His other well-known, perhaps controversial, novel, The Satanic Verses (1988), is about Mohammad, the prophet's temptation to abdicate his philosophy of monotheism and include three goddesses, Lat, Monat, and Uzza, in the Koran as divine and deserving people's offerings, and his final rejection under violent circumstances and pressure from his followers, calling them Satanic Verses.

The Muslim world was outraged by Rushdie's flippant narrative about Mohammad and bayed for his blood. A fatwa was issued. It placed Rushdie under constant fear of death, and he was severely attacked and injured at the Chautauqua Institute in New York State (1922). Fortunately, he survived but lost an eye.

Another famous novel, The Victory City (2023), is about a woman called Pampa. She is stunningly beautiful and quite generous with her gifts to men of power and position. She soon establishes a township named Bisnagar. One day, two cowherds named Hakka and Bakka visit her to seek financial help. Pampa gives them a sack of his magical seeds, which they sow in a barren land, and the land comes alive, and the two lay the foundation of the Vijaynagar empire. Pampa marries Hakka, and after his death, she marries Bakka and remains the mainstay of the empire, which flourishes with landmark achievements in planning architecture and social life. After the death of Bakka, the empire is run by his squabbling relatives and begins to disintegrate with concerted attacks by Muslim neighbours.

His latest collection of five stories, The Eleventh Hour (2025), explores the final condition in the last stage of life.

The first story is called "In the South." It is about two superannuated men who are whiling away their time teasing each other, awaiting death. "You look terrible," Junior told Senior, as he did every morning. "You look like a man who is only waiting to die," the senior responded, nodding

gravely and also speaking in accordance with their private tradition. "That is better than looking, as you do, like a man who is still waiting to live." Both of them had come to the sad realisation that "Babydom is not only their past but also their future."

They meticulously cashed their pension slips themselves. One day, they were on their way to collect the pension. Junior saw a new Vespa with two girls heading headlong in his direction. He tried to avoid it but fell and bumped his head on a sidewalk, and before the senior could reach him to help him, he died. They were waiting for death, but one day, unexpectedly, it came and took away one of them.

The story titled "The Musician of Kahani" explores the emptiness and peculiar world of the super-rich and a remarkably talented musician. The term "Kahani" is a Hindi word meaning "story," and in keeping with the trend of renaming old identities, Rushdie refers to Bombay as Kahani.

The narrative follows a college professor who falls in love with his student, Meena, who is twenty years his junior. Despite the significant age difference, they decide to get married. As time goes on, the professor struggles with a project he is developing, which ultimately fails. In contrast, Meena achieves great success by designing a search engine, which she sells to an American for one hundred million dollars.

With this newfound wealth, the couple and their daughter, Chandni, relocate to an upscale neighbourhood in Bombay. However, the professor's failure and his wife's success create tension in their marriage. Meanwhile, their daughter, Chandni, shows great promise and exhibits signs of becoming an exceptional music maestro.

Disappointed in his endeavours and uneasy in his married life, Raheem, the professor, falls for the charm of a man who propagates the cult of "Anti-Religion-Religion" and soon acquires the status of Gurushanker from just Shanker. The cult also propagates free sex and material success. Gurushanker inducts Raheem into his cult and assigns him the job of serving soup. Raheem left his family and joined the cult. The cult starts buzzing with new premises, a long line of fancy cars, and throngs of men and women tired of the rigid morality constraints of social life.

Chandni's fame as a miracle-working musician spread likewise. Manjoo Ferdous, the heir of the fabulously rich Ferdaus family, is a cricket star. Both make an ideal pair and soon the ultimate knot. When Chandni becomes pregnant, the joy and celebrations reach unprecedented heights. Although Chandni does not enjoy it, the Ferdous family believes in letting their wealth represent the family.

Meera comes to Ferdous' palace to be near her daughter during her advanced pregnancy. One day, Chandani informs Meera that the baby has stopped kicking. The doctors come and announce that the baby has stopped breathing. A pall of gloom spreads over the Ferdaus umpire. The family had booked all the cultural and theatrical platforms and paid hefty advances to international artists to celebrate the birth of the successor to the Ferdous empire. Manjoo's mother was against cancelling extraordinary celebrations and hence opposed the C-section. The show goes on notwithstanding the dead child in Chandani's womb. This makes her furious, and

she leaves Ferdaus's palace and rages through music. Her music destroys the ill-got wealth of Ferdous, the umpire, and the cult of Guruprasad.

The Old Man in the Piazza describes a public square where people from the adjacent villages gather and squabble over their petty affairs. In this square, there is a cafe called "Cafe of the Fountain." An old man regularly visits it at about four o'clock and orders a strong coffee. At six p.m., he orders a small beer and a sandwich, and at 8 p.m., he rises and shuffles away. All through, he remains silent. The same cafe hosts a woman (in the fashion of Rushdie) called Language; earlier, she too remained silent because it was a time of "yes," but with the advent of a period of discussions, arguments, and court quarrels, she too became loquacious and started moving with abandon.

One day, a couple sought some advice from the old man. The old man uttered something. When they returned, they spread the news that they were happy because of the old man's guidance. Soon, people left—squabbling and seeking—and hordes of people gathered around him for advice. This hurts Language, and she walks out of the cafe. That leaves the old man speechless, and he begins to gaze into the silence once more.

Rushdie's fiction captivates readers with its imaginative novelty; however, it lacks an emotional connection with them.