

*Reading the Crisis:
The Polemics of Salman Rushdie's
"The Satanic Verses"*

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I

TO BEGIN WITH, life in the literary world has never been the same ever since the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988). What we have witnessed has been an overwhelming crisis of reading, interpreting, and responding to a troubled, troubling text.¹ As such, *The Satanic Verses* daringly and ambitiously presents itself as a historiographical metafiction, deploying various tropes and encompassing multiple layers of signification, while operating within a postmodernist, counter-culture context. Rushdie's strategy involves "pitting levity against gravity" (*Satanic* 3); its narratological slogan, inspired by *The Arabian Nights*, declares "it was and it was not . . . it happened and it never did" (35). Transcending time and space, the narrative moves synchronically (between England, India, and Argentina) and diachronically (between the present and the early days of Islam). Yet this impressively expansive narrative is consciously bounded by the *doppelgänger* motif, embodied by two survivors of a blown-up plane: Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta. These dual "angeldevilish" (5) heroes experience a series of tragi-comic, fantastic-realistic episodes narrated in the usual Rushdiesque multi-layered, multi-toned fashion.

While Rushdie's two preceding novels, *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), touched off some controversy in India and Pakistan respectively, the crisis caused by *The Satanic Verses*

excessively and intensely surpassed the previous reactions; it assumed an unprecedented violence whose universal implications are bound to be damaging. Deplorably, the crisis has resurrected ancient cultural enmities (if ever they were dormant), provoked an ugly orgy of accusations, name-calling, and racism, in the midst of which the West (to use those grand, binary divides) has once again misread the East, and the East has once again misrepresented itself. More seriously and closer to my concerns, we risk, in this sorry situation, contaminating our discourse — whether literary or religio-political — with intolerance, transgression, and disturbingly presumptuous assumptions about the superiority of *one* value system over another. What we acutely need in the process of reading (and hopefully riding) the crisis is a genuine, mutual (at times heroic) exercise of sympathetic imagination, whereby the concerns and sensitivities of the *other* are recognized.

II

Philosophe, orateur, apôtre, législateur, guerrier, conquérant d'idées, restaurateur de dogmes rationnels, d'un culte sans images, fondateur de vingt empires terrestres et d'un empire spirituel, voilà Mahomet! A toutes les échelles où l'on mesure la grandeur humaine, quel homme fut plus grand? ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE

Our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Imposter, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to any one. The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only. THOMAS CARLYLE

Any reader of Rushdie's earlier works, especially his critically acclaimed *Midnight's Children*, has, like myself, looked forward with excitement and eager anticipation to reading another novel by a writer of such creative energy and fertile imagination. However, anyone who has even a rudimentary knowledge of the culture and civilization of Islam would immediately realize on encountering certain passages in the text that the book contains a bombshell. The most offensive part of the novel centres on the historical portion in which the narrative turns into a *roman à clef*, depicting in a deliberately convoluted way the life of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as Mahound. Obviously the choice of this name is

anything but innocent. As the *OED* tells us "Mahound" signifies, especially for Western medievalists, four meanings, all offensive: "false prophet"; "a false god"; "a hideous creature"; and "a name for the devil."

More particularly, the offensive parts are contained in Chapter II, "Mahound" (89-126), and Chapter VI, "Return to Jahilia" (357-94). Rushdie's deliberate discourse, couched in a thinly veiled dream sequence, suggests three offensive things about this "Mahound-Mahon-Muhammad" (401). First, Mahound, a calculating businessman-turned-prophet, founds a religion called "Submission" (a literal translation for the Arabic word "Islam") in the desert city of Jahilia (which literally means "ignorance" but here stands for pre-Islamic Mecca). Charismatic and determined, Mahound seems mainly engaged in a personal pursuit of power. This "fit man, no soft-bellied usurer he" (93) has three powerful opponents: the poet Baal, "the precious polemicist" and one of Jahilia's "blood-praising versifiers" (98); the wealthy businessman Abu Simbel, the plutocrat whose manipulative skills enable him to "make his quarry think he has hunted the hunter" (98); and Abu Simbel's wife Hind, a towering, lustful figure whose seductive powers are rooted in wealth, status, and physical charm. Nevertheless, Mahound's crafty, at times cruel, schemes triumph over these formidable foes, since he has "no scruples . . . no qualms about ways and means" (363).

Second, this businessman-turned-prophet cunningly contrives "those matter-of-fact revelations" (366), claiming them to be delivered to him by the archangel Gibreel (Gabriel). These speculations are uttered by Mahound's intoxicated scribe, Salman the Persian (again an irreverent depiction of one of the Prophet's companions by the same name):

And Gibreel the archangel specified the manner in which a man should be buried, and how his property should be divided, so that Salman the Persian got to wondering what manner of God this was that sounded so much like a businessman. This was when he had the idea that destroyed his faith, because he recalled that of course Mahound himself had been a businessman, and a damned successful one at that, a person to whom organization and rules came naturally, so how excessively convenient it was that he should have come up with such a very businesslike archangel, who handed

down the management decisions of this highly corporate, if non-corporeal, God. (364)

Proceeding with this implicit/explicit notion of the apocrypha of *The Qur'an*, Muslims' holy book, Rushdie revives the long dead issue of the so-called “Satanic Verses” from which the novel's title is derived. The title alludes to an incident that two Muslim historians (who lived about two centuries after the Prophet's death) report to have occurred: Muhammad, allegedly, made a concession to the oligarchy of pre-Islamic Mecca, accepting three idols as divine intercessors.² In the course of the novel, the wily Mahound becomes partly tempted, partly pressured into a deal with Abu Simbel to compromise the new religion's categorical monotheism by accepting three idols (Al-Lat, Al-Uzza, and Manat) as intermediaries between worshipping, revenue-generating pilgrims and God. The deal gives crucial political and practical advantages to Mahound's new religion; simultaneously, it secures profit for Jahilia's business establishment. However, Mahound revokes the deal and recants the *ayāt* (verses) that endowed the idols with intercessionary powers, claiming that the verses were deliberately altered, falsified, and delivered to him by Shaitan (Satan). This disputable episode — as well as others that Rushdie appropriates — is capitalized on by some Orientalists, even though almost all Muslim scholars reject it. By adopting and dramatizing this episode, Rushdie highlights it as a version of truth that may have been deliberately ignored by the sanitized and “sanctified” chronicles of history. The ultimate implication of this narrativized incident is that *The Qur'an* is not the holy, definitive book that all Muslims believe to be God's exact words, *ipsissima verba*, but a text conveniently faked by the Prophet.

Third, and more seriously, Rushdie portrays an elaborate scene at “the most popular brothel in Jahilia” (376) called the Curtain, “Hijab” (which also means in Arabic “veil,” a suggestion that Muslims treat their women, some of whom may wear veils, as prostitutes). The female workers at the Curtain impersonate the Prophet's wives to improve business. The idea is the fruit of Baal's depraved poetic imagination:

How many wives? Twelve and one old lady, long dead. How many whores behind the Curtain? Twelve again; and, secret on her

black-tented throne, the ancient Madam, still defying death. Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy. Baal told the Madam of his idea; she settled matters in her voice of a laryngitic frog. "It is very dangerous," she pronounced, "but it could be damn good for business. We will go carefully; but we will go." (380)

In this segment of the novel, the real names of the Prophet's wives (whom Muslims reverentially call "Mothers of the Believers") are used. Even a dead wife is not spared in this puzzling, bizarre segment, since catering to necrophilic customers can create profit:

Strangest of all was the whore who had taken the name of 'Zainab bint Khuzaimah', knowing that this wife of Mahound had recently died. The necrophilia of her lovers, who forbade her to make any movements, was one of the more unsavoury aspects of the new regime at The Curtain. But business was business, and this, too, was a need that the courtesans fulfilled. (382)

Believers would legitimately consider such a wantonly contrived episode as the most vicious of Rushdie's offences. To them Rushdie's blend of blasphemy with quasi-pornography tastelessly verges on the obscene.

As an admirer of Rushdie's talent and a believer in the function and validity of literature, I can appreciate why a Western reader, educated in a secular, liberal-humanist culture, may be bedeviled by all the fuss and furor about a mere book, a work of fiction containing a troubling dream sequence. However, in order to understand the enormity of what has been done, a circumspect, tolerant reader needs to appreciate what the Prophet Muhammad means to Muslims all over the entire Muslim world: from Senegal to Kurdistan to Indonesia. The Prophet is not only a religious figure (the Messenger of the Faith) but also the symbol of the heroic tradition, the figure who epitomizes virtue, wisdom, love, compassion and courage. Fully human as he repeatedly affirmed, the Prophet has nevertheless become for over fourteen centuries a constant cultural focus in the collective consciousness of the masses. In short, he is the holiest figure that represents for over one-fifth of the earth's population the driving, enduring, cohesive centre. Is it any wonder then that Muslims (including liberal and secular Muslims) become puzzled, offended, or outraged when such a

figure is so gratuitously and relentlessly ridiculed in a work of fiction?

Let us examine the issue from another angle. It is my belief that had Rushdie written a non-fictional work about the Prophet in which he engaged in a metaphysical or spiritual speculation, the anger would not have been so intense, nor would it have had such a regrettable level of demonization and counter-vilification. Rushdie's narrative strategy involves using subterfuge in the guise of fictionality. He cleverly immunizes his text against external charges by associating the offensive passages with the obsessive imagination of a possessed character. Moreover, he can always deploy the classic claim of authorial distance or demand multiple discourse about an ambivalent text by inviting other hitherto unarticulated layers of meaning. Here then is the sore point for the protesting Muslims: they feel frustrated and furious because the assault on the Prophet can be easily denied as a mere work of fiction, a mere dream sequence, or a mere statement uttered by a drunken character who does not represent the author's views. They see little room for meaningful, factual, point/counter-point debate.

III

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination"). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those events into historical facts. This is not a "dishonest refuge from truth," but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs.

LINDA HUTCHEON

In attempting to gauge our response to a complex text such as *The Satanic Verses*, we need to establish, as Bakhtin taught us, that literature is a process, not a final product, and that a novel is quintessentially polyphonic; that is, it cannot be reduced to a single voice: authorial, privileged, or otherwise. Moreover, the driving energy that propels the narrative in Rushdie's work is guided by postmodern views on history, which "confront the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for the

present" (Hutcheon, "Problematizing" 371). Here, history does not mean final, definitive renditions, nor does it involve the "customary fetishizing of facts" (Hutcheon, "Problematizing" 377); rather history is a selective, reconstructive, narrative discourse that challenges the dominant versions of representation and provokes a counter discourse. Moreover, if history, as Hayden White and others argue, is a form of narrative, the postmodern fiction that deploys and dramatizes historical figures or events can claim to be yet another version of the past that is entitled to legitimacy. The net result is that the postmodern version rivals or at least destabilizes the master narrative: self-consciously, tentatively, yet transgressively. Thus the postmodern historiographer reworks his material with characterological hubris and humility, affection and aversion, care and cruelty. Consequently, if the text affirms anything, it affirms its ambivalence, tentativeness and paradoxicality.

Such a paradoxical manner in the configuration and reshaping of history parallels, in Rushdie's *oeuvre*, a similar hesitant view towards history itself as an epistemological phenomenon to be contended with. On the one hand, history assumes a frightening kaleidoscopic totality over the individual's fate; as with Saleem Sinai, one is "handcuffed to history" (*MC* 9). Likewise, Gibreel Farishta's obsession with history takes the form of a series of dreams that disturbingly infiltrate taboo territories. On the other hand, history represents a valuable source of inspiration, a liberator that can edify and enlighten us on complex, current issues. It functions as a crucial ideological ally that ultimately enriches the narrative of tentativeness and enhances the discourse of ambivalence: the primary aim is to probe rather than propound, question rather than confirm, doubt rather than dictate. History is in the eye of the beholder or projector; we do not have one history but *histories*. And Rushdie does not hide his hostility towards any belief system that posits "history" on fixed, sanctified grounds. Like all postmodern writers, he sees reality (whatever that may mean) as an unfinished project, a flux phenomenon that resists containment or closure and remains open to multiple renditions and projections.

In order to prove his point, he accordingly selects his target most riskily and attacks ruthlessly and relentlessly the driving, enduring, cohesive centre of Muslim history and civilization, symbolized in

the figure of the Prophet Muhammad. This may explain why the portrayal of the Prophet appears so inflammatory and offensive, since it entails ridiculing Islam's most sanctified figure. To Rushdie, as to all postmodernists, no one is sacred, nothing is static, and everything is open to question, to parody, and to subvert. Hence the clash of cultures and the conflict of representations.

IV

The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient. EDWARD SAID

Let me then conclude by venturing the following five *hypotheses*:

1. If the "Rushdie Affair" proves anything, it affirms the inseparability of text and context. Any previous notions we might have had about the insularity of literature have been proven false. For, as Linda Hutcheon cogently argues, "gone now is the belief that art is, or can be, autonomous, separate from the world. Postmodernist art situates itself squarely in the context of its own creation and reception in a social and ideological reality" ("Challenging" 34). In his article "Outside the Whale," Rushdie himself emphasizes that "works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and that the way they operate cannot be separated from politics, from history" (130). We thus cannot divorce text from context. Put differently, the production of any literary work is culturally conditioned; subsequently the responses to the literary work are likewise culturally conditioned.³

2. The postmodernist impulse to articulate, appropriate, parody or subvert contexts has included foraying into the world of politics. *The Satanic Verses* does exactly that. It delves daringly and legitimately into various current political issues, because — as Rushdie lucidly and unequivocally argues — "politics and literature, like sport and politics, do mix, are inextricably mixed, and . . . that mixture has consequences" ("Whale" 137). Accordingly,

one can qualify *The Satanic Verses* as a text permeated by politics from page one. The response (or responses) to such a polemical text is/are bound to be political too. We may not like some of the responses, but the text itself elicits and provokes a political response.

3. Starting with its title, *The Satanic Verses* unearths and copies some of the nastiest claims that a few Orientalists, be they missionaries or affiliates of colonial enterprises, have fabricated about the history and culture of Islam. Anyone familiar with Edward Said's compelling arguments in *Orientalism* (1978) and his subsequent works is aware of the weight and mass of what those "experts" have propagated about Islam. The impact of their writings is still to a large extent dominant in Western views on Islam. Rushdie's utilization of those fabrications seems to the ordinary Muslim reader not only flattering to those pre-packed stereotypes about Islam, but also to signal the burning of bridges between the author and his own cultural roots.

4. By copying this reductively edited version of Islamic history, Rushdie, who should have known otherwise, has made his motives seem suspect to Muslims. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, he has turned his literary product into an attractive item (hot and rare) for Western consumers. Yet by doing so, Rushdie, the leftist polemicist, may have qualified himself for what the Marxist-feminist critic Gayatri Spivak calls "the privileged native informant" (256). (She means by that those Third World writers who exploit their intimate knowledge of their culture to present unflattering images that endorse Western stereotypes: her two models are V. S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee.)⁴ In other words, Rushdie's narrative, if the hypothesis is valid, becomes in the final analysis alien to the Third World view of itself. Regrettably, he has, to apply Said's comment on Naipaul, "allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution" ("Intellectuals" 53), and has thus rendered himself inoperative within the Third World literary discourse. As I see it, the dialectic of that discourse is critical (at times severely critical) of its cultural roots, yet remains militantly committed to them. I am thinking of such committed writers as Naguib Mahfouz (the

Egyptian novelist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988) and Faiz Ahmad Faiz (the Pakistani poet).

5. While we may mildly or severely critique *The Satanic Verses*, while we may quibble with its contentious discourse, while we may impute all sorts of mercenary, conspiratorial, or blasphemous motives to its author, the book remains impressive. As Janette Turner Hospital puts it, this novel is “a firecracker of a work whose every page fizzes with linguistic acrobatics and exuberance, with cross-language puns, with clichés suddenly rinsed and new[ly]-minted so that they shock and shimmer.” Besides, its author’s energy, creativity and imagination have proven him to be one of the outstanding writers in the English language today. Given its profound literary value, its depth, its density, and above all its humour, *The Satanic Verses* does not deserve to be banned. It demands *debate*, not destruction.

NOTES

- ¹ I wish to delineate three distinct aspects pertaining to the bizarre drama we call “The Rushdie Affair.” The first relates to *The Satanic Verses* as a complex literary text. The second relates to the concept of freedom of expression championed by liberal-humanists as well as the literati. The third relates to the death sentence against the author, a move which compounded an already confusing situation and prompted the swift, sensational media to get on the bandwagon. The focus of this article is on the first aspect.
- ² The two historians are Al-Waqidi (A.D. 747–823) and Al-Tabari (A.D. c. 839–923). The Prophet died in A.D. 632.
- ³ As an illustration of such a culture-specific response, let me excerpt Shahabuddin, who rhetorically asks Rushdie, “You depict the Prophet whose name the practicing Muslim recites five times a day, whom he loves, whom he considers the model for mankind, as an impostor and you expect us to applaud you? You have had the nerve to situate the wives of the Prophet, whom we Muslims regard as the mothers of the community, in a brothel and you expect the Muslims to praise your power of imagination?”
- ⁴ Spivak has used the term “false native informants” in reference to the works of Naipaul and Mukherjee (“Scripts”).

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