

*The Satanic Verses: A Secular Muslim's
Response*

With relentless inventiveness, Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* continues his chutnification of English, seasoning it so that the language itself seems surprised, delighted to find itself subcontinentalized. He not only demystifies England, something that is long, long overdue, but he also, once again, rescues Indo-English fiction from the clutches of that rheumatic pomposity called V.S. Naipaul. And I'm again grateful: grateful that even if the book is published in the monolithic West, it has a thorough Indianness, a raucous, wonderfully vulgar quality that substantially, if not wholly, owes its melodramatic excess to Bombay cinema—Rushdie often caters only to subcontinentals. For instance, many of my friends from India saw in the opening scene of *The Satanic Verses* an echo of *An Evening in Paris*, the Bombay blockbuster film in which the matinee idol Shammi Kapoor descends from a helicopter and sings to a water-skiing Sharmila Tagore, “Āsmān se āyā farishta” (An angel has descended from the sky). Thus, Rushdie's audience, in many ways, is not the West—no matter what anyone says—for he seldom stops to explain himself to the Westerner. He doesn't need to annotate anything for the subcontinental. For example, Brad Leithauser in *The New Yorker* muses that *Chamcha* is a thickened version of *Samsa* in Kafka's *Metamorphoses*, a mistake repeated by Tzvetan Todorov in *Dissent*. Well, the subcontinentals know what *Chamcha* means.¹ Further, no Indian I know of has complained about Rushdie's prose. Doris Lessing, however, finds it (in the *Verses*) turgid, hardly readable. Similar reactions have come from many literate and literary Americans who have been unable to go beyond the first twenty to thirty pages, finding the prose an assault of sorts.

I also am assaulted, though differently. For the book (I mean specifically the sections set in the seventh century) does offend me, and I am a rum-swizzling, Manhattan-twisting, Scotch-guzzling Muslim, an all-American Shiite, if you will, who identifies strongly with the culture and language (Urdu) of North India's Muslims—but that is about as far as I go. There is no pan-Islamic zeal in me, no desire to live in any self-declared Islamic state. (In this regard, I should stress that most

countries with a majority of Muslim populations are de facto secular states, as Akeel Bilgrami has pointed out in *Grand Street*.) Why is it then that the book does offend me? After all, I never cared for Zia ul-Haq's Pakistan or Khomeini's Iran.

I think it is that I, as a cultural Muslim, find that Rushdie has not merely been blasphemous (I am always in favor of blasphemy) but that he has used a most insulting tone, been a provocateur in a highly gratuitous manner. He has not only been cynical; he has been scornful. Why should people allow themselves to be insulted? (I am not advocating *jihad*.) Rushdie has taken the only icon of the Muslims—ironically, one that cannot be depicted pictorially—and defaced it. He has then drawn the world's attention to each step in this defacement. And for what? To offer the West (for Rushdie's audience, in many ways, is also the West) more ammunition to attack Islam? It turns out that a "bridge of dreams," in the words of Brad Leithauser, "is too flimsy and insubstantial a structure to support heavy traffic between the seventh century and the twentieth; the two worlds never completely fuse." This observation recognizes, though only on aesthetic grounds, the gratuitousness of the seventh-century sections.

As I went through those sections, I kept asking myself: What is the point? Is it to condemn fundamentalism or to provoke it? Doris Lessing remarks that Rushdie is "reported to have written this book specifically to provoke the fundamentalists, and to air their bigotries. Would he have written it," she continues, "if he had known he would provoke them to this extent?" Unlike some Muslims, I have no objections at all to "Ayesha" and "The Parting of the Arabian Sea," sections that would have been even more shattering and convincing without the shadow of the seventh century lurking over them. My problems, as should be clear by now, are with "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia."

Condemning fundamentalism is a noble enterprise; provoking it is not. And this is where Rushdie has missed a great opportunity, particularly on behalf of secular Muslims who are tired to death of Khomeinists and their shadows on the one hand and the Western portrayal of Muslims on the other. Rushdie could have taken some cues from Dostoevsky, who, in "The Grand Inquisitor" section in *The Brothers Karamazov*, uses Christ to expose a hypocritical structure of power during the Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor recognizes Jesus in the crowd and tells Him that he will burn Him the following day in His own name at the stake. Wouldn't it have been more useful to bring Muhammad into the twentieth century to expose the abuses of a Khomeini? The bridge of dreams might not have been so tenuous then. I have also found it tantalizing to think what else Rushdie could have done,

ways in which he could have given secular Muslims some ammunition to face Khomeinists as well as the West—for example, if Gibreel Farishta or Saladin Chamcha had, at one point or the other, been victims of the Imam as well as of the Savak (and thus of the CIA)? In any case, if Muhammad had confronted the Imam and demolished his *untime*, I would have been ecstatically grateful. Rushdie is magnificent when he shows us “the Imam grown monstrous, lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates; as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole.” We know of the thousands who perished in the Iran–Iraq war, and I still agonize over the execution of the poet Said Sultanpour—a victim first of the Shah and then of Khomeini.

To tackle my charge of gratuitousness:

Even in terms of the immediate story, it is difficult to believe that Gibreel Farishta, a Bombay cinema idol, could be well-read enough to have such inversed, scholarly dreams as the ones Rushdie manufactures for him. (Rushdie, as is apparent to readers of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, loves inversions of all sorts.) And the dreams about Jahiliya certainly seem less dreamlike than the rest of the book, a rather strange paradox but one that begins to make sense when one realizes that in those dreams one is constantly aware of something being explained. There is a programmatic literalness in those chapters. Were those two sections all that essential to the novel? We could debate this question forever, but I think more detailed, elaborate sections about the Imam would have done just as well besides being more convincing and, politically–socially, more useful. And this is a book that certainly cannot be divorced from history; *The Satanic Verses* parades its interest in history, in contemporary history, as do all the circumstances surrounding it.

To be even more specific:

What was the point in giving this often profit-motivated prophet the name Mahound? The prophet adopts “the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn: likewise, our mountain-climbing prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound.” Rushdie somewhere says that he wanted to *occupy* the term *Mahound* the way Blacks had occupied *black* and turned it around so that now it does have positive connotations; they have rescued the term from those who possessed it. But is *Mahound* in *The Satanic Verses* turned around in any such fashion? Some have argued that Mahound is quite an attractive figure and that Rushdie in his depiction of Mahound reveals a very deep

and subtle loyalty to Islam. But what, in effect, does it mean to occupy a negative term unless one makes it *obviously* positive?

I think using *Mahound* was one of Rushdie's truly unfortunate choices. Why dig up a term from medieval Europe and then give it back to the Europeans, with some modifications of course, but essentially as something they are happy with? They can say: See, we were right, right from the days of the Crusades. Notice: most of the West has been quite happy with the depiction of Muhammad and Islam in the *Verses*. The tone is so irreverent that it seems everything, including some of Islam's most sacred narratives, has been turned into a joke. Edward Said, a staunch defender of Rushdie, also recognizes the gratuitousness of these sections when he says: *The Satanic Verses* is, "in all sorts of ways, a *deliberately* [my italics] transgressive work. It parallels and mimics the central Islamic narratives with bold, nose-thumbing daring." Rushdie claims, in an essay in the *New York Review of Books*, that he was trying "to give a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great world religion." But Muhammad comes across as a fake of sorts, not as the founder of a great world religion. The Koran comes across as the work of a charlatan, a conniving, at times bumbling opportunist. Do readers truly think they are witnessing the birth of a great world religion? One more point: When one wants to occupy a term, shouldn't that term have currency? Digging up a term from medieval Europe is to be gratuitous—it is creating an issue where there was none—and then saying that this dug-up term is to be occupied is to be doubly gratuitous.

In the ensuing controversy, what has totally been lost sight of is that Islam has great traditions of learning and tolerance and that most Islamic poetry—just read the great Sufi poets—is blasphemous in its celebration of unorthodoxy, in its praise of the tavern and liquor, in its relentless questioning of God. As Doris Lessing says, "Once, in Spain, under the Caliphs, in Cordova and Toledo and Seville and other great Islamic cities, Moslem and Christian and Jewish poets and savants lived and worked together, and the civilization they made inspired and influenced all Europe." It was Averroes (Ibn Rushd), a Muslim philosopher and physician in twelfth-century Spain, who saved the *Poetics* from oblivion in his commentary on Aristotle. Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel laureate (who, because of the death-sentence against Rushdie, accused Khomeini of "literary terrorism"), likes to remind people that after "a victorious battle against Byzantium, . . . the Muslims gave back prisoners of war in return for a number of books of the ancient Greek heritage in philosophy, medicine, and mathematics. . . . This was a testimony of value for the human spirit in its demand for knowledge, even though the demander was a believer in God and the demanded a

fruit of pagan civilization.” And as yet another proof of the heterogeneity and tolerance of the Islamic world: in Tunisian schools students read Mehmood Messadi’s *The Hadiths of Abu Hurayra*, a novel in which a couple make love right beside the Kaaba. Further, not all Muslim countries have banned *The Satanic Verses*, and in some Muslim countries the ban is not enforced. Rushdie, of course, is himself more than aware of how Islam is misrepresented in the West: “It needs to be said repeatedly in the West that Islam is no more monolithically cruel, no more an ‘evil empire,’ than Christianity, capitalism or communism. The medieval, misogynistic, stultifying ideology that Zia imposed on Pakistan in his ‘Islamization’ program was the ugliest possible face of the faith. . . . To be a believer is not by any means to be a zealot. Islam in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent has developed historically along moderate lines, with a strong strain of pluralistic Sufi philosophy; Zia was this Islam’s enemy.”

To return to my charge of gratuitousness: What was the point in having prostitutes adopt, to drum up business, the names of the wives of the prophet? What purpose did it serve besides catering to some postmodernist fever? Such strategies, instead of bringing out a change in perception, are bound to make Muslims, practicing and secular, more retentive and certainly defensive. It is like taking a group of people who have heard only Chopin all their lives, not to a jazz or blues or even rock and roll concert, but straight, with no warning, to a heavy metal affair. It would be an assault on the nerves. To make people listen—and the issues Rushdie raises are worth raising—one cannot insult them. This is a simple rule of rhetoric. Akeel Bilgrami says that the book “has started (or restarted) an important and worthwhile debate about the nature and role of Islam *today*” [my italics]. But has it? Where? Among whom? What belies Bilgrami’s assertion is that the book has made many secular Muslims also defensive, Muslims whose central question in this matter is articulated (though for purposes quite different from mine) by Edward Said:

[Why] must a Muslim, who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, now represent us so roughly, so expertly, and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriate our tradition, reality, history, religion, language, and origins? Why, in other words, must a member of our culture join the legions of Orientalists in Orientalising Islam so radically and unfairly?

The answer Said gives, I think, evades the question, at least its immediacy. Again, I ask: Among whom has the debate started? The people among whom it should have (and I *am* for such a debate, as are many

other Muslims) are Muslims. But Rushdie has managed to make even nonpracticing Muslims feel hurt and angry, leaving many of us with little to defend except his legal and aesthetic right to write the novel, leaving many of us with little to be impassioned about except his right to live and to write what he pleases. Which, of course, is not a little thing. We absolutely must defend him, not only because we need him to be around for a long, long time to keep writing, to keep saving Indo-English fiction from the clutches of *chamchas* like Naipaul, but because, whatever our misgivings about *The Satanic Verses*, we must save Islam from the Khomeinis and Zias of this world.

However, given—in the words of Akeel Bilgrami once again—the “ubiquitous fact of the caricaturing of the Islamic world by the Western press and television media,” I, as a secular Muslim, must remain aggressively defensive in reminding the West of *its* hypocrisies, *its* shortcomings. I am especially defensive in the face of the ideological convenience that allows New Yorkers to demonstrate in their avenues and that inspires the American PEN to hold a meeting in Manhattan at which one author, Gay Talese, reads the Lord’s Prayer. The *New York Times*, in its summary of the event, of course refused to mention this act of Christian fundamentalism. The self-righteousness that allows people to walk around carrying placards that say they are Rushdie makes me want to turn around and very coldly and flippantly say: Really? I emphasize the Western adventures, the incredible double-dealings that have resulted in the current state of many Muslim countries. Fundamentalist Iran, for example, is the West’s gift to itself.

- t Before I’m accused of being a Third World snob, let me explain, in Rushdie’s words, what *Chamcha* means: “A *chamcha* is a very humble, everyday object. It is, in fact, a spoon. The word is Urdu; and it also has a second meaning. Colloquially, a *chamcha* is a person who sucks up to powerful people, a yes-man, a sycophant. The British Empire would not have lasted a week without such collaborators among its colonized peoples.”

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