

Rushdie, Islam and Postcolonial Defensiveness

One would have thought that if one had succeeded in irritating PEN liberals and Muslim extremists with the same argument, then the argument had surely secured the truth of the matter.

In my "Rushdie and the Reform of Islam,"¹ I argued that the only persuasive defence of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* against the widespread—moderate and extremist—Muslim condemnation of it, lay in the significance it had for the world's vast population of moderate Muslims in their struggle against repugnant social policies in many Islamic countries and against the fact or prospect of theocratic Islamic tyrannies. Though I did not suggest that the "liberal" appeal to the First freedom was hollow or humbug, I did insist that those who made the appeal had by and large put the wrong description on what they were doing. They were not, as they seemed to think, giving an argument, they were only expressing a view, their view. By contrast to the mere eloquent expression of a cherished view, *arguments* in a dispute between two parties can only appeal to considerations that are internal to the values and beliefs of the other. Thus my own argument's appeal to the aspirations of moderate Muslims.

I made this claim not just on the practical grounds that an appeal to Muslims (however moderate) that they be tolerant would be ineffective in the context of a book which questioned the very possibility and desirability of faith in Islam in a world which its author saw as brutally changed by large-scale immigration and in which, he claimed, Islam no longer had a progressive public and political role. I argued that, in this context, there was something *theoretically* unsituated and simple-minded about the appeal to liberal freedoms; that it was a bit like saying that a scientific research foundation should agree to fund an application which proposed to prove that the earth is flat, on the ground that it would be displaying intolerance towards that opinion not to. In a plea for tolerance by one party toward another in a dispute, one must be able to provide some argument or evidence that will open a mind to the consideration of a view which that mind is committed to finding either seriously false or frivolous. By looking to values *internal* to moderate Muslims, I sought to provide that argument.

I won't rehearse my argument here, except very briefly. It seemed to

me that the right diagnosis of the magnitude and vehemence of the Muslim response to Rushdie had to do with the fact that much more than private faith was perceived to be under attack, since Islam is, both by doctrine and in practice, a religion that has a very high political profile. Its political pretensions, however, are also the source of considerable anguish for moderate Muslims since they are constantly exploited to foist upon Muslim societies policies (and even sometimes regimes) which moderate Muslims find detestable. My paper urged moderate Muslims who were offended by the novel to nevertheless direct their attention to Rushdie's own anguish, to his own scorn and detestation for these things, and it asked them to respond to what I took to be a challenge thrown down by those sections of the novel in which Islam is most obviously the subject: can we any longer separate out the tyrannies of social and political practice from the context of dogma and doctrine in which they have lived? To try and meet the challenge, I claimed, was to take the novel seriously, to awaken to its significance for their own goals, and not simply to dismiss it with the charge of being offensive. Even if the challenge was successfully answered, an honest effort to think it through could not proceed without acknowledging that Rushdie was, for all their differences, their ally in a common and worthy agenda. With that acknowledgment crucially in place, it then seemed to me that a moderate Muslim reader, even if he found the self-consciously post-modern irreverence of the novel alien and offensive, even if she disagreed with Rushdie's wholesale scepticism about the revelation and about Muhammad's unfaltering monotheism, could nevertheless be in a better psychological position to see it as merely Rushdie's own individual mode of pursuit of that shared agenda. Now, the excesses (if that is how one viewed them) of an ally's rhetoric may still offend, but he could hardly any longer be convicted of treachery.

The argument, however, has succeeded in irritating some moderate Muslims as well.

In the article which accompanies this one, Agha Shahid Ali protests that my argument has not worked with him and other moderate Muslims. His complaint, to put it no more simply than he does, is that he does not believe that the book has the significance for moderate Muslims that I claim for it because by its "gratuitous insults" it has made Muslims more defensive than ever against the West; and that one must not be influenced by Rushdie to neglect to attack the "monolithic" West's "double-dealings" and "hyprocrisies," its responsibility for the recent rise of fundamentalism in Muslim countries such as Iran.

In my paper I had explicitly, and in some detail, addressed the question

of Muslim defensiveness and had gone out of my way to point out the role of Western governments in supporting and encouraging Islamic 'fundamentalism.' But perhaps the discussion was too buried in other themes, so I am glad to have the chance to say something more about it.

Muslim defensiveness with regard to the West is a very nuanced thing. In thinking about it historically, one must distinguish between hostility and defensiveness. For centuries the relations between Christian Europe and its growing Islamic neighbor were defined by a hostility in matters of territory and doctrine and were displayed in the violence of wars and in the most vilifying propaganda against the other. But there was a robustness in this exchange and there was a perverse form of respect that was shown by more or less equal foes. There was a genuine appreciation of and instruction in the achievement of the other in the wide span of culture, science, philosophy, and literature. It was only with the rise of Western colonial domination that the health of hostility eroded into a feeling of defensiveness bred upon the loss of autonomy and upon colonial attitudes of superiority and condescension.

These feelings and attitudes have persisted today despite the rise of independent Muslim nation-states not merely because independence is a relatively recent phenomenon and these things are hard to shake off, but because the polarities of the Cold War have created a political climate in these countries that perpetuate the loss of autonomy in revised but nevertheless recognizable forms. Efforts at economic and political development, which to a large extent have been shaped by the paradigms of the West or of Soviet socialist planning, have not taken root in a way that enhances a sense of self-determination. This was seen to be a problem not just in Islamic countries but in Third World countries generally, and it was this sort of problem that the "non-aligned" movement set out to address. The movement was not always successful and in any case did not get unanimous Muslim support. Economic development seemed to bring with it satellite status in the orbit of one or other superpower, and it did not restore a sense of self-respect and autonomy to newly independent nations. It brought instead an abiding resentment against what were perceived to be either permissive or godless societies. To take just one example, it is a mark of this schizoid psyche that Pakistanis, who have for four decades gratefully accepted massive American economic and military aid, reacted to the publication of Rushdie's book by attacking the American Cultural Centre, which they took to be the symbol of the enemy whom Rushdie represented. Economic development brought satellite status in the further sense that large sections of the population were politically and economically alien-

ated from the governing elites who (as in Iran under the Shah) often owed their power and wealth to foreign governments and capital. To add to this there was the unjust displacement of the Palestinian people by a process which had its origins in brute colonial fiat and which has been continuing with the support of Western governments. It is not possible to discuss the defensiveness that prompts the extreme or the moderate reaction of Muslims to Rushdie's novel without coming to a proper understanding of these seemingly distant factors. The defensiveness is not discontinuous with the general aspirations of the colonized and the 'Third World' sensibility.

It is unlikely that the struggle of the moderates against extremists in Muslim society will be successful until the moderates forge a model of economic development and of political structure that not only avoids the wrong sort of dependency upon foreign capital and aid, but also ensures that large segments of the population are not left out of the economic and political life of their country. One needs to build on a careful diagnosis of why attempts in the past to forge such indigenous and egalitarian models, such as in Nasser's Egypt, failed. Perhaps, with the passing of the Cold War, there is a better prospect for these societies to tap the investment and aid of economically more advanced nations and to integrate with more modern and progressive nations without the danger of being made satellites.² Perhaps in the fullness of time such integration will restore the sense of equality that marked precolonial relations. Until such a time Islamic fundamentalism will continue to have appeal for those demoralized either by economic exclusion or a perceived lack of autonomy. An Islamic Reformation can come only on the coattails of these broader changes.

There is also an excruciating reflexivity to the defensiveness. There are literally hundreds of thousands of Muslims who stand in brave and sometimes active opposition to a number of suffocating, traditional tyrannies of social and political life in many Muslim nations; yet many of them are made self-conscious by the idea that in doing so they are playing into a colonial and postcolonial history of misrepresentation and propaganda against their people. The vitality and creativity of their opposition and of the drive to change the place and role of Islam in politics is much diminished by this reflexive defensive posture. The posture is particularly relevant in the response to Rushdie because it has done more than create a false sense of disloyalty: it has blinded the moderate and modernist Muslim to the point and usefulness the novel has for his or her own moderate and modern commitments.

It has also given rise to misplaced criticisms of Rushdie by Western intellectuals who fail to see how patronizing their stance is to the

Muslims, whose feelings they claim to be defending. Let me say a word about the most well argued and thoughtful of these, a recent letter addressed to Salman Rushdie by the philosopher Michael Dummett in the pages of the *London Independent*. (Before I do, I should remind readers that few English men or women have given their time and energies so selflessly to the task of defending the rights of Muslim and other immigrants in Britain than Ann and Michael Dummett; remind them also of Rushdie's own contribution to this task over the years.) Dummett scolds Rushdie for setting back the hopes of Muslims in Britain against racial prejudice by insensitively inciting their defensive feelings and generating, in turn, a conservative racist backlash. He also argues that Rushdie shows no understanding of the concept of the holy and its importance in the lives of religious people. Agha Shahid Ali, who openly announces his defensive feelings against the West and who is offended by what he calls the 'gratuitous' sections of the novel in which cherished Muslim notions are parodied, echoes both these complaints. Dummett's first argument betrays a remarkably provincial attitude toward the questions about Islam as they emerge from Rushdie's novel and as they occupy the reflections of moderate Muslims. There is the question of Islamic tyrannies which have killed and imprisoned thousands of Muslims. There is the question of a religion which, in the countries in which it has political and social relevance, is exploited to introduce and sustain social policies and practices which moderate Muslims despise. There is the question about whether those policies and practices are separable from the context of doctrine, dogma, and hierarchy in which they are embedded. There is even perhaps the question, relevant to the second of Dummett's arguments, of whether the concept of the holy in Islam is itself obviously separable from this integrated context of doctrine and policy: Can one attack the policies in their larger context without mounting an attack on the holy as it is found in Islam? It is both unfair to Rushdie and beside the point for Muslims who are struggling to understand and shape the future of a *world* religion to be told that they must not pursue these questions openly, assertively, and with the full use of their creative talents, because they would undermine the status of a migrant community on an island in the North Sea. One can only hope that Muslims from that migrant community will realize that they cannot be halted by the qualms that are encouraged by such misguided sympathy and generally by the reflexive defensive posture, and that they will awaken to the urgency of these questions.

Some critics of Rushdie have said that he has shown bad judgment by having failed to see the extremity of the feelings he was going to

provoke. Others have suggested that, but for Khomeini's *fatwa*, he saw it all clearly and deliberately sought the publicity it brought him. There is a point-missing obtuseness in all this. Agha Shahid Ali worries that the novel has "provoked rather than condemned" the fundamentalists. The plain fact is that fundamentalists have been and will be provoked by much less than Rushdie serves up, so it is overscrupulous to worry about provoking them. By focusing on the fundamentalist response, these critics have all failed to explore the questions that Rushdie's novel and the aftermath of its publication pose for moderate Muslims, who are as opposed to the fundamentalist element in their societies as they are hurt by the novel. The deep question is whether the answers that moderate Muslims will, on reflection, provide to these questions are compatible with their own condemnation of the novel. If not, there is a fundamental but implicit contradiction in their position, and it is a matter of enormous consequence that they become alive to it. To be hurt and offended by the novel is one thing, a natural thing, for a devout person, however moderate. But to take up these questions and answer them with reason and intelligence is quite another thing, for it does not permit the offence to breed a stultifying defensiveness. I am not suggesting that Muslims will or should agree with Rushdie in his wholesale religious scepticism or his ideas about how the religious impulse is better gratified in our world by art and literature than by orthodox religions. But to disagree and to criticize him amount to taking his novel seriously and therefore to rejecting the sort of condemnation of it one finds even in his more moderate critics. Such disagreement will require that they provide a detailed answer to the question: how can Muslim nations work to build a just and free society in the sort of legitimizing religious framework that even the secular among them have adopted, without surrender to or constant threat from the fundamentalist elements? Recent history has repeatedly shown that the progressive possibilities of a politicized Islam amount to a dangerous myth. Khomeini's Iran, Zia's Pakistan, widespread subjugation of women all over the Islamic world, these and much else all accumulate around us as evidence for a negative answer to the question. Rushdie's *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* have done much to make this evidence vivid. If his novels are remembered for having raised once again the possibility of such reformist consciousness among moderate Muslims, it is hard to see what his bad judgment is supposed to consist in. It is hard to see why the publicity he has sought is selfish. As far as I can see it has—at hideous cost to himself—publicized the desperate need for a reformed, depoliticized Islam.

Like many moderate Muslims, Agha Shahid Ali refers with pride to

the tradition of tolerance within Islam, and, like them, he points with anger to the hypocrisy in Western criticisms of Islam, when the West itself has so much within it that is subject to the same criticisms. No one can deny what he says. But I do want to take a moment to express irritation with the point of making it the fundamentally important focus in this context. One commonly hears in recent discussions of Islam the following sort of exchange. Somebody criticizes some aspect of the Islamic world, for example, the Islamic reaction to *The Satanic Verses*, to which someone else replies: "But there is no 'Islamic World', there are many Islams, and besides censorious reactions against blasphemy can be found in other religions too." The reply is defensive and a conversation-stopper, just when the conversation should be proceeding to an intelligent diagnosis of the widespread hostility of the response, even within an acknowledgment of a great deal of diversity in Islam and of censorship elsewhere. Progressive Muslims who are interested in reform, have to overcome the fear of generalizing about their religion and its practice. A reformation presupposes that one has distilled from the diversity a core practice and a core doctrine to which one is opposed. No doubt different things will form different cores in different countries. But one should not be prevented, by a fear of falling into Western caricatures of Islam, from stating and analyzing these contextually situated generalities and thinking hard about strategies of change. After all, there are many Wests, but that does not stop me (or Ali) from distilling out of them a postcolonial economic and political core and a postcolonial mentality and seeing it as a source of continued domination and contempt.³

Ali denies that moderate Muslims are responding positively to the novel in the way, he thinks, I had claimed. Since I addressed my entire paper as an argument *against* the moderate *condemnation* of the novel, I was perfectly aware of the fact that their response was dismissive of Rushdie. I had made it clear that the very defensiveness that Ali admits to in himself was preventing Muslims like him from seeing the primary worth of the novel for them. I insisted that if the internal argument I offered was seen as speaking to something primary, then that alone would allow those moderate Muslims to be psychologically more prepared to see the offending passages in the book as secondary, as the individual excesses of a headstrong talent. My point was not that the novel had already quickened their reformist tendencies. It was rather that if they paid attention to it long enough to stop sulking, it should alert them to a conflict within their own values and thinking, and a contradiction in their own lives. The conflict was between what was implicitly entailed by their opposition to the fundamentalists on the one

hand, and on the other their faith in a doctrine with detailed relevance to the polity, a relevance constantly invoked by the fundamentalists to impose policies and regimes that were anathema to moderate Muslims. The contradiction lay in the question: Wasn't even their moderate condemnation encouraging a self-enclosing and paralyzing defensiveness and insularity, encouraging, that is, the very things that were obstacles to a creative, spirited, and determined reformist movement against the fundamentalist element in their society that they were pledged, by their moderation, to oppose? It would be an ungenerous people, hardly deserving of the description "moderate," which would persist in bleating about the satirical and parodic "excesses" of an author who had raised questions of such deep and primary significance for them.

In the case of moderate Muslims (like Agha Shahid Ali) educated in and contributing to Western literature and culture, it is much more than a lack of generosity. Their defensiveness has prevented them from situating what would otherwise seem to be "gratuitous insults" in an appropriate theoretical context of the literary possibilities of cultural and political criticism, a context with which they should be perfectly familiar. One stance on the mode of cultural criticism, a stance that all of Rushdie's novels brilliantly exemplify, is that the novel's power to criticize existing hegemonies cannot be restricted to the mode of argument and counterargument; it must if necessary take in, in its criticism, the hegemonizing compromises of that mode itself. It must commit itself to providing a clash of modes and languages. No doubt this runs the risk of being perceived as creating excesses, but the stance has always claimed that anything less comprehensive in its polemical and critical intention and effect would only perpetuate the forms and pieties that frame the hegemonies in question.

This post-modern stance is not hard to discern in *The Satanic Verses* unless one is distracted by one's own defensiveness. Anybody who notices that a novelist is disrespectful, not merely to a religious prophet and his family with the play of proper names,⁴ but to everything else he touches in every novel he writes, must surely pause to wonder whether there is a considered point underlying this comprehensiveness, and whether the particular things that offend him might have flowed from a more general conviction of what the possibilities of a novel are in the author's own conception of his work. Nor, obviously, is the stance Rushdie's invention. It is admittedly true that in the last several decades in the West, the target of this stance has always been the bourgeois hegemonies of a culture shaped by a seemingly decaying but, in fact, highly resilient capitalism. As Brecht advised Benjamin: Start with "the bad new things." So it might seem startling and injudicious

that an Anglo-Indian novelist brings this stance to a target which his Western critics would have us consider a “bad old thing,” pre-Enlightenment religiosity, something that the West itself has outgrown, but to be discussed and criticized where it does exist in a more appropriately solemn mode. Rushdie is very well aware of this and has all along resisted the idea of the unsuitability of his adopted mode of writing for his subjects. The question Edward Said rightly poses and which Agha Shahid Ali is right to quote and ask again—why did Rushdie fall into this Orientalizing misrepresentation of Islam?—therefore, has an answer. In making a ‘bad old thing’ the target of a post-modern cultural critical stance, *The Satanic Verses* repudiated the historicist restriction of appropriate targets for appropriate stances; it repudiated the restriction as *itself* another Orientalist withholding of the creative possibilities of Islam for its own self-understanding and self-criticism.⁵ Why should well-known antecedents to Rushdie within this stance, such as for example the films of Buñuel and Arabal (sickening to devout Christians), be any more justified in their intended power to undermine the seemingly perpetual conserving tendencies of bourgeois European culture than Rushdie’s intentions in his own novel, to undermine the constricting and conserving dimensions of the holy for Islamic reform?

Literature and criticism, in the world in which Rushdie was educated and lives and writes, has witnessed the passing of Leavisite Humanism and Modernism; and it is witnessing the inabilities of an avowedly antihumanist structuralist and poststructuralist ideology, which succeeded it, to cope with its own urges for cultural criticism. It is struggling to forge a more politicized humanism. The older humanist paradigms seem manifestly naive and irrelevant, so much so that a vexed question looms for the whole literary culture: how can a humanism, however politicized, fail to seem so? The stance Rushdie has chosen, drawing on and echoing diverse literary and critical strands—Surrealist manifestoes, Bakhtin, to name just two—is one effort to answer this question. The irreverent, blaspheming polemical potential provided by the familiarizing speech of popular culture, the “carnival” which “marks the suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions,” which “opposes all that is ready-made and completed, all pretence at immutability”⁶—these are the explicit adoptions of an answer which attempts, on the one hand, to move out of existing apolitical formalisms and relativisms, and on the other to finesse the outdated, legitimizing modes of traditional humanisms. The answer may not, in the end, satisfy and undoubtedly there are other possible answers. But it is *an* answer, and Agha Shahid Ali and others should acknowledge that novels which struggle to provide such answers are

struggling with one of the most urgent demands of their culture. "Gratuitousness" would, therefore, be a dumbfoundingly unfair charge to bring against them.

I am glad to have been asked to respond to a heartfelt reaction by another moderate and secular Muslim to *The Satanic Verses*, a response very different from my own; glad because the novel is of such obvious importance not only to Muslims' understanding of themselves but to how Muslims must expect and demand that others understand them. All the same, it is not an easy thing to write about Salman Rushdie in this way these days because one has the feeling that, in seeing this larger significance of his novel and the aftermath of its publication, one would have found a way of forgetting *him*. In my mind, I have no doubt that Muslims in the future will remember him for awakening or reawakening them to the possibility of reform. But I fear that we today, with our learned historical and literary diagnoses, our religious and political debates, will not keep constantly in our mind that he is right now a prisoner; a prisoner like many others who have been put in other sorts of prison for daring to provoke their people out of their complacency to think about the contradictions in their public and personal lives. We should not forget his imprisonment. If Sakharov and Havel could see better times, so, one must assume, can Rushdie.

Notes

I owe much to Maggie Peters for her intellectual advice and support during the writing of this and the earlier article referred to in Note 1.

- 1 *Grand Street* (Summer 1989).
- 2 I fear that in the hindsight gained over the next few years, this conjecture will have seemed ludicrously optimistic. The issue is a complicated one and turns on questions of how much the stranglehold that foreign capital and aid can have on a "Third World" country has been a result of the geopolitical pressures of the Cold War and how much due to the inherent neocolonizing tendencies of the international spread of capital. It is fascinating to see that these very issues of economic development without satellite status are being vigorously debated by different elements in the Iranian government in their efforts to reconstruct a war-devastated economy.
- 3 In his paper he seems to be unaware that he has done so and calls the West "monolithic" for no apparent reason. Why if one recognizes diversity in Islam, should one withhold it from the West? Obviously the point should be to recognize it in both and abstract out different uniformities and generalities from the diversities for different practical and theoretical (explanatory) goals. No social science, no agenda for social change, can proceed without muddle if they ignore this simple methodological canon. "Monolith" and "diversity" are not descriptive categories independent of these practical and theoretical ends. For more on these methodological considerations, see my "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Explanations of Islam." (forthcoming in *Transition*)
- 4 Ali's charge of gratuitousness is based primarily on his unhappiness with Rushdie's use of the name "Mahound" for Muhammad and with the section where prostitutes adopt the names of the wives of the prophet to enhance their business.

5 See also Fredric Jameson ("Post-Modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146) on the appropriateness of pastiche rather than parody in the context of postmodernist culture. Though I happen to find this restriction wholly unconvincing as well (for reasons that I can't possibly elaborate here), that is not because I am committed to the strong *general* claim that periodicity imposes no constraints on the effectiveness of such modes and stances. If that were so my concern in the next paragraph for a politicized humanism, fitting for the post-modern literary sensibility, would have no validity. My claim is weaker and more particular. Putting aside Jameson, I am only claiming of Rushdie's stance as I have described it, first that there is a tendency to see it as yielding Orientalising distortions and excesses in the context of its particular target—Islam—because of a perceived inappropriateness of that stance for that target; and second this perception of inappropriateness, this restriction of what Islam may employ for its own self-criticism, smacks of the very Orientalism that it charges the stance with having fallen into.

6 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Cambridge, MA, 1968).