

A Forum on *The Satanic Verses**

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S SATANIC NARRATION

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A year ago in Pakistan, six people were killed in riots over *The Satanic Verses*, an allegedly blasphemous book. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini called on the faithful to execute the author, Salman Rushdie, promising that any Muslim who lost his life while trying would go straight to heaven; and a reward worth 5.4 million dollars provided additional incentive.

By their own admission, virtually none of the Muslim protestors had read *The Satanic Verses*. The book is banned in both India, where Rushdie was born, and Pakistan, where his family now lives, as well as in Iran, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Egypt. The Sunni Muslim theologians of Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo, who issued the ban, based their decision on a reading of only selected excerpts of the novel. Iran alone among the Islamic countries called for the death of the author. Iran is a fundamentalist Shi'ite theocracy, whereas the majority of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims. Al Azhar banned the book, but stopped there. Salman Rushdie is not the only noted author to be banned by the Great Mosque in Cairo. In 1959 Al Azhar prevented the Egyptian publication in book form of a novel by Naguib Mahfouz. Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, concurred with the decision.

At the time of its banning, few Westerners had read the novel, either. Its official American publication date was 22 February 1989. Although advance copies had been available for several weeks before that, the death sentence issued by Khomeini against Rushdie and his publishers in February, coupled with bomb threats to bookstores, led Waldenbooks, B. Dalton, and Barnes and Noble to temporarily remove the book from their shelves. A year later, the book is easy to procure, at least in the United States, but many people hardly get past the title, which polarizes the book's potential audience. On one hand, non-Muslim readers are unlikely

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to know what the title means. They are therefore in the position of someone who picks up an English Romantic poem championing Satan without having read any earlier versions of the Fall. On the other hand, Muslims may recognize the title and find themselves systematically insulted throughout the novel.

The willingness of devout Muslims to condemn a book of which they have read only the title is easier to understand if one realizes that the novel is itself named after a banned text. The original “Satanic verses” are those that Muhammad censored from the Qur’an, because he believed them to be inspired by the devil. The verses in question consider the relation between Allah, whose name means “the God,” to three ancient Arab goddesses, including Al-Lat, whose name means “the goddess,” according to the article on Al-Lat in the first edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1936). This article is worth comparing with the one in the new edition of this encyclopedia, which claims that the etymology of “Al-Lat” is contested, and that she may be related to Astarte. At one point in his revelations, Muhammad recited that these three goddesses were intercessors with Allah; but that position was quickly superseded. The orthodox view is now contained in Sura 53 of the Qur’an, which names the goddesses, dismisses them because they are female, and assures the faithful that “They are but names which you and your fathers have invented; Allah has vested no authority in them.”

This historical act of revision is reenacted within the novel in a dream-sequence chapter, called “Mahound,” a derogatory name for Muhammad. Muslims have objected to Rushdie’s fictional portrayal there of a character resembling the Prophet. A more subtle critique, still from a point of view informed by Islam, is that the chapter has a suspicious narrator who may be, as in the case of the original troubling verses, Satan himself. Rushdie’s Mahound doubts that the verses he has received concerning the exalted role of the three goddesses, including Al-Lat, are legitimate, and so he returns to the angel. Gibreel, who is both the angel in this episode, and the human actor who is dreaming the episode, protests to the reader in italics, with Anglo-Indian accents: “*Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I’m just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help. Help*” (109).

Mahound wrestles with the angel, and manipulates the answer. In the

next section, as Gibreel reflects on this, a first-person voice breaks through in italics, saying, "*it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me.*" The paragraph ends, "*and we all know how my mouth got worked*" (123). The speaker claims to have given both revelations, to have spoken both for and against the goddesses. We cannot be sure whether Gibreel or Satan is saying this; but the voice claims that either it was Gibreel both times, or both times it was Satan. So, no matter whether it was Gibreel or Satan, the angel was manipulated by Mahound; the will of a questionable prophet determined the revelation.

The seriousness of Rushdie's revisions regarding inspiration and authority must be measured against the Muslim belief that every single word of the Qur'an came not from Muhammad, but from God himself. Moreover, the original text is as it were on file with God. Most Muslim authorities think the word "Qur'an" means "what he read" or "what he recited." This is the governing narrative that Rushdie is working both with and against. The myriad metamorphoses in the novel can be understood as so many attempts to engage, question, and celebrate the creation of textual versions of what may be read, or recited, or revealed.

This overarching concern is introduced in the opening scene, in which two hijacked Indian passengers, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, fall from an exploding plane and land in England. Both are actors; one specializes in imitating voices and the other in the Indian film genre of "theologicals." While falling, they metamorphose into versions of the archangels, Gibreel (Gabriel) and Shaitan (Satan). They shout verses at one another in contest and tumble past the specter of a woman who is singing "verses" in which Gibreel "thought he made out, but maybe not, the name of *Al-Lat*" (8).

As they "fall" together, this pair of opposites melds into a troublesome double-unit. A disembodied will-to-live overtakes Saladin and spreads to Gibreel. In a command much like the archangel gave to Muhammad to "Recite," the will-to-live commands Gibreel to "Sing." It is Gibreel's song that lands them safely. A narrator who claims, "I know the truth, obviously," comments on this chain of inspiration, and questions its type:

"Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.
Which one was the miracle-worker?
Of what type—angelic, satanic—was Farishta's song?
Who am I?" (10)

By asking “Who am I?” this narrator poses for the novel the same question Muhammad asked of the dubious “Satanic verses”: who is their narrator?

Rushdie’s writing gains in importance by making this connection between a sacred tradition regarding textual transmission and contemporary metafiction, or writing-about-writing. At a time when we have all but lost our faith in definitive origins, Rushdie writes us into a world of versions that is nevertheless not a trivial world, but a world suffused with the sacred. In its questioning of both the transmission of sacred text, and contemporary representations of writing, *The Satanic Verses* may well be the first postmodern Islamic novel.

Rushdie’s textual critique of Islam deserves closer analysis. For it is this act of audacity, rather than any simple obscenity, that is the heart of the matter. One of the most interesting things about *The Satanic Verses* is that within it, we find inscribed versions of the very controversy over sacred and profane writing which has so colored the reception of the book. In fact, Rushdie writes specifically about the authority of the text of the Qur’an, and dramatizes the possibly fictional dimension of the sacred text.

In *The Satanic Verses*, one of Mahound’s three helpers is a Persian “with the unusual name of Salman,” a name he shares with the author of the novel. Salman has been Mahound’s scribe during the time that the Prophet and his followers have been living away from Jahilia. Sneaking back into that city, a drunken Salman recounts to another poet, named Baal, that it is his textual uncertainties that brought about his disillusionment with the faith: “‘The closer you are to a conjuror,’ Salman bitterly replied, ‘the easier to spot the trick’” (363). Salman suspects too close a relation between the angel Gibreel and Mahound himself: “he just laid down the law and the angel would confirm it afterwards; so I began to get a bad smell in my nose, and I thought, this must be the odour of those fabled and legendary unclean creatures, what’s their name, prawns’ (364–365).

After a dream in which Salman sees himself hovering over Mahound, Salman realizes that he couldn’t tell whether his newly arch-angelic point of view was that of the divinely authorized Gibreel, or of Shaitan, who had once falsely transmitted to Mahound the Satanic verses. Salman the scribe decides to test Mahound by slightly altering the text. Mahound doesn’t notice. “So I went on with my devilment, changing verses,” recounts Salman. In an exchange chillingly consonant with the reception of

the novel, the two earthly poets confer: “Baal asked, ‘Why are you sure he will kill you?’ Salman the Persian answered: ‘It’s his Word against mine’” (368).

The orthodox chain of inspiration should go from archangel to prophet to scribe, but in *The Satanic Verses*, that hierarchy is called into question. First, the prophet is suspected of dictating to the archangel; then, in this dream, the scribe is seen dictating to the prophet. The chain of command has been inverted, to feature the human writer.

Here it is important to consider the history of the word “*Shaitan*.” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* informs us that “Al-Shaitan is the chief of the evil spirits and shaitan is a spirit, though not necessarily evil. There is no fixed tradition as to the relation of al-shaitan with the shaitans and other djin.” The notion of a shaitan as “Satan” is borrowed from Judaism. The Arabic word *shaitan* can be used in the sense of “genius,” much as in its original sense of inspiration by a spirit. “Belonging to the same order of ideas,” the *Encyclopaedia* adds, “is the belief that a poet was possessed by a *shaitan* who inspired his words.” In this generic and morally neutral usage, all human poetry is satanic verse. In playing on the synecdoche between Satan and all inspirational spirits, *The Satanic Verses* asks us to reflect on the transmission of fictions both sacred and profane.

In this regard, the Salman within the novel is a double of Salman the author, the writer of fiction. Fiction as Europeans and Americans know it is not a longstanding practice in the Islamic world, which excels at storytelling rather than novel-writing. Even in the West, there lurks the suspicion that fiction is a somewhat dubious practice, a socially sanctioned form of lying. The uneasy relations between history and novel-writing have long been hard for Westerners to explain to themselves. The award of the Nobel Prize to Mahfouz was largely for his work in establishing the novel as a genre in Arabic. It is no wonder that this is tough going for the Islamic world.

In *The Satanic Verses*, the chain of scriptural transmission shows the fiction-writer’s word to be a version of the Holy Word, and Salman the scribe to be a version of the fictional prophet Mahound. Following the archangel Gibreel, Mahound recites; following Mahound, Salman transcribes. This is the model of narration that will recur throughout Rushdie’s writing. The orthodox view stresses the continuity, even the identity of the transmitted text. *The Satanic Verses* however stresses the room for im-

provisation and inversion at every step. With his one small alteration, Salman the scribe opens the door to the idea of fiction.

Rather than simply rejecting orthodox belief about the origin of inspired texts, *The Satanic Verses* artistically reenacts multiple levels of doubt. This is not a case of alleged blasphemy that could be dealt with, even if one were so inclined, by expunging the offending part the way an editor might simply delete an obscene expression in an otherwise acceptable piece of writing. From his first novel on, Salman Rushdie's special domain has been precisely this problem of a possible artistic reordering of a sacred text. In *Grimus*, Rushdie's first novel (1975), the Gorfis are intelligent beings, embodied in rock, who play an elaborate game in which given elements are rearranged in new combinations. At the verbal level, Gorfis recombine letters into new words, as we might make the anagram "lure" out of the word "rule." But they carry it farther:

The Gorfic obsession with anagram-making ranges from simple rearrangement of word-forms to the exalted level of the Divine Game of Order. The Game extends far beyond mere letter-puzzling; the vast mental powers of the Gorfis make it possible for them anagrammatically to alter their very environment and indeed their own physical make-up. . . . The Rules of the Game are known as Anagrammar. (*Grimus* 77)

In a recent review of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, Rushdie restates his admiration for anagrams:

Hey, Frenesi turns out to be an anagram of "free" and "sin," the two sides of her nature, light and dark, just as the hero of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop, could be made to reveal his essence anagrammatically, turning into "sloth" or "entropy." Sure, it's still working, that ole anagrammar. (*The New York Times Book Review*, January 14, 1990)

The anagrammatic turn of mind is somewhat obsessional, though we should remember that in *Grimus*, the narrator explains that fiction-making itself is a kind of obsession. The Gorf of Calf Island is credited with transforming the question: "*And are we actually to be the least intelligent race in our*

Endimions?” into the anagram: “Determine how catalytic an elite is: use our talent and learning-lobe.” The narrator praises the transformation:

This is a perfect use of Anagrammar; for not only does it contain all the letters of the Chiefest Question and only those letters, but moreover, it enriches the Question itself, adding to it the concept of catalysis and its origins, and instructions about how the question is to be answered.” (*Grimus* 78–79)

Amusing, yes, and a little frightening. After all, this passage was not written by a Gorf. We can be grateful, however, for Rushdie’s gloss on his own fiction, because his concern with reordering persists through all his novels.

Rushdie’s next novel, *Midnight’s Children* (1980), contains more than one character with a compelling desire to make order out of given elements. Doctor Aadam Aziz, the grandfather of the narrator/protagonist of *Midnight’s Children*, is a returned student from Heidelberg, a reality so removed from his home of Bombay that he spends his life in a state of protracted doubt, torn between East and West. The fledgling physician is called to examine a young female patient, whose modesty demands that he examine only the particular body part that is ailing. Aadam examines each successive fragment through a hole cut in a sheet that is held up in grand theatrical style by two strong-armed serving women.

The patient’s father, we infer, has guessed correctly that the young doctor would be drawn to play this erotized version of the Divine Game of Order, for doctor and patient marry and their daughter applies this analytical method to her second husband, whom she breaks down mentally into small units, which she can reconstruct as someone to love: “Each day she selected one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and concentrated her entire being upon it until it became wholly familiar” (75). Their child, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, rediscovers the sheet through which his grandparents met and uses it to act out the part of a ghost in a nursery play.

But it is Ahmed Sinai whose life’s goal is fit for a theologian: Ahmed longs to rearrange the fragments of the Qur’an into the correct chronological order. The Qur’an, explains the narrator, is a transcription of Muhammad’s Recitation. However, Muhammad did not recite in one fell swoop. The inspired recitation came in stages, each of which was written down separately:

When Muhammad prophesied, people wrote down what he said on palm leaves, which were kept any old how in a box. After he died, Abubakr and the others tried to remember the correct sequence; but they didn't have very good memories. (*Midnight's Children* 93)

Two chapters of *The Satanic Verses*, "Mahound" and "The Return to Jahilia," continue this fragmentation and recombination with a comic reenactment of the founding of Islam. The treatment of religion in these chapters ranges from the troubling to the tasteless. One charge often repeated in the press is that in *The Satanic Verses*, the wives of the Prophet are portrayed as prostitutes. This is not quite true, although an accurate account may not be any more palatable.

In "Return to Jahilia," a prostitute gets the idea to pretend to a particular customer, one of the less than totally faithful, that she is Ayesha, the favorite wife of Mahound—and, historically, the favorite wife of Muhammad. This is such a success that other residents of the brothel collude in acting out the parts of Mahound's other eleven wives, and the brothel more and more takes on the character of an elaborate fictional reproduction of the Prophet's harem. Thus this set of female characters enacts within their domain the same concern with textual versions we saw earlier in the case of the male poet-prophets. It is not difficult to see how some people find this portrayal offensive.

The brothel as a privileged theatrical space is set up already in *Grimus*, with its "House of the Rising Son"—yes, "son"; Islam is not the only religion to come in for rough handling in Rushdie—governed by the male fiction that the resident women want whatever their male customers want. *Grimus's* House features a further unreal gesture of being an equal opportunity brothel, where prostitutes of various races and creeds serve both men and women. The whores include the Indian Kamala Sutra, the Chinese Lee Kok Fook, a Black Florence Nightingale, and two bisexual prostitutes, one male and one female. The madam is named Jocasta, perhaps in acknowledgment that everyone loves their mother first.

Under the previous madam, Liv, the whores had all been generalists. Jocasta on the other hand insists that they specialize. Each room of the brothel is set up as a separate fantasy-stage, presided over by a sadist, a nice girl, a Tantrist, or whatever. This specialization and attendant theatricality is further developed in *The Satanic Verses*, where the several sideshows

all work together in a composite reenactment of the harem of the Prophet.

From the focus on the brothel, one might not guess the strength of women characters generally in Rushdie's fiction. It is not only in brothels that women are found running the show. Both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* (1983) are structured along family lines; *Shame* is even prefaced by an elaborate genealogical tree charting the relations among the Shakil, Hyder, and Harappa families. Family units are often controlled by a woman; the three Shakil sisters, for example, orchestrate a sort of tripartite quasi-virgin birth. The Hyder matriarch, Bariamma, presides over a dormitory-like arrangement in which forty women are visited secretly by their husbands once Bariamma is asleep. The "dormitory" is also the site of storytelling, with its collection of stories making up the family. The transmission of family story shares with the transmission of sacred story the injunction against alteration, as we find in the introduction to "an extract from the family saga of Raza and Bilquis, given in the formulaic words which it would be a gross sacrilege to alter." (*Shame* 81). Nevertheless, after the retelling of one included story, the narrator adds, "It is possible that the above incident has been a little embellished during its many tellings and retellings; but I shall not be the one to question the veracity of oral tradition" (95).

Shame is a woman's story, in the sense that the novel's inspiration is the actual story of a Pakistani woman murdered by her father in London, "because by making love to a white boy she had brought such dishonor upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain" (123). The narrator gives this girl a new name, "Anna Muhammad," linking this woman with the series of Prophet-characters, and launching her into fiction:

Anna, deported, repatriated to a country she had never seen, caught brain-fever and turned into a sort of idiot. . . . Or maybe the fever was a lie . . . intended to cover up the damage done by repeated blows to the head. (125)

Blows inflicted by her mother, out of shame that the child was not a boy.

Rushdie does not underestimate the force of repressed femaleness, whether in the monster of *Shame*, or in the banished goddesses of the "Satanic verses." His male characters are constantly faced with the consequences of a system that, from the outside, looks as though it gives men

great power over women. Women can be veiled to the eyeballs, locked in the house, and expunged from the official record, and yet one comes away from these novels with the impression that these repressed women are the driving force of the world.

An unusual number of Rushdie's male characters are in love with a powerful sister. The protagonist of *Grimus* is given eternal life by his older sister, who has raised him, initiated him into sexual life, and whom he pursues for centuries. His sexual desire for her drives the plot. The Brass Monkey of *Midnight's Children* is the narrator/protagonist's younger sister, but she always has the upper hand. His love for her, contemptuously rejected, colors—actually, it “scents”—his sexual relations with all other women. But the most powerful female figure in all of Rushdie's fiction is Ayesha of *The Satanic Verses*. Her erotic magnetism is clear from the moment we see her, through the eyes of Mirza Saeed, a man who, standing in the bedroom he shares with his beloved wife, looks out the window at Ayesha and is overcome with lust. The compelling call of Ayesha is erotic, but not only carnal. Ayesha is married to the archangel, and her desire is for the holy city. Is she a female version of the true Prophet, or a return of the banished goddesses of the “Satanic verses”?

The novel contains two chapters, “Ayesha” and “The Parting of the Arabian Sea,” that together form one of the most moving religious narratives of the twentieth century, a magical realist story of great faith. Ayesha, a modern-day visionary who shares the name of the beloved wife of Muhammad, is spoken to by the archangel Gibreel. Like the earlier Prophet, she calls herself a Messenger. An entire village heeds her command to undertake a pilgrimage on foot to Mecca.

Even the wife of the village lord—the man who is in love with Ayesha—prepares to go. This man can no more reason with his wife than with himself about Ayesha's call. At last he says, “But at least take the Mercedes station wagon. It's got air-conditioning and you can take the icebox full of Cokes” (239). She goes on foot. He drives slowly behind, providing running commentary from the “station wagon of scepticism.”

The account of the pilgrimage contains variations on details from the life of the Prophet. Muslims believe that, as the founder of their religion and his followers left the city of Mecca and traveled to the place that would be called Medina, “City of the Prophet,” a protective space hovered over Muhammad. In Rushdie's twentieth-century revisioning of the sacred pil-

grimage, this time led by a woman and with Mecca as its goal, the protective space is represented as a canopy of butterflies—one thinks of the yellow butterflies in another magical realist novel, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The tower of butterflies shades the pilgrims, feeds and clothes their leader Ayesha, and at the edge of the waters that separate the believers from the holy city, transforms itself into a massive cloud of innumerable beating wings: the archangel come to part the waters of the Arabian Sea.

Policemen interrogate the witnesses, who tell conflicting stories about the end of the pilgrims. Some say they walked into the sea and drowned; others say the sea stood back as the pilgrims walked on to the holy city. The most wrenching testimony comes from those who dived in to try to “save” the pilgrims. Like Moses, the divers saw the holy land, but could not cross over. One of them, Muhammad Din, testifies:

“Just when my strength had failed and I thought I would surely die there in the water, I saw it with my own eyes; I saw the sea divide, like hair being combed; and they were all there, far away, walking away from me. She was there also, my wife, Khadija, whom I loved.” (504)

The police however request a more worldly explanation:

“Don't shit from your mouth. . . . Already the drowned bodies are floating to shore, swollen like balloons and stinking like hell. If you go on lying we will take you and stick your nose in the truth.” (504–505)

Another diver reports to the village lord: “‘It is our shame that we were not thought worthy to accompany. On us, Sethji, the waters closed; they slammed in our faces like the gates of Paradise’” (505).

Mirza Saeed, the sceptical, rational leader of the village, has lost both his wife and Ayesha to a vision denied to him and is cast back on the material shore:

When he found out that he was the only survivor of the Ayesha Haj not to have witnessed the parting of the waves. . . . [he] broke down

and wept for a week and a day, the dry sobs continuing to shake his body long after his tear ducts had run out of salt.” (505).

The elements of the Ayesha Haj are present in the opening chapter of *The Satanic Verses*. The details of that version of the story of belief/non-belief are more Westernized, with the historical and political dimension of allusions to the actual hijacking of a Canadian jetliner. And the conflict between material versus spiritual interpretations of one event is in this account more pressing for Western readers, who may feel themselves more threatened by a possible hijacking than by a pilgrimage that gets out of hand. The trajectory of the novel, though, runs from the comic but threatening opening scenario, through the burlesque brothel scene, to the mystical display of belief on the Ayesha Haj.

From the first, Rushdie’s conjunction of religious drama and drama of a more profane sort is emphasized by the word “stars.” We have been told that the hijackers are “all handsome, they were actors, too, they were stars now, shootingstars or falling” (78). Gibreel Farishta is a “superstar” in theological movies, and Saladin Chamcha is an actor who plays alien beings on TV. The religious drama enacted here has an Aeschylean majesty that is missing from the brothel-harem comedy, but is taken up again in the Ayesha Haj. It is the abstract drama of great forces, of the conflict between time and eternity. And in this version of the drama, the starring role is played by a woman.

In one larger-than-life gesture, the woman leader of the terrorists displays her armed body to the captive actor-spectators on the plane named for paradise:

Then she slipped her robe back on and spoke in her faint oceanic voice. “When a great idea comes into the world, a great cause, certain crucial questions are asked of it,” she murmured. “History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?” Her body provided the answer. (81)

“What kind of idea are you?” This question runs through *The Satanic Verses*. It is asked first of an idea when it is weak, and again once it is strong. It is asked of Islam in the time of Muhammad/Mahound, when

the new idea hesitates over making an accommodation with the three goddesses of the original “Satanic verses”: “What kind of idea are you?” It is asked again once an idea has come to power. In voices male and female, human and angelic, *The Satanic Verses* asks this question of Islam today: “What kind of idea are you?”