

# 7 The Satanic Verses Controversy: A Brief Introduction

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On 26 September 1988 Viking/Penguin published in the United Kingdom *The Satanic Verses*, a new novel by Salman Rushdie.<sup>1</sup> The novel was keenly awaited in the literary world where Rushdie was regarded as among the most inventive and ambitious novelists of his generation. He had already won the Booker Prize, probably the most prestigious literary award in Britain, for his second published novel *Midnight's Children*, in 1981.<sup>2</sup> His subsequent novel, *Shame*, was also short-listed for the prize, though to Rushdie's undisguised dismay it did not win, and he was internationally recognised as a novelist of the first importance.<sup>3</sup> However, Rushdie was also a controversial writer – both his novels and his essays and critical writings had generated heated debate – and even before it was published it was known that the new novel would create more than a literary stir, though the extent of the controversy it eventually provoked could not have been anticipated by anyone.

Rushdie's background is an interesting and unusual one, and far from irrelevant to the controversy that was to envelop *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>4</sup> He was born in Bombay on 19 June 1947, only two months prior to Indian independence from Britain. His parents were prosperous and devout Muslims, who remained in Bombay after the partition of India and Pakistan. His father was a successful businessman who had been educated in Law at Cambridge University. Rushdie was the only son though he had three sisters. His experience of Bombay clearly had an enormous influence on Rushdie. He was one of the privileged in a city where millions were destitute, but also a member of the Muslim minority in a city dominated by Hindus and where religious violence was an intermittent reality and a constant threat. As a boy he was brought up to speak both Urdu and English; he went to an English mission school; and in his own words 'was brought up in a very Anglophile and Anglocentric way'. It was expected, therefore, that he would complete his education in England, which he did first at Rugby, the exclusive public school, and then in 1965, he went, as his father had done to Cambridge, having won an Exhibition.

Rushdie's early experience of England was traumatic. He was totally unprepared for the ingrained and routine racism with which he was received and continued to be treated by his fellows at Rugby. In consequence, after completing his

schooling, Rushdie had not wanted to return to England and it was only under protest and his father's assertion of parental pressure that he went to Cambridge at all. Moreover, while he was at Rugby his parents had moved to Karachi in Pakistan, separating him further from his childhood in Bombay. In fact Cambridge proved to be a much less disagreeable experience than he had expected. He read History at King's College and was active in the Footlights Club, the University's drama society. Though Cambridge too had its snobbery and exclusiveness, Rushdie responded much more positively to both the variety of university life and the relative diversity of the student population. In addition his time as an undergraduate coincided with the emergence of the counter-culture, of hippies, drugs and flower-power; and anti-Establishment feeling, increasingly focused around opposition to the expanding war in Vietnam, became fashionable.

It seems that Rushdie experienced his time at Cambridge as largely liberating but it also created some problems for him. While at Cambridge he had undertaken a historical investigation of Islam and it afforded him the opportunity to read many books which would not have been available to him in India or Pakistan. (It was at this time that he first read of the so-called 'Satanic Verses' which were to be so important later.) Partly as a consequence of this study of it, and no doubt under other influences too, Rushdie became highly sceptical of his Islamic faith. This produced some strain in relations with his family, and on his return to Pakistan he found his Islamic codes increasingly alien and restrictive. He came to feel ill at ease there and his discomfort clearly showed. He was viewed with some suspicion, even by many of his friends, as one who had been corrupted by Western atheism and materialism. In consequence Rushdie moved to London and opted for British citizenship. He initially adopted a fairly bohemian lifestyle, later marrying an Englishwoman, Clarissa Luard, with whom he had a son. At first he supported himself mostly by acting in the fringe theatre, later by working as a part-time copy-editor for Ogilvy and Mather; and he also began to write.

Rushdie's first published novel was *Grimus* in 1975, though it was not the first novel he had attempted to write; he had earlier abandoned *The Book of the Fir*, a novel about a successful Muslim holy man. *Grimus* was not a success on its first appearance. It failed to win the Victor Gollancz science fiction competition for which it had been entered and the reviews in the English literary press were almost universally poor. However, when, four years later, the book was published in the US the reviews were much more positive. In the interim he had written another novel, *Madam Rama*, about the movie industry – as befits a man from Bombay, Rushdie is a great film enthusiast – which he decided not to try to publish. He then began work on a novel about India which was to become in its final form *Midnight's Children*. The title referred to those Indians born in the first hour after Indian independence and the novel itself was an enormously ambitious undertaking. It is also in part a coming to terms by Rushdie with his complex cultural heritage, a critical but affectionate portrait of his Bombay and an exploration of his own identity; though of course it cannot be reduced to these

biographical concerns. It mixes realism with fantasy, real characters such as Mrs Gandhi and some of his own family with entirely fictional creations, and historical events with imaginary ones. The narrator is partly himself and partly not; but with hindsight the closing words of the novel seem uncannily prescient of his own situation after the *fatwa*: 'it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace.'

It is almost impossible not to be impressed by *Midnight's Children* with its exuberant narratives and constant inventiveness, even if at times it is a bit too absorbed by its own cleverness, and its reception was in marked contrast to that of *Grimus*. It was instantly hailed as 'brilliant', 'marvellous', 'magnificent', 'a *tour de force*' and in the *New York Review of Books* as 'one of the most important novels to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation'. Moreover, not only was the novel a great critical success it was also a great commercial one too. In a very short space of time, in almost fairy-tale fashion, Rushdie had been transformed from a struggling aspirant novelist to one of the leading figures not merely of literary London but the international cultural scene. However, Rushdie's penchant for provoking political controversy was evident even at this time. *Midnight's Children* was also an intensely political novel and Rushdie's treatment in it of Mrs Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, was extremely hostile and disparaging. In fact Mrs Gandhi sued Rushdie and his publisher, Jonathan Cape, about one passage which suggested that her son Sanjay had accused her of ill-treating her late husband. Mrs Gandhi won, securing a public apology and the withdrawal of the libellous passage from all future editions, in addition to Rushdie and Jonathan Cape having to pay all the costs.

Several events, some personal and some public, seemed to stimulate Rushdie's next novel *Shame* which, perhaps not surprisingly, focused on Pakistan, his second home on the Indian sub-continent. However, to describe it as his second home may be to suggest an affection for Pakistan which Rushdie had never possessed. As was mentioned earlier his time in Pakistan had not been particularly happy and this was to be reflected in the new novel which was consistently more bitter and savage than *Midnight's Children*. Both Presidents Bhutto and Zia, thinly disguised in the novel, and the most important of Pakistan's recent political leaders, were subjected to Rushdie's biting satire and the novel was notably more harshly critical of the country it recreated. (Though *Shame* was never formally banned in Pakistan its publication there was known to be risky and it was principally available only in a pirated edition.) However, this darkening of tone seemed to have little effect on the reception of the novel which received similarly glowing reviews to *Midnight's Children*. It was also another resounding commercial success, despite its failure to win the Booker Prize. Moreover Rushdie, who had always been deeply interested in politics, became an increasingly prominent political figure. For example, he spent three weeks in

Nicaragua as a guest of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers, and his subsequent reflections in *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey*<sup>5</sup> contained a fierce attack on American foreign policy in that country. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Charter 88, and he was frequently and volubly critical of Mrs Thatcher – herself an object of his literary satire – and her Conservative governments in Britain.

Rushdie was also a trenchant opponent of the ever-increasing political power of Islam and its leaders, and Islam was to be very important to his next novel, *The Satanic Verses*, though in no sense is it simply a novel about Islam. While literary interpretation is always difficult and often controversial there is widespread agreement that the novel is centrally concerned with questions of identity and modernity. The book links the experience of the migrant with the loss of certainty and moral absolutism characteristic of the modern age in a narrative which champions doubt against certainty, and particularly the certainties of the Qur'an. Rushdie himself has described it as 'a love-song to our mongrel selves' though his own pronouncements about the book, his intentions in writing it and what it is about, have been various and sometimes conflicting, and therefore need to be treated with some scepticism. However, it would be wrong to make much of that since even at the best of times authors are often unreliable commentators on their own work, and many of Rushdie's utterances have been made at anything but the best of times. There seems little doubt though that he expected the novel to be controversial and that he was well aware that it would be received with widespread hostility in the Muslim world. The publishers had been warned by their reader of likely trouble even before publication. But there is similarly little doubt that Rushdie was taken aback by the extent of the controversy it generated even prior to the *fatwa* (which he most certainly did not anticipate).

It is tempting, and might be thought appropriate here, to reproduce some of the passages in *The Satanic Verses* which have been found most offensive by Muslims. However, this is a temptation which ought properly to be resisted. The offending passages cannot simply be taken from their context since that context is not merely essential to Rushdie's defence of his novel but to the meaning of the passages. For example, most of the passages which have given greatest offence relate to the dreams of Gibreel, one of the central characters, and to ignore that they are dreams would be to misrepresent what is being depicted in the novel. Of course this is not to claim that because the book is a novel it cannot be blasphemous or offensive; it is to accept that some passages will certainly be so if detached from the novel and simply presented as straightforward assertions or insults. Nor does it settle what difference context will make. It should be noted that Rushdie has himself explicitly repudiated any defence along the lines of 'after all, it's only a novel', and analogously it would not be enough to say of the offending passages that, 'after all, they are only dreams'. Any evaluation of the meaning or merits of the novel must presuppose a reading of it, though as is

evidenced by the different responses of Muslim and liberal Western readers there is unlikely to be any agreement about either its meaning or its merits.

Some Muslims see *The Satanic Verses* simply as a piece of hate literature – a gratuitous vilification of the Prophet and a deliberate insult to all Muslims. Rushdie and his defenders have emphatically and consistently denied what he calls ‘the “insults and abuse” accusation’. Yet there have also been more sophisticated critiques of *The Satanic Verses*: One of the best-documented of these is by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies in their *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*.<sup>6</sup> They argue in some detail that *The Satanic Verses* ‘fits neatly into, indeed is a logical culmination of the well-known tradition of Orientalism’. The term ‘Orientalism’ was coined by Edward Said to characterise the process by which the Western scholarly tradition has systematically distorted the understanding of the Orient and Islam to emphasise both its ‘otherness’ and its inferiority as a means of buttressing Western domination. According to Sardar and Davies *The Satanic Verses* – ‘the colonial picture postcard of modernist fiction’ – reinforces and perpetuates Western ignorance and prejudice about Islam, which for Muslims ‘reveals the abject poverty of an historical legacy that insists on demeaning their collective history, themselves and all that they hold sacred’.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, that the novel should be so lauded by Western literary critics – it was again nominated for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Prize for Fiction in addition to the many enthusiastic reviews – only added to the insult and confirmed Muslims in their view of Western hostility towards them.

It is more than a little ironic that Rushdie, himself of Muslim origin and a virulent critic of Western neo-colonialism, should be accused of furthering the distortions of Orientalism. However, whatever the merits of that charge, there is no doubt that the fact that Rushdie was a Muslim has itself been an important aspect of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*. It is most unlikely that if the book had been written by a Westerner it would have generated the same level of hostility among Muslims or led to the *fatwa*. Of course they would not have liked it any more but the subsequent reaction would not have had about it the sense of betrayal that has marked much of the Muslim response to Rushdie. Indeed in an attempt to try to convey the nature of their feelings to bemused Westerners some Muslims have likened Rushdie’s action in publishing the novel to an act of treachery, not unlike that of a national traitor in time of war. Yet it is difficult to know quite how to respond to this kind of claim. On the one hand it does help to convey an understanding of the intensity of the Muslim response, perhaps especially to a secular audience.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand it seems to imply a relationship between a religious community and its members which is no longer acceptable in the West: a church may expel or excommunicate a member but only from that church. Moreover, it is a familiar feature of Western experience, and has been for some time, that it is often former believers who are the fiercest and most implacable opponents of a religion, and their right to oppose is widely

thought to be worth protecting. Some of the essays in this volume attach considerable importance to the good of cultural membership and its relationship to self-respect but the Rushdie affair brings out just how cautiously such considerations need to be treated.

It is impossible to catalogue all of even the most important events which followed from the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In Britain some Muslim leaders almost immediately called for a ban on the book and for Rushdie to be prosecuted for libelling Islam. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher replied that there was no legal basis for action against the book or Rushdie. The first significant Muslim demonstration against the book appears to have taken place in Bolton in early December 1988 when a copy of *The Satanic Verses* was publicly burnt. However, this event did not receive any national publicity and it was not until a similar but larger demonstration took place in Bradford on 14 January 1989 that the issue really began to receive any prominence in the British media. (Predictably when the press did begin to take an interest in the issue its contribution was, with a few honourable exceptions, mostly ill-informed and provocatively tendentious.) Later in the month there was a major demonstration in Hyde Park to petition Viking/Penguin, the publishers, to withdraw the novel, but without success. On the whole it must be said that the response of the publishers and especially Rushdie himself to Muslim protests was uncompromising.<sup>9</sup> The book also had an immediate international impact, being effectively banned in India within a few days of its publication in England. In the following weeks the novel was additionally banned in South Africa, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia, Bangladesh, Sudan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Qatar, and there were numerous protests by Muslim groups around the world.

The crucial month in many ways, however, was February 1989. It began with the British Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, announcing that there were no plans to reform the blasphemy laws to take account of Muslim objections to the unfairness of the existing law. On the 12th six people were killed in Islamabad in rioting provoked by the novel and the following day there was another death and many were injured in a riot in Kashmir. But the event which was to dramatically change Rushdie’s life and radically transform the whole situation took place on 14 February. On that day the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran proclaimed a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie informing ‘all the fearless Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Qur’an, as well as all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, whenever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult Islamic sanctity. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr’. The following day was declared a national day of mourning in Iran for those Muslims who had died in the disturbances surrounding Rushdie’s book and there was a massive demonstration outside the British Embassy. All Viking/Penguin books were banned from Iran and Hojatalislam

Hassan Sanai, head of a religious foundation in Iran, offered a reward of over two and a half million dollars to any Iranian, and one million dollars to any non-Iranian, who succeeded in assassinating Rushdie. Reportedly these sums were soon doubled.

There followed considerable support for Khomeini's *fatwa* among Muslim leaders across the world, though significantly the Saudi-dominated Islamic Conference Organisation did not endorse it, and demonstrations against the book continued. In Bombay ten people were killed and about fifty seriously injured in anti-Rushdie riots ten days after the *fatwa*. A brief attempt to defuse the situation through Rushdie's issuing a (qualified) apology to Muslims came to nothing when the apology was rejected as insufficient and the *fatwa* confirmed. The whole affair had become an international political event and Rushdie's ability to influence it was now very slight. It seems indisputable that the *fatwa* and subsequent happenings were increasingly determined by larger political priorities.

The precise status of a *fatwa* within Islam is controversial among Muslims. It is unclear, for example, whether once issued a *fatwa* can be withdrawn or set aside. It has further been claimed that Khomeini was acting exclusively as a religious leader and that the *fatwa* has no political standing. Whatever the merits of this latter claim, and it seems to run contrary to many Muslims' insistence on the necessary interconnectedness of the political and the religious within Islam, there can be no doubt as to the *fatwa's* gravity. While the exact status of the *fatwa* must be a very important issue for Muslims there seems no reason to doubt that it effectively made Rushdie a target for assassination, whether officially sponsored by the Iranian government or through an isolated act of an aggrieved Muslim. It was no paranoid fantasy of Rushdie's or politically motivated exaggeration by the British government to believe that his life was under serious threat. As a result Rushdie went into hiding with police protection, a situation which still pertains at the time of writing, over three years after the *fatwa* was issued and after the death of Khomeini himself. Indeed, without being too pessimistic, it is quite hard to see how Rushdie is ever likely to be free of fear of possible assassination by Muslim extremists whatever the position of the Iranian government.

The impact of the *fatwa*, though, was not limited to its dramatic consequences for Rushdie personally. As mentioned earlier, it also transformed the nature of the affair into an international incident. Diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran were broken off and both the European Community and the USA provided extensive support for Britain. The affair became part of a political struggle between Iran and the West and of the power struggle within Islam between Iran and Saudi-Arabia. However, subsequent international developments though obviously very important have less relevance to the issues with which this book is concerned. In so far as a range of additional issues about non-interference in the domestic affairs of another state and state-sponsored terrorism are raised, they are not the focus of discussion here.

Another, more relevant, effect of the *fatwa* was, not surprisingly, to signi-

ficantly alter the terms in which *The Satanic Verses* affair was discussed. Most obviously in Britain and the West it shifted sympathy much more in Rushdie's direction. While Rushdie had not lacked supporters prior to the *fatwa*, especially amongst liberal opinion and the literati, many had felt that while Rushdie was entitled to publish what he did, he was not deserving of much sympathy for the animosity he had provoked. At its simplest this took the form of, 'if you insult people you cannot be surprised if they do not respond kindly to it', while from a broader perspective it was thought that Rushdie's book could only have an adverse effect on race relations in Britain (and perhaps jeopardise the safety of British hostages then held in the Lebanon under Iranian control). However, after the *fatwa* it undoubtedly became more difficult to criticise Rushdie or the book without being interpreted as providing support for the *fatwa*.<sup>10</sup> In short the *fatwa* polarised discussion about *The Satanic Verses*, for not only did it shift non-Muslim opinion behind Rushdie, it made it extremely difficult for moderate Muslims to dissociate themselves from the more militant representatives of Islam. Indeed it took extraordinary courage for Muslims to speak out against the *fatwa*, especially after two moderate *imams* were shot in Brussels, and though many Muslims have voiced criticism, it is difficult to assess how far Muslims opposed to the *fatwa* have been understandably cowed into submission by fear of the consequences of not being seen to support it.

The subsequent history of the Rushdie affair is not without its interest but there would be little point in trying to chart it in the context of the concerns of this book. Most of the immediate tensions, both international and within Britain, have lessened: diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran have been restored; the hostages have been released; and public protests against *The Satanic Verses* are fairly rare. Yet Rushdie himself remains in hiding, though making a few more 'public' appearances, and the *fatwa* remains in force. The book has not been banned in Britain or most of the Western world, and though Viking/Penguin did not publish one, a paperback version has appeared in Britain and America, published by a syndicate of anonymous US publishers in 1992. Rushdie has written and published a fairy-tale, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which has proved utterly uncontroversial though well reviewed.<sup>11</sup> He has also published *Imaginary Homelands*, a collection of his occasional non-fiction writings, which includes 'In Good Faith' and 'Is Nothing Sacred?' his two principal defences of *The Satanic Verses* and the role of the creative writer.<sup>12</sup> Those readers interested in Rushdie's self-justification should consult those two essays in particular. More surprisingly perhaps, Rushdie appears to have effected a very partial and uncertain *rapprochement* with Islam and his Muslim heritage though not of course with its more militant leaders or the 'Actually Existing Islam' of Muslim states such as Iran. However, the predominant feeling is that there is at best a weary if uneasy truce rather than any very deep meeting of minds over *The Satanic Verses*.

The long-term effects of the Rushdie affair on relations between Muslims and

the dominant community in Britain cannot yet be established. It seems to have helped Muslims find a voice in British politics, though also made more manifest differences within the Muslim community.<sup>13</sup> Whether this will be a prelude to a series of future confrontations, for example over education and family law, is as yet uncertain. However, the affair has exacerbated racial tensions; and that the very name 'Rushdie' should have been used to taunt the supporters of Pakistan at recent Test cricket matches is a depressing irony, which will not be lost on Rushdie himself.

However, these later events are largely irrelevant to an understanding of the various dimensions of the Rushdie affair which were essentially delineated by the middle of 1989. Little that has happened since has introduced new issues or contributed much to the clarification (or indeed resolution) of the old ones. What are these issues?<sup>14</sup> Even this is a matter of controversy but *inter alia* the Rushdie affair is in part about the grounds and limits of free expression; the place of religion in a secular society; the nature of Islamic fundamentalism; the foundations and limits of liberalism; the preservation of cultural identity in a multicultural society; the proper basis of legislation; the social, political and cultural consequences of racism and the colonial heritage; the meaning of novels; and much else besides. Perhaps at the most pressing level it is primarily about the terms on which we are prepared to live together, one with another, whatever our differences of faith, culture and value. Certainly this concern lies at the heart of most of the succeeding essays, which engage more substantively with some of the above issues, and with questions of moral principle for which this chapter has done no more than set the scene.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking/Penguin, 1988).
2. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).
3. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1983).
4. The principal sources for the following account of Rushdie's life and the dispute about *The Satanic Verses* are W. J. Weatherly, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1990); Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds) *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth estate, 1989); Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Wrath of Islam*, revised and updated edition (London: Hogarth Press, 1991); Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful With Muhammad! The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London, Belleur, 1989); Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991); and various interviews and reports in the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *The Times*, *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday*. It has not seemed appropriate to cite a specific source for every assertion or quotation.
5. Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (London: Picador, 1987).

6. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1990).
7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
8. Probably the fullest account of the Rushdie affair from a robust Muslim perspective can be found in Shabbir Akhtar, op. cit.
9. Rushdie's response to the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in India was especially myopic. Even many of his supporters recognised that to straightforwardly permit publication there would have been irresponsible, given the certainty of violent public disturbances.
10. It is perhaps appropriate to note here, therefore, that none of the contributors to this volume, whatever their views of the Rushdie affair, support or endorse the *fatwa*.
11. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta Books, 1990).
12. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991).
13. I have in mind groups such as 'Women Against Fundamentalism' which largely consists of Muslim women opposed to the 'authoritative' interpretation of Islam offered by (male) community leaders.
14. For an interesting account of some of the issues and their implications for political philosophy see Bhikhu Parekh, 'The Rushdie Affair: Research Agenda for Political Philosophy', *Political Studies* 38, 1990. It should perhaps be noted that this book is not concerned with issues such as state-sponsored terrorism, which are also important and clearly relevant to some aspects of the *Satanic Verses* controversy.
15. I am very grateful to Susan Mendus for her most helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.