

ART VERSUS POWER IN *THE SATANIC VERSES* OF SALMAN RUSHDIE

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I yearn for Mecca and its clear skies. I yearn for the whispering of time on every corner and want to walk along the streets and lose myself among the holy sites. I can now see myself, my brothers, how I go through the alleys of Mecca and recite verses from the Koran as if they were being proclaimed for the first time. It is as if I were listening to a lesson spoken by the Almighty. What joy! What joy! (Nagib Mahfouz, *Echo of My Life*, 1997, in Reichold, K. & Graf, B. *Buildings that Changed the World*. n.d., p. 42)

She who dies on the great pilgrimage is assured of a home in Paradise. Your wife is sitting now among the angels and the flowers; what is there for you to regret?(Ayesha the *kabin* in *The Parting of the Arabian Sea*, *Satanic Verses*, p. 495).

Nagib Mahfouz (winner of the 1988 Nobel prize for Literature) proclaims a personal experience of the pilgrimage to Mecca; Ayesha's is delusional, not to mention, fictitious, which makes it all the more ironic. Everyone has the right to enjoy freedom of conscience, to express ecstasy and share one's experience of the spiritual, the transcendental, and the supernatural, as much as the clamor of skeptics and atheists to express their freedom from superstition and dogmatism. Salman Rushdie has upset this balance and stirred a great controversy among Islamic fundamentalists and extremists who, today, comprise the emerging power that threatens the Western world. This paper attempts a cursory look into magic realism evident in the novel and a sampling of the counts of blasphemy committed against the Prophet, the Quran, and the Islamic God, and Rushdie's response.

The novel

Salman Rushdie used an excerpt from *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe for his epigraph in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. "Satan" is, according to Defoe, "...confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode...without any fixed place, or space..." There are characters in the novel who are vagabond, wandering...without any fixed place or space.

At more than 500 pages (561 to be exact and peppered with fused words; e.g., justlikethat, getoutofitsillynamoo, etc.), it is divided into nine (9) parts, some of which are further subdivided into chapters (Part I, The Angel Gibreel, four chapters; Part III, EllowenDeeowen [London], five

chapters; Part V, A City Visible but Unseen, two chapters; and Part VII, The Angel Azrael, three chapters), while Part II, Mahound, Part IV, Ayesha; Part VI, Return to Jahilia; Part VIII, The Parting of the Arabian Sea; and Part IX, A Wonderful Lamp, have only one chapter. For the parenthetical reference of this paper, only the part and the page will be referred to.

Close reading reveals at least two (2) inaccurate details: Rushdie gives a vivid metaphor, thus: As the ill-fated AI-420 “cracked in half...fell like tidbits of tobacco from a broken cigar...Also there had been more than a few migrants aboard, yes, quite a quantity of wives who had been grilled by reasonable, doing-their-job officials...*a sufficiency of children* [*italics mine*] ...mingling with the remnants of the plane...” (p. 4). Quite a quantity of wives and a sufficiency of children; but many pages later, the text says, “Women, *children*, Sikhs were *all released*” [*italics mine*]; (Part I, p. 80); i.e., only about fifty remain as hostage, including the two Indian actors (Part I, p. 80).

Another is found in Chapter 1 of Part III, EllowenDeeowen: “Rosa Diamond; she was eighty-eight years old...” (p. 133). In Chapter 2 of the same part, it is established that she sailed to Argentina in 1935 (p. 149) more or less as a 40-year-old bride (p. 150), and at that age, she neither has the luxury of a long engagement nor the time to delay the wedding. If she were 40 circa 1935, then the year of the Bostan crash must be 1983. However, on page 156, “Rosa Diamond in her eighty-nine-year-old weakness begun to dream her story of stories...for more than half a century; i.e., more than 50 years, when it should be only 49 years.

Synopsis

The highjacked jumbo jet *Bostan*, flight AI-420, breaks in half above the English Channel, with Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha incredibly surviving the fall. Rosa Diamond gives them shelter; soon Chamcha, who believes he morphed into a horned imp, gets arrested, detained, but eventually freed, and finds refuge in a family of Indian immigrants. Way back home in Bombay, Farishta has risen from humble beginnings as a dabbawallah to a Bollywood star. In contrast, Chamcha hails from a wealthy but dysfunctional family and obtains his education in London where he honed his craft as a stage actor. Farishta increasingly turns insane and in his schizophrenia and delusions sees and talks to his dead lover Rekha Merchant and believes that he is the Archangel Gibreel. In London he falls in and out of love with Alleluia Cone; the last straw snaps when his foil Chamcha poisons the relationship through anonymous calls.

In contemporary India, like a pied piper, Ayesha the kahin is able to dupe pilgrims into a 150 mile, 11 week walk to the coast, then “across the

bed of the Arabian Sea” toward Mecca. Meanwhile, the Imam lives in exile in London, drinking a glass of purified water every five minutes. The story of Mahound is told in Farishta’s serial dreams; from his marriage to the rich widow and the founding of a new religion, the revelations of the archangel Gibreel and the transcripts made by Salman the Persian; the consideration and eventual rejection of Lat, Uzza, and Manat; the conversion of Jahilia (Mecca) and the powerful Hind (or so it seemed) to the new religion; the parallel harem in *The Circuit* (a brothel); until the triumph of Lat over Mahound who shortly dies after she appears in his bedroom.

With his father dead, Chamcha returns to India and settles in their old mansion. Farishta fatally shoots dead the film mogul Sisodia and Alleluia Cone; he turns out uninvited at Chamcha’s mansion, incoherent, his madness fully manifested, and kills himself with a revolver before the police could arrest him.

Magic realism and madness

Magic realism renders the reading a little less friendly; i.e., the reader has to determine whether the discourse is reality, a dream, the hallucination of a madman, or a combination of these planes. The very first page confronts the reader with the incredibility of two ‘falling’ stars, Gibreel/Farishta talking to his foil Saladin Chamcha. According to Khan (2012, p. 1), “events populate the world of *The Satanic Verses* in the manner of a *dream-like-waking* or a *waking-like-dream* [*italics original*].”

Unlike Farishta with years of experience portraying the supernatural in films, Chamcha frowns upon religion and superstition. Nevertheless, he has changed to a satyr, replete with huffs and horns:

What puzzled Chamcha was that a circumstance which struck him as utterly bewildering and unprecedented – that is, his metamorphosis into this supernatural imp – was being treated by the others as if it were the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine...How could it be...where in all that ...common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events plausibly transpire? (Part III, p. 163)

Chamcha, despite this metamorphosis into the devil, remains sane. Farishta, on the other hand, notwithstanding repeated attempts by Alleluia Cone (Cohen) to have him cured of his schizophrenia, would relapse from bad to worse. One episode of madness is his encounter with a total stranger while he was having this delusion that he is the Archangel Gibreel who can see a soul or ‘ka’ in search of its mislaid body, thus:

‘I can help you,’ he promised, and the young soul looked at him in wild disbelief. Gibreel leaned forward, grasped the ka’s face between his hands and kissed it firmly upon the mouth, for the spirit that it kissed by an archangel regains, at once, its lost sense of direction, and is set upon the true and righteous path. – The lost soul however, had a most surprising reaction to being favored by an angelic kiss. ‘Sod you,’ it shouted, ‘I may be desperate, mate but I’m not that desperate,’ – after which, manifesting a solidity most unusual in a disembodied spirit, it struck the Archangel of the Lord a resounding blow upon the nose with the very first in which its image was clasped; – with disorienting, and bloody, results. (Part V, p. 333)

Farishta’s madness has its full manifestation at the climax of the novel where he is the unexpected visitor of Chamcha in the old Scandal Point mansion. Farishta shoots himself with a gun before the police could arrest him for the death of the film mogul Sisodia and his (Farishta’s) lover Alleluia Cone. Before that, he tells Chamcha his version of the crime; here Rushdie employs typesetting of the text – deliberate use of disjointed uneven spaces and kerning – to simulate the incoherence of Farishta’s last statements in the novel:

It was so it was not in a time long forgot
Well, anyway goes something like this
....
I can’t be sure but something like this for the crime of being
human
especially female but not exclusively people must pay
Something like that (p. 558)

Art versus power

Blasphemy in the Novel

A large part of religious subtext in the novel comes from the Islamic tradition filtered mainly through the madness and serial dreams of Gibreel Farishta. Part II, Mahound, Part IV, Ayesha, and Part VI, Return to Jahilia, are entirely culled from the dreams of Farishta.

Blasphemy, Homi Bhabha writes in *Location of the Culture* (p. 226, quoted in Khan, 2012, p. 17), “is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed or alienated, in the act of translation.”

“The novel,” according to Khan (2012), “fictionally refashions certain parts of the Qur’an by imaginatively ‘polluting’ the divine revelations (p.

15).” Khan adds, “the most important translations of the pure and impure that Rushdie performs...[i] the refashioning of the life of the prophet, and introducing an element of skepticism through the episodes of the verses...and [ii] changing the traditional episodes with scandalous, sexual, and profane characters (p. 15).” Here, according to Khan, Rushdie commits blasphemy.

The Prophet

Rushdie transforms the biography of the Prophet through the dreams of Gibreel Farishta. Farishta is born Ismail Najmuddin, who becomes a dabbawalla running thirty-forty tiffins laden with lunch to various offices in Bombay. He has learned, loosely, through his mother, Naima. Here, his religious education stands on less-than-academic foundations:

From his mother Naima Najmuddin he heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if *inaccuracies* [*italics* mine] had crept into her versions he wasn't interested in knowing what they were...Sometimes, though, he caught himself in the act of forming *blasphemous* [*italics* mine] thoughts...as he drifted off to sleep in his cot...his somnolent fancy began to compare his own condition with that of the Prophet...he made a success of his job as the business manager of the wealthy widow Khadija, and ended up marrying her as well...This dream of marrying the Babasaheb brought him awake, flushing hotly for shame, and after that he began to worry about the impurity of his make-up that could create such terrible visions. (Part I, p. 22)

Years later, as the famous Bollywood actor Gibreel Farishta, in one of his serial dreams, he shows the dotted lines connecting him, Mohammad (peace be upon him) and Mahound (the fictional prophet):

Sometimes when he sleeps Gibreel becomes aware, without the dream, of him sleeping, of himself dreaming his own awareness of his dream, and then a panic begins, O God, he cries out, O all good allahgod [*sic*]...Got bugs in the brain, full mad, a looney tune and a gone baboon. Just he, the businessman, felt when he first saw the archangel: though he was cracked, wanted to throw himself down from a rock as high as the roof of the world.../

...The businessman [Mahound]: looks he should, high forehead, eaglenose, broad in the shoulders narrow in the hip. Average height, brooding, dressed in two pieces of plain cloth, each four ells in length, one draped around his body, the other over his shoulder. Large eyes; long lashes like a girl's. His strides can seem too long for his legs, but he's a light-footed man. Orphans learn to be moving targets, develop a rapid walk, quick reactions...His name: a dream-

name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given, but he won't answer to that here; nor, though he's well aware of what they call him, his nickname in Jahilia down below – *he-who-goes-up-and-down-old-Coney* [*italics original*]. Here he is neither Mohamet nor MoeHammered [*sic*]; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride 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.

That's him. Mahound the businessman, climbing his hot mountain in the Hijaz... (pp. 94-95)

It is not surprising that the excerpt above invited a backlash; i.e., Mohamet nor MoeHammered...the Devil's synonym: Mahound. It must be just play of words for Rushdie but faithful Muslims revere the name of their prophet such that they add "Peace be upon him" after the utterance of his name, Mohammad. Aghapour (2005) confirms that "a cursory reading of Rushdie's references to the Islamic tradition is enough to make clear that those references are often profane and parodic, which seem to make *The Satanic Verses* overtly anti-Muslim" (p. 10).

Rushdie also creates a not-so-flattering picture of the domestic life of the prophet Mahound by creating a parallel harem in *The Circuit*, the most popular brothel in Jahilia; i.e., the prophet has 12 wives; *The Circuit* has its own 12 whores named after the prophet's wives; the scheme (of naming them thus) turns out to be profitable and attractive to patrons. The prophet's favorite wife, Ayesha, has a double in the brothel—its famous 15 year old whore (Part VI, pp. 394-395). Aghapour (2005) validates this treatment of Mahound: "The character Mahound...is often represented in critical fashion, while Baal, the very antithesis of the prophet, receives sympathy and understanding" (p. 10).

The Quran

Rushdie insinuates an inaccurate and thus unreliable transcription of the words of Allah supposedly revealed to the Prophet by Archangel Gabriel by employing a deceptive and skeptical scribe. Salman the Parsi, with uncanny parallelism with Salman the novelist, is appointed as Mahound's official scribe (Part VI, p. 377):

The fishy smell began to obsess Salman, who was the most highly educated of Mahound's intimates owing to the superior educational system then on offer in Persia. On the account of his scholastic advancement Salman was made Mahound's official scribe.

Salman the Persian discloses that he made unauthorized alterations in the transcripts of the prophet's recitations. Although this is fiction, it would insinuate that the holy book of Islam is not entirely divinely inspired, and that with inaccuracies introduced, thus polluted:

If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as *all-bearing, all-knowing* [*italics original*], I would write, *all-knowing, / all wise*. Here's the point: Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was actually writing the Book, or rewriting anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation of God's own Messenger, then what did this mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry? (pp. 380-381)

The excerpt above clearly injects doubt upon faithful Muslims. Salman, emboldened, next changes "all-hearing" to "all-wise," and "Christian" to "Jew" (p. 381). The novel also insinuates that the holy book shackles freedom, even whimsical, thus: "He [Baal the poet] invited Salman the Persian...and uncorked a bottle of the sweet wine made with uncrushed grapes which the Jahilians had begun to make when then found out that it wasn't forbidden by what they had started disrespectfully calling the Rule Book (p. 398)." Further, Rushdie seems to mock the strictures of the Quran, thus:

Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation – the *recitation* – told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep, and which sexual positions had received divine sanction, so that they learned that sodomy and the missionary position were approved of by the archangel, whereas the forbidden postures include all those in which the female is on top...Gibreel further listed the permitted and forbidden subjects of conversation, and earmarked the parts of the body which could not be scratched no matter how unbearably they might itch. He vetoed the consumption of prawns, those bizarre other-worldly creatures which no member of the faithful had ever seen... (Part VI, p. 376)

On the gossip surrounding the favorite wife of the prophet, Ayesha: "O, he's done it," Salman replied. "Same as ever. He saw his pet, the archangel, and then informed one and all that Gibreel had exonerated

Ayesha.” (p. 400). This seeming arbitrariness is paralleled in the epileptic doll maker turned pilgrimage leader Ayesha who conveniently ascribes to the Archangel Gibreel commands of submission:

‘We are ordered by the archangel to go directly to the sea, without returns or detours’... / Then she disappeared...did not reappear for a day and a half...she always knew how to whip up an audience’s feelings...then she sauntered back up to them...this time her silver hair was streaked with gold, and her eyebrows, too, were golden...summoned the villagers to her and told them that the archangel was displeased that the people of Titlipur had been filled up with doubts just because of the ascent of a martyr to Paradise. (Part VIII, pp. 494, 496)

The greatest controversy of the novel pertains to the title, specifically the verses that refer to it: “Have you considered El-Lat and El-‘Uzza / and Manat the third, the other?” (Arberry, 1955, p. 244). Islam claims to be a monotheistic religion; i.e., when asked to enumerate the gods, Mahound’s follower Bilal answers, “ ‘One,’... *How many did you say?* One, he repeated, one (Part II, p. 104). But Mahound, then an upstart, is shown to have compromised this monotheism by a false revelation, or the Satanic Verses: “Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?” (p. 117) The context here is accommodation of and compromise with the then rulers of Jahilia (Mecca), Grandee Abu Simbel and his powerful wife, Hind. Later, Mahound recants, saying to his followers that the revelation about the three goddesses is inspired by the devil and promptly repudiates the worship of the goddesses’ idols:

He stands in front of the statues of the Three and announces the / abrogation of the verses which Shaitan [Satan] whispered in his ear. These verses are banished from the true recitation, *al-quran*. New verses are thundered in their place.

‘Shall He have daughters and you sons?’ Mahound recites. ‘That is a fine division! These are but names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers. Allah vests no authority in them.’

He leaves the dumbfounded House before it occurs to anybody to pick up or throw, the first stone. (pp. 126-127).

The God of Islam

Allah is the god of Mahound (“*there is no God but Al-Lab*,” Mahound whispers to Khalid” p. 386). Meanwhile, Al-Lat is the principal goddess of Jahilia, specifically of the powerful Hind: “She commands them to fight in the name of Al-Lat” (p. 384). But the citizens of Jahilia choose Submission

(Islam)—the Grandee has submitted. Hind is left with no choice but to submit, or so it seems. The serial dreams of Farishta ends with his dream of the death of Mahound. In this dream, Ayesha, his favorite wife, is at his deathbed, thus:

‘Who’s there? he called out. ‘Is it Thou, Azrael? [the angel of death]

But Ayesha heard a terrible, sweet voice that was a woman’s, make reply: ‘No, Messenger of Al-Lah, it is not Azrael.’

And the lamp blew out; and in the darkness Mahound asked: ‘Is this sickness then thy doing O Al-Lat?’

And she said: ‘It is my revenge upon you, and I am satisfied. Let them cut a camel’s hamstrings and set it on your grave.’

Then she went, and the lamp that had been snuffed out burst once more into a great and gentle light, and the Messenger murmured, ‘Still, I thank Thee, Al-Lat, for this gift.’

Not long afterwards he died... (Part VI, p. 406)

The above excerpt suggests that in the end, the worship of Al-Lat triumphs; Hind is alive, Mahound, dead. And this parallels Farishta (the archangel Gibreel) and Chamcha (the devil): Farishta dies and Chamcha lives. In real life, Koumeni is dead; Rushdie is alive.

Life imitates art

Contemporary political personalities also figure in the novel, the mention of which might have stirred the hornet’s nest: The imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Koumeni rules Iran after the unpopular Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi is deposed in a revolution. The imam is parodied in Part IV, Ayesha: “Who is he? An exile. /...His home is a rented flat...The Imam is the enemy of images...But in his bedroom,...there hangs a more potent icon, the portrait of a woman of exceptional face...the Empress...Ayesha” (Part IV, pp. 211-212). The empress could be the wife of the Shah or a representative of the hated government of the Shah. Even the notorious intelligence machinery of the Shah is mentioned: “...the exiled boss of the SAVAK torture organization of the Shah of Iran” (Part IV, p. 213). Rushdie creates irony, thus: the Imam promotes the purifying properties of water made clean using American technology: “The Imam drinks water constantly, one glass every five minutes, to keep himself clean; the water itself is cleansed of impurities, before he sips, in an American filtration machine” (Part IV, p. 215).

In an interview uploaded on youtube, Rushdie admits that the release of the novel is a case of bad timing: That Koumeni was very sick he most likely did not read; did not see a copy of the novel...He was an

opportunist—Iran just had a costly war with Iraq. The war was unpopular among Iranians; *Satanic Verses* was an opportunity to rally the Iranians and Muslims away from the unpopular war. Rushdie concludes that it is “my bad luck to be Koumeni’s last stand” (Sir Salman Rushdie Interview, uploaded by eelp0800136 to [m.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgzxa1-1Tnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgzxa1-1Tnc) 00:07:10-00:08:30 of 1:17:15).

The conflict of art and power is paralleled in the novel in the characters of Baal the poet and Abu Simbel, the Grandee of Jahilia (Mecca): A lampoonist feared in Jahilia, Baal gives his job description: “‘A poet’s work,’...‘To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start argument, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep’... **‘It isn’t right for the artist to become the servant of the state’** [boldface mine] (Part II, p. 100); to which the man of power thinks, “Here’s a great lie, thinks the / Grandee of Jahilia drifting into sleep: the pen is mightier than the sword” (Part II, pp. 104-105).

But Rushdie expresses no regret about the outcome of the novel: “Art is irreverent; it’s not good at keeping to the rules; it doesn’t do what it’s told or what it is supposed to do...the work of art tries to open the universe a little...to the edge, you push the frontier outwards...” (01:14:01-01:16:10). On his role as an artist to tell stories versus censorship by the powerful, “...you can’t do that if you are told to ‘look out,’ ‘watch out,’ ‘be careful,’ ‘don’t step on my toes,’ ‘do not upset anyone.’...I am in favor of upsetting anyone” (01:16:20-01:16:40).

Finney (1998), taking the side of the novelist, reminds Muslims that “to read into a novel an act of blasphemy is to misunderstand the nature of fictional discourse.” Moreover, Finney discloses that like Rushdie, he has lost his religious faith long ago, and likewise shuns religious dogmatism. Finally, he personally feels more comfortable within fictional discourse, “where writers name the unnamable, where language is a tool of power, where dreams hold their own material reality...”

Conclusions and recommendations

A postmodern novel like *The Satanic Verses* is challenging to read. Its use of magic realism can also be a cause of confusion; i.e., on what plane is the narrative operating—real, conscious world, the world of dreams, hallucinations, or in the mind of the schizoid, a mixture of all these—awake, asleep, or both?

The novel has questioned what has been accepted through the ages in established religions. Rushdie however, in so doing, has blasphemed the prophet (PBUH), the Quran, and the God of Islam, thus, it invited a great controversy that resulted in its being banned in India and Islamic states.

The language is also foregrounded. A stylistic or linguistic analysis of the novel to look into fused words (justlikethat, foresolong, longago, thenagain, slowslow, getoutofitsillyoldmoo, itsthesoddingbeach, etc.) will be productive. A postcolonial reading of the novel will also reap new insights on the diasporic experience of South Asians (Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis) and other migrant workers.

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