

Verity & the Verses

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A PLEA FOR REASON IN THE LIGHT OF THE RECENT ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF SIR SALMAN RUSHDIE

The retelling of Islam's origins is a minor theme, in a multifaceted multi-timeline multi-layered epic, running to but 72 pages in a narration that spans 547 (as per the *Satanic Verses*' 1st ed. I read, way back in 1989), i.e. ca. 1/8th of the whole book. Contrary to popular belief, both detractors' and supporters', Rushdie's theme was *not* Islam at all, but the post-colonial experience of the 20th century Diaspora to which he himself belongs. If those who are decrying the book had taken the trouble, in these 33 years, to actually read it they'd have discovered how sympathetic it really is to the plight of the immigrant (especially from the Indian subcontinent) in the UK, and how full of vitriol against the British system (PM Thatcher is dubbed 'Mrs. Torture', for example) for demonizing the poor hapless migrant: *those*, if any, were the 'Satanic' aspects—directed against Western hypocrisy, not, in the first instance, at Koranic revelations.

The paradox is that, at first blush, the very title has made many Muslims take it as a 'Satanic' invention of Rushdie's, and that the novel vilifies their faith, literally, from the word go.

Why, then, that specific title?

Because the story of the so-called Satanic Verses [cf. Surah 53: 19–20; and, among the biographies of the Prophet, al-Tabari's *Tarikh* vol. 6], whether today considered apocryphal or not, is, nevertheless, recounted

by some of Islam's own earliest and most respected scholars¹; and if you hail from a Muslim background, as the Rushdies do, like all true writers, you'd naturally dip into your own tealeaves, so to speak, for inspiration, than look afar, say, to the Mormons or Korea's Moonies, wherein, too, similar (albeit less apt) metaphors might've been come by. Yes, that's it; despite a marginal role in the book, that too in a couple of surreal dream sequences, it seems to me that the genesis of Islam served Rushdie as a powerful metaphor, on 3 levels:

- 1.) **the Islamic calendar is the only one where Time itself begins with an event of Migration or Hijrah** (that of the Prophet to *Medina*, in Arabic, *the City*)—you see the connection? Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis moving to London City? these three nationalities and *it*, the cosmopolitan wen, not Islam, engender the main characters of the novel;
- 2.) what this Migrant figure does or says is oft derided and misunderstood (as the Prophet was, in his first decade of preaching) by the society around him: it will contrive to make diabolic what is angelic, and vice versa, thereby to juggle with a motif of specular transformations unparalleled since Kafka's *Metamorphosis*;
- 3.) challenged on all fronts, the Migrant might momentarily yield to social pressures, but quickly revert to his former true self. That is exactly what, according to the aforesaid Islamic sources, happened in the so-called Satanic Verses incident, and also exactly how it's retold by Rushdie.

And the fictional Prophet's fictionalized epithet, **Mahound**? It takes after a medieval orthography, and, in a typically Rushdiesque triple repartee, methinks, also after the Hindustani term for **an elephant tamer or trainer, mahout**, itself **an allusion to the Prophet's birth in what ancient Arabs used to call 'the Year of the Elephant', when divine intervention stopped a war elephant sent to demolish the Kaabah, thus, I say, not a pejorative, but a praise-name, 'Mahound' presenting the Prophet as a Migrant able to dominate the rogue forces of history, defeat all adversities**. In the novel, Mahound does in fact recant the Satanic Verses, right after the words escape his mouth! Where is mockery here? Is that not what Islam's own doctors say? Is he not a hero who, by sheer moral strength, is able to crush the most nefarious designs of the Devil? Mahound is, indeed, such a heroic personage! **Reading *The Satanic Verses* did**

¹ Here's one of Islam's finest living exegetes, Dr. Shabir Ali, explaining the issues at stake: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlalmIjDhr8>; and here's the Wikipedia page on the subject: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satanic_Verses.

not diminish one bit my appreciation of Islam's contributions to civilization; my respect for its practitioners; nor affection for my Muslim friends: I still share in their joy at *Eid*, still partake of their *iftar*, and give them cakes at Christmas, as I always have. It's rather the lone wolf that tarnishes all of Islam, in the eyes of the world. Many immigrants in my area do not know the local language; a scene is often seen at the hospital, here: due to covid restrictions, the husbands cannot accompany their wives; seeing a veiled lady totally lost, in the corridors, unable to follow the instructions, if I happened to be there, I'd spontaneously offer to help. Would I, *any more?* I doubt, unless clearly asked to by her male guardian, if any. Whose loss is it, when one dastardly deed makes us all apprehensive of having anything to do with any Muslim, even of a humane gesture?

Let us remember, **Jesus also was tempted by Satan** (now, was he not?), **in the desert, for 40 days: we Christians do not think that takes anything away from Christ's ministry, rather we admire him all the more for he overcame Satan. Shouldn't Muslims be doing the same, for a transitory moment in their Prophet's life, because he *at once* subdued the Fiend, the arch-Adversary?** The Koran itself (22:52) states, *We never sent any apostle or prophet before you but that, when he longed, Satan cast into his longing. But God abrogates what Satan casts in, and then God puts His verses in proper order, for God is all-knowing and wise.*

Even so, **offence might be taken** because a bawdyhouse, in the book's aforesaid dreamscapes, renames some of its girls after the Prophet's wives. **This may be seen as an exaggerated treatment of the subplot, and, personally, I'd NOT have done it!**² It is a part of the oneiric yarn: an antagonist of Mahound's, bowing to how he had prevailed, seeks thus to cash in on his celebrity, with these pseudonyms. It is a fictive hyperbole on the historical fact that many pagan Arabs, even from his own clan, the Quraysh, continued to plague the Prophet with every conceivable calumny. Though they did worse (try to kill him, for one), there is no evidence they resorted to *this* particular mischief; yet, can it be counter-proven that no courtesan, no fille-de-joie, has ever, in 1400 years, had names like the revered ones of the Mothers of the Believers? those were simply Arabic names, borne (like all names, in all cultures) by saints &

² Art must constantly push boundaries, but what about those not germane to the highest artistic office: beauty? Epicurus himself recommended the milder (not the wilder) pleasures. Wishing to write for a universal audience, Alessandro Manzoni is reputed to have suppressed of his own accord the most ardent passages of carnal passion in *The Betrothed*, so that "even cloistered nuns could read it, without blushing".

sinners alike, as prevalent before Islam as after. Again, I repeat, I think Rushdie's creative imagination ran away with him at this point; but I'd rather forgive him for fanciful overdrive than deny him the right to live, above all, to write. I do the same with Nikos Kazantzakis, for re-elaborating, in his *Last Temptation of Christ*, the Passion of our Lord & Saviour in a very defamatory way, one contrary to all our hallowed Christian tradition (not the case with *the Satanic Verses*, in as much as the controversial tale is told in Islam's own texts).

All the same, like the reviewer who, while seeing in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* an 'attempt at the Bible' also saw the value of the work, I acknowledge the artistic merits of *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Kazantzakis, like Rushdie, wrote according to his lights, in a spirit of sincere in-delving. To disagree with parts is not to go blind to the whole, nor does it confer license to stifle the wellspring of the perceived effrontery. The whole will always exceed the sum of its parts, and parts *other* than the ones we object to might be perfectly agreeable. As with victuals, one eats what one likes and leaves the world to the food it prefers.

We must recall, here, two epitomic occasions when Christian sentiments were hurt, ridiculed. We rejected the thing done, but no lover-of-Christ has ever asked that the guillotine be pulled out of the museum and applied to the neck of the doer. I speak of Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus & the Scoundrel Christ* [that 2nd phrase! a flagrant figmentation of his]; and of the caricature of the Most Holy Trinity as Father-Son-Holy Spirit engaged in mutual sodomy—how blasphemous is that?—on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, yes, the very ones! An outrage? it is outright obscene. Yet, our trust in God Almighty is not so fragile as to be shaken by the acts of mere men.

Last but not the least, if anything, Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is a magnum opus; as a ziggurat of imagination, in its vast scope and mind-defying structure, second, perhaps, only to Bulgakov's *Master & Margarita* (cited by Rushdie himself as one of his models). It must be read, cover to cover, to form any opinion about it. For or against. That being said, it is by no means an easy tome to take on; quite the contrary. One would have to be at home with high-flown literature, with the likes of Joyce, Marquez, Pynchon, to plough past even the first few pages. So, when some say they weren't able to, I believe them; what I don't, is the claim that it was because the slandering of Islam starts to pile up from page 1: someone is lying through their teeth—they have not bothered to read!—Mahound's is a side-entrée, one that appears several chapters and nearly a 100 pages into the smorgasbord, as it were. You couldn't possibly have

‘read’ what you take exception to if you read only the first page(s).

I know some avid readers who couldn’t stomach Bulgakov’s masterpiece; they surely won’t Rushdie’s. That is fine, you don’t necessarily have to uphold or champion a work-of-art³.

One is free to boycott a book, without opening it; to discourage kith and kin from buying it (not a p. to *Puck*, let him lampoon what holy cows he will). That’s okay; that too is what freedom of expression is all about. It is only the incitement to arbitrary assassination that appears to annul all the progress humanity has made since the end of the Inquisition, the abolition of slavery. Dostoevsky ends *Crime & Punishment* comparing, at length, Napoleon and Muhammad: shall we burn him, in effigy, posthumously? and Voltaire? who dared pen a play called *Mahomet*; and who is the prophet of the doomed steppes, in *The Blind Assassin*, disguised as sci-fi? who is the unsuspectable author of *The Revolt of Islam*, which, naturally, “has nothing to do with Islam”? **The Prophet was, and remains, a giant of human history, one of the major shapers of mankind’s destinies; is it possible that, in speaking of man, men shall never touch upon this great man, on what is known of his times?**

It is to the honour of Great Britain that, despite Rushdie’s caustic critique of her, she nurtured and knighted him; does it honour the Ummah to want to physically eliminate a man of letters, one of their own, one whose work has been compared to Tolstoy’s, who, with his pen, has given voice to their cause in the press of peoples? One of the most prolific litterateurs of our age, Sir Salman’s authorial status stands on the 20-odd books he has to his credit, todate, including essays, stuff for kids, sundry non-fiction. If he is now awarded the Nobel Prize, no-one ought to be upset: it’d not be—as his knighthood was not—because of a few 100 of pages, but for an entire lifetime’s oeuvre of many 1000s of scrolls of peerless wondrous prose. Quoth the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, ‘Rushdie is arguably the most talented and significant author writing in the English language today’. But if one is to be sentenced to death row only for having once thought a thought (even an ‘objectionable’ one), anyone may as well be, simply because s/he exists, because s/he was born.

³ However, *if you are interested*, here’re Prof. Paul Brians’ [Washington State Univ.] extensive notes cross-referencing Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, the one post-modernist work that these our troubled times are likely to be remembered by; I mean, not for the scandal it inadvertently touched off, but for the sublime it most assuredly touched.

<https://brians.wsu.edu/2017/02/08/cover-satanic-verses/>.