

# SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE SATANIC VERSES*



This article asks how far politicians are prepared to go in protecting the democratic rights of citizens and how far literary matters are used to bolster political positions. It also asks whether the concerns about Rushdie's famous book were, in fact, religious at all, and asks how we, who live in a privileged, stable, democratic society, should respond to religious judgements of literature and to Islamic fundamentalism.

**Carl Tighe**

Salman Rushdie was born in Mumbai in 1947. He attended Cambridge University, and, after a brief period in Pakistan, made his home in the UK. After his first novel *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981, he quickly became a literary celebrity. In 1988 Salman Rushdie won the Whitbread Award with his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>1</sup>



Salman Rushdie

The story opens with two Indian actors, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, falling through the air after an Air India jumbo jet has exploded at 29,000 feet above the English Channel. The novel referred to a real act of terrorism, when an Air India Boeing 747 was blown up in 1985 - supposedly by Sikh terrorists. The two men survive the fall but find themselves transformed into the archangel Gabriel (who in Islamic tradition brought down from God to Mohammed the visions and messages that make up *The Koran*) and Satan.

There is a very strong subversive thread running through the book. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin are miraculously saved and chosen as protagonist in the fight between Good and Evil. Parts of the novel allude to legendary episodes in the life of the Prophet Mohammed, where he is said to have added *suras* (verses) to *The Koran* only to realise later that they were based in visions transmitted not by God but by Satan. In other parts of the novel the Prophet, referred to as Mahound (a derogatory name given to the prophet in medieval times), tells his dreams. Another section of the novel has a holy woman and her followers drowning when the waters of the Arabian Sea fail to part for her. In another provocative section of the novel 12 prostitutes working in a brothel called *hijab* (the veil) take on the names of the wives of the Prophet and when word gets out a long queue of customers quickly forms. The novel ends with Chamcha reconciled to his Indian identity and willing to return to his roots. Gibreel on the other hand is driven mad by his inability to reconcile himself and his doubts and by his failure to find love, and he kills himself.

Rushdie has publicly stated that literature has taken the place of religion in his life, but nevertheless he borrowed heavily from the Islamic tradition to provide the context and subtexts for *The Satanic Verse*. The novel abounds in provocative stories of Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> S. Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, Viking / Penguin: London, 1988.

*djinns*, martyrs, seers, and angels who act rather more like humans than an orthodox Muslim believer might wish.

Rushdie has always spoken his mind, regardless of whose sensibilities he may offend and, turning on the basic meaning of the Arabic word *Islam* meaning submission, Rushdie suggests very powerfully in this novel that the followers have been terrorized into belief. It is a suggestion that some Muslim responses to the novel might be said to confirm. However, his aim was not to simply undermine or insult Islam. He was also using the novel as a way of examining the lives of immigrants. He was interested in men and women who arrive in the First World only to be mangled by the post-industrial machine that is western – but particularly British - society. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha are unwilling prophets in a foreign city they call Elowen Deeowen (L.O.N.D.O.N.), where the natives are unfriendly and criticise them for not being English enough. Their days are full of apocalyptic visions and battles in the land of Margaret Thatcher. Like all immigrants, they are adrift in a strange land.

The book appeared to favourable reviews and under normal circumstances would have been a moderate 'literary' success. It is reasonable to assume that like most 'literary novels' its sales would probably have been very modest, since it could attract very few western readers who would understand most of its concerns and references. However, the fact that Rushdie was paid a very large advance for the novel – variously reported as either \$800,000 or £800,000 – indicates that the publisher expected the novel to sell through some 'success de scandal'.<sup>2</sup>

Syed Shahabuddin and Khursid Alam Khan, two Indian Muslim MPs, claimed that the book was blasphemous. They later admitted that they had in fact not read the book, but still petitioned the government of Rajiv Gandhi to ban it. Understandably sensitive to a potential religious conflict, the Gandhi government bowed to the demand in October 1988. It insisted that the ban 'did not detract from the literary and artistic merit of Rushdie's writing. Rushdie replied by penning an open letter to the Indian Prime Minister, saying: 'thanks for the good review'. Stung, the Indian government replied that it would not permit 'literary colonialism', especially in the form of 'religious pornography'.<sup>3</sup>

*The Satanic Verses* was subsequently banned in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Qatar, Sri Lanka and South Africa. The book was ceremonially burned in Bradford, England, on January 14, 1989. But smuggled copies of the book still sold very well in all these countries. Even in India, where one in 10 citizens is Muslim, there was a brisk trade in pirated copies. By the end

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<sup>2</sup> M. Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change*, OUP: Oxford, 1994, 199.

<sup>3</sup> This account of the Rushdie Affair is drawn from several sources, particularly: G. Wheatcroft '5 Years on Death Row', *The Guardian* (11 Feb 1994) 2-3; A. Blundy, 'Chronicle of a Nightmare', *The Guardian* (11 Feb 1994) 2-3; Ian Black, 'Nine Year Wait for Peace of Mind', *The Guardian* (25 Sept 1998), 7; C. Hitchens, 'The Quiet Triumph', *The Guardian* (13 Feb 1999), 7. Ian Black, 'Iran Lifeline for Rushdie', *The Guardian* (23 September 1998), 1; J. Wilson & H. Carter, 'Rushdie's Nightmare Years as a Fugitive', *The Guardian* (23 Sept 1998), 7.

of 1989 the publicity surrounding the book ensured that its sales topped 1.1 million copies in hardcover, though publication of a paperback edition had been suspended.

The affair might have ended at this, but Conservative Pakistanis decided to test the new government of Western-educated female Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. They demanded that she exert pressure on the US government to halt publication and distribution of the book. It soon became clear that the US was not in favour of literary colonialism either, and was not to be dictated to. Anti-US riots broke out in Karachi and Islamabad. On February 12, five people were killed by police gunfire during a protest in Islamabad. In Britain the Union of Muslim Organisations petitioned that Rushdie be prosecuted for blasphemy, but the government refused as the law was designed only to protect the doctrines of the Church of England. The Islamic Defence Council presented a petition to Penguin books insisting that the book be withdrawn. Penguin refused. In Pakistan the Islamic fundamentalists turned to the Iranian supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, for help. Khomeini sensed a chance of greater status in the Moslem world. On 14 February 1989, the Ayatollah broadcast on Radio Tehran. Without reading it, imam Khomeini was confident of what he thought about the book and the author and his judgement was broadcast widely:

In the name of God Almighty. There is only one God, to whom we shall all return. I would like to inform all zealous 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 Koran*, as well as the publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing. In addition, anyone who has access to the author of the book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should refer him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all. Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini.



Bradford, January 1989

In truth Rushdie could hardly have expected the Ayatollah to be pleased. In the novel he had mocked a thinly disguised, bearded Ayatollah, insisting that Islam was not supposed to be a cult of personality. Further, he described Khomeini standing at the

mouth of hell, devouring his people - a vivid and unflattering image of the man who had sent millions of young Iranis off to war against Iraq.

The announcement of this *fatwa* (death sentence) put everyone associated with the publication, distribution and sale of the book in danger. Following the Ayatollah's lead, the Khordad Foundation offered a bounty of \$1 million to whoever killed Rushdie. Within a few days this had risen to \$2 million and it was reported that hundreds of Muslim would-be assassins from around the world were heading for London to exact vengeance. On February 24, Khomeini offered a \$3 million bounty for the death of Rushdie. On the same day 12 people were killed and 17 wounded in Bombay when police open fire on a crowd of 10,000 protesting outside the British Embassy. Several other people died in Egypt and elsewhere. At the University of California at Berkeley, two bookstores carrying the book were firebombed. Muslim communities throughout the world held public rallies. Copies of the book were publicly burned in Bolton and Bradford. Further deaths during protests followed in Egypt.

In March 1989 two Muslim religious leaders who had refused to endorse the *fatwa* were assassinated in Brussels. On 27 May 1989 30,000 Moslems held a protest rally in Hyde Park. On 14 September 1989 four bombs were left outside British Penguin bookstores. In 1991, Rushdie's Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, was stabbed to death in Tokyo and the Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo, was beaten and stabbed in his Milan apartment. Police said gangsters connected to the Iranian secret service had attacked him. In 1993 Rushdie's Norwegian publisher William Nygaard was shot three times and left for dead outside his home in Oslo. That same year 37 guests died when locals protesting against Aziz Nesin, Rushdie's Turkish translator, burnt down their hotel in Sivas, Turkey. In the year that followed Penguin received more than 5,000 abusive or threatening letters and 25 bomb warnings. The company had to evacuate its Kensington premises six times and was besieged on most days by pickets of young Muslims. Threats were made to the Kensington branch of W. H. Smith to force them to remove the book from sale.

Since publication Rushdie has lived under police security at a cost of about £1,000,000 per year. In 1990, he published an essay *In Good Faith* to appease his critics and issued an apology in which he seems to have reaffirmed his respect for Islam. However, the Iranian clerics still did not retract the *fatwa*. Rushdie has made further statements to defend his book but still many in the Muslim community consider him a wanted man.

In 1997 Khordad Foundation announced that it had increased the \$2million bounty on Rushdie to \$2.5million, and in February 1998 the highest Iranian state prosecutor, Morteza Moqtadaie, in a sermon delivered at Tehran university, renewed the death sentence declaring: 'The shedding of this man's blood is obligatory. Any Muslim who hears an insult to the prophet must kill the person who commits the insult. It is better that those closest to that person try to kill him first.'

In 1998 Vaclav Havel (Czechoslovak President) and Mary Robinson (Irish President) made it their business to intervene in the issue, to receive Rushdie, to make his a test

case of international standards and the defence of free speech. Their efforts were quietly successful. After the death of Khomeini in 1989 the Iranian government publicly committed itself to opposing the death sentence against Rushdie. Newly appointed Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, a liberal cleric, declared: 'We should consider the Rushdie issue as completely finished.'

At the United Nations, Irani Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi promised British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that Iran would restrain itself from threatening Rushdie's life and that the government would approach the Khordad Foundation to persuade them to abandon the idea of a bounty. This was clearly part of a much larger attempt between Iran and the UK to normalize relations. Shortly afterwards Rushdie declared that he would soon be able to stop living in hiding. He also said he regretted having made earlier statements to appease his opponents and confirmed that he was no longer a practicing Muslim.

However, that same month, in spite of the statements by the Irani government, three Iranian clerics again called on Moslems to kill Rushdie and the Association of Hezbollah University Students pledged an additional \$333,000 for the bounty on Rushdie's head. In 1998 Khordad Foundation announced in a full-page newspaper ad that the \$2.5 million bounty had risen to \$2.8 million. Foundation director Ayatollah Hassan Sanei declared:

To make the *fatwa* everlasting and encourage its execution, I have decided to raise the reward offered by the foundation. This reward for killing Salman Rushdie is a great honour for the foundation and we must preserve it.

At the same time several Irani writers were killed in their homes and others were assaulted or threatened. Opposition to Khatami's reformist initiatives was gathering strength. In Britain Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the Muslim Parliament in Britain said that the Irani leaders were powerless to revoke the *fatwah* and that Rushdie was only safe in Britain. Anjem Choudhary of Al-Muhajiroun, one the the more extreme British Muslim organisations, said that the Iranis simply did not have the power to lift the *fatwah* since 'anyone who insults the prophet must face capital punishment.'

In February 1999 Ayatollah Hassan Sanei, director of the Khordad foundation, told the newspaper *Jomhuri Islami*: 'The idea of Rushdie's annihilation is still very much alive and seeks only the right moment.' In February 2003 Iran's Revolutionary Guard reiterated the call for assassination. In 2005 the *fatwa* against Rushdie was reaffirmed by Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a message to Muslims making the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. In response to requests to withdraw the *fatwa*, the Irani government stated that only the person who issued it may withdraw it, and Khomeini is dead.

The law alone could not guarantee Rushdie's safety. For more than 10 years Rushdie was in hiding, and there is still a price on his head. The original *fatwa* has been withdrawn, but a new one has been issued in its place. Even though *The Koran* clearly

says 'Allah does not love aggressors', martyrdom and heavenly reward have been promised to any Muslim who kills him. Immediately after the Ayatollah issued his *fatwa*, Viking-Penguin reneged on their contract and refused to issue a paperback edition of the book. At the same time several European publishers cancelled their editions of the novel. (Most of those publishers later had a change of heart and issued the book.) An Iranian diplomat even met with Pope John Paul II to urge that the Italian edition be withdrawn, but the Pontiff did not cooperate.

For their part, the heads of several American bookstore chains ordered that *The Satanic Verses* be withdrawn from the shelves. Although they eventually reversed their policy, those executives served for a time as Khomeini's most effective censors. British Airways, which runs a very successful route from London to Tehran, announced it would not take Rushdie as a passenger to any destination. And Rushdie still has to be very careful about public appearances. For the most part he remained in hiding, guarded, moving from one safe house to another. It was a living in hell. Predictably some western religious leaders saw the affair as a way of restoring their own waning power, rather than as a matter affecting human rights. New York's Cardinal O'Connor said that the book was 'blasphemous and offensive'. And this was followed by similar denunciations by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi of Israel and by the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The book remained on sale in Turkey, but most countries with a large Muslim population (Zanzibar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania, Liberia, Sierra Leone) and several non-Muslim countries (Poland, Bulgaria, Japan and Venezuela) chose to ban it or to restrict sales. However, no other Muslim state aligned itself with Iran in the matter of the death threat. In the Moslem world Irani, Kurdish and Arab writers were among the first to spring to Rushdie's defence with a collection of articles published in French under the title *Pour Rushdie*.<sup>4</sup> Many, writing openly under their own names, contributed to this anthology of comment, satire and criticism. They pointed out that the issue at stake was not whether the Muslim world should adopt western values, but of maintaining an ancient freedom to experiment with ideas and with language, even if this meant offending those who sought to monopolise the interpretation of scripture. They also pointed out that in their opinion Rushdie had not in fact defamed the Prophet (which the Ayatollah would have realised if he had ever read the book) since the offending passages in the book occurred as part of a madman's nightmare. In the opinion of these writers it was doubtful that the cleric-censors knew what they were talking about. For these writers the whole affair was more to do with the Ayatollah asserting Islamic clerical power, opposing western political influence and attempting to regain political respect for Iran than it was to do with religious matters.

While the novelists Margaret Drabble, Günter Grass, Martin Amis, Nadine Gordimer, Norman Mailer, politician Michael Foot and the writers of PEN were known to have

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<sup>4</sup> Later published in English as: A. Abdallah (ed.), *For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech*, Brazillier: New York, 1994.

spoken up on the side of freedom of expression, in general British writers were neither unswervingly kind nor fully supportive. The Conservative writer and journalist Peregrine Worsthorne made unseemly noises about how the liberal left had made a multi-racial bed and now must lie in it. The Conservative novelist and editor Auberon Waugh wondered just how far, as 'deeply stained white imperialists', the British should exert themselves to save Rushdie 'from his own people'. The poet Stephen Spender was quite clear that mass immigration was the real culprit. The children's author Roald Dahl branded Rushdie 'a dangerous opportunist.' Feminist academic Germaine Greer refused to sign any petitions in support of the book or the author and called him 'a megalomaniac, an Englishman with dark skin.' Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said: 'I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them.' Thriller writer John Le Carré also refused to offer support.

Singer-song writer and convert to Islam, Yusuf Islam (formerly known as pop singer Cat Stevens), who had also been lampooned in the novel, publicly stated his support for the *fatwa*. Later, in a 1989 TV documentary, he repeated that he wasn't against the death sentence. Rather than go to a demonstration where Rushdie would be burned in effigy, he said: 'I would have hoped that it'd be the real thing'. If Rushdie showed up at his door, he said, he 'might ring somebody who might do more damage to him than he would like... I'd try to phone the Ayatollah Khomeini and tell him exactly where this man is'. *The New York Times* later reported that Yusuf Islam stood by these comments in a subsequent interview.



Yusuf Islam (formerly known as singer/song-writer Cat Stevens)

As Yusuf Islam began to understand the reaction to his words he became increasingly embarrassed at his behaviour and began to attempt to repair the damage to his reputation. He claimed he had been ambushed by questions on this issue and had been misquoted. His later, considered, official statement, which was posted on his website for many months, was as follows:

Under the Islamic Law, Muslims are bound to keep within the limits of the law of the country in which they live, providing that it does not restrict the freedom to worship and serve God and fulfil their basic religious duties (*fard'ayn*). One must



not forget the ruling in Islam is also very clear about adultery, stealing and murder, but that doesn't mean that British Muslims will go about lynching and stoning adulterers, thieves and murderers. If we can't get satisfaction within the present limits of the law, like a ban on this blasphemous book, *Satanic Verses*, which insults God and His prophets – including those prophets honoured by Christians, Jews as well as Muslims – this does not mean that we should step outside of the law to find redress.

*The Satanic Verses* is not the only book to have excited fundamentalist Muslim hatred. Hanif Kureishi was the target of death threats for his portrayal of the northern England Muslim homosexual subculture. Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz (Nobel Prize for Literature 1988) is banned in many parts of the Muslim world: in 1994 the 84-year-old writer was attacked outside his Cairo apartment. The exact nature of his offence is still not clear, but he is generally regarded as a 'liberal' Muslim. In Bangladesh the Council of Soldiers of Islam sentenced novelist Taslima Nasrin to death for demanding the emancipation of Muslim women and greater religious tolerance. Rushdie has spoken out in defence of these, and many other writers.

Rushdie is a naturalized citizen of England. He should in theory have had the full protective force of laws guaranteeing rights of opinion and free expression, security from death threats and full political and diplomatic support against any kind of foreign interference. However, British politicians – on the left and right - did not stand up for him. If anything they were craven in failing to face down Iran or to prosecute those seeking to procure a murder in the UK. Edward Heath, Conservative ex-Prime Minister, was said to be furious with Rushdie over damage to trade relations with the Arab world. Norman Tebbit, Chairman of the Conservative Party, called Rushdie 'despicable'. Labour MPs Gerald Kaufman and Roy Hattersley saw the novel as a calculated assault on Islam and an abuse of liberal freedoms.

Less than a year after the start of the *fatwa*, Mrs Thatcher, lampooned in the book as Mrs Torture, had resumed diplomatic relations with the Khomeini regime. The USA (usually referred to by Irani religious leaders as 'the Great Satan') resumed and increased trade with Iran in spite of the *fatwa*. President George Bush declined to make any comment on the affair simply because American interests were involved. President Clinton received Rushdie at the White House in November 1993, but was very quick to point out that he 'meant no disrespect' to the Muslim world and that he saw the author 'for only a few minutes.' In 1998 Iran's former President Mohammed Khatami said the *fatwa* was finished. However it has never been officially lifted, and has several times been reiterated by religious leaders. Iran's deputy Culture Minister Seyed Abbas Salehi has said: 'The Fatwa is a religious decree and will never lose its power or fade out.' M. Hanne summed up the way the novel had been used by saying:

*Satanic Verses* was... an innocent cultural artefact which was appropriated as a weapon... It was grabbed by the mullahs in Muslim immigrant communities in Britain to strike out at the secular materialist forces by which they perceived their communities to be besieged; by Muslim politicians in India to strengthen

their hand in communal struggles; and, most dramatically of course, by the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shi'ite leadership in Iran, as both a missile in their ideological war with the West and a device to enable them to assert supreme authority over all Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

Ten years after publication, Rushdie began cautiously to come out of hiding. From 2004-06 he served as president of American PEN. He has now received eight honorary doctorates and was awarded a Knighthood for services to literature in 2007. However, the problem of the fatwa against Rushdie refuses to go away. In 2012 Rushdie was invited to appear at the Jaipur Literary festival – the biggest literary event in India, but had to call off his visit after the Indian Intelligence Service warned him that hit-men had been sent by Dawood Ibrahim (a crime boss living in exile) to 'eliminate' him after a conservative Muslim cleric had called for Rushdie to be banned from the Festival. Rushdie withdrew saying: 'It would be irresponsible to my family, to the festival and to my fellow writers to come to the festival in these circumstances.'<sup>6</sup> In 2015 Rushdie was invited to speak at the Frankfurt book fair, causing Iran and several other Muslim nations to withdraw. In 2016, 27 years after the initial fatwa, forty state-run media outlets in Iran pooled their finance to raise an additional \$600,000 (£430,000) to add to the bounty on Rushdie's death. The total pool on Rushdie is now thought to run to many millions of dollars.<sup>7</sup>

### Follow Up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- Was the response of the many Muslims who found the book offensive a misreading – a non-literary response to a literary work?
- It is often said that where there is no power, there is no responsibility. Vaclav Havel, on the other hand, spoke of 'the power of the powerless', when writers faced governments and big political ideas. What do you think? What powers do you think writers have?
- The Indian Muslim MP Syed Shahabuddin is reported to have said that Rushdie's offensive actions were not unintentional or a careless slip of the pen, but a deliberately and consciously planned act with devilish forethought and an eye to the market. What do you think?
- The temper of Indian Islam has been described by Malise Ruthven as 'harsh, neurotic and insecure'. Do you think this might be true? If so, why? And if it is true, what bearing does it have on the Rushdie case?
- Why did British, Indian and Irani Muslims react in the way they did? Why didn't Arab and South East Asian Muslims respond in the same way?
- It has been said that Rushdie made life for other non-fundamentalist Muslim writers like Naguib Mahffouz much more difficult. In what way can Rushdie be held responsible for any deterioration in their situation?

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<sup>5</sup> M. Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change*, OUP: Oxford, 1994, 201.

<sup>6</sup> J. Burke, 'Fear for India Festival' *The Guardian*, 21 January 2012, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Sian Cain, 'More Money Raised on Rushdie Fatwa', *The Guardian* (Review), 22 February 2016: 5.

- In criticising responses to the book are we promoting a negative image of Islam or are we defending our democratic right to free speech?
- Does Rushdie have the right to think and say what he likes? Do all writers have that right? In what ways is that right modified?
- What are the limits of free speech? Why shouldn't people be offended? Should there be blasphemy laws? What is the difference between explaining and justifying terrorism?
- In what ways (a) can writers challenge religious opinion (b) can religious opinion terrorise writers? What might the middle ground between these positions be?
- Can a book or a writer be held responsible for causing riots? Can a book kill people? And if it does, is the author responsible? What actual harm did Rushdie's book do? What actual harm did the opponents of Rushdie's book do?