

## The Satanic Verses: The Rhetoric and the Dream

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**Abstract:** *I am inclined to trust Salman Rushdie's claim, shortly after *The Satanic Verses* had been symbolically burnt in Bradford (14 Jan. 1989), that "that was not the book [he] wrote." He wrote a tale only to discover that his readers' "misreadings" produced another; a "framed" narrative that drove him to live in hiding and perilously precipitate declarations of apostasy. If Rushdie wrote the tale(s) he wrote (immigration, divided selves, dreams), the text produced its own tale (defamation, blasphemy) and confirmed its implied author in what Derrida calls, in another context, his "faithful unfaithfulness." Let us believe, in spite of the controversies, that Rushdie's intentions are liberating ones and that his authorial intentions, as he asserts in his apologia "In Good faith," though a bit oddly, are the only trustworthy guide for the novel's meaning.*

**Key-words:** *Salman Rushdie, apostasy, defamation, blasphemy, Islamic tradition*

While the odd chapters of *The Satanic Verses* (a novel in nine chapters) relate the ordeals of two Indian immigrants (Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha) in London (ill-treatment, exploitation, disappointment, betrayal, considered the first plot), the even chapters, as is shown shortly, tell the story of Gibreel Farishta's dreams (considered the novel's second plot) that denigrate Islam as many before him did, in fact, though in another shape. Thus Gibreel becomes Archangel Gabriel and takes possession of Prophet Mahound's mind whenever he is in cave Cone meditating. Rushdie's Gibreel claims that all those revelations and those "endlessly proliferating rules" Mahound (Rushdie's fictional prophet) recited are either of his own invention or of Mahound's own invention but confirmed into revelation upon Mahound's insistence; which Gibreel/Rushdie calls "the revelation of convenience".<sup>1</sup> The novel is very allegorical, perhaps to a fault.

### Chapter Two claims that

- a demon called Gibreel Farishta took possession of Muhammad's mind while meditating in Cave Cone (Rushdie's fictional Hera Cave) and dictated the verses Muhammad recited (105-106)
- as "*al-gharaniq*" verse Prophet Muhammad once recited after verse 20 of surat al-Najm was considered "satanic" and later deleted, then there is no reason why not to believe that many of the Quranic verses, if not all, are "satanic" (114).

### Chapter Four claims that

- Muhammad was ignorant and idiotic
- Gibreel (the archangel) was mad, lecherous, and homosexual
- Ayesha was malicious and destructive
- Ayesha confessed having been touched by Gibreel and that was why she declined to remarry after Muhammad's death.

### Chapter Six (the most controversial)

- accuses Allah of cowardice (not Almighty, absent while people suffer in His name, unconfident of Himself)
- treats Prophet Muhammad as a charlatan and an impostor (363-64)
- derides all that is related to *Shari'a* law (ablution, morality, treatment of women, interdictions, inheritance) and sees them restrictive, destructive, serving rather the Prophet (363-64)

- accuses the Revelation scribes of having exploited Muhammad's ignorance and altered some of the verses or added some of their own (367-68)
- treats Muhammad's disciples (*sahabees*) as "scum" and claims that many of them embraced Islam against their will and apostatised after Muhammad's death.
- accuses the Prophet's wives of debauchery (380-82)
- claims that Al-Lat killed Muhammad to revenge his destruction of her temples and that when she visited him while he was dying he thanked her for allowing him to meet Allah (392-94).

### **Chapter Eight ridicules**

- Haj, fasting, and Jihad (487-90)
- Shari'a punishments (stoning of adulterers, cutting off thieves' hands, flagellating false witnesses and slanderers of married women)
- miracles (Muhammad's midnight journey or *isra* to Jerusalem and the Afterworld).

Many of the novel's arguments, if not all, are built on what had always looked "ambiguous" in Islamic tradition. Let us discuss some of the episodes and see what goes wrong.

Rushdie's description of Gibreel Farishta "trapped" in his "extraordinary," if not "eccentric," relationship with eighty-eight year old Rosa Diamond, one of the novel's dream-women, serves the novel's "satanic verses" plot very well. After Saladin's arrest, Gibreel stayed with Rosa "trapped by her eyes" and "held by unseen chains." It "seemed to him that his will was no longer his own to command, that somebody else's needs were in charge" (143-144). He "felt her stories [about the Roman conquest, Argentina, her husband Henry, gauchos, dams] winding round him like a web." He is "snared" in her descriptions of her old days, enthralled by her narrative sorcery, "trailing behind her meekly" (148). He senses "a tugging in the region of his navel, as if something were trying to come out." Then the pain in his navel went violent, "a pulling pain, as if somebody had stuck a hook in his stomach, that a cry escaped his lips" (146-148). To "help her complete the last revelation ... and draw the images from him," they got linked, "navel to navel" by "a shining cord" (154).

Rosa's narrative sorcery leads to Gibreel's following conclusion:

Gibreel's stomach ached so badly that he feared for his life, but at the very moment that his rational mind was considering the possibility of an ulcer or appendicitis, the rest of his brain whispered the truth, which was that he was being held prisoner and manipulated by the force of Rosa's will, just as the Angel Gibreel had been obliged to speak by the overwhelming need of the Prophet, Mahound (150).

Gibreel insists that Prophet Muhammad was enthralled and plagued by some kind of narrative sorcery like that which had chained him to Rosa (150, 154) and Allie. Like him, Gibreel suggests, Mahound/Muhammad had been under the spell of Archangel Gibreel's magic, or of Satan in disguise, unable to make a distinction between what is right and what is wrong. But Mahound believed he was a prophet just as Gibreel Farishta believes, while on his way to London (193-194), that he is the Archangel Gibreel who showed Mahound Mount Cone where he went to seek revelations condoning decisions made at home and dreaming, as he climbed the mountain, that trees called his name and rocks greeted him (110). Not only that, Gibreel believes being often inside the Prophet, Mahound's other self, "bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, ... flow[ing] in both directions along the umbilical cord" (110), just as had been the case with Rosa Diamond (154).

Commenting on this particular episode, Rushdie says that he wanted to "give a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great world religion." There is no reason, of course, not to believe him. And many Western scholars accept the idea that the Prophet had been mishandled without questioning his sincerity.

*The Satanic Verses* does not only argue that Islam is not, as Rushdie claims in interviews, "a religion of peace" but "a religion in pieces," but also goes hand in hand with what some of the Shiite sects (al-Nasirya or Alaouites)<sup>2</sup> and non-Muslims believe: that Gibreel revealed Allah's words in meaning and that Prophet Muhammad worded them in Arabic. Hence the probability of Muhammad having warped some revelations for his own use. Sunnis believe that the Quran contains Allah's words and that they are neither of Gibreel's nor of Muhammad's invention. The Quranic revelations or verses were thought to have been transmitted and recorded unabridged. But revelations were not limited to Quran, of course. There were orders, recommendations, reprimands, telling or showing Prophet Muhammad what to do (called Sunna/ teachings), which might have been transmitted in meaning.

The Revelation of the Quran happened as follows:

#### According to Rushdie

Mahound, still in his notsleep, becomes rigid, veins bulge in his neck, he clutches at his centre. No, no nothing like an epileptic fit, it can't be explained away that easily ... The dragging again the dragging and now the miracle starts in his my our guts, he is straining with all his might at something, forcing something, and Gibreel begins to feel that strength that force, here it is *at my own jaw* working it, opening shutting; and the power starting within Mahound, reaching up to *my vocal cords* and the voice comes.

*Not my voice* I'd never know such words I'm no classy speaker never was never will be but this isn't my voice it's a Voice.

Mahound's eyes open wide, he's seeing some kind of vision, staring at it, oh, that's right, Gibreel remembers, me. He's seeing me. My lips moving, being moved by. What, whom? Don't know, can't say. Nevertheless, here they are, coming out of my mouth, up my throat, past my teeth: the Words (112).

#### According to Islamic tradition

Gabriel came to me while asleep and said: "Read." "I can't read," I said. So he strangled me until I felt strained, then released me and said: "Read." "I can't read," I said. He strangled me again and strained me until I felt dragged, then released me and said: "Read." "I can't read," I said. He strangled me a third time until I felt strained, then he released me and said: "Read in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created/ Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:/Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,/He Who taught (the use of) the pen,/Taught man that which he knew not. (surat al-Alaq/The Clot: 1-5). When I read it, he left me, and I woke up. He returned to Khedija bint Khuweilid (his first wife) shaking and told her what had happened to him. "God will never abandon you," she said and took him to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfel, a blind elderly versed in Hebrew. He listened to Muhammad then said: This is the kind of revelation that Moses received. I wish I were part of it, I wish I were alive, for your people will expel you. "Will they?," asked Muhammad. "Yes," Waraqa said. "Anyone coming with what you're coming with will have enemies. If I live longer, I'll support you as no other will." Waraqa died a few weeks later.<sup>3</sup>

According to Islamic tradition, when something was about to be "revealed" to him, Prophet Muhammad became rigid, started sweating, and his eyes remained wide open as though he were "listening" to something, which "listening" condition Rushdie refers to frequently, but satirically, in the novel (110, 113-14).

When talking about who reveals what to whom, Rushdie insists that when God states in the Quran "We said unto the angels, be submissive unto Adam" (al-Kahf/The Cave: 50),<sup>4</sup> this is an acknowledgement of "man's ability to master, through knowledge, the forces of nature which the angels represented" (336). This means that "archangels could only speak

when men chose to listen” (336). And as there is a “choice”, man can manage without God and create miracles. “When man chooses” is what Rushdie calls the “firm persuasion,” an idea he borrowed from William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1789).

Does a firm persuasion [sic] that a thing is so, make it so? All poets believe that it does. & in ages of imagination this firm persuasion [sic] removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion [sic] of any thing” (338).

Thus there is nothing miraculous in Mahound’s prophethood, as any “poet” can invent miracles if he happens to be offered “a firm persuasion” in something, such as making angels or dead people or genii speak to him. And what Blake calls “firm persuasion”, which view Rushdie adopts in the novel, Greek philosophers call “illuminism” or “inspiration”, and Sufi Muslims call “vision” (*kashf*). Secularists adopted the Sufi view and considered the Quran an “emanation” (*faidh*) of the inner reason and praised Muhammad’s brilliance/genius and purity of mind only to deprive him, Muslim scholars think, of prophethood.

To many Muslim intellectuals, Allah treated Satan’s or Iblis’s dissidence magnanimously, better than the Inquisition did dissenters and Khomeini Rushdie. The reference to Satan’s refusal to be “submissive unto Adam” is reported in the following surats: The Cow (2: 34), The Heights (7: 11-18), Al-Hijr (15: 28-39), The Night Journey (17: 61-63), The Cave (18: 50), Taha (20: 116-117), and Sad (38: 74-81). Satan was “cursed” and expelled, which provoked his reaction that “he will lie in wait for [those] on [Allah’s] straight way”. In spite of his threat, Allah gave Satan the “respite” he asked for to “bring [Adam’s] descendents under [his] sway (7: 11-18; 17: 61-63). The same magnanimity is seen manifest in Allah’s treatment of the Jews who claim that “Allah’s hands are tied up.” Every time they kindle the fire of war or of “obstinate rebellion and blasphemy,” Allah extinguishes it (5: 64).

The wrestling thesis Rushdie promotes in the novel falls within this context. Because he wants to “listen” to revelations, Mahound provokes Gibreel until he loses his temper, pins him down, and finally utters (reveals) what Mahound wants (often “verses of convenience”). God’s “words,” Rushdie makes Gibreel say, are Satan Gibreel’s words (as Rushdie’s Gibreel is sometimes archangel, sometimes the Devil in disguise) poured all over him (123).

In a cave five hundred feet below the summit of Mount Cone, Mahound wrestles the archangel, hurling him from side to side, and let me tell you he’s getting in *everywhere*, his tongue in my ear his fist around my balls, there was never a person with such a rage in him, he has to know he has to KNOW and I have nothing to tell him, he’s twice as physically fit as I am and four times as knowledgeable, minimum, we may both have taught ourselves by listening a lot but as is plaintosee [sic] he’s even a better listener than me; so we roll kick scratch ...

After they had wrestled for hours or even weeks Mahound was pinned down beneath the angel, it’s what he wanted, it was his will filling me up and giving me the strength to hold him down, because archangels can’t lose such fights, it wouldn’t be right, it’s only devils who get beaten in such circes, so the moment I got on top he started weeping for joy and then he did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again, made it pour all over him, lie sick (122-23)

Honestly, this is one of the purple passages of the novel. Had anti-Rushdie Muslims read it irrespective of religious bias and sensitivity, they would have found great pleasure. It is a purple passage because Rushdie tries to imagine an answer to the big question related to the famous “al-gharaniq” or “satanic verses” incident which gives the novel its title.<sup>5</sup>

It was in a wrestling scene like the one described above that Gibreel “poured over” Mahound the “satanic” verses he would recite to calm his Jahilia opponents. The “satanic verses” incident did take place, in spite of many Muslim scholars’ determination to prove the contrary. A transliteration of the “satanic verses” from Arabic gives “*tilk al-gharaniq al-’ula wa inna shafa’ata-hunna la-turtaja*,” which means, as Rushdie puts it, “these are exalted

females whose intercession is to be desired" (340). The "added" verse allowed those who had not yet been converted to Islam to worship their Lat, Uzza, or Manat.<sup>6</sup>

It is a curious fact that some Arab historians repudiate the "satanic verses" affair as a fabrication of polytheists (*mushrikeen*), while al-Tabari (in his *Tarikh al-Tabari*), Ibn Hisham (in his *Sirat Ibn Hisham*/Ibn Hisham's Biography), and Ibn Kathir (in his *al-Bidayah wal Nihayah*/The Beginning and the End), the three most renowned exegetes in Islamic history, present well-attested reports of the incident.

The "satanic verses" incident runs as follows:

#### According to Rushdie

'And in an instant the silence in the great tent is complete.

'*The Star*,' Mahound cries out, and the scribes begin to write.

'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful!

"By the Pleiades when they set: Your companion is not in error; neither is he deviating.

'Nor does he speak from his own desires. It is a revelation that has been revealed: one mighty in power has taught him.

'He stood on the high horizon: the lord of strength. Then he came close, closer than the length of two bows, and revealed to his servant that which is revealed.

'The servant's heart was true when seeing what he saw. Do you, then, dare to question what was seen?

'I saw him also at the lote-tree of the uttermost end, near which lies the garden of Repose. When that tree was covered by its covering, my eye was not averted, neither did my gaze wander; and I saw some of the greatest signs of the Lord.'

A this point, without any trace of hesitation or doubt, he recites two further verses.

'Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?' – After the first verse, Hind gets to her feet; the Grandee of Jahilia is already standing very straight. And Mahound, with silenced eyes, recites: 'They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed.'

As the noise – shouts, cheers, scandal, cries of devotion to the goddess Al-Lat – swells and bursts within the marquee, the already astonished congregation beholds the doubly sensational spectacle of the Grandee Abu Simbel placing his thumbs upon the lobes of his ears, fanning out the fingers of both hands and uttering in a loud voice the formula: 'Allahu Akbar.' After which he falls to his knees and presses a deliberate forehead to the ground. His wife, Hind, immediately follows his lead (113-15).

#### According to Islamic Tradition

"Al-gharaniq"/birds (Lat, Uzza, and Manat) are referred to in Kuranic surats al-Najm, al-Isra, and al-Haj. To many theologians, Prophet Muhammad was praying in Mecca and reading al-Najm (The Star): "By the Star when it goes down/Your Companion is neither astray nor being misled/Nor does he speak from his own desire/It is no less than inspiration sent down to him/He was taught by one Mighty in Power/Endued with Wisdom: for he appeared in stately form/While he was in the highest part of the horizon/Then he approached and came closer/And was at a distance of but two bow-lengths or even nearer/So did He reveal to His Servant what He revealed/The Prophet's mind and heart in no way falsified that which he saw/Will you then question what he saw?/For indeed he saw him at a second descent,/Near the Lote-tree beyond which none may pass:/Near it is the Garden of Abode./Behold, the Lote-tree was shrouded in mystery unspeakable!/ His sight never swerved, nor did it go wrong!/For truly did he see, of the Signs of his Lord, the Greatest!/Have you seen Lat. and 'Uzza,/ And Manat, the third, Manat?" (al-Najm/The Star, 53:1-20)

After verse 20, Prophet Muhammad, who seemed to have fallen asleep, added "They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed."

Thinking that the added verse was genuine, the infidels got extremely pleased and when he prostrated, they prostrated with him in respect for their "goddesses." When the news that Quraish got converted to Islam reached those Muslims who had gone to Ethiopia (Habasha) to escape the cruelty of Quraish, they all returned home.

But a new verse soon came to cancel the mistaken one.<sup>7</sup>

Verses 6 and 13 are deleted in Rushdie's version. In his version of verses, the Prophet or Messenger speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, which is not the case

in the Holy Quran. These are perhaps “the few touches of [his] own” Rushdie talks about in the acknowledgements.

References to these “satanic” verses are referred to, as I said, in surats al-Najm (53:19-20), al-Isra (17:73-74),<sup>8</sup> and al-Haj (22:52-53).<sup>9</sup> These are plain evidences that the story was not a forgery and that the recitation occurred. More than this, before the recitation of al-Najm, historians assert, Umayya ibn Khalaf and Abu Jahl ibn Hisham (Muhammad’s uncle) tried to make a deal with Muhammad by asking him to recognize their goddesses in exchange for their recognition of his. And as Prophet Muhammad did not like leaving his people, “he pitied them.”<sup>10</sup> The second version says: they told him: we won’t let you reach the Black Stone until you recognize our goddesses. Muhammad said to himself: ‘Why not doing what they say, and God knows that I don’t really mean it.’ The third version says: they told him “If you’ve been sent to us [as messenger], so send away your good-for-nothing followers and we’ll follow you.” He “showed signs of agreement” (*rakana lahum*). And the last version is that Prophet Muhammad suffered a lot of hurt and lies from his enemies that he wished (*tamanna*) he had been able to show them the right path (*hada*). Because there was a tendency on his part to make amends with his opponents, the Devil made him utter the verses his opponents wanted.

“Divine” verses came to “cancel” the “Satanic” one and dissipate Muhammad’s distress, but not without bringing about much trouble from the disappointed dissidents. “And We did not send before you any apostle or prophet, but when he desired, the Shaitan made a suggestion respecting his desire; but Allah annuls that which is cast” (al-Haj/The Pilgrimage, 22:52). Prophet Muhammad’s failing is seen as a human failing in which many prophets before him had fallen. So it is not Rushdie who is qualifying the verses as “Satanic,” but Allah in the above-quoted verse. Because Muhammad felt inclined to make “a deal” with Quraish, to use Rushdie’s term, but was reluctant, the devil jumped on the occasion and “poured” a “Satanic” verse into his ears as Rushdie’s Gibreel is seen doing Mahound after each wrestling.

Dissidence within Muhammad’s group followed this incident as the “Satanic” verse, added after verse 20 of surat al-Najm, comes just after three “divine” verses insisting that God’s Messenger is “neither astray nor deviating, nor does he speak from his own desires. It is a revelation that has been revealed” (al-Najm, 53:1-3). The great dissidence (called *ridda* in Islamic history) that followed Muhammad’s death and brought about the *ridda* (apostasy) wars during Abu Baker’s rule, was not because he died, but because the nomads refused to pay Zakat (almsgiving) and preferred to follow three self-declared prophets (Lassad al-Ansi, Tuleiha al-Asdi, and Museilama al-Kadhab) whose rules (shari’a) were considered rather humane.<sup>11</sup>

While God does not blame Muhammad for the “satanic verses,” Rushdie does. According to Rushdie, the verses are intentionally added for “convenience”.

Mahound sits on the edge of the well and grins. ‘I’ve been offered a deal.’ By Abu Simbel? Khalid shouts. *Unthinkable. Refuse.* Faithful Bilal admonishes him: Do not lecture the Messenger. Of course, he has refused. Salman the Persian asks: What sort of deal. Mahound smiles again. ‘At least one of you wants to know.’

‘It’s a small matter,’ he [Mahound] begins again. ‘A grain of sand. Abu Simbel asks Allah to grant him one little favour.’ Hamza sees the exhaustion on him. As if he had been wrestling with a demon. The water-carrier is shouting: ‘Nothing! Not a jot!’ Hamza shut him up.

‘If our great God could find it in his heart to concede – he used that word, *concede* – that three, only three of the three hundred and sixty idols in the house are worthy of worship ... [sic]’

‘There is no god but God!’ Bilal shouts. And his fellows join in: ‘Ya Allah!’ Mahound looks angry. ‘Will the faithful hear the Messenger? They fall silent, scuffing their feet in the dust.

‘He [Abu Simbel] asks for Allah’s approval of lat, Uzza and Manat. In return, he gives his guarantee that we will be tolerated, even officially recognized; as a mark of which, I am to be elected to the council of Jahilia. That’s the offer (105).

To Rushdie, Mahound has an “exploitative tendency” or an inclination for “matter-of-fact revelations” (366) not only to convert people to the new faith, but also to reason them out of their reason.

In this context, Mahound or Gibreel or Allah, as you can never distinguish the one from the other, becomes “obsessed by law,” by the “desire” to regulate the imaginable and the unimaginable.

Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself sprouting rules, 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. [...] 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 included all those in which the female was 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 [...] and Gibreel [...] specified the manner in which a man should be buried, and how his property should be divided, so that Salman the Persian got to wondering what manner of god this was that sounded so much like a businessman. [...] he called that Mahound himself had been a businessman [...] he just laid down the law and the angel would confirm it afterwards [...] [his were] revelations of convenience (363-65)

And when Ayesha (of the novel) protests against Mahound taking a number of wives and rejects what she calls his trick that it was for political alliances, he went “into one of his trances” then “sprouted rules” to validate his choices:

‘That girl [Ayesha] couldn’t stomach it that her husband wanted so many other women,’ he [Salman the Persian] said. ‘He talked about necessity, political alliances and so on, but he wasn’t fooled. Who can blame her? Finally he went into – what else? – one of his trances, and out he came with a message from the archangel. Gibreel had recited verses giving him full divine support. God’s own permission to fuck as many women as he liked. So there: what could poor Ayesha say against the verses of God? You know what she did say? This: “Your God certainly jumps to it when you need him to fix things up for you.”’ (386)

One of the most known scandals said to discredit a prophet and annul his prophethood is his wife’s fornication out of wedlock. Hence no prophet had ever been betrayed, sexually speaking, by his or one of his wives. There had been political, but never sexual, betrayals. The “ifk” (lie) affair in Islam almost terminated Muhammad’s prophethood had not a series of verses come “to fix things.”

The famous “ifk” version goes as follows:

#### **Rushdie’s version**

Ayesha and the Prophet had gone on an expedition to a far-flung village, and on the way back to Yathrib their party had camped in the dunes for the night. Camp was struck in the dark before the dawn. At the last moment Ayesha was obliged by a call of nature to rush out of sight into a hollow. While she was away her litter-bearers picked up her palanquin and marched off. She was a light woman, and, failing to notice much difference in the weight of that heavy palanquin, they assumed she was inside. Ayesha returned after relieving herself to find herself alone, and who knows what might have befallen her if a young man, a certain Safwan, had not chanced to

#### **Ayesha’s version**

Ayesha said: on the way back to Medina from Beni Mustaliq expedition [in the year 6 H] we camped in a place not far away from Medina to spend the rest of the night. When people started packing for departure I realized that I lost my necklace in the place where I had just been for a call of nature. So I went back to look for it. While I was away, my palanquin was picked and placed on the camel as had always been done. And as I was not heavy, nobody noticed my absence. When I returned to the camp, I found nobody ... I wrapped myself up in my gown [jilbab] and sat in my place knowing that people would come back to look for me. Then Safwan

pass by on his camel ... [sic] Safwan brought Ayesha back to Yathrib safe and sound; at which point tongues began to wag, not least in the harem, where opportunities to weaken Ayesha's power were eagerly seized by her opponents. The two young people had been alone in the desert for many hours, and it was hinted, more and more loudly, that Safwan was a dashing handsome fellow, and the prophet was much older than the young woman, after all, and might she not therefore have been attracted to someone closer to her own age? 'Quite a scandal,' Salman commented, happily.

'What will Mahound do?' Baal wanted to know. '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.' (387)

ibn Muattal, who had not even camped with the rest of people for some kind of business of his own, arrived. When he saw my black jilbab, he got closer (and used to know me before I wore the veil) and said: 'to God we belong and to Him is our return, the Messenger's wife? And I remained wrapped and did not say anything. He said: Why are you left behind? Then he got his camel closer to me to mount it, which I did. Then he took the camel's head and walked until we reached the people without them knowing that I was not inside the palanquin. Then the "ifk" people started saying what they said.

When the verses exonerated me, the Messenger went out to tell people about what had been revealed to him and ordered Musattah ibn Ethaha, Hassan ibn Thabet (the poet), and Himna bint Jahsh [sister of Zeinab bint Jahsh, Muhammad's wife] be whipped for their lies.<sup>12</sup>

Khomeini would never have issued his death sentence against Rushdie had his novel been transgressive only against Ayesha as a "woman of loose morality." The novel treats Ayesha just as the Shiites do. They thought she was behind the sufferings of Caliph Ali ibn Abi Taleb and his son Hussein ibn Ali (Shiites' idols) in Iraq. And she was the cause of their demise to a great extent, though Sunni scholars repudiate, as always, incidents liable to bring about controversies.

Historically, Ayesha sided with the Umayyad governor of Damascus (Muawea ibn Abi Sufiane)<sup>13</sup> against Caliph Ali simply because of the "ifk" affair Ayesha quotes above. When Prophet Muhammad asked Ali (his cousin and son-in-law) his opinion regarding the "lie", Ali replied: "You can take another wife. And ask her maid; she'll tell you the truth." Which reply Ayesha interpreted as him believing she had an affair with Safwan. It was God's verses (in The Light, 24:11-16)) that acquitted her against all the odds and saved Muhammad's prophethood in fact.

We have the impression that Rushdie's version of Ayesha's affair forces the reader to believe that something happened between her and Safwan: she remained *behind* on purpose to meet *a man of her age* and return *safe and sound*. The ellipsis in the text plays a major role in providing the doubt that circumvents this affair. Rushdie is not the first to have treated this subject in this way. Shiite movements have used the same invective, Sunni scholars call "Israelite," technique.<sup>14</sup>

Rushdie's Ayesha protests against rules allowing Mahound to have more than one wife, but when it comes to rules exonerating her she does not complain (387). Nothing like this happened with the real Ayesha in Islam, of course. It is true that whenever Muhammad arrives from an expedition with a new wife, or whenever an odalisque (*jarja*) is sent him, it is always Ayesha, as he trusts her much, who "inspects her" and readies her (washing her, combing her hair, etc) for him. Thus she is said to have been the cause of the repudiation, before sexual consummation, of at least two of such women not for very much obvious reasons. Muhammad knew many of her tricks, of course, but always forgave her. Remember that the image of Ayesha depends on which book we read. Read about her in a Shiite book and you will hate her all your life. I almost did, Sunni though I am, when I read about her in al-Yacoubi's very persuasive history book, before I learnt that he was Shiite.

Women's role is quintessential in *The Satanic Verses* as they are seen showing Mahound what to do, presenting him suffering their guiles and, to some extent, shaping the newly-rising faith in the way they want. The novel's women (in the "dreams" episodes) not



only question, but also help deconstruct the “new Faith of Submission” (363) and produce a debilitated prophet.

Once when their quarrelling irritated him he forswore them all for a month. When he went to see ‘Ayesha’ after twenty-nine nights she teased him for not having been able to stay away. ‘That month was only twenty-nine days long,’ he replied. Once he was caught with ‘Mary the Copt’ by ‘Hafsah’, in ‘Hafsah’s’ quarters and on ‘Ayesha’s’ day. He begged ‘Hafsah’ not to tell ‘Ayesha’, with whom he had fallen in love; but she told her anyway and Baal had to stay away from ‘Mary’ of the fair skin and curly hair for quite a time after that. (384)

This is exactly what happened to Prophet Muhammad. He never lies, but “begged” Hafsah to lie (“not to tell Ayesha”), but she did tell her. And verses again (in surats al-Tahreem/Banning and al-Ahzab/The Clans) came to mend things and help Prophet Muhammad regain his power at home.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars gave another reason why Muhammad forswore all his spouses for a month. Meccans dominated their women. But when they moved to Medina/Yathrib (called hijrah/flight), they found that women dominated men. So, Meccan women started learning from Medina’s until one day Umar ibn al-Kattab (future second caliph) felt irritated when his wife contravened him. “Why are you irritated,” she said? “Prophet Muhammad’s wives disobey him and sometimes leave him at night.” As his daughter “Hafsah” was one of Muhammad’s spouses, Umar went straight to her and learnt that she disobeyed her husband and sometimes left him at night, like the rest of his wives. Umar gathered Muhammad’s wives and admonished them for irritating the Prophet. It was because of their acts of disobedience, in addition to jealousy and need, that Muhammad decided to forswear them all for a month (or twenty-nine days). Then two verses (in surat al-Ahzab: 33:28-29) came to make his spouses choose between “divorce and the glitter of Life” and “Allah, His Messenger, and Afterlife.” They all chose to stay with him.<sup>16</sup>

Fleeing the revenge of the victorious former exile Mahound, the poet Baal finds refuge in Jahilia’s most renowned brothel, called “The Curtain,” and gets disguised as one of the eunuch’s bodyguards for a number of years. The people of Jahilia, including his wife Hind, are not only displeased with their Grandee Abu Simbel surrendering the city peacefully to Mahound, but also accusing him of betraying their cause. Neither are they pleased with Mahound’s severe rules and restrictions. They look with nostalgia at their former hedonistic life in the city. Soon the brothel grows more popular as a place of lust and expression. And when the prostitutes adopt the names of the prophet’s wives and ask Baal to marry them, Baal (Semitic god of fertility, but also a false god) promotes himself as the anti-Mahound/Muhammad character, just as the brothel/“The Curtain” is the anti-mosque image (383) or the tarnished image of Muhammad’s chaste home.

The fifteen-year-old whole ‘Ayesha’ was the most popular with the paying public, just as her namesake was with Mahound, and like the Ayesha who was living chastely in her apartment in the harem quarters of the great mosque at Yathrib, this Jahilian Ayesha began to be jealous of her preeminent status of Best Beloved. She resented it when any of her ‘sisters’ seemed to be experiencing an increase in visitors, or receiving exceptionally generous tips. The oldest, fattest whore, who had taken the name of ‘Sawdah’, would tell her visitors [...] the story of how Mahound had married her and Ayesha, on the same day, when Ayesha was just a child.’ In the two of us,’ she would say, exciting men terribly, ‘he found the two halves of his dead first wife: the child, and the mother, too.’ The whole ‘Hafsah’ grew as hot-tempered as her namesake, and as the twelve entered into the spirit of their roles the alliances in the brothel came to mirror the political cliques at the Yathrib mosque; ‘Ayesha’ and ‘Hafsah,’ for example, engaged in constant, petty rivalries against the two haughtiest whores [...] ‘Umm Salamah the Makhzumite’ and, snootiest of all, ‘Ramlah’, whore namesake, the eleventh wife of Mahound, was the daughter of Abu Simbel and Hind. And there was a ‘Zainab bint Jahsh’, and a ‘Juwairiyah’, named after the bride captured on a military expedition, and a ‘Rehana the Jew’, a ‘Safia’ and a ‘Maimunah’, and, most erotic of all the whores, who knew tricks she refused to teach to competitive ‘Ayesha’: the

glamorous Egyptian, 'Mary the Copt'. Strangest of all was the whore who had taken the name of 'Zainab bint Khuzaimah', knowing that this wife of Mahound had recently died. (381-82)

The list of Muhammad's spouses, by order of marriage, is as follows: Sawdah bint Zom'a (after the death of her husband and cousin in Ethiopia/ Habasha); Ayesha bint Abi Baker; Hafsa bint Umar (in 3 H/624 CE, was hot-tempered, as Rushdie says, Muhammad is said to have divorced, then remarried, her); Zainab bint Khuzaimah (in 4 H/625 CE, spent a few months with Muhammad then died); Um Salamah al-Makhzumiya (in 4 H/625 CE); Ramlah bint Abi Sufiane (in 5 H, after the death of her apostate husband Ubeid Allah ibn Jahsh); Zainab bint Jahsh (in 5 H/626 CE, after having been divorced by his valet Zeid ibn Harithah); Juwairah (or Juwairiyah) bint al-Harith (in 6 H/627 CE); Safiah bint Yahia (in 7 H/628 CE); Meimunah bint al-Harith (in 7 H/628 CE); Raihanah bint Amroe (won her in 5 H/626 CE during Beni Quraidhah expedition, then married her); Mary the Copt (Um Ibrahim, she was offered him in 8 H/629 CE by the ruler of Egypt)

If Um Salamah al-Makhzumiya (or the Makhzumite) and Ramlah bint Abi Sufiane<sup>17</sup> were the "haughtiest" and "snootiest" of all Muhammad's wives, as is reported in Islamic tradition, that is because the first told Umar, the day he rebuked the Prophet's wives for disobeying their husband, that Muhammad could have "admonished his wives himself" and kind of drove him to retreat; while the second, daughter of Abu Sufiane (grandee of Quraish) and Hind (eater of Hamza's liver), is said to have refused to let her visiting father (in 8 H/629 CE, to seek a truce) sit on her bed: "It's the Messenger's bed, and you're a sullied polytheist."<sup>18</sup>

Muslims are classified into three major categories: (1) Islamists, or conservative fundamentalists Rushdie calls "tribes of clerics;"<sup>19</sup> (2) practicing Muslims who have nothing to do with Islamism and fundamentalism; and (3) non-practicing Muslims, whom Rushdie calls the "great mass of ordinary, decent, fair-minded Muslims."<sup>20</sup> Many of the last-group Muslims are, according to Islamic criteria, blasphemous; no longer respectful of God, Prophet Muhammad, and his wives, let alone praying and fasting in Ramadan. They treat Muhammad as "a bon vivant,"/a jovial fellow, who liked women and forbade abstinence, and do not even consider themselves apostates.

To the first group, Rushdie is a *heresiarch*; that is both *apostate* and *schismatic*. The immediate effect of his novel, even for those who learned about its contents from the media, is that it adds fuel to the fire and confirms the third category listed above in their reluctance or uncertainty. And as I said above, Rushdie is not the first to have defected from Islam to hold a view at variance with the recognized tenets of his "former religion" (heresy). Many were like him, including Egyptian Nobel Prize-winner Najib Mahfouz who was almost killed in 1994 not for defending freedom of expression immediately after the Rushdie affair (2 March 1989), but for a novel (*Ouled Haritna*/Children of Our Quarter) he published in 1959 and in which he was more satirical of Islam than Rushdie. Shortly after the eruption of Rushdie affair, Sheikh Umar Abderrahman of al-Azhar University (plotter of the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993) issued a *fatwa* treating Mahfouz of apostasy and pointing out that had Mahfouz been sentenced to death the day *Ouled Haritna* was published, Rushdie would have learnt the lesson.

Some of the Quranic verses had been of Umar in Khattab's formulation. The Prophet's wives remember very well how verse 5 of surat al-Tahreem/The Banning (66:5), related to his admonishing them for hurting their husband, repeats Umar's own words. Needless to point out that the verse serves Prophet Muhammad:

It may be, if he divorced you (all), that Allah will give him in exchange consorts better than you,- who submit (their wills), who believe, who are devout, who turn to Allah in repentance, who worship (in humility), who travel (for Faith) and fast,- previously married or virgins (66:5).

As canonical compilers Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870), Abu Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (824-892), and Ahmed ibn Musa ibn Mardawayh (935-1020) have pointed out, Caliph Umar is credited for having formulated the following verses:

- “and take ye the station of Abraham as a place of prayer” (The Cow, 2:125)
- “Whoever is an enemy to Allah and His angels and apostles, to Gabriel and Michael,- Lo! Allah is an enemy to those who reject Faith” (The Cow, 2:98)
- “And when ye ask (his/the Prophet’s ladies) for anything ye want, ask them from before a screen: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs” (The Clans, 33:53)
- “So blessed be Allah, the best to create!” (The Believers, 23:14)<sup>21</sup>

Other believers or disciples found their opinions revealed to Prophet Muhammad as verses. The expression closing the verses absolving Ayesha from the “ifk” affair (The Light, 24:11-16) is Saad ibn Ma’adh’s (“this is a most serious slander!”).<sup>22</sup> Verse 144 of Surat Al-Imran was Mus’ab ibn Umeir’s. He kept holding Muhammad’s banner in Uhud war and saying what was to become a revealed verse as he saw his arms chopped off one after the other.<sup>23</sup> And when one of the disciples’ wives asked, in the same war, about Prophet Muhammad’s health and was told that he was alive she said part three of verse 140 of Surat Al-Imran: “that He may take to Himself from your ranks Martyr-witnesses (to Truth)” (Al-Imran, 3:140).

The day Prophet Muhammad won Mecca (8 H/ 629 CE), he proclaimed peace for all except six (two women and four men) he ordered them killed “even if they were found clung to Kaaba’s curtains.” These were Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh (one of Prophet Muhammad’s scribes who declared apostasy and whose foster-brother Othman interceded for him), Abdullah ibn Khatal (another of the Prophet’s scribes who apostatized; he had two songstresses who slandered Muhammad, one was killed and the other sought protection and survived), Ikrima ibn Abi Jahl (escaped to Yemen until his wife sought protection for him), and Maqis ibn Sababa (killed, for slaying his brother’s slayer after having received a compensation and for apostatizing).<sup>24</sup>

The tale of Salman Farsi’s apostasy in *The Satanic Verses* reproduces almost literally Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh’s apostasy. Prophet Muhammad had 42 scribes, three of whom apostatized. Of the three apostate-scribes, Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh was the only one who embraced Islam again and became a devout Muslim. But reports of the reasons why he apostatized remained not only disconcerting, but also food for thought.

Salman Farsi (Mahound’s scribe) explains the reason of his apostasy as follows:

... when he [Salman] sat at the prophet’s feet, writing down rules rules rules, he began, surreptitiously, to change things.

‘Little things at first. If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as *all-hearing, all-knowing*, 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... So I had to go on doing it. May be he’d just missed out once, I thought, anybody can make a mistake... So the next time I changed a bigger thing. He said *Christian*, I wrote down *Jew*. He’d notice that surely; how could he not? But when I read him the chapter he nodded and thanked me politely, and I went out of his tent with tears in my eyes... There is no bitterness like that of a man who finds out he has been believing in a ghost. I would fall, I knew, but he would fall with me. So I went on with my devilment, changing verses, until one day I read my lines to him and saw him frown and shake his head as if to clear his mind, and then nod his approval slowly, but with a little doubt. I knew I’d reached the edge, and that the next time I rewrote the Book he’d know everything. (367-368)

Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh (Prophet Muhammad’s scribe) is reported to have revealed the following reasons why he defected from Islam:

One day the Prophet recited ‘Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then we made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then we developed out of it another creature’ (The Believers, 23:14). When he finished, I said “So blessed be Allah, the best to create!,” and the Prophet said “write it down, for thus has been revealed.” I wrote it down, but I grew suspicious. So I said: If Muhammad gets revelations, I get revelations too. If he is a liar, I’m just writing down what he says. I directed Muhammad wherever I wanted. Whenever he recited ‘*all-mighty, all-wise,*’ I said ‘or *all-knowing, all-wise,*’ and he said ‘yes, all the same.’ And whatever I add, he says ‘write it down, for thus has been revealed.’<sup>25</sup>

Rushdie’s suspicion has, therefore, all the elements of being justified, as even some of the Prophets’ scribes felt suspicious and apostatized. But because Abdullah ibn Saad’s revelations did not counterpoise the miracles they have witnessed, early disciples and scholars disparaged them as “forgeries” and centered their interest on compiling the “reasons of revelation” (*Asbab al-Nuzul*) and the chains of transmission and narration (*Isnad*), leaving authentication to later exegetes.<sup>26</sup> In spite of some canonical scholars’ effort to prove the contrary in a mesh of arguments, Abdullah ibn Saad’s apostasy seems to have really happened.

Many of Muhammad’s personal “wishes” got confirmed by divine verses. In Rushdie’s terms, Muhammad formulated the verse then asked Gibreel to confirm it in a revelation. The story of his cousin Zainab bint Jahsh is the kind of story that can never be forgotten, of course, as The Holy Quran talks of it. She was the wife of his valet and adopted son Zeid ibn Harithah. She was beautiful, generous, but always quarrelling with her husband in the year or so she spent with him. Whenever Zeid complains to Muhammad, the latter admonishes him to keep his wife while in reality, which God reveals in the famous verse 37 of surat al-Ahzab/The Clans, he wants her divorced to wed her himself. God’s verse marries her to him (*zawwajnakaha*/We joined her in marriage to thee) to serve as a precedent for believers to marry the former wives of their adopted sons.

*falamma qadha Zeidun minha watara zawwajnakaha likeila yakuna alal muomineena harajun fi azwaji ad'iaihim idha qadhau minhunna watera wa kana amrul lahi maf'ula/* Then when Zeid had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality), We joined her in marriage to thee: in order that (in future) there may be no difficulty to the Believers in (the matter of) marriage with the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality) (their marriage) with them. And Allah’s command must be fulfilled (al-Ahzab/The Clans, 33:37)

Zainab is quoted to pride herself on having been married to the Prophet by God from above seven skies, just as Ayesha is quoted to pride herself on having been exonerated by God. Many of Muhammad’s contemporaneous Muslims did not swallow the idea of him marrying his adopted son’s former wife, in spite of the verse, particularly that it was Zeid who was sent, after her period of waiting or *iddat*, to ask her hand for her cousin the Prophet.<sup>27</sup>

If we assume that such things happen and that there is nothing wrong, then we have to admit that Muhammad should be treated as a human being, as Rushdie insists.<sup>28</sup>

That some of the verses were “verses of convenience,” or at least looked like verses of convenience and brought about controversies among Muslim scholars, cannot be denied. Such “ambiguities” led many in the years following Prophet Muhammad’s death to declare themselves “prophets,” as is explained in the section about heresy, or found their own sects with their own Quran (as was the case with the Druze). But questioning or distorting the basics of a faith, of what has grown as “certainty,” needs a courage that equates the Jihadist courage, where posterity is seen more important than “the ruination of one’s life.” Hence Rushdie resorts to fiction, to the “dream stratagem,” to the unlimited power of language.

[L]iterature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds; and, because it is in its origin the schismatic Other of the sacred (and authorless) text, so it is also the art most likely to fill our god-shaped holes...

The writer who does not challenge the beliefs and prejudices of the reader is generally viewed by the literary establishment as dull if not cowardly.<sup>29</sup>

As Rushdie claims, and as critics did not fail to point out, the novel attacks certainties and absolute truths. "Transgressive aesthetics" is the novel's currency.<sup>30</sup> It is implied that "the Prophet's message was a little too worldly, and too subject to opportunistic policy adjustments, to have been divinely inspired."<sup>31</sup> The day of archangels, Farishtas, exceptions, and revelations is gone, "if indeed they ever existed at all outside of the minds of the believers and those who would exploit that belief to their advantage."<sup>32</sup> In this sense, absolute truth or a received doctrine is like a totalitarian system; and women in fundamentalist Islam are like prostitutes in a brothel. There is, therefore, in "The Curtain" episodes, and in its prostitutes' conduct and adoption of the prophet's wives' names, a rebellion against their "received" ideology.

If we reckon that there is a difference between writing a novel that hurts some people and writing to hurt people, then maybe Rushdie did not mean to be inflammatory and derisive. In his defense of Salman Rushdie, Edward Said states, which I repeat here to illustrate my point, that Rushdie "writes in and for the West. It is the fate of hybrids and immigrants, that fate too is part of this contemporary world: to leave no pure, unsullied, unmixed essence to which some of us can return whether that essence is pure Islam, pure Christianity, pure Judaism, or Easternism, Americanism, Westernism."<sup>33</sup> To be part of the crowd, of the storm, Rushdie believes, one has to "challenge certainties." The novel's revelation plot is no more than a reading; a reflection on what he calls the "ambiguous" episodes and "holes" in Islamic tradition.

Salman Rushdie is "set[ting] his words against the Words of God (387)," just as Salman Farsi does in the novel. But the novel's Salman repents and saves his head, while Salman Rushdie, who knows that "his blasphemy cannot be forgiven" (374), prefers to continue unrepentantly deriding religion, politics, and culture. Having perhaps learnt from Nietzsche that what is making us fools is not doubt but certainty, Rushdie treats all truths, without distinction, with skepticism. The comment like the one following Jumpy Joshi's soliloquy (exposing his resentment of his friend Hanif Johnson's control of language, 281) is revealing of how language (or "vocabularies of power") is born and shaped. There is a wrestling between the writer and language, not unlike the wrestling between Mahound and Gibreel Farishta (dragging and straining, which precede a revelation), during which newly-"conceived" words/thoughts/ dogmas/truths come to destabilize what is "received." But is it Rushdie's fault if that they do?

Because Hanif Johnson masters not only "the language of desire," which allows him to deflower the seventeen-year-old Mishal Sufyan while Jumpy Joshi fails, but also the "vocabularies of power" ("sociological, socialistic, black-radical, anti-anti-anti-racist, demagogic, oratorical, sermonic," 281). It is because of his control of languages that he dares do what he does, while Jumpy fails even to dare know why he cannot conquer Mishal's heart. Thus the strife between them ends and Jumpy is defeated before reaching Hanif. "Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true" (281); a point that connects with Rushdie's (or Blake's) principle of "firm persuasion" discussed above.

If Hanif's discourse is political, Baal's is literary: a discourse within a discourse. The strife between Baal and Mahound (whose discourse projects the exclusion of poets or versifiers, considered "errant" and, to some interpreters, "atheists" in Islam)<sup>34</sup> is linguistic. Baal nails up his "verses" on the walls of the Kaaba then on the brothel walls to vie with

Mahound's "verses" and infuriate Muslims. Rushdie makes each of Baal and Mahound utter what each considers his sacred verses: poetry for the first, revelation for the second. Baal's role (after growing as a satirist) is "to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" (97).

Just before Mahound's successful return, we see Baal surveying his uselessness and failed art. His verses are full of loss. He sees his world of language drifting away. The landscape of his poetry grows desert, abstract. Loss "led him to create chimeras of form, lionheaded goatbodied serpenttailed impossibilities whose shapes felt obliged to change the moment they were set, so that the demotic forced its way into lines of classical purity and images of love were constantly degraded by the intrusion of elements of farce" (370). Isn't Rushdie's "demotic" style forcing its way into lines of classical purity?

Baal is not killed because he dishonours the Prophet's wives, but because he desecrates the religious discourse and "mock[s] the Recitation" (392). His wives are sentenced to death by stoning, not for assuming the identity of the Prophet's wives, but for "the immorality of their lives" (391). "Baal stood face to face with the Prophet, mirror facing image, dark facing light" (391). As he walks towards the ground where he is to be beheaded, he shouts "Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive." Mahound replies: "Writers and whores. I see no difference here" (392). It is as though the Prophet complains about writers' imagination and women's guiles. Each sees his opponent's discourse "prostituting" truth. To Mahound, human imagination or discourse prostitutes the religious narrative. To Baal, religious narratives are prostituting truth. The brothel is Baal's idea; conceived as the "navel" of Jahilia as the Kaaba is the "navel" of the Earth (381). The success of Jahilia after Mahound's departure (hijra) is a success of Baal's enterprise/imagination/freedom of expression at the expense of Mahound's revelation. With Baal executed, only one discourse is left: the religious one. You cannot silence, Rushdie implies, what you do not like. And when Rushdie believes that "where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy" (380), Baal becomes the anti-Mahound image. Dissidence or blasphemy becomes inevitable, which makes sense.

Taking literature literally is what has caused the ravings about *The Satanic Verses*. People, Muslims and non-Muslims, look at the plot of the novel as something infiltrating their lives and shaking their beliefs. In this sense, every book is likely to threaten one's faith and be therefore deemed libelous or blasphemous. Writing is deemed forbidden when it touches on one's taboos; when it crosses the threshold of the ordinary. I join those who connect writing about the ordinary and the accepted with the domain of journalism and reporting; while fiction requires going beyond the conventional and the known.

I have read elsewhere that a novel should be looked at as a terrorist act which kills demons in us and catharizes our sins. Some might argue that *The Satanic Verses* was indeed "a terrorist act" as it brought about the deaths of dozens of people around the world. Gibreel's caustic dreams should be understood as an escape from some form of fury or dejection or helplessness, Gibreel's or Rushdie's, just as Gibreel shooting himself (546) should be understood as Rushdie murdering the character and his associations. A significant ending, in fact.

If crossing the threshold of the conventional towards the world of the fantastic is catharizing, then it is worth being blasphemous. Eating pork is forbidden in Islam. But when one is forced to consume it (for hunger or treatment), one is forgiven (The Table, 5: 3). The right to blaspheme becomes worth defending, just as terrorism, fictive or political, becomes worth defending, as it offers a form of liberation. Calvin's spiritual discipline, R. H. Tawney writes, "made Geneva a city of glass, in which every household lived its life under the supervision of a spiritual police."<sup>35</sup> If Christians are religiously disciplined, that is because the Inquisition, Martin Luther, and Calvin had paved the way for the development of the Puritan

notion, as I said above, of “God within” them. They do not need any other God to show them the right path, to which (Orientalist) Rushdie seems to have adhered. Ordinary Muslims, instead, still find the sanctity of Allah and Prophet Muhammad in the Quran and desecrating it is wreaking havoc with their feelings. Western scholars admit that Islam has never had the equivalent of a European Enlightenment and a Muslim Voltaire. Rushdie is probably the first to have dared to be one and call for subjecting the Quran to criticism with such a tenor.<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of the riots over *The Satanic Verses*, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (1992-1995), al-Qaeda’s masterminded 9/11 attacks (2001), the troubles over Prophet Muhammad’s cartoons (2005), the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the growing Jihadist fatwas, ‘Islam and apostasy’ emerged as one of the main contemporary issues dividing Muslim scholars.

Muslim scholars are seen divided over whether a Muslim can choose a religion other than Islam. In 2007, Ali Joma’a, Egypt’s grand mufti, shocked his co-religionists when he wrote “yes, they can,” in the light of three Quranic verses: (1) “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion” (The Disbelievers, 109:6); (2) “Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve” (The Cave, 18:29); and (3) “There is no compulsion in religion” (The Cow, 2:256).<sup>37</sup> Though the mufti did not fail to demonstrate that deserting Islam is a sin the price of which is eternity in Hell, his view went against the Shia and the four main Sunni schools which argue in support of death for apostates. Joma’a’s scripturally-based view is of course shared by Muslims living in the West as it leaves Islam as a matter between the individual and God.

But pressure of public opinion not only in “apostasy” cases, but also in what is called “lewd” affairs, is driving the authorities as well as hard-line Islamic scholars to take the toughest possible stance. Prominent of such stances is Sheikh Salah Luhaidan’s, Saudi Arabia’s chief justice’s, declaration that “media moguls” are “apostles of depravity” who deserve being killed for broadcasting “lewd” television shows subversive to the faith during the holy month of Ramadan.<sup>38</sup> As most of the “moguls” in question have ties to the ruling family, Luhaidan qualified his words on a television interview: “Such people should only be killed after being tried in a Saudi court and only after being given a chance to mend their ways.”<sup>39</sup> In December 2008, the ruling majority in the Egyptian Parliament introduced a bill incriminating clerics issuing fatwas without the authorities’ permission. While the measure is hailed by al-Azhar (the country’s religious authority), it is demonized by the Muslim Brothers.<sup>40</sup> The puritan Saudi Wahhabites, whose Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, had recently stated that celebrating birthdays is “sinfully unIslamic,” would certainly endorse the Muslim Brothers’ view.<sup>41</sup>

Muslim mainstream scholars, including Saudi prominent rival sheikhs, find such “chilling” fatwas tarnishing Islam and the spirit of tolerance, beside the fact that they often make a mountain out of a molehill. Like beheadings and kidnappings, fatwas are part theatre, a terrorist tool the shock value of which soon fades away.

Let me finish this work with a woman’s dream read on a Saudi TV programme I happened to have watched in 1999 in Saudi Arabia. In the letter, the Saudi woman talked of having dreamt that her son stood between her legs as a husband does and fulfilled her to an imaginable extent. She wanted to know the Sheikh’s interpretation. Congratulations, he said, as he folded the letter. This is a sign of filial devotion. Congratulations, he repeated, that you have a son of this kind. End of the Sheikh’s comment.

In real life, and according to *shari’a*, incest (*nikah al-maharim*) is punished by death (stoning), just like adultery (*zina*). When it is a dream, it is something else, as is explained above. And it even augurs performing Haj when one dreams fornicating with his mother in *Muharram* (one of the Hijri months during which wars were banned).

Isn't this woman's letter similar to Rushdie's fiction, and this woman's dream similar to his? Dreaming something forbidden, unconventional, unethical, taboo. Or perhaps some would say hers is a real dream while his is a forged one. But what if the letter's dream is forged too? What if her dream is a form of "wishful thinking"? It is this ambiguity and this double-standardness that worries readers. Had the woman-dreamer been in the West, the sheikh's interpretation would have been different. Had Rushdie dreamt or published his dream in India, not in the West, the response would have been different. Or perhaps India would not have allowed him to dream or publish his dream at all.

## Notes

[1] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), 365. All Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.

[2] They believe that Gibreel as well as the genii take human shape to do evil in the name of man. To them, Salman Farsi (one of the key characters in *The Satanic Verses*) is one of their sacred symbols and the "bab" that leads to wisdom.

[3] al-Hafidh Ismael ibn Omar Ibn Kathir. *Al-Bidayah wal Nihayah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmya, 1418 H/1997 CE), 14 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, vol. 3, 3.

[4] See also surat al-Isra/The Night Journey (17: 61).

[5] "Satanic verses" is thought to have been thus coined by William Muir in his *The Life of Mohammad from Original Sources* (1923). Rev ed. Ed. T.H. Weir (New York: AMS Press, 1975).

[6] Lat, the feminine for Allah, belonged to Thaqif tribe in Ta'if (near Mecca). It is a white-sculptured rock on which was built a place for worshippers. Uzza, a tree in Nakhlah (between Mecca and Tai'f) over which were placed a monument and curtains, belonged to Kuraish and Beni Kinana tribes. And Manat (in Meshallal, between Mecca and Medina) belonged to Khuzaa, Aus, and Khazraj, from which they started their Haj rites. See Abul Fateh Muhammad ibn Abdelkarim al-Shahrestani, *Al-Milel wal Nihel* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmya, 1413 H/1992 CE), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 3, 557-656; and Abu Muhammad Abdelmalik Ibn Hisham, *Al-Sirah al-Nabawyah libn Hisha*, Commentary by Omar Abdessalem Tedmuri (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1410 H/1990 CE), 4 vols, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, vol. 1, 63, 101-102.

[7] In his *Tafsir*, surat al-Haj, Ibn Kathir quotes Said ibn Jubeir, Abdullah ibn Abbes, Ibn Jarir, Muhammad ibn Kaab al-Qaradhi, Umayya ibn Khaled, Abu Daoud, Qatada, and Ibn Abi Hatem (all of them disciples, followers, or historians) having confirmed this incident. Karen Armstrong speculates that the *gharaniq* were probably Numidian cranes thought to fly higher than any other bird and therefore much like angels. Muhammad was probably giving the Lat, Uzza, and Manat a delicate compliment, without compromising his message. See her *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (London: HarperOne, 1990), 114.

[8] "And their purpose was to tempt thee away from that which We had revealed unto thee, to substitute in our name something quite different; (in that case), behold! they would certainly have made thee (their) friend!/And had We not given thee strength, thou wouldst nearly have inclined to them a little."

[9] "Never did We send an apostle or a prophet before thee, but, when he framed a desire, Satan threw some (vanity) into his desire: but Allah will cancel anything (vain) that Satan throws in, and Allah will confirm (and establish) His Signs: for Allah is full of Knowledge and Wisdom:/That He may make the suggestions thrown in by Satan, but a trial for those in whose hearts is a disease and who are hardened of heart: verily the wrong-doers are in a schism far (from the Truth)."

[10] *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, Surat al-Isra, 17:73-74.

[11] *Al-Bidayah wal-Nihayah*, vol 6, 232-33.

[12] *Al-Bidayah wal Nihayah*, vol. 4, 129-31; and *Sirat ibn Hisham*, vol. 3, 243-49.

[13] Brother of Ramlah bint Abi Sufiane, one of Prophet Muhammad's wives.

[14] See the treatment of Ayesha's affair in the following Shiite reference books: *Tarikh al-Yaacoubi* (Yaacoubi's History) and *Al-Kefi fi Ilm Eddine* (The Appropriate in Theology, by Muhammad ibn Yaacoub al-Kilini).

[15] See *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, surat al-Tahreem, 66:1-3. "O Prophet! Why holdest thou to be forbidden that which Allah has made lawful to thee? Thou seekest to please thy consorts. But Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful./ Allah has already ordained for you, (O men), the dissolution of your oaths (in some cases): and Allah is your Protector, and He is Full of Knowledge and Wisdom./When the Prophet disclosed a matter in confidence to one of his consorts, and she then divulged it (to another), and Allah made it known to him, he confirmed part thereof and repudiated a part. Then when he told her thereof, she said, "Who told thee this? "He said, "He told me Who knows and is well-acquainted (with all things)."

[16] "O Prophet! Say to thy Consorts: "If it be that ye desire the life of this World, and its glitter,- then come! I will provide for your enjoyment and set you free in a handsome manner. /But if ye seek Allah and His



Messenger, and the Home of the Hereafter, verily Allah has prepared for the well-doers amongst you a great reward." Prophet Muhammad started with Ayesha and told her that God had just decided to let his spouses choose quit him if they want to. She chose to stay with him and so did the rest of his wives. *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, surat al-Ahzab, 33:28-29.

[17] She embraced Islam long before her parents.

[18] *Al-Bidayah wal Nihayah*, vol. 4, 224.

[19] Whom Rushdie considers to represent the "contemporary thought police." "Choice Between Dark and Light," *The Observer*, 22 Jan. 1989. These are the people, Anthony Burgess writes in an article for *The Independent* entitled "Islam's Gangster Tactics", who often do not "know directly what they are protesting against." (16 Feb. 1989)

[20] In "In Good faith," in his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 393-414. In "Yes, This Is about Islam," *The New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2001), Rushdie writes: "Most Muslims are not profound Quranic analysts. For a vast number of "believing" Muslim men, "Islam" stands, in a jumbled, half-examined way, not only for the fear of God – the fear more than the love, one suspects – but also for a cluster of customs, opinions and prejudices that include their dietary practices; the sequestration or near-sequestration of "their" women; the sermons delivered by their mullahs of choice; a loathing of modern society in general, riddled as it is with music, godlessness and sex; and a more particularizing loathing (and fear) of the prospect that their own surroundings could be taken over – "Westoxicated" – by the liberal Western way of life."

[21] The Prophet's scribe Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh, as we will see below, claims having said this while writing down the recitation.

[22] The verses absolving Ayesha run as follows: "11. Those who brought forward the lie are a body among yourselves: think it not to be an evil to you; On the contrary it is good for you: to every man among them (will come the punishment) of the sin that he earned, and to him who took on himself the lead among them, will be a penalty grievous. 12. Why did not the believers - men and women - when ye heard of the affair,- put the best construction on it in their own minds and say, "This (charge) is an obvious lie" ? 13. Why did they not bring four witnesses to prove it? When they have not brought the witnesses, such men, in the sight of Allah, (stand forth) themselves as liars! 14. Were it not for the grace and mercy of Allah on you, in this world and the Hereafter, a grievous penalty would have seized you in that ye rushed glibly into this affair. 15. Behold, ye received it on your tongues, and said out of your mouths things of which ye had no knowledge; and ye thought it to be a light matter, while it was most serious in the sight of Allah. 16. And why did ye not, when ye heard it, say? - "It is not right of us to speak of this: Glory to Allah. This is a most serious slander!" (The Light, 24:11-16)

[23] "Muhammad is no more than an apostle: many Were the apostle that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will ye then Turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah. but Allah (on the other hand) will swiftly reward those who (serve Him) with gratitude." (Al-Imran, 3:144)

[24] See *Al-Bidayah wal Nihayah*, vol. 4, 238-239.

[25] Pardoned, Abdullah ibn Saad ibn Abi Sarh embraced Islam again and became governor of Egypt and North Africa during Caliph Othman's rule. He was one of the early Islamisers of North Africa. Though discarded from politics by Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib in 36 H/660 CE, he avoided partisanship in the "dissidence war" (36-40 H/656-660 CE) between Caliph Ali and Muawea ibn abi Sufiane, like many disciples of Prophet Muhammad.

[26] Ibn al-Athir, *Usud Ulghabah fi Ma'arif al-Sahabah* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), vol. 3, 154; Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Quran* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1987), 2 vols., 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 7-21, 82-85; Abu Ja'afar Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami'a ul-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran* (Beirut: Wizarat al-Ma'arif, 1986), vol. 5; Hafiz Zainuddin Abdurrahim al-Iraqi, "Alfiyyat as-Sirat al-Nabawiyyah," in *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hisham* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1998), vol. 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 299.

[27] *Al-Bidayah wal-Nihayah*, vol. 4, 117-118.

[28] "They have turned Muhammad into a perfect being, his life into a perfect life, his revelation into the unambiguous, clear event it originally was not. Powerful taboos have been erected. One may not discuss Muhammad as if he were human, with human virtues and weaknesses." In "In Good faith," in his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 393-414.

[29] "Is Nothing Sacred?," in his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 424.

[30] Rushdie's contribution to literature is seen in his "transgressive aesthetics." See his *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002* (London: Jonathan Capen 2002), 407-42; and Madelena Gozalez, *Fiction After the Fatwa: Salman Rusdhie and the Charm of Catastrophe* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2005).

[31] Aram Bakshian Jr., "The Satanic Verses," *National Review*, 24 March 1989.

[32] Terri Beth Miller, "'It was so, it was not so:' The Clash of Language in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*," *Nebula*, issue 1, 2005, 28.

- [33] "Rushdie and the Whale," *The Observer*, 26 Feb. 1989. Rushdie wrote that one cannot live inside the whale. Outside the whale there is the unceasing storm, the quarrel, the political fiction, material, that is, for the writer. To be part of the crowd, of the storm, one has to "challenge certainties".
- [34] Surat al-Shu'ara/The Poets: 224-226.
- [35] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, (London: Penguin, 1938), 125.
- [36] See Rushdie, "Yes, This Is about Islam," *The New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2001; and Paul Brians, "Notes for Salman Rushdie: *The Satanic Verses*." [www.wsu.edu/~brians/anglophone/satanic\\_verses/contents.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/anglophone/satanic_verses/contents.html) 15 Oct. 2008.
- [37] See "In Death's Shadow," *The Economist*, 26 July 2008.
- [38] See "Death to the Media Moguls," *The Economist*, 20 Sept. 2008.
- [39] "Death to the Media Moguls." Luhaidan was dismissed on 14 Feb. 2009.
- [40] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper, 18 Dec. 2008.
- [41] "Death to the Media Moguls." In January 2009, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh declared that 'demonstrations' (in support of Gaza) are unIslamic too. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of al-Jazeera channel issued fatwas calling for severe punishment of homosexuals and pervers (24 March 2001), authorizing Hamas to deploy women to carry out suicide bombings (22 March 2004), boycotting American and Israeli products (14 April 2004), and performing Jihadist activities against Israelis and Israeli targets (29 Dec. 2008). See *The Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2004, vol. XI, n°3.

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