

The Satanic Verses: Narrative Structure and Islamic Doctrine

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Most critics of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* have focused on the novel's treatment of the Islamic religion. In the debate about the book the fact has frequently been overlooked that *The Satanic Verses* is, after all, not a religious tract but a work of fiction. A literary interpretation is therefore indispensable in an attempt to assess *The Satanic Verses*. One would be mistaken, however, in downplaying the religious component in a novel that not only carries a religious reference in its title but abounds with Islamic references and connotations. In its very structure, the novel raises issues that are of cardinal importance from the point of view of Islamic ethics and aesthetics. This essay will discuss these structural elements—particularly the narrative mode and the position of the narrator—with regard to their relationship to Islamic doctrine. These structural elements cannot of course be separated from the novel's narrative content, but their existence is less open to any reinterpretation necessitated by the author's actions or statements outside of the novel's text. They are thus much more clearly indicative of the novel's ideological basis.

The Satanic Verses is for the most part a tour de force describing in frequently exuberant language the realistic, surrealistic, and magic-realistic adventures of two East Indians, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, both of whom temporarily reside in London. The fates of the actor Farishta and the voice imitator Chamcha are thrown together when the plane which is supposed to take them from India to England is hijacked and eventually blown up by religious extremists.

The narrative begins with Farishta and Chamcha falling out of the plane and miraculously surviving not only the explosion, but also a 30,000-foot fall into the sea. Understandably, the experience has a significant affect on the two survivors. Rushdie thus establishes clearly on the first page of the novel that his description of Farishta's and Chamcha's fate does not follow the tradition of photographic realism. A narrative that opens with two characters surviving a free-fall of 30,000 feet clearly depicts a world which does not function according to the rules discovered by natural science. The world of "Proper London, capital of Vilayet"¹ is depicted in a magic realism that includes far more magic than realism, but the city is nevertheless vaguely recognizable as a portrait of the capital of Great Britain. The relationship between the novel's "Proper London" and the actual city of London is essentially the same as that between the country depicted in Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) and the real Pakistan. However, *Shame* identifies itself as allegorical: "Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately,

¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1988) 4.

however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously."²

No such clarification exists in *The Satanic Verses*, however, and the novel consequently enters religiously dangerous territory. Using the mode of magic realism, Rushdie puts his text in opposition to a basic Islamic understanding about creation. A mixture of realism and fantasy in the portrait of the world contradicts the Islamic concept of the world as a unified creation originating *exclusively* with God, whom the Qur'an characterizes as "Regulating and governing all things."³ One has to note, however, that the Islamic cosmology is more comprehensive than what is described by the physical sciences. The literary depiction of ghosts and spirits such as that of Aladdin's lamp is, interestingly enough, compatible with the Islamic world view. The Qur'an speaks repeatedly (most clearly in 15:27 and 55:15) of bodiless beings called Jinn. These spirits live in the world but have no power to alter it or affect anything in it in any way.

An author who in his books creates a world which is in its structure different from the factually experiencable one thus violates a cardinal rule of Islam since, if only in the context of his fiction, he equates himself with God. In a strict religious interpretation, Rushdie thus becomes guilty of *shirk* (Polytheism), the gravest sin in Islam. Consequently, magic realism is anathema in the Islamic view of the world. A narrative thus has to function within the aesthetics of traditional realism and is necessarily received as conforming to them. Therefore, whatever Rushdie describes in the sections that are not denoted as dream sequences—"The Angel Gibreel," "Ellowen Deeowen," "A City Visible but Unseen," "The Angel Azraeel," and "A Wonderful Lamp"—is received as hypothetically possible although not necessarily verifiable.

The Satanic Verses thus presents to its readers a world that is, from the point of view of Islamic doctrine, highly suspect: if the world of the novel is different from the one created by God, who has dared to challenge God's exclusive right to creation? Further questions inevitably follow: what is the significant difference of this fictional world, and what is the position of the fiction—in this case *The Satanic Verses*—to this world?

A comprehensive study of *The Satanic Verses* shows that the novel presents in its text the description of a world in which most values presented by and promoted in the Qur'an are inverted. In fact, the whole novel can be read as an inversion of the Qur'anic text.

The close and problematic relationship of *The Satanic Verses* and the Qur'an shows clearly in the identity of the novel's narrator. In the novel as well as in the Qur'an, the narrator is omniscient and occasionally makes direct statements in the text. The narrator of the Qur'an, who occasionally refers to himself as "I" or "We," is accepted by Muslims to be God. *The Satanic Verses*

² Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, 1984) 70.

³ *The Holy Qur'an*. Trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Qatar: Presidency of Islamic Courts and Affairs. n.d.) 10:3. See also 112:1-4. All Qur'anic references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

corresponds to the Qur'an in this respect. The novel's narrator is not as easily identified, but the text contains some hints that the novel's narrator, too, is the inversion of "the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds" (Qur'an, 1:2).

The first suggestion of the narrator's identity appears in the context of the controversy between Mahound's monotheism and the Jahilian veneration of Al-Lat: "From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. He moves in mysterious ways: men say. Small wonder, then, that women have turned to *me*" (95; emphasis added). The question is, of course, who refers to himself—or herself—as the champion of women against the supposedly chauvinist God who permits a patriarchal interpretation of His rules. In the Qur'an, the basic conflict is that between the forces of Allah and the forces opposed to Him, summarized as the devil. The speaker in the quotation above represents the opposition to Allah and thus, in the Qur'anic context, the devil.

This conclusion is supported by the startling scene (318-19) in which the narrator makes his only personal appearance in the narrative, thus making this passage highly significant for the overall coherence of *The Satanic Verses*. Physically, the apparition closely resembles the photo of Salman Rushdie on the back cover of the book. But there seems to be more than self-irony behind this portrait. The obvious connection between author and appearance makes clear that the reader is here presented as the responsible force behind the narrative. The apparition identifies itself as God, but the novel's Islamic context clearly establishes this statement as a lie: "God said, 'By no means canst thou see Me (direct)'" (Qur'an 7:143). Consequently, the figure on the bed can only be "Neechayvala, the Guy from Underneath" (318)—in English terminology, the devil.

The central role the devil plays in the overall structure of *The Satanic Verses* becomes clear from the narrator's second direct comment: "Don't ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. . . I've been pretty self-controlled up to this point and I don't plan to spoil things now. Don't think I haven't wanted to butt in; I have, plenty of times. And once, it's true, I did. I sat on Alleluia Cone's bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel. *Ooparvala* or *Neechayvala*, he wanted to know, and I didn't enlighten him" (408-09). This passage identifies the devil not only as the narrator of the whole novel but also as the origin of the mysterious revelations in the Mahound dreams. Initially, Mahound correctly identified the source of the confusion (123), but the narrative attempts to dispel this knowledge, and the narrator uses numerous tactics to confuse the reader's insights into the novel's structure, but a careful reader with a background in Islamic cosmology is nevertheless provided with sufficient information to recognize the novel's narrative situation.

The title *The Satanic Verses* thus refers not only to the incident of the mysterious verses revealed in the Mahound dreams, but also to the novel as a whole. The Qur'an, revealed to Muhammad in verse form, can be called "The Divine Verses," and its counterpart, the devil's anti-Qur'anic "revelations" about life, are consequently *The Satanic Verses*.

At the same time, the title refers to an episode in the novel which is emblematic of the fictional world's structure as well as of the novel's intertextual relationships to Qur'anic and historiographic texts. In this episode, *The Satanic Verses* takes up an incident derived from Islamic history. The truthfulness of this historical model is seriously disputed by scholars⁴ and touches upon the very foundations of Islam. Differently from the other historical incidents reworked in the novel—for example the "Battle of the Trench" (365)—the incident of the "satanic verses" appears almost completely unchanged from the historiographic model.

The story of the "satanic verses" is of particular significance for the whole Islamic system of beliefs since it challenges the basic idea of Islam, the Oneness of God. After a direct quotation from sura 53, which establishes the Qur'anic context, *The Satanic Verses* has Mahound receive a curious revelation: "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other? . . . They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed" (114). Through this revelation, God supposedly acknowledges the three deities venerated in pre-Islamic Arabia and contradicts His revelation of sura 112, which declares that there is only one God.

The idea that such a verse would be revealed in clear contradiction to all other revelation defies normal logic, but it can be used to strengthen the doubt of those people who consider the Qur'an a human fabrication and its origins, at best, "opaque."⁵ *The Satanic Verses* further exploits the fact that early Muslim history is not well recorded by suggesting that the prophet Mahound—whom the novel undeniably presents as a representation of Muhammad in this section, even to the point of ascribing direct quotations from the Qur'an to him (114)—not only accepts this absurd revelation but even welcomes it for political reasons. *The Satanic Verses* thus again aims in the opposite direction of the Qur'an, undercutting the position of the prophet instead of supporting it.

More important than the attack on the prophet is the image of God presented in *The Satanic Verses* as a whole and in the Mahound dreams in particular. The narrative suggests that the revelations Gibreel communicates to Mahound are of dubious origin: "Being God's postman is no fun, yaar. Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture. God knows whose postman I've been" (112). The insertion of the absurd verses into the revelation implies that some power other than God participates in the creation of the supposedly divine text. This fact has significant consequences. If another power can modify the revelation, human beings have no guarantee that the Qur'an they are told to obey is in fact the word of God. In this particular instance, Mahound is given correcting verses (124; a direct quotation from the Qur'an, 53:23) and he rejects the interference as the work of the devil (123), but the matter does not rest here. The narrative suggests that Mahound's problem cannot be solved so easily: "Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small

⁴ Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and The Rage of Islam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 38-39.

⁵ Ruthven 37.

detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*" (123). This statement has to be read together with the fictional scribe Salman's undetected changes to the revealed text (367) and the implied notion that Mahound himself may have altered the revelation to suit his personal and political needs (386). Consequently, the episode of the dubious verses raises the question for the authenticity—and thus authority—of the revealed text. God states in the Qur'an itself in no uncertain terms that the text is genuine and incorruptible (15:9; 81:24-25). Since the belief in the Qur'an as the pure word of God forms an essential basis of Islam and of the culture based upon this religion, the Mahound dreams of *The Satanic Verses* constitute an attack on the very basis of a religion-based culture.

The episode of the dubious verses is also a further means of questioning the image of God as all-powerful. The fact that there is apparently no guarantee against such a mysterious insertion suggests that God does not seem to have the power to protect His own revelation. From this suggestion, it is only a small step to the insinuation that the God portrayed in *The Satanic Verses* has no real power at all and can consequently not punish anybody disobeying His rules. In addition, while the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the power of God and His uniqueness, *The Satanic Verses* suggests the opposite by insinuating that there not only exists a divine power other than God, but that this other power—or yet another one—can influence divine revelation. The logical consequence of this message would be to abandon the worship of only one God and start worshipping these other deities as well. The Mahound dreams thus convey a message which is the direct opposite of the crucial rule to "seek refuge with the Lord and Cherisher of Mankind" with which the Qur'an closes (114:1).

The "satanic" point of view as the novel's ideological center becomes an important factor for the construction of a part of the book which at first does not appear to be closely related to religious concerns. It turns out, however, that the novel's peculiar narrative structure is responsible for the remarkable portrait of the immigrant community in London. The most important objective behind the depiction of the events concerning the various characters surrounding the Shaandaar Cafe seems to be to illustrate sketchily the miserable living conditions of the Pakistani immigrants in contemporary Britain. It has been noted, however, that the novel's depiction of the people who suffer from these conditions is curiously slanted: "The book's characterizations of West Indians (like its characterization of women) are often embarrassing and offensive. Although very much at home in the up-market publishing sphere, Rushdie nevertheless plays the role of court satirist too well."⁶ Brennan dismisses these portraits as evidence of Rushdie's insensitivity and as the arrogance of a cultural arriviste. I would argue that these characterizations arise out of the novel's overall premises. While the novel manages to arouse the reader's anger against oppression, it undermines this anger at the same time by ridiculing its victims. The narrative thus creates

⁶ Walter Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 164.

confusion and, more importantly, deflects the reader's opposition to injustice. This tactic fits exactly the reevaluation of traditional moral values we find throughout *The Satanic Verses*. The Qur'an and other religious texts advocate compassion and justice; *The Satanic Verses* parodies such values and thus presents itself as a counter-Qur'an which inverts the values of the Qur'an and, in a wider angle, ridicules the moral values of the whole Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

The final element of the novel's structure to be examined here is the construction of the main protagonist, since *The Satanic Verses'* invective against Islam is most clearly focalized in the character of Gibreel Farishta. Farishta's biography as well as his spiritual development in the novel consist almost exclusively of factors that contradict the basic tenets of Islam. Farishta's name alone connects this character clearly to Islam. Gibreel is the name of the Archangel (Gabriel) who transmitted the Qur'an to Mohammed, and is thus the angel most important for human beings. The word Farishta means, as the novel explains, "angel" (17). Equally full of Islamic connotations is Farishta's original name, Ismail Najmuddin: "Ismail after the child involved in the sacrifice of Ibrahim, and Najmuddin, *star of the faith*" (17).

Having grown up as a Muslim in Bombay, Farishta has become famous as an actor in religious movies, successfully portraying various deities of the Hindu pantheon (16-17). Such a career is in fundamental opposition to Islam in several ways. Islam forbids the representation of human beings and animals.⁷ Farishta's activity is anti-Islamic also because Islam emphasizes a strict monotheism. From an Islamic point of view, the Hindu deities that Farishta portrays are idols whose worship is the worst possible sin (4:48); 4:117). Since Farishta is, at least nominally, a Muslim, he is doubly guilty from an Islamic point of view: for forsaking Islam and for participating in idol-worship. Creating such a protagonist—and, particularly, giving him this name—is quite problematic in an Islamic context but need not be considered "sinful." Such a character might be acceptable from an Islamic point of view if his obvious spiritual confusion were either shown to lead to unmitigated disaster or to be remedied by some—presumably religious—cure. Farishta's paranoid schizophrenia might therefore make his development in the novel more acceptable to Muslim readers, although they might wonder what purpose a novel serves that records the distorted fantasies of the diagnosed insane.

Unfortunately, most of the debate about *The Satanic Verses* has taken place in a context prone to disregard the book's novelistic aspects. Malise Ruthven's study, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam*, has shown why this extraliterary early reception was probably inevitable. As a consequence of this debate—if that is still the appropriate term for a process involving death threats and book burnings—*The Satanic Verses* is now a text indissolubly linked to extraliterary concerns. It cannot be the aim of a literary essay to solve matters of life and death or to determine what an author intended to express with a work of art. The narrative structure of *The Satanic Verses* contains elements which are in radical contrast to Islamic concepts.

⁷ Philip K. Hitti, *Islam: A Way of Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970) 163-64.

From the point of view of contemporary Western thought, such a text is unproblematic. But this novel exists in the same zone of cultural tension from which the characters in the novel suffer. One can only hope for the recognition of *The Satanic Verses* as a work of art which deserves to be appreciated as such, especially since, for example on the linguistic level, *The Satanic Verses* is a success of the foremost order. In none of his previous novels has Rushdie achieved such a wealth of imaginary detail blended with keenly observed facts, such carefully crafted levels of expression, and such a joy of fabulation comparable only to Rabelais and Grass. These artistic aspects of *The Satanic Verses* are far more deserving of critical attention than the novel's religious content. The critical appreciation and examination of *The Satanic Verses* as a work of art will be much more rewarding than the thematic preoccupation that has so far dominated the discussion of the novel.