A Bit of This and a Bit of That: Rushdie’s Newness

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I take criticism so seriously as to believe that, even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for.

Edward W. Said, The World, the Text and the Critic

I

We got drunk, Abdullah and I.

Abdullah, a political activist from back home, started life as a nationalist; for a long time a Marxist, he now described himself as a radical humanist. We were open-mouthed all night, words coming out, booze going in. But I could have got high on the chitchat alone.

The talk came around, via the recent spate of extremist nationalisms in south Asia, to The Satanic Verses. The fatwa was more than a year old, Rushdie’s recantation still to come. “What do you think about the book?” he asked.

I like it very much. Machang, it makes me feel free, more free! No one from our part of the world has done this up to now. Shook a fist back at the mullahs.

“Yes I know. I had the same feeling... Did you write something?”

No.

“Why not?”

I was out of the country at the time.

“What a convenient excuse!” Abdullah grimaced, then looked past me, flourished the scotch bottle. “If we don’t, yaar, the white neo-orientalists will continue to use him and our fundamentalist brothers will keep him quiet. We must boost him, toast him. His kind of guts, I say, who has?”

He stood up. “Here’s to Salman Rushdie,” he proclaimed. “May he live a hundred years!”

Then turned. “And you, you useless motherfucker, write!”

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So, I sat down and thought something.

Question one: What all is the book about?
It is about losing the ground beneath your feet: the place of your birth and the faith of your prophet. (Mostly, the former.)

About the impact of such migration: the loss of identity and certainties, and the search for replacements. It is about the racism of white Britons: towards, mostly, Muslim south Asians. About how — and this is raised, rather than explored — if cultures “leak” into one another, instead of imposing one upon the other as they now do, new and hopefully better cultures, better and more tolerable ways of life, could come into being.

It is an act of faith, a plea for hybridity, a profoundly secular work.

And it is about the loss of faith; specifically, Islam. To that extent it is a critique of faith. And of Islam.

But the thrust of the text is not anti-Islam. The straightjacket variant dominant in some parts of the Muslim world today, fundamentalism, is what bothers Rushdie. Only two scenes in the book deal with contemporary Islam — the description of the exiled imam and of the Indian mystic who took her followers into the sea — and they look at despotic uses of it. The sequences in the book that Muslims justifiably find offensive — where Muhammad is called Mahound, where Mahound and god are compared to businessmen, where Salman the scribe tampers with the holy revelation, where Islam is described as having “damn rules for everything,” the use of the “satanic verses,” most of all where whores take on the names of Muhammad’s wives — should be understood as the why of someone who is unable to believe.

Question two: Who all is the book for?

Did Rushdie write for the West, as many of his critics from the Muslim world would have it? Only for a Western audience? Did he not want the book read elsewhere? Did his themes never reverberate — positively — in other societies?

Yes they did. Hear this cry of an unknown Pakistani, anonymous letter writer to the London Observer at the height of the controversy. “Salman Rushdie speaks for me in The Satanic Verses, and mine is a voice that has not yet found expression in newspaper columns. It is the voice of those who are born Muslims but wish to recant in adulthood, yet are not permitted to do so on pain of death.”

“I know this man,” says Abdullah.

You do?

“Ya. Not the name, the character. I have known him all my life.”

The one who must be anonymous continued. “So we hold our tongues, those of us who doubt. Call it cowardice or hypocrisy, tact or appeasement, we bury our heads in the sand...”

“Then along comes Rushdie and speaks for us. Tells the world that we exist — that we are not simply a mere fabrication of some Jewish conspiracy. He ends our isolation.”
This wretched person is a westernized south Asian. The subcontinent, populated by more than a billion, has a substantial minority of people like him. Like me. Call us what you will — secularists, anti-fundamentalists, humanists. If for no one else, Salman Rushdie at least spoke for us.

And we have been the most silent for the past two years. If we continue thus we may lose the argument, if not the battle, by default.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” interjects Abdullah the unmerciful. “It is high time you explained yourself. Your silence has a price!”

And question three: What to say about the fusspots (who now seem to have won)?

Simply this. I understand their grief, but they are dangerous.

II

One year after Khomeini’s fatwah, Salman defended and described the book, reacted to the controversy thus: “Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.”

The strength of his argument, its newness, lies in his refusal to excuse the ayatullahs of this earth, to make distinctions between the intolerance of the Islamic fundamentalist and that of the white racist. In his insistence that bigotry is bigotry, and must be so identified, whether it comes from the “oppressor,” or from the “oppressed.” Unfashionable, perhaps. Which is why many from the left haven’t defended him. But necessary. Because not to do so would be to valorize oppressed groups, present them as perfect. Whereas the task is to critically scrutinize the oppressed too, perhaps even more carefully.

Salman Rushdie is part of a new and different generation of ex-colonised. The previous generation — its immediate contradiction being with the colonial power — defined itself in opposition to its former masters. Its politics, its generational mission in Franz Fanon’s sense, was to rediscover collective self-respect. That has been more or less done.

We have, this nascent generation, more or less come to terms with our past, have excavated and are excavating it from the dungeons of the orientalist-colonizers. Now, we demand a present, require states and socio-political systems in which we can fulfill ourselves. And are not content with laying the whole blame on imperialism and its legacy, an unfair world system.

We have a complex awareness of our plight. Realize the contribution of colonialism to our present dilemmas — which have been worsened by
neocolonialist economic and other relations. But we are also disturbed, perhaps even more so, by the responsibility of our own ruling classes for our distress. For this — even at the risk of being used by the neo-imperialists — we are not prepared to apologise.

Abdullah the activist feels strongly on the subject. "Say that after being fucked-up by the colonialists we are fed up of being fucked-up by our own. This is the question! Are we to react to the ayatullahs with polite language? With please and excuse me sir? With but-with-all-due-respect-I-must-humbly-disagree?"

A fundamentalist sampler from south Asia:

As a result of violent clashes with the region's majority Tamils in 1985, the minority Muslims of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka established militias for their self-defense. (Muslims are seven per cent the population of the island, but form a third of the populace of the east.) Naseer, 23, was leader of one such group, called Hizb-al-Islam. I met him after yet another Tamil-Muslim bloodfest and asked what his organisation stood for.

He looked me in the face, said without the slightest taint of irony: "We will work to achieve an Islamic state in Sri Lanka. Even if it takes us one thousand years."

"This man is no laughing matter," says Abdullah, suppressing a smile. "He is the deadly serious type."

In Rajiv Gandhi's Congress-must-be-careful-not-to-upset-the-Muslim-vote India, Shahbano, a divorced Muslim woman, sued her ex-husband for alimony (not permissible under Muslim law). The Indian Supreme Court, in April 1985, granted her request; and the Congress, party — remember — of the great secularists Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, accepted the Court's decision. At a by-election held shortly after, Rajiv Gandhi's party was routed — because the Muslims defected to the opposition. The nervous Prime Minister, grandson of Nehru, promptly passed a bill bringing Muslim marriage laws — in a secular state, yaar — more in keeping with the sharia. And put Muslim women, according to one commentator, once more at "the mercy of the[ir] male relatives." When Hindu fundamentalists tried to exploit her case, Shahbano herself, under pressure from her own kind — Muslims, not women — recanted and denounced the Supreme Court judgement.

Asks Abdullah: "And they want us to treat such people sympathetically?"

In Pakistan ruled by Zia al-Haq, in 1404 A.H., Safia Bibi, a blind girl, was raped by two men. She took them to court but failed to prove her case since, being blind, she could not identify her violators. In the course of the rape, one of the men had made her pregnant. Bibi was subsequently tried for adultery, found guilty, and sentenced to death by stoning.
“They are asking us to defend these bastards?” Abdullah is angry, sounding tough. The emotion does not come from scotch alone.

In Saudi Arabia. In Malaysia. In Iran.... Nearly always without the consent of the people, fundamentalists in many parts of the Muslim world dictate the terms and conditions of life. So many from this world wonder, like the Jordanian writer Fadia Faqir, who asked at the end of her reaction to The Satanic Verses: “Is exile the only answer to the resurgence of Islam?”

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Yes, Salman Rushdie, living in the west, has written a book “attacking” Islam. Yes, the book appears at the resurgence, during a new round of the “ancient and bitter” battle between the Christian west and Islam. And yes, the book, and the reaction to it in some parts of the Muslim world, have been used by the west as “evidence” against Islam.

BUT...

In the name of all that is holy, how can you defend something you do not believe in? (Even if, or simply because, it is under attack by something else that attacks you too.) This is a question of paramount immediacy to at least some of us from the Muslim world who feel affronted and disgusted, if not suppressed, not only by neo-colonialism and Orientalism but — perhaps even more so — by a step-child of it, Islamic fundamentalism.

“The enemy of the enemy is not a friend. That is the point!” Abdullah slaps his hands, gets rhetorical. “When do we take on the long beards? After they have triumphed? When we are all dead? Are we going to allow them to stop us before we even think, let alone speak?”

The point is that one can defend Rushdie without also defending the Orientalists; it is possible, while challenging Orientalism, to challenge fundamentalism as well. Dangerous, but possible; even imperative.

Scotchbottled, Abdullah is getting impatient. “Come to the point,” he says, a little shrilly. “Tell them what Salman has made possible. He has opened for us so many doors that we will not allow to be closed again. Write that we can’t and won’t and shan’t be defending this new, fascist Islam any more. They must learn to tolerate dissent, disbelief.”

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Its controversial reception must not make us feel that The Satanic Verses is an arrow aimed at the heart of fundamentalist Islam. More vehemently, most of the book is a fictional response to white (British) racism.

Many scenes in the book depict the way non-whites are treated in Britain and point to Rushdie’s anger with white British society. An anger that has been (conveniently?) overlooked by many of his western critics.
A deep and searing anger against a society that does not allow, to use Raymond Williams’ phrase, “equality of access” to its colored citizens.

If some western commentators ignore this side of the book in their eagerness to taunt Islam with it, the fault is not Rushdie’s. It is part of the danger of daring to be new that one will be used by people with other agendas. (Witness, for instance, Fay Weldon’s writings on the affair.) Therefore, Rushdie’s Orientalist (ex-?) supporters must be confronted with other readings of The Satanic Verses.

“I will thrust other interpretations on them — in their faces if necessary,” says Abdullah the insistent.

Like that of Homi Bhabha, who wrote at the beginning of the controversy: “those of us who have experienced the authoritarian and patriarchal conditions of orthodox communities, of any color or creed, and have witnessed their attempts to stifle dissent and discussion, can never endorse demands for censorship and unquestioned conformity. Such quiescence serves and preserves the traditional hierarchies of power and knowledge. So where do we turn, we who see the limits of liberalism and fear the absolutist demands of fundamentalism?”

Among a few others, we must turn to the Rushdie of The Satanic Verses, who staked new ground: dared ask new questions, did the unfashionable, attacked the oppressed. We turn back to the question of newness.

Abdullah has begun to cheer. “The slowcoach is getting there at last,” he smiles, and goes in search of ice.

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Midway through the book, Rushdie describes what he means by newness. His prescription for Britain is that it must learn, borrow, grab from India (India serving here as a metaphor for the tricontinental, the ex-colonies). Fed up with dull, desultory, dead Britain, with London, Gibreel Farishta wants to give it life by tropicalizing it, by igniting the town red with chillie powder, to give London the following gifts:

- increased moral definition, institution of a national siesta, development of vivid and expansive patterns of behavior among the populace...new birds in the trees (macaws, peacocks, cockatoos), new trees under the birds...the traditional and soulless English commitment to 'high workrate' having been rendered obsolete by the heat. Religious fervor, political ferment, renewal of interest in the intelligentsia. No more British reserve; hot-water bottles to be banished forever, replaced in the foetid nights by the making of slow and odorous love. Emergence of new social values: friends to commence dropping in on one another without making appointments, closure
of old folks’ homes, emphasis on the extended family. Spicier food; the use of water as well as paper in English toilets; the joy of running fully dressed through the first rains of the monsoon

As Bhabha argues, in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie “redefines[s] the boundaries of the western nation... [And] suggests that it is only through dissemiNation — of meaning, time, people, cultural boundaries and historical traditions — that the radical alterity of the national culture will create new forms of living...”

However, as Rushdie wrote during the controversy, many British Muslims fear intermingling, hybridity. They have been defended by, among others, Talal Asad who says that the “frightening thing about the Rushdie affair for the British liberal elite is the existence of political activity by a small population that seeks authority for its difference in its own historical, religious traditions.”

Yes, but such a move to remain within the ghetto is frightening to non-liberals, too. To quote Bhabha again: “Encouraging the separate development of ethnic identities is easy. It’s also much safer than providing a platform for the formation of a collective, political will that seeks to question and redefine — from the minority position — the rationalities and priorities of a socialist tradition...”

The *Satanic Verses* debate, you see, cannot be framed as a battle between the forces of secular liberalism and of religion (or religious fundamentalism). Rushdie attempts to go beyond that, has a new, mongrel vision of culture and society; one that both the liberals and the fundamentalists would deny. In the battle to bring about this new society, the liberals and the fundamentalists are on the same side, for both fear the loss of their faiths, their certainties.

III

Abdullah, these days, is long-faced. He hasn’t recovered from Rushdie’s recantation. “They have won,” he says. But it is, at best, a temporary victory for the fundamentalists. For the battle has not ended. *The Satanic Verses*, the book and the controversy, forms but one round in the struggle to envision, if not create, different and more equitable ways of life.

Salman Rushdie, now, seems to have become a victim of the very orthodoxy he critiqued. Ironically enough, *The Satanic Verses* opened doors for others but closed them for Rushdie himself.

To Bhabha, the tragedy of the Rushdie affair “is that we haven’t found the place from which to pose our different questions in a spirit of criticism and solidarity.” But we must keep trying, must walk through the doors, try to find the place, the space, to continue the debate.
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