

Features

Satanic Verses

Even the most self-effacing of those of us who write to be published would admit to the hope that something at least of what we write might affect others' thinking, elicit a response, even, for some, begin a Great Debate.... or be quoted by someone else (a footnote would do?), or become compulsory reading for a generation of students. There is no end to what notoriety or fame a scholar might achieve, although these secret thoughts cannot be made explicit, for fear of being thought too passionate in our rationality, or too ambitious for public recognition.

Even in our most deluded moments however, we do not think that it is likely that our words will ever send thousands on to the streets in protest, or be a matter of life and death in a number of disparate cultures. We of but moderate ambition are profoundly shocked and puzzled by a response such as that directed towards Salman Rushdie on the publication of his

latest novel. As students and scholars of religions, we might not want to think that the power of myth (so 'easily' analysed in this treatise and that) might be responsible. Or is it nothing to do with myth at all, or history, but the politicising of religious ideas? Or is it that we do not understand sufficiently well any of the issues involved and merely make guesses, or indulge in patronising shock-horror commentaries before retreating to some task we can manage without too much anxiety?

In the likelihood that it is the latter that is more the truth, I have asked Professor Tony Johns of the ANU to write a short Feature article on some of the dream sequences in Rushdie's novel so that we understand better the cultural background of Islam and its great scripture and tradition, and the problem of satire in relation to the Sacred..

— The Editor

Notes on 'Islamic' Elements in *Satanic Verses*

Mahound is in his Paradise above the Evening Star

(*Don John of Austria is going to the war*)

He move a mighty turban on the timeless hour's knees

His turban that is woven of the sunsets and the seas.

— G. K. Chesterton.

Mahound, a name used to refer to Muhammad in medieval Europe, appears to great effect in Chesterton's

rambunctious poem, *The Battle of Lepanto*. Salman Rushdie has taken advantage of its connotations in his novel *Satanic Verses*, during the dream sequences which his protagonist Gibreel is present at, and reports on, scenes and events associated with the life of the prophet Muhammad in the city of Jahilia. Since Jahilia (ignorance) is the term used to describe Arabia prior to the mission of Muhammad, it is not difficult to identify it with Mecca.

The work has an elaborate contrapuntal structure, the bass line of which is provided by these dream sequences. Such a counterpoint is suggested by the title itself, which evokes meanings on a number of levels. As the title of a book, it is ambiguous and intriguing in its own right. but alongside its undefined resonances it has a specific referent: an incident which early Muslim biographers of Muhammad report as occurring in Mecca around 615. While the prophet was suffering deeply as a result of the insults and rejection of his fellow townsmen in Mecca, some of whom were urging him not to abandon totally their ancestral beliefs, the following verses of chapter 53 of the Qur'an, The Star, were revealed to him. They are verses that assert the genuineness of his claim to be a prophet:

1. By the Star when it sets,
2. Your fellow townsman (i.e. Muhammad) is not in error, nor is he deceived:
3. Nor does he speak on impulse.
4. It is nothing other than an inspiration revealed to him.

A number of verses later, the Revelation utters the rhetorical question

- 19 Have you reflected on Al-Lat,
Al-'Uzza
- 20 And Manat, the third of them?
(i.e.. three goddesses revered at Mecca).

A question which the Revelation allegedly answered:

They are exalted cranes (high flying birds) whose intercession may be hoped for.

This answer was seen by Muhammad's fellow Meccans as a compromise that allowed a place in the new religion for older cult practices. They would accept belief in one God, provided that the power of the goddesses in their cult to intercede for them was recognized. As a result of the recognition given by these verses, persecution of Muhammad and his followers ceased.

Later, however, Muhammad realized that the compromise had been engineered by Satan, and these verses of compromise, subsequently known as the Satanic Verses, were expunged from the Qur'an, and replaced by one of genuine inspiration

- 21 Are you to have male offspring and
He females?

scorning the Meccans who were anxious to have sons for themselves, but were happy to attribute to God daughters, who might intercede for them.

The majority of modern Muslims deny that the incident ever occurred. On *a priori* grounds they regard it as unthinkable that Satan should have the power to interfere with the divine inspiration, or that Muhammad might have compromised with his opponents in this way. Earlier exegetes however held other views: that Muhammad did compromise, that the verses were uttered by Satan, imitating his voice; or Satan made use of Muhammad's longing to convert his fellow tribesmen to prompt him to utter them, or simply made the Quraysh to hear them, without Muhammad even having uttered them.

This then is the referent of the title. But the book is a novel, not history or biography, and the characters and events that it weaves and permutes, whatever

their status in narratives about the life of the prophet, are symbols generated in the author's mind to communicate his own experience and comment on life: that mankind tends naturally to deceive, that sincerity may be mixed with insincerity even when God is called on as guarantor, and that even the purest resolve may be lured into compromise. Such ideas are the infrastructure of the book, and the symbols that express them appear indeed to derive from a transmogrification of events in the traditional accounts of Muhammad.

Another example of such a transmogrification is based on an incident related to the compilation of the Qur'an. It pertains to chapter 23, The Believers. The text reads:

- 12 Truly we fashioned man from finest clay
- 13 Then placed him as a drop of semen in a secure abode
- 14 Then fashioned the drop into a clot of blood, then fashioned the clot into a congealed mass, then fashioned the congealed mass into a bone, then clothed the bone with flesh, then made it a new creation, Blessed then be God, the best of Creators.

It is reported that one of Muhammad's scribes, Abdullah b. Abi Sarh, having listened to and written out these verses down to the words "then made it a new creation" exclaimed in wonderment "Blessed then be God, the Best of Creators", and Muhammad accepted these words of Abdullah as part of the revelation.

It is this incident that Rushdie has developed in his account of Salman, another character in Gibreel's dream who,

disturbed by the spate of rules pouring out of Mahound's mouth, begins to notice how "useful and well-timed the angel's revelations tended to be", an observation based on a saying attributed to Muhammad's wife Ayesha. Salman has become one of Mahound's scribes. To test his genuineness, he begins to make changes in his record of the words recited by the prophet when revelation came upon him:

"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 re-writing, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry.... I was writing the Revelation, and nobody was noticing... I was sadder than I've ever been... I went out of my tent with tears in my eyes... there is no bitterness like that of a man who finds out he's been believing in a ghost."

Salman left Mahound as did Abdullah Muhammad. Abdullah in fact was on a list of those due for execution when Muhammad returned to Mecca in triumph, but was spared on the pleading of Uthman, whose foster brother he was. In the novel, Salman makes an obsequious submission which Mahound magnanimously accepts.

It is not difficult to see in the elaboration of such episodes, the cry of

anguish of one whose faith in the wisdom, genius or inspiration of another appears to have been deceived.

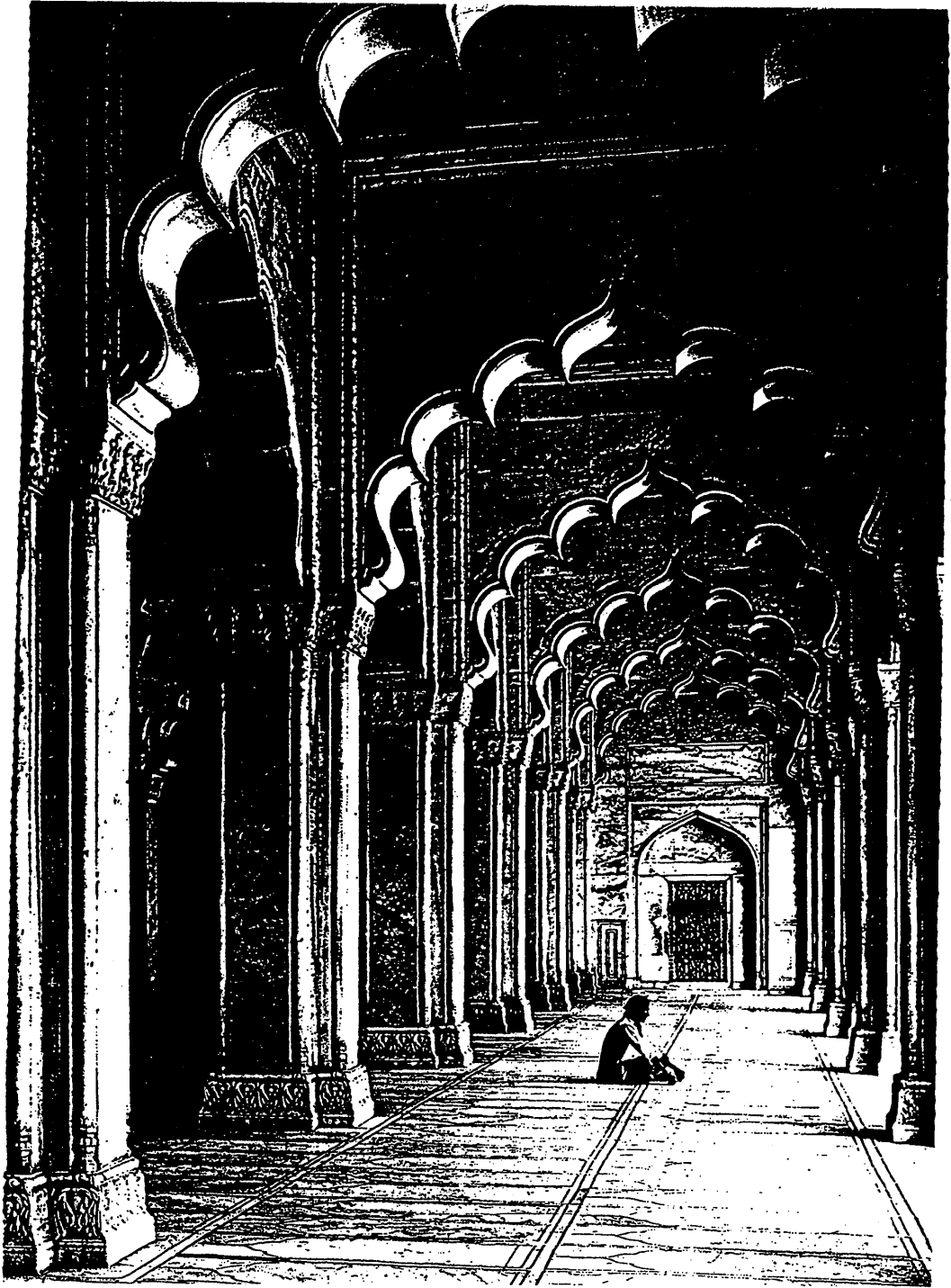
Yet there may be more to the matter than this. Perhaps the novel does go beyond the use of such incidents as symbols to a studied mockery of the claims of Muhammad, and the zany dislocations in Gibreel's dreams express a rejection of the Islam of the author's childhood. It may have to do with his marginal position in English society, Islam, after all, was one of the components of his foreignness, and hence non-acceptance in Britain. In this sense then, Islam has failed him, and in the light of that failure, he sees it as a confidence trick that has betrayed his trust.

Nevertheless, it is unwise to attribute to an author the ideas and attitudes of any of his characters. Perhaps the book is predominantly a comment at large on the world as we know it. Yet certainly Rushdie knows well the traditional stories of Muhammad, and regularly gives them a bitter twist. There is, for example, a surrealistic scene in which the twelve prostitutes in a Jahilia brothel, prompted by the satirical poet Baal, another character in Gibreel's dreams, each adopts the name of one of Mahound's wives, taking the name of a wife approximating to her own age and physical endowments. Thus the most youthful and alluring styles herself Ayesha, the name of Mahound's youngest and favourite wife; on the death of his wife, Khadija. They re-enact with their clients the problems that he (and Muhammad) encountered in his harem, occasioned by the quarrels of his wives.

There is no doubt that to read these parts of the book would be a scarifying experience to traditional minded Muslims living in a world in which the figures concerned with the revelation of the Qur'an are idealized, insulated against

any contact with reality, and protected from irreverence, let alone any expression of satire. They cannot cope emotionally with a literary work that caricatures a lost faith, a sub-genre of writing well enough known in the West - almost of the household of the faith - where such protection no longer exists. This treatment of Mahound, his credibility, his book and his wives (even if they only suggest, and are not directly identified with the figures of history Muslims regard as sacred), cause a far deeper pain than that experienced by fundamentalist Christians at films such as *Hail Mary*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a deeper pain, and a more radical response, because Rushdie's use of traditional Muslim sources cuts so close to the credibility of the Muslim revelation.

— Professor Anthony H Johns
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