

IN GOOD FAITH

It has been a year since I last spoke in defence of my novel *The Satanic Verses*. I have remained silent, though silence is against my nature, because I felt that my voice was simply not loud enough to be heard above the clamour of the voices raised against me.

I hoped that others would speak for me, and many have done so eloquently, among them an admittedly small but growing number of Muslim readers, writers and scholars. Others, including bigots and racists, have tried to exploit my case (using my name to taunt Muslim and non-Muslim Asian children and adults, for example) in a manner I have found repulsive, defiling and humiliating.

At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature. It has often seemed to me that people on all sides of the argument have lost sight of this simple fact. *The Satanic Verses* has been described, and treated, as a work of bad history, as an anti-religious pamphlet, as the product of an international capitalist-Jewish conspiracy, as an act of murder ('he has murdered our hearts'), as the product of a person comparable to Hitler and Attila the Hun. It felt impossible, amid such a hubbub, to insist on the fictionality of fiction.

Let me be clear: I am not trying to say that *The Satanic Verses* is 'only a novel' and thus need not be taken seriously, even disputed with the utmost passion. I do not believe that novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew. I am well aware that this can be a hackle-raising, infuriating attempt.

What I have wished to say, however, is that the point of view from which I have, all my life, attempted this process of literary renewal is the result not of the self-hating, deracinated Uncle-Tomism of which some have accused me, but precisely

of my determination to create a literary language and literary forms in which the experience of formerly colonized, still-disadvantaged peoples might find full expression. If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity.

Standing at the centre of the novel is a group of characters most of whom are British Muslims, or not particularly religious persons of Muslim background, struggling with just the sort of great problems that have arisen to surround the book, problems of hybridization and ghettoization, of reconciling the old and the new. 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 mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.

Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings. Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, *like flavours when you cook*.

The argument between purity and impurity, which is also the argument between Robespierre and Danton, the argument between the monk and the roaring boy, between primness and impropriety, between the stultifications of excessive respect and the scandals of impropriety, is an old one; I say, let it continue. Human beings understand themselves and shape

their futures by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable; not by bowing the knee, whether to gods or to men.

The Satanic Verses is, I profoundly hope, a work of radical dissent and questioning and reimagining. It is not, however, the book it has been made out to be, that book containing 'nothing but filth and insults and abuse' that has brought people out on to the streets across the world.

That book simply does not exist.

This is what I want to say to the great mass of ordinary, decent, fair-minded Muslims, of the sort I have known all my life, and who have provided much of the inspiration for my work: to be rejected and reviled by, so to speak, one's own characters is a shocking and painful experience for any writer. I recognize that many Muslims have felt shocked and pained, too. Perhaps a way forward might be found through the mutual recognition of that mutual pain. Let us attempt to believe in each other's good faith.

I am aware that this is asking a good deal. There has been too much name-calling. Muslims have been called savages and barbarians and worse. I, too, have received my share of invective. Yet I still believe—perhaps I must—that understanding remains possible, and can be achieved without the suppression of the principle of free speech.

What it requires is a moment of good will; a moment in which we may all accept that the other parties are acting, have acted, in good faith.

You see, it's my opinion that if we could only dispose of the 'insults and abuse' accusation, which prevents those who believe it from accepting that *The Satanic Verses* is a work of any serious intent or merit whatsoever, then we might be able, at the very least, to agree to differ about the book's real themes, about the relative value of the sacred and the profane, about the merits of purity and those of hotch-potch, and about how human beings really become whole: through the love of God or through the love of their fellow men and women.

And to dispose of the argument, we must return for a moment to the actually existing book, not the book described

in the various pamphlets that have been circulated to the faithful, not the 'unreadable' text of legend, not two chapters dragged out of the whole; not a piece of blubber, but the whole wretched whale.

Let me say this first: I have never seen this controversy as a struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom. The freedoms of the West are rightly vaunted, but many minorities—racial, sexual, political—just as rightly feel excluded from full possession of these liberties; while, in my lifelong experience of the East, from Turkey and Iran to India and Pakistan, I have found people to be every bit as passionate for freedom as any Czech, Romanian, German, Hungarian or Pole.

How is freedom gained? It is taken: never given. To be free, you must first assume your right to freedom. In writing *The Satanic Verses*, I wrote from the assumption that I was, and am, a free man.

What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist. Without the freedom to challenge, even to satirize all orthodoxies, including religious orthodoxies, it ceases to exist. Language and the imagination cannot be imprisoned, or art will die, and with it, a little of what makes us human. *The Satanic Verses* is, in part, a secular man's reckoning with the religious spirit. It is by no means always hostile to faith. 'If we write in such a way as to pre-judge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of élitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?' asks one of its Indian characters. Yet the novel does contain doubts, uncertainties, even shocks that may well not be to the liking of the devout. Such methods have, however, long been a legitimate part even of Islamic literature.

What does the novel dissent from? Certainly not from people's right to faith, though I have none. It dissents most clearly from imposed orthodoxies of *all types*, from the view that the world is quite clearly This and not That. It dissents from the end of debate, of dispute, of dissent. Hindu communalist sectarianism, the kind of Sikh terrorism that blows up planes, the fatuousnesses of Christian creationism

are dissented from as well as the narrower definitions of Islam. But such dissent is a long way from 'insults and abuse'. I do not believe that most of the Muslims I know would have any trouble with it.

What they have trouble with are statements like these: 'Rushdie calls the Prophet Muhammad a homosexual.' 'Rushdie says the Prophet Muhammad asked God for permission to fornicate with every woman in the world.' 'Rushdie says the Prophet's wives are whores.' 'Rushdie calls the Prophet by a devil's name.' 'Rushdie calls the Companions of the Prophet *scum and bums*.' 'Rushdie says that the whole Qur'an was the Devil's work.' And so forth.

It has been bewildering to watch the proliferation of such statements, and to watch them acquire the authority of truth by virtue of the power of repetition. It has been bewildering to learn that people, millions upon millions of people, have been willing to judge *The Satanic Verses* and its author, without reading it, without finding out what manner of man this fellow might be, on the basis of such allegations as these. It has been bewildering to learn that people *do not care about art*. Yet the only way I can explain matters, the only way I can try and replace the non-existent novel with the one I actually wrote, is to tell you a story.

The Satanic Verses is the story of two painfully divided selves. In the case of one, Saladin Chamcha, the division is secular and societal: he is torn, to put it plainly, between Bombay and London, between East and West. For the other, Gibreel Farishta, the division is spiritual, a rift in the soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so. The novel is 'about' their quest for wholeness.

Why 'Gibreel Farishta' (*Gabriel Angel*)? Not to 'insult and abuse' the 'real' Archangel Gabriel. Gibreel is a movie star, and movie stars hang above us in the darkness, larger than life, halfway to the divine. To give Gibreel an angel's name was to give him a secular equivalent of angelic half-divinity. When he loses his faith, however, this name becomes the source of all his torments.

Chamcha survives. He makes himself whole by returning to his roots and, more importantly, by facing up to, and learning to deal with, the great verities of love and death. Gibreel does not survive. He can neither return to the love of God, nor succeed in replacing it by earthly love. In the end he kills himself, unable to bear his torment any longer.

His greatest torments have come to him in the form of dreams. In these dreams he is cast in the role of his namesake, the Archangel, and witnesses and participates in the unfolding of various epic and tragic narratives dealing with the nature and consequences of revelation and belief. These dreams are not uniformly sceptical. In one, a non-believing landowner who has seen his entire village, and his own wife, drown in the Arabian Sea at the behest of a girl-seer who claimed the waters would open so that the pilgrims might undertake a journey to Mecca, experiences the truth of a miracle at the moment of his own death, when he opens his heart to God, and 'sees' the waters part. All the dreams do, however, dramatize the struggle between faith and doubt.

Gibreel's most painful dreams, the ones at the centre of the controversy, depict the birth and growth of a religion something like Islam, in a magical city of sand named Jahilia (that is 'ignorance', the name given by Arabs to the period before Islam). Almost all the alleged 'insults and abuse' are taken from these dream sequences.

The first thing to be said about these dreams is that they are *agonizingly painful to the dreamer*. They are a 'nocturnal retribution, a punishment' for his loss of faith. This man, desperate to regain belief, is haunted, possessed, by visions of doubt, visions of scepticism and questions and faith-shaking allegations that grow more and more extreme as they go on. He tries in vain to escape them, fighting against sleep; but then the visions cross over the boundary between his waking and sleeping self, they infect his daytimes: that is, they drive him mad. The dream-city is called 'Jahilia' not to 'insult and abuse' Mecca Sharif, but because the dreamer, Gibreel, has

been plunged by his broken faith back into the condition the word describes. The first purpose of these sequences is not to vilify or 'disprove' Islam, but to portray a soul in crisis, to show how the loss of God can destroy a man's life.

See the 'offensive' chapters through this lens, and many things may seem clearer. The use of the so-called 'incident of the satanic verses', the quasi-historical tale of how Muhammad's revelation seemed briefly to flirt with the possibility of admitting three pagan and female deities into the pantheon, at the semi-divine, intercessory level of the archangels, and of how he then repudiated these verses as being satanically inspired—is, first of all, a key moment of doubt in dreams which persecute a dreamer by making vivid the doubts he loathes but can no longer escape.

The most extreme passage of doubting in the novel is when the character 'Salman the Persian'—named not to 'insult and abuse' Muhammad's companion Salman al-Farisi, but more as an ironic reference to the novel's author—voices his many scepticisms. It is quite true that the language here is forceful, satirical, and strong meat for some tastes, but it must be remembered that the waking Gibreel is a coarse-mouthed fellow, and it would be surprising if the dream-figures he conjures up did not sometimes speak as rough and even obscene a language as their dreamer. It must also be remembered that this sequence happens late in the dream, when the dreamer's mind is crumbling along with his certainties, and when his derangement, to which these violently expressed doubts contribute, is well advanced.

Let me not be disingenuous, however. The rejection of the three goddesses in the novel's dream-version of the 'satanic verses' story is also intended to make other points, for example about the religion's attitude to women. 'Shall He [God] have daughters while you have sons? That would be an unjust division,' read the verses still to be found in the Qur'an. I thought it was at least worth pointing out that one of the reasons for rejecting these goddesses was that *they were*

female. The rejection has implications that are worth thinking about. I suggest that such highlighting is a proper function of literature.

Or again, when Salman the Persian, Gibreel's dream-figment, fulminates against the dream-religion's aim of providing 'rules for every damn thing', he is not only tormenting the dreamer, but asking the reader to think about the validity of religion's rules. To those participants in the controversy who have felt able to justify the most extreme Muslim threats towards me and others by saying that I have broken an Islamic rule, I would ask the following question: are all the rules laid down at a religion's origin immutable for ever? How about the penalties for prostitution (stoning to death) or thieving (mutilation)? How about the prohibition of homosexuality? How about the Islamic law of inheritance, which allows a widow to inherit only an eighth share, and which gives to sons twice as much as it does to daughters? What of the Islamic law of evidence, which makes a woman's testimony worth only half that of a man? Are these, too, to be given unquestioning respect: or may writers and intellectuals ask the awkward questions that are a part of their reason for being what they are?

Let no one suppose that such disputes about rules do not take place daily throughout the Muslim world. Muslim religious leaders may wish female children of Muslim households to be educated in segregated schools, but the girls, as they say every time anybody asks them, do not wish to go. (The Labour Party doesn't ask them, and plans to deliver them into the hands of the mullahs.) Likewise, Muslim divines may insist that women dress 'modestly', according to the Hijab code, covering more of their bodies than men because they possess what one Muslim recently and absurdly described on television as 'more adorable parts'; but the Muslim world is full of women who reject such strictures. Islam may teach that women should be confined to the home and to child-rearing, but Muslim women everywhere insist on leaving the home to work. If Muslim society questions its own rules daily—and make no mistake, Muslims are as

accustomed to satire as anyone else—why must a novel be proscribed for doing the same?

But to return to the text. Certain supposed 'insults' need specific rebuttals. For example, the scene in which the Prophet's companions are called 'scum' and 'bums' is a depiction of the early persecution of the believers, and the insults quoted are clearly not mine but those hurled at the faithful by the ungodly. How, one wonders, could a book portray persecution without allowing the persecutors to be seen persecuting? (Or again: how could a book portray doubt without allowing the uncertain to articulate their uncertainties?)

As to the matter of the Prophet's wives: what happens in Gibreel's dreams is that the whores of a brothel *take the names* of the wives of the Prophet Mahound in order to arouse their customers. The 'real' wives are clearly stated to be 'living chastely' in their harem. But why introduce so shocking an image? For this reason: throughout the novel, I sought images that crystallized the opposition between the sacred and profane worlds. The harem and the brothel provide such an opposition. Both are places where women are sequestered, in the harem to keep them from all men except their husband and close family members, in the brothel for the use of strange males. Harem and brothel are antithetical worlds; and the presence in the harem of the Prophet, the receiver of a sacred text, is likewise contrasted with the presence in the brothel of the clapped-out poet, Baal, the creator of profane texts. The two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse, are juxtaposed by making them echoes of one another; and, finally, the pure eradicates the impure. Whores and writer ('I see no difference here,' remarks Mahound) are executed. Whether one finds this a happy or sad conclusion depends on one's point of view.

The purpose of the 'brothel sequence', then, was not to 'insult and abuse' the Prophet's wives, but to dramatize certain ideas about morality; and sexuality, too, because what happens in the brothel—called *Hijab* after the name for 'modest' dress as an ironic means of further highlighting the

inverted echo between the two worlds—is that the men of 'Jahilia' are enabled to act out an ancient dream of power and possession, the dream of possessing the queen. That men should be so aroused by the great ladies' whorish counterfeits says something about *them*, not the great ladies, and about the extent to which sexual relations have to do with possession.

I must have known, my accusers say, that my use of the old devil-name 'Mahound', a medieval European demonization of 'Muhammad', would cause offence. In fact, this is an instance in which de-contextualization has created a complete reversal of meaning. A part of the relevant context is on page ninety-three of the novel. 'To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound.' Central to the purposes of *The Satanic Verses* is the process of reclaiming language from one's opponents. (Elsewhere in the novel we find the poet Jumpy Joshi trying to reclaim Enoch Powell's notorious 'rivers of blood' simile. Humanity itself can be thought of as a river of blood, he argues; the river flows in our bodies, and we, as a collectivity, are a river of blood flowing down the ages. Why abandon so potent and evocative an image to the racists?) 'Trotsky' was Trotsky's jailer's name. By taking it for his own, he symbolically conquered his captor and set himself free. Something of the same spirit lay behind my use of the name 'Mahound'.

The attempt at reclamation goes even further than this. When Saladin Chamcha finds himself transformed into a goatish, horned and hoofy demon, in a bizarre sanatorium full of other monstrous beings, he's told that they are all, like him, aliens and migrants, demonized by the 'host culture's' attitude to them. 'They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.' If migrant groups are called devils by others, that does not really make them demonic. And if devils are not necessarily devilish, angels may not necessarily be angelic . . . From this premise, the novel's exploration of morality as internal and shifting (rather

than external, divinely sanctioned, absolute) may be said to emerge.

The very title, *The Satanic Verses*, is an aspect of this attempt at reclamation. You call us devils? it seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil's version of the world, of 'your' world, the version written *from the experience* of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. The purpose is not to suggest that the Qur'an is written by the devil; it is to attempt the sort of act of affirmation that, in the United States, transformed the word *black* from the standard term of racist abuse into a 'beautiful' expression of cultural pride.

And so on. There are times when I feel that the original intentions of *The Satanic Verses* have been so thoroughly scrambled by events as to be lost for ever. There are times when I feel frustrated that the terms in which the novel is discussed seem to have been set exclusively by Muslim leaders (including those, like Sher Azam of the Bradford Council of Mosques, who can blithely say on television, 'Books are not my thing'). After all, the process of hybridization which is the novel's most crucial dynamic means that its ideas derive from many sources other than Islamic ones.

There is, for example, the pre-Christian belief, expressed in the Books of Amos and Deutero-Isaiah and quoted in *The Satanic Verses*, that God and the Devil were one and the same: 'It isn't until the Book of Chronicles, merely fourth century BC, that the word *Satan* is used to mean a being, and not only an attribute of God.' It should also be said that the two books that were most influential on the shape this novel took do not include the Qur'an. One was William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the classic meditation on the interpenetration of good and evil; the other *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, the great Russian lyrical and comical novel in which the Devil descends upon Moscow and wreaks havoc upon the corrupt, materialist, decadent inhabitants and turns out, by the end, not to be such a bad chap after all.

The Master and Margarita and its author were persecuted by Soviet totalitarianism. It is extraordinary to find my novel's life echoing that of one of its greatest models.

Nor are these the only non-Muslim influences at work. I was born an Indian, and not only an Indian, but a Bombayite—Bombay, most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch of Indian cities. My writing and thought have therefore been as deeply influenced by Hindu myths and attitudes as Muslim ones (and my movie star Gibreel is also a figure of inter-religious tolerance, playing Hindu gods without causing offence, in spite of his Muslim origins). Nor is the West absent from Bombay. I was already a mongrel self, history's bastard, before London aggravated the condition.

To be an Indian of my generation was also to be convinced of the vital importance of Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a secular India. Secularism, for India, is not simply a point of view; it is a question of survival. If what Indians call 'communalism', sectarian religious politics, were to be allowed to take control of the polity, the results would be too horrifying to imagine. Many Indians fear that that moment may now be very near. I have fought against communal politics all my adult life. The Labour Party in Britain would do well to look at the consequences of Indian politicians' willingness to play the communalist card, and consider whether some Labour politicians' apparent willingness to do the same in Britain, for the same reason (votes), is entirely wise.

To be a Bombayite (and afterwards a Londoner) was also to fall in love with the metropolis. The city as reality and as a metaphor is at the heart of all my work. 'The modern city,' says a character in *The Satanic Verses*, 'is the *locus classicus* of incompatible realities.' Well, that turned out to be true. 'As long as they pass in the night, it's not so bad. But if they meet! It's uranium and plutonium, each makes the other decompose, boom.' It is hard to express how it feels to have attempted to portray an objective reality and then to have become its subject . . .

The point is this: Muslim culture has been very important to me, but it is not by any means the only shaping factor. I am

a modern, and modernist, urban man, accepting uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing. I believe in no god, and have done so since I was a young adolescent. I have spiritual needs, and my work has, I hope, a moral and spiritual dimension, but I am content to try and satisfy those needs without recourse to any idea of a Prime Mover or ultimate arbiter.

To put it as simply as possible: *I am not a Muslim*. It feels bizarre, and wholly inappropriate, to be described as some sort of heretic after having lived my life as a secular, pluralist, eclectic man. I am being enveloped in, and described by, a language that does not fit me. I do not accept the charge of blasphemy, because, as somebody says in *The Satanic Verses*, 'where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy.' I do not accept the charge of apostasy, because I have never in my adult life affirmed any belief, and what one has not affirmed one cannot be said to have apostasized from. The Islam I know states clearly that 'there can be no coercion in matters of religion'. The many Muslims I respect would be horrified by the idea that they belong to their faith *purely by virtue of birth*, and that any person so born who freely chose not to be a Muslim could therefore be put to death.

When I am described as an apostate Muslim, I feel as if I have been concealed behind a *false self*, as if a shadow has become substance while I have been relegated to the shadows. Sections of the non-Muslim British media have helped in the creation of other aspects of this false self, portraying me as egomaniacal, insolent, greedy, hypocritical and disloyal. It has been suggested that I prefer to be known by an Anglicization of my name ('Simon Rushton'). And, to perfect the double bind, this Salman Rushdie is also 'thin-skinned' and 'paranoid', so that any attempt by him to protest against falsifications will be seen as further proof of the reality of the false self, the golem.

The Muslim attack against me has been greatly assisted by the creation of this false self. 'Simon Rushton' has featured in several Muslim portrayals of my debased, deracinated personality. My 'greed' fits well into the conspiracy theory,

that I sold my soul to the West and wrote a carefully planned attack on Islam in return for pots of money. 'Disloyalty' is useful in this context, too. Jorge Luis Borges, Graham Greene and other writers have written about their sense of an Other who goes about the world bearing their name. There are moments when I worry that my Other may succeed in obliterating me.

On 14 February 1989, within hours of the dread news from Iran, I received a telephone call from Keith Vaz, MP, during which he vehemently expressed his full support for me and my work, and his horror at the threat against my life. A few weeks later, this same gentleman was to be found addressing a demonstration full of men demanding my death, and of children festooned with murderous placards. By now Mr Vaz wanted my work banned, and threats against my life seemed not to trouble him any longer.

It has been that sort of year. Twelve months ago, the *Guardian's* esteemed columnist, Hugo Young, teetered on the edge of racism when he told all British Muslims that if they didn't like the way things were in Britain, they could always leave ('if not Dagenham, why not Tehran?'); now this same Mr Young prefers to lay the blame for the controversy at my door. (I have, after all, fewer battalions at my disposal.) No doubt, Mr Young would now be relieved if I went back where I came from.

And, and, and. Lord Dacre thought it might be a good idea if I were beaten up in a dark alley. Rana Kabbani announced with perfect Stalinist fervour that writers should be 'accountable' to the community. Brian Clark (the author, ironically enough, of *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*), claiming to be on my side, wrote an execrable play which, mercifully, nobody has yet agreed to produce, entitled *Who Killed Salman Rushdie?*, and sent it along in case I needed something to read.

And Britain witnessed a brutalization of public debate that seemed hard to believe. Incitement to murder was tolerated on the nation's streets. (In Europe and the United States, swift government action prevented such incitement at a very early

stage.) On TV shows, studio audiences were asked for a show of hands on the question of whether I should live or die. A man's murder (mine) became a legitimate subject for a national opinion poll. And slowly, slowly, a point of view grew up, and was given voice by mountebanks and bishops, fundamentalists and Mr John le Carré, which held that *I knew exactly what I was doing*. I must have known what would happen; therefore, did it on purpose, to profit by the notoriety that would result. This accusation is, today, in fairly wide circulation, and so I must defend myself against it, too.

I find myself wanting to ask questions: when Osip Mandelstam wrote his poem against Stalin, did he 'know what he was doing' and so deserve his death? When the students filled Tiananmen Square to ask for freedom, were they not also, and knowingly, asking for the murderous repression that resulted? When Terry Waite was taken hostage, hadn't he been 'asking for it'? I find myself thinking of Jodie Foster in her Oscar-winning role in *The Accused*. Even if I were to concede (and I do not concede it) that what I did in *The Satanic Verses* was the literary equivalent of flaunting oneself shamelessly before the eyes of aroused men, is that really a justification for being, so to speak, gang-banged? Is any provocation a justification for rape?

Threats of violence ought not to coerce us into believing the victims of intimidation to be responsible for the violence threatened. I am aware, however, that rhetoric is an insufficient response. Nor is it enough to point out that nothing on the scale of this controversy has, to my knowledge, ever happened in the history of literature. If I had told anyone before publication that such events would occur as a result of my book, I would instantly have proved the truth of the accusations of egomania . . .

It's true that some passages in *The Satanic Verses* have now acquired a prophetic quality that alarms even me. 'Your blasphemy, Salman, can't be forgiven . . . To set your words against the Word of God.' Et cetera. But to write a dream based around events that took place in the seventh century of

the Christian era, and to create metaphors of the conflict between different sorts of 'author' and different types of 'text'—to say that literature and religion, like literature and politics, fight for the same territory—is very different from somehow knowing, in advance, that your dream is about to come true, that the metaphor is about to be made flesh, that the conflict your work seeks to explore is about to engulf it, and its publishers and booksellers; and you.

At least (small comfort) I wasn't wrong.

Books choose their authors; the act of creation is not entirely a rational and conscious one. But this, as honestly as I can set it down, is, in respect of the novel's treatment of religion, what 'I knew I was doing'.

I set out to explore, through the process of fiction, the nature of revelation and the power of faith. The mystical, revelatory experience is quite clearly a genuine one. This statement poses a problem to the non-believer: if we accept that the mystic, the prophet, is sincerely undergoing some sort of transcendent experience, but we cannot believe in a supernatural world, then *what is going on?* To answer this question, among others, I began work on the story of 'Mahound'. I was aware that the 'satanic verses' incident is much disputed by Muslim theologians; that the life of Muhammad has become the object of a kind of veneration that some would consider un-Islamic, since Muhammad himself always insisted that he was merely a messenger, an ordinary man; and that, therefore, great sensitivities were involved. I genuinely believed that my overt use of fabulation would make it clear to any reader that I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow a fiction to take off from history. The use of dreams, fantasy, etc. was intended to say: the point is not whether this is 'really' supposed to be Muhammad, or whether the satanic verses incident 'really' happened; the point is to examine what such an incident might reveal about what revelation is, about the extent to which the mystic's conscious personality informs and interacts with the mystical event; the point is to try and understand the human event of revelation. The use of fiction was a way of creating the sort of

distance from actuality that I felt would prevent offence from being taken. I was wrong.

Jahilia, to use once again the ancient Arab story-tellers' formula I used often in *The Satanic Verses*, both 'is and is not' Mecca. Many of the details of its social life are drawn from historical research; but it is also a dream of an Indian city (its concentric street-plan deliberately recalls New Delhi), and, as Gibreel spends time in England, it becomes a dream of London, too. Likewise, the religion of 'Submission' both is and is not Islam. Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical. Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history.

Here is more of what I knew: I knew that stories of Muhammad's doubts, uncertainties, errors, fondness for women abound in and around Muslim tradition. To me, they seemed to make him more vivid, more human, and therefore more interesting, even more worthy of admiration. The greatest human beings must struggle against themselves as well as the world. I never doubted Muhammad's greatness, nor, I believe, is the 'Mahound' of my novel belittled by being portrayed as human.

I knew that Islam is by no means homogeneous, or as absolutist as some of its champions make it out to be. Islam contains the doubts of Iqbal, Ghazali, Khayyám as well as the narrow certainties of Shabbir Akhtar of the Bradford Council of Mosques and Kalim Siddiqui, director of the pro-Iranian Muslim Institute. Islam contains ribaldry as well as solemnity, irreverence as well as absolutism. I knew much about Islam that I admired, and still admire, immensely; I also knew that Islam, like all the world's great religions, had seen terrible things done in its name.

The original incident on which the dream of the villagers who drown in the Arabian Sea is based is also a part of what I 'knew'. The story awed me, because of what it told me about the huge power of faith. I wrote this part of the novel to see if

I could understand, by getting inside their skins, people for whom devotion was as great as this.

He did it on purpose is one of the strangest accusations ever levelled at a writer. Of course I did it on purpose. The question is, and it is what I have tried to answer: what is the 'it' that I did?

What I did not do was conspire against Islam; or write—after years and years of anti-racist work and writing—a text of incitement to racial hatred; or anything of the sort. My golem, my false Other, may be capable of such deeds, but I am not.

Would I have written differently if I had known what would happen? Truthfully, I don't know. Would I change any of the text now? I would not. It's too late. As Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote in *The Physicists*: 'What has once been thought cannot be unthought.'

The controversy over *The Satanic Verses* needs to be looked at as a political event, not purely a theological one. In India, where the trouble started, the Muslim fundamentalist MP Syed Shahabuddin used my novel as a stick with which to threaten the wobbling Rajiv Gandhi government. The demand for the book's banning was a power-play to demonstrate the strength of the Muslim vote, on which Congress has traditionally relied and which it could ill afford to lose. (In spite of the ban, Congress lost the Muslims and the election anyway. Put not your trust in Shahabuddins.)

In South Africa, the row over the book served the purpose of the regime by driving a wedge between the Muslim and non-Muslim members of the UDF. In Pakistan, it was a way for the fundamentalists to try and regain the political initiative after their trouncing in the general election. In Iran, too, the incident could only be properly understood when seen in the context of the country's internal political struggles. And in Britain, where secular and religious leaders had been vying for power in the community for over a decade, and where, for a long time, largely secular organizations such as the Indian Workers Association (IWA) had been in the

ascendant, the 'affair' swung the balance of power back towards the mosques. Small wonder, then, that the various councils of mosques are reluctant to bring the protest to an end, even though many Muslims up and down the country find it embarrassing, even shameful, to be associated with such illiberalism and violence.

The responsibility for violence lies with those who perpetrate it. In the past twelve months, bookshop workers have been manhandled, spat upon, verbally abused, bookshop premises have been threatened and, on several occasions, actually fire-bombed. Publishing staff have had to face a campaign of hate mail, menacing phone calls, death threats and bomb scares. Demonstrations have, on occasion, turned violent, too. During the big march in London last summer, peaceful counter-demonstrations on behalf of humanism and secularism were knocked to the ground by marchers, and a counter-demo by the courageous (and largely Muslim) Women Against Fundamentalism group was threatened and abused.

There is no conceivable reason why such behaviour should be privileged because it is done in the name of an affronted religion. If we are to talk about 'insults', 'abuse', 'offence', then the campaign against *The Satanic Verses* has been, very often, as insulting, abusive and offensive as it's possible to be.

As a result, racist attitudes have hardened. I did not invent British racism, nor did *The Satanic Verses*. The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), which now accuses me of harming race relations, knows that for years it lent out my video-taped anti-racist Channel 4 broadcast to all sorts of black and white groups and seminars. Readers of *The Satanic Verses* will not be able to help noticing its extremely strong anti-racist line. I have never given the least comfort or encouragement to racists; but the leaders of the campaign against me certainly have, by reinforcing the worst racist stereotypes of Muslims as repressive, anti-liberal, censoring zealots. If Norman Tebbit has taken up the old Powellite refrain and if his laments about the multi-cultural society find favour in the land, then a part of the responsibility at least must be laid at the door of those who burn, and would ban, books.

I am not the first writer to be persecuted by Islamic fundamentalism in the modern period; among the greatest names so victimized are the Iranian writer Ahmad Kasravi, stabbed to death by fanatics, and the Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, often threatened but still, happily, with us. I am not the first artist to be accused of blasphemy and apostasy; these are, in fact, probably the most common weapons with which fundamentalism has sought to shackle creativity in the modern age. It is sad, then, that so little attention has been paid to this crucial literary context; and that Western critics like John Berger, who once spoke messianically of the need for new ways of seeing, should now express their willingness to privilege one such way over another, to protect a religion boasting one billion believers from the solitary figure of a single writer brandishing an 'unreadable' book.

As for the British Muslim 'leaders', they cannot have it both ways. Sometimes they say I am entirely unimportant, and only the book matters; on other days they hold meetings at mosques across the nation and endorse the call for my killing. They say they hold to the laws of this country, but they also say that Islamic law has moral primacy for them. They say they do not wish to break British laws, but only a very few are willing openly to repudiate the threat against me. They should make their position clear; are they democratic citizens of a free society or are they not? Do they reject violence or do they not?

After a year, it is time for a little clarity.

To the Muslim community at large, in Britain and India and Pakistan and everywhere else, I would like to say: do not ask your writers to create *typical* or *representative* fictions. Such books are almost invariably dead books. The liveliness of literature lies in its exceptionality, in being the individual, idiosyncratic vision of one human being, in which, to our delight and great surprise, we may find our own image reflected. A book is a version of the world. If you do not like it, ignore it; or offer your own version in return.

And I would like to say this: life without God seems to

believers to be an idiocy, pointless, beneath contempt. It does not seem so to non-believers. To accept that the world, here, is all there is; to go through it, towards and into death, without the consolations of religion seems, well, at least as courageous and rigorous to us as the espousal of faith seems to you. Secularism and its work deserve your respect, not your contempt.

A great wave of freedom has been washing over the world. Those who resist—in China, in Romania—find themselves bathed in blood. I should like to ask Muslims—that great mass of ordinary, decent, fair-minded Muslims to whom I have imagined myself to be speaking for most of this piece—to choose to ride the wave; to renounce blood; not to let Muslim leaders make Muslims seem less tolerant than they are. *The Satanic Verses* is a serious work, written from a non-believer's point of view. Let believers accept that, and let it be.

In the meantime, I am asked, how do I feel? I feel grateful to the British government for defending me. I hope that such a defence would be made available to any citizen so threatened, but that doesn't lessen my gratitude. I needed it, and it was provided. (I'm still no Tory, but that's democracy.)

I feel grateful, too, to my protectors, who have done such a magnificent job, and who have become my friends.

I feel grateful to everyone who has offered me support. The one real gain for me in this bad time has been the discovery of being cared for by so many people. The only antidote to hatred is love.

Above all, I feel gratitude towards, solidarity with and pride in all the publishing people and bookstore workers around the world who have held the line against intimidation, and who will, I am sure, continue to do so as long as it remains necessary.

I feel as if I have been plunged, like Alice, into the world beyond the looking-glass, where nonsense is the only available sense. And I wonder if I'll ever be able to climb back through the mirror.

Do I feel regret? Of course I do: regret that such offence

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has been taken against my work when it was not intended—when dispute was intended, and dissent, and even, at times, satire, and criticism of intolerance, and the like, but not the thing of which I'm most often accused, not 'filth', not 'insult', not 'abuse'. I regret that so many people who might have taken pleasure in finding their reality given pride of place in a novel will now not read it because of what they believe it to be, or will come to it with their minds already made up.

And I feel sad to be so grievously separated from my community, from India, from everyday life, from the world.

Please understand, however: I make no complaint. I am a writer. I do not accept my condition. I will strive to change it; but I inhabit it, I am trying to learn from it.

Our lives teach us who we are.

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