

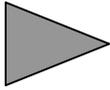
THE COST OF FREE SPEECH

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Abstract

The present study discusses the consequences free speech may have in today's society, making reference to the case of one of the most controversial novels of the twentieth century, namely the book Salman Rushdie published in 1988: "The Satanic Verses". By presenting the different aspects of the controversy surrounding the novel, we hope to reveal significant points related to the intricate and at times potentially dangerous connections established between religion and fiction and to show how a multitude of elements – including religious, political and social factors – combine in shaping the effect a piece of writing has on its audience.

Keywords: free speech, blasphemy, disobedience, religion, fiction, Islam



Introduction

So as to understand Muslim reactions to the novel, we shall begin by offering an explanation of the meaning of the word Islam. As pointed out by Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*, *Islam* means *submission, obedience*: “The name of the new religion is Submission.” (*The Satanic Verses*, 79) This is extremely significant, as it points to a (seemingly) irreconcilable difference – and not a minor one, a matter of detail, but one touching the essence – between the views on the world held by the author of the book and the views – or, more precisely, beliefs – of a large part of the book’s audience: Muslim readers. Not accidentally, this is the part of the audience that had the strongest objections to the novel.

The difference refers to the basic fact that religion (and this holds true for any religion, with variations in the way it is applied in practical life) is centered on the idea of acceptance, surrendering or – to use the exact word Rushdie used, *submission*. In other words, believers center their existence on a fact that is not subject to debate, but must be accepted as such: the existence of God, with the multitude of consequences it implies on the believer’s life: different rules of conduct, moral principles, even extremely precise interdictions or recommendations for everyday life.

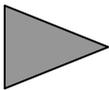
This view of the world in which everything is accepted without questioning is obviously miles apart from Rushdie’s view – which embodies the typically postmodern condition of the man whose life is centered on the very process of questioning. Rushdie opposes, in principle, any dualistic, fixed way of looking at things. For him, the fact that is *not* subject to debate is the right to question, to discuss and even to dismantle any fixed way of seeing and understanding. What is this “right” called in modern society? The answer is simple: *free speech*.

The question that arises refers to the limits of free speech. Is it a valid justification for everything, including – and this is the touchy point in the current discussion – blasphemy?

The point Muslim commentators make is that there are certain things that are not to be analyzed, and that certainly should not be taken lightly. The word of God – which is precisely what the verses in the [Qur'an](#) express – should not be changed in the slightest degree nor should their original meaning be distorted. And this is what Rushdie does in the central episode of the novel. Hence, according to them, the book is liable to be accused of blasphemy.

But free speech is a delicate notion. We may wonder: can one actually conceive of setting limits to such a concept? Is it not against the very essence of the concept to restrict it, to impose boundaries to what “speech” may contain? Proponents of free speech will argue that telling one what he is or is not permitted to discuss in a novel is a breach of the very core of one of the most important principles in modern society.

Are the two views presented above completely irreconcilable? To what extent will the feud between the two go – to put it more simply – *what is the cost of free speech?*



The cost of free speech

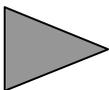
Moments in what was termed “the Rushdie affair” include (Hanne, 1994: 191): public demonstrations of anger by many thousands of Muslims from the various immigrant communities in Britain (and Canada) shortly after its publication; demands by governments of several Islamic countries that the book be banned; riots in India and Pakistan in which a total of twenty people were killed; the issuing of a fatwah (a formal religious pronouncement) against Rushdie and his novel by Ayatollah Khomeini; repeated offers from organizations in Iran of a bounty for any Muslim to kill Rushdie, and his going into hiding under police protection; the withdrawal for several months by all the countries of the European Community of their ambassadors to Iran; the killing in Brussels of two imams who spoke out against the fatwah; the murder of one translator of the novel and life-threatening attacks on two others; Rushdie's declaration after a meeting with some senior Islamic clerics that he was, after all his assertions to the contrary, now a Muslim; requests from the relatives of British hostages in Beirut that the paperback version of the novel not be published; the burning down of a hotel in Turkey by Muslim

fundamentalists because people associated with publication of the novel in that country were staying there, and so on.

Some commentators of the book went so far as to compare the events in 1989 - 1990 in the Rushdie affair with those starting the Second World War, and feared that the novel could be the spark that would make the situation between Iran and Western nations explode. They were, fortunately, wrong. Still the question remains: what does the book contain that makes it so offensive to such a large number of readers? Before attempting an answer, we should make an important remark: the term “readers” might be misused in this context.

*From the point at which Faiyazuddin Ahmad started to distribute photocopies of selected passages of **The Satanic Verses** from Leicester, England, responses to its publication split in a very obvious way. Among those commenting on the novel, or responding to it in other ways, there were now three groups: those who had read all or most of it (and it must be said that it is, by any standard, a difficult novel to read); those who had read only extracts selected by someone else (whether in English or in translation); and, finally, there was that vast number of people, Muslim and non-Muslim, in Britain and elsewhere, who only knew the work secondhand, on the basis of what they had been told about it, whether through their mosque or Islamic cultural center or through the mass media (if they were British Muslims, they received unsympathetic messages from television and the tabloid newspapers which conflicted distressingly with the messages they received from their own religious leaders). (Hanne, 1994: 204)*

To sum up, a large proportion of those willing to kill or die for the book had not even read it. It might sound like a naïve argument – given the fact that one realizes that Rushdie’s novel could be just a pretext used in a wider political battle – but the fact still remains puzzling for one accustomed to reading rather than burning books. Why was the book burnt?



The issue of Islam

What we shall try to prove in this study is that the book is not anti-Islam; although, as the colossal (negative) impression the novel made on Muslim readers shows, we cannot avoid discussing Islam in its analysis, our opinion is that it would be wrong

to view *The Satanic Verses* as a blasphemous writing relying solely on unjust criticism of one of the world's most important religions. As we shall see in the following arguments, a one-sided condemnation of the book is totally unacceptable. This extremely complex book deserves more than a superficial reading; we shall start by giving an overview of its reception and we will try to explain why it has provoked such a reaction.

Even prior to its publication, it had become clear that the book would be controversial. The publishers of *The Satanic Verses* sought advice on the likely impact of the novel on Muslim religious sensibilities from sources both in Britain and in the Indian subcontinent in the months preceding its publication. According to a study on the book written by Michael Hanne, in *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change*, the answers they received should have rung alarm bells. One of Viking Penguin's own editorial advisors in India, Khushwant Singh (a distinguished historian and a Sikh, not a Muslim), phoned Peter Mayer, Chair of the Penguin Group, several times to warn against publication on the grounds that he was "positive it would cause a lot of trouble ... There are several derogatory references to the Prophet and the Qur'an. Muhammad is made out to be a small-time impostor." At the same time, the publishers are supposed also to have submitted the manuscript to nine British religious scholars, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, a majority of whom concluded that "the book could not be considered a work of fiction because it used historical figures and would therefore cause a lot of offence. We told Viking Penguin that if the book was released it would unleash terror beyond the control of one person or even one country."

While the first part of the argument – that using historical figures would make it impossible for a book to be considered fiction – is difficult to be taken seriously, the second part turned out to be, unfortunately, prophetic.

According to Michael Hanne, an important incentive for Rushdie to ignore the negative reactions his book might provoke could have been the financial advantages brought by the novel's publication:

It is arguable, too, that the large advance Rushdie received for the novel (whether it was \$800,000 or, as some sources indicate, £800,000) suggests that both author and publishers expected the level of sales which only a succès de scandale could

guarantee for a novel whose dense style and elusive structure would otherwise attract a relatively limited audience. (Hanne, 1994: 199)

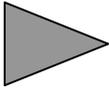
Although this might be true, we do not consider financial matters as crucial in making the decision of publishing a book – or, at least, it would not be one of the major concerns of a writer. It seems obvious, after reading the book, that there are other, far more important, issues it addresses; therefore, we think we can easily dismiss the accusation that the book's reasons for criticizing and its overall rebellious nature is simply a publicity stunt. There is more at stake than just money.

Hanne continues his argument by noting the widespread agreement amongst Indian and Western commentators, with expertise on Indian affairs, that, given the extreme sensitivity of intercommunal relations in India, it was entirely predictable that violence would follow its publication there. Malise Ruthven recalls several instances where books and articles (even a careless headline) published in India have been followed by fatal conflicts between Hindus and the minority Muslims.

What, in retrospect, seems absurd, is not the all too obvious, if unpalatable, fact that an item of fiction can cause rioting and death in India, but that a novelist whose reputation has been built on his grasp of the Indian psyche appeared to think otherwise. (Ruthven, 1990: 89)

Following this line of thought, Rushdie was accused of "carelessness" if not "callousness". (Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Rimli Bhattacharya, 1990: 29)

These opinions are extremely strange, if we take into consideration the fact that the issue discussed was not a political decision, but the publishing of a book. Shall we conclude, after seeing that there will be disagreement with the opinions we shall utter, that we should keep silence? The answer given by Rushdie to this question – and the answer that any proponent of free speech would give – was definitely not. Unfortunately, the cost of free speech seems to be extremely high in – paradoxically – a period when it is one of the most common phrases one can hear.



The Satanic Verses episode

The episode central to both the book and the controversy surrounding it is the one giving the title of the novel. Some considerations on the structure of the book might be useful before describing the episode.

The novel is comprised of several parallel narratives, unravelling in contemporary London, seventh century Arabia and twentieth century Pakistan. While its main narrative stream deals with events taking place in London after the two main characters “fall from the sky” (from a burning airplane) and assume the roles of the angel (Gibreel Farishta) and the devil (Saladin Chamcha), the one that has mainly caused offence is placed in the 7th century in the city of Jahilia (a version of Mecca). The “archangel” (Gibreel Farishta) is the one who “dreams” these episodes and gives an (unreliable) account of the events.

The *Satanic Verses* episode refers to a story in Islamic lore that has been described by several Muslim historians and biographers, of whom the best known are the ninth century historians Al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd. Ibn Sa'd relates that at a time when Muhammad strongly desired to establish better relations with his countrymen, he was once at the Ka'ba, reciting from the Koran. When he came to the passage: "Do you behold Allat and Al 'Uzza, and also Manat, the third idol?" – which now concludes: "What? shall ye have male progeny and Allah female? This were indeed an unfair partition!" – Satan suggested two lines to him: "These are the exalted females, and truly their intercession may be expected." Muhammad then prostrated himself and prayed, and the whole tribe of Quraish followed him. Later that evening, when the prophet was meditating at home, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, and Muhammad recited the sum to the angel. "Have I taught you these two lines?" asked Gabriel. Muhammad then realized his error and remarked that he had attributed to Allah words that He had not revealed. (Sawhney, 1999: 253)

The episode in Rushdie's novel differs from the one described above, and the differences might account for the Muslim reaction to the book. Here is the episode in Rushdie in which Mahound (Muhammad) accepts the three goddesses:

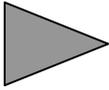
At this point, without any trace of hesitation or doubt, he [Mahound] recites two further verses. "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the

other?" After the first verse, Hind gets to her feet; the Grandee of Jahilia is already standing very straight. And Mahound, with silenced eyes, recites: "They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed." (The Satanic Verses, 71)

Later, Mahound takes back his acceptance:

*He stands in front of the statues of the Three and announces the abrogation of the verses which Shaitan whispered in his ear. These verses are banished from the true recitation, *_alqur*" an_. New verses are thundered in their place. "Shall He have daughters and you sons?" Mahound recites. "That would be a fine division!" These are but names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers. Allah vests no authority in them." He leaves the dumbfounded House before it occurs to anybody to pick up, or throw, the first stone. (The Satanic Verses, 78)*

It is evident that Rushdie's translation consciously calls attention to the ambiguous status of dreaming, which can signify at once an idle fantasy and a profound vision. Most other English translations of the sura "Al Najm" of the Koran, to which Rushdie's text refers, do not use the word dream at all. Nevertheless, one may read the sura itself as betraying an anxiety about revelation, at least in its overriding concern with establishing its own authority. The sura in the text of the Koran reads: *By the star when it sinks down, your companion [Muhammad] neither strays nor is allured; neither does he speak out of whim. It is naught but a revelation inspired, taught him by one vigorous in power [Gabriel], prudent and in true nature, while poised on the uppermost horizon. Then he drew near and lower, until he was at two bow lengths distant or nearer. Then he revealed to His servant what He revealed. The heart did not falsify what he saw. Do you dispute over what he saw? ... Indeed he saw his Lord's greatest signs. Have you seen al Lat and al 'Uzza, and Manat the third, besides? Have you [begotten] males and has He [begotten] females? That is indeed an unjust partition. They are nothing but names you yourselves and your fathers named them. God has sent no authority concerning them. They [the Pagans] but follow surmise and what the souls desire, when indeed there came to them guidance from their Lord. (The Bounteous Koran 700-011) (Sawhney, 1999: 253)*



Conclusions

Why should this episode bear so much importance for a Muslim? Because it implies that the word of God is unreliable, - since it is subject to such corrections, and thus attacks the very foundation of belief.

According to Simona Sawhney,

The hidden desire of literature is to be the law itself, even as its work is to transgress the law. Literature cannot conceal its own desire to become revelation, even while its mode of narration mocks its claim to the authority of truth. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this impossible desire that makes literature "satanic." (Sawhney, 1999: 253)

She correctly points out that literature and religion fight for the same territory. Why real deaths should occur in the fight is still a question that remains to be answered.

Does this make the book an offence to Islam, a blasphemy? An attempt at an answer can be found in Damian Grant's study on Rushdie, who argues against this accusation. He says:

*Perhaps we should understand Rushdie's troublesome novel as a pilgrimage into the imagination in search of the source of religious feeling...**No novel so obsessed by the temptation of faith can be judged as blasphemous.*** (Grant, 1999: 87. My highlighting)

His view perfectly matches the arguments Rushdie himself used when defending the book against such accusations. For an attentive reader of the novel, the search Damian Grant describes is obviously genuine. In *The Satanic Verses*, as well as in his other novels, Rushdie's yearning for faith is apparent. As Fawzia Afzal-Khan put it:

...the point of view that emerges is not anti-Islam but anti-closure, opposed, in principle, to any dualistic, fixed way of looking at things. Framed in this way, Rushdie's impulse towards blasphemy becomes really an impulse towards regeneration: renewal born of a destruction of old, fixed ways of seeing and understanding. (Grant, 1999: 86)

The Satanic Verses is, therefore, a novel centered on disobedience, but it is far from being a blasphemous book. It aims towards regeneration and opposes closure: in the end, the only thing that causes a book to be 'alive' is its openness, the richness of debate and the flow of ideas following it. And there are few books surrounded by a thicker cloud of controversy than Rushdie's novel.

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