

Salman Rushdie: deconstructing the old to construct the new

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In ancient cultures words could kill. It is said that the Welsh poet Dafyd ap Gwylm, insulted by a rival at an eisteddfod, on the instant composed and recited a satire which caused his opponent's death. Today, however, while words can still hurt, the most serious injuries they bring are likely to be dealt to those who utter them.

The July 1988 report by PEN International listed 305 writers known to be imprisoned or otherwise penalised because of their writings. During the previous year 49 writers had been released, and 33 new cases of imprisonment had become known. Countries with the worst records both for numbers of prisoners and for their torture and mistreatment include Israel, Libya, South Africa, USSR, and Vietnam. In Chile and Guatemala, writers simply disappear, either from prison or when picked up in the streets. The country with the worst record in the PEN files is Turkey, with 25 known cases of imprisonment in 1988, and a further 13 reports of arrests since then. The political editor Nurettin Ozturk has disappeared, and his mother thinks he may have been killed in police custody. Others have been sentenced to death or to imprisonment for terms of between 36 and 111 years. Alleged offences include distributing illegal pamphlets, membership of banned organisations, and insulting the military forces or the state authorities.

The most notorious case in recent times of a writer suffering for his words is that of Salman Rushdie, who has been forced into hiding because his novel Satanic Verses was decreed

blasphemous by Iran's aged and autocratic leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini. The novel opens with the free fall of its two leading characters--both actors--who have been blown out of an aircraft destroyed by the female leader of a gang of terrorists. Their freefall is a symbol of the free fall of the author's imagination, just as their ejection is a symbol of the ejection of twentieth-century society from its technological comfort by the horror it has produced. Only by freefall can we recover ourselves, and Rushdie's imagination falls through the centuries to discover from Mahound, or Mohammed, the meaning of the word which brings us and our history into being.

By rewriting history, Rushdie's novels free us from established patterns and grant us the opportunity to create a new reality. In Midnight's Children the hopes of a new fellowship based on independent nationhood are destroyed as individuals struggle for power over others. In Shame the nation itself is characterised by greedy children, a rapacious dictator, and elders who view reality only one part at a time, through a hole in a sheet. In The Satanic Verses Rushdie goes back to the illusions which underlie these struggles, to the origins and history of the words and creeds with which humans explain and hide the nakedness of their desires. Rushdie produces a reality which frees us from the judgements of pagan nature, of a single God, and of an all-powerful God. He thus forces us to judge for ourselves, to take responsibility for our own actions. The violent reaction to his work is a measure of the affront this represents to our security.

I

Rushdie's three major novels are concerned with history. His characters can neither make it nor escape from it. Yet history is itself a matter of words, and therefore in principle we can remake it as we wish. But Rushdie shows that this remaking cannot escape from its origins.

In Midnight's Children, Dr Aadam Aziz--himself presumably a reincarnation of the doctor in Forster's Passage to India--is as a child involved in the history retold for him by Tai, the illiterate shikara boatman. Tai talks of the Moghul emperors, whose lives thereafter are as inevitably entwined in Aziz's life as is his time at the university of Heidelberg, where he learns European language and science. This learning ~~which~~ divides him forever from the world of Tai, who rejects him and his knowledge and eventually drives him from the valley of his birth. Yet while the valley may reject him, his own being cannot be separated from it. Although he becomes a successful academic in Agra, he carries his past with him in the person of his wife, the Reverend Mother, who refuses to accept his western ways. The divisions of this household are passed on in turn to the narrator, who is born simultaneously into the new secular India and its Moghul past. In telling his own story, he recreates this new India, yet his words are bound to the past and to the events which destroy the promise of the new nation.

Similarly, Omar Khayam Shakil, one of the central characters in Shame, is precipitated from the enclosed museum of his remote home into the power struggles of a modern Pakistan. Here he marries Sufiya Zinobia, elder daughter of General Raza Hyder and

his wife Bilquis, daughter of Mahmoud the Woman who represents the decayed glory of empire. But although Mahmoud describes himself as "the chief administrative officer of a glorious Empire" (p.59), he is no Moghul lord but proprietor of the Empire cinema in Delhi in the last days of the British Raj. Yet the last days of this cinema are more glorious than the last days of either the British or the Moghul emperors. In a gesture worthy of Akbar, he insists on screening films for audiences on both sides of the religious divide, and for his pains has his theatre burnt down by zealots in the riots which brought to birth the new states of India and Pakistan. His daughter is burnt naked in the conflagration, and so starts her new life stripped of all past identity. While the Empire is burning, Saleem and Shiva, antagonists of Midnight's Children, are being born.

The central problem of these novels is thus division, fragmentation and identity. Just as India and Pakistan are divided, so are their characters divided between these countries and between past and present, religious and secular, individual and communal. And, just as the new nations have to create a new identity from their separate and common pasts, so the characters of the novels have to create their individual identities from the fragments of history, tradition and personality they have inherited and the random events in which history embroils them. They have to act in the present to constitute themselves from both past and future, yet they can know neither. All time is continually present to them, yet it constantly hides its reality. The Satanic Verses take this intertwining of the individual and

history a stage further as the gods themselves enter history to contest reality as plurality and as unity. The divide in the novel is between the religion of the many gods revealed in the one, and the one revealed in the many. yet this divide is itself merely a matter of words, although life and death may hang on getting the words right. Yet this rightness can be found only in history, and history itself is a matter of words which deceive even as they reveal. As the repeated catch phrase has it, "it was so it was not in a time long forgot"

Rushdie's fiction produces neither a real nor an unreal world, but one at an angle. As the narrator of Shame explains, "There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality - - - My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan" (p.29). The angle is so slight that the two realities, fictitious and real, constantly collide and intersect so that one can effect the other. Thus the novelist speculates that when his own family took refuge in the Red fort from rioting mobs, they "might have felt some hint of the fictional presence of Bilquis Kemal, rushing cut and naked past them like a ghost - - - or vice versa. Yes. Or vice versa." (p.64-65) History, memory and reality are inextricably intertwined, but the words of the story-teller reveal the patterns they make in our lives.

The story-teller and his country of fiction are, however, bound by the same rules of its origin as is the world of history. When, in Midnight's Children, the narrator tries to remake his autobiography to fit his wishes, he realizes that by falsifying

his actions he has merely bound himself more strongly to history:

- - - I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred. - - - the memory of one of my earliest crimes created the (fictitious) circumstances of my last. (Midnight's Children, p.443).)

But in telling his fictional story the narrator is discharging an obligation to the real world in which power has silenced the voices of history. The narrator of Shame, on a passage which may or may not be directly historical, tells us that he has had "to invent what never happened to me" because his friend the poet, who may also be the fictional character Omar Khayam Shakil, has been tortured and silenced and will never write the quatrains of his historical namesake. Rushdie also points out that this namesake was little regarded by his own countrymen and is now known most widely through his translation into English by Edward Fitzgerald. The narrator himself is, he says, a "translated man", and while, he admits, it "is generally believed that something is always lost in translation", he clings to the notion that "something can also be gained" (p.29). Just as Rushdie's situation as "translated man" makes him representative of his time, so his books can be read as essays in translating events from time into words, and so into history. They thus return to the reader the power of words over history which the same words deny.

Words exercise their greatest power over history when they are embodied in a sacred text which can no longer be questioned. But this power raises two questions. First, how can we be sure that the text itself contains the truth, and second, how can we understand what truth the text contains. Rushdie confronts these two questions in The Satanic Verses.

The first question is raised by Mahound when in his wrestling with Gibreel he is forced to the realisation that words may deceive not only the listener but also the speaker. Convinced that he has heard the truth, he is confronted with a political demand to bargain with his God, like Abraham before Sodom. For the price of three goddesses in the temple, his religion, and therefore his God, will be accepted and the people will find salvation. But Mahound, and his alter ego Gibreel who, in this earlier incarnation is both the archangel who wrestles with Mahound and the voice whom the prophet forces to speak his inmost thoughts or visions, cannot even be sure that there is a God to make the bargain:

Today, as well as the overwhelming intensity of Mahound, Gibreel feels his despair: his doubts - - - Must I betray myself for a seat on the council? Is this sensible and wise or is it hollow and self-loving? I don't even know if the Grandee is sincere. Does he know? Perhaps not even he. I am weak, and he's strong, the offer gives him many ways of ruining me. But I, too, have much to gain. The souls of the city, of the world, surely they are worth three angels? Is Allah so unbending that he will not embrace three more to save the human race?--I don't know anything.--

Should God be proud or humble, majestic or simple, yielding or un--? What kind of idea is he? What kind am I?

(pp.110-11)

This agony of indecision leads Gibreel to speak what Mahound wants to hear, and thus causes Mahound to utter the Satanic verses of the novel's title, the verses which elevate the pagan goddesses Lat and Uzza and Manat as "exalted birds" whose intercession is desired indeed" (p.114).

Mahound's retreat from unyielding monotheism appals his few followers, heralds an orgy of madness and murder in the city of Jahilia where the proclamation is made, is rejected by Mahound's enemy, the Princess Hind, who will accept no compromise between the old and the new, and drives the prophet to another wrestling match with Gibreel, which leads to his recantation and announcement that the previous vision came not from God but from Shaitan (Satan). This recantation brings renewed persecution and causes Mahound to perform his own Hegira of flight from Jahilia. But the novel draws no distinction between the two wrestling matches. In each case Gibreel overcomes Mahound physically and is then possessed by him, forced to speak the words of Mahound's vision. Only when Mahound speaks these words to the people does his vision obtain reality and thus become active in history.

But in becoming active in history it also threatens to bring history, and with it time, to an end. Virtually every character that Gibreel meets in his nightmare incarnations is seeking such an escape from the intolerable demands of history. the exiled Iman dreams of freeing his subject people so that he can bring

them back to the word and then devour them. The peasant girl Ayesha, who shares the name of Mahound's favourite wife and of the harlot he has killed, leads her village people out from the land to death and mystic salvation beneath the waters of the Arabian Sea. Rosa Diamond returns through him to her earlier life which came to an end with the death of her gaucho lover. Mahound himself, in bringing the word of truth to Jahilia, brings an end to its history and makes it merely a part of his revelation, a site of the subjugation he preaches. The destruction of the brothel and its whores, and the execution of the poet Baal who has taunted him, symbolize the end of independent life, and therefore of the possibility of history. When the final truth is known, life is no longer possible except by denying it. Gibreel therefore must wonder whether the words he brings are in fact from God or from his antagonist, Shaitan.

The novel opposes the words of these celestial visitants to the very human actions of those who seek to make their history by the narrative of deeds rather than the revelation of truth. These include his lovers, Rekha Merchant and Alleluiah Cone, both of whom eventually plunge to their deaths from the roof of the Everest Vilas in Bombay, the various film-makers and businessmen with whom he is professionally involved, and his companion in freefall, rival and enemy, Salahuddin Chamchawala, or Saladin Chamcha, and his various allies. These allies include his estranged wife and her lover, the poet 'Jumpy' Jamshed, who are eventually killed by the police when they try to establish the truth, Muhammed Sufyan, charitable if ineffective owner of the Shaandar cafe which provides refuge to Chamcha, and Muhammed's

practical wife and daughters. The burning of this cafe during race riots both destroys the hopes of creating a new and embracing order among the richly mixed races of London and provides the occasion to end the feud between Chamcha and Gibreel.

This feud provides the structure on which the events of the novel are built. On the one hand, Gibreel ascends to higher and higher flights of vision which induce in him even greater depths of despair, until he eventually takes his own life. On the other, Chamcha retreats further into himself, undergoing metamorphosis into God's goatish antagonist, until he is freed by the admission of his own hatred for Gibreel and by Gibreel's act of reconciliation. Yet, while this act frees Chamcha to return to India and his true identity, it leaves Gibreel isolated in the knowledge of his solitariness before God.

Gibreel's ordeal begins with his passion for Alleluiah Cone, and ends only after her destruction by Chamcha and by Rekha Merchant. Chamcha, like Gibreel, is an actor, but whereas Gibreel plays countless gods in Hindi movies, Chamcha, trying to create himself as an Englishman, succeeds only in becoming the faceless man of a thousand voices, playing the voice over in television advertisements. After his freefall from the sky, he metamorphoses into a goatish devil, and survives only by being offered sanctuary over Muhammed Sufyan's Shaandar cafe. Yet he is miraculously restored when he accepts his jealousy and hatred of Gibreel and Alleluiah Cone and uses his voices to bring about their destruction. He achieves this through words spoken on the

telephone, words from a disembodied enemy. He phones them in a thousand voices which repeat scurrilous rumours and childish but Satanic verses. This process of destruction reaches its climax on the night when Brickhall is set ablaze in racial riots, and Gibreel, finally driven from her home by Alleluiah, descends on it like the angel of the apocalypse. Here, as the cafe burns, he comes across Chamcha, ³realises the truth about his persecutor, and frees him in an act of magnanimity which seals his own fate. Henceforth, Chamcha is freed from both persecution and his animal form, but Gibreel is bound to his incarnations as archangel.

Eventually Rekha, or rather her ghost, completes Alleluiah's destruction by pushing her off the Everest Vilas and so preventing her either returning to Gibreel or achieving her private dream of a solo ascent of Everest. Gibreel, now left totally alone with his nightmares, pours out his story to Chamcha and then takes his own life. The only escape from the words of God is death.

Chamcha has achieved his freedom only by stilling the ghosts of his past. Foremost among these is his father, who has thrice betrayed him. The father took him to England, denied him emotional support, and left him with the true lesson that ~~he~~ was responsible for himself and the false lesson that he could make himself whatever he wanted to be. In Chamcha's eyes, he was further betrayed when his father remarried, and again when he took his son's former nurse as his own mistress. He has thus refused his own paternal role and destroyed successive ideals of the mother. Yet, during his last illness, Changez Salhuddin teaches this son how to die, and the old trouble between them is

not healed, but simply vanishes. The words passed between the father and the constant troop of visitors restore Chamcha, now again known by his full Indian name of Salahuddin, to the human race as they reveal to him the value of human life:

A real bag of all sorts, Salahuddin thought; but marvelled, also, at how beautifully everyone behaved in the presence of the dying man: the young spoke to him intimately about their lives, as if reassuring him that life itself was invincible, offering him the rich consolation of being a member of the great procession of the human race,--while the old evoked the past, so that he knew that nothing was forgotten, nothing lost; that in spite of the years of self-imposed sequestration he remained joined to the world. Death brought out the best in people, it was good to be shown-- Salahuddin realized--that this, too, was what human beings were like: considerate, loving, even noble. We are still capable of exaltation, he thought in celebratory mood; in spite of everything, we can still transcend. (p.527)

Rushdie does not give us any of these words exchanged with the dying man, because their importance is not what they refer to but what they do. They speak the truth of which they make Salahuddin a part, but they speak it not by communication but through the primary function of language, communion. Even when Salahuddin himself finds the words he wishes to say to his father, they are spoken as a gift rather than a statement:

Now Salahuddin found better words, his Urdu returning to him after a long absence. We're all beside you, Abba. We

all love you very much. (p.530)

Salahuddin does not know for certain whether his father hears, but this does not matter so much as the fact that they are sharing almost to the last moment^{of} his father's life.

He is teaching me how to die, Salahuddin thought. He does not avert his eyes, but looks death right in the face. At no point in his dying did Changez Chamchawala speak the name of God. (p.531)

When this man who dies without illusions, confident that death is the end--"I have no illusions; I know I am not going anywhere after this"--(p.529) is carried to his grave, it is on a bier wrapped in flowers and fraⁿrance, and with a green silk covering "with Quranic verses embroidered upon it in gold" (p.533). Language matters to the end, not for what it says, for^{it} is shown to mean nothing, but as a guarantee of the human continuity that Salahuddin has discovered from his father's death. It remains only for Salahuddin to confirm his re-entry to the world of history by joining his companions in political action, acting as witness to Gibreel's story and his death, and accepting his own love for Zeenat Vakil and for his country.

The words that Salahuddin discovers at the end of the novel have the opposite function from those of Gibreel's various prophecies. The prophet, whether Marx or Mahommet, or Rushdie's fictitious Mahound, by offering absolute truth acts in history to create the laws which bind the people they seek to liberate, and thus destroy history. By reliving history in words, and then accepting words for themselves rather than for any truth they refer to, Salahuddin frees himself to act as a responsible human

in history. The cosmopolitan business^{man} like Billy Buttuta use words as commodities to manipulate others, but thereby reduce themselves to commodities to be used in their turn to satisfy the desires of others. The migrant families of Brickhall High Street try to use words to reconstruct a community from the shards of their past and the opportunities of their present, but are defeated by bigotry in power. Yet finally it is only those who, like Muhammed Sufyan, Jamshed Joshi or Salahuddin himself, learn to listen to others rather than speak their own words who find hope either for themselves or for others.

This leaves open the question of why a book devoted to the search for reconciliation should arouse such anger as to bring about a death sentence for its author. This cannot be explained merely in terms of blasphemy. Even if, in contradiction to the author's explicit statement (p.93) we identify Mahound with Mahomet, his flirtation with false goddesses is only fleeting and does not contradict the claims of his final uncompromisingly monotheistic vision. This episode of the Satanic verses is taken from a canonic Islamic source, and succeeds in achieving the author's intent of giving "a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great religion" (Salman Rushdie, 'The Book Burning', New York Review of Books, 2 March 89, p.26). His only possible offence is that he has, as he remarks in the same article, dared to confront the thought police of Islam by placing their religious phenomenon in an historical context. This act preserves the central insight of Islam, that the faithful communicate directly with their God, even if the god is secular

humanism. It does, however, contradict the right of ideologues of any faith to impose their vision, their truth, on history. By pointing to the difficulty of defining truth in words, Rushdie is true to an insight at least as old as Cervantes, that the world is always different from our understanding of it. By repeating this insight, and deconstructing the received faiths of east and west, Rushdie offers us life. It is no wonder that the agents of death have passed sentence on him, for once the word is doubted their power is destroyed. Yet unless the word is doubted it can never heal.