

THE POLITICS OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S FICTION

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explain the politics of Salman Rushdie's fiction and situate the principal debates over the publication of *The Satanic Verses* within political and literary theory. I argue here that Rushdie is a modern rather than a post-modern writer, and detail how as a writer he is drawn to the philosophies and aesthetics of modernity: secularism and socialism, modernism and surrealism. The modernity he espouses in *The Satanic Verses*, I suggest further, differs significantly from that he advocates in the Booker Prize winning *Midnight's Children*. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie espouses a Western secularism which is not, to him, alien to the Bombay and the India he was born into -- no less Indian, that is, than his family's faith in Islam. In *The Satanic Verses*, in contrast, Rushdie seeks nothing less than to articulate a modernity of the East. As a short of rival *Qur'an*, *The Satanic Verses* envisions -- and itself seeks to help bring into being -- a secular Muslim culture. Fundamental to the blossoming of said culture, the novel proposes, are secular reclamations of the grand narratives of Islam. Rushdie invites Muslims to celebrate their own sceptical philosophers and secular writers in addition to their Western counterparts, and warns against the embrace of Western secularism at the expense of Muslim culture. Provocatively, Rushdie suggests that given the Western intelligentsia's current espousal of post-modernism, one must now travel to the intellectual circles of the East to find strong defenders of modernity -- as does Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses*. Within the realm of literary theory, I conclude that post-colonial theory, with its expectation that the post-colonial writer celebrate rather than question his home culture, and post-modernism, with its assumption that one cannot interpret novels

such as *The Satanic Verses*, offer inadequate explanations of the politics of Rushdie's fiction. Within the realm of political theory I differentiate Rushdie from left-leaning philosophers such as Cornel West and Charles Taylor, who believe that modernity cannot stabilize itself without recourse to faith. If Rushdie can be said to have an affinity with a political philosopher, than that philosopher would be Jurgen Habermas, quintessential defender of modernity and critic of post-modernism.

Introduction

On February 14, 1989, the government of Iran issued a *fatwa* calling for the death of Salman Rushdie and offering a reward of one million dollars cash--in addition to eternal salvation--for his assassination. The *fatwa* was issued in response to the perceived blasphemy against Islam contained in his novel *The Satanic Verses*, which was published in Britain and nominated for the Booker Prize in 1988. An arrow has been launched, the foreign minister of Iran explained, which sooner or later must pierce its target. When the Ayatollah Khomeini died his successor reaffirmed the *fatwa* and doubled the bounty on Rushdie's head to two million.¹ The declaration of the *fatwa* against Rushdie had the immediate effect of catapulting him, until then best known in literary circles for his Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight's Children*, to the attentions of Imams, politicians and intellectuals of all fields across the globe. Rushdie's fiction had always been decidedly and aggressively political in nature, and the publications of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* had become political events in their own right. Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie in Britain for his portrayal of her and her regime in *Midnight's Children*--in it Rushdie blames Indira for much of what went wrong in India after independence, accusing her of abandoning Nehru's secular nationalism in favour of one overtly Hindu in nature and of thus inflaming communalist tensions. *Shame*, in turn, was banned in Pakistan, a country the very existence of which the novel called into question, along with the idea that the *Qur'an* could serve as the constitution for *any* state in the modern world. Rushdie was also known in his adopted home of Britain for writing controversial articles on race and religion in politics; he caused quite a stir by stating in a BBC broadcast that "[i]f you are a liberal, you say that black

1 For a detailed chronology of the first four years of the *fatwa*, see the chronology appended to *The Rushdie Letters* (Steve MacDonogh ed; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

people have problems. If you aren't, you say they are the problem. But the members of the new colony have only one real problem, and that problem is white people."² Despite these previous controversies, little of note was written on Rushdie's politics until after the *fatwa*.

The controversy over the publication of *The Satanic Verses*--what is often referred to as the Rushdie affair--has been of unprecedented political dimension for a modern work of art. The Rushdie affair, Charles Taylor writes with reference to multiculturalism, presents liberals with a cruel dilemma; for the act of choosing sides on the affair forces them to abandon the pretence of state neutrality (no longer can they maintain that a liberal constitution is value neutral with reference to conflicts between host and immigrant cultures).³ Bhikhu Parekh, in turn, suggests that multiculturalism in only one of the important issues which have to be redefined in political philosophy in light of the Rushdie affair. Rushdie, Parekh suggests, "stands at the centre of such large battles as those between Christianity and Islam, secularism and fundamentalism, Europe and its ex-colonies, the host society and its immigrants, the posts and the pre-modernists, art and religion, and between scepticism and faith."⁴ To Parekh the minimum agenda for the political philosopher in the wake of the Rushdie affair is to rethink the relationship between freedom of expression and equality, and between individual and communal rights in general.⁵ *Public Culture*, in an editorial comment on the Rushdie affair, insists on its importance to disciplines other than literary and political theory: "it is interesting that it is the Rushdie case," the editor notes by way of example, "that has pushed anthropologists beyond ethical relativism."⁶ The case "was more than a political issue," Geoffrey

² "The New Empire Within Britain," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 138.

³ Charles Taylor *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition": An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 62-63.

⁴ "The Rushdie Affair: Research Agenda for Political Philosophy," *Political Studies* (1990 v38), 696.

⁵ *ibid*, 707.

⁶ "Editor's comment," *Public Culture* (1989 v2 [1]) 127.

Wheatcroft concurs, "it was a *Kulturkampf*. It divided continent from continent, culture from culture, nation from nation; in the United States and in England it savagely divided opinion."⁷ Wheatcroft likens the Rushdie affair to the Dreyfus affair of the late nineteenth century, and calls it "a defining event of our time."⁸ I venture further that no thinker in the arts and humanities can afford to ignore it. To intelligently engage the affair is to rethink what one believes and how all of it fits together. Conservatives in Britain are forced to, in their defence of freedom of speech, question blasphemy laws which protect Christianity. Liberal theorists and practitioners of government must rethink state neutrality and multiculturalism. The more left-leaning or progressive camps in the west must come to terms with the logical implications of their own campaigns against freedom of expression. Anthropologists and literary critics must ponder anew ethical relativism. Theorists of international relations must attest if the *fatwa* represents the dawn of an age Samuel Huntington has predicted will be dominated by the clash of civilizations, not ideologies. Scholars and practitioners of Islam must decide if sceptical Muslims will be allowed to think write dream what they will. All of this because of a book.

Taylor and Parekh's claims about the importance of the debate are warranted. As a sort of rival *Qur'an*, *The Satanic Verses* envisions--and itself seeks to help bring into being--a secular Muslim culture. The specific criticisms Rushdie makes in the novel of the text and practice of Islam--such as that pertaining to Islam's treatment of women--are themselves commonplace, and have become controversial mostly due to the manner in which they are articulated. What is remarkable in Rushdie's retelling of the birth of Islam, in "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia," is his salvaging of the Muslim skeptical tradition, a tradition he sees nascent at the time of revelation itself. Rushdie dreams a shadow Mahound, the poet Baal, a man who refuses to submit to

⁷ "The Friends of Salman Rushdie," *The Atlantic* (March 1994) 22.

⁸ *ibid.*

Mahound and his God, and who is able to move beyond the idea of God. It is remarkable that Baal voice these now commonplace criticisms, and that he voice them *then*. Fundamental to the blossoming of a secular Muslim culture, Rushdie proposes in *The Satanic Verses*, are secular reclamations of the grand narrative of the *Qur'an* itself. This is an extraordinarily ambitious and provocative idea, of which Rushdie's revisionist portrayal of the prophet Muhammad constitutes only a part. Rushdie invites Muslims to celebrate their own skeptical philosophers and secular writers, and warns against the embrace of Western secularism at the expense of Muslim culture. Provocatively, one of the protagonists of the frame narrative of *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha, embraces both the secularist and Marxist facets of modernity in a voyage from West to East, and not, as to be expected, the reverse. Saladin's voyage represents a reversal of the equation Rushdie presents in *Shame*. In *Shame* Rushdie travels East to understand the ethics of shame--of the pre-modern world. Contemporary Pakistan is likened to medieval Europe. Time, or history, has come to a halt, and dictators manipulate religion to perpetuate themselves in power. In a tone which is reminiscent of that of *The Economist* when it gives advice to the political elites of 'backward' countries; the narrator of *Shame* recommends to the leaders of Pakistan the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality, "all available from stock at short notice," with which they are to build a post-Islamic Pakistan.⁹ *Midnight's Children* in turn, for all its Indiannes, like *Shame* does no more than advocate a secular and Western framework of government for the Indian subcontinent. *The Satanic Verses* constitutes a far more ambitious work than either *Midnight's Children* or *Shame* because in it Rushdie seeks nothing less to articulate a modernity of the East.

Unfortunately, the debates Taylor and Parekh sketched on *The Satanic Verses* have been mostly side-stepped so far. Much of the blame for this, I suggest, can be attributed to the assumption that *The Satanic Verses* is not only

⁹ *Shame* (London: Picador, 1983), 251.

unreadable¹⁰ but *uninterpretable*—that, as Brad Leithauser puts it, the book "is so dense a layering of dreams of hallucinations that any attempt to extract an unalloyed line of argument is false to its intention."¹¹ David Birch lodges a similar complaint regarding the side-stepping of the debate on the politics of *Midnight's Children*, in his article "Postmodernist Chutneys."¹² Writing ten years after the publication of the Booker Prize winning novel, Birch complains that the assumption that *Midnight's Children* is an open text has made a discussion of its politics all but impossible. *Midnight's Children* is not, Birch states, an open text—not a 'postmodernist chutney'. If *Midnight's Children* reveals Rushdie's affinity with a philosopher and a philosophy, Birch suggests, then that philosopher is Jurgen Habermas,¹³ quintessential defender of modernity and critic of post-modern philosophers.¹⁴ Leithauser writes of how *The Satanic Verses* is intentionally constructed as an open text, but this is yet to be shown—as in the case of scholarship on *Midnight's Children*, the premise that Rushdie is a writer of post-modern fiction (from which follows the conclusion that Rushdie's line of argument cannot be ascertained) is assumed rather than argued for. *The Satanic Verses*, Rudolf Bader ventures, is "a playful meta-text created by a fanciful, imaginative mind,"¹⁵ the book can be only be understood if the reader is familiar with "the liberating irrationality of postmodernist magic realism."¹⁶ In explaining why Muslims deem *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous, Akhtar, Jussawalla, and Kabbani offer close readings of "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia" (the two

¹⁰ That *The Satanic Verses* is 'unreadable' was already a cliché a year after the fatwa (as Rushdie himself complains in "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 412), and the assumption remains, five years later, to help muddle the debate (as Wheatcroft complains in "The Friends of Salman Rushdie," 28).

¹¹ in *The New Yorker* (May 15th 1989, pg 127), as cited by Malise Ruthven in *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the rage of Islam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) 132.

¹² "Postmodernist Chutneys," *Textual Practice* (1991 v5 [1] 1-7).

¹³ "Postmodernist Chutneys," 7.

¹⁴ See Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990).

¹⁵ "The Satanic Verses: An Intercultural Experiment," *International Fiction-Review* (1992 v19 [2],) 72.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 75.

chapters which retell the birth of Islam) as well as detailing these passages' concordance with the novel as a whole.¹⁷ In arguing that the novel is not offensive to Muslims, Rudolf Bader offers no more than disconnected snippets of the text, preferring to found his argument on comparably eclectic references to critical theory. Post-structuralist critics lack their structuralist colleagues' penchant for scientific inquiry, and are thus unlikely to even *attempt* to establish *The Satanic Verses* as an open text (which would imply, at the very least, arguing that the novel can be read both as an affirmation and as a refutation of faith). Whereas a structuralist such as Umberto Eco grounds his arguments on the open nature of Joyce's texts on a close reading of how they are constructed,¹⁸ post-structuralist or post-modernist critics think it enough to make broad references to the presence of dreams and complex references in the text in warranting their assumption that *The Satanic Verses* is post-modern. Some seem to operate on a short-hand version of post-modernism--which bears little resemblance to post-modernism as brilliantly articulated by Jonathan Culler in *On Deconstruction*¹⁹ -- by which they understand that any text which juggles many narratives and perspectives at once (or perhaps just any work of contemporary literature which is difficult to read) is post-modern.²⁰ Unlike Culler, and unlike Birch,²¹ those who insist on interpreting Rushdie as a writer of post-modern fiction demonstrate little if any sign of having engaged Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard or even

¹⁷ Shabbir Ahktar, *Be Careful with Muhammad: The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989); Feruza Jussawalla, "Resurrecting the Prophet: The Case of Salman the Otherwise," *Public Culture* (1989 v2 [1] 106-117); Rana Kabbani, *Letter to Christendom*.

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *L'oeuvre Ouverte* (Paris: Editions du Soleil, 1965). One should not deduce from Eco's argument on Joyce that *all* novels since Joyce (or even just novels influenced by Joyce) are open texts. Eco himself warns against such a mistake in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Jonathan Culler *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²⁰ Of those critics cited here, this statement holds true for Bader, Cundy, DuVernet, Leithauser, Srivastava and Wright.

²¹ It is evident from Birch's article and from his *Language, Literature and Critical Practice: Ways of Analyzing Text* (London: Routledge, 1989) that Birch is well acquainted with postmodern philosophy and literary theory.

introductory texts on post-modern philosophy. Aruna Srivastava's attempt to liken the political philosophies of Salman Rushdie (in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*) and Mahatma Gandhi to those of Nietzsche and Foucault, for example, is outright embarrassing.²²

The debate on modernity in *The Satanic Verses* starts, as Birch suggests, with *Midnight's Children*. What Birch affirms, I will argue for here--that *Midnight's Children* is a decidedly modern, not post-modern, piece. Most of the confusion surrounding the politics of *Midnight's Children*, I suggest in Chapter 1, can be traced to Rushdie's desire to make his argument for a secular government in India sound not Western (which indeed it is) but Indian. I devote three separate chapters to *The Satanic Verses*. In the first I discuss the political significance of the frame narrative of the novel, in which Gibreel Farishta discovers faith as he journeys West, and Saladin Chamcha discovers modernity as he journeys East. In the second I touch upon the question of the offensiveness of the chapters in which Rushdie reclaims the narrative of the *Qur'an* for his secular Muslim culture. Finally, in the third, I address the frequently articulated claim that the chapters which retell the Hawkes Bay Incident, "Ayesha" and "The Parting of the Arabian Sea," constitute an affirmation of faith and a refutation of modernity (and thus the loose thread in Rushdie's anti-*Qur'an*). In my conclusion I sketch some of the principal ramifications of my argument for literary and political theory.

There is a certain sense of urgency to the understanding of Rushdie's politics. With the political spotlight on an 'unreadable' book, what literary critics and other academics write and fail to write on the affair is not inconsequential to political events themselves. Given the importance of the issues at hand, side-stepping the debate itself constitutes a political act, as demonstrated by the development of the debate over the affair in Britain. Historian of Islam Malise

²² Aruna Srivastava, "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and history in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*," *ARIEL* 1989 v20 (4) 62-78.

Ruthven toured Bradford and other British cities with large Muslim communities in the wake of the *fatwa* and she describes some of the conferences set up by the government to foster a spirit of understanding between Rushdieites and anti-Rushdieites. In one such conference, literary critic Ian Wright sought to explain to his largely Muslim audience that *The Satanic Verses* had to be understood within the context of 'postmodern magic realism.' A Muslim member of the audience protested that the novel was offensive--that any real attempt to reach an understanding between Rushdieites and anti-Rushdieites had to address the question of the novel's offensiveness. Wright insisted that in relation to Rushdie's novel one can talk not of meaning but only of "the different *levels* of meaning that could be extrapolated from his text."²³ If only Muslims were well versed in literary criticism, Wright implied, they would understand the inappropriateness of deeming post-modern magic realist texts offensive or inoffensive. The question of offence is particularly significant in Britain, given the continued existence of blasphemy laws there which protect Christianity against works deemed blasphemous. The most recent and relevant precedent invoked in the discussion of the Rushdie affair is the *Gay News* case of 1977. At that time the magazine was convicted of blasphemous libel for its publication of a poem by James Kirkup, "The Love That Dares to Speak its Name," a fantasy in which the centurion who removes Christ from the cross fornicates with his corpse.²⁴ The verdict, the result of a private prosecution, was upheld on appeal and in the House of Lords. Eleven years later members of the Muslim community demanded that these blasphemy laws be broadened to include faiths other than Christianity. Shabbir Akhtar and Rana Kabbani published books arguing--with close reference to the text of *The Satanic Verses*--that Rushdie's novel was

²³ As opposed--presumably--to talking of the different (and potentially offensive) *meanings* that can be extrapolated from a text. Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair*, 132, my italics.

²⁴ Wheatcroft provides the plot description for the poem in "The Friends of Salman Rushdie," 30, but Malise Ruthven provides a much richer discussion of the *Gay News* case as precedent in *A Satanic Affair*.

offensive to Islam, in such a manner that if it had concerned Christ and not Muhammad, Christians would want it banned.²⁵ Christian leaders in Britain--the Archbishop of Canterbury among them--proved sympathetic to arguments such as those put forth by Akhtar and Kabbani, acknowledging that the choice the British government faced was that of either revoking the blasphemy laws or--as they preferred--amending them to protect Islam. The British government did neither--acquiescing in the assumption that Rushdie's unreadable book was--as so many literary critics claimed--also incapable of offence. To the perceived offence contained in *The Satanic Verses*, British Muslims added that of being told that they are not well read enough to ascertain if they should be offended by Rushdie's book, and that of knowing that that the British legal system will continue to protect Christianity but not Islam against perceived blasphemy. Criticism such as Wright's exacerbates the tension between host and Muslim cultures, and his argument should not pass unexamined. Both in societies in which the novel was banned, and in those in which it was not, an understanding of Rushdie's politics opens a door into the significance of freedom of speech and of censorship. Most Muslim governments other than Iran, *The New York Times* comments, apparently hope "that the Rushdie issue will simply go away."²⁶ But of course, as the example of Britain shows, the Rushdie affair and its consequences will not go away.

²⁵ Shabbir Ahktar, *Be Careful with Mubammad: The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989); Rana Kabbani, *Letter to Christendom*.

²⁶ "No slur to Islam in Rushdie talk, President insists," *The New York Times* (A:7, December 1 1993).

Chapter 1 *Midnight's Children*: Rushdie dreams a secular India

"We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell." Jawaharlal Nehru, Independence night.¹

Rushdie's Indian politics, and the manner in which they are articulated in *Midnight's Children*, are best understood in terms of a series of paradoxes. "At the heart the idea of India," Rushdie writes, "there is a paradox: that its component parts, the States which coalesced into the union, are ancient historical entities, with cultures and independent existences going back many centuries; whereas India itself is a mere thirty-seven years old. And yet it is the 'new-born' India, the baby, so to speak, the Central government, that holds sway over the greybeards."² The baby, further, differs significantly from the greybeards regarding the principles upon which India should be governed: "[h]ere is another of the paradoxes at the heart of the India-idea: that the ethic of independence movement, and of the independent State, has always been secular; yet there can be few nations on earth in which religion plays a more direct or central role in the citizens' daily lives."³ Secularism, Rushdie confesses, "has been much under attack of late, outside India as well as inside it;" but it is nonetheless "a paradoxical fact" that secularism "is the only way of safeguarding the constitutional, civil, human, and yes, religious rights of minority groups."⁴ However counter-intuitive the enterprise of a secular framework of government for India may seem, Rushdie insists it is better than a "Hindu *imperium*"—the baby must have its way, lest the greybeards take to bickering among themselves, "and produce civil unrest on a scale that would dwarf the Partition troubles."⁵

¹ Cited in *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991, page 136). In this chapter references to *Midnight's Children* will be included in parenthesis and those to all other sources in footnotes.

² "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 41.

³ "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 42-3.

⁴ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 2.

⁵ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 385.

Also under attack of late, Rushdie confesses, is the idea that the Indian writer who writes from outside India can write of the heart of India, can determine what the facts of Indian politics are. The Indian writer who writes from outside India, Rushdie admits, may be obliged "to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost."⁶ "But," he protests, "there is [what else?] a paradox here. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed."⁷ Rushdie is particularly concerned with what the Indian press has written on *Midnight's Children*; that "the despair of the writer from-outside," and particularly the despair of *his* own narrator in *Midnight's Children*, "may indeed look a little easy, a little pat."⁸ "But I do not see the book as despairing or nihilistic," he protests:

What I tried to do was to set up a tension in the text, a paradoxical opposition between the form and content of the narrative. The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-generation. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems.' The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can really be termed a despairing work.⁹

The pessimism of Saleem's story is to be attenuated, then, by the optimism inherent in his manner of telling it; Rushdie claims to have constructed what can only be termed—to borrow a term of Edward Said's which Rushdie is so fond of—a *pessoptimistic*¹⁰ novel. It is not surprising, then, that *Midnight's Children* has begot both optimistic and pessimistic critics. The optimists tend to be Western, and to focus on Rushdie's celebration of 'the infinite possibilities of the country' at the complete expense of consideration of why Saleem's story leads him to despair; on form at the expense of content.¹¹ The pessimists, as Rushdie

⁶ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 11.

⁷ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 11.

⁸ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 16.

⁹ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 16.

¹⁰ "On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Edward Said," *Imaginary Homelands*, 174-5.

¹¹ The sort of critic that writes not of Rushdie's India but of his *Indianness*. Rushdie criticizes this kind of criticism in "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist," *Imaginary Homelands*, 61-70.

acknowledges on more than one occasion, tend to be Indian,¹² much more knowledgeable about--and thus concerned with--Saleem's story, and not nearly as dazzled by the Indianness of Rushdie's form.

The series of paradoxes through which Rushdie explains the politics of India and *Midnight's Children*, coupled with the contradictory nature of the criticism the novel has inspired, may seem to warrant the assumption that the novel has been constructed as an open text and that extracting an unalloyed line of argument from its pages is false to its intention. But such an assumption is not warranted; if anything the paradoxical truths Rushdie advocates are remarkably understandable and consistent, and they invite, rather than make impossible, a debate on his Indian politics. Rushdie's use of the term paradox represents a necessary acknowledgment of the inherent contradictions in his Indian politics and in his relationship to India as a writer-from-outside. It would be naive for Rushdie to ignore the contradiction involved in advocating a secular framework of government for the least secular of nations, or that in his belief that the writer-from-outside India has as privileged, if not more, an insight into India than his counterpart in Delhi or Bombay. These are both, as he puts it, paradoxical truths. But they are also, he insists, necessary truths. India, and Indian literature, he fears, are increasingly defined in less paradoxical, and consistently Hindu, terms. By way of example Rushdie cites a seminar on Indian writer in English in 1982 where an eminent Indian academic delivered a paper on Indian culture "that utterly ignored all minority communities," and where a distinguished novelist began his contribution by reciting a Sanskrit *sloka* and declaring that "[e]very educated Indian will understand what I've just said."¹³ Rushdie traces this redefinition of Indian literature and society in overtly Hindu terms to the authoritarian rule of Indira Gandhi between 1974 and 1977 known as the

¹² "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987," 33, and "Imaginary Homelands," 16, *Imaginary Homelands*.

¹³ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 2.

Emergency. It was during the Emergency, he writes, that the government of Indira Gandhi "abandoned its policy of representing the coalition of minorities, and began to transform itself into an overtly Hindu party. Not only Hindu, but Hindi."¹⁴ "The reason why so many of us were outraged by the Emergency went beyond the dictatorial atmosphere of those days, beyond the jailing of opponents and the forcible sterilizations;" by adopting an overtly Hindu nationalism, Rushdie suggests, Indira Gandhi's Congress took the lid off "the Pandora's box of communal discord."¹⁵ "Such actions invariably bring forth reactions," Rushdie expands, "and the growth of communalist policies in India stemmed this shift by the ruling party. From Hindu nationalism sprang separatism of all sorts; if Hindustan was really to be turned into the home of Hindus, no wonder some Sikhs began to talk of a homeland."¹⁶ "It has seemed to me, ever since it happened," Rushdie reiterates, "that the imposition of the Emergency was an act of folly comparable to the opening of that legendary box; and that many of the evils besetting India today—notably the resurgence of religious extremism—can be traced back to those days of dictatorship and State violence."¹⁷ Against the bleak prospect of the dawn of a Hindu *imperium*, Rushdie insists on the viability of a secular framework of government. "Secularism, for India," Rushdie writes, "is not simply a point of view; it is a question of survival."¹⁸ Indian secularism is, then, a necessary paradox.

Authors do not choose the books they write, Rushdie states in reference to *The Satanic Verses*.¹⁹ Neither, I add, do they choose their critics. In the process of advocating a secular and thoroughly Western framework for government in India, Rushdie set up a tension between the content and form of *Midnight's Children*, to make it clear it was Indira's India, not India itself, he was

¹⁴ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 386.

¹⁵ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 3.

¹⁶ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 386.

¹⁷ "Dynasty," *Imaginary Homelands*, 52.

¹⁸ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 404.

¹⁹ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 408.

disenchanted with--that his "pickles of history," as Saleem phrases it, "are, despite everything, acts of love" (550). Rushdie did such a good job of celebrating India that Western critics seem yet to stumble upon the idea that he was doing anything else in his pessoptimistic novel. Winner of the Booker Prize in 1981, and of the Booker of Bookers in 1993 (as the best novel in the twenty-five year history of the award), *Midnight's Children* has been swamped by optimistic criticism. *Midnight's Children* is heralded for its Indianness: its allegedly Indian conceptions of time and history, the Indian manner in which it denounces British colonialism.²⁰ The only thing which is not deemed Indian is its politics: Rushdie's portrayal of the history of independent India, which takes up roughly four-hundred out of the novel's five-hundred pages, has yet to be examined as anything more than a celebration of India and a critique of colonialism. Of the twelve articles written on Rushdie's treatment of history in *Midnight's Children* so far,²¹ not a single one considers the need to the novel's discussion of the policies of Jawarharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Thirteen years after the publication of Rushdie's pessoptimistic novel, it is not hard to understand why Rushdie wrote that "[i]n the case of *Midnight's Children* I certainly felt that if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West."²² Indian critics and readers did not reject the work, but they did deem it "despairing" and "nihilistic,"²³ and it is important to know why they did so, given the degree to which scholarship on *Midnight's Children* dictates how Rushdie's other novels are read. *Midnight's Children* does not, as Srivastava and Riemenschneider have it, favourably juxtapose Indian notions of history and time with those of the West. Quite on the contrary: Rushdie insists

²⁰ See, for example, Aruna Srivastava's "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*" (ARIEL 1989 October v20 [4] 62-78) and Dieter Riemenschneider's "History and the Individual in Anita's Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," (World Literature Written in English 1984 Winter v 23 [1] 196-207).

²¹ As of June 1993 CD-ROM edition of the MLA International Bibliography.

²² "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 19-20.

²³ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 16.

on a modern framework of government for India in *Midnight's Children*, and on a modern and Western concept of history and time in "In God We Trust."

In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie seeks to give the lie not only to the official facts but also to the official--and overtly Hindu--ideology of the Emergency.

Midnight's Children, as Rushdie points out, is not a guide-book to or encyclopaedia of India,²⁴ and neither should it be interpreted as such. But I agree further with Rushdie that--as he writes in relation to Attenborough's film of Gandhi--"artistic selection creates meaning."²⁵ Rushdie leaves on the cutting-room floor, I venture, much of what might have complicated his favourable juxtaposition of Nehru's secular nationalism with Indira's overtly Hindu nationalism. The single most significant cut is that of the influence of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals in independence and in the independent state.

In dreaming an India where the ethic of the independence movement and of the independent state has always been secular, Rushdie downplays the significance of Mahatma Gandhi to both. When Richard Attenborough downplays *Nehru's* significance to independence in his film *Gandhi*, Rushdie protests that "[t]he film, by turning Nehru into Bapuji's acolyte, manages to castrate itself."²⁶ "Nehru was not Gandhi's disciple," Rushdie explains,

They were equals, and they argued fiercely. Their debate was central to the freedom movement--Nehru, the urban sophisticate who wanted to industrialize India, to bring it into the modern age, versus the rural, handcraft-loving, sometimes medieval figure of Gandhi: the country lived this debate, and it had to choose. India chose Gandhi with its heart, but in terms of practical politics, it chose Nehru. One can understand nothing about the nature of India's independence unless one understands the conflict between these two great men.²⁷

Mahatma was a profoundly religious man: he prayed twice a day, and his religious convictions ran deeper than his socialism.²⁸ His socialism, in turn,

²⁴ "Errata': Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," *Imaginary Homelands*, 25.

²⁵ "Attenborough's Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 103.

²⁶ "Attenborough's Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 105.

²⁷ "Attenborough's Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 105.

²⁸ For this brief contrast of Nehru's and Mahatma Gandhi's political visions I have drawn from David Eugene Smith's *India as a Secular State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

owed more to John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy than to Marx; instead of the modernization of society through state intervention Mahatma wanted the presence of the state reduced, allowing for a return to a society Rushdie would term "rural, handcraft-loving, and sometimes medieval." Jawarharlal Nehru, influenced by the philosophy of Marx and the experience of many visits to the U.S.S.R. and China, placed a great emphasis on state secularism and state socialism, and was less of a traditionalist and of a conservative than Gandhi. Gandhi was fond of citing similarities between Hindu scriptures, the *Bible* and the *Qu'ran*; he believed a tolerant discourse of religious syncretism, reminiscent of Hinduism, could accommodate all the people of India. Nehru insisted instead on a secular framework for the state. *One can understand nothing about the nature of India's independence unless one understands the conflict between these two great men.* Yet the conflict between these two great men is absent from *Midnight's Children*, a novel very much concerned with independence and which devotes no less than one hundred twenty-three pages--which make up *Book One*--to the final formative years of the independence movement (1919-1947). Saleem acknowledges Mahatma Gandhi's hold on the Indian people by depicting a scene in Amritsar, 1919:

Leaflet newspaper mosque and wall are crying: *Hartal!* Which is to say, literally speaking, a day of mourning, of stillness, of silence. But this is India in the heyday of Mahatma, when even language obeys the instructions of Gandhiji, and the word has acquired, under his influence, new resonances. *Hartal--April 7*, agree mosque newspaper wall and pamphlet, because Gandhi has decreed that the whole of the India, shall, on that day, come to a halt. To mourn, in peace, the continuing presence of the British.
(32)

And Saleem illustrates Mahatma's popularity again by describing the commotion in a movie theatre at the announcement of Mahatma's death: "[t]he audience had begun to scream before he finished; the poison of his words entered their veins--there were grown men rolling in the aisles clutching their bellies, not laughing but crying, *Hai Ram! Hai Ram!*--and women tearing their hair" (169). Nothing

within the universe of *Midnight's Children* justifies such a commotion, however; Mahatma and his ideals have simply been edited out of Saleem's India. Rushdie does not even voice the criticisms he has of Mahatma's and which he expresses elsewhere²⁹ --the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals to the independence movement and to independent India is simply dismissed by Saleem's imagination. When he juxtaposes Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in his non-fiction, Rushdie does not edit out the complicating variable of Mahatma Gandhi:

Her use of the cult of the mother--of Hindu mother-goddess symbols and allusions--and the idea of *shakti*, of the fact that the dynamic element of the Hindu pantheon is represented as female--was calculated and shrewd, but one feels that this, too, would have disturbed her father, who had never been in favour of Mahatma Gandhi's use of Hindu mysticism. Jawaharlal saw the divisiveness implicit in the elevating of any one Indian ethic over the others; Indira, less squeamish, became, by the end, too much a Hindu and too little a national leader.³⁰

By taking Mahatma Gandhi out of the equation of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie manages to present Indira's Hindu mysticism--and not Nehru's secularism--as discordant with the India idea, as if Hindu mysticism had not played a prominent role in the struggle for independence, as if it had no redeemable history in the history of Indian independence. Rushdie stacks the cards in favour of secularism in India, by presenting Indira's authoritarian and chauvinistic Hindu mysticism as the only option to the secularist ethic of Nehru.

The near absence of Mahatma Gandhi in the novel allows Saleem to equate the ethic of independence to that of Nehru. The children of midnight which the title refers to are the children of independence; born like Saleem at the precise moment of India's arrival at independence, they are "mysteriously handcuffed to history," their destinies "indissolubly chained" to that of India (3). And yet, as the presence of Nehru and the absence of Mahatma in the novel makes clear, Rushdie's midnight's children are not so much the children of independence as they are the children of *Nehru's* independence. "We have to build the noble mansion of free India," Rushdie cites Nehru at the moment of

²⁹ "Attenborough's Gandhi," *Imaginary Homelands*, 105-6.

³⁰ "Dynasty," *Imaginary Homelands*, 50.

independence and of Saleem's birth, "where all her children may dwell" (136). Further, Rushdie conjures up a letter from Nehru to baby Saleem, making indissoluble the link between Saleem's fate and that of Nehru's India: "Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient fate of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of *our* own" (143, my italics). References to Nehru's letter recur in the text, constantly identifying Saleem not only with independence but with Nehru. At the age of eleven Saleem is able to convene the children of midnight in a telepathic conference--the Midnight's Children's Conference. The MCC is a forum where children from different regions, castes, languages and faiths can chat freely; where all of India's children may dwell. "Below the surface transmissions--the front-of-the-mind stuff which is what I had originally been picking up," Saleem explains, "language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words" (200). The Midnight's Children's Conference, I suggest, represents nothing less than the noble mansion which Nehru dreamt of but never came into being. In *Midnight's Children* the MCC is destroyed by a direct order of Indira Gandhi.

"Today the papers are talking about the supposed rebirth of Mrs. Indira Gandhi," Saleem--the narrator of *Midnight's Children*--complains, "Today, perhaps, we are already forgetting, sinking willingly into the insidious clouds of amnesia; but I remember, and will set down how I--how she--how it [Indira's days in power] happened" (460). This, Rushdie writes in his non-fiction, the proper function of literature. "Writers and politicians are natural rivals," Rushdie writes, "[b]oth groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory."³¹ Literature, he writes with reference to the Emergency in India, "can and perhaps must give the lie to official facts."³² After returning to

³¹ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 14.

³² *ibid.*

power in 1979, Rushdie explains, Indira Gandhi's major objective was "to achieve a personal rehabilitation, to obliterate the memory of the Emergency and its atrocities, to be cleansed of its taint, absolved of history."³³ Rushdie cites by way of example an interview Indira gave to the BBC:

she said that there were some people around who claimed that bad things had happened during the Emergency, forced sterilizations, things like that; but, she stated, this was all false. Nothing of the type had ever occurred. The interviewer, Mr Robert Kee, did not probe the this statement at all. Instead he told Mrs Gandhi and the *Panorama* audience that she had proved, many times over, her right to be called a democrat.³⁴

This interview was representative of the acquiescence of media and politicians in Indira's rehabilitation, Rushdie suggests, "[s]he told the world that the horror stories about the Emergency were all fictions; and the world allowed her to get away with the lie"--probably, Rushdie suggests, because capital both in India and in the West "saw that a rehabilitated Mrs Gandhi would be of great use, and set about inventing her."³⁵ Rushdie sets his novel against this re-invention of Indira Gandhi, writing a contraband history of Indira's atrocities--of the "bad things" the world seemed ready to forget. Rushdie possesses the rather immodest conviction that he has succeeded, by writing *Midnight's Children*, in determining how Indira Gandhi will be remembered by history--that his novel goes some way towards refusing her the absolution she so much desired. This conviction is evident in a letter Rushdie writes Rajiv Gandhi at the time of the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in India. Rushdie tells Rajiv not to think that Indira's rehabilitation could survive the legacy of *Midnight's Children*; while the present belongs to politicians, the future, Rushdie ventures, belongs to art.³⁶ "Thirty jars stand upon a shelf," Saleem writes in the novel's last chapter, referring to the thirty chapters which have preceded it, "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (549). "One day, perhaps," Saleem continues, "the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be

³³ "Dynasty," *Imaginary Homelands*, 51.

³⁴ "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands*, 14.

³⁵ "Dynasty," *Imaginary Homelands*, 51.

³⁶ "Open Letter to Rajiv Gandhi," *The New York Times* (October 19 1989).

overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth" (550). Saleem's pickles proved too strong for Indira's palate and she took Salman Rushdie to court in Britain for his portrayal of her.³⁷ In *Midnight's Children*, as in Rushdie's non-fiction, the damage done by Indira's Emergency to Indian political life transcends "the jailing of opponents and the forcible sterilizations."³⁸ In the novel the social worker in charge of sterilizing Saleem herself explains the broader political significance of the Emergency. "The people of India worship our Lady like a god. Indians are only capable of worshipping one God" (521). "What about the pantheon," Saleem protests, "the three hundred and thirty million gods of Hinduism alone? And Islam and bodhisattvas..." (521). "Oh, yes! My God, *millions* of gods, you are right!" she interjects as Saleem begins to venture outside the Hindu pantheon, "But all manifestations of the same OM" (521, italics in original). The syncretism she speaks of is exclusive to Muslims and other religious minorities in India, as she implicitly acknowledges with her next question: "You are Muslim, you know what is OM? Very well. For the masses, our Lady is a manifestation of the OM" (521).

Within Saleem's India, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the paradox of a secular India is both desirable and obtainable. Outside of the realm of fiction, however, it is sufficient to check Rushdie's argument for a secular India against its sources for its faults to appear. "[W]e cannot discuss religion in the modern world," Rushdie writes, "even in such societies such as India or Ummah-Islam, as if it still operated in the world before the rise of the nation-state."³⁹ On the significance of the rise of the nation-state to the understanding of the role of

³⁷ Ruthven mentions the case in passing in *A Satanic Affair*.

³⁸ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 3.

³⁹ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 381.

religion in the modern world, Rushdie draws from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*:

Anderson warns against the idea that the imagined communities of nations simply grew out of the decaying bodies of the imagined communities of faith and the dynastic realms that supported them. Rather, he argues, quoting Erich Auerbach and Walter Benjamin,⁴⁰ the crucial change was in our apprehension of time. Time, in the imagined community of Christendom, was held to be near its end; and also contained the idea of simultaneity--God's eye could see all moments, past, present, and future, so that the here and now was only part of the eternal. Benjamin calls this 'Messianic time'. Our modern concept of time, by contrast, is guided by ticking clocks. It moves forward. It is a 'homogeneous, empty time, in Benjamin's phrase. And, says Anderson, 'the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogy of the idea of the nation.' ... When religion enters the political arena today, then, it does so as an event in linear time; that is, as part of the world of the nation-state, and not a rejection of it.⁴¹

Rushdie understands that some of history's participants-- such as the Iranian revolution's Ali Shariati--may want to turn back the clock, to stage "a revolt against history," but he notes that despite Shariati's best efforts "time in Iran has persisted in running forward."⁴² As Rushdie cites Friedrich Durrenmatt elsewhere, "What has once been thought cannot be unthought"⁴³ --once the modern conception of time had been thought, the notion of a theocracy became obsolete. "[W]hat Pakistan has been discovering, very painfully," Rushdie suggests, "is that no religion is any longer a sufficient basis for a society. The world has changed too much for that."⁴⁴ He hopes India will learn from Pakistan's experience and preserve its secular framework of government--rather than becoming "a Hindu *imperium*."⁴⁵

Following Anderson Rushdie stresses the need to understand the predominantly nationalistic nature of the Iranian revolution, and of other

⁴⁰ More specifically, Anderson cites Auerbach's *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), and Benjamin's *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973).

⁴¹ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 381-2. Rushdie quotes here from the first chapter of Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁴² "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 383 and 384 respectively.

⁴³ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 410.

⁴⁴ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 387.

⁴⁵ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 385.

contemporary religious revivals. Imagined communities of faith have been broken up into nation-states, so it no longer makes to speak of Muslim and Arab nations as a "united, unified, homogeneous" community,⁴⁶ even if the resurrection of such a community and the abolishment of the nation-state is advocated by Iranian leaders such as Ali Shariati and the Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴⁷ Today the imagined community of Islam fails to transcend national identity even *within* Muslim nation-states such as Pakistan, where the Punjabi, Sindhi and Baloch nationalisms of old are again in evidence --"a very clear demonstration," to Rushdie, "of the impracticability of trying to place religious beliefs at the centre of contemporary politics."⁴⁸ And the clock cannot be turned back (assuming there is in fact a will to do so), because the conditions which made possible the existence of imagined communities no longer exist. What enabled Christianity and Islam to be imagined communities, "international groupings whose unities existed in the minds of the believers," Rushdie writes borrowing from Anderson,

was the existence of sacred languages through which the religions could be mediated to many different people speaking many different tongues. These languages, and the role of the literate elites as the mediators of the languages to the largely illiterate masses... provided the underpinning substructure of the great universal faiths. The decline in power of the sacred languages and their interpreters, and the parallel rise in the idea of the nation, changed the world's relationship to belief in the most fundamental way.⁴⁹

The imagined community of Islam, Anderson writes, lacked the idea "of a world so separate from language that all languages are equidistant (and thus interchangeable) signs for it;" ontological reality, then, was "apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of representation"--here Qur'anic Arabic.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 382.

⁴⁷ "Rhetoric, however memorable, remains rhetoric," Rushdie writes, arguing that "any examination of the facts will demonstrate the rifts, the lack of homogeneity and unity, characteristic of present-day Islam. The murky war between Iran and Iraq reveals, if it reveals nothing else, the primarily nationalistic character of the States involved." Pages 384 and 383 respectively, "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*.

⁴⁸ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 387.

⁴⁹ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 381.

⁵⁰ *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 21-22.

Print language, however, brought nationalism,⁵¹ and made impossible the return to a world where reality was mediated primarily by the interpreters of sacred languages. The rise of the nation-state, then, is no more reversible than the invention of the printing press. Nationalism, Rushdie affirms citing Tom Nairn, "always moves forward while claiming to look back, in a kind of progress-by-regression," and that is why, Rushdie believes, Khomeini managed to produce the semblance of a revolt against history with his nationalist revolution.⁵²

A return to the imagined community of faith is no more an option in Pakistan than in the Muslim world in general; it has been rendered impossible by the fact of nationality. But Rushdie does believe, however, that within plural societies such as India and Pakistan, secular nationalisms may be able to capture the imagination, respectively, of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, and of Punjabis, Sindhis and Balochis. This is where Rushdie differs from Anderson and Hobsbawm. Rushdie echoes Anderson's citation of Erich Auerbach and Walter Benjamin on the apprehension of time, and of Tom Nairn's suggestion that nationalism progresses "in a two-faced, a Janus-headed manner,"⁵³ but what Rushdie does not cite is the reason Anderson gives for writing *Imagined Communities*. What led him to explore the origin and spread of nationality, Anderson reveals, was *socialism's* inability to overcome nationality in the Communist world.⁵⁴ Anderson's line of argument in *Imagined Communities* owes as much to Hobsbawm as it does to Auerbach, Benjamin and Nairn, but Rushdie does not cite Hobsbawm. It is useful to analyze what Hobsbawm affirms--and Rushdie does not--about the development of Indian nationalism in

⁵¹ *Imagined Communities*, 122.

⁵² "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 384. Tom Nairn's seminar work, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: New Left Books, 1977), is also cited by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*.

⁵³ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 384.

⁵⁴ *Imagined Communities*, the introduction. Anderson relies here on the work of historian Eric J. Hobsbawm.

independent India.⁵⁵ To Hobsbawm, the main challenge for the elites in India has always been that of keeping the support of the traditional (and anti-modern) masses without jeopardizing their own modernizing plans: to make the paradox of secular government in India viable. This was relatively easy in the first years after Independence. India was ninety percent illiterate at the time of independence, which allowed the upper middle class virtual free reign in constructing the institutions and processes of a modern nation-state. The Brahmin, Oxbridge-educated elite had an influence over the masses comparable to that of the interpreters of sacred languages in the imagined communities Anderson describes. Yet in the decades that followed independence India witnessed the rise of a middle class which was not content to follow the lead of the elite. Most significantly, the monster of Hindu nationalism reared its Janus-head. The new Hindu middle class insisted on looking back, and resented Nehru's emphasis on secularism and modernity. The middle castes flexed their muscle, protesting against egalitarian and democratic impulses; there was a grass roots reaction against all forms of affirmative action for the *Harijans*, or untouchables. The rise of the AGP--the Hindu fundamentalist party--was the logical consequence of the rise of this new middle class. It became necessary for the Congress Party to claim to look back while moving forward, and market a Hindu nationalism of its own. The Congress Party, then, did not so much lift the lid off the Pandora's box of communal discord, as much as it had to adapt to an environment where this Pandora's box had inevitably burst.

India has changed too much, to Hobsbawm, for the elites to have their way. Rushdie is not unaware of arguments such as Hobsbawm's:

Now it can be argued forcefully that the idea of secularism in India has never been much more than a slogan; that the very fact of religious block voting proves this to be so; that the divisions between the communities have by no means been subsumed in a common 'Indian' identity; and that it is strange to speak of

⁵⁵ I have pieced together fragments on India from Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780--Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Hobsbawm does not discuss Pakistan at length.

nationalism when the main impetus in present-day India comes from regionalist, separatist political groups.⁵⁶

"The union's survival," Rushdie counters, "is an answer of a sort, a rough and imperfect answer, but at least an indication that for many Indians the idea of the gigantic-nation-state has taken root."⁵⁷ This is a weak argument--the continued existence of India no more proves secularism's success in capturing the imagination of the different peoples of India than the continued existence of Pakistan proves that Islam has succeeded in subsuming national identities in a common 'Pakistani' identity. The question Rushdie needs to answer is that of how the secular nationalism of the elites in India would capture the imagination of the different communal groups; how the baby will talk the graybeards into submission, once it no longer has other instruments of persuasion. Rushdie insists that the question of secularism in India is a question of leadership: "Does," he asks, "India still have the will to insist on this safeguard?"⁵⁸ But he acknowledges that the paradox of Indian secularism is at the point of unraveling, and that he does not know how this can be avoided. "It's my guess," he concludes on the fortieth anniversary of Indian independence, "that the old functioning anarchy will, somehow or other, keep on functioning, for another forty years, and no doubt for another forty years after that. But don't ask me how."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 385.

⁵⁷ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 385.

⁵⁸ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 3.

⁵⁹ "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August, 1987," *Imaginary Homelands*, 33.

Chapter 2: *The Satanic Verses*: Articulating a modernity of the East.

If Rushdie can be likened to a political philosopher, Birch proposes, than that philosopher would be Jurgen Habermas.¹ Though Birch is writing about *Midnight's Children*, and provides little more than intuition in the way of a rationale for the affinity, I will argue that *The Satanic Verses* provides evidence of the likeness between author and philosopher. *The Satanic Verses* is not concerned with secularism as a form of government as much as it is with modernity as an intellectual enterprise. Jurgen Habermas proposes that we understand modernity as a new time-consciousness:

Whereas in the Christian West the "New Age" [neue Zeit] had designated the future age that would dawn only on Judgement Day, from the late eighteenth century on the "modern age" [Neuzeit] means one's own period, the present... The epochal new beginning that marked the modern world's break with the world of the Christian Middle Ages and antiquity is repeated, as it were, in every present moment that brings forth something new. The present perpetuates the break with the past in the form of a continual renewal.²

Habermas charts the philosophical ramifications of the same change in time which Anderson and Rushdie discuss with regards to the phenomena of nationality. In perpetuating the break with the past modernity, Habermas writes, draws on itself for the establishment of an intellectual horizon which makes meaning possible. With the advent of modernity, one can no longer rely on exemplary periods or models which, in the past, one would have adhered to "without hesitation".³ The question to be posed then, becomes:

Can modernity stabilize itself in the knowledge that it derives its normative orientations from within itself, or must it allow itself, as an ungrounded product of the disintegrative process of secularization, to be drawn back within the horizon of eschatology and cosmology?⁴

Philosophers today define themselves through their response to this question: Habermas argues that modernity can stabilize itself, though he fears that the

¹ "Postmodernist Chutneys," *Textual Practice* (1991 v5 [1]), 7.

² Habermas, Jurgen *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), page 48.

³ *The New Conservatism*, 48-9.

⁴ *The New Conservatism*, 136.

belief that it cannot become predominant during the course of the 1980's. He identifies a neo-conservative backlash against modernity in Germany, Republican America, and in Thatcherite Britain which is the stage for much of the frame narrative of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. In brief, neo-conservative cultural policy operates on two fronts:

On the one hand, it is to discredit intellectuals as the social bearers of modernism, at once obsessed with power and unproductive; for postmaterial values, especially expressive needs for self-realization and the critical judgements of a universalist Enlightenment morality, are seen as a threat to the motivational bases of a functioning society of social labour and a depoliticized public sphere. On the other hand, traditional culture and the stabilizing forces of conventional morality, patriotism, bourgeois religion, and folk culture are to be cultivated. Their function is to compensate the private lifeworld for personal burdens and to cushion in against the pressures of a competitive society and accelerated modernization.⁵

Habermas finds that *cultural* neo-conservatism has followers outside of conservative ranks—that some of those who support social modernity (as embodied by the modern industrial welfare state) do so at the expense of cultural modernity. Habermas cites the example of Joachim Ritter, who fears that modern men will be reduced to the mere structure of their needs if the powers of tradition (which modernity frowns upon) do not retain "the strength to compensate for the unavoidable abstractions of bourgeois society."⁶ My own example is that of Charles Taylor, who criticizes the "recent rash of neo-conservative measures in Britain and the United States, which cut welfare programmes and regressively redistribute income, thus eroding the bases of community identification,"⁷ but who is also an advocate of cultural conservatism. "There is large element of hope," Taylor writes, faced with what he perceives as the malaise of modernity, "[i]t is a hope which I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however horrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central

⁵ *The New Conservatism*, 61.

⁶ *The New Conservatism*, 33.

⁷ *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1989), 505.

promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided."⁸

Like Habermas, Rushdie believes in modernity's ability to stabilize in the knowledge that it derives its normative orientations from within itself. And like Habermas, Rushdie senses the alternative is a return to faith. The frame narrative of *The Satanic Verses* posits the two alternatives, in the form of the juxtaposition of "two fundamentally different *types* of self:" Gibreel, who "has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous*—that is, joined to and arising from his past," and Saladin, "a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention."⁹ The story of Gibreel is that of an Indian who regains in Britain the faith he had lost in India. The story of Saladin Chamcha, with which I will concern myself here, is that of an Indian immigrant to Britain who discovers modernity only upon his return to India. Provocatively, Rushdie suggests that the West now invites from the immigrant only an echo of modernity, and that Saladin will arrive at modernity not by pursuing Englishness, but rather, by rediscovering, and redefining, his roots. Rushdie is excited by the prospect of a secular Muslim culture, which would become the common enterprise of Muslim philosophers, historians and writers. He is encouraged by Fouad Zakariya's *Laïcité ou Islamisme*, in which the contemporary Muslim philosopher attempts to modernize Muslim thought. He admires "the great Arab historian Albert Hourani" for salvaging, in his *History of the Arab Peoples*, some of the rich skeptical tradition of Islam. According to the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd Averroes, as paraphrased by Hourani, "not all the words of the Qur'an should be taken literally. When the literal meaning of Qur'anic verses appeared to contradict the truth to which philosophers arrived by exercise of reason, those verses needed to be interpreted metaphorically."¹⁰ Hourani describes Arab

⁸ *Sources of the Self*, 521.

⁹ *The Satanic Verses* (Dover: The Consortium, 1992), 427. Page references to the novel are enclosed in parenthesis from this point on.

¹⁰ "One Thousand Days in a Balloon," *Imagined Communities*, 436.

civilization in the twelfth century as urban and sophisticated, and far more tolerant of religious minorities than their European contemporaries.¹¹ Islam, Rushdie believes, need not be "Actually Existing Islam," but rather, a "progressive, irreverent, sceptical, argumentative, playful and *unafraid* culture,"¹² as Hourani describes it in the past and Zakariya envisions it in the future. It is this secular Muslim culture that Rushdie sought to help usher in with *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie is not making here an argument concerning the structure of government in Muslim nations, neither does he set up a tension between the form and the content of his work. It is a more personal argument—the debates which take place within the novel concern the impact of religion and modernity on the lives of individuals, artists of some sort or another, who must decide between modern and pre-modern explanations of the world.

In *Midnight's Children*, Doctor Aziz returns from Europe a Marxist and a secular man. When the twenty-five year-old Aadam Aziz returns to Kashmir after completing medical school in Germany, he sees Kashmir "through traveled eyes," and feels "as though the old place resented this educated, stethoscoped return."¹³ And indeed it does. Aziz is unable to remake his friendship with the old boatman Tai, who had told him countless stories when he was a boy. Now Aziz's Heidelberg bag "sits between doctor and boatman, and has made them antagonists" (16). "Sistersleeping pigskin bag from Abroad full of foreigners' tricks. Big-shot bag," Tai says in his fury, "[n]ow if a man breaks an arm that bag will not let the bonesetter bind it in leaves. Now a man must let his wife lie beside that bag and watch knives come and cut her open. A fine business, what these foreigners put in our young men's heads. I swear: it is a too-bad thing. That bag should fry in Hell with the testicles of the ungodly" (16). Aziz lands a job at Agra University, and moves out of Kashmir with his young wife. "Forget

¹¹ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Books, 1992).

¹² "A Thousand Days in a Balloon," *Imagined Communities*, 437. Italics in original.

¹³ *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 5. In this paragraph references to *Midnight's Children* will be included in parenthesis.

about being a good Kashmiri girl," he tells Naseem, and "[s]tart thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (33). Naseem refuses to come out of purdah, explaining that strangers will see more than her face and feet, "[t]hey will see more than that! They will see my deep-deep shame!" (33). Aziz is no more successful at night when he asks her to move a little: "Move where?... Move how?... My God, what have I married? I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls like them! Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any...bad word woman" (32). Europe-returned, Aziz had at first tried to be the good Kashmiri boy of old. But as he attempts his morning prayer he hears the voices and mockery of his German classmates in his head, he is caught "in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief," and he comes to think of the ceremony of prayer as no more than a charade (6). He decides never again to bow in submission to Allah, but the loss of his faith comes with a price: in its place there is a void, "a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history" (4). With time, Islam and India will reclaim him, he will himself forfeit being a modern Indian man for the semblance of his former faith and of his former Kashmiri self. But Aziz never quite succeeds in silencing the echoes of *Vorwärts*, and Lenin's *What is To Be Done?*, and of the five years he spent in Germany. Rather than with faith, he fills the void in his heart with guilt for not being able to change completely back from "that German Aziz" (26)--as Tai had put it.

Saladin Chamcha, in contrast, discovers both Marxism and secularism upon his return to India. In Britain Saladin Chamcha inhabits the post-modern world of commercials and television. Saladin is quite unaware of the artificiality of his environment, unlike Mimi Mamouljian, his co-star on a tv show, who offers the following analysis:

I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with post-modernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a "flattened" world. When I become the voice of a bottle bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly, understanding what I'm doing and why. Viz., I am earning cash. (261)

Chamcha believes he has done more than make money: "I have struggled, in my fashion, to find my way towards an appreciation of the high things, towards a small measure of finesse" (260). But Saladin does live in flatland, and in his struggle towards "an appreciation of the high things" he is capable only of imitation, of pastiche. Had he not fallen from a plane at a height of twenty-nine thousand and two feet, and been subsequently fired, Chamcha might have remained a post-modern man like his boss, Hal Valance, "a monster: pure, self-created image, a set of attributes plastered thickly over a body that was, in Hal's own words, 'in training to be Orson Welles'" (266). Saladin envied Hal's "self-made man's paradise" (269), and enjoyed eating with Hal a lunch which was "predictably jingoistic: *rosbif, boudin Yorkshire, choux de bruxelles*" (269). Born Salahuddin Chamchawala in Bombay, Saladin the immigrant sought all his life to imitate the English way of life. "*Othello*, 'just that one play'," Chamcha once stated, "was worth the total output of any dramatist in any other language, and though he was conscious of hyperbole, he didn't think the exaggeration very great" (398). Here Chamcha brings to memory Thomas Babington Macaulay, President for Public Instruction in Bengal, who affirmed in 1834 that "a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."¹⁴ At that time Macaulay introduced in Bengal an English education system he hoped would create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect"¹⁵ --people, I suggest, such as the Saladin Chamcha of before the plunge towards the English Channel. "Him and his Royal Family, you wouldn't believe," Pamela, his British wife, recalls, "Cricket, the Houses of Parliament, the Queen. The place never stopped being a picture postcard to him" (175). "One of the reasons she had decided to *admit it* end her marriage before fate did it for her," the narrator explains, "was

¹⁴ cited in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 86.

¹⁵ cited in *Imagined Communities*, 86.

that she had woken up one day and realized Chamcha was not in love with her at all, but with that [her] voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit" (180).

In England Saladin is "apolitical" (177), and is incapable of realizing what's going on even when he has it explained to him by Hal Valance:

'The thing that's so amazing about her is the size of what she's trying to do.' Her? Baby? Chamcha was confused. 'I'm talking about you-know-who,' Valance explained helpfully. 'Torture. Maggie the Bitch.' Oh. She's radical all right. What she wants--what she actually thinks she can fucking *achieve*--is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who *want*, and who know that with her, they can bloody well *get*. Nobody's ever tried to replace a whole fucking *class* before, and the amazing thing is she might just do it if they don't get her first. The old class. The dead men. You follow what I'm saying.' 'I think so,' Chamcha lied. 'And it's not just the businessmen,' Valance said slurrily. 'The intellectuals, too. Out with the whole faggoty crew. In with the hungry guys with the wrong education. New professors, new painters, the lot. It's a bloody revolution. (270)

As he boarded that fateful flight from India back to England, Saladin was in training to become another Hal Valance, a post-modern representative of the class of people Macaulay had hoped to bring into being. Saladin had been given signs that he was about to wake up from the dream England he inhabited, but until the fall he ignored them. When for example Hal's wife wanders into interrupt their jingoistic lunch, and signal it is time for Chamcha to leave, Hal explains that "[o]n Sunday afternoons we go to bed and watch pornography on video. It's a whole new world, Saladin. Everybody has to join sometime" (270). "No compromises. You're in or you're dead," the narrator notes, "It hadn't been Chamcha's way; not his, nor that of the England he had idolized and come to conquer. He should have understood then and there: he was being given, had been given, fair warning" (270). Later, during his trip to India, Saladin comes to think of the role he had created for himself--the pastiche of an Englishman--as a trap, as he explains to his lover Zeeny Vakil:

When he was young, he told her, each phase of his life, each self he tried on, had seemed reassuringly temporary. Its imperfections didn't matter, because he could easily replace one moment by the next, one Saladin by another. Now, however, change had begun to feel painful; the arteries of the possible had begun to harden. 'It isn't easy to tell you this, but I'm married now, and not just to wife but life.' (63).

India "jumbled things up" for Saladin, "measuring him against her forgotten immensity, her sheer presence, the old despised disorder" (54). Saladin is overwhelmed by a passionate political debate he witnesses in a bar, finds himself falling in love with Zeeny Vakil, and finds his proper English accent slipping. As he settles into his seat on Flight 420, however, Saladin feels "with deep relief, the tell-tale shiftings and settlings in his throat which indicated that that his voice had begun of its own accord to revert to its reliable, English self" (73). But Saladin does not revert to his old reliable English self.

When he returns to India again, now as Salahuddin Chamchawala, he succeeds in discarding his British, conservative self. Salahuddin finds himself taking part in a political demonstration organized by the Communist Party of India (Marxist): "the formation of a human chain, stretching from the Gateway of India to the outermost suburbs of the city, in support of 'national integration'" (537). Though he at first dismisses the significance of his participation in the event—"Me, taking part in a CP (M) event. Wonders will never cease; I really must be in love" (538)—at the demonstration itself he "could not deny the power of the image" (541). Another image, that of his dying father, leads him to embrace secularism. When he watches his father Changez die, Salahuddin also discards the possibility of a return to faith:

Then all of a sudden Changez Chamchawala left his face; he was still alive, but he had gone somewhere else, had turned inwards to look at whatever there was to see. *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. (531)

When the mullah comes to take care of his father's corpse, Salahuddin interrupts the mullah's work:

Small pieces of black cloth were being stuffed into Changez's mouth and under his eyelids. 'This cloth has been to Mecca,' the mullah said. *Get it out!* 'I don't understand. It is holy fabric.' *You heard me: out, out.* 'May God have mercy on your soul.' (532).

Chapter 3 "Mahound:" The lampooning of the prophet and the reclamation of the poet.

'Excuse, baba, but you should not blaspheme.'

Reviewing Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* in 1984 Rushdie is distressed by a single ambiguity:

the Baron quite forfeits the readers' sympathy (and to be honest, in the case of this reader, so, nearly, does the Baron's creator) when he rapes his wife's servant as a way of being close to dear Estela again. 'I always wanted to share her with you, my darling,' he 'stammers', and mad Estela makes no demur. The servant, Sebastiana, is not asked to comment. It is an ugly moment in a book which, for the most part, avoids coarseness at the most brutal of times.¹

And yet, when Rushdie published a novel of his own four years later, it contained a comparable scene. In *The Satanic Verses* Changez Chamchawala pays an aging servant to pretend she's his dead wife. She dresses in his wife's old saris, lies sensually on the sofa when Changez is visited by his son Saladin, and—it is strongly implied—does not refuse Changez his connubial rites. The women present are allowed to comment, but only to consent to what is taking place, arguably making Rushdie's scene both uglier and less ambiguous than Llosa's. "[I]n this manner we may keep her spirit alive," explains Kasturba, the servant (68). When Saladin protests these goings-on his own lover intervenes: "Why be such a sourpuss? You're no angel, baby, and these people seem to have worked things out okay" (68). There is a gap, as the juxtaposition of these two scenes hints, between how Rushdie thinks women should be portrayed in fiction and how he portrays them in his own. In Rushdie's non-fiction he is an avowed feminist: he does not miss in *Imaginary Homelands* a single opportunity to criticize a text, government or a religion for its treatment of women. "Pakistan," he writes with conviction, "neither wants nor needs a legal system which makes the evidence of women worth less than that of men,"² and half of

¹ *The Satanic Verses*, 66. References to *The Satanic Verses* from this point on will be included in parenthesis, as in the next two chapters dedicated to its study.

² "Mario Vargas Llosa," *Imaginary Homelands*, 313.

³ "Zia Ul-Haq. 17 August 1988," *Imaginary Homelands*, 54.

the Qur'anic rules he calls into question elsewhere are so faulted for their treatment of women.⁴ He cites the women's movement as a predecessor to the 'Charter 88' movement he supports,⁵ prompts Edward Said in an interview to discuss the "unheard voices of Palestinian women,"⁶ and criticizes John Le Carre for his characterization of women ("[t]o put it simply: women usually mean trouble").⁷ Something of this concern with women's rights is evident in his fiction: when he stresses the benefits of a secular nationalism for women in *Midnight's Children*,⁸ when he writes of Anahita Muhammad in *Shame*,⁹ and when he questions the laws the Prophet lays down determining the conduct of women in "Mahound" of *The Satanic Verses* (366-7). And yet his fiction is yet to display a single credible female character. Timothy Brennan¹⁰ among others has adequately described Rushdie's characterization of women as embarrassing, and not even *Grimus* escapes from said criticism.¹¹ Rushdie's male protagonists, in turn, often blame women for their woes, as Saleem does in *Midnight's Children* "the long series of women who have bewitched and finally undone me good and proper."¹² When in *The Satanic Verses* Saladin protests Changez's prostitution of the servant Kasturba he is reminiscent of Rushdie the essayist; yet it is also significant that here--as in much of Rushdie's fiction--women are not given the opportunity to speak out on such issues themselves.

⁴ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 400.

⁵ "Charter 88," *Imaginary Homelands*, 164.

⁶ "On Palestinian Identity: a Conversation with Edward Said," *Imaginary Homelands*, 180.

⁷ "Jean le Carre," *Imaginary Homelands*, 219.

⁸ *Midnight's Children*, 294.

⁹ *Shame*, 115-6.

¹⁰ *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, 164.

¹¹ See Cynthia Cundy's "'Rehearsing Voices': Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (1992 v27 [1]).

¹² *Midnight's Children*, 289. Saleem later makes a list of all the women who he blames for his misfortunes (484). And yet, unlike Hyder, Farishta or Chamcha, Saleem also feels a need to ask why he blames women for his fate: "perhaps--one must consider all possibilities--they always made me a little afraid." (*Midnight's Children*, 229). This moment of introspection is offset, however, by more ambiguous considerations: "How are we to understand my too-many women? As the multiple faces of Bharat-Mata? Or as even more...as the dynamic aspect of Maya, as cosmic energy, which is represented as the female organ?" (*Midnight's Children*, 485).

A similar discrepancy exists, I will argue here, between how Rushdie expects others to write about Islam and his own presentation of the Prophet Muhammad and believing Muslims in "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia" of *The Satanic Verses*. In his non-fiction, Rushdie protests the presentation of Islam in the Western media and academic circles. Rushdie is particularly indebted to Edward Said's trilogy on the subject, the gist of which he understands as follows:

In the first volume, *Orientalism*, he analyzed 'the affiliation of knowledge with power', discussing how the scholars of the period of Empire helped to create an image of the East which provided the justification for the supremacist ideology of imperialism. This was followed by *The Question of Palestine*, which described the struggle between a world primarily shaped by Western ideas--that of Zionism and later of Israel--and the largely 'oriental' realities of Arab Palestine. Then came *Covering Islam*, subtitled 'How the Media and the Experts Determine How we See the Rest of the World', in which the West's invention of the East is, so to speak, brought up to date through a discussion of responses to the Islamic revival.¹³

Not only does Rushdie interview Said on the question of Palestinian identity but he cites Said whenever the West's presentation of Islam is the question at hand.

"What 'Islam' now means in the West," Rushdie writes invoking Said,

is an idea which is not merely medieval, barbarous, repressive and hostile to Western civilization, but also united, unified, homogeneous, and therefore dangerous: an Islamic Peril to place beside the Red and Yellow ones. Not much has changed since the Crusades, except that now we are not even permitted a single, leavening image of a 'good Muslim' of the Saladin variety. We are back in the demonizing process which transformed the Prophet Muhammad, all those years ago, into the frightful and fiendish 'Mahound'.¹⁴

In this vein Rushdie criticizes Naipaul for--in his anxiety to prove the existence of an Islamic stranglehold on new Islamic states--presenting a much too simplified version of Islam in *Among the Believers*;¹⁵ he notes that "[t]he medieval, misogynistic, stultifying ideology which Zia imposed on Pakistan in his 'Islamization' programme was the ugliest possible face of the faith,"¹⁶ and feels a constant need to differentiate between "Actually Existing Islam" and the faith itself.¹⁷

¹³ "On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Edward Said," *Imaginary Homelands*, 166.

¹⁴ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 382.

¹⁵ "Naipaul Among the Believers," *Imaginary Homelands*, 374.

¹⁶ "Zia Ul-Haq. 17 August 1988," *Imaginary Homelands*, 54.

¹⁷ "One Thousand Days in a Balloon," *Imaginary Homelands*, 437.

When Rushdie claims in an article¹⁸ that he had sought in *The Satanic Verses* to reclaim the narrative of Islam from its opponents, then, his statement of good intentions is entirely consistent with what he has written of Islam elsewhere in his non-fiction:

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 where 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 the 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. (...) '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'.¹⁹

The trouble is that, as in regards to his concern with women's rights, this statement of good intentions finds little textual backing in the novel itself. As I will show by way of a close reading of the two chapters in question, the context of *The Satanic Verses*—despite the passage Rushdie cites which is indeed reminiscent of Said—does little to attenuate the negative connotations of 'Mahound'. And while Brennan would not claim that Rushdie's characterizations of women are *intentionally* negative, it is hard not to perceive "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia" as deliberate refutations—rather than reclamations—of the original narrative of Islam as presented in the *Qur'an*. Literature, Rushdie writes, must give the lie to the official version of events; in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie questions not medieval Europe's 'Mahound' (as he would like to be able to claim), but rather the official history of the Prophet Muhammad, as presented in the *Qur'an*. Rushdie seeks a secular reclamation of the narrative of Islam, not from the opponents, but from the proponents of Islam as faith.

The incident of the satanic verses, from which Rushdie's novel takes its title, is based on a story which is reported by two early Muslim commentators, Tabari

¹⁸ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*.

¹⁹ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 402.

and Ibn Sa'd, and accepted by several scholars of Islam, among them Fazlur Rahman, Sir William Muir, W. Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson.²⁰ The story is simple: Muhammed, encountering difficulty in his effort to convert the citizens of would-be Mecca, is offered a compromise. If Muhammed agrees to the canonization, in Islam, of three of the city's gods, the city and all its souls will be his. He consults Gibreel, who reveals God's assent to the offer. He returns to the city and proclaims his new revelation. Yet later Muhammed recants it, saying that it was the work of Shaitan, not Gibreel. In this version of history the verses which sanctioned compromised were not godly but satanic. In Rushdie's treatment of the disclosure of 'the satanic verses', good and evil, Allah and Shaitan, are absent from both revelation and recantation. Gibreel and Muhammed (here Mahound) are left to fend for themselves; literally, they wrestle and tumble together in trance until Gibreel is forced to say what Mahound wants to hear. This is a consciously secular and historical rewriting of the incident: both Mahound and Gibreel have to contend with God's absence at the moment of revelation. *Both archangel and prophet, further, come to experience doubt.*

Gibreel Farishta makes for an unusual archangel, as he is a decadent twentieth-century actor from Bombay 'theologicals'; he has played gods and messengers from many different religions and evidently the role-playing is starting to get to him. As he falls asleep at night, he feels drawn into a dream of the city of Jahilia, of Mecca before its conversion to Islam. He is more than a spectator: he is the archangel Gibreel, omniscient. While he has been given the part, however, he has not been fed the proper lines; God, it seems, has misplaced his cue cards. "*Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and benotheist alternatives,*" Gibreel laments, "*and I'm just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help. Help.*" (109 italics in original). No divine assistance is forthcoming. Gibreel as archangel resents the absence of Allah: "*He never turns*

²⁰ Malise Ruthven *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the rage of Islam*, 37/39.

up," Farishta explains, "The one it's all about, Allah Ishvar God. Absent as ever as we writhe and suffer in his name" (111). Gibreel feels for Mahound, senses his anguish, but has nothing to offer him. For a fleeting instant, when 'revelation' comes, Gibreel feels God is about to intervene, "Mahound's eyes open wide," he notes, "he's seeing some sort of vision, staring at it,"--but then Gibreel remembers: "oh, that's right... He's seeing me" (112). Words pour forth from Gibreel's lips; his lips are moving, or rather, they are being moved by someone or *something* else:

What, whom? Don't know, can't say. Nevertheless, here they are,
coming out of my mouth, up my throat, past my teeth: the Words.
Being God's postman is no fun, yaar.
Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture. (112)

The curtain rises and the main star is out; the puppet wonders what has happened to the puppeteer. Like Vladimir and Estragon without Godot, Gibreel and Mahound have to make do without God.

Mahound's own account of the process of revelation allows for the interpretation that he hears only that which he already knows, the answer he has already settled on. "This *listening*," he explains to his scribe, "is not of the ordinary kind; it's also a kind of asking. Often, when Gibreel comes, it's as if he knows what's in my heart. It feels to me, most times, as if he comes from within my heart: from within my deepest places, from my soul" (106). Is Gibreel Farishta dreaming Mahound, or is it Mahound that conjures up Gibreel? Perhaps they dream each other, simultaneously: what is missing from this picture, in any event, is evidence of a God that would dream them both. In Rushdie's novel, we know Mahound is willing to compromise before he seeks revelation. When he informs his followers of the offer of compromise, they protest--they will not allow for a deity other than Allah. Mahound attempts to persuade them. He begins by attempting to downplay the concession: "It's a small matter... a grain of sand" (105). But the stubbornness of his followers forces him to be blunt about his motivation:

'Haven't you noticed? The people do not take us seriously. Never more than fifty in the audience when I speak, and half of those are tourists. Don't you read the lampoons that Baal pins up all over town?... They mock us everywhere... Sometimes I think I must make it easier for the people to believe... You all know what has been happening. Our failure to win converts. The people will not give up their gods. They will not, not... Shaitan and Gibreel. We all, already, accept their existence, halfway between God and man. Abu Simbel asks that we admit just three more to this great company. Just three, and, he indicates, all Jahilia's souls will be ours.' (106-107)

His small band of followers remain unconvinced. They urge him to pose the question to the archangel. When he returns from the trance, he bypasses the usual routine of informing his followers of the revelation and proceeds directly to a tent where most of the citizens of Jahilia are gathered for the annual poetry competition. Without any hesitation, he recites the verses that will sanction the compromise: "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?... They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed" (120).

Mahound is not satisfied with the result of the compromise. His disciples are angry with him and have lost morale. The city, which is putting on a carnival, seems as corrupt as ever. There is, to him, little evidence that he has succeeded in saving the souls of its inhabitants. Mahound finds he needs to rethink the compromise. Like the revelation that made it possible, however, the recantation must also be sanctioned by the archangel. Overwhelmed by his mistake Mahound faints during the carnival. The next morning he talks himself into the idea that the compromise was sanctioned by Shaitan, not Gibreel, speaking this new truth "out aloud to the empty air, making it true by giving it voice" (123). The verses he recited in the poetry tent were not, then, "the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly but satanic" (123). Trouble is, Mahound is still being observed by Gibreel, who begs to differ on the nature of the prophet's compromise: "*it was me both times, baba, me first and me second also me. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked*" (123 italics in original). By blaming his own sins on Shaitan,

Rushdie's Mahound also succeeds in wooing back his followers, though the prophet is himself surprised by the extent to which he is able to save face. His disciples conjure up the necessary rationalizations on his behalf, and Mahound has merely to concur: "Yes... It was a wonderful thing I did. Deeper truth. Bringing you the Devil. Yes that sounds like me" (125). Mahound is bitter and cynical; he hates having to go along with the charade. What Mahound will not admit to his follower is that Abu Simbel's offer of compromise caused him to doubt his faith. When he approached Gibreel with Abu Simbel's offer of compromise, his anguish was awful:

He *asks*: is it possible that they *are* angels? Lat, Manat, Uzza...can I call them angelic? Gibreel, have you got sisters? Are these the daughters of God? And he castigates himself, O my vanity, I am an arrogant man, is this weakness, is it just dream of power? Must I betray myself for a seat on the council? Is this sensible and wise or is hollow and self-serving?... 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 of idea am I?* (111 italics in the original)

He retreats to Yathrib, north of Jahilia, to collect himself and to consolidate his leadership before returning to claim the souls of Jahilia.

In Yathrib one of the most controversial sets of laws in the *Qu'ran*--namely that regarding women--is laid down by the prophet and later confirmed by Gibreel. Mahound, his former scribe Salman explains, "didn't like his women to answer back, he went for mothers and daughters, think of his first wife and then Ayesha: too old and too young, his two loves" (366). But in Yathrib, where Mahound and his followers stayed in the twenty-five years that constituted their exile from Jahilia, the women not only answered back but possessed the right to divorce their husbands at will. When Mahound notices his female converts "beginning to go for that sort of thing, getting who knows what ideas in their heads" (366), he falls into yet another series of timely revelations: "the angel starts pouring out rules about what women mustn't do, he starts forcing them back into the docile attitudes the Prophet prefers, docile or maternal, walking three steps behind or sitting at home being wise and waxing their chins" (367). The closer

you are to the conjurer, however, the easier it is to spot the trick (363), and Mahound's favourite wife does not prove to be as credulous as the rest of Mahound's followers. She was not fooled by his talk about necessity and political alliances and pressed Mahound on the matter of his needing twelve wives. "Finally," Salman recounts, "he went into--what else?--one of his trances, and out he came with a message from the archangel. Gibreel had recited verses giving full divine support. God's own permission to fuck as many women as he liked" (386). "Your God," Ayesha answers Mahound promptly, "certainly jumps to it when you need him to fix things for you" (386). No other versions of Mahound's revelations are offered in the text to contradict Gibreel, Salman and Ayesha on the matter; Rushdie's Mahound is the most pragmatic of false prophets--more politician than prophet.

My close reading of these controversial chapters demonstrates that they do not constitute--as Rushdie would have it a posteriori--a reclamation of Mahound. It is ingenious for Rushdie to juxtapose his Mahound favourably with the baby-frightener of medieval European tradition in his non-fiction. But such a favourable comparison does not a reclamation make. That Rushdie did no worse than European writers at the time of the crusades in his portrayal of Muhammad is hardly cause for the faithful of Islam to celebrate. That he did little better explains much of the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. The focus for the Muslim outrage over the publication of the novel, Ali Mazrui and Badawi explain, was "less the raising of doubt than the lampooning of the Prophet."²¹ Shabbir Akhtar published a book-length study of the novel which sought to detail just how the novel is offensive in its treatment of Muhammad.²² "Actually Existing Islam" takes offence too easily, Rushdie argues in his defence, for it "has all but deified its Prophet, a man who fought

²¹ Cited in Ruthven *A Satanic Affair*, 47.

²² Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad! The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989).

passionately against such deification.²³ Historian of Islam Malise Ruthven attests to such a deification, explaining that non-Qur'anic anecdotes and literary tradition have established Muhammad's conduct as "the absolute model for Muslim life."²⁴ Every detail of Muhammad's life "down to the cut of his beard, the clothes he wore, the food he liked," Ruthven explains, became in the formative period of Islamic culture the ideal for the whole civilization.²⁵ Accordingly, in the Islamic literary tradition,

Muhammed's moral perfections are matched only by his physical beauty and the absence of all physical impurities. He was born fully circumcised. The earth swallowed up his excrement; more acceptable body products like hairs and nail-clippings were collected as talismans. His shirt was enough to cure a jew's blindness...²⁶

Rushdie argues that he sought not to lampoon the Prophet but merely to reclaim his humanity, drawing from a different set of literary and historical anecdotes:

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.²⁷

But Rushdie's Mahound lacks all the redeeming features that--for example--Nikos Kazantzakis' Christ possesses.²⁸ In *The Satanic Verses* Mahound's greatness is seldom if ever asserted; bereft of his divinity, he is belittled; he would be more worthy of admiration if Rushdie had granted him human strengths as well as weaknesses. Rushdie's Mahound may not be a monster or a hideous creature, yet still he is no more than a false prophet, a self-serving politician who manipulates religion (like *Shame's* Hyder before him) whenever it suits his personal or political needs.

²³ "One Thousand Days in a Balloon," *Imaginary Homelands*, 437.

²⁴ Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair*, 34.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair*, 32.

²⁷ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 409.

²⁸ Nikos Kazantzakis *The Last Temptation of Christ* (New York: Bantam Modern Classics, 1968).

Muslims, Rushdie insists, are offended not by the actually existing book (which they have not, by and large, read), but rather by *The Satanic Verses* as described "in the various pamphlets that have been circulated to the faithful."²⁹ This is likely true, but I suggest that were the faithful to read the book they would easily find cause for offence. Rushdie cites six statements published in such pamphlets which he deems false but which have acquired the authority of truth by virtue of their repetition. Yet some of these statements are not as far removed from the novel as Rushdie would have them. *'Rushdie says the Prophet Muhammad asked God for permission to fornicate with every woman in the world.'*³⁰ Salman the Persian does tell us as much, and Rushdie does not give us reason to doubt his namesake as narrator (further, Rushdie acknowledges the intent of questioning Qur'anic verses on the particular subject of women).³¹ *'Rushdie says the Prophet's wives are whores.'* This Rushdie does not say—rather, twelve whores take up the names of the Prophet's wives to excite their customers (and, in dramatic terms, to reinforce the parallel between their husband Baal and Mahound). *'Rushdie calls the Prophet by a devil's name.'* This Rushdie does do, and his justification of his use of 'Mahound' is unconvincing. *'Rushdie calls the Companions of the Prophet scum and bums.'* Rushdie explains that they are so described by their persecutors when the conversion of Jahilia is yet to take place,³² but he does not explain why after the conversion is complete Khalid, for example, remains blood-thirsty and slow-witted, even in the eyes of Mahound (375). *'Rushdie says the whole Qur'an was the devil's work.'* Certainly, within the context of "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia," it makes as much sense to argue that the whole *Qur'an* was the devil's work as it does to affirm it was the work of God. The narrator throughout may or may not be Shaitan, and his talk, "devil

²⁹ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 396.

³⁰ The six statements, none of which are italicized in the original, are cited in "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 397.

³¹ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 399-400.

³² "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 401.

talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel. Me?" (93). *'Rushdie calls the Prophet Muhammad a homosexual.'* Rushdie does not call Mahound a homosexual in as many words, but he introduces a strong element of homoeroticism in his description of the process of revelation. This is introduced first from the narrator's point of view: "Gibreel and the Prophet are wrestling, both naked, rolling over and over, in the cave of the fine white sand that rises around them like a veil;" then from Gibreel's: "and let me tell you he's getting in *everywhere*, his tongue in my ear his fist around my balls;" and again, when Mahound throws the fight, from Gibreel's: "it's what he wanted... so the moment I got on top he started weeping for joy and then he did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again, made it pour all over him, like sick" (122-3 italics in original).³³ The controversy is not, then, merely the product of a gross misrepresentation of Rushdie's novel on behalf of his opponents. Religious Muslims have no more cause to celebrate the publication of *The Satanic Verses* than Indira Gandhi did that of *Midnight's Children*, or the leaders of Pakistan Rushdie's to acclaim his suggestion that they find for their nation a "real reason for being--let us say, a post-Islamic Pakistan."³⁴

What Rushdie does reclaim in retelling the birth of Islam in Jahilia is the story of its poets; it is entirely appropriate for "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia" to have prompted a debate on censorship and freedom of speech, for the author himself privileges such a debate in the novel. "As for the poets," it is written in the *Qur'an*, "the perverse follow them. Hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley and how they say that which they do not?"³⁵ In *The Satanic Verses* Mahound does not consider the conversion of Jahilia to Islam complete until the

³³ Arguably this homoeroticism is also present in the first revelation (110-112). See Sara Suleri's excellent, and thoroughly convincing, study of this in *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁴ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 387.

³⁵ Cited in Ruthven *A Satanic Affair*.

poet Baal, a longtime critic, has been executed. Mahound forgives all other opponents: Hind, former Matriarch and *de facto* ruler of Jahilia, who waged war against Mahound and ate his uncle's heart raw; and Salman the Persian, Mahound's former scribe, who as scribe dared to change Qur'anic lines. Baal he cannot forgive. The conflict between Baal and Mahound is first posited as one between the pagan and the Islamic imagination; as a young man, Baal worships the Goddess Lat, arch-enemy of Mahound's Allah in the Jahilian imagination. As a servant of Lat, and at the bidding of Abu Simbel, Baal writes ballads which satirize the prophet Muhammed and his lack of success in converting citizens of Jahilia to Islam. At the time of the conversion of Jahilia, however, Baal "had arrived at godlessness," he had begun, "stumblingly," to move beyond good and evil, "beyond the idea of gods and rules" (379). Baal becomes "the secret, profane mirror of Mahound" and begins to write again after many years (384); and when he writes he is inspired by his love for his twelve wives, not Al Lat or Allah. Baal describes the process of inspiration in terms disconcertingly reminiscent of Mahound's own revelations: "It's strange... It is as if I can see myself standing beside myself. And I can make him, the standing one, speak; then I get up and write down his verses" (385). Though he does not understand this process fully, Baal takes it for the coming of the muse. Mahound, in contrast, feels a need to explain the same process in religious terms, to pass off his inspiration and his ideas as God's truth, and to make others abide by his whims and rules. When Mahound sentences Baal to death it is clear from the exchange that he damns not just a poet but literature itself:

'Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you cannot forgive.'

Mahound replied, 'Writers and whores. I see no difference here.' (392)

The birth and spread of Islam, the text reminds us, depended on the suppression of the non-Islamic imagination. Saleem had already hinted as much in *Midnight's Children*: "In Arabia...at the time of the prophet Muhammad, other prophets also

preached... Prophets are not always false simply because they are overtaken, and swallowed up, by history. Men of worth have always roamed the desert."³⁶ Writers must play their part, *The Satanic Verses* reminds us, to rescue those narratives swallowed up by history, that the suppression of the dissident imagination never be complete. "A poet's work," Baal explains, "[t]o name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep. (97). For as Rushdie allows Baal to learn after Mahound's conversion of Jahilia, "no imperium is absolute, no victory complete" (378).

³⁶ *Midnight's Children*, 365.

Chapter 4 The Story of Ayesha: Rushdie's retraction?

Khadija, the tactless old lady who had been for half a century the contented and contenting spouse of Sarpanch Muhammad Din, saw an archangel in a dream. 'Gibreel,' she whispered, 'is it you?' 'No,' the apparition replied. 'It's I, Azrael, the one with the lousy job. Excuse the disappointment.' (479-480)

In Karachi, in February 1983, thirty-eight people entered the sea at Hawkes Bay in the hope that its waters would part and they would be able to complete a pilgrimage to the Shi'a holy city of Kerbala in Iraq.¹ Response to the incident in Pakistan was largely determined by sectarian affiliation: Sunnis dismissed the pilgrims as lunatics while Shi'ites praised them as martyrs. A group of wealthy Shi'a businessmen flew the bodies of the pilgrims to Kerbala, so that, in a sense, the crossing of the sea was completed. Rushdie rewrote the story of the incident in "Ayesha" and "The Parting of the Arabian Sea", purging it of its sectarian character.² Rushdie has carefully distanced his prophetess from the original; and he has named her Ayesha, after the wife of Muhammed who Sunnis, not Shi'as, hold dear to their hearts. The prophetess of *The Satanic Verses* leads her followers to the edge of the Arabian sea, not Hawkes Bay, and their pilgrimage is to Mecca, not Kerbala. Ayesha is thus a Muslim--not just a Shi'a--prophetess.³ Nonetheless, in Rushdie's treatment, the incident demonstrates the continuing power of religious discourse at a moment in which, according to Rushdie's earlier novels, the modern age has matured--an age where religion should no longer be able to satisfy all of an individual's needs or provide the *raison d'être* for a state. Some critics⁴ have interpreted these chapters to constitute an affirmation of faith,

¹ Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the rage of Islam*, 45.

² Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the rage of Islam*, 46.

³ Interviewed by Malise Ruthven, Shabbir Akhtar insists on reading sectarianism into Rushdie's version of the Hawkes Bay incident, affirming that Rushdie shows "profound insight into the dangers of a false religion" but not into those of Islam in general (*A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the rage of Islam*, 96). But it may be that Akhtar has simply not read the novel carefully enough, as is evident by the several mistakes he makes in recounting the plot of *The Satanic Verses* in his own book, *Be Careful with Muhammad! The Salman Rushdie Affair*.

⁴ See, in particular, Rudolf Bader's "The Satanic Verses: An Intercultural Experiment by Salman Rushdie." Bader tries as many other post-modernist apologists for Rushdie have to prove that

and as such, that they balance the bleak portrait of religion offered in "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia;" if they were right, the interpretation that Rushdie has spun an anti-*Qur'an* in *The Satanic Verses* unravels. I will argue here that these two chapters do not constitute such an affirmation of faith, and therefore that they cannot be read as retractions for the chapters dealing with the Prophet Muhammad nor for the novel as a whole. By way of a second conclusion on the political significance of "Ayesha" and "The Parting of the Arabian Sea" I will argue that they represent a reformulation of his politics as articulated in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, on the question of whether religious fundamentalism in the Indian subcontinent springs from the people or is imposed on them.

The potential loose thread of Rushdie's anti-*Qur'an* is the passage in which Mirza Saeed, who throughout intended to dissuade the villagers from their pilgrimage, abandons his secularism at the moment of his death. Ayesha appears to him, beckoning him to 'Open Wide!' as tentacles of light flow from her navel:

He was a fortress with clanging gates. -- He was drowning.-- She was drowning, too. He saw the water fill her mouth, heard it begin to gurgle in her lungs. Then something within him refused that, made a different choice, and at the instant that his heart broke, he opened.

His body split apart from his adam's-apple to his groin, so that she could reach deep within him, and now she was open, they all were, and at the moment of their opening the waters parted, and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea. 507

But Mirza never made much of an ambassador for secularism in the backward village. Though Mirza reads Nietzsche the night before he first sights Ayesha (216), his modernism never ran deep: "the zamindar and his wife were known as one of the most 'modern' and 'go-go' couples on the scene; they collected contemporary art and threw wild parties and invited friends round for fumbles in

the novel is too complex, and too ambiguous, for us to even attempt to tease out its potential verdicts on religion and modernity.

the dark on sofas while watching soft-porno VCR's" (227).⁵ The narrator describes him as a "godless man, the weak end of a strong line" (237); and Mirza, too, likens his secularism to weakness: "a kind of disease; one of detachment, of being unable to connect ourselves to things, events, feelings. Most people define themselves by their work, or where they come from, or suchlike; we have lived too far inside our heads. It makes actuality damn hard to handle" (483). Mirza's failure to connect to things, events, and feelings marks him as a post-modernist rather than a modernist man in Rushdie's book; Mirza's words echo Rushdie's own regarding post-modernism's inability to describe how the world of the imagination engages the 'real' world: "The French, these days, would have us believe that this world [of the imagination], which they call 'the text', is quite unconnected to the 'real' world, which they call 'the world'."⁶ Mirza and his wife are not modern but 'modern' and 'go-go;' after a night of reading Nietzsche Mirza awakes with a sensation best described as a malaise: "rising before dawn with a bad dream souring his mouth, his recurring dream of the end of the world, in which the catastrophe was invariably his fault... he was angry with himself for being so foolish in his choice of bedside reading matter" (216). In terms of philosophy, it makes sense that Mirza turn to pre-modern values out of dissatisfaction with modernity (which never meant more to him than a sort of godless hedonism).⁷ His opposition to Ayesha is suspect from the start, fed as it is by the "bitter energy of his desire for her" (497); during the pilgrimage Mirza curses Ayesha at least once a day "but he could never keep up the abuse

⁵ Presumably, Mirza and Mishal had joined the brave new world Hal Valance bragged about to Saladin (270), a world explicitly linked by the text to post-modernism--as I have shown in Chapter 2.

⁶ "The Location of Brazil," *Imaginary Homelands*, 118. With regards to *The Satanic Verses*, Rudolf Bader argues not so much that there is no connection between worlds real and imaginary but rather that they are connected in such labyrinthine and complicated ways, through such a dense layering of textual references, that any attempt to establish a connection between the two would inevitably end in failure. ("The Satanic Verses: An Intercultural Experiment by Salman Rushdie")

⁷ See Charles Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ont: Anansi, 1991), and *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

because everytime he looked at her he desired her so much that he felt ashamed" (498). When he first sighted Ayesha "he felt a surge of lust so powerful that he instantly felt ashamed" (219), and when she reaches into him at the moment of his death there is a strong suggestion that they are consummating something other than a spiritual relationship.

Many other details in Rushdie's story of the prophetess Ayesha make it difficult for it to be interpreted as an affirmation of faith. As in Mahound's revelations, the archangel who appears to her is not a messenger from God but rather Gibreel Farishta, a late 20th century Bombay star of theological pictures. And like Mahound's conversion of Jahilia, Ayesha's pilgrimage features both timely revelations and ruthless pragmatism. When the first of the pilgrims dies Ayesha refuses her a proper burial. The widower defects to Mirza's camp, and some of the pilgrims gather around them at night to hear their arguments. To Mirza's eyes, Ayesha's reactions to this development are unmistakably human. She casts various glances in his direction, and "whether she was a visionary or not Mirza Saeed would have bet good money that those were the bad-tempered glances of a young girl who was no longer sure of getting her own way" (482). Then she disappears for a day and a half, "she always knew how to whip up an audience's feelings", he concedes (482). Ayesha returns to inform the pilgrims that Gibreel not only confirmed the ascent of their fallen pilgrim to heaven, but also warned them of reprisals for their doubts: "he was seriously thinking of withdrawing his offer to part the waters, 'so that all you'll get at the Arabian Sea is a salt-water bath, and then it's back to your deserted potato fields on which no rain will ever fall again'" (482). Understandably, the villagers are appalled, and decide to flirt with Mirza's secularism no longer. Ayesha's mood swings, like her revelations, seem more human than divine. When one of the pilgrims questions the confidence of a God which demands the sacrifice of his followers as proof of their faith, Ayesha responds by imposing even stricter disciplinary measures, "insisting that all pilgrims say all five prayers, and decreeing that Fridays would

be days of fasting. By the end of the sixth week she had forced the marchers to leave four more bodies where they fell: two old men, one old woman, and one six-year-old-girl" (483). When, later, Mirza presents an offer to fly twelve of the pilgrims to Mecca along with her--as a compromise--Ayesha hesitates, and asks him for time to think it over. Like Rushdie's Mahound, Ayesha is not predisposed against compromise. Think it over, *and ask Gibreel*, Mirza reminds her (499). Yet Ayesha makes this decision by herself, without consulting the archangel: "He told me to go and ask my angel, but I know better... How could I choose between you? It is all of us, or none" (499). Believing herself the representative of God, Ayesha is careless of her cruelty. When the pilgrims pass by a mine where an accident has claimed fifteen-hundred lives, Ayesha declares it to be "a judgement upon them for the bad attempts they made," referring to a different group of miners who had attempted to barricade the pilgrims at the outskirts of the city. But "they weren't at the bloody barricade," Mirza protests, "they were working under the goddamned ground." (493). "They dug their own graves", she replies, flatly (493). In the same city she encounters a commotion outside a mosque, where an illegitimate baby has been left in a basket. When the Imam declares the baby to be the Devil's child, Mirza invites Ayesha to address the crowd. "Everything will be asked of us", she tells them; and the crowd, "needing no clearer invitation," stones the baby to death (497). It seems that--once again--no sanction from Gibreel was required.

"So-called Islamic 'fundamentalism' does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people," Rushdie wrote in *Shame*, "[i]t is imposed on them from above."⁸ Yet when he revisits Pakistan in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie has lost his assurance that "the ramming-down-the-throat point stands."⁹ There is no equivalent in the story of Ayesha to Hyder and his manipulation of elections, the army, and the

⁸ *Shame*, 251.

⁹ *ibid.*

media; there is no Big Brother. The prophetess Ayesha is a young woman who wears "a saffron yellow sari wrapped around her nakedness, after the fashion of the poor women of that region" (219). She may know how to whip up an audience's feelings, as Mirza puts it, and yet she has no more recourses than that of a story-teller. Ayesha tells the people that God has commanded them (through Gibreel) to walk to Mecca, and they believe her. If anything, the instruments of coercion are on the zamindar's side. He follows the pilgrims in an air-conditioned Mercedes station wagon, with an icebox full of Cokes, trying to persuade his wife to at least make the trek comfortably. And yet he is incapable by way of argument to dissuade even the least credulous of the villagers from joining the pilgrimage:

Srinivas... we are modern men. We know, for instance, that old people die on long journeys, that God does not cure cancer, and that oceans do not part. We have to stop this idiocy... We are not communal people, you and I. Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai! We can open up a secular front against this mumbo-jumbo. (476)

Mirza's secular front simply does not have the power to capture the people's imagination. No talk of liberty, equality and fraternity will reach them as does Ayesha's promise: "Everything will be required of us, and everything will be given" (233). The change in Rushdie's Pakistani politics from *Shame* to "Ayesha" and "The Parting of the Arabian Sea" finds an echo in his non-fiction.

"Pakistanis," Rushdie writes in 1981, "have never been a mullah-dominated people;" they do not desire Islamization, he insists, it was just a process Zia used "as a means of shoring up his unpopular regime."¹⁰ In 1988 it is not *Pakistanis* but Pakistan which "neither wants nor needs a legal system which makes the evidence of women worth less than half that of men;"¹¹ Pakistan as embodied in Faiz Ahmed Faiz--who Rushdie deems Pakistan's greatest poet-- that is. Though Rushdie still believes in 1988 that "most Muslims" were "disturbed and frightened" by *Zia's* Islamization programme, he is conspicuously silent on the matter of

¹⁰ "Naipaul Among the Believers," *Imaginary Homelands*, 374.

¹¹ "Zia Ul-Haq. 17 August 1988," *Imaginary Homelands*, 55.

whether they are or are not a mullah-dominated people, of whether fundamentalism does or does not spring from the masses. He still believes as of 1990 that Pakistan demonstrates "the impracticability of trying to place religious beliefs at the centre of contemporary politics," but he no longer argues that these beliefs are unpopular.¹²

Elsewhere in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie acknowledges that what he wants for India may differ from what its people want. The first break with his Indian politics as articulated in *Midnight's Children* comes with the admission that the people or the crowd have a will at all, and therefore must bear the responsibility for their actions. "We are all guilty of Assam," the poet Bhupen Gandhi declares in reference to a massacre, "Each person of us. Unless and until we face it, that the children's deaths were our fault, we cannot call ourselves a civilized people" (56). In Saleem's India, Bhupen's statement would have been shocking—it is not allowed for by a single one of *Midnight's Children's* thousand and one stories. Most of what happens in our lives, within the universe of *Midnight's Children*, takes place in our absence; only the Widow, or the Widow's Hand or such another metonymical being, are to blame for the destruction of the children of midnight and of Nehru's dream of a noble mansion where all them could have dwelt. That citizens of India be held responsible for events that took place in their absence, upon which they could not have been said to have had a direct bearing, represents a complete reversal of the assignment of political responsibility in *Midnight's Children*. To will, as Rushdie writes elsewhere in *The Satanic Verses* (93), is to dissent; if each citizen of India possesses a will both as an individual and as part of a collectivity, than he/they can dissent from their leaders. In *The Satanic Verses* the Indian people can be said to have the genuine ability to move irrespective of the elite. "In India," Swatilekha ventures in a latter discussion with Bhupen, "the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had 'excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project'. As a

¹² "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 387.

result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of the grand narratives, that is, religious faith" (537). "But," protests Bhupen Gandhi with an argument strongly reminiscent of Rushdie's own in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, "these [religious] narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way" (537). Swatilekha talks of the historical development of the Indian state, making it clear the masses were never part of the ethical project (recently under the Mughals and the British and under Congress after independence). Bhupen concedes this point and is left wondering what might have happened if Indira Gandhi had adopted less retrogressive policies: perhaps she could have widened the appeal for the masses of her father's secular nationalism? Then the ethical projects of the elites and masses could have been made to coincide in the form of a secular nationalism. But Swatilekha will not even grant Bhupen this much, pointing out that such a forced coincidence would not amount to more than a pretence of state neutrality: "Battle lines are being drawn up in India today... Secular versus rational, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on" (537). Bhupen concedes what Rushdie as Saleem would not: first, that the masses had little to do with the ethics of independence, and second, that they have had a lot to do with—and thus responsibility to bear in—communal violence since independence.

The change in Rushdie's Indian politics from *Midnight's Children* to *The Satanic Verses* is echoed in his non-fiction. In 1984 he described the Indian revolution as "a genuine mass movement."¹³ In 1990 he is ready to concede that "it can be argued forcefully that the idea of secularism in India has never been much more of a slogan."¹⁴ The ethical project of the revolution was never more than a slogan to the people at large; the Indian revolution was thus not a *genuine* mass movement. Communal violence Rushdie had blamed almost

¹³ "Outside the Whale," *Imaginary Homelands*, 99.

¹⁴ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 385.

entirely on Indira Gandhi on the occasion of her death;¹⁵ in 1987 he blames it also, albeit tardily, on "the emergence of a collective Hindu consciousness that transcends caste, and that believes Hinduism to be under threat from other Indian minorities."¹⁶ Rushdie is unlikely to ever stop exaggerating the extent to which Indira is responsible (vis-à-vis other variables such as the rise of the middle class, for example) for the emergence of a collective Hindu consciousness,¹⁷ but it is significant that he has both accepted the elitism implicit in the enterprise of a secular nationalism for India and that he is willing to assign responsibility to those who carry out—not just provoke—communalist riots. It makes for a stronger Indian history, as well as for a stronger moral philosophy, in his politics.

¹⁵ "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi, *Imaginary Homelands*, 41-6.

¹⁶ "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987," *Imaginary Homelands*, 31.

¹⁷ As evident in both "In God We Trust" (1990) and in the introduction to *Imaginary Homelands*, penned in 1991.

Conclusion

My first and most important conclusion is that it is a mistake to interpret Salman Rushdie as anything but a writer of modernist fiction. "I spent my student days," Rushdie writes of his time at Cambridge, "under the spell of Bunuel, Godard, Ray, Wajda, Welles, Bergman, Kurosawa, Jancso, Antonioni, Dylan, Lennon, Jagger, Laing, Marcuse, and, inevitably, the two-headed fellow known to Grass readers as Marxengels."¹ "[M]y sense of God ceased to exist long ago," he recalls elsewhere, "and as a result I was drawn towards the great creative possibilities offered by surrealism, modernism and their successors, those philosophies and aesthetics born of the realization that, as Karl Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"² Rushdie is not suspicious of the enterprise of modernity as many of his post-colonial and post-modernist admirers and critics are. To him the Enlightenment is the defining moment the debate between skeptics and believers, both in the East and in the West, a debate which dates from the beginning of recorded history. Rushdie has a rich knowledge of the history of Islam, informed by historians such as Maxime Rodinson and Albert Hourani, and is confident in his knowledge that there have been times in which Christian Europe trailed the Arab world as far as tolerance, the arts, and scientific inquiry are concerned. That the Enlightenment originated in Europe does not, to Rushdie, hopelessly compromise it. In his fiction and non-fiction on the Indian subcontinent, Rushdie consistently advocates the ideals of the Enlightenment, and those of the modernity which it made possible. India, to Rushdie, should no more reject English language and culture than it should Urdu and the Muslim tradition. He resents the characterization of Muslims in India as Mughals: "[f]or if Muslims were 'Mughals', then they were foreign invaders, and Indian Muslim

¹ "Gunter Grass," *Imaginary Homelands*, 276.

² "Is Nothing Sacred?," *Imaginary Homelands*, 417.

culture was both imperialist and inauthentic."³ He defends the use of English in India, and the presence of Western philosophy, among the same lines—as Sufyan puts it in *The Satanic Verses*, "let us not pretend that Western culture is not present; after these centuries, how could it not be part of our heritage?"⁴ "I was born an Indian, and not only an Indian, but a Bombayite," Rushdie writes, stressing that he was deeply influenced by his childhood in that "most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch of Indian cities."⁵ The West is not, he writes, absent from Bombay; "I was already a mongrel self, history's bastard, before London aggravated the condition."⁶ History's bastard, Rushdie insists in believing in the enterprise of modernity, in the continual search for the new, and in the necessity of privileging knowledge and discourse. In the case of India he does not so much argue for an Indian secularism, but for a Western secularism which is not, to him, alien to the Bombay and the India he was born into—no less Indian, that is, than his family's belief in Islam. Rushdie's Indian politics do change—most significantly he no longer insists on the idea that Indian independence was a genuine mass movement and that the secular ethical project of the elites was ever more than a slogan to the masses. But he insists on the importance of a secular framework for India nonetheless, as he continues to do for Pakistan. It is only with *The Satanic Verses* that Rushdie articulates a modernity of the East. Provocatively he suggests that given the current post-modern ethic of the West one must now travel East to find strong defenders of modernity.

The debate on the Rushdie affair may prove him right. In the West, within the realm of political theory, the Rushdie affair forced a debate on cultural modernity. "Myth," Rushdie cites Roland Barthes, "is statistically on the right."⁷

³ Introduction, *Imaginary Homelands*, 2.

⁴ *The Satanic Verses*, 246.

⁵ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 404.

⁶ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands*, 404.

⁷ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 391.

"The idea of the sacred is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture," he affirms, "because it seeks to turn other ideas--Uncertainty, Progress, Change--into crimes."⁸ "To respect the sacred," he warns, "is to be paralyzed by it."⁹ The left must seek to de-mystify, even if that entails not giving people what they ask for--"certainties, absolutes."¹⁰ Following Rushdie's rationale, those on the left would be expected to support his efforts to de-mystify Islam, while those on the right would be expected not to. This is not what has happened. Liberal opinion was unanimous in its support of free speech in the *Gay News* case of 1977, Wheatcroft notes, but twelve years later, with regards to the Rushdie affair, the liberal ranks were broken.¹¹ Wheatcroft attempts to explain why this is the case by suggesting that political correctness--the crystallization of orthodoxies of the left--is to blame for the heterogeneity of contemporary liberal opinion. A better explanation, I suggest, is that during the time that elapsed between the two affairs many liberals have been acquired what Habermas has diagnosed as cultural neo-conservatism. Some of the more interesting left-leaning political philosophers today, such as Charles Taylor and Cornel West, conclude that modernity *cannot* stabilize itself without recourse to religion.¹² "There is something uniquely powerful about religious language and symbols," Taylor writes in reference to Rushdie's use of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*, "which makes even those who reject them need them in order to explore their own universe."¹³ By writing *The Satanic Verses*, then, Rushdie prompted a debate which made apparent the rift between liberals who believe modernity can derive its normative orientations from within itself, and those who insist it cannot.

To William Pfaff, the powerful modern Western tradition of skepticism has

⁸ "Is Nothing Sacred?," *Imaginary Homelands*, 416.

⁹ "Is Nothing Sacred?," *Imaginary Homelands*, 416.

¹⁰ "In God We Trust," *Imaginary Homelands*, 391.

¹¹ "The Friends of Salman Rushdie," *The Atlantic* 38.

¹² See Cornel West's *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), in addition to Taylor's *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity*.

¹³ "The Rushdie Controversy," *Public Culture* (1989 v2 [1]), 121.

its own central value, "which is to examine and if necessary attack all existing and established values," Rushdie's mistake, to him, "was to apply this modern European standard of discourse to a religion which still believes in itself."¹⁴ Within literary theory, post-colonial theorists have questioned the appropriateness of applying modern assumptions about the purpose of literature and inquiry to non-Western works of literature.¹⁵ The main benefit of this questioning has been the expansion of the canon to include works which would not have been appreciated otherwise. The Rushdie affair raises the issue of the writer's responsibility to his community and culture: should Rushdie be criticized for applying the standards of modernity to India, Pakistan, and Islam at its birth? Yes, Parekh answers, arguing that "[a]s a Muslim as well as a scholar of Islam, Rushdie owed it to his people to counter the 'myths' and 'lies' Christians had spread about them over the centuries, or at least to refrain from lending them his authority."¹⁶ "*The Satanic Verses*," Timothy Brennan complains, "shows how strangely detached and insensitive the logic of cosmopolitan 'universality' can be... 'Discipline', 'organisation', 'people', -- these are words that the cosmopolitan sensibility refuses to take seriously."¹⁷ Like the Imams of the East, some Western literary theorists have taken it upon themselves to determine what writers should and should not be allowed to write about their own cultures and communities.

The Western reaction to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* seems to warrant Rushdie's suggestion that one dog Saladin Chamcha's steps, and journey to the intellectual circles of the East, to understand modernity. "The only privilege literature deserves--and this privilege it requires in order to

¹⁴ Cited in "The Friends of Salman Rushdie," *The Atlantic*, 43.

¹⁵ See Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) and Bill Ashcroft [et al] *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁶ "The Rushdie Affair: Research Agenda for Political Philosophy," 699.

¹⁷ Brennan, Timothy *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 165, 166.

exist," Rushdie writes, "is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out;"¹⁸ it is a privilege that many Western intellectuals would revoke. Timothy Brennan is willing to entertain the suggestion that freedom of expression represents "literary colonialism;"¹⁹ to Katherine Mackinnon it represents an instrument of the patriarchy;²⁰ and to Gayatri Spivak it represents "racism."²¹ To Breckenridge, freedom of expression "disguises deep parochialisms of value:"

Our post-Enlightenment assumption is that all intelligent criticism must follow the individualized act of reading. Some groups in the Islamic world are saying that criticism--socially, politically, and collectively constructed--can precede the individual act of reading. In this deconstructionist world, is this a barbaric view?²²

Despite the resistance among culturally conservative groups both in the East and West to Rushdie's call for a secular Islam culture, it has not gone unheeded. Perhaps the single most important evidence for this was the recent publication of a collection of essays by Arab and Muslim writers in defense of free speech, *For Rushdie*.²³ *For Rushdie* is everything that its mostly Western counterpart, *The Rushdie Letters*,²⁴ is not. The contributors to *The Rushdie Letters* by and large acquiesce in the assumption that Rushdie has been misunderstood, and make broad arguments in favour of freedom of speech. It is significant they do not refer to the text of *The Satanic Verses* itself. Rather pathetically, Rushdie is left in his thanks to single out one writer (Kazuo Ishiguro) out of about fifty for referring to the text of the novel *at all*.²⁵ Most of the Arab and Muslim writers who contribute to *For Rushdie*, in contrast, make the harder arguments for freedom of speech which the text of *The Satanic Verses* requires. The book

¹⁸ "Is Nothing Sacred?", *Imaginary Homelands*, 427.

¹⁹ *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, 144-5.

²⁰ *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty "Reading *The Satanic Verses*," *Public Culture* (1989 v2 [1]), 95.

²² Carol A. Breckenridge, "On Fictionalizing the Real"

Public Culture (1989 v2 [1]), iv.

²³ Abdallah, Anouar (ed), *For Rushdie: essays by Arab and Muslim writers in defense of free speech* (New York: George Braziller, 1993).

²⁴ MacDonogh, Steve ed *The Rushdie Letters*.

²⁵ Ishiguro's letter, in turn, does no more than to praise *The Satanic Verses* as an immigrant narrative.

represents precisely the sort of forum for debate that Rushdie envisioned possible. If all copies of *The Satanic Verses* were to burnt or to disappear, and if the novel were to be remembered for nothing other than inspiring this collection of essays by Arab and Muslim writers in defense of free speech, *The Satanic Verses* would already represent a significant step in the ushering in of a modern Muslim culture.

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