

# Truth and non-Truth? Islam and madness in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I hope to explore the West's attitude toward Islam through a close reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Broadly speaking, I will argue that the core of the formulation of terror is a modern assessment of religion generally as irrational, counter to truth and resistant to the secular rationality of the state; and if this is the way religion is figured, the application to Islam in particular is even more intensive and condemnatory since Islam, the West's external constitutive "Other," is thought to be particularly vulnerable to radical ideologies counter to the state's secular mandate. The correspondence between Islam and the radical principles believed to produce terror—literal readings of scripture and the religious intolerance, oppression, and violence that are thought to flow from such readings—is not inherent to Islamic tradition nor is it unique to it. This correspondence is produced through the paradoxes of a liberal secular power that aims to separate religion from politics while also seeking to govern the souls of religious subjects, mysteries which we find evident in Rushdie's representation of Islam in his novel.

## Keywords

secular, government, Islam, terrorism

## Introduction

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed bondage*—Immanuel Kant

*There is no obedience to anyone if it is disobedience to Allah*—Islamic Hadith

According to Lisa Stampnitzky, the global emergence of what we now know as terrorism took place in 1972 with the attack at the Munich Olympics. The capture and ultimate killing of nine Israeli hostages were broadcast live to an audience of some 900 million people (29).

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In this single event, violence became more than itself; Munich signaled the beginning of violence as global spectacle; terror as entertainment was born.

However, this new meaning for terror was not immediately apparent. Stampnitzky cites several so-called terrorism experts who, while conceding the significance of the Munich attack to the formation of what we understand as terror today, recognize that they did not fully realize why this was so crucial a moment. They were not, at the time, confronted with the certainties we now take for granted, but with multiple explanations centered on the pathology of the perpetrators. The newspaper headlines following the attacks represented the attackers as "mad men," "insane," "outlaws." But, in fact, these labels did not refer to the persons who committed the act, but only to the act itself. What the terrorists *did* was "mad"; terror itself remained beyond comprehension.

The attacks of September 11th changed this. While still resistant to all explanation and all understanding, "terror" nonetheless stabilized into a coherent subject of discourse. This in part was due to the events themselves, which, borrowing from Slavoj Žižek's theorization of events, appeared "seemingly from nowhere, without discernible causes...without solid being as its foundation" (4). The events of September 11 were paradigmatically revolutionary, seeming to arise from nothing and yet and as such announcing their significance as the beginning of a new history. The confusion surrounding the attacks was also consequential to their re-presentation within a structure of unknowns. Video footage of the second plane flying into the Twin Towers was played on automatic loop for days as the attacks were woven into a narrative of violence without history. The story of terror that would follow would, therefore, have only this moment as its reference and would as such anticipate a future with no history except for this one. Terror, once the moniker of state violence and internecine warfare, would now refer to the meaninglessness of this moment.

At the same time, the meaninglessness of terror would itself constitute a definite meaning in the discourse that would be produced in the War on Terror, which was, in the words of then President George Bush, a war against the "evil." Terror, on this reading, was posited in the soul: "Our nation saw evil," Bush stated, "the very worst of human nature." And so began what would subsequently become inherent to the discourse of terror: a continual slippage in meaning by which terror would signify an act, the experience produced by the action as well as a subject. Terror was in the soul of Islam. But how the West moved from the soul of an individual Muslim terrorist to the notion of a total Muslim assault on its way of life (Christian and secular) is what I believe needs further examination. In this paper, I hope to explore this connection through the close reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Broadly speaking, I will argue that the core of the formulation of terror is a modern assessment of religion generally as irrational, counter to truth and resistant to the secular rationality of the state; and if this is the way religion is figured, the application to Islam, in particular, is even more intensive and condemnatory since Islam, the West's external constitutive "Other," is thought to be particularly vulnerable to radical ideologies counter to the state's secular mandate. The correspondence between Islam and the radical principles thought to produce terror—literal readings of scripture and the religious intolerance, oppression, and violence that are thought to flow from such readings—are represented in Rushdie's portrayal of Muslims in *The Satanic Verses*. This article will focus on Rushdie's use of Islamic historiography to criticize Muslim readers for their faith in what it presents as both meaningless and oppressive and will suggest that the correspondence Rushdie creates

between Islam and the meaningless is a reflection of the paradoxes of a liberal secular power that aims to separate religion from politics while also seeking to govern the souls of religious subjects. The Muslim terrorist, like the figures of madness represented in the novel, is, I suggest, less a manifestation of 'Islam' than a reflection of the vexed legacy of secularism and the contradictory epistemological framework—at once insistently positivist and metaphysical—in which secular states seek to govern.

### ***The Problem of Government: Religion in Secular Culture***

Before examining Rushdie's novel, I would like briefly to explore the ways in which notions of truth are derived in secular culture. Let me, therefore, begin with an obscure but nonetheless revealing series of observations by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In 1966, he suggested that the world is divided into halves--the developed and the developing. The improved half, he argued, "is deeply committed to the notion that the real world is external to the observer, that knowledge consists of recording and classifying data--the more accurately, the better . . ." On the other hand, he also suggested that developing cultures are ones that "escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking [and] have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the real world is almost entirely internal to the observer . . . Empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new countries than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it" (cited in Said 48).

Kissinger's observations, despite their early date, highlight one of the central ambiguities of modern power. On the one hand, the problem of development Kissinger poses is very clearly an epistemological one. The division between development and under-development is constructed between what appears to be Kissinger's reading of "truth" as empirically derived knowledge on the one hand, and on the other, "untruth" the various ontological a priori knowledge systems that are characteristic of faith systems. The act of reading presumed in Kissinger's division is one which situates an identity between meaning and the thing observed as opposed to the subjective creation of meaning through the observer's interpretation of reading signs. The alignment of development with the former also suggests that such readings require an absolute consciousness of the very act of reading, and, importantly, a self-reflexive awareness of oneself as a subject of a purely physical, given world. Observation is, therefore, reproductive and conservative of the given world in which we live. To fail to read the world in these ways is, therefore, to be undeveloped.

Connected to the epistemological problem Kissinger's observations pose, is the question of the subject's subjectivity. This is the ontological problem Kissinger highlights in his discussion of developing nations as retainers of an "essentially pre-Newtonian view that the real world is completely internal to the observer." Implicit in this statement is the problem of how those thought to be undeveloped relates to and govern themselves. What does it mean to be the subject of an "internal" reality rather than an external one? While Kissinger does not go on to address this question, that arises within the discourse of a leading intellectual figure of the modern state is itself suggestive of some possible answers, namely, religion's resistance to the governing imperatives of the current state, which, as Wael Hallaq astutely notes, is premised on its ability to produce national and, hence, secular citizens. The government in this setting encompasses not only the conduct of conduct, but also the epistemological structures within which subjects are provided. "For an entity to form itself in the image of a fully realized state," Hallaq argues, "it must presuppose a particular subject/subjectivity, viz. citizen" (21). What constitutes development for Kissinger is therefore not a measure of the economic or political constitution of the state. Rather, development is more fundamental than these concerns: it refers

solely to the capacity of the state to produce particular sorts of subjects. While it is not clear from Kissinger's statements how and why this process takes place, it would seem that the process itself is an internal one with important implications for the state, including the very premises of its power. What the subject of undevelopment represents is a subjectivity impenetrable to the government that seeks to control not only what its subjects are doing but also what they *think* about what they do. In the context of the contemporary "post-secular" era, this challenge to development's subjects has been imagined through Islam and the radical "terrorist" impulses it is thought to produce.

It is in this context that I turn to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and suggest that while it is offered as literature and so aspires to be what sacred texts once were ("the quintessential space for producing reflections on the most profound experiences" (Asad 286)), in the polarized context of its publication and afterlife, Rushdie's novel aims to govern the souls of Muslims. This is the case because of the secular state's mandate to protect religious freedom by separating religion from politics on the one hand, and the concurrent concern with Islamic "fundamentalists" and reining in radical beliefs on the other. By government here, I am referring to a force relation between the state and the subject—what Foucault called "the conduct of conduct"—where power is inscribed through the discourses, knowledge, and institutions that have as their aim the production of citizens. Within this framework, subjects are produced through regimes of surveillance, discourses of expertise, and cultural artifacts, among other structures seeking as their ultimate (if not ulterior) purpose, the production of citizens. This notion of power is diffused as the government takes place at a distance and proceeds through liberal principles of freedom and individual agency. The paradox of these tenets emerges in the locating of religion within the space allocated to freedom on the one hand, and to the private realm on the other. And this paradox is evident in Rushdie's treatment of Islam as a problem of the self that must be managed through and under (accurate) regimes of knowledge and truth. Thus, by an exploration of Rushdie's fictional account of the life of Muhammad as a madman dreamed into existence by a madman, and of his subjects as blind persons who "can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes," I will be suggesting that the novel constitutes Muslims as subjects in need of proper government. In this vein, I further suggest that it aims to discipline Muslims toward secular norms by adopting a literalist reading of Islamic history and literalized readings of the Quran so as to transform what is held as sacred Truth into historical artifacts that not only no longer bear any relevance to contemporary life, but that, viewed within a modern empiricist framework, could also have never "really" existed. In this transformation, sacred Truth is rendered profane and faith in the sacred is rendered madness.

*Truth and Madness: Governing the Souls of Muslims*

The publication of the *Satanic Verses* produced widespread protest in many Muslim communities, to which Rushdie delivered some (contradictory) responses, one of which posited the novel as literature. This enabled him to argue that his work should be protected as a space for free thought: "Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way. The reason for ensuring that that privileged arena is preserved is not that writers want the absolute freedom to say and do whatever they please. It is that we, all of us, readers and writers and citizens and generals and godmen, need that little unimportant looking room" (cited in Asad 289). In his analysis of Rushdie's response, Talal Asad compared Rushdie's conception of literature to ideas of the sacred, noting that when pondering "everything in every possible way," Rushdie did not turn to books on "political economy, philosophy or theology, but that he read and wrote fiction, literary

criticism, and poetry for spiritual sustenance” (289). When Rushdie says "literature," Asad therefore concludes, he means a very particular body of writing capable of producing (multiple and often contradictory) truth(s). Literature as a genre of *imaginative* writing thus presupposes particular kinds of reading and specific types of readers.

Many reactions to the novel follow this line of thought. The prominent postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha reads it as a work of hybridity, pastiche, postmodernism,<sup>ii</sup> A commentary on the normalized state of migration in an increasingly globalized world, and opines that *The Satanic Verses* “suggest[s] that there is no such whole as the nation, the culture or even the self” (cited in Asad 262). Writing about the novel’s cultural politics, Aamir Mufti locates the novel’s political claims in this hybrid form, suggesting that

pastiche--that is, hybridity of form, in this case the juxtaposition and overlapping of realist, "magical realist," and "modernist" modes; the parodic rewriting of historical and religious narratives and of metropolitan texts, genres, and motifs; the use of the resources of literary as well as popular culture--takes on in Rushdie's text a deeply political and critical turn. It is precisely this ambivalence of form--is the book about "real" events in Islamic history or is it pure fiction and fantasy?--that Constitutes the space within which the novel can function as critique. Pastiche, in this context, is neither a purely formal question nor merely the textual correlate of a hybrid "external reality." Pastiche and formal ambivalence are here the very conditions that enable the literary text to enter the public sphere as the political act. (310)

The politics of pastiche in Rushdie's works, Aamir claims, work "ironically" to "enunciate the signs of the colonizer in order to subvert their meaning” and therefore critique hegemonic forms of power. Parody, he suggests, provides ironic distance "as a means of expressing a simultaneous sense of continuity and discontinuity with the (colonial) past, offering a workable and efficient stance toward the [latter] in its paradoxical strategy of repetition as a source of freedom” (310).

However, not all readers of the novel viewed it this way, that is, through the prism (or excuse) of literary license. Many Muslims, in particular, rejected such claims, took offense at the novel’s representation of Islamic history and read the work not against its colonial background, but as being in continuity with it for its use of the Islamic tradition as a means of mocking and shaming Muslims toward secular western norms. Asad cites several examples highlighting the sense of moral injury many Muslims experienced as a result of the novel's parodic portrayal of Muhammad, with one respondent taking particular offense at the ways in which "the sacred is interlaced with flippancy” (cited in Asad 279). For these readers, the novel’s critical approach to Islam is itself a reflection of its position within a predominantly secular culture, a position foreclosing the possibilities for their divergent readings of the novel; I will return to this criticism in my last section. Here, I merely wish to emphasize that believing the novel is a general critique of hegemonic power itself presupposes a particular way of reading (and a special form of authority) linked to secular sensibilities. It is not naturally the case that an attitude of questioning and skepticism should be associated with freedom, as many of the novel’s defenders suggest; rather it is the consequence of the preconceived notion that freedom itself is expressed in critique.

It should also be noted that criticism is not foreign to the Islamic tradition. However, it is important to emphasize that evaluation takes place within a different modality of reading and thus through various ethical and epistemological norms. Jonathan Brown aptly demonstrates the inextricable connection between formal debate, argumentation, reasoning, and the formation of



consensus/dissent in the elaboration of orthodox Islamic thought and practice. Such practices always take place within the confines of Islamic law and jurisprudence wherein precedent and analogical reasoning form the basis of Islamic governance. In this framework, tradition becomes a source for freedom rather than that which is limiting of it. The irreducibility of the past with the present, taken for granted in contemporary secular formations, is thus transformed in Islamic jurisprudence into a space of analysis and discernment where fundamental similarities between the past and the present can be found. What is at issue, Hussein Ali Agrama notes in this context, is how the past is related to the future, “the skills and capacities of self they elicit, the ways they orient people’s temporal experiences and interpretations of events” (168). Drawing on the tradition for the managing and understanding of the present emphasizes memory and the skills of discernment rather than creativity and reform. It also rests on fundamentally different notions of power linked not only to the past but to practices of reading the past and bringing the past into relation with the present.

The *Satanic Verses* diverges dramatically from this tradition in its use of Islamic history. While the novel relies heavily on the use of magical realism in the central plot, it (anachronistically) adopts an empiricist worldview in its treatment of Islamic history and Islam’s prophet, Muhammad, a rendering that places the novel in the tradition of empire and literature’s civilizing mandate. The novel’s portrayal of subaltern subjects of faith as living in a magical world of their own (imaginative) making and from which they need rescue places the novel in the category of “civilizing” writing, the aim of which is to transform readers into proper subjects. The novel itself is a tapestry of interwoven narratives. The story of Mahound, a medieval Christian deformity of Muhammad signifying the devil, parallels the life of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad. Mahound’s story is itself posited within the dreams of the main character, Gibreel Farishta. In these dreams, Mahound closely mirrors the historical Muhammad of Islamic tradition and the sequence of events in these sections follows closely the historical record of Islam’s early emergence in Mecca.<sup>iii</sup> Like Muhammad, Mahound is married to an older businesswoman who sponsors his religious project. Also like Muhammad, Mahound is followed by a small group of companions whose names in the novel closely mimic those in the Islamic record—Khalid, “the water carrier” is the satirical representation of Khalid bin Walid, one of the first converts to Islam; Bilal, whom the novel calls a “big black monster,” is a fictional representation of the former slave and adopted son of Muhammad; Salman “the Persian,” a scribe described in the novel as part of Mahound’s “raggle-taggle” group of early followers, is meant to be a parodic representation of Muhammad’s amanuensis (as well as a reflection of the author); and Hamza is Mahound/Muhammad’s uncle, among others.

Mahound’s antagonists, and thus the conflict he faces in Jahilia (Mecca), also parallel the historical narrative. Abu Simbel, the leader of the Shark tribe in the novel, is the fictional representation of Abu Sufyan, the leader of the Meccan Quraish. Like Abu Sufyan, Abu Simbel is a figure of great wealth and political power. His financial and political status in the city is the consequence of his dominance over its various religious shrines. And, as in Islamic tradition, the conflict between Abu Simbel and Mahound centers on the proliferation of gods and goddesses in the city; Mahound preaches a message of oneness, while Abu Simbel supports the city’s polytheistic tradition.

The dispute between Mahound and Abu Simbel centers on power. The Shark tribe, led by Abu Simbel and his wife, Hind, dominates the city by (cynically) supporting its polytheistic religious structure for economic and political gain. It is not entirely clear if Abu Simbel and Hind themselves have faith, but several passages suggest they do not.<sup>iv</sup> It is, however, eminently

apparent that the people of Jahilia are faithful believers, and so Abu Simbel and Hind understand that maintaining the city's polytheistic tradition (and their role as its protectors) is vital to maintaining their own economic, social, and political hegemony. The problem Mahound poses to them is, therefore, twofold: he brings a message of oneness that arises from notions of a transcendent power rising above the powers of the city's local gods and, thus, of Abu Simbel as well. The ever cynical politician realizes this and quickly grasps the political implications of Mahound's monotheistic message: "Why do I fear Mahound?" he asks. "For that: one one one, his terrifying singularity" (102).

In the conflict that plays out between them, both Abu Simbel and Mahound appear to be rational, political players capable of transcending the enchanted world in which they live. For Abu Simbel, the sacred is very much a historical construct from which he can disengage himself and manipulate for personal gain. As a cunning politician, he also assumes that Mahound shares the same perspective and so views his revelations from this self-created, expedient lens. Because the sacred is pure politics for Abu Simbel, he reads Mahound's monotheistic message as a political play for power:

Whereas I am always divided, always two or three or fifteen. I can even see his point of view; he is as wealthy and successful as any of us, as any of the councilors, but because he lacks the right sort of family connections, we haven't offered him a place amongst our group. Excluded by his orphaning from the mercantile elite, he feels he has been cheated; he has not had his due. He always was an ambitious fellow. Ambitious, but also solitary. (102)

This view of Mahound is not just the perception of the one misguided or corrupted character. Throughout the novel's subplot, the revelation scenes are interwoven into a rationalist calculus not known to have been present in Islam's early history and presented as though they were. The notion that political calculations drive revelation is evinced most particularly in the scene of the "Satanic Verses" and Mahound's sudden reversal of his position regarding the city's many gods. To summarize this episode briefly, Abu Simbel, along with the members of his tribe, resists Mahound's monotheistic message and begin a program of persecution against Mahound and his followers. When the pressure to permit a system of polytheism in alignment with the demands of the Shark tribe becomes too high, Mahound returns to the city with a message allowing the city's three most revered goddesses--Lat, Uzza, and Manat—to be recognized in the new faith. This concession, however, produces a perverse result. While the tribal leader Abu Simbel is satisfied, Mahound's concession enables accusations of fraud and his struggle to save his message (and reputation) thus becomes enmeshed within the city's politics. Abu Simbel's wife, in particular, takes the three-goddesses concession as an opportunity to manipulate Mahound into again reversing course, undermining her husband's authority, which is always her goal. Mahound retracts his statements and admits that the revelation regarding the three goddesses was the work of the devil, Shaitan(Satan), who had taken on the guise of the messenger angel, Gibreel: "It was the Devil," he says aloud to the empty air, making it true by giving it voice. "The last time, it was Shaitan" (123). After this admission, the narrator interjects his suggestion that *this* realization is in fact also a fiction. The "truth" of the "non-truth" of the "Satanic Verses" is that all Mahound's beliefs are merely a reflection of what Mahound is able to convince himself is true, which implies, of course, that it is not true, but simply another creation of Mahound's own imagination: "This is what he has *heard* in his *listening*," the narrator again comments with emphasis, "that he has been tricked, that the Devil came to him in the guise of

the archangel, so that the verses he memorized, the ones he recited in the poetry tent, were not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly, but satanic" (123).

When we examine this scene in the context of other revelation scenes, it appears that the polytheistic concession thus is far more complex than a mere struggle for power. The question of motive here and elsewhere begins to be clouded over by more troubling questions. Who is Mahound? Or, as the narrator puts it, "What kind of idea are you?" Throughout the novel's subplot, the narrator interrogates the epistemological foundations of revelation by posing questions about Gabriel's (the novel's protagonist and through whose dreams we encounter Mahound) and, by extension, Mahound's sanity. This mode of questioning emerges early, as when we are confronted with the narrator's commentary on the preceding developments leading to the revelation of the satanic verses, as in this comical introduction: "He's coming: making his way up Cone Mountain to the cave. Happy Birthday: he's forty-four today. But though the city behind and below him throngs with the festival, up he climbs, alone. No new birthday suit for him, neatly pressed and folded at the foot of his bed. A man of ascetic tastes" (92). The purpose of these interjections is not merely to "make fun." The purpose is to use fun-making to probe at the edges of the epistemological edges of the sacred: "What strange manner of a businessman is this?" the narrator asks (92). This question is revealing of novel's critical ethos vis a vis Muslims.

Just before this scene, the novel positions readers within a sane/insane moment of consciousness where Gibreel realizes that he is sinking into madness. This section begins with Gibreel falling into his role as the *messenger angel*: "Gibreel when he submits to the inevitable, when he slides heavy-lidded towards visions of his angeling, passes his loving mother who has a different name for him, Shaitan, she calls him, just like Shaitan, same to same . . ." (90). Gibreel's personal history is here mixed with elements of Islamic tradition, he becoming, imaginatively, *the angel* Gibreel knew in the traditional narratives of Hagar and Muttaalib: "[B]efore the businessman there are other stories, here he is, Archangel Gibreel, revealing the spring of Zamzam to Hagar the Egyptian. . . . And later, after the Jurhum filled up Zamzam with mud and golden gazelles, so that it was lost for a time, here he is again, pointing it out to that one, Muttaalib of the scarlet tents, father of the child with the silver hair who fathered, in turn, the businessman" (91). Gibreel's self-conscious madness thus coincides with the novel's representations of Islam. The purpose of this is to at once cast Islamic history as fiction by placing it within a rationalist logic of what is physically possible and, by adding a second layer of recognizable fictionality to conceptions of the sacred, rendering them both products of an imagination that is "making things up."

In these scriptural passages in the novel, Gibreel is also the devil or Shaitan. Initially, this impression is conveyed through Gibreel's memory of being called a "devil" by his mother for being naughty because, as a child, he had "been fooling around with the tiffins to be carried into the city for the office workers' lunch, mischievous imp . . . rascal has been putting Muslim meat compartments into Hindu non-veg, tiffin carriers, customers are up in arms" (90). This information flows from the novel's central plot, wherein Gibreel comes of age in India as the son of a Muslim restaurateur delivering meals to clients. But as the passage develops, Gibreel's memory (itself a creation of Rushdie's fiction) devolves even further into fantasy, although built on traditional Islamic narratives about Shaitan. Gibreel effectively becomes "*the devil*," a figure of spiritual corruption drawn from Muslim tradition, "Shaitan cast down from the sky, making a grab for a branch of the highest Thing, the lote-tree of the uttermost end that stands beneath the Throne," (91) a parodic rendering of what is believed to have been the introduction of evil into



the world with the fall of the angel Iblis. The “Throne” is obviously an allusion to God, taken from Quranic references to He who is “High Above, over His Throne.” The passage then continues by referencing the incident of the “Satanic Verses” and Shaitan/Gibreel's role in their revelation. Despite his fall, Shaitan "lived on, was not couldn't be dead, sang from hell below his soft, seductive verses . . . . With his daughters as his fiendish backing group, yes, the three of them, Lat Manat Uzza, motherless girls with their Abba, giggling behind their hands at Gibreel, what a trick we got in store for you, they giggle, for you and for that businessman on the hill” (91). It is precisely here that Rushdie’s pretense of history goes awry and his wholly negative critique of Islamic conceptions of the sacred becomes most prominent. The incident of the “Satanic Verses” is itself apocryphal; that Rushdie juxtaposes it with accurate references to Quranic verses and traditional beliefs demonstrates a strategy to cast doubt on all sacred writings as fictional equivalents to his novel-writing fictions. Such a move directs itself to Muslims for whom doubt and fiction are fundamentally in opposition to faith.

The tension between the sacred and what the novel casts as fantastical, purely imagined, and at times also evil is heightened when Gibreel as an angel is contaminated by Gibreel the protagonist's very evident psychosis and the subsequent convergence between his consciousness as Angel/Shaitain and Mahound's/Muhammad's equally doubleconsciousness:

But when he enters a different sort of sleep, a sort of not-sleep, the condition that he calls *listening*, and he feels a dragging pain in the gut, like something trying to be born, and now Gibreel, who has been hovering-above-looking-down, feels a confusion, *who am I*, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangels are actually *inside the Prophet*, I am dragging in the gut, I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper’s navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies *listening*, entranced, I am bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other. We flow in both directions along the umbilical cord. (110).

From this and similar passages, it becomes clear that Gibreel’s psychosis becomes Mahound’s; Gibreel is transformed fully (meaning he can no longer distinguish “reality” from his hallucinations) into the angel Gibreel, who now speaks through Mahound. This is significant not only because it is, again, another parodic liberty with the Islamic narrative—it is not believed that Gibreel “entered” into Muhammad nor that Gibreel spoke through Muhammad; rather revelation begins with the mandate to “read,” a mandate talked to Muhammad and from which the verses of the Quran emerge—but also because the convergence of Gibreel’s consciousness with Mahound’s takes place precisely when Gibreel is going mad. The implication, of course, is that Muhammad was also angry and the Quran was but a reflection of this madness, an idea drawing on familiar themes from anti-Muslim polemics, in which Muhammad is characterized as possessed or epileptic, as Deepa Kumar has observed:

Muhammad was said to be a magician, a sorcerer who used his evil powers to produce fake miracles and thereby seduce men into embracing his false doctrines; he was a renegade Christian priest, perhaps even a cardinal, whose frustrated lust for power led him to seek revenge on the church by propagating his pernicious teachings; he was sexually promiscuous, an adulterer, and promoted licentiousness in order to ensnare men into depravity; his death was as disgusting and shameful as his life, for he was devoured by dogs, or suffocated by pigs during an epileptic fit. (Loc 340)

The theme of madness also paradoxically places the novel within the Islamic tradition where it is narrated that Muhammad reacted to his first encounter with Gibreel by questioning his sanity. Thus Muhammad's state of mind would become a crucial sticking point in representations of

Islamic tradition as either true or untrue. *The Satanic Verses* draws on this tradition in order to perpetuate mainly western, Christian images of Muhammad and Islam

The convergence of the novel's suggestive themes regarding Muhammad's possible madness with much of early Western Christian literature assaulting the Muslim world is also apparent in the additional (even if contradictory) suggestion that Muhammad was also evil. This also is made evident by the all-knowing narrator's commentary, which directs our reading. In the first revelation scene when Mahound is climbing Mount Cone to meditate, this narrator interrupts the discourse to posit a question: "What is the opposite of faith?" And then he answers himself: "Not disbelief . . . Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt" (92). In this scene, Gibreel is again playing his multiple roles in quick succession, but also simultaneously. He is himself, dreaming the scene described; and he is also the angel Gibreel since the appearance of Mahound is coincident with Gibreel entering into his own and Mahound's consciousness. At the same time, Gibreel is Shaitan/Satan, but if so that renders Mahound, an incarnation of the devil. Mahound's evil essence is reinforced by the narrator who, in answer to his question of doubt as noted above, also provides an acknowledgment of a call—"I know; devil talk. Shaitan is interrupting Gibreel." And then another question: "Me?" (92). Who is speaking here?

The effect of this collapsing of points of view in the hands of a skeptical narrative voice is to offer readers a view of Mahound as a figure of many possibilities, thus undermining his unitary status as a prophet of a divine message. Madness, which casts revelation as hallucination and delusion; evil, implied by Mahound's earlier representation as a rational politician: both place revelation within an impossibly shifting realm of consciousness, knowledge, and power—Rushdie has tried to undo revelation using doubt. The cumulative effect of this contradictory and skeptical rendition whereby the sacred is reduced to either political motive or madness is to undercut Islam's sacred truths and put the sanity of those who believe in these truths in question. However, at this juncture we come on a paradox, for if the foundations of Islam—Muhammad's divine message and the Quran's sacred Truth—are held untrue, what is truth, and how can it be known?<sup>v</sup>

#### *Critical Responses*

In "In Good Faith," written in response to Muslim protests against the novel's publication, Rushdie defended himself against his critics. In contradiction to an earlier statement claiming "that the book in question isn't actually *about Islam*, but migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death . . . [and] deals with a prophet who is not called Mohammad living in a highly fantastical city made of sand . . . followed by fictional followers, one of whom happens to bear my own first name" (cited in Asad 274) he now asks:

Are all the rules laid down at religion's origin immutable forever? How about the penalties for prostitution (stoning to death) or thieving (mutilation)? How about the prohibition of homosexuality? How about the Islamic law of inheritance, which allows a widow to inherit only an eighth share, and which gives to sons twice as much as it does to daughters? What of the Islamic law of evidence, which makes a woman's testimony worth only half that of a man? Are these, too, to be given unquestioning respect: or may writers and intellectuals ask the awkward questions that are part of their reason for being what they are? (*Imaginary* 399)

In this sentence alone, Rushdie's claim that his work was not a critique of Islamic law is clearly belied. Rather, he now seems to own up to the charge, admitting that his novel quite specifically aimed to put into question, the Muslim religion, its laws and its faith. While authorial intent

cannot determine a text's ultimate meaning, an author's interpretation of his work becomes part of a wider culture of readings and forms in itself an inter-text of the text in question. What Rushdie has to say about the novel is therefore not irrelevant to the way in which it is read. With this said, we might note that it cannot be the case, as Rushdie elsewhere claims, that *Satanic Verses* is a work of dissent aimed at opening discussion about matters of concern to Muslims and non-Muslims alike—but that it is not about Islam, Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic tradition. Further, if the goal of the novel is indeed to create a dialogue about matters of spiritual concern, it cannot be “just” a work of art, to be assessed as a “looking room for oneself,” as Rushdie suggested in another context.<sup>vi</sup> It needn't, of course, be noted that literature is not simply an “unimportant looking room.” It is, as Rushdie is well aware, precisely the opposite. Literature ascended to its ideological heights by playing a vital role in the formation of imaginative communities. Its role as an idealized cultural artifact is to both mold and reflect upon the culture in which it is situated in normative ways, one of which is to see literature as, on the one hand, a space for exploring the truths of life and the other, art for art's sake. In either case, writing aspires to its place by aiming to be a “looking room” not for one's thoughts, as Rushdie claimed, for others and of others through imaginative representations. And if it not mere “entertainment” but rather a space for exploring the “truths of life,” literature also aims to fulfill a civilizing function by shaping the way readers think about themselves, society, and culture in its manner of representation.

The themes of doubt and madness that figure so powerfully in the novel do provoke questions specifically about the Islamic tradition, alongside more general questions about truth, ethical frameworks, and thus individual and social ontologies; above all, it questions the validity of belief itself. How can believers believe in what the text suggests is manifestly unjust, clearly ridiculous, and also untrue. It is thus important to note that all these questionings refer to a particular way of figuring both history and “truth” that is by no means universal or uncontested, but which are nevertheless taken for granted by the author. This way of reading (and writing) conceives truth as both what is scientifically possible and empirically available, while also, and in an entirely different register, that which is open to contestation, argument, critique, and play. Rushdie thus aims for the proverbial wanting its cake and eating it too—he offers up a truth based on the facticity of a purely physical world, while also questioning the very possibility of any truth at all. That these contradictory structures were not recognized by western readers as being in tension with one another registers their location within the same epistemological framework. The world of secular reason posits that historical facts are governed by the laws of physics and the powers (and limits) of human observation while at the same time opening the way for a rigorous questioning of all truth, a thoroughgoing relativization of ethical frameworks and social mores and an undoing of history itself. Subjects of faith, particular subjects of minority religions, find themselves oddly placed in these circumstances. When the constraints of citizenship are added to this situation, those for whom the sacred constitutes the singular purpose and end of life face questions not only about their allegiance to the state but also deeper questions about their very “selves.” One of the principle criticisms leveled against the novel's Muslim protestors in the British Commonwealth thus centered on their adherence to British values, which, though never explicitly defined, seem to entail a number of contradictory ideals, as, for example, individual freedom on one hand, and racial, religious, and ideological homogeneity on the other. The larger question the novel poses to its troubled characters is “What kind of idea are you?” and that is precisely directed at the novel's Muslim readers alone. In presenting the narrative of Islam as the history of madness in which the only “truth” is

uncertainty itself, the novel implicitly asks Muslims who and what they are. Thus the novel is not an exploration of faith as Rushdie argues, but an attack on a specific religion; his question is not “What do you believe?” but the far more corrosive, “Why do you believe?”

The riots, the calls for banning the book, and the fatwa calling for Rushdie’s death themselves were represented in the media within the same narrative framework Rushdie drew on in his novel. Scenes of Muslim outrage were recycled throughout the coverage to reinforce a narrative arguing religions tyrannical grip on the souls of Muslims. For secular readers of the text, these reactions were incomprehensible. And so the question was often asked: Why are Muslims angry about a work of fiction? What kind of religious faith can be shaken by the creative play of the imagination? These questions miss a crucial point: the novel must be read within the broader social and historical context in which it uncomfortably fits as “literature”--if it fits at all. When we return it to the long tradition of anti-Muslim polemics in the West, in which Muhammad’s character is cast into question and, by extension, the souls of Muslims are opened to scrutiny and criticism, we can see that the novel easily lends itself to a culture of Islamophobia and a discourse of terrorism in which Muslims are read as fanatical and irrational, and hence dangerous. This is where the offensiveness of *Satanic Verses* lies. Defenses of the novel's representations of Islamic tradition as part of a strategy of destabilizing hegemonic narratives is cynical and self-serving since in judging one set of principles to be untrue, another set is advanced as true--the Truth, in fact. The novel contradicts its suspicions of truth narratives not only by placing itself within a "Truth" tradition (a liberal secular tradition in which literature plays a civilizing role), but also by critiquing "Truth" itself as something which does not exist from secular reason. In this sense, the novel takes a stand for "truth" against "Truth," for if one is certain of the non-Truth of Islamic faith, Islam becomes essentially “fiction” and its content is rendered meaningless (fantastical) as the only possible “truth” of anyone’s reasonable historical account.

In order fully to understand why the novel’s parodic rendering of Islam’s truths caused offense, we have to understand the role that narratives of the Prophet’s life play in Muslim societies. Jonathan Brown, the author of *Misquoting Muhammad*, usefully summarizes the significance of these narratives to the development of Islamic legal and social practices:

The faith’s scriptural foundation is made up of two parts. Its core is the Qur’an, which Muslims believe to be the unchanging record of God’s revealed word, a small volume that can be gripped and memorized word for word. Around it are the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, amorphous and contested. The indistinct corpus of Hadiths in Sunni, as well as Shiite Islam, surrounds the solid nucleus of the Qur’an like a nimbus; its inner reaches made up of a narrow band of well-known Hadiths that circumscribe the established teachings and precedent of the Prophet. (8)

Narratives of the prophet’s life and words are also folkloric in an everyday sense. They are integral to Islamic rituals dealing with all manner of daily life, including elements of life not thought to be within the purview of “religion,” including matters now relegated exclusively to the state, for example, taxes, business contracts, and education, among many other state-controlled entities. Further, as Wael Hallaq has demonstrated in his lengthy studies of the Shari’a tradition, Shari’a encompasses both a legal and moral economy by which Muslims have aimed to govern themselves for centuries.<sup>vii</sup> Central to the conceptualization of Shari’a law has been its "religious" moral register. The legal principles derived from Islamic tradition center around the ethical principles established first in the Quran and elaborated in centuries of religious opinion and social tradition. The questions Islam's jurists ask are thus fundamentally different

from those posed by those of the state. Where the legal framework is instantiating and regulating the state function for the sake of the state's survival, Islamic law is theological in its fullest sense. The sanctioned and the prohibited are so because they are believed to be a reflection of a divine will. The constitution of Muslims through an Islamic ethical-legal framework thus also turns on an absolute submission to God's will, a submission instantiated through personal belief in the sacred and reflected in practices that flow from this faith. Central to the constitution of the Muslim and the Muslim umma (community of believers) by extension is a vision of the Prophet Muhammad as both the messenger of God's divine will and a human model of goodness whose life provides the closest approximation to God's vision for humankind on earth. For Rushdie, such devotion is represented as both absurd and oppressive:

Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation—the recitation—told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep, and which sexual positions had received a divine sanction, so that they learned that sodomy and the missionary position were approved by the archangel, whereas the forbidden postures included all those in which the female was on top. Gibreel further listed the permitted and forbidden subjects of conversation, and earmarked the parts of the body which could not be scratched no matter how unbearably they might itch. He vetoed the consumption of prawns, those bizarre other-worldly creatures which no member of the faithful had ever seen, and required animals are killed slowly, by bleeding, so that by experiencing their deaths to the full they might arrive at an understanding of the meaning of their lives...(374).

This passage is not merely a commentary on the Quran and its many “rules, rules, rules.” It is also a commentary on Islamic ethics itself. As Asad notes, “in deriding the very idea of rules of conduct, (‘rules about every damn thing . . . It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free’),” (294) Rushdie is also making a claim about what it means to be free. In this regard, it might be suggested that the novel is offered not as a universal critique of ideologies limiting freedom—if it were, it might have taken up some of the many “rules” governing daily life in the modern state. Rather, it is a critique of only one very particular ideology—the Muslim faith, and the “rules” that govern it. Thus to satirize the life of the prophet is to question the very ontology of Islam itself and not just, as Rushdie offered in one of his responses to the novel's critics, its “fundamentalist” adherents.

If we take *Satanic Verses* seriously, which, given the extent to which it was taken to represent core Western values not only of freedom of expression, but also of free thought, that is, skepticism toward non-empirical truths, we should thus be concerned about the implications of some of its themes. Focusing on the point of greatest controversy for Muslims—the representations of Mahound—we might posit the following as Rushdie's train of logical thought: The Prophet Muhammad was a madman who conjured up the verses of the Quran in a hallucinatory fit. Those who revere him as a messenger of God, and thus believe and live by his Quran as embodying sacred Truth are, like the Prophet, also mad; what they take as Truth is untrue, the very definition of “madness” in Rushdie's world of hallucination. This logical sequence is produced very paradoxically when the reader must continually unwind the demands of fictional representation, which construct a barrier in interpretation that denies the subject of



faith an understanding of its logic: Rushdie is seemingly offering us a work of fiction that need not be logical. Literature as imaginative writing, we are told, is to be appreciated on its own merits. To critique it for its ontological fallacy rather than its themes, character, genre, and artistry is fundamental to misunderstand it. To take it seriously as anything other than literature, to be offended, for example, by its satiric representations, is also to place oneself outside the framework of western identity, which, on the one hand, values the freedom of expression as sacred, while also assuming a fundamental and permanent tentativeness and relativity inherent in all language. Rushdie then presented his work as “purified” of any ideological connections, so that when some Muslims reacted violently to the novel’s publication, they were thought to have betrayed the reality it contained: a blinding religious zeal. Muslims became what they always already were—fanatical, irrational, beyond the pale of reason, mad, and in need of reform.

#### *Conclusion*

Contemporary terror discourse paradigmatically highlights this paradox of secular power by manifesting the problem religion poses where the state aims to “conduct conduct” in its own (secular) terms and where power is located in the soul. Hence the problem of terror is framed not only as a problem of its violence but more fundamentally as a problem of religious subjectivities (that could lead to violence). Initially situating the place of religion in secular society as a problem of governmentality Rushdie’s novel demonstrates the ways in which these assumptions are activated in the representation of Islam today. *The Satanic Verses*, although antedating the global War on Terror by several years, anticipates the production of terrorism as Islamic violence and embodies those Western associations with Muslims that have come to condition present discourses of terror. Through this reading we can perhaps see how West has come to lodge its notion of terror and terrorism in the soul of Islam and why the novel (and, by extension, the language of “radical” Islam) offended so many Muslims.

So what is true about the *Satanic Verses* controversy?

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<sup>i</sup>As Paul Kahn notes in his exploration of Western morality, "For much of European history, the face of evil—when it was not the Jew—has been the Muslim." Kahn, Paul. *Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 84.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Bennett, David. "Salman Rushdie as *Post-modernist: The Politics of Genres and Self-Representation in the Satanic Verses Affair.*" *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 19.1. (1997): 1-37. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> Historically, it is known that Muhammad was a trader who worked for his older, wealthy wife, Khadija, when, at the age of forty-four, he began periods of meditation in the hills overlooking Mecca. In the year 610, Muhammad is believed to have received the first revelation from the angel Gabriel. Over the course of the next twenty years, Muhammad would receive several such revelations on all matters concerning the Arab's spiritual and material life. From these revelations would be developed a legal system that would govern the entirety of the Muslim empire from the Iberian Peninsula to the Asian subcontinent. While the specific practices that would flow from this system would vary from location to location, they would all be governed by the same overarching systemic structure stemming from a Quranic world view, which, as Hallaq aptly summarizes, constituted "a holistic system of belief, in a cosmology that *comprised* a metaphysic," that is, Hallaq suggests, "not only profoundly moral but is also itself constructed, both in form and content, out of moral fiber." The central principle of Muhammad's teaching drew on that of the Christo-Judaic tradition: the singularity of the God and the precedence of the material and spiritual wellbeing of the community, an episteme that translates "into an acknowledgement that what we do for ourselves—certainly as individuals, but *more importantly*, as members of a social group" (Hallaq, Wael. *The Impossible State*, 83. The emphasis in the original.)

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<sup>iv</sup> In her conversation with Mahound regarding the three goddesses, Hind makes it clear that for her the question of the divine is very much a matter of politics, a game of power. "Between Allah and the Three there are can no peace," she insists. "I want the fight. To the death; that is the kind of idea I am" (121).

<sup>v</sup> Interestingly, of course, this is the same question that Jesus and Pilate confront in his trial--it is the question that all spirit-oriented religions have had to answer.

<sup>vi</sup> See for example Rushdie cited in Bennett, David. "Salman Rushdie as *Post-modernist*: The Politics of Genres and Self-Representation in the *Satanic Verses* Affair." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 19.1. (1997): 6. Print.

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