

The Satanic Verses Post Festum

The Global, The Local, The Literary

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In the following pages, I do not intend to present a systematic scholarly essay on either the Rushdie affair or the novel that precipitated it, *The Satanic Verses*.¹ My intention, instead, is to discuss some of what I would regard as neglected aspects of both novel and affair by making a kind of collage of analyses, observations, criticisms and commentaries on several conventional and unconventional issues that this unprecedented international politico-literary scandal threw into such prominence.

I. Globalization and Literature

The 1970s ended with a major international debate sparked by the publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*.² At the time, I contributed, both in Arabic and English, to the polemics, debates and discussions raging practically everywhere about the vexed questions and issues raised in and by Said's book.³

As the controversy unfolded, I was struck by a vague but persistent feeling that there is something special, unique and/or qualitatively new about the universality of the discussions over this whole Orientalism issue. They seemed international, world-encompassing and transcendent of habitual geographical locations, national borders and cultural differences in a most unprecedented way, especially for a work emerging out of the American academy. No

book in recent memory, no matter how great, revolutionary, critical and/or offensive, had managed to simultaneously draw such complex and powerful reactions, both positive and negative, from Arabs, Indians, Africans, Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans, Russians, Muslims, Christians, Jews etc., as well as from Marxists, liberals, nationalists, Islamists, rightists, leftists, neutralists, culturalists, universalists, nativists, postmodernists, and much of it through the medium of English.

Similarly, no book before Edward Said's *Orientalism* had succeeded in commanding the simultaneous and spontaneous attention of highly articulate sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, linguists, literary critics, historians, philosophers, humanists, orientalist, journalists, politicians, diplomats, public intellectuals, immigrants and so on, in all four corners of the earth.

In the early 1980s, I found myself explaining away these novel features of the *Orientalism* debate by attributing them variously to: (a) A concatenation of some very special and exceptional circumstances such as had surrounded Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr. Zhivago*, leading to an unprecedented international crisis and debate over both the novel and the Nobel Prize for literature awarded to the author in 1958. But,

I, then, dismissed the Pasternak incident as no more than a highly unusual episode of the Cold War at one of its worst moments. (b) The random convergence of various lines of radical concerns, postcolonial interests, and critical intellectual approaches emanating from very many parts of the world and their seemingly accidental intersection at the time of the publication of Said's *Orientalism*. (c) The earlier stirrings within the field of Orientalism itself, indicating that perhaps the time was ripe for some critical stock-taking, soul-searching and consciousness-raising concerning what the discipline was all about, particularly in those days.

But, then, the 1980s surprised us by ending with an even more protracted and massive transnational, transcultural and transcontinental controversy, row and struggle over Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Again, I contributed, both in Arabic and English, to the polemics, debates and discussions raging literally everywhere on the surface of the earth about the vexed questions and issues raised both in and by the novel.⁴

As the Rushdie controversy unfolded, it dawned on me that the universalism of the earlier *Orientalism* debate was really neither an exceptional circumstance nor an accidental episode, but the beginning of a genuinely new world-wide movement and trend. This became confirmed, first, by the starkly global nature of the Rushdie affair and the singular sweep of the controversies over *The Satanic Verses* throughout the 1990s; and second, by the equally universal and transcultural attention given practically everywhere around the world to the articles and books of Francis Fukuyama⁵ and Samuel P. Huntington⁶ on "the end of history" and "the clash of civilizations" respectively. To be noted also is the fact that the latter two authors stake out overarching universalist claims themselves about the whole of humanity, its history, future and destiny. Like Said's *Orientalism* and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, their work left no one untouched, and

consequently the reactions came from everywhere on the surface of the globe. Actually, Huntington noted in the introduction to his book that according to the editors of *Foreign Affairs* his article "stirred up more discussion in three years than any other article they had published since the 1940s... The responses and comments on it have come from every continent and scores of countries... Whatever else it did, the article struck a nerve in people of every civilization." In brief, the universality that struck me as so exceptional at the beginning of the 1980s, had become routine by the middle of the 1990s.

The consolation I drew from all this is that books still make a difference and on a scale never witnessed before, critical thought counts in the most unlikely quarters, fine literature remains capable of unsettling the whole world and authors continue to be alive, well and kicking. I say this in the face of such postmodern routine proclamations as the death of the author, the end of the novel and the demise of literature.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion that underlying this whole phenomenon stretching from the *Orientalism* debates to the Huntington controversies, is what we have come to call the process of globalization. I came to this realization by reflecting on what seemed to me, then, like certain urgent questions and considerations suddenly pressed on our consciousness by the Rushdie affair itself. For example:

(a) What does it mean in today's world and to today's world when a satirical "English" novel that takes in India, England, Islam, Khomeini's revolution, the East/West divide, immigrant communities and a lot of other hot issues, anomalies and paradoxes, generates unprecedented massive reactions in the West, no less than in the Indian subcontinent, no less than the Muslim World, no less than Africa?

(b) Is the world getting unified — or maybe over unified — not only commercially, communicationally, scientifically and technically, but also culturally? Or, are we, perhaps, seeing the rise of a certain kind of super-

culture or over-culture to be added to the well-known earlier cultural forms such as popular, middle-brow and high-brow cultures?

(c) Could we be seeing the formation of transnational, transcontinental and translinguistic cultural vanguards set on meeting the spiritual, intellectual and artistic needs of the emerging financial, technological, managerial and business elites that preside over and run the currently globalizing world economy?

(d) Are we witnessing the rise of a world literature out of the myriad of local and national literary traditions and what is the role of the authors of the periphery in building and nourishing this new development? Furthermore, how is all this reacting on the Western core itself and affecting its own literary output and creative writers?

It seemed to me at the time that these important questions had never been posed so starkly, urgently and on such a global human scale as with the Rushdie affair and novel. Consequently, whatever one may think of the artistic merits of Rushdie's literary productions, whatever one may think of the religious status of *The Satanic Verses* — blasphemous or innocent — this highly challenging feature of his novel is sufficient to make the whole incident command our serious attention for a long time to come, both in East and West. I say both East and West, because the uniqueness of the Rushdie affair lies precisely in the fact that a book has finally succeeded, and for the first time ever, in implicating at one and the same time, both Muslim East and secular West in the same religio-literary scandal and affair.

Now, I would like to return to my contention that the emerging universalism first noted in the *Orientalism* debate and then come to fruition in the Rushdie controversies, would have been quite impossible without the globalization process currently taking hold of humanity.

Globalization is at bottom an economic process with the usual social, political, cultural, legal etc., ramifications attendant on such major economic shifts and

transformations. For my present purposes, it is enough to characterize globalization as the most advanced phase of the capitalist transformation of mankind under the leadership and hegemony of the core countries. This massive process flows primarily from the center to the periphery with a lot of feedback and reflexes impacting the center itself.

I would like to couple this characterization with George Lukács' observation that "artistic forms rise and decline with the rise and decline of the image of their epoch." Lukács' succinct formulation is, I think, inspired by Goethe's remark somewhere to the effect that "literature deteriorates only as mankind deteriorates."

What I am saying, then, is that (a) globalization is a new rising epoch encompassing the whole of humanity, (b) this epoch has its own image in-the-making at the present time, and (c) the artistic forms appropriate to and expressive of this image have started to rise and evolve as well (taking care here not to confuse artistic and/or literary forms with formal techniques).

In his *Testaments Betrayed*,⁷ Milan Kundera described Europe as the society of the novel and called the modern Europeans the children of the novel. He, then, proceeded to castigate both Europe and the Europeans for failing so miserably in defending their mother, the novel, throughout the turmoil of the Rushdie affair. Kundera's rebuke illustrates very nicely, in my view, this idea of an intimate relationship — an elective affinity, if you wish — between the image of a rising European modernity, on the one hand, and the concomitant rise of this new literary form that we call the novel, on the other. One can as beneficially think, in this context, of Hegel's description of European modernity as the age of prose and the prosaic, as against the image of an earlier epoch of poetry, chivalry and heroism.

We know that Goethe was the first to formulate the pregnant idea and highly suggestive ideal of *Weltlit-*

eratur, i.e., the idea of a universal world-literature-in-the-making and the ideal of a common world literature transcending national limits, cultural boundaries and provincial traditions. Now, consider the following extension of Goethe's suggestion:

... and as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the various national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

This is Karl Marx echoing the great German poet while giving his own characterization of the modern epoch and its image in the *Communist Manifesto*.

For Karl Marx, without the universalizing drive of European capitalism, without its unquestionable world-historical commanding position and without the resulting *Weltmarkt* in all sorts of goods, products and exchanges, the idea of world literature would have been quite unthinkable. For Goethe as well, without the universalizing drive of European literature (primarily the novel), its emerging world-historical commanding position and the resulting formation of a *Weltmarkt* in all sorts of cultural productions, the idea of *Weltliteratur*, would have also remained quite unthinkable. It is as if these two giants saw the present globalization epoch, its image and its literary forms as somehow already immanent in the main universalizing drift of their times.

This is not blind Eurocentrism on the part of either Goethe or Marx, but (a) a recognition of the central place and privileged position occupied by European literature in the then rising *Weltmarkt* in everything, (b) an admission not only of that literature's role as the main vehicle of the cultural universalization processes going on under their very eyes, but also of its status as paradigm and model, (c) a making of the best use possible of the extraordinarily privileged position that each of them found himself in as an observer capable

of surveying the world's literary outputs from the commanding heights of the center and with a fair amount of Olympian detachment, and (d) a heightened awareness of the historicity of literature and of the impossibility of severing literary practice from the pressures and tugs of a wider history.

As I reflect on this whole issue of globalization and literature, I read both Goethe's proposal and Marx's characterization as brilliant anticipations of the arrival of a new epoch which makes possible, for the first time, the rise of literary forms that appropriate the whole world under the image of a single entity. These forms have to seriously transcend the earlier understandings — be they noble or trivial — of world literature as not much more than: (1) An act of bringing together, in some fashion or other, the great books of all times and places, (2) an upholding of the ideal of a grand synthesis of all that is glorious and sublime in the world's high cultures, (3) a collecting in one supreme formation of the greatest literary works produced anywhere around the world at any one time, (4) the mere give and take that occurs (and has been occurring) among the world's various national and local literary traditions, (5) the intense exchanges and interchanges that have been taking place among the world's national literatures through the preponderant medium of Euro-American literary productions, (6) those non-Western works that find great favor with and circulate widely among the readers of the core countries, particularly the works chosen in and by the West for prestigious prizes, high praise and critical acclaim, (7) the idea of the rise of a cultural *Weltmarkt* as a neutral arena where all nations, cultures, authors etc., offer their literary goods and services, (8) the mere circulation and exchange of works of literature across national borders and cultural boundaries, (9) the steady internationalization of reading publics and of writing elites, sort of a cosmopolitanism of reading and writing, and (10) the mere internationalization

and/or commercial globalization of the literary.

Thus, contrary to the currently shrill claims of the postmodernists, globalization and the processes, images, forms and vocabularies attendant on it seem like the fulfillment of the very modernity that Goethe and Marx struggled with while trying to comprehend, express and explain. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, the *Weltliteratur* attendant on globalization and its forming image is precisely the product of this European modernity pushed to its logical consequences in the very act of its total universalization. If I were to use the fashionable terminology of the post-structuralists, I would have, then, to say that this emerging *Weltliteratur* is really more of a variation and/or shift of emphasis within the same relentlessly universalizing modernity-paradigm (or modernity-problematique), than a shift or leap from one paradigm (or problematique) to another.

The pains, fears and hesitations attendant on this shift of emphasis from an older, thoroughly Eurocentric understanding of the concept of *Weltliteratur* to its newer and more comprehensive meaning are already evident in the later work of the great German literary scholar, critic and theoretician Erik Auerbach. According to Edward Said's account in *Culture and Imperialism*:

When Auerbach, in a justly famous essay entitled "Philologie der *Weltliteratur*," written after World War Two, takes note of how many "other" (i.e., non-European) literary languages and literatures seemed to have emerged... he expresses more anguish and fear than pleasure at the prospect of what he seems so reluctant to acknowledge.⁸

I find extremely interesting and instructive the fact that at the time when a new, more authentic and more accurate understanding of the concept of world literature seems to be emerging — at least as far as the novel is concerned — proclamations in the core countries about the end of the novel, the demise of litera-

ture and the death of the author seem to grow more emphatic, cynical and defensive. I find no less interesting and instructive the fact that a peripheral author like Salman Rushdie should come to the defense of the novel as *the global art form* in the face of these Western Cassandras.

In an article entitled "In Defense of the Novel Yet Again," published in the special issue of *The New Yorker* magazine devoted to fiction,⁹ Rushdie retorted by arguing that if the European novel is suffering from decline and exhaustion in the eyes of some of its practitioners and critics, it does not follow at all that the novel, as a universally established world art form, is either exhausted or in decline or anywhere near dead. For Rushdie, these Europeans have to be made to understand that "it doesn't matter where the great novels come from as long as they keep coming," and now they are coming from India, Latin America, Asia, Africa and so on. In other words, these Europeans have to finally reconcile themselves to the dual fact that the originally European art of the novel can and will certainly survive an exhausted Europe and that the decline of the European novel stopped a long time ago from being the same thing as the decline of the novel *per se*.

For, according to Rushdie, might not what seems to these European pundits and epigoni as the end of the novel, "be simply that a new novel is emerging — a postcolonial novel, a decentered, transnational, interlingual, cross-cultural novel.... If we include writers from beyond the frontiers of Europe, it becomes clear that the world has rarely seen so rich a crop of fine novelists living and working at the same time."

In brief, what I am suggesting is that Goethe's and Marx's concept of *Weltliteratur* is an idea whose time has come.

In light of all this, *The Satanic Verses* takes on the guise of the multicultural, multinational world-novel *par excellence*. Most probably it is the first such novel we

know of. So many cross-cultural themes, topics, activities, world-views, characters, politics and so on, are fused in it and interwoven into its fabric and texture that you can alternatively describe it, as the supra-national novelistic synthesis of the fin-de-siècle (or fin-de-millénaire) globalizing condition that is currently taking hold of humanity. For example, in the novel India, England, Islam, Europe, Iran, the West, the Arabs — as a settled past, as a lived present and as an anticipated future — do not simply coexist and impact each other at the periphery (à la E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*), nor are they merely contemporaneous with and adjacent to each other, but mesh and interpenetrate at all conceivable levels: economic, commercial, scientific, colonial, anti-colonial, political, ideological, religious, cultural, artistic, personal, sexual, etc.

As a result, we find *The Satanic Verses*, on the one hand, ambivalently celebrating, in theme and form, the exhilarating dynamism of this world-historical globalizing process, sweeping away over-defined and over-ossified identities, breaking restrictive cultural, social, political etc., boundaries of all sorts and expanding along the way the experiential possibilities of each self. On the other hand, Rushdie's novel senses and laments the dark diabolical, even Mephistophelian, and destructive underside of this world historical dynamism as represented in its devastating effects on historical communities, ancient nations, sacred cultures, proud peoples, such that all that had been thought solid and taken to be permanent and abiding seems to melt into thin air in no time.

The Satanic Verses is also a tale of two cities: Bombay and that other London, the London of the immigrant minorities from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Caribbean that the author calls, "A City Visible but Unseen." Rushdie does artistically to Bombay and the "City Visible but Unseen" what we all know Balzac did to Paris, Dickens to London, Joyce to Dublin and

Naguib Mahfouz to Cairo, but with a difference. Rushdie's two cities are novelistically taken in and represented totally under the aspect of the new global condition and its universalist regime, not excluding all its tragi-comic effects and details. Only under this new regime, it becomes possible for a novel like *The Satanic Verses* to present the inhabitants of the "City Visible but Unseen" as people who left their settlement to settle nowhere and regard that as a normal condition to boot.

In addition, *The Satanic Verses* is a world novel in a new sense precisely because it cannot be construed exclusively as an English novel about India, or an Indian novel about Islam, or an immigrant novel about Britain or a third world novel about Europe, for it is all these things and much more. It is this brilliantly crafted surplus which makes it not only the world novel of our times, but also a world-class novel in its own right. Its diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, stylistic etc., components are dispersed all over the globe, but the resulting synthesis is still far more than any sum of its originally mutually exclusive and often hostile parts. In other words, it is at present the unrivalled world novel on account of its organic composition whereby India, Britain, Europe, Islam, the immigrants and so on, not only stop coexisting alongside each other, touching at the peripheries only, but proceed to become, by force of global circumstance, seriously constitutive of each other in an unprecedented manner and in unheard of ways.

This is why we can safely say that *The Satanic Verses* remains the leading novel not written with an exclusively European and/or American and/or Arab and/or Indian and/or African readership in mind. It is certainly not a world novel just because bad luck, adverse political developments and certain international conjunctures forced it on the attention of the whole world in a previously unheard of fashion. We can safely say as well, it is a world novel because it de-

picts so well the transitional period in which the consciousness of a new phase of world capitalism is being formed and expressed.

Furthermore, it is inconceivable that such a world novel could have been produced in French, German, Urdu or Arabic, for only English would do, given its status as globalization's world language *par excellence*. Hence, the intriguing question: Is *The Satanic Verses* English literature or is it simply literature written in English? Or, are we seeing the breakdown of such distinctions, categories and classifications in favor of a higher and more comprehensive synthesis still to come?

In any case, the decisive links between Rushdie's innovative artistic practices, the vocabularies he devises, the structures and figures of speech that he invents to express this unprecedented global condition and relentless process are all there to be noted, investigated and appreciated by those willing and able to take the time and make the effort, particularly the professional literary critics and the specialized scholars.

In all this, we have on display as well, an act of postcolonial poetic justice whereby this Indian Muslim immigrant appropriates to himself the *lingua franca* of globalization, twists it to suit his purposes, bends it to conform to his experiences, distorts it to serve his particular ends, hybridizes it to satisfy his special needs, exoticizes it to express his foreign world and then resplashes this whole new literary concoction all over the globe. Now the exalted temples of learning in the Anglo-Saxon core of the core find themselves tending and teaching an English literature shot through and through with the peculiarities, mannerisms, expressions, distortions and themes of what their old colonialist graduates once arrogantly dismissed as the "babu" of the natives. This is poetic justice indeed.

The upshot of it all is not only a babu-English subversively and parodically produced by a superior mastery of the master's tongue, but also a new Indo-

European language that Rushdie baptized as "this Angrezi in which I am forced to write." His Angrezi, is (a) intentionally well attuned to the textures of the ordinary and everyday in defiance of the formality and artificiality of much contemporary peripheral literary culture, (b) directed at subverting both the standards of the imperial English to which a writer like him is supposed to conform as well as the norms of the nativistic tongues to which he and his peers are constantly being called to authentically adopt, and (c) meant to become the denationalized locus of the global and universal, by at the same time confirming, challenging and subverting the *lingua franca* of the center. This is why Rushdie will neither assimilate into the center à la Naipaul nor go back home to cultivate God's nativist little literary and linguistic acre, à la Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya.

The relationship of the Rushdie affair and novel to the globalization process is complex and many-sided. For example, globalization provided the necessary and sufficient conditions for a debate over an "English" satirical novel to transcend its local origins, British context, immigrant themes, religious skepticism etc., and turn into a transnational, transcultural, transcontinental global controversy and international scandal. In other words, globalization is what helped turn *The Satanic Verses* from what may have never gone beyond an internal Muslim scandal and quarrel into a world-wide explosion, from what may have done no more than precipitate an Iranian-British dispute into a universal crisis and from what may have remained no more than another revolutionary Muslim Shi'i "fatwa" into an international impasse.

Critics have noted how *The Satanic Verses* documents, uses, mimics, satirizes, caricatures and parodies the process of globalization. I would like to go further by claiming that the novel may prove to be to the globalization epoch and its image, what Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy of novels¹⁰ have always been to

Cairo's *Lebens-Welt* and its image between the First and Second World Wars on the one hand and the 1919 and 1952 Egyptian Revolutions, on the other.

Similarly, if Fredric Jameson, one of America's most prominent literary critics and theoreticians today, finds it appropriate to characterize postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism,"¹¹ I see nothing wrong in describing *The Satanic Verses* as the finest expression to date of the "literary logic of globalizing capitalism." Again, if the world-system economist and analyst, Samir Amin, could call the emerging world of globalizing capitalism "the empire of chaos,"¹² then nothing should prevent us from regarding *The Satanic Verses* as the novel of that empire.

Two more details are worth mentioning in this connection. Considering that the stage on which the more spectacular aspects of the globalization drama are unfolding and its battles are being fought is the ex-Third World and the ex-Soviet Union, the fact that the author of this first world-novel happens to be neither an American nor a European, but a Muslim Indian immigrant to the most classical of the classical core countries, acquires additional symbolic significance. Of similar importance, is the fact that *The Satanic Verses* should have appeared in 1989, the very year in which the last obstacle to the unbridled gushing of capitalist globalization vanished, viz., the collapse of European communism and the consequent rapid demise of the Soviet Union itself. For all these reasons, I find it very impoverishing to deal with Rushdie's novel as a purely Anglo-Indian literary phenomenon.

Globalization often appears in *The Satanic Verses* as the realm of necessity to which all have to adjust on pain of marginalization, if not historical extinction. It comes through — for ill or good or some combination of the two — as destiny, or as the newly emerging destiny. In characters like Mimy Mamoulian, Hal Valance and Whisky Sisodia, we have a first depiction of what it means to be a thoroughly globalized man

and/or woman, globalized in aspirations, values, beliefs, travels, outlook, chicaneries, foibles, love affairs, financial dealings, crookery and so on. The resulting image is not pretty: Highly elastic people, all surfaces but no interiors, plenty of roles without a role, piles of dreams without a dream, lots of sensing and sensations without either sense or sensibility, the cacophony of a thousand and one voices, where no one finds his voice. This is the result of a world experienced as nothing more substantial than an unending series of opportunities, risks, accidents, bets, chances, adventures, occasions, deals and affairs upon affairs of all possible sorts and impossible kinds.

True to form, *The Satanic Verses* never tires of self-referentially reminding the reader that it is directly implicated in the globalization process gushing out from the center to the periphery. In the process, globalization's discourses are parodied, its tensions reflected, its paradoxes recalled, its contradictions mocked, its pretensions debunked, its heroes satirized and its mannerisms, banalities, vulgarities, farces and pseudo-tragedies exposed.

In the novel, even the Joycean-Faulknerian stream of consciousness (or semi unconsciousness), falls prey to the logic of this new necessity. In other words, this supposedly last privileged sphere of human subjectivity, spontaneity and freedom simply succumbs to the requirements and exigencies of a surrounding world of globalized dead objects and fetishized commodities, i.e., a world "thingified" to the bitter end. In this sense, globalization is also the generalized commodification of everything everywhere and everywhen. This turns the literary stream of consciousness from an ostensibly autonomous form of becoming propelled by its own creative energies into an operation that unfolds according to the necessities and needs of an overwhelming process rapidly imposing itself on humanity's outer world, inner processes and intimate experiences.

We all remember how in Jean Paul Sartre's most celebrated novel, *La Nausée*, a thingified world of inert objects, lifeless commodities and neutral things relentlessly besieges Antoine Roquentin and gives him his bouts of nausea. This is Sartre's nausea of the spirit from which Antoine finds temporary respites only in the world of art and its consolations. But, here nausea is still the sign of the human subject's immersion in the world and of his/her complicity with the very dead objects that bring about the nausea attacks in the first place. In *The Satanic Verses* globalized commodification simply absorbs the human subject, reconstitutes his subjectivity accordingly and puts a radical end to this kind of "healthy" nausea. Now who needs a refuge in art and its consolations? Still better, why not announce the end of art *tout court*.

To be fair to Rushdie, I must add that he is no mere aesthetic scoffer at either the emerging globalized human condition nor at the philistinism of the human types it secretes and forms. He earnestly seeks, I think, to transcend both the cynicism of the ironist's scoffing stance and the philistinism of the objects of his ironies in a more meaningful, humane and promising direction. Thus, we find *The Satanic Verses* working hard at the literary level — and quite successfully in my view — to transcend the by now well rehearsed dichotomy in the high modernist European novel between the lifeless objectivism of the nouveau roman — à la Alain Robbe-Grillet — on the one hand and the chaotic gushing of a monotonous stream of subjective states of consciousness, associations, impressions, ideas, anticipations, emotions, perceptions, illusions, desires, hallucinations etc., on the other.

For example, the characters of Robbe-Grillet's novels of the 1950s experience no nausea because the complicity of human subjects in the world of objects simply ceased to exist. What now exists are neutral objects abstractly and geometrically described in a narrative from which even the author has been refined

out of existence in favor of static structure, lifeless form and the supremacy of technique. Or, as Robbe-Grillet once commented: "Les choses son les choses, et l'homme n'est que l'homme." Given this hard and fast separation of human agency from the objects out there, no wonder all of Robbe-Grillet's characters turn out to be schizoids. His famous movie, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961, directed by Alain Resnais), is the best visual illustration of what I am describing.

No wonder either, that in Samuel Beckett's play *Oh Les Beau Jours*, the only meaningful activity that engages the ever-sinking Winnie is fiddling endlessly with a few lifeless objects in a silly bag, talking non-stop to no one in particular about her trivial collection of ordinary daily-life articles, toothbrushes and all. This is modern Euro-American *Choisisme* at its finest, starkest and most hollow.

But in Rushdie's art in general and *The Satanic Verses* in particular, the two sides of this antinomy are mediated in manifold ways in the hope of yielding happier, more authentic and revealing visions of reality even under the aspect of a mercilessly globalizing and thingifying condition. This is especially evident in the hallucinations of a mentally deranged character like Jibreel Farishta, because "fools never lie," as Naguib Mahfouz reminds us in one of his novels. The deeper truths are grasped by Farishta because in him the parallel lines of the objective and the subjective meet, touch, criss-cross and at decisive moments coincide to enrich each other by yielding a higher, more accurate multidimensionality of vision which combines and surpasses the tedious unidimensionality of each side of the original dichotomy.

Georg Lukács once observed: "With present-day techniques anything from the atom bomb to the interior monologue can be photographed, and it is ultimately the writer's approach to reality that determines whether he produces a painting or a photograph, an

articulate statement or a mute babbling." As far as *The Satanic Verses* is concerned, I think Rushdie's approach to the new globalized reality allowed him to produce — in theme and form — a real painting and not just a photograph, an articulate statement and not a mere babbling. I say a painting on purpose, for, first, painting is to Rushdie's later novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, what film and cinema were to *The Satanic Verses*; and second, because the multidimensionality of color in painting acquires its analogue in Rushdie's art in the multidimensionality of word and phrase, for which he is justly famous.

II. Other Precedents and Instances

Throughout the 19th century, Arab and Muslim intellectuals, observers, reformers, students, travelers, etc., followed with great interest Europe's critiques of religion, such as carried out by the Voltaires, the Spinozas, the Marxes, the Nietzsches, the Freuds, the Darwins, the Huxleys, and so on. They set out to learn, among other things, lessons about such issues as the conflict between science and religion, the place of religious belief in a secular social order, the function of religious scriptures in a modern scientific and technological age.

Let me recall a few examples. First, the contacts and relations between Auguste Comte and his disciples, on the one hand, and the great Ottoman reform movement of the 19th century and its representatives and operatives (known as the *Tanzimat*, i.e., the Ottoman perestroika), on the other, are well known and documented by the specialists in the field. Second, something similar may be said about the connection of the Saint Simonians to the reform movement led by Mohamed Ali Pasha (1805-1846) in Egypt itself, and later on about the Fabians in England and their ties to the Arab intelligentsia active, then, in what has been variously called the Arab *Nahda*, the Arab Renaissance, the Arab Awakening as well as the Liberal Age of Arab Thought.

At the level of individuals, I shall limit myself to a mention of the two dominant personalities of the *Nahda* period, namely Jamal Adin Afghani and Mohamed Abdu and these are names that have become now familiar to some educated First World publics, thanks, of course, to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its aftermath.

Afghani was the towering personality and force in the crystallization, at the time, of a Muslim movement in reaction to Europe's continuing colonial incursion and expansion in the heartlands of Islam, especially the Arab World. What concerns me here are small but significant details like the famous correspondence between Afghani and the all-purpose European scholar and public intellectual of that time, Ernest Renan, on the matters pertaining to the conflict of science and religion, the place of religious belief in a secular social order and the role of religion in general and Islam in particular, in impeding progress or otherwise.¹³ When Afghani visited London in 1885, he stayed with an orientalist, traveler, and author called Wilfred Blunt; and the dominant topics of their consultations and discussions were naturally politics and religion.

Mohamed Abdu was the great latitudinarian theologian and interpreter of Islam of that period. Wilfred Blunt maintained a very close, personal and intellectual association with Abdu during his long stays in Cairo. He was also close to Urabi Pasha, an intellectual disciple of Abdu and the hero of the armed opposition to the British military occupation of Egypt in 1882. Blunt himself had lost his Roman Catholic faith after studying Darwin's *Origin of Species* and he noted the following about Mohamed Abdu: "I fear he has as little faith in Islam as I have in the Catholic Church." Abdu and Blunt made a pilgrimage together to Brighton, England to converse and learn from none other than the most famous Darwinian of the day, Herbert Spencer.

In the 1920s two major Rushdie-like affairs exploded in Egypt shaking the Arab World and shocking the Islamic World at large. These domestic scandals continued a series of periodic eruptions around dangerous books that have never ceased to this moment. In other words, the Rushdie affair can easily be seen as a magnified continuation of a long chain of similar incidents. It is neither a unique, nor an isolated occurrence, contrary to the prevalent impression in both East and West. Let me say something about each of these two most celebrated literary scandals.

In 1924, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), the founder of modern Turkey, abolished the Caliphate, i.e., the last vestiges of the Ottoman Sultanate, as part of the process of founding modern Turkey out of the ashes of the World War I. To form an idea of the radicalism, enormity and impact of Ataturk's act, try to imagine what would have happened had the conquering Italian rationalist forces in 1879, abolished the Papacy, after the forceful annexation of the Papal domains to the Italian Kingdom, in lieu of recognizing the Pope's sovereignty over the Vatican and his spiritual leadership of all Catholics. In fact, Ataturk toyed with such an idea in 1922 (the Italian solution), but then decided to completely abolish the Caliphate in order to prevent any future legitimist claims and restorationist movements.

Soon after, an Azhari doctor and cleric, 'Ali Abdurazik (Azhari refers here to Al-Azhar, the great mosque and citadel of Islamic learning in Cairo), published a book indirectly defending the abolition of the Caliphate (*Islam and the Principles of Governance*, Cairo, 1925). He argued on internal Islamic grounds for the separation of Mosque and state, affirming that Islam as a religion does not necessitate any specific form of power and/or kind of rule or government. It could be materially a tyranny, as it often was historically and imperially, and it could be a democracy, as it should be now. The Caliphate, he argued, is a histori-

cal form and nothing inherent in the faith itself. The book rocked and shocked the Islamic World then. The author was accused of every conceivable sin including apostasy, heresy, blasphemy, you name it. He was thrown out of Al-Azhar, i.e., he was defrocked. A large body of literature was produced by way of refutations, denunciations, replies, polemics, etc., but unlike Rushdie, he was not condemned to death. Quickly his book became part of mainstream Arab thought and culture.

A year later another Rushdie-like affair erupted in Egypt when a graduate of the Al-Azhar Seminary itself, and of the Sorbonne in Paris, published a most famous critical book on pre-Islamic poetry (*On Jahili Poetry*, Cairo, 1926). This was Taha Hussein, who rose later on to become the dean of Arab letters for a long time indeed. This book was seen for what it was at the time, i.e., an introduction to a higher criticism of the Koranic text itself. The explosion was huge and the commotion great, with all the attendant harassments, accusations, denunciations, refutations, etc., that we are all familiar with from the Rushdie affair. But, again, in Taha Hussein's case there was no death sentence or even the threat of one.

As I said earlier, the eruption of such affairs has continued uninterruptedly since that time. The most notorious instance, in the later series, being my own book of 1969, *Critique of Religious Thought*.¹⁴ These religio-political-literary explosions were carefully monitored, reported, commented on and evaluated in the West by specialists, orientalist, diplomats, journalists, scholars and so on.

As I hinted earlier, the uniqueness of the Rushdie affair consists in the fact that for the first time ever a critical literary-religious scandal engages deeply both Muslim East and secular West at one and the same time. In other words, for the first time ever, the West is not simply monitoring and watching the Rushdie-like affairs exploding in the Arab World. Nor is the Muslim

World curiously listening to echoes of the West's critiques of religion. But both have become deeply involved in one and the same anti-religious literary scandal and affair. This is certainly an unprecedented development in the 20th century; and I dare say, a very important one at that. Thus to understand something about the Rushdie affair is to understand something very significant about the contemporary condition of our world and about present world developments of a certain kind.

I would like to emphasize again that in spite of the current Islamic resurgence, fundamentalism, Islamism, revivalism, etc., Rushdie-like incidents surrounding books continue to erupt to this very moment, at least in the Arab World. Contrary to the impression pedaled by international media experts, commentators, journalists, critics and so on, intellectual life and cultural activity in the Arab World are not as Islamically conformist, religiously unquestioning and spiritually stagnant as these pundits would want us to think and believe. For example, Naguib Mahfouz's famous novel, *The Children of Our Alley*, dealing allegorically with the conflict of science and religion and with the idea of the ultimate death of God at the hands of modern scientific knowledge, remains banned by Al-Azhar in Egypt; but like all the important banned books in the Arab World, it is available everywhere.

At the height of the Rushdie affair a novel appeared in Cairo under the title, *The Vacuum in a Man's Mind*, or *The Distance in a Man's Mind*, which the clerics attacked for lampooning the prophet, assaulting Islam and claiming that the Koran was not inspired by God. 'Ala' Hamed, the author, a Muslim, was jailed, then tried with the publisher and sentenced to eight years imprisonment.

At the same time, Al-Azhar demanded the immediate banning and confiscation of the book published in Beirut by the eminent Egyptian judge and scholar of early Islam, Khalil Abdul-Karim under the title, *The*

Historical Roots of Muslim Shari'a Law.¹⁵ Some years later, the same author caused a no less significant religious commotion in his country when he published his account of the early formative period in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁶

Not minding the threats emanating from Tehran at the time, an emancipated woman in 'Amman, Jordan, proceeded to publish a story under the title *In the Cell*, satirizing her previous family life as the obedient wife of a big functionary in the fundamentalist Muslim Brothers Organization.¹⁷ She was denounced in the local press and from the pulpit during the Friday prayers for blasphemy and for constituting a danger to Islam.

Other examples are to be found in the work of: (a) The late Farag Fouda, assassinated by Islamists in Cairo in 1992, on account of his critical writings in general and his last book in particular. Fouda was hunted down after Al-Azhar denounced and banned his book *To Be or Not To Be*. Most probably this is the only case during the 20th century where a daring and politically uninvolved Arab Muslim author actually lost his life purely on account of his published views and writings;¹⁸ (b) Nasr Hamid Abouzeid, who has had to take refuge in Holland after the publication of his book *Critique of Religious Discourse*;¹⁹ (c) Syria's Muslim theological radical and superb latitudinarian, Mohamed Shahrour; (d) Lebanon's revolutionary interpreter of Muslim Shari'a Law, the departed Sheikh 'Abdullah 'Alayli; and (e) the internationally famous Egyptian doctor and feminist activist, Nawal Al-Sa'dawi.

Worthy of mention as well are the two most recent Arab literary storms involving both Egypt and Syria. The first exploded in the Spring of 2000, on account of a novel published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture under the title of *The Rain Palace*, daringly dealing with the life and struggles of the Druze community in southern Syria during the 1920s. The author, Mam-

douh 'Azzam (himself a Druze), concentrates his revealing tale on the intricacies, machinations and inner workings of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, against the French military occupation and rule of Syria, starting 1920. As is well-known, the Druze community played both a major and a leading role in that revolt. The author's demystificatory approach to that sacrosanct event led to the scandal.

As expected, the elders and Sheikhs of the community publicly denounced the novel and its author for such grave sins as heresy, slandering the holy traditions of the community, hanging high its dirty laundry for all to see, sowing the seeds of dissent in the country and spreading corruption over the surface of the earth. The accusers called on the Syrian authorities to immediately ban and confiscate the book and to put the author on trial for all the charges listed above. The controversy over the book continued for more than three months, mainly in Syrian, Lebanese and Egyptian newspapers, magazines and various kinds of literary publications. In the end, it died a natural death without any harm befalling either author or novel.²⁰

The second and much more ferocious scandal broke out when the Egyptian Ministry of Culture republished an older work of the well-established Syrian novelist, Haidar Haidar, in the Spring of 2000. This is his successful political novel, *A Banquet for the Weeds of the Sea* that first appeared in Cyprus in 1983, and then went into six editions in Syria and Lebanon. It is probably the only local piece of fiction that takes in the "Eastern" and "Western" parts of the Arab World (Iraq and Algeria), at the same time. The story deals with the 1968 failed communist uprising in the marshes of Southern Iraq on the one hand, and the collapse of the Arab revolutionary aspirations raised by the Algerian war of liberation from French colonial rule, on the other. In the end, its defeated and totally disillusioned hero takes a plunge into the sea

never to reappear again.

The Islamist Labor Party in Egypt seized on this novel to settle old scores with the Ministry of Culture, regarded by them as a den of secularists, leftists, nationalists and irreligious free thinkers. The party's newspaper, *Al-Sha'ab* (The People), launched a fiery campaign of vilification against author, publisher and book. The controversy quickly became a grand pan-Arab commotion in which Arab media of all tendencies participated, for, against and in-between. The climactic point was reached in the cross-fire-type confrontation between Syria's poet, dramatist and critic, Mamdouh Adwan, and the Mufti of Mount Lebanon, Mohamed 'Ali Al-Jozo, aired by the Qatar based Al-Jazira television station in the summer of 2000. A most remarkable and unprecedented incident took place on the air. When the author, Haidar Haidar, was called upon (by telephone) to intervene in the discussion, he astounded viewers by reading out aloud a sexually most explicit and sacrilegious passage from one of the great and most venerated master pieces of classical Arabic prose. No such words have ever been either uttered or heard before or since on an Arab television program of any sort.

The novel was denounced by *Al-Sha'ab* as "a blasphemous work by an apostate writer who deserved to be killed." In other words, incitements to murder were not lacking either. Similar condemnations and accusations flowed freely from the pulpits of mosques during the Friday prayer sermons, particularly in Egypt. The students of the Al-Azhar Mosque and University rioted in the adjoining streets and police reinforcements had to call in armored cars and to resort to tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the rioters. There were casualties on both sides. The whole affair was vehemently and angrily debated in the Egyptian parliament.

As expected, Al-Azhar formally damned the novel for being full (a) of phrases "scorning all religions and

divinities, including Allah, the Prophet and the Koran," (b) of shameless erotic and sexual asides, (c) of insults to Arab rulers, attributing to them all sorts of crimes and calling on the people to rise up against them and (d) of deliberate violations of religion, divine law, moral values and political decency. The Sheikh of Al-Azhar lent his signature to the condemnation.

The Egyptian and Arab intelligentsia fought back valiantly. The Committee of the Supreme Council for Culture in Cairo published a report strongly defending the novel, its author and publisher, rebutting in detail the charges brought against them. In Cairo, the Writers Union, the Supreme Council for Culture, the Journalists Union and a host of independent authors, publishers, journals etc., launched a powerful counteroffensive against this Islamist assault on literature, culture and free thought. In defense of and solidarity with the impugned officials of the Ministry of Culture, 350 Egyptian writers, artists, poets, journalists and intellectuals signed a petition to the Public Prosecutor assuming co-liability for the publication of the novel.

As is often the case with such storms in the Arab World, no one was seriously hurt. After over three months of heated exchanges, angry confrontations, dangerous incitements to violence and menacing threats, the scandal simply died a natural death.²¹

III. The Recantation of the Recantation

At the end of 1990, Rushdie published in the British press a short proclamation entitled, "Why I Have Embraced Islam."²² This was his recantation which produced a lot of gloating on one side of the divide and much shock and dismay on the opposite side, particularly among Rushdie's supporters and defenders, both in East and West. In this short announcement, Rushdie affirmed: (a) That upon profound thought he has now come to accept Islam's two basic tenets of the faith, namely the oneness of God and the

prophecy of Muhammad, in the hope that the debate over his novel would be continued from now on from inside the Muslim camp, not from outside it; (b) that he will not authorize any new translations of the novel and would block the publication of the much awaited paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*; (c) that in doing all this he is in no way renouncing his books and literary past; and (d) that this formula was agreed upon after lengthy dialogue and negotiations with a group of enlightened Muslims in England who call themselves the Society for the Promotion of Religious Tolerance.

What is one to make of this proclamation and retraction? Since Rushdie went into hiding, I personally thought that he had conducted himself in an exemplary fashion. In all his writings, articles, interviews, statements, etc., he threaded a fine line between avoiding the unnecessary provocation of his foes, on the one hand, and/or giving in on matters of principle, on the other. His pronouncements were carefully thought out and thought through to maintain this delicate balance. The representative texts of this phase are his defense of himself, published by *Granta*, the eminent British literary journal, under the title *In Good Faith*²³ and his allegory *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.²⁴

Haroun and the Sea of Stories is a gem of a fable where the sea of stories wells up and flows with Scheherazadian inexhaustibility and where Khattam Shud, the censor, the villain, the pope, the mullah, the Aya-tollah, the powers that be, are out to interrupt that flow by sealing it at the source; the creative imagination in general and the creative imagination of the artist in particular. The mere uttering of the name Khattam Shud, sounds menacing in Arabic. In Urdu, it is the conventional formula with which one ends a story told. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is really Alice in Wonderland plus Le Petit Prince plus The Wonderful Wizard of Oz plus Scheherazade all rolled in one for

the space age. As these two tracts show, so far Rushdie had conceded nothing.

Nonetheless, the novella contains much soul searching on the part of the author and a number of telling allusions to the predicament he found himself in. For example, the question is playfully, but repeatedly and emphatically raised, "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?," as if to ambivalently inquire: Is a story (or novel) ever worth all this turmoil, violence, hatred and sacrifice? Should his defiance of the Khattam Shuds of this world continue, or should he relent? But, then, defiance for the sake of what? For the sake of fictions and invented stories "that aren't even true"?!

What lies behind the recantation, then? To the best of my investigations and inferences the following maneuvers underlay it: (a) The most vulgar forms of theological casuistry in order to get around the famous "fatwa" of Ayatollah Khomeini. The reasoning was as follows: When Rushdie wrote and published his novel, he was not a believing Muslim. Since Islam abrogates or invalidates what came before it, then Rushdie cannot be either held responsible or punished for what he did before embracing Islam. So, this is the Jesuitical distinction on which the case was to rest; (b) A meeting at the Egyptian Embassy in Paris that brought together (a few days before the publication of "Why I Have Embraced Islam") Rushdie and Mohamed 'Ali Mahgoub, Minister of the *Awqaf* (Religious Endowments) in the Egyptian government at the time. Mahgoub accepted and blessed Rushdie's embrace of Islam in return for the latter's dual pledge to exert extra efforts to achieve a better understanding of Islam and to block the publication of the paperback edition of the accursed novel as well as of any new translations that may be coming on the way;²⁵ (c) An announcement by Rushdie (a few days after the publication of "Why I Have Embraced Islam") on a BBC radio program (channel 4) to the effect that he had

already been invited by the Egyptian authorities to meet with Sheikh Al-Azhar in Cairo. Rumors circulated at the time of a possible meeting with President Hosni Mubarak, as well;²⁶ (d) A number of indications showing that during Rushdie's negotiations with the Committee on Religious Tolerance, Tehran and London played the usual game of nods and winks to do Rushdie in. Tehran winked that it may consider accepting his embrace of Islam but was preparing all the while to use the recantation to discredit him with his supporters, defenders, sympathizers, well-wishers, and in the eyes of the whole world showing him as no more than an insincere hypocrite and opportunist who deserved what he got. And this is actually what happened. This is how Tehran behaved. London nodded in favor of the deal under negotiation wanting to finish with the whole burden of Rushdie and the Rushdie affair, to finish with the embarrassments, the expenses, the protection, the tensions and so on.

Underlying all this intrigue, sophistry and hypocritical religious politics was a hellish plan to put Rushdie under the protection of Sunni Islam against his continuing condemnation by Shi'i Islam. For Rushdie's sake, I was very happy that the plan did not work, because I can think of nothing worse for a writer like him than to willingly allow himself to be squeezed between the contending parties to a world-wide open and hidden struggle at the time over the definition of Islam: I mean Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran on the other, King Fahd on one side and President Rafsanjani on the second side. It would have been utter foolishness for Rushdie to have allowed himself to become a pawn manipulated by the powerful clashes of the hierarchies of established official Sunni Islam and the hierarchies of official revolutionary Shi'i Islam. In fact, they would not have hesitated for a second before sending a mere artist, an individual novelist, down the drain the moment it suited their wider purposes and broader interests.

Furthermore, Rushdie's proclamation "Why I Have Embraced Islam" was so carefully crafted, so calculating, so unconvincing that it all sounded like a person announcing that upon profound thought and reconsideration: I have decided to believe in God starting next morning at eight o'clock. His declaration made it unambiguously clear that he was embracing Islam not as a convert or a born again Muslim who finally saw the light, but for the purely utilitarian purpose of being able, at least nominally, to carry on the debate about his book and the defense of himself from inside the Muslim camp rather than from outside it. To be noted in this regard as well, is the carefully worded statement he had issued earlier and in which he apologized for "the pain that the publication of *The Satanic Verses* caused to many Muslims in many parts of the world," but stopped short of apologizing for having written the novel.

Of course, Rushdie eventually realized the futility of all these machinations and impossible promises, recanted the recantation at an appearance at Columbia University (December 12, 1991), where he denounced the deceptions of these intrigues and reaffirmed his stand on principle. The Columbia University recantation of the recantation contained an auto-critique for having succumbed to the temptations and illusions of the easy way out of his predicament plus an explanation of his motives for having done what he did. The relevant passage of his statement is well worth quoting:

Those who were surprised and displeased by what I did perhaps failed to see that I wanted to make peace between the warring halves of the world, which were also the warring halves of my soul... I have never disowned my book, nor regretted writing it. I said I was sorry to have offended people, because I had not set out to do so, and so I am.

In this context I agreed to suspend — not cancel — a paperback edition to create 'space for reconciliation'. Alas, I overestimated these men. Within days, all but

one of them had broken their promises and recommenced to vilify me and my work... the suspension of the paperback began to look like a surrender. In the aftermath of the attacks on my translators,²⁷ it looks even more craven. It has now been more than three years since *The Satanic Verses* was published; that's a long, long 'space for reconciliation'. Long enough. I accept I was wrong to have given way on this point. The *Satanic Verses* must be freely available and easily affordable if only because, if it is not read, these years will have no meaning. Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it."²⁸

It is equally interesting to note in this connection, that the open letter Rushdie addressed in the summer of 1994, to the Bangladeshi doctor, feminist and author Taslima Nasreen — at the time hounded and threatened with death by the Islamists of her country — reveals the anguish, hesitations, conflicting passions and thoughts that must have been raging in his own mind — each struggling for mastery there — when he decided to give the path of recantation a try. He spoke to Taslima Nasreen in the following telling and moving words:

How sad it must be to believe in a God of blood! What an Islam they have made, these apostles of death, and how important it is to have the courage to dissent from it.

Taslima, I know that there must be a storm inside you now. One minute you will feel weak and helpless, another strong and defiant. Now you will feel betrayed and alone, and now you will have the sense of standing for many who are standing silently with you.

Perhaps in your darkest moments you will feel you did something wrong — that those demanding your death may have a point. This, of all your goblins you must exorcise first. You have done nothing wrong. The wrong is committed by others against you.

You have done nothing wrong, and I am sure that one day soon you will be free.²⁹

This beautiful, revealing and telling address forms an obvious extension of and complement to Rushdie's

recantation of the recantation.

IV. Fatwa

At the height of the Rushdie affair, I raised in a short article the question: Is Ayatollah Khomeini's "fatwa" against Salman Rushdie really a fatwa? My answer was and continues to be that it is not.³⁰ Since then, Mehdi Mozaffari arrived at the same conclusion after subjecting the whole issue to a careful and thorough examination in his book *Fatwa*.³¹

So, I may as well begin my observations by reproducing the following translation of the full text of the "fatwa," as it was made public by Khomeini's office in February, 1989:

Date: 67/11/25 (February 14, 1989) Announcement on the publication of the apostasian book: *Satanic Verses*:

In the name of God Almighty; there is only one God, to whom we shall all return; I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* which has been compiled, printed and published against Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing. In addition, anyone who has access to the author of the book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should refer him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all. (Ruhollah Al-Musavi Al-Khomeini).³²

In his study, Mozaffari admits that at the beginning and like everyone else, he took Khomeini's pronouncement to be a legitimate fatwa "without questioning its adherence to Islamic rules for valid, genuine fatwas."³³ By way of comparison, I can say that from the very start the "fatwa" did not read like a fatwa at all, as far as I was concerned. It simply had neither the form nor the feel nor the texture of what Muslims — both Sunni and Shi'i — would generally recognize

as a fatwa. It was not even signed and sealed as fatwas always are (particularly those delivered by Khomeini himself). To me, it read much more like a judgment or a sentence. Later on, this reading got confirmed when I found out that Iran's most important newspaper, *Kayhan*, had published the text of the "fatwa" under the following banner headline: "A Message From Imam Khomeini To The Muslims Of The World: A Death Sentence Against The Apostate Author Of The Book *The Satanic Verses* And Its Publishers."³⁴ It was noteworthy for me as well, that none of the accompanying articles, explanations, elaborations, commentaries and editorials in that issue of *Kayhan* ever referred to the Imam's message as a fatwa.

How did Khomeini's "announcement" or "message" become a fatwa, then? At the time, I blamed the Western media for acting on the ignorant assumption that the function of Muslim clerics is primarily to issue fatwas and act as *Muftis* (jury-consults). Mozaffari's close study of the issue led him to trace the first use of the term in the Western press to the articles of two prominent French orientalist and experts on contemporary Islam, Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel. I shall quote, here, his two main conclusions:

Another important thing that obviously did not attract the attention of the experts and observers of the Rushdie Affair, is the fact that during the period immediately following the delivery of the *fatwa* (a few months maybe), nobody in Iran, even the high political or religious authorities who talked about Khomeini's sentence, referred to it as a '*fatwa*! Iranian newspapers which published articles on this affair the day after the sentence did not use the term '*fatwa*' either. Instead of '*fatwa*', they used the term 'message' (*payâm*) (*Kayhan*, February 15, 1989). It becomes quite clear that nobody in Iran used the term '*fatwa*' for Khomeini's sentence. Rather it was some western observers who first used this term.³⁵

And

It was not the clergy in Iran, nor the Iranians, nor the

Muslims, who first called Khomeini's declaration a *fatwa*. According to our research, three great European newspapers (*The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Le Monde*) used — at least in the beginning — the correct terminology with regard to Khomeini's death sentence. On February 15, 1989 (the day after Khomeini's declaration), *Le Monde* used the following terms: 'Khomeiny ordonne l'exécution de ... Rushdie.' Or 'Khomeiny dans un message aux musulmans du monde entier...'. *The Times* did the same thing, using the terms 'Khomeini's order' and 'Khomeini's murderous edict' (February 17). During the following days, *The Times* wrote, 'Ayatollah's call for the killing' (February 21), and 'Khomeini's death threats' (February 22). *The Guardian* mostly used the term 'death sentence' (February 16 and 17). Curiously enough, the term '*fatwa*' appeared in *Le Monde* twice, on February 16 and 17. The interesting thing is that while *Le Monde's* journalists continued to use the correct words, two young French Islamologists introduced the word '*fatwa*' in their writings. First, Olivier Roy wrote 'Mais la *fatwa* "décret" de l'imam Khomeiny ...' (February 17), and then came what could be called the real beginning of the usage of '*fatwa*' with Gilles Kepel's article in *Le Monde* on February 25 (published the day before, as is *Le Monde's* habit). He began his article with this sentence: 'La *Fatwa* de l'Ayatollah Khomeini ...'.³⁶

Now, I would like to add a detail to Mozaffari's careful analysis, viz., that the daily *Kayhan* published by the Iranian opposition in London did reprint the text of the Imam's message *cum* death sentence on February 23, 1989, referring to it as a *fatwa*. This could help explain another anomaly that struck Mozaffari, Khomeini's casual use of the term "fatwa" on one and only one occasion in connection with the death sentence. According to Mozaffari,

....Khomeini in his message on 'Strategy for the Future of Revolution', which was issued on February 22, mentioned *en passant* the 'Islamic *fatwa*' followed immediately by the term 'death sentence', which he had delivered on February 14. It is quite astonishing that Khomeini used these two different terms interchangeably. But there is no doubt that in his mind, the term

'death sentence' is predominant; otherwise he would simply use the term '*fatwa*' without any additions.³⁷

It may be quite likely that Khomeini found it useful on this single occasion to borrow the term "fatwa," circulating among the Iranian opposition in England (as is evident from its use by the London *Kayhan*), especially that he followed carefully, at the time, what the opposition in exile was doing and saying.

Needless to say, the Western media instantly universalized the term "fatwa" turning it into a household word everywhere, imposing it, in the process, on every conceivable form of discourse about the Rushdie affair and novel. After that all formal and informal pronouncements, arguments, discussions, justifications, defenses, attacks and counter-attacks pertaining to the Rushdie case inescapably spoke of "The Fatwa" as if it were a *fatwa*.

Now, the other question that imposes itself is: If the "fatwa" is not a *fatwa*, what is it, then? As Mozaffari pointed out, a *fatwa*, in the strict sense, is "originally and essentially an Islamic version of the Roman *jus respondi*, which during history has been transformed into various versions."³⁸

More commonly a *fatwa* is a *responsa*, a dispensation or a reply to a query concerning the problems, paradoxes, anomalies that life constantly throws up in the face of the faithful, be they the high and mighty or the poor and humble. In fact, a *fatwa's* most common function is to circumvent the application of the letter of the law to avoid unnecessary harm to life, limb, property, community, etc. This is why a good Mufti always runs the risk of being a bad Muslim. This is why, also, the routine issuing of *fatwas* is mostly associated, in common Arabic parlance, with such not-quite-honorable practices as hair splitting, verbal quibbling, vulgar casuistry, the drawing of Jesuitical distinctions, the torturing of texts, the unprincipled bending of principles and servility to the powers that be.

Furthermore, any person who regards himself

versed in Muslim law and doctrine and finds others who believe in him, can produce a fatwa on this or that matter of life's affairs big and small. His fatwa will not be binding except on those who accept his opinions as a jury-consult. For example, the assassins of President Sadat of Egypt sought and obtained a fatwa from a trusted Sheikh of their own, allowing them to carry on with their plot to kill the "apostate president." Basically, going to the Mufti or Sheikh is something like consulting your priest or lawyer.

It is important to note also that seeking a fatwa before embarking on a momentous course of action has eschatological implications and theological applications. Thus, should it turn out, at the end of time, that the assassination of President Sadat was wrong, then, on the Day of Judgement the responsibility for that crime would fall on the Mufti who gave the green light, rather than on those who, in good Muslim conscience, perpetrated the act. Just think of King Henry V, in Shakespeare's celebrated play, checking carefully with his Church and its high priests the justice of his plan to invade France and then arguing that his victory at the battle of Agincourt was simply the work of God's hand. In similar fashion, the Ottoman Sultan needed a fatwa from the Grand Mufti of the realm (Sheikh-ul-Islam), to go to war to assure him and his soldiers that they are fighting a just war and not merely killing people wantonly.

Mozaffari's study leads him to argue that Khomeini's pronouncement is really a declaration of war against the West, or in his own words, "A Bill of War against the West" and a "constitutional bill of war" against the West.³⁹ I think this is very much of an overstatement of the case. In my own judgement the "fatwa" is (a) a grand decision emanating from the Iranian revolutionary situation and politics of the moment, (b) a death sentence and (c) a call on every Muslim all over the world to regard it as his religious duty to carry out that sentence. It is the kind of call

which the Imam or the Grand Mufti or the Great Faqih of the age or Sheikh-ul-Islam authorizes himself to issue in moments of extraordinary danger to Islam and for the defense of the integrity and sanctity of the faith and *umma*. In such exceptional circumstances the jurist may also call upon and permit any (and every) Muslim to hold himself responsible for fending off that danger.

At the international political level, Khomeini was convinced that true Islam was facing a formidable Western conspiracy to destroy it and that Rushdie was a main instrument of that conspiracy. Or, as Mozaffari expressed the matter:

Khomeini's anti-Western paranoia became more obvious in his long message of February 22, 1989, a few days after his *'fatwa'* on Rushdie. Talking about the Rushdie Affair, he indicated explicitly that the anti-Islamic forces (Zionists, British and Americans) were behind Salman Rushdie. These forces were working to destroy Islam and Muslims. In Khomeini's eyes, Rushdie was playing the role of an agent.⁴⁰

On the other side of the divide, it did seem to the West then, as if Khomeini was on top of what, for a moment, looked like a somewhat coherent Islamic world front (or wave) advancing under the banner of the "fatwa," ready to sweep all before it. This is when a sense of panic overtook West European societies and their media in particular, and this is when the fear and hatred of Islam reached their zenith on the old continent.

However, this whole bubble burst the moment a serious international crisis erupted, viz., the moment Iraq's armies received their orders from Saddam Hussein to march into Kuwait in early August 1990, setting the stage for the Second Gulf War. Then, what looked like a coherent Islamic world front, simply shattered into innumerable fractions, factions, sects and fronts quarrelling over what positions to take and which side to support during the escalating Gulf crisis.

This fragmentation was most palpable at the top, in the fierce competition among King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussein himself and King Hussein of Jordan (assisted by PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat), to mobilize pan-Islamic support for their respective involvements in the Gulf crisis and war. King Fahd convened a college of about 400 Muslim muftis, sheikhs, faqihs, imams, 'alims, Islamist activists and what have you in Mecca itself, for the purpose of producing the right kind of fatwas, Koranic justifications and religious rationalizations for the legitimization of the Saudi policies of the moment. Not to be outdone, Saddam Hussein also convened his own international college of 400 or so 'alims, faqihs, sheikhs etc., to Islamically justify his invasion and occupation of neighboring Kuwait. Not to be left behind either, King Hussein assembled a third Muslim college in 'Amman to Koranically and Islamically approve the middle-of-the-road position he had defined for his country in the unfolding drama of Desert Storm. Even the *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan split and splintered over the issue.

At the level of domestic politics, the "fatwa" acted to galvanize support for Khomeini's leadership — known then as "The Line of the Imam" — in a manner similar to the massive mobilizing effect that the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, had on all strata of Iranian society. In both instances, "The Line of the Imam" emerged triumphant against all rival programs, competing policies, oppositional forces and critical personalities within the Islamic Revolution itself. Let us not forget that about seven months before issuing his condemnation of Salman Rushdie, Khomeini had had to accept a highly humiliating and personally very repugnant cease-fire in the eight-year war with Iraq. He had also to cope with a basically defeated army, a demoralized population and a wholly disillusioned *Pasdarān* or Revolutionary Guards. Considerations of this nature lead Mozaffari to the following sound conclusion:

In this context, the Rushdie Affair would have been an unprecedented occasion for the Iranian patriarch to regain center stage and show his authority in the hope of improving his tarnished image, while diverting the attention of Iranians from thorny internal problems and difficulties. Certainly, Khomeini's *fatwa* was immediately exploited politically by different political-clerical factions within Iran as well as by the Ayatollah's immediate entourage and various rival groups. They all hoped to exploit this affair in their own interest. All this seems quite reasonable and politically rational. But the problem of Khomeini's personality remains, as well as the existence of similar precedents which suggest that the Ayatollah's action was motivated first and foremost by religious considerations.⁴¹

This leads me to a threefold conclusion: (1) The fact that Khomeini's so called "fatwa" acquired such massive international power and significance is an affair of state, power politics and revolution and not an affair of either faith, theology or Shari'a Law. (2) Because Khomeini's death sentence is not a fatwa, it is, in principle, neither revocable nor counteractable. Only the disappearance of the peril to Islam that brought it about would invalidate it in the sense of rendering it immaterial and unnecessary anymore. Because it is not handed down by a properly constituted court, Muslim or otherwise, it is not appealable. In other words, it is purely political and discretionary. (3) It would have been in Rushdie's favor had the "fatwa" been really a fatwa for two reasons: (a) because such a fatwa may be counteracted by an opposing fatwa from another doctor of law, Imam or Mufti (such as the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar), and (b) because the procedural rules and conventions for issuing and dealing with fatwas are all well-known, well-established and well-observed by all the parties concerned.

Will the "fatwa" ever be lifted, rescinded or withdrawn in the foreseeable future? The chances for such a step are non-existent, given what we know

about the behavior of clerical power structures in similar instances. For example, it was only in November 1992, that the Catholic Church formally admitted having done anything wrong to Galileo. It took the commission appointed by Pope John Paul II to review the condemnation of the great scientist in 1633, 13 years to reach the conclusion that "we today know that Galileo was right in adopting the Copernican astronomical theory."⁴² Then, a day later, *The New York Times* reported the following:

Moving formally to rectify a wrong, Pope John Paul II acknowledged in a speech today that the Roman Catholic Church had erred in condemning Galileo 359 years ago for asserting that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

The address by the Pope before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences closed a 13-year investigation into the Church's condemnation of Galileo in 1633, one of history's most notorious conflicts between faith and science.⁴³

It should be clear from the previous analysis as well, that Rushdie's first recantation was as insincere, coerced and utilitarian as Galileo's. As we all know by now, the persecuted father of modern physics recanted his recantation, not only when he supposedly whispered "it moves," but ultimately when he gave the world his most mature work, *Dialogues on the New Sciences* composed behind the backs of the Church censors, watching his every move, and smuggled out of Italy to Holland for publication under the nose of the Inquisition. Similarly, Rushdie recanted his recantation, not only when he gave his lecture at Columbia University, but also when he overcame the terror of the "fatwa" threatening to undo him by never ceasing to write satirically, critically and creatively, particularly about the sacred.

In fact, this analogy acquires greater cogency on the basis of the authoritative study of the Galileo case by Pietro Redondi, *Galileo Heretico*.⁴⁴ Redondi argues that the Church condemned Galileo not so much for

his Copernicanism, i.e., his cosmology, as for the explosive implications of his new physics, mainly his atomism, for the doctrine of transubstantiation. This came at a perilous time for the Church when the doctrine in question was under attack by rising Protestantism and its rival doctrine of consubstantiation. We all know something by now about the subversive and explosive implications of Rushdie's art for the comparably sacred Islamic scholastic doctrines and narratives.

Of interest also is the fact that not unlike Rushdie, Galileo wrote some of his more controversial works in the epico-satiric style of fiery literary polemics, taking on none other than the *Collegio Romano* itself. In fact, this is pretty much the style of Rushdie's literary productions and particularly *The Satanic Verses*. Let me add that it was Galileo who first defined carnival as the time and place where it is permissible to speak freely about everything.⁴⁵ And *The Satanic Verses* is nothing if it is not carnivalesque to the core and if it is not free speech about everything.

The other famous case is that of the Dominican priest Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake by the same Church in 1600, in Rome, for heresy. Bruno was a bold and daring speculative mind of the European Renaissance who refused to recant his espousal of the, then, emerging new sciences in order to save his life. He is now commemorated as the first modern martyr of both modern science and free thought. Still, the Church hierarchy could do no more for him, after the passage of 400 years, than express its regrets (February 2000), for having used such violent means in dealing with his person and thoughts. In spite of the Church's delayed expression of regret, Bruno remains a heretic according to the announcement of Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's Minister of Foreign Affairs, because his writings are "incompatible" with Christian teachings.⁴⁶

This happened during the "Holy Year" marked by

Pope John Paul II, as a time for the Church “to apologize for past errors and excesses,” including the Inquisition and the persecution of the Jews. Now, given this clerical intransigence, it should come as no surprise to learn that the Vatican had petitioned Mussolini in the late 1920s for the removal of Bruno’s statue from where the Italian Nationalists had erected it in 1887, in the Piazza Campo dei Fiori in central Rome. When the petition failed, the Papacy reacted by canonizing Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino in 1930, since he was responsible for managing the trials and persecution of both Galileo and Bruno.

Not to be forgotten either, is the instance of one of modern Europe’s most eminent philosophers, Benedict Spinoza, who was excommunicated from the Synagogue on account of his heretical Cartesian philosophical teachings. Unlike Galileo, Spinoza never recanted. Until today, the continuing efforts of intellectuals, scientists, philosophers and artists (both Jewish and otherwise) all over the world to rehabilitate the great philosopher by rescinding the excommunication edict, have foundered on the stern refusal of the Chief Rabbis to reverse themselves, or more accurately to reverse their Amsterdam ancestors, and admit to a monumental historical error.

On the other side of the divide, there is the strict position taken on these matters by the ex-head of the clerical power structure in Saudi Arabia, the late Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Bin Baz, the master faqih and Grand Mufti of the Kingdom. In defense of the old Koranic geocentricism, Bin Baz simply apostatized those Muslims who believe that the earth is round and revolves around a stationary sun. As late as 1982, he published a book expounding the absolute truth on this matter, condemning to apostasy all those who believe otherwise (heliocentrism) and unambiguously reminding all concerned that the punishment for apostasy in Islam is death.⁴⁷

In light of these comparisons and of the gravity of

the issues at stake, Mozaffari’s attack on Rushdie for the minimal and benign offense of discourtesy to Islam and Muslims — as the subtitle of his book makes clear — appears eminently trivial and ridiculous.

The “fatwa” against Rushdie does not stand a chance of being formally lifted or retracted in the foreseeable future for the following reasons: (a) As the above comparisons show, the mills of the Gods continue to grind very slowly on both sides of the East-West divide. (b) Serious clerical power structures hardly ever admit to major historical errors, particularly when they regard themselves as the representatives and guardians of absolute truth. (c) Such power structures operate at best on the principle of simply proceeding forward after absorbing and transcending whatever errors were committed in the past or along the way.

As a result, Khomeini’s “fatwa” had to die a natural death instead of an official one. It simply lapsed, or became *caduc*, as the French would say. At the international level, the beginning of the end for the fatwa arrived when Iranian negotiators and official spokesmen started assuring the European Union — first privately and then publicly — that the “fatwa” is a religious pronouncement and has little to do with state policy. This is the first time that the Ayatollahs came around to affirming some sort of a distinction or even separation between state and religion, between government policy and ideological mass mobilization in Iran.

This inclination was formalized when on September 24, 1998, Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kamal Kharrazi, publicly committed his government — after a decisive meeting with his British counterpart, then, Robin Cook — to refraining from any actions that could endanger Rushdie’s life, to dissociating the Iranian state from the bounty on his head and to discouraging all others from acting in ways that could threaten his well-being.

Meanwhile, the "fatwa" had turned into a purely internal Iranian affair and point of contention between reformists and reactionaries, between moderates and hardliners; with the latter accusing the former of being "soft" on Rushdie and of betraying the "fatwa."

Actually, the slow demise of the fatwa internationally was accompanied by an intensifying series of shrill, pompous, nervous and hollow declarations on the part of the conservative factions in Iran about the eternal validity of the "fatwa," the continuing relevance and importance of doubling the bounty on Rushdie's head, about how "the Rushdie issue will end only with killing him and all the elements associated with the publishing of the book" and how "executing Rushdie remains a duty incumbent on all Muslims until the day of resurrection."

V. Satan's Verses

What are the Satanic Verses after all, considering that they have provoked so many satanic curses along the way?

At the level of the classical Islamic narrative, the primary source for the incident of the Satanic Verses is the greatest, most renowned and voluminous early Muslim historian, chronicler, and Koran interpreter: Al-Tabari (died 923). He devoted several long pages of his massive history to recounting the incident in detail.

What I find striking is that in the mass of scholarly, popular, and journalistic literature produced around the world about the Rushdie novel and its title, hardly anyone now bothered to go to the original source, i.e., Tabari's narrative. Even more striking is the fact that no one has bothered, either, to put the relevant passages of the novel side by side with Tabari's story to make a close and detailed comparative examination and analysis of the two narratives and texts. This, in spite of all the jargon of authenticity, contextualization, intertextuality, fore-grounding, back-grounding and deconstruction that we hear all around us, particularly

from the Western lit-crit crowd. What adds insult to injury is that most of Tabari's history has been available in English translation for sometime now, including the section on the Satanic Verses.

So, I may as well start by reproducing in full Tabari's account of the incident of the verses:

The Messenger of God was eager for the welfare of his people and wished to effect a reconciliation with them in whatever ways he could. It is said that he wanted to find a way to do this, and what happened was as follows....When the Messenger of God saw how his tribe turned their backs on him and was grieved to see them shunning the message he had brought to them from God, he longed in his soul that something would come to him from God which would reconcile him with his tribe. With his love for his tribe and his eagerness for their welfare it would have delighted him if some of the difficulties which they made for him could have been smoothed out, and he debated with himself and fervently desired such an outcome. Then God revealed: By the Star when it sets, your comrade does not err, nor is he deceived; nor does he speak out of (his own) desire...

And when he came to the words: "Have you thought upon al-Lat and al-'Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?"

Satan cast on his tongue, because of his inner debates and what he desired to bring to his people, the words: "These are the high-flying cranes; verily their intercession is accepted with approval."

When Quraysh heard this, they rejoiced and were happy and delighted at the way in which he spoke of their gods, and they listened to him, while the Muslims, having complete trust in their Prophet in respect of the messages which he brought from God, did not suspect him of error, illusion, or mistake. When he came to the prostration, having completed the surah, he prostrated himself and the Muslims did likewise, following their Prophet, trusting in the message which he had brought and following his example. Those polytheists of the Quraysh and others who were in the mosque likewise prostrated themselves because of the reference to their

gods which they had heard, so that there was no one in the mosque, believer or unbeliever, who did not prostrate himself. The one exception was al-Walid b. al-Mughirah, who was a very old man and could not prostrate himself; but he took a handful of soil from the valley in his hand and bowed over that. Then they all dispersed from the mosque. The Quraysh left delighted by the mention of their gods which they had heard, saying, "Muhammad has mentioned our gods in the most favorable way possible, stating in his recitation that they are the high-flying cranes and that their intercession is received with approval."

The news of this prostration reached those of the Messenger of God's Companions who were in Abyssinia and people said, "The Quraysh have accepted Islam." Some rose up to return, while others remained behind. Then Gabriel came to the Messenger of God and said, "Muhammad, what have you done? You have recited to the people that which I did not bring to you from God, and you have said that which was not said to you." Then the Messenger of God was much grieved and feared God greatly, but God sent down a revelation to him, for He was merciful to him, consoling him and making the matter light for him, informing him that there had never been a prophet or a messenger before him who desired as he desired and wished as he wished but that Satan had cast words into his recitation, as he had cast words on Muhammad's tongue. Then God cancelled what Satan had thus cast, and established his verses by telling him that he was like other prophets and messengers, and revealed: "Never did we send a messenger or a prophet before you but that when he recited (the Message) Satan cast words into his recitation (*umniyyah*). God abrogates what Satan casts. Then God established his verses. God is all-knowing, wise."

Thus God removed the sorrow from his Messenger, reassured him about that which he had feared and cancelled the words which Satan had cast on his tongue, that their gods were the high-flying cranes whose intercession was accepted with approval. He now revealed, following the mention of "al-Lat, al'Uzza and Manat, the third, the other," the words:

Are yours the males and his the females? That indeed

were an unfair division! They are but names which you have named, you and your fathers...

To the words:

To whom he wills and accepts.

This means, how can the intercession of their gods avail with God?

When Muhammad brought a revelation from God cancelling what Satan had cast on the tongue of His Prophet, the Quraysh said, "Muhammad has repented of what he said concerning the position of your gods with God, and has altered it and brought something else." Those two phrases which Satan had cast on the tongue of the Messenger of God were in the mouth of every polytheist, and they became even more ill-disposed and more violent in their persecution of those of them who had accepted Islam and followed the Messenger of God.⁴⁸

As the above account makes clear, the Prophet faced stiff and powerful opposition from his own tribe and city, Mecca, as his uncompromising monotheism dismissed the entire pantheon of the pre-Islamic Arabian gods and goddesses as mere idols destined for destruction. At one point, the Prophet reached a compromise with the elders of Mecca and of his own tribe, the most powerful and wealthy of the Arabian tribes, to give their main goddesses some recognition in his teachings in return for a respite in the uphill struggle against the high and mighty of his city, clan, tribe, family, cousins, relatives, etc. In fulfillment of this development, the Prophet received the revelation that gave the most exalted goddesses of Arabia intercessory powers and a mediating role with Allah, i.e., between God and man. The revealed verses were: "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza / and Manat the third the other? / These are the exalted birds (or angels) / and their intercession is desired indeed."

Now, Lat, Uzza and Manat were the names of the famous female deities of Arabia and of the tribe of the Prophet. These exalted "high-flying cranes," "birds" or "angels," were sometimes known as the Daughters of

Allah, as well. Let me add in passing that we know from the work of an early Muslim author about Arabia's pre-Islamic gods and goddesses — *The Book of Idols* by Ibn Al-Kalbi — that these verses were borrowed verbatim from a chant ritually repeated by the Prophet's tribe while worshipping in the Meccan shrine, which means the Prophet must have known them by heart.⁴⁹

This concession lifted for a while the persecution directed against the budding Muslim movement, but created much dissention within the ranks of the Prophet's followers. Then, at a later date, the Prophet abrogated the verses and justified their withdrawal by saying that they were not a true revelation from Allah in the first place, but a prompting of the devil. Hence their name in English, *The Satanic Verses*, and hence the title of Rushdie's novel. The retraction of the verses is related at some length in the first 25 verses of sura 53 of the Koran, the chapter of The Star. Naturally, the retraction restored harmony within the small Muslim community around the ideal of uncompromising monotheism, but reopened the struggle with the enemy, mainly the Prophet's tribe, cousins, city and so on.

Let me note as an aside, the interesting paradox that although the Arabian tribes of those times greatly esteemed and cultivated the qualities of manliness and the virtues of warrior-knights, still their most prominent and preferred objects of worship were female deities. The Koranic abrogation of the Satanic Verses refers to this point explicitly and scolds the Arabs for, on the one hand, valuing manly virtues then proceeding to worship females, on the other. Islam's mission was, of course, to make good this discrepancy by rendering the religious superstructure completely consistent with the lived infrastructure, i.e., in favor of a very masculine god at the expense of the female deities.

The abrogation of The Satanic Verses took place

in the following manner according to Tabari's account: Gabriel appeared to the Prophet and asked him to recite again the "Sura of The Star." The moment the Prophet started uttering the first satanic verse, Gabriel interrupted saying, "I did not reveal these to you," and then made the appropriate correction.

Hasan Hanafi, one of Egypt's most prominent and prolific thinkers today and a well-known sympathizer and defender of the Islamists of his country, gave a particularly interesting secular interpretation of the Satanic Verses incident *à propos* of the furor over the Rushdie novel. In the following paragraph, I shall give both a summary and a somewhat free translation of Hanafi's words:

The Prophet's overriding preoccupation was the construction of a state in Arabia. He had his troubles with the Christians, the Jews and the idolaters. At one point the idolaters, the worst and fiercest enemies of his project, approached him saying, 'why can't you just mention our goddesses in your teachings? You don't even have to call them goddesses, all you need to mention is their intercessionary role and function with God. Then we will all work together to change the system in Arabia!' The Prophet was inclined to accept the compromise because it temporarily alleviated the ferocity of the struggle with his own tribe and people, i.e., the Prophet saw that the compromise constituted a good deal for a political leader like himself because it served the vital interest of his movement at that particular moment. It is as if the Prophet had told himself, 'what harm is there in mentioning their goddesses for, say, a year or so, and then retracting that acknowledgement at an appropriate moment, considering that revelation also changes with the change of circumstance.' And so it was. Salman Rushdie was right and said nothing new on this matter. In addition, the artist is free to write as he wishes and he is to be judged only by the standards and principles of literary criticism.⁵⁰

It should be evident from the preceding explanations that Rushdie did no more in his novel than take Tabari's entire story and dramatize it in the manner

typical of modernist novelists, satirists and artists in general. And Tabari's narrative is first class raw material for dramatization, personification, fictionalization, and so on. For example, the tension between God, the Prophet, Gabriel, Satan and the collapsing old tribal ties and loyalties of Arabia are the stuff out of which epic characters are made and dramatic stories are told. This high modernist dramatization of the historian's account means: Imposing new forms on the old raw material, eliminating the privileged position of the author, smashing the monotony and serenity of the original narrative, disturbing its unilinear time-sequences and rearranging its spatial contiguities. Rushdie achieves this by basically transmuting Tabari's historiless history — all told under the aspect of eternity — into fallible human decisions, contingent actions, imponderable consequences, shaky expectations, realizable and unrealizable dreams as well as into passions, calculations, hesitations, uncertainties, mistakes, doubts, anticipations, failures, successes, defeats, retreats, advances, i.e., into all the traits that define the condition of being human. As a part of this process, he reproduces with great dramatic impact and tension the relevant Koranic verses of the "chapter (or sura) of The Star" in their two consecutive versions. First as dictated by Gabriel and corrupted by Satan and second as double checked and corrected by the Archangel himself.⁵¹

This is why I feel justified in saying that in depth, underlying the Rushdie affair is the Arab and/or Muslim artists' impulse today to pillage the narratives of his historical heritage, appropriate them anew to himself, put them at the service of his present art, make them relevant to the drift of his times and in the end contribute to the formation of a new and more appropriate kind of sensibility, spirituality and even religiosity. But, as I pointed out earlier, very little work has been done on relating themes and characters in Rushdie's epic to their originals in the Muslim grand

narrative that he as a novelist had pillaged and utilized. This scholarly, critical and analytical laziness in dealing seriously with the world-novel par excellence is truly scandalous.

VI. Rushdie in the Arab World

The Arab World is objectively and subjectively the heartland of Islam. Where did the Arab World stand on the Rushdie affair and how did it fare throughout the crisis?

In spite of Muslim fundamentalism, revivalism, Islamism and so on, the Arab World came out much better off on the Rushdie affair than any one could have thought or expected, including myself.

Above all, there were no reactions in the streets either against the novel or in support of Khomeini's "fatwa." We have no record of any serious Arab public calls — official, unofficial, journalistic or popular — either urging the implementation of the "fatwa" or threatening Rushdie and his defenders with death or inciting violence against persons, institutions and countries that were generally perceived as implicated in the Rushdie case.

The Arab governments said what they were supposed and expected to say and let the matter go at that (the sole exception being a nominal endorsement of the "fatwa" by Libya's capricious leader Muammar Qaddafi on March 6, 1989). For example, the official Saudi Arabian position maintained that as Islam is not a lawless religion, a trial is necessary before sentencing Rushdie to any punishment. In other words, some kind of due process of law — Islamic or otherwise — had to be observed before reaching any sort of verdict.

At the level of the media, the London-based Saudi Arabian newspaper, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, went out of its way to play down the significance of the whole Rushdie furor, immediately after the announcement of Khomeini's "fatwa." In an important editorial, the paper

proceeded to argue (a) that the punishment of Rushdie for his crime is Allah's responsibility in the after-world, (b) that both book and author will be damned by God and history in this world as well as the next one, (c) that *The Satanic Verses* will surely meet the ignominious fate of all the other works that have tried to defame Islam and (d) that attention should now concentrate on real problems, such as "the problem of the relationship of Muslims to the West."⁵²

Shortly after, a Saudi spiritual leader of Belgium's Muslims, Abdullah Ahdal, and his Tunisian deputy, Salim Bahri, were shot dead in the main Brussels mosque (March 29, 1989), for acting openly to calm down Muslim incitement to violence against Rushdie in Europe in general and in Belgium in particular.

On March 23, 1989, President Hafez Asad of Syria, gave a long and comprehensive interview to *Time* magazine on the Middle Eastern political issues of the day. When asked about Khomeini's "fatwa," Asad remained evasive and noncommittal emphasizing two points: First, that since he is neither a *faqih* nor a 'alim, judging the issue on religious grounds is certainly beyond his field of competence. Second, that regardless of any fatwa that may or may not have been issued, Rushdie insulted the religion of a billion Muslim and were he a citizen of Syria, he would have been put on trial for that offense.⁵³

Meanwhile, Sheikh Al-Azhar in Egypt, Mohamed Sayyed Tantawi, had already announced his religious and legal opposition to the "fatwa" and so did Hasan Turabi of Sudan, one of the most eminent leaders and theoreticians of the Islamist movement world-wide.⁵⁴

At the 18th meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in the Saudi Arabian capital, Riyadh (March 13, 1989), the Foreign Ministers of the 46 member countries, (a) refused to approve Khomeini's death sentence in spite of the insistence and urgings of Iran's representative, (b) satisfied themselves with not much more than deploring the publication of *The*

Satanic Verses, accusing the novel of blasphemy and of maligning Islam and the Muslim personality, and (c) refrained from recommending any line of action whatsoever either against Rushdie or for dealing with the Rushdie affair.⁵⁵

An influential segment of the Arab intelligentsia — particularly the left-leaning secular intellectuals — came out in support of Rushdie, without necessarily adopting the novel. They spoke out and published their views under sometimes dangerous circumstances.

Egypt's Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz quickly solidarized with the hounded author and denounced in no ambiguous terms the hysterical curses emanating from Iran's clerics.

In Damascus, 50 poets, authors, painters, journalists, university professors, thinkers etc., issued a manifesto, at a most critical moment in the rapid unfolding of the Rushdie affair, standing up for the right of Salman Rushdie the author to live and write.

The operative paragraphs of this manifesto were published in the Lebanese press, including the names of all the signatories.⁵⁶ For some mysterious reason the Western media took no notice at all of that important act of solidarity — coming from the inside, as it were — in spite of the extensive coverage they were devoting at the time to all aspects of the Rushdie affair.

Still, since by sheer accident the Damascus manifesto appeared on the same day as President Asad's interview with *Time* magazine, the security services and martial law authorities in Syria immediately interpreted the action as an instant and direct challenge and/or reply to Asad's very words on the Rushdie affair and the "fatwa." This resulted in a lot of secret police investigations, interrogations, harassment and such, until the authorities satisfied themselves that the declaration had been completed and sent for publication long before anyone knew about the President's

interview with *Time*.

In spite of all that, the Damascus-based Palestinian intellectual, critic and commentator, Feisal Darraj, proceeded to publish an article condemning the various Muslim fundamentalist movements for exhibiting such bigotry and intolerance in their dealings with literature in general and *The Satanic Verses* in particular.⁵⁷

On another front, the émigré Arab intellectuals in London, Paris, Berlin and other European capitals contributed their significant share as well to defending Rushdie's art and freedom. They issued communiqués, published articles, gave interviews, appeared on television, went on radio programs to express their solidarity with the writer persecuted in the name of Islam.⁵⁸

On February 19, 1989, over 100 intellectuals from Arab and Muslim countries (mostly Arab) demonstrated against the "fatwa" in Human Rights Square in Paris. In April, The Arab Association of Human Rights in the French capital issued a declaration signed by many prominent Arab writers, journalists, filmmakers, poets, actors, (including Naguib Mahfouz), affirming that "no blasphemy does as much damage to Islam and to Muslims as the call for the murder of a writer," and calling on "all those, who like us, are attached to Arab-Muslim civilization, to reject without qualification calls for murder which designate all Muslims as potential assassins..."⁵⁹

The London-based Syrian scholar and thinker Aziz Al-Azmeh very courageously defended Rushdie on British television and in print during the hottest and most perilous moments of the crisis.⁶⁰ In Paris, the Lebanese critic, writer, and activist Fawaz Tarabulsi denounced Rushdie's persecution as a "satanic game."⁶¹

Another example: At the height of the campaign against *The Satanic Verses* and the hysteria attendant on it then, two London-based Arab-Muslim journalists

published, in London, a very enlightened book in Arabic under the title: *The Satanic Verses between the Pen and the Sword*, in an attempt to defend the autonomy of literature and to explain calmly the circumstances underlying and surrounding the Rushdie explosion.⁶² The work was primarily meant for the reading Arab publics in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States, considering that a majority among them lacked the skills needed for reading the novel in the original. No doubt, the book succeeded remarkably: (a) In giving the reader a good idea concerning what the novel is all about and who its author is. (b) In providing him/her with a clear exposition of its story-line, main themes and, above all, the controversial passages that triggered the explosion. (c) In making available to the reader a simple critical assessment that put the work in some sort of a rational socio-political-literary perspective. (d) In putting before him/her lengthy summaries and translations of crucial passages from the novel at a time when *The Satanic Verses* was neither readily available nor translated into other languages.

Not to be missed either, is a book that first came out in French under the title *Pour Rushdie*,⁶³ containing short contributions by 100 Arab and Muslim writers, poets, dramatists, intellectuals, artists and thinkers dedicated to the support of Rushdie's freedom to move, write and publish unhindered. The English and Norwegian translations of this volume appeared a year later in New York and Oslo respectively.⁶⁴ The famous British author, critic and commentator, Christopher Hitchens, gave the following appreciation of the significance of this book:

The *summa* of the published record is a book, originally in French and entitled *Pour Rushdie*, in which almost every writer of worth in the Arab and Iranian and wider Muslim world took Salman's side, and identified his cause with their own hopes for emancipation. This volume was the finest possible repudiation of all the West-

ern conservative elements who claimed to see merit in the Ayatollah's condemnation of blasphemy... Generally more forthright and more courageous than their Western cousins, these authors — from the Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish — stipulated not just their fellow feeling for good old Salman, but their sense of *identification* with the personal and social dilemma he had exposed ... Anyway, many writers from the 'Muslim' world got the point more clearly, and more swiftly, than some of their 'free world' counterparts.⁶⁵

I think Hitchens overstates the case a bit here, as the predominant majority of the contributors to the volume are Arab, while most of the rest neither work nor live in their respective Muslim countries.

Closer home, the only work to appear in the Muslim world (and in Arabic) unabashedly defending Rushdie, his novel and his satirical handling of actually existing Islam is my *The Tabooing Mentality: Salman Rushdie and the Truth of Literature*. One half of this volume is devoted to laying bare the origins of some of Rushdie's themes, motifs, imagery, symbols, allusions, characters, incidents and episodes, in the classical Islamic grand narrative and its primary sources and reference points. For example, for the first time the text of Tabari's account of the Satanic Verses incident is made available to ordinary Arab readers in the context of the controversy over the novel and in conjunction with Rushdie's novelistic representation of the same incident. This amounted to an invitation to all concerned to verify for themselves the widely repeated accusation that Rushdie went out of his way to falsify the early history of Islam.

The Tabooing Mentality sought also: (a) To show in some detail that a work like *The Satanic Verses* sits very well with — and could even form a continuation of — the long established traditions of satire, parody, debunking and mockery of all the sacred and profane cows of this world to be found in classical Arabic prose and poetry; (b) to explain the nature of the high

modernist Western artistic tradition and experience out of which Rushdie hails as a creative writer and fabulator; and (c) to give the reader a taste of the style in which *The Satanic Verses* was composed — considering that a serious translation into Arabic remains out of the question in the foreseeable future — by providing him/her with long quotations from the work in Arabic translation.

This book went through four editions in the 1990s and generated over 500 pages of controversy, debate, attacks, counter-attacks, polemics, defenses, apologies, refutations etc., throughout the Arab World (including my own reply to critics). Interestingly enough, Syria's long-serving Minister of Defense, General Mustafa Tlas, entered the fray early on with an article accusing me of "getting out of my skin," for having defended Rushdie and his work. The reply to my critics was first published in 1997, under the title, *Beyond the Tabooing Mentality: Reading the Satanic Verses*, with the entire controversy reproduced as an appendix to the volume.⁶⁶ I also included in the book the first translation ever into Arabic of Rushdie's defense of himself, *In Good Faith*,⁶⁷ his article "The Choice between Darkness and Light"⁶⁸ and the chapter of *The Satanic Verses* entitled "The Angel Azraeel" (on account of its mock-epic style).⁶⁹ All this constituted what may be fairly regarded as the local Arab sub-controversy and argument over *The Satanic Verses* and its international ramifications and reverberations. No similar debates are known to have developed or taken place in the rest of the Muslim World, with the exception of Turkey.

After this review, the three developments that stand out as of most consequence for me are:

- (1) The fact that the violence, street rioting, fire bombings, property destruction, calls for the immediate implementation of the "fatwa," open incitement to murder and brazen hate speech, all occurred either in the West or in non-Arab Muslim countries or in countries with

substantial Muslim minorities, like India and South Africa.

Prime examples are:

- a) The by now world famous book-burning rituals and demonstrations in Bradford, England on January 14, 1989.
- b) The street riots in Islamabad, Pakistan, leading to the burning of the American Cultural Center there and the death of five of the attackers in the process (February 13, 1989).
- c) The death of 12 Muslim rioters and the injury of over 50 others in Bombay, India at the hands of the riot police in February 24, 1989.
- d) The reported injury of some 100 rioters, when police fired on demonstrators in Dhaka, Bangladesh (March 3, 1989).
- e) The attempted assassination of William Nygaard, the publisher of the Norwegian translation of *The Satanic Verses*, in Oslo, October 11, 1993. Mr. Nygaard, though severely injured survived the attempt on his life.
- f) The assassination of Professor Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of Rushdie's novel, in Tokyo, July 11, 1991.
- g) The attack on Ettore Capriolo, the Italian translator of the novel, in Milano, July 3, 1991. Mr. Capriolo suffered serious wounds and injuries as a result of the attempt to kill him.
- h) The worst was to come in the northern town of Sivas in Turkey, known as the Sivas Pogrom. On July 2, 1993, a mob of Muslim fundamentalists attacked and put to the torch the Sivas cultural center and the adjoining Madimak Hotel, where a gathering of Turkish artists, poets, authors, intellectuals etc., was taking place in honor of the Turkish poet Pir Sultan 'Abdal, and where Aziz Nesin — one of Turkey's most eminent men of letters — was to read, in translation, passages from *The Satanic Verses*. Forty people died in the fire and about 60 others were seriously injured. Aziz Nesin escaped unharmed and died shortly after.

(2) The fact that the reactions to the Rushdie novel and

affair in the Arab World never went beyond the media and the printed word, in particular. They remained confined to polemics, denunciations, refutations, critiques, replies, verbal abuse, exaggerations and so on, but without death threats, incitement to violence, calls to kill Rushdie and/or instigations to murder.

This healthier situation encouraged me to propose to the Arab reading public in general and to the intelligentsia in particular that from now on we all commit ourselves to abide by a code of honor based on the following principle: If our ancient ancestors operated on the maxim of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, then we should operate, from now on, on the maxim of a poem for a poem, an essay for an essay, a novel for a novel and a book for a book. In this way we would have contributed something to the preservation of the grain of truth contained in the ancient retributive maxim, on the one hand, and we would have helped in humanizing, sublimating and updating it, on the other.

(3) The fact noted earlier, viz., that intellectual, cultural and artistic life in the Arab World is not as Islamically conformist, religiously unquestioning and spiritually stagnant as it often seems on the surface, especially from the outside.

How do we account for this unexpected kind of reaction to the Rushdie novel and affair in the Arab World, especially in comparison with what we know happened in many other Muslim countries and among most non-Arab Muslim communities and minorities?

A number of plausible explanations immediately suggest themselves after excluding pure chance and mere coincidence, given the protracted nature of the Rushdie case and its massive ramifications.

There is first, this unique relationship of intimacy which Arabs feel to Islam, to its rise, spread, belief-systems and history in general. This is the profound, but often unarticulated, conviction that, in the final analysis, Islam is very much of an Arab affair (it is our own thing, so to speak), and when non-Arab Muslims start acting more royalist than the king and more Catholic than the Pope in their zeal for Islam, Arabs

can only assume an attitude of polite reserve before such an awkward spectacle. I presume, Italians harbor similar feelings and attitudes about Catholicism, north Germans about the Reformation and Middle Eastern Christians about Christianity in general (considering that, after all, Christianity is not a European religion). For a change, it seems, then, that this thoroughly Arabo-centric view of Islam played a benign and tempering role as far as Arab reactions to the Rushdie affair are concerned.

The Arabs are also well aware of the other side of this coin. I mean their deep-seated, but rarely openly expressed, suspicion of all forms of non-Arab Islam as somehow flawed, adulterated and/or vitiated by all sorts of alien impurities and external contaminations. This awareness finds its mirror-image in the equally unarticulated, but nonetheless deeply felt inferiority complex on the part of non-Arab Muslims concerning the purity and authenticity of their Islam. For, with the exception of the very learned *mullahs*, these Muslims have no access to the holy scriptures, traditions and lore of their religion in the original, i.e., in Arabic. In the Indian sub-continent, this situation is complicated for the worse by the fact that Islam is very much of a minority religion surrounded by a sea of "abominable" paganism, polytheism and outright idol-worship. This, naturally results in typical compensatory attitudes and forms of behavior such as defensiveness, exaggerated self-righteousness, aggressive assertiveness, touchiness, excessive dogmatism, fanaticism, literalism, neurotic intolerance — and the endless production of apologetics. In comparison, Arab Muslims (or more accurately Sunni Arab Muslims), seem to wear their Islam a little more thinly, casually and confidently than the rest of the flock.

There is, second, the perception in a predominantly Sunni Arab World that the revolutionary Imam in Tehran used the Rushdie case not only to consolidate Shi'i clergy-power at home, but also to turn him-

self into the over-arching Pope of Islam all over the world, into the true defender of the faith everywhere and into the final authority on ultimate Islamic affairs, no matter what. This, at a time when the stakes were still very high in the on-going struggle to define the meaning and role of Islam in the contemporary world. Naturally, such Shi'i clerical pretensions, assertiveness and claims could not possibly go down well in the Arab World, either with the powers that be, or the educated elites, or the clergy, or the popular classes.

Thus, the Arab World witnessed two major conspiracy theories about Rushdie and his novel. The first regarded him either a witting or unwitting instrument of the continuing imperialist-Zionist-orientalist plot against the Arabs and Islam in general. The second saw in him a secret agent of resurgent heretical Shi'ism out to defame, discredit and undo Sunni Islam.

The first conspiracy theory is standard fare in the Arab World as it inevitably pops up whenever and wherever a major political, cultural, artistic, literary and/or ideological crisis erupts among the Arabs. As far as Rushdie is concerned, the exiled Iraqi leftist thinker and critic, Hadi Al-Alawi, was the most systematic proponent of this theory. He went so far as to accuse Rushdie of being in the service of Western imperialism in general and American imperialism in particular when he wrote a novel that intentionally fans the flames of enmity between the Iranian and Arab peoples at a time when Iraq and Iran were at war.⁷⁰

The second theory was elaborated at length by the Egyptian writer and literary critic, Zuheir 'Ali Shaker, in a book published in Cairo under the title: *The White Crow or the Salman Rushdie Phenomenon*.⁷¹ Shaker accused Rushdie of the following misdeeds:

- a) Belonging to the extremist esoteric Shi'i sect in India known as the "Ghurabiyah" (from *ghurab*, meaning crow in Arabic). This faction holds the "heretical" belief that the Archangel Gabriel, either wit-

tingly or unwittingly, delivered the first revelation of the Koran to Muhammad when he should have communicated it to 'Ali, his first cousin (and extreme look alike), as Allah had ordered him to do.⁷²

- b) Satirizing, distorting and discrediting the true Arab Sunni version of Islam, while cunningly adopting and promoting its false Shi'i version.
- c) Camouflaging his true purpose of giving as wide a currency as possible to this heretical form of Islam by making dishonest and misleading declarations about his own atheism, secularism and leftism.
- d) Conspiring with Imam Khomeini to have the "fatwa" issued against his person in order to insure for his novel the greatest possible world attention and the broadest possible global circulation, all in the service of spreading and propagating the heretical Shi'i kind of Islam it contains.
- e) Writing the novel to provide support in the West and other places to the Farsi-Shi'i side in Iran's war against Iraq, a war also against the rest of the Arab World in general and Sunni Arabism in particular.

There is, finally, that long series of Arab Rushdie-like affairs, discussed in Section II, extending from the last quarter of the 19th to the end of the 20th century.

This series encompassed books, authors, incidents, controversies, literary scandals, dissidents and dissenters (who ran afoul of both religious and temporal authorities) that reflected the entirety of the socio-political spectrum, right, left and center.

For example, 'Ali Abdurazik — as pointed out earlier — was an enlightened conservative Azhari cleric who argued his case in favor of the abolition of the Caliphate like a classical *'alim* and on grounds internal to the traditional Islamic discourse on such matters. Taha Hussein represented the classical liberal position both politically and in the critical approach he chose to apply to his subject-matter. My book *Critique of Religious Thought* combined a left-wing *marxist* position with radical enlightenment-type critiques of religion. On the other hand, The Saudi Sheikh, critic, polemicist, dissident and refugee, Abdallah Qusaymi,

was satisfied to remain the nihilistic Nietzschean iconoclast that he always was, while the Arab nationalism of the unorthodox Egyptian Koranic scholar, Mohamed Ahmad Khalafallah, edged closer and closer to chauvinistic self-aggrandizement.

There is no question that this long succession of Rushdie-like incidents, affairs and controversies — big and small — had a cumulative liberating impact on recent and contemporary Arab thought, culture and life in general, bringing previously untouchable subjects within the compass of critical thought, autonomous reason and worldly debate. It has certainly desensitized the Arab World's mainstream cultural life to critical debates about religion and the sacred in general. This is why almost none of the Arab "antiheroes" involved in the explosive affairs mentioned above either lost his life for the cause or suffered really serious injuries along the way; this, in spite of official accusations of apostasy, denunciations for *kufr* in Friday sermons, and trials for blaspheming against Islam.⁷³

What is even more interesting is the fact that such incidents and affairs keep exploding in the Arab World regardless of the "fatwa" and in spite of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and revivalism. In every one of these instances you find, deep down, that the authors are still grasping, expressing, using and reacting to aspects of the socio-historical crisis attendant on the civilizational and cultural paradigm-shift that Arab societies (and Muslim ones too) have been struggling with and suffering through for the last two centuries.

For example, the opening pages of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* are devoted to the tragi-comic incongruities, paradoxes and absurdities of Adam Aziz, a Kashmiri modern-trained physician who had read Lenin's *What is to be done?* at the University of Heidelberg, trying to practice his art from behind a perforated sheet on a veiled feudal female in the backwoods of Kashmir.

Already, about a half century ago one of Egypt's

most eminent men of letters had published a similar allegory about the tragedy of Ismail Efendi, a modern-trained Egyptian doctor who leaves London to practice his art on, among others, an illiterate female relative in his extremely materially depressed and highly superstitious village.⁷⁴ Just as Adam Aziz had somehow to carry on with the treatment in spite of the perforated sheet Islamically standing between him and his patient, similarly Dr. Ismail had somehow to carry on with his treatment in spite of the magical lantern Islamically standing between him and his sick cousin. Like Galileo in Bertolt Brecht's famous play, both Dr. Ismail and Dr. Aziz shun the heroic path of Giordano Bruno, make the compromises necessary for the continuation of their work — a work that historically transcends their individual destinies — and for the eventual triumph of what they stand for.

Obviously, then, the authors and books referred to above generate reactions because they honestly and boldly either explore, expose, criticize or parody the conflicts, incongruities, contradictions, paradoxes, absurdities and tensions attendant on this paradigm-shift. More specifically, attendant on the impact of the modern forms of knowledge and of appropriating and acting on the world (the two doctors), on the ancient systems of belief, local knowledges and disintegrating life-forms as symbolized by the perforated sheet and the magical lantern.

More broadly, we know that in the modernity paradigm science as a method of inquiry, as a body of knowledge and as applied technology, (a) has become the decisive form of theoretical and practical knowledge available to mankind and (b) has displaced all earlier forms of appropriating, interpreting and acting on the world such as myth, magic, religion, legend, affective encounter, scholastic reason and so on.

So, as existing Arab societies reach out for development, seek economic progress, acquire scientific technical skills and, in the process, shed the old para-

digm, Rushdie-like cases will continue to arise — big and small, local and pan-Arab — with a regularity approaching that of a natural law. In point of fact these societies are already so positioned in the modern world, so integrated into the drift of contemporary history and so racked by transforming oppositions, tensions and contradictions as to make such eruptions a virtual inevitability.

Notes

¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, Viking, London, 1988.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.

³ "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Forbidden Agendas*, Al-Saqi Books, London, 1994. Also, Alexander Lyon MacFie (ed.), *Orientalism: A Reader*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 217-238. For the Arabic version, see my book *The Tabooing Mentality: Salman Rushdie and the Truth of Literature*, Al-Mada Publications, Damascus and Beirut, 3rd edition, 1997, pp. 13-92.

⁴ Sadik J. Al-Azm, "The Importance of Being Earnest about Salman Rushdie," *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, edited by D. M. Fletcher, Rodopi Publications, Amsterdam, 1994, pp. 255-292. For the much longer Arabic version, see *The Tabooing Mentality: Salman Rushdie and the Truth of Literature*, pp. 163-300.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, pp. 3-18. Also his *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993, pp. 22-49. Also his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996.

⁷ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, Faber and Faber, London, 1995.

⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 45.

⁹ Salman Rushdie, "In Defense of the Novel Yet Again," *The New Yorker*, June 24, 1996, pp. 48-55.

¹⁰ Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, Cairo, 1956. *Palace of Desire*, Cairo, 1957. *Sugar Street*, Cairo, 1957.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Verso Books, London, 1991.

¹² Samir Amin, *Empire of Chaos*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1992.

¹³ For these contacts and exchanges see: Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of*

Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983. And Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and Abdu: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Islam* Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., London, 1966.

¹⁴ Sadik J. Al-Azm, *Critique of Religious Thought*, Tali'a Publications, Beirut, 1969. Eighth edition, 1997. For a thorough account of the scandal precipitated by this book see: Stefan Wild, "Gott und Mensch im Libanon," *Der Islam*, Band 48, Heft 2, February, 1972, pp. 206-253.

¹⁵ Sheikh Khalil Abdul-Karim, *The Historical Roots of Muslim Shari'a Law*, Dar Al-Intishar Al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1997.

¹⁶ Sheikh Khalil Abdul-Karim, *The Formative Period in the Life of The Truthful and Upright*, Myrit Publications, Cairo, 2001.

¹⁷ See Zalikha Abou-Rishé's collection of short stories, *In the Cell*, Cairo, 1987.

¹⁸ For wide coverage of the incident and the achievements of the victim see the Egyptian weekly *Almussawar*, No. 3531, June 12, 1992.

¹⁹ Nasr Hamid Abuzeid, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, Sinai Publications, Cairo, 1992.

²⁰ For a particularly interesting and revealing intervention in the debate on the side of the author, see Iman Shaker's article in the literary magazine *Akhbar al-Adab*, Cairo, No. 352, April 9, 2000, pp. 34-35.

²¹ For an account of the whole affair sympathetic to the Islamist side see Ahmad Fouad 'Abdul-'Aziz's book, *A Banquet for the Weeds of the Sea: Atheism Takes off its Masques*, Madbouli Publishers, Cairo, 2002. See also Sabry Hafez's excellent review, "The Novel, Politics and Islam," *New Left Review*, No. 5, September-October, 2000, pp. 117-141.

²² Salman Rushdie, "Why I Have Embraced Islam," *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, London, 1991, pp. 430-432.

²³ Salman Rushdie, *In Good Faith*, Granta Books, London, 1990. Republished in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 393-414.

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Granta Books, London, 1990.

²⁵ Carmel Bedford, *Fiction, Fact and the Fatwa: 2000 Days of Censorship*, An Article 19 Publication, London, 1994, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ The attacks occurred in Japan and Italy. The Japanese translator died of his wounds, while the Italian survived the attempt on his life.

²⁸ "One Thousand Days in a Balloon," *The Rushdie Letters*, edited by Steve MacDonogh, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1993, pp. 15-24.

²⁹ *The International Herald Tribune*, July 15, 1994.

³⁰ "Quelle Fatwa?," *Pour Rushdie*, La Découverte, Paris, 1993, pp.

30-32. Also, "Is the Fatwa a Fatwa?," *For Rushdie*, George Braziller, New York, 1994, pp. 21-23.

³¹ Mehdi Mozaffari, *Fatwa: Violence and Discourtesy*, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, Denmark, 1998.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁴ *Kayhan*, February 15, 1989. Republished in *Kayhan-i Hawaii*, (the international edition), February 22, 1989.

³⁵ Mozaffari, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 55, 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴² As expressed in an interview for the occasion by Cardinal Paul Poupard, the head of the investigating Papal commission. *The New York Times*, October 31, 1992.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, November 1, 1992.

⁴⁴ Pietro Redondi, *Galileo Heretico*, translated from Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, February 18, 2000.

⁴⁷ The following is a somewhat free translation of the long title of his book: *The Traditional and Perceptual Proofs for the Possibility of Ascending to the Planets, for the Motion of the Sun and Moon and for the Fixity of the Earth*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1402 (H), 1982. See in particular pages 26 and 114-115.

⁴⁸ *The History of al-Tabari, Volume VI, Muhammad at Mecca*, translated and annotated by Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald, State University of New York Press, New York, 1988, pp. 107-110.

⁴⁹ *The Book of Idols* by Hisham Ibn Al-Kalbi, translated by Nabih Amin Faris, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1952, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Islam and Modernity: A Mawqif Symposium*, Dar Al-Saqi, London, 1990, pp. 234-235.

⁵¹ *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 114-115 and pp. 124-125, respectively.

⁵² *Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 18, 1989.

⁵³ *Time* magazine, April 3, 1989. The interview was released in Syria, March 27.

⁵⁴ Mozaffari, p. 38.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁶ *Assafir*, Beirut, March 23, 1989. The text of the manifesto — including all the signed names — was published in full for the first time in my book: *The Tabooing Mentality: Salman Rushdie and the Truth of Literature*, 1993, pp. 301-303.

⁵⁷ Feisal Darraj, "Salman Rushdie in the Mirror of the Extremist Religious Forces," *New Jordan*, Nos. 12-13, Spring, 1989.

⁵⁸ For example, see their declaration: "We are All Rushdie," *Le Nouvelle Observateur*, Paris, February 23-March 1, 1989.

⁵⁹ *Fiction, Fact and the Fatwa*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ See his articles in *An-Naqid*, London, March 9, and October 16, 1989. Also his piece "Poisoned Utopia," in the *Guardian*, February 17, 1989.

⁶¹ *Zawaia*, Paris, No. 1, July-August, 1989.

⁶² Adel Darwish and Imad Abdurazik, *The Satanic Verses between the Pen and the Sword*, London, 1989.

⁶³ *Pour Rushdie*, La Découverte, Paris, 1993.

⁶⁴ *For Rushdie*, George Braziller, New York, 1994. *Til Rushdie*, Cappelen Forlag, Oslo, 1994.

⁶⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, Verso, London, 2000, p. xvii.

⁶⁶ Sadik J. Al-Azm, *Beyond the Tabooing Mentality: Reading the Satanic Verses*, Al-Mada Publications, Damascus and Beirut, 1997.

⁶⁷ See Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 393-414.

⁶⁸ *The Observer*, London, January 22, 1989.

⁶⁹ *The Satanic Verses*, pp. 397-469.

⁷⁰ For Alawi's writings on the Rushdie affair see *Al-Hurriyah* magazine, Damascus, March 9, 1989, July 29, 1990 and *Beyond the Tabooing Mentality*, pp. 415-422. For my reply see pp. 51-109.

⁷¹ Zuheir 'Ali Shaker, *The White Crow or the Salman Rushdie Phenomenon*, Al-Hilal Books, No. 465, Cairo, 1989. See also *Beyond the Tabooing Mentality*, pp. 85-95.

⁷² According to Shaker, the "Al-Ghurabiyah" sect derives its name from the belief that the Prophet Muhammad and his first cousin 'Ali resembled each other so much so that the two were "as indistinguishable as one crow from another."

⁷³ The two exceptions here are (1) The Sudanese modernist Muslim theologian and religious reformer Mahmud Muhammad Taha, who was hanged for apostasy in 1985 by the dictator of the country, Ja'far Numeiri, shortly before a popular uprising brought down his bankrupt military regime, and (2) Egypt's Farag Fouda assassinated in Cairo by an Islamist faction in 1992. The attempt on Naguib Mahfouz's life failed.

⁷⁴ Yahya Haqi, *Um Hashim's Lantern*, Cairo, 1944.
