Why was *The Satanic Verses* so offensive to Muslims?

Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses* caused considerable uproar in Muslim nations and communities around the world, starting shortly after its publication by Penguin, on 26th September, 1988.\(^1\) By the time of its publication in the USA by Viking, a division of Penguin, on 22nd February, 1989 it had been banned in a number of South Asian countries, copies of it had been burned in the UK and a fatwa had been issued against its author and publishers by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,\(^2\) a Shi’a Muslim scholar and, at the time, Supreme Leader of Iran. At the heart of the negative response to the book by large parts of the Muslim community were claims of blasphemy and dishonour towards the Prophet Muhammad and his wives.\(^3\) Yet, as will become apparent, there were a number of specific issues behind the offence that was caused, not solely due to the content of the book itself; the ethnic demographics relating to much of the Muslim Diaspora in the West, Rushdie’s own status as (in the eyes of many Muslims) an apostate and the legal systems of many Western nations exclusive understanding of blasphemy as being against the Christian worldview all contributed to the reaction that the book received.

Rushdie was already a celebrated author when the book was published, having won the Booker Prize in 1981 for a previous novel, *Midnight’s Children*.\(^4\) *The Satanic Verses* was shortlisted for the same prize in 1988, but did not win.\(^5\) His origin as an Indian-born but British educated author from a Muslim family (though he is understood to be an atheist\(^6\)) is evident in much of his

\(^1\) Herbert, D., *Religion and Civil Society*, p.157  
\(^2\) Webster, R., *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, p.19  
\(^3\) Waines, D., *An Introduction to Islam*, pp.260-1  
\(^5\) [http://www.themanbookerprize.com/prize/books/135](http://www.themanbookerprize.com/prize/books/135) - last accessed 30/4/08  
\(^6\) Herbert, D., *op. cit.*, p.181
work, which focuses on the Indian subcontinent, it’s colonial history and culture as well as Western politics, having moved to the UK during his education.\(^7\)

*The Satanic Verses* is identifiable as a work of magic realism,\(^8\) with a main plot interspersed by a number of shorter stories involving the same characters coming in the form of dreams that they experience. It is primarily located in the UK at the time of its writing, although the two main characters are both of Indian origin. The story is determined by a traumatic event that these two characters experience, after which each assume different personalities; one of the Archangel Gabriel and the other of the devil. It is in these roles that the characters experience the dreams, some of which were the parts of the book which those Muslims who had read it (as well as those who hadn’t) found offensive. An explanation of these sections follows later.

Much of the media focus on the response to the book was, in the UK at least, centred on the British city of Bradford in Yorkshire. Bradford at the time (as it does now) had a significant mix of ethnic minorities in its population, though this was dominated by Muslims with approx. 11%.\(^9\) It was here that copies of the book were burnt in the January after its publication. As a result, “Bradford, in the popular imagination, became a centre of Muslim ‘fundamentalism’, with the city a bridgehead in the West for the establishment of separatist, Islamic enclaves.”\(^10\) But before that, it was already a place of great interest; “seen as ‘a microcosm of a larger British society that was struggling to make sense of itself, even as it was undergoing radical change.’”\(^11\)

This essay is an attempt to summarise the main aspects of the book that caused offence and also to examine some of the causes, as outlined above, for the variety of responses to it. That the book caused enormous offence is unquestionable, and the accusations of how that offence was

---

\(^7\) Pipes, D., *The Rushdie Affair*, p.41  
\(^8\) *Ibid.*, p.43  
\(^9\) Herbert, D., *op. cit.*, p.168  
\(^10\) Lewis, P., *Islamic Britain*, p.4  
caused are well rehearsed and undeniably based in the reality of many Muslims responses to what
the book contains. However, as with many things, there is more lying behind the uproar than
Muslims reading the book and being offended by it. Indeed, it is apparent that few who
campaigned against it ever actually read it.\textsuperscript{12}

The content of \textit{The Satanic Verses} that offended Muslims can, relatively accurately, be
summarised as those sections which, figuratively at least, dealt disparagingly with the Prophet, his
wives and the Archangel Gabriel’s actions in Islamic history. It also contains significant critique of
Islamic practice and politics, but

“They did not seem much concerned about its critical discussion of Islam... but felt
strongly about its treatment of Muhammad, his disciple and his wives, a sensitive
subject for Muslims for centuries. They resented that he had been called an imposter
who made up his revelations as he went along, made deals with the Archangel and
treated religion as a kind of business... They also felt distressed by the brothel scene in
which twelve prostitutes increased their earnings by taking the names of and
pretending to be, Mahound’s [Muhammad’s\textsuperscript{13}] wives.”\textsuperscript{14}

Yet the significance of the objection to this treatment of the Prophet was equally due to the
corollary implication that the Qur’an was less than inerrant and inspired by God. Casting doubt on
the Prophet cast doubt on the message he was given, thus “[T]hey bitterly complained that \textit{The
Satanic Verses} reduced [the Qur’an] to a book about how to ‘fart’, ‘f...’ and ‘clean one’s behind’.”\textsuperscript{15}

This view was encouraged by the title of the book itself. The term ‘satanic verses’ is, in
academic circles, commonly understood to refer to the incident described in the \textit{Tabari} when
Muhammad, having desired to appease the polytheism of his Meccan contemporaries, was
deceived by Satan and uttered two lines that had this effect. The Archangel Gabriel subsequently

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Pipes, D.}, \textit{op. cit.} pp.20, 53-5
\textsuperscript{13} The name Rushdie used as a literary reference to a character symbolising the Prophet. See below.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Parekh, B.}, \textit{The Rushdie Affair and the British Press}, cited in \textit{Herbert, D.}, \textit{op. cit.}, p.163-4
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid.}
ordered Muhammad to remove these two lines and replace them with lines that re-exerted the monotheism on which Islam is built. As contentious as this issue is, a book being titled *The Satanic Verses*, if understood to refer to this event would not, in itself, cause a problem. But outside of a mainly Western, academic environment, this event is referred to as the *gharaniq* incident, not the satanic verses incident, by virtue of the line that was removed mentioning *gharaniq* / exalted/high-flying birds. When the title of Salman Rushdie’s book was translated into Arabic, Persian and Turkish, the word ‘verses’ was rendered as (variations of) *ayat*, which is used explicitly to refer to Qur’anic verses.

“Back-translated literally into English, these titles mean ‘The Qur’an’s Satanic Verses’. With just a touch of extrapolation, this can be understood to mean that ‘The Qur’anic Verses Were Written By Satan’. Simplifying, this in turn becomes ‘The Qur’an Was Written By Satan’, or just ‘The Satanic Qur’an’.”

It is not difficult to see how this would be viewed as perhaps the ultimate blasphemy of the book itself in Muslim eyes. That would have been enough to condemn *The Satanic Verses*, despite the author’s assertion that this was not his intention in the choice of the title.

Yet there were more aspects of the book that drew outrage, and the depiction of Muhammad was not the least of these. The section of the book that deals with the satanic verses incident itself involves a character named Mahound, clearly identifiable as the Prophet. ‘Mahound’ is a name for Muhammad that dates back to the crusades, and was used then and subsequently as an offensive reference to the Prophet. But before we consider what references to Muhammad were deemed offensive, it is important to understand why they would be so.

---

16 *Pipes, D., op. cit., pp.116-7*
17 *ibid., pp.114-5*
18 *ibid. p.55*
The response from many in UK Muslim communities was unprecedented in modern times. The media picked up on images of book-burning and invoked images of Nazi Germany to suggest a parallel. The fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini was repeatedly assented to, often with public acknowledgement of a desire to carry it out without fear of reprisal. Clearly, the offence that was felt ran deep and strong in those who protested against the book and its author. And yet, globally, there were different responses from Muslim communities. There were only relatively few violent protests around the world when the sheer number of Muslims around the globe is considered. Attacks on bookshops in the USA and an attack on the American Embassy in Pakistan made the news, but by far the greatest intensity of violent outbursts were in the UK. This is notwithstanding the fact that there were many Muslims in the UK who distanced themselves from the violence of the protests, whilst making more political and legal efforts to show their displeasure.  

It could have been due to Salman Rushdie’s residency here, but I would suggest that something about the cultural background and social status of the Muslim communities also played a part.

The British Muslim population is predominantly South Asian in origin as a result of historic links with the British Empire in that and other regions. Amongst the many Islamic institutions being set up in the latter part of the twentieth century, the Barelwi and Deobandi traditions of South Asia were dominantly represented, indicating the ‘denominational’ affiliation of a majority of the Muslim population. Characteristic of South Asian (and specifically Barelwi) Islam is a marked veneration for the Prophet, beyond that of other strands of the faith. “It is hard to exaggerate the veneration of the Prophet which informs Islamic piety and practice in South Asia in all traditions, but especially amongst the Barelwis...” So it is that, at the time, the British Muslim community/ies, distributed in various centres were, by virtue of their ancestral background,

---

19 Lewis, P., op. cit., p.157
20 Ansari, H., ‘The Infidel Within’, pp.25, 145
21 ibid. p.346
22 Lewis, P., op. cit., p.154
particularly likely to respond in a particular way to certain aspects of Rushdie’s book. Similarly, “whilst fundamentalism is primarily a movement of the middle class, devotion to the Prophet is strongest among the rural peasantry from which Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants to Britain, unlike those in the United States, originate.”\textsuperscript{23} It may have been this which meant that “[W]ords such as ‘honour’ and ‘dignity’ were used more by demonstrators than ‘blasphemy’,”\textsuperscript{24} as they saw the offense as being against the Prophet as much as against Allah. In the passages of the book where Mahound appears, a negative characterisation of the Prophet could easily be read from them. His character is dubious to say the least\textsuperscript{25} and he is criticized for apparently receiving revelations that suited his purposes, and not just once, but repeatedly.\textsuperscript{26}

“Muslims will allow attacks on Allah; there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies; but to disparage Muhammad will provoke from even the most ‘liberal’ sections of the community a fanaticism of blazing vehemence.”\textsuperscript{27}

Many Muslims in South Asia, and the UK (between which there was significant communication due to historical and familial ties) were horrified by what was implied about the Prophet, and their veneration of him led to the anger of their reaction.\textsuperscript{28} “The Satanic Verses was for many Muslims an unavoidable challenge to demonstrate their attachment to and love for their faith,”\textsuperscript{29} and as such resulted in the intense scenes that were witnessed in Bradford and elsewhere in the UK, as well as around the world.

As we have seen, in certain traditions within Islam, reverence for the Prophet is more prized than in others, such that in many other traditions within Islam it is possible to say something which sounds almost contradictory to a previous quote:

\textsuperscript{23} Modood, T., Multicultural Politics, pp.106-7
\textsuperscript{24} ibid., p.118
\textsuperscript{25} Lewis, P., op. cit., p.155
\textsuperscript{26} Pipes, D., op. cit., p.63
\textsuperscript{27} Lewis, P., op. cit., pp.154-5
\textsuperscript{28} Ansari, H., op. cit., p.358
\textsuperscript{29} Modood, T., op. cit., p. 119
“... a Muslim may question Muhammad’s conduct as a political leader, criticize the caliphs ... for impiety, blast the mullahs ... for their greed, and ridicule the establishment for its hidebound ways. But a Muslim may not question the authenticity of the Qur’an. To do so is to raise doubts about the validity of the faith itself, and this is usually seen as an act of apostasy.”

But in *The Satanic Verses*, both were understood to have happened; disrespect of Muhammad and blasphemy against the Qur’an itself. Rushdie, who could already have been considered apostate for the Western lifestyle and education that he enjoyed, had, in the eyes of many, crossed a boundary that a Muslim should never cross. There are other aspects of the book that were deemed offensive by Muslims; references to Mecca as *Jahilia* (Arabic for ‘ignorance’), Abraham is insulted, Muhammad’s wives maligned as prostitutes, God is even depicted as having dandruff and being ‘the creature of evil’. Significant attention has been paid to the perception that the character Mahound, as an expression of Muhammad, acknowledges and thus validates the existence of the three pagan goddesses referred to in the original *Tabari* account of the satanic verses. This, as with the majority of the passages that caused offence, can be and has been explained by the author and others as anything other than attempts to cause offence. If that argument was ever heard by those who opposed the book, it was rejected. “In their view, Rushdie purposefully sought to denigrate the core of the Islamic faith, and nothing else.”

It has already been noted that, in the UK, there were a variety of responses to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In the months immediately after its publication, letters were sent by a number of Muslim organisations to the Prime Minister asking for *The Satanic Verses* to
be banned, as it had been in India even before publication, citing that the book would cause significant distress to Muslims in the UK.\footnote{Lewis, P., \textit{op. cit.}, p.157} In time, this unsuccessful request developed into attempts to bring criminal proceedings against the publishers for blasphemy,\footnote{Webster, R., \textit{op. cit.}, p.21} though this too was unsuccessful, as blasphemy laws in the UK only cover what is deemed blasphemous in the Christian faith. The publishers and other literary and legal organisations defended the publication of the book as an important expression of the freedom of speech. However, Muslims were able to point out the inequality of a system that, in an ethnically and religiously diverse society, only stipulated against the offending of one particular (albeit dominant) religion. Additionally, at a time of heightened racial tension, questions of British Muslim identity were drawn into the argument.

“To British Muslims, the issue at stake was not freedom of expression but, really, blasphemy. They were concerned with the kinds of offenses that were included under the British law of blasphemy and, most important, which religions it covered and whether offenses to religious groups such as slander and incitement to hatred were similar to offenses relating to “race” and ethnicity.”\footnote{Haddad, Y.Y., \textit{Muslims in the West}, p.25}

This debate about the enshrinement of a Christian worldview in the British legal system as well as British culture was not concluded, despite extensive debate at the time.\footnote{Webster, R., \textit{op. cit.}} It even has very contemporary echoes, most notably in the furore caused by a consideration of aspects of Islamic Law and how it does and may relate with the British legal system by the Archbishop of Canterbury.\footnote{http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7232661.stm - last accessed 30/4/08}

But the blasphemy laws themselves proved no use for those Muslims who were opposed to the book, although it opened a little wider the floodgates of investigation along lines such as this:
“Truth is sometimes painful, disturbing and offensive. That being so, the question which remains unanswered is whether blasphemy can itself be a vehicle of truth, and whether the right to engage in blasphemy ... should be defended at all costs.”\textsuperscript{42}

It is entirely perceivable that the lack of legal protection for religious sensibilities contributed in and of itself to the violent expression of distress caused by \textit{The Satanic Verses}. Whilst the book makes no reference to it itself, it has its part to play.

\textit{The Satanic Verses} undoubtedly caused great offence to Muslims around the world. There was an apparent focus of intensity in the UK to the violent expression of the distress. Whilst much of its content was, in and of itself, offensive to Muslims and the Islamic faith itself, there were other factors in the situation that exacerbated the reaction. We have seen how the demographic, ethnic and ‘denominational’ make up of the Muslim Diaspora in the UK meant that offence caused by references to Muhammad through the character Mahound were felt particularly keenly here. But there was also a clash of cultures. Where the book cast doubts over the authenticity of the inspiration of the Qur’an, it cast doubt over the validity of the faith itself, whether knowingly and deliberately or not. Here, acting as an example of a Western assertion of the right of free speech, it encountered a rigidity in Islam that refused to tolerate the ‘right’.

“[Outrage] is (sic) felt so strongly for the simple reason that the major part of the Islamic world has never passed through the same kind of conscience-centred revolution which is an important part of our own historical experience. Islam has never established the primacy and the sanctity of the ‘God-within’ and most ordinary Muslims have not developed any attitude which parallels the Puritan notion of ‘a Bible-within’. The Koran remains the essential and only sanctuary of God and of the Prophet Muhammad, and any attempt to tamper with that sanctuary or to abuse its holiness is seen as an attempt to destroy religion itself.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} Webster, R., \textit{op. cit.}, p.31

\textsuperscript{43} Webster, R., \textit{op. cit.}, p.30
This ideological clash had a cultural background, at least in the UK, where the Muslim community was seeking identity and protection, but struggling to find either. These ideological and cultural differences eventually came even to the legal sphere, illustrating how deep the division was. At the time these tensions were not played out in the media. Indeed, “[l]ittle attention was ever given to the Muslims’ own perceptions and feelings of offense and hurt beyond the public demonstrations.” The focus was on the violence and the aggression that sold papers.

It is surely not too speculative an assertion to make that a novel had never been so in the public spotlight or caused so much controversy as *The Satanic Verses*. It is possible that it never will again. In some respects the effect of its publication is ongoing today. Whilst Rushdie no longer lives in hiding, the *fatwa* issued nearly twenty years ago remains and will never be revoked.

---

44 Ansari, H., *op. cit.*, pp.232-3
45 Haddad, Y.Y., *op. cit.*, p.23
46 Pipes, D., *op. cit.*, p.15
47 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4260599.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4260599.stm) - last accessed 30/4/08
Bibliography


Internet References

BBC News Website – http://news.bbc.co.uk

The Man Booker Prize – http://www.themanbookerprize.com