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Rushdie Affair Revisited

Abstract: The article discusses the controversy surrounding the 1988 publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* from today's perspective, drawing on the writer's memoir *Joseph Anton*. It provides an overview of Rushdie's career, a brief resumé of the events that followed the Ayatollah Khomeini's edict calling for the murder of the novelist, as well as a critical assessment of Rushdie's latest book. Published in September 2012, the memoir fails to shed any new light on the debate concerning freedom of expression and a writer's social responsibilities. It mostly focuses on the singular plight of a novelist forced to live in hiding. The opportunity to bring out some important links between politics, literature and history, which Rushdie's autobiographical account might have provided, seems to have been wasted.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, *fatwa*, *Joseph Anton*, memoir, novel, Khomeini.

February 2013, the time of writing these words, marks the twenty-fourth anniversary of the *fatwa* – Khomeini's proclamation of a death sentence on Salman Rushdie, the British writer of Indian origin. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the dispatch of this "unfunny Valentine" from "the lethal old man dying in his room" (Rushdie 2012:11), the news that hit the headlines in 1989 and condemned an active writer to a life in hiding, transforming him into a state-protected individual constantly surrounded by police officers of the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police. A period of twenty-four years in the life of a man counts as a long time, but in the history and development of humanity it may seem a mere trice. And yet the world of 2013, in which the memory of 9/11 is still fresh, and in which the word 'jihad' has entered the everyday lexicon for good, is a different world from that of 1989. Militant Islam, al-Qaida activities and the social unrest in a number of Arab countries have become daily occurrences. The year 1989 has gone down in the annals of history as the climactic moment of the downfall of communism and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, but for Rushdie it was the year when his private world collapsed. From today's perspective the lot of a single author may demand less attention than the upheavals in Central Europe and their social and political consequences, while the growth of religious fundamentalism and nationalism most certainly continues to invite serious discussion. Yet the 2012 publication of *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, Rushdie's autobiographical record of his life under the *fatwa*, rekindles the ashes of what became known as the Rushdie Affair, calling for reflection and a brief resumé of facts and opinions, especially in the new socio-political context.

The phrase "Rushdie Affair" – written either with or without quotation marks – is a popular term which refers to the controversy over the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and its aftermath: violent mass protests, heated public debates on the issues of freedom of expression and the nature of blasphemy, attempted and conducted killings, Muslim anger and wounded assertiveness. As both Rauwerda (2008) and Pipes (2003) stress, for the first time in the modern era a government (the political leader and head of state of Iran) called for the killing of a private individual who was citizen of a foreign country. For the first time a work

of fiction caused an international diplomatic crisis and the official severing of international relations. And for the first time Muslim rage resulted in such large-scale public rallies, fire-bombed bookshops, and innocent civilians attacked, seriously injured or killed. "The Rushdie controversy raised important questions about the many millions of Muslims now living in the West and their relationship to the civilization around them" (Pipes 2003: 16). Some of these questions have remained unanswered.

1. Salman Rushdie: life and work

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay (today known as Mumbai) in 1947, the year when India became independent, the only son in a Muslim family, the eldest among three sisters. Islam did not play a significant role in the children's upbringing or education. As he recalls in *Joseph Anton*, he hardly ever participated in religious ceremonies and never learnt to pray. Recitations in Arabic were for him "mumbling" unknown words in a language he could not speak (2012: 8). In a sketchy portrait of his family presented in the memoir, what comes to the fore is the father's alcoholism with bouts of "unprovoked, red-eyed rage" (2012: 21) and his most cherished gift for future generations – a changed surname, his father's own idea and invention. The name 'Rushdie' comes from 'Ibn Rushd', the name of the twelfth century Muslim philosopher of Spanish-Arab background who translated the works of Aristotle. The old Indian name of 'Din Khaliqi Dehlavi' was changed to 'Rushdie' when Salman was still a child. The real significance of this fact was understood by the boy much later. In the opinion of his son, Rushdie senior was "a true scholar of Islam who was entirely lacking in religious belief", and "a godless man who knew and thought a great deal about God" (2012: 23). The name was chosen "because he respected Ibn Rushd for being at the forefront of the rationalist argument against Islamic literalism in his time" (2012: 23).

In 1961, at thirteen, Salman Rushdie was sent to Rugby, a prestigious English public school, where he felt profoundly sad and alienated. He recalls:

At an English boarding school in the early 1960s [...] there were three bad mistakes you could make, but if you made only two of the three you could be forgiven. The mistakes were: to be foreign; to be clever; and to be bad at games [...]. He made all three mistakes. He was foreign, clever, non-*sportif*. And as a result his years were, for the most part, unhappy, though he did well academically and left Rugby with the abiding feeling of having been wonderfully well taught (2012: 26-27).

It was at Rugby that Rushdie fully rejected faith. When he writes about it, as he does in *Joseph Anton* and in *Imaginary Homelands*, the tone is invariably jocular or even flippant:

In the matter of God: the last traces of belief were erased from his mind by his powerful dislike of the architecture of Rugby Chapel [...] 'What kind of God,' he wondered, 'would live in a house as ugly as that?' An instant later the answer presented itself: obviously no self-respecting God would live there – in fact, obviously, there *was* no God, not even a God with bad taste in architecture. By the end of the Latin lesson he was a hard-line atheist, and to prove it, he marched determinedly into the school tuckshop during break and bought himself a ham sandwich. The flesh of the swine passed his lips for the first time that day, and the failure of the Almighty to strike him dead with a thunderbolt proved to him what he had long suspected: that there was nobody up there with thunderbolts to hurl (2012: 31-32).

Then came his studies at King's College, Cambridge, his father's old *alma mater*. Initially, he was very reluctant to leave India and return to the UK and pleaded with his father "not to send him to Cambridge, even though he had already won his place. He didn't want to

go back to England [...] to spend more years of his life among all those cold, unfriendly fish" (2012: 35). There were days when he would sit alone in his room and weep in loneliness. But studying history proved fulfilling. In the academic year of 1967-8, King's College offered among its special subjects in history one entitled "Muhammad, the Rise of Islam and the Early Caliphate". College regulations were such that a subject could not be cancelled even if there was only one student who wished to take it up. Rushdie was this single student and, under the supervision of Professor Arthur Hibbert, embarked on a journey of intellectual discovery and analytical study of the birth of Islam and the life of the Prophet. After graduation he worked briefly in advertising as a freelance copy-writer.

Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus*, appeared in 1975 and did not impress either the critics or the reading public. The book's bad reception "shook him profoundly" (2012: 51) and he had to fight off despair. Spectacular success came with *Midnight's Children* (1981), often considered Rushdie's masterpiece and "a landmark in late twentieth-century fiction" (Bradford 2007: 195). The title of the novel refers to the birth of one thousand and one children endowed with magical properties, all born on the 15th of August 1947, between midnight and one a.m., the first hour of Indian Independence. The subject matter of the book is India itself, its history and destiny. *Midnight's Children* was showered with prizes. It won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, an Arts Council Writers' Award, the English-Speaking Union Award, and, most importantly, the coveted Booker Prize in the year of its publication. In 1993, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the creation of the Booker Prize, it was judged to be "The Booker of Bookers", the best novel among those which had ever been awarded the title.

Rushdie is a great erudite and a prolific author, a tireless exponent of the themes of migration and cultural hybridity, "a writer of prodigious if uneven talent who deserves his international reputation" (Shakespeare 2012). Especially praised for his contribution to the tradition of magic realism and the development of the postmodern novel, he merits recognition as an ingenious postcolonial story-teller who has not only become widely read but is also regularly assessed by academia. Critical studies of his life and work – in the form of dissertations, articles and full-length books – can be counted in the hundreds. Steeped in the cultural memory of the Indian subcontinent and in European heritage, Rushdie's fiction takes inspiration from multiple sources: historical records, contemporary cinema, and popular culture, peopled by a rich and varied cast of characters. His "textual pyrotechnics and verbal exuberance" (Procter 2009) have earned him admiration and high regard world-wide. Bradbury (1989: 360) asserts that Rushdie expanded the English language "with the narrative freedoms afforded by the myths, the folklore, and the storytelling rituals of the Indian narrative tradition". A number of Rushdie's uniquely brilliant metaphors have often been cited as examples of his linguistic inventiveness that has added a completely new flavour to the English language, as was the case with his "chutnification of history". His best known novels bring together the miraculous and the mundane, the sacred and the profane, the lofty and the pedestrian, the East and the West, fact and fiction, mixing and co-mingling disparate elements. They include *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001), *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). Rushdie has also published short stories and non-fiction: *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (1987), *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, and *Step Across this Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002*, works that demonstrate his great argumentative skills and admirable intellectual discipline and control in handling the brevity and precision of the genre.

Engaging in a critical assessment of Rushdie's *oeuvre* invariably stimulates debate on literature as a medium of cultural memory. Astrid Erll (2009: 219-222) argues that the 'cueing function' of various works of artistic expression consists in their ability and power to recall the past and engender memories, both on the individual level of a particular reader and the

collective level of a group – a group that shares culture, nationality, ethnic or religious identity. Although literature's 'cueing' function does not require social agreement about the content of reflection, a similar reaction may ensue from the readers' shared knowledge and cultural background. When Rushdie (1992: 74) admits: "I have never been able to read Kipling calmly", it is a statement that challenges Kipling's view of India which was passed on to the British, a view predicated on the imperial ideology of the day. Reading Kipling, as Edward Said maintains, one is bound to encounter the "Orientalized India of the imagination" (1994: 181), very different from the India which many Indian readers may know or remember.

It is precisely because of literature's appeal on the level of collective memory of a group that particular texts, or their fragments, resonate differently with different readers. For example, in Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, two short passages evoke the cultural memory of the Poles. Although their significance in the context of the story seems negligible, yet they may unsettle or even disturb. One fragment concerns the driver of the Polish Pope John Paul II when the Pope was "plain Cardinal Woytyla" (2000: 502); the other uses the name of a Polish actor in a description of an iconic movie scene presented as a real event. We read:

Apparently this driver had been with him for years, and when it was time to elect a new Pope the two of them drove down from Cracow in some little beat-up Polish pollution-wagon [...] the future Pope and his workingman sidekick strikin' out for glory. Anyway, they get to the Vatican, the driver waits and waits, the smoke goes up, *habemus Papam*, and finally he hears the news, it's his good buddy, his road pal, his boss. Then a messenger comes to see him. Drive the car back to Cracow and then find yourself another job, says the messenger. Your ass is fired (2000: 502).

And earlier:

A Polish patriot, Zbigniew Cybulski, has been murdered in a back yard, amid sheets blowing from washing lines. Blood spread across a white sheet held against his midriff. A battered tin mug that fell from his hand has become a symbol of resistance. No: it is a holy relic, worthy of worship. Bow down. (2000: 322).

It is only to those who have seen Andrzej Wajda's film "Ashes and Diamonds" that the above excerpt rings with deception. Even though *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is "about the permeable borderline between the imaginary and the real worlds" (2012: 553), the easy use of proper names of real people, rather than *dramatis personae*, calls into question the ethical nature of such a literary contrivance. Subjected to fantasy and speculation, recognizable men and women transform into characters as puppets in the author's larger scheme.

Rushdie has often stressed the writer's absolute freedom of expression and argued for recognition of the power of literature and its right to provoke. "Artistic freedom had been the air he breathed" (2012: 196). "He had always written presuming that he had the right to write as he chose [...] and knowing, too, that countries whose writers could not make such presumptions invariably slid towards, or had already arrived at, authoritarianism and tyranny" (2012: 117). In *Imaginary Homelands* he asks: "What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist" (1992: 396). No other book has offended as profoundly as *The Satanic Verses*. No other book has been called an insult so often. No other book has touched the chord of Muslim sensibilities so tragically.

2. *The Satanic Verses*: facts and opinions

Before *The Satanic Verses* controversy, Rushdie had already been condemned for his treatment of India and Pakistan in *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), both texts having been deemed offensive: the former because of the thinly disguised and extremely negative portrayal of Indira Gandhi, the latter due to its harsh criticism of the Pakistani ruling elite.

The publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 was the most immediate reason for the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa*, on the grounds that the novel was a blasphemy against Islam. When today people recall the moment of the book's appearance on the market and in the public consciousness, they often erroneously think of 1989. This common mistake made, for example, by Melanie Phillips (2008: 45), results from the assumption that British Muslims' angry reaction to the book was immediate, sparked off directly by its release. This was not the case. *The Satanic Verses* was published in September 1988 and the first street protests, which took place in Britain in December of the same year, did not arouse much interest. It was only in January 1989, when the novel was publicly burnt in Bradford, that the British media started to give the issue extensive coverage. Bradford, a large city in Yorkshire (today inhabited by over 500,000 people), with a substantial Muslim minority, is sometimes treated as a symbolic place. Presently, according to the 2011 census statistics¹, nearly a quarter of the population of Bradford are Muslim (24.7%). In the previous census of 2001 the figure stood at 16%, with a marked increase to over 25% in the group of 16 to 24-year-olds. The city has the highest concentration of Pakistanis in the UK, a figure which rose over the period of 2001-2011 from 14.5% to 20.4%. Sometimes called 'the curry capital of Britain', Bradford provides the location for a number of British feature films which engage with the presence of the UK's South Asians, notably Udayan Prasad's "My Son the Fanatic", based on Hanif Kureishi's short story, and "East is East" – an adaptation of Ayub Khan-Din's drama. It is in the latter movie that the road sign 'Bradford' becomes so meaningfully changed to 'Bradistan', alluding to the importance of Islam. In popular belief, the sheer concentration of Muslims in Bradford accounts for the city's fame as a centre of Islamic fanaticism, turning it into "a city in which ideas carry knives" (Kureishi 1986: 165).

In 1986, three years before the *fatwa*, Hanif Kureishi wrote an essay about Bradford for the *Granta* Special Issue of Travel Writing, claiming that it was in Bradford that:

[S]o many important issues, of race, culture, nationalism, and education, were evident in an extremely concentrated way [...]. These were issues that related to the whole notion of what it was to be British and what that would mean in the future. Bradford seemed to be a microcosm of a larger British society that was struggling to find a sense of itself, even if it was undergoing radical change (Kureishi 1986: 149-150).

Today Kureishi's words sound prophetic. The 1989 anti-Rushdie demonstrations in Bradford started an avalanche.

British Muslims' protests against *The Satanic Verses* were preceded by a strong negative reaction outside the UK, especially in India. Prior to the novel's publication, following a few interviews with the author and the inclusion of the book's extracts in the

¹ Statistical data released by the Office of National Statistics, available on <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-ethnicity.html#tab-Ethnicity-across-the-English-regions-and-Wales>

Indian press, a campaign for banning the novel started. What Rushdie said to Indian journalists at that time reveals his awareness of a possible problem. Asked whether he feared a backlash from the mullahs, he answered: "Even *Shame* was attacked by fundamentalist Muslims. I cannot censor. I write whatever there is to write" (quoted in Jain 1988: 32); and later: "I guess some people might get upset because it [*The Satanic Verses*] is not reverent, but the point is it is a serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person" (quoted in Basu 1988: 33). Both interviews appeared in the Indian press in September 1988. A fortnight later, on the 5th October, India "earned the dubious distinction [...] of being the first country in the world to have banned the book" (Mitta 2012). Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Syria, Lebanon, Kenya, Brunei, Thailand, Tanzania, Indonesia, and Sudan followed suit.

Events came in quick succession. In the early days of February 1989, seven people were killed during demonstrations in Pakistan and India, and on the 14th of the same month the head of state of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, called on Muslims all over the world to execute the author of the blasphemous novel. Rushdie was proclaimed guilty of apostasy and defamation. An Iranian businessman offered a \$3 million bounty for his head. Khomeini's edict reads:

I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* – which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an – and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death.

I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, whenever they may be found, so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities. God willing, whoever is killed on this path is a martyr (quoted in Pipes 2003: 27).

The novel's alleged anti-Islamicism rests on several pillars. At the centre stands a story that some of the verses of the Koran had been originally dictated to the Prophet Muhammad by Satan (hence the term 'Satanic Verses'), and later removed from the holy book. In *Joseph Anton* Rushdie explains that among a number of historical sources which deal with the life of the Prophet Muhammad there are important and trustworthy biographical accounts, compiled by Ibn Ishaq, Waquidi, Ibn Sa'd, Bukhari and Tabari, which refer to "the incident of the satanic verses" (2012: 43), and which constituted the basis of his novel. As argued in the essay "In Good Faith", the described incident is "the quasi-historical tale of how Muhammad's revelation seemed briefly to flirt with the possibility of admitting three pagan and female deities into the pantheon" (Rushdie 1992: 399). Other contentious points include the fact that one of the protagonists, Gibreel Farishta, described in the novel as sex-obsessed and engaging in adultery, is believed to be a representation of Archangel Gabriel ("farishta" being an Urdu word for "angel"). Mecca, Muslims' most sacred city, is called "the city of Jahliya", which means "the city of Ignorance". The names of the Prophet Muhammad's wives are taken by prostitutes in a brothel to arouse their clients. Muhammad himself is referred to by the insulting name Mahound, which was used by the Crusaders in the Middle Ages, and presented as a businessman striking deals with God. Additionally, the novel includes a dream sequence which is a thinly veiled portrayal of Khomeini. Equally important is the question of form. Tariq Modood (1992: 70) writes about "the passages which reduce Islam to a sexual appetite: the vulgar language, the sexual imagery", and the "cheap and offensive ways" of raising important ideas. In the opinion of Muslims, the novel spreads lies about Islam, is abusive in its treatment of the holy Prophet, demeaning and degrading their faith. The anti-novel multi-pronged campaign concerned accusations of an inaccurate portrayal of Islam, the use of foul language, the author's derisive attitude toward religion, the abusive nature of both content and form, the defamation of the Koran, and staining the honour of Muslims

worldwide. Thus, Rushdie was pronounced guilty of blasphemy and of committing libel against the community. Although most protesting Muslims have never read the book, they believe it to be an assault on the collective cultural identity of the whole *Umma*.

The Satanic Verses is a work of fiction alternating dream and reality, written in a comic tone and often classified as a carnivalesque novel. It concerns the issues of the immigrant experience, alienation, transformation, and cultural crisis. In the words of the author, "it is a migrant's-eye view of the world [...] written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition" (Rushdie 1992: 394). It is also "a work of radical dissent and questioning and reimagining" (Rushdie 1992: 395). Critics have called it "a late twentieth-century version of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a dynamic leviathan that both bemoans and magnificently represents the state of humanity – a dream of lost faith mired in heartless consumerism" (Bradford 2007: 197). Interpretations and assessment differ, though. For Pankaj Mishra, *The Satanic Verses* "is less about the immigrant condition than a helplessly Anglophilic Indian's profound ambivalence about a British ruling class that regards him as a wog" (Mishra 2012).

Significantly, at the time of the publication Rushdie did not consider himself a Muslim. In his 1990 essay entitled "In Good Faith" we read:

It feels bizarre, and wholly inappropriate, to be described as some sort of heretic after having lived my life as a secular, pluralist, eclectic man. I am being enveloped in, and described by, a language that does not fit me. I do not accept the charge of blasphemy, because, as somebody says in *The Satanic Verses*, 'where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy.' I do not accept the charge of apostasy, because I have never in my adult life affirmed any belief, and what one has not affirmed one cannot be said to have apostasized from (1992: 405).

Moreover, Rushdie has always claimed that writing controversial texts is an author's right or even a calling, perhaps a solemn duty. It is through novels that 'newness' can enter the world. It is through literature that dissent and rebellion can gain ground and inspire. It is through fiction that the boundaries and limitations of language and form get expanded and open up the universe. Therefore, there should be no restrictions on the writer's freedom in the choice of content and ways of presentation. Rushdie's belief in his 'freedom to offend' echoes in all his books. The above-quoted passages from *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* exemplify his non-discriminatory nature of ridicule. *The Satanic Verses*, besides the alleged slur on Islam, contains a scathing critique of the UK in the decade of the 1980s, the time of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, alluded to through the figure of Mrs. Torture. As Procter (2009) claims, the book is "as critical of Thatcherism as it is of Islam, with both 1980s London and ancient Jahilia/Mecca becoming parallel universes associated with emergent cultures of intolerance and fundamentalism".

In the discussion that followed *The Satanic Verses* controversy and Khomeini's *fatwa*, various important issues were hotly debated and public opinion in Britain became split. Many literary luminaries unreservedly took Rushdie's side arguing for freedom from censorship. In *Joseph Anton*, he gratefully acknowledges the support, help and friendship offered by Harold Pinter, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Edward Said, Nadine Gordimer, Vaclav Havel, Bono of U2, and many more.

Regrettably, the defence of the novel focused entirely on the issue of freedom of speech, not the book's merit. What the author hoped for was a more particular vindication,

like the quality defence made in the cases of other assaulted books, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Ulysses*, *Lolita*; because this was a violent assault not on the novel in general or on free speech per se, but a particular accumulation of words [...] and on the intentions

and integrity and ability of the writer who had put those words together (Rushdie 2012: 115).

This has never happened. Many years after 'the Affair', Margaret Drabble revealed in her review of *Joseph Anton*:

I would have been more than happy to offer evidence in court for the literary merit of *The Satanic Verses*, a defence Salman would have appreciated. Like Michael Foot, I had greatly admired the novel, particularly the passages about Thatcher's subversive, divided multicultural London. But this defence was never required. And, in the long run, it wasn't needed. Rushdie's work has rightly won worldwide recognition (Drabble 2012).

The public debate proved grossly disappointing also because it steered clear of some vital concerns of a more general character, namely the public role of religion and the nature of a modern multicultural society. As Parekh notes, the discussion in the media "largely concentrated on the threat to Rushdie's life, and when it discussed Muslim demands, it conceptualized the issue as one of conflict between freedom and fundamentalism, the former central to and the latter representing a mortal threat to the British way of life" (Parekh 2000: 303). Instead of engendering an informed rational polemic, it polarized society. Although many British Muslims disapproved of death-sentences for writers, very few dissociated themselves from *fatwa*. The Rushdie affair boosted their assertiveness and self-awareness.

After Khomeini's extraterritorial murder order, Rushdie remained in hiding for over ten years, the blackest and the bleakest time in his life. As a constantly protected captive, he found a security which could not be extended to everybody involved in the publication of his novel. After the Iranian leader's death in June 1989, *fatwa* was not revoked and violent protests did not subside. The American Center in Islamabad was attacked, Collet's and Dillons bookshops in London firebombed. Rauwerda (2008: 431) writes that, in total, twenty-two people died "as a result of the novel's publication". Professor Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, was stabbed to death in 1991. The Italian translator, Dr Ettore Capriole, barely survived a similar attack. And a Norwegian publisher, William Nygaard, was shot three times and badly wounded. Rushdie notes that "[h]e thought every day of William Nygaard and his bullet holes, of Ettore Capriolo kicked and stabbed, of Hitoshi Igarashi dead in a pool of blood by a lift shaft" and that such attacks meant that literature itself "had been vilified, shot, kicked, knifed, killed and blamed at the same time" (2012: 428).

Whenever somebody asks Rushdie whether he would still have written *The Satanic Verses*, knowing the tragic toll, he feels hurt about such "shifting the blame from the men of violence to the target of their attacks" (2012: 226), and constantly repeats that "the consequences of violence were the moral responsibility of those who committed the acts of violence; if people were killed, the fault lay with their killers, not with a faraway novelist" (2012: 229).

3. *Joseph Anton*

Joseph Anton is Rushdie's pseudonym used during the thirteen years of his sequestered life, a false name by which he would be known to the people around him, including the policemen who protected him. 'Joseph' was taken from Joseph Conrad and 'Anton' from Anton Chekhov, two writers whom Rushdie holds in high esteem. The period between 1989 and 2002, during which he lived as Joseph Anton, was a time of frustration, agony over his lost freedom, psychological trauma from his life in captivity, and constant attempts to reclaim his

normal life. The book illustrates it very well. Written in the third person, Rushdie's memoir painfully records his ordeal – repeatedly moving houses, negotiating with various officials and politicians, acute awareness of the danger to which his family was exposed (both in and outside Britain), unrelenting threats and hate mail. It is a very long book. On over six hundred pages the reader often finds information and comments he/she would gladly do without – details of the author's infidelities and the problems of his four marriages, quarrels with agents and publishers, squabbles over money, drunken parties with various celebrities. Bringing up intimate particulars of the private lives of public figures – their diseases and medications, fits of anger, home addresses, even the look of their genitals – strikes the reader as both tactless and out of place. When in chapter four, entitled "The Trap of Wanting to Be Loved", the author speaks of his yearning for understanding and acceptance, it seems deeply unfair that he himself so hastily denies such a wish to others. Too many people will not love him for what he has written about them. The Muslim leaders of Bradford are called "the Bradford clowns" (441), the writer Roald Dahl described as "a long unpleasant man with huge strangler's hands" (101), and Kalim Siddiqui named "the malevolent gnome" (488). There is a graceless comment about the singer Cat Stevens (today, after his conversion, known as Yusuf Islam), who "bubbled up in the *Guardian* like a fart in a bath" (436). Fellow writers, journalists, and one ex-wife in particular receive very cruel treatment.

The use of third person narration, meant as a distancing device between Salman Rushdie the writer and his alias – Joseph Anton – whom he became involuntarily, suggests an attempt at objectivity and reining back emotion. However, as noticed by Wilson (2012), by adopting this technique the author puts himself beside Julius Caesar and General Charles de Gaulle. They too published memoirs in which they spoke of themselves as if of their devolved selves and may seem highly appropriate company for a person often accused of vanity, arrogance, and even self-canonization. But the divided identity revealed in the title is much more than a literary ploy. At moments it becomes an intolerable burden. There is a two-tier division between 'Joseph Anton' and 'Salman Rushdie', as well as between 'Salman' and 'Rushdie'. The author notes: "The gulf between the private 'Salman' he believed himself to be and the public 'Rushdie' he barely recognized was growing" (2012: 131). And later:

He was aware that the splitting in him was getting worse, the divide between what 'Rushdie' needed to do and how 'Salman' wanted to live. He was 'Joe' to his protectors, an entity to be kept alive [...] 'Rushdie' was much hated and little loved. He was an effigy, an absence, something less than human. He – it – needed only to expiate (2012: 251-252).

Rushdie writes about 'Joe' as his "hated pseudonym" (2012: 466) and 'Joseph Anton' as "a sort of fictional character" (2012: 165), "the person he both was and was not" (2012: 177). He remembers and salutes each small step which could take him "back towards his real life", "[a]way from Joseph Anton, in the direction of his own name" (2012: 458), and writes how he wanted to detach himself "from the body of the man scuttling from vehicle to vehicle" (2012: 466). The day when Joseph Anton, an international publisher of American origin, died and Salman Rushdie, the novelist of Indian origin, was re-born, would become one of the happiest and most celebrated moments of his life. There is also a revolting figure of 'Satan Rushdy', "the horned creature on the placards carried by demonstrators" (2012: 5), with a protruding red tongue, an effigy of himself as hanged, displayed by hostile cheering crowds in faraway cities.

All major British newspapers published reviews of the book and the opinions of critics, as was to be predicted, vary greatly. Wilson (2012) calls it "a most peculiar book" and "an artless ramble", which unfolds "galumphingly" and "conveys a bewildering emptiness". For Nicholas Shakespeare (2012), it is "awfully long, solipsistic and of necessity self-serving", but also "funny, painfully moving and absolutely necessary to read". Mishra (2012)

asserts that the use of the third-person narration "frequently makes for awkward self-regard". And the writer Margaret Drabble (2012) finds *Joseph Anton* full of both "telling trivia and profound insights". Admittedly, large sections of the book provide a candid and earnest account of a fugitive's secret life, "with its cringings and crouchings, its skulkings and duckings" (2012: 241).

Particularly moving is a scene describing Rushdie as a broken person re-embracing Islam. On Christmas Eve 1990, the writer met a group of Muslim leaders who demanded that he prove his sincerity. Believing that his statement of faith might put an end to 'the Affair', he signed a provided document. Later, he would look on the event with horror and shame, bitterly regretting his action, believing that: "He should have turned his back then and gone home, away from degradation, back towards self-respect" (2012: 274). Proclaiming *shahadah*, the first pillar of Islam, was a lie.

He had survived this long because he could put his hand on his heart and defend every word he had written or said. He had written seriously and with integrity and everything he had said about that had been the truth. Now he had torn his tongue out of his own mouth, had denied himself the ability to use the language and ideas that were natural to him. Until this moment he had been accused of a crime against the beliefs of others. Now he accused himself, and found himself guilty, of having committed a crime against himself (2012: 276).

Considerable attention is devoted to the activities and help provided by Article 19, the human rights organization set up in 1986, which promotes freedom from censorship, the name having been taken from article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which asserts the human right to freedom of opinion and expression. The organization started the Rushdie Defence Campaign and proved instrumental in finding support and facilitating Rushdie's public appearances in many European countries as well as in the United States. Thanks to the work of the members of Article 19, those courageous, selfless and determined people who devoted their lives to a noble cause, Rushdie could hope that his ordeal would come to an end. He acknowledges this with gratitude.

However, most of the memoir, regrettably, lacks quiet and sober reflection. Drowned in petty concerns, submerged in the details of the publishing business, overwhelmed by the mood of hurt dignity, it laboriously re-enacts meetings, conversations, and journeys, suffering from its author's obvious need to make the public know 'everything', 'the whole truth'. Being a pawn in someone else's game, feeling powerless and disenfranchised, having to accept that for every public appearance he needed official permission and security measures, injured his self-respect and bruised his honour. Especially painful were various public pronouncements about his monumental egotism, megalomania and assertions that he was "a social irritant" (2012: 550), "a troublemaker [who] didn't merit [...] assistance", "that he had done nothing of value in his life" (2012: 455). Accusations that his special protection cost the British taxpayer huge sums of money also grieved him deeply.

It is especially Rushdie's lack of forgiveness which creates the impression of small-mindedness and an ungenerous spirit, his holding a long-standing grudge against all those people who turned their backs on him in times of crisis, wrote unflattering reviews, or criticized his refusal to apologize. Borrowing an idea from a Grace Nichols poem, one may re-title Rushdie's book as "He is a long-memored man", wishing at the same time that the author, like his mother, had been able to develop the technique of 'forgettery' which helped Negin Rushdie survive an unhappy marriage. It might have proved therapeutic again.

A high point and much welcome diversion comes in the form of several enclosed letters. Addressed to both real people and some fictional personae, they show Rushdie's wry humour and determination. In a missive addressed to Robinson Crusoe he asks: "*Suppose you*

had four Man Fridays to keep you company, and they were all heavily armed. Would you feel safer, or less safe?" (2012: 187, original italics). Turning to Bernie Grant, the legendary black MP elected to parliament in the 1980s as one of four non-white politicians, Rushdie expresses his disappointment when Grant refused to support him and accuses the black leader of representing "*the unacceptable face of multiculturalism, its deformation into an ideology of cultural relativism*" (2012: 187, original italics), finishing his message on an ironic note: "*to quote the great monochrome philosopher Michael Jackson, it don't matter if you're black or white*" (2012: 187, original italics). Unfortunately, such inclusions become badly counterbalanced by fragments of actual letters and statements which Rushdie received in support, as in: "*We should really be grateful to Rushdie for having opened up the imaginary for Muslims once again*" and "*The only truly free man today is Salman Rushdie [...] He is the Adam of a library to come: one of freedom*" (2012: 410-411, original italics). All traces of humour suddenly leave the writer when the topic becomes his historical role and his self-image. In such instances he seems incapable of detachment.

The book also suffers from redundancy and too heavy a reliance on the author's journal. To Rushdie's readers, many passages echo his earlier statements, interviews, and essays too closely, incidentally giving the impression of calculated manipulation. For example, the memory of Princess Diana's death elicits a comment: "[A]s she died, the last thing she saw would have been phallic snouts of the cameras coming towards her through the smashed car windows, clicking, clicking. He was asked to write something for the *New Yorker* about the event and he sent them something of this nature" (2012: 520). The original text appeared in the American magazine on 15th September 1997. Rushdie compared the circumstances of Princess Diana's death to J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* and David Cronenberg's subsequent film adaptation. Both the tragic accident in Paris which killed the Princess of Wales and Cronenberg's movie are for Rushdie "a cocktail of death and desire" and he writes: "The object of desire, in the moment of her death, sees the phallic lenses advancing upon her, snapping, snapping. Think of it this way, and the pornography of Diana Spencer's death becomes apparent. She died in a sublimated sexual assault" (Rushdie 1997). The remark in *Joseph Anton* about 'something of this nature' seems an understatement. The reason why Rushdie mentions his *New Yorker* article at all is not so much a wish to modify or rephrase his original crass formulations, or to mellow the tone, but to complain about the response of the British press. The media's reaction to his text takes priority over the event itself.

Joseph Anton: A Memoir deals with the tragic period between 1989 and 2002 when Salman Rushdie was forced by circumstances to leave the limelight and had to lead the secluded life of a hunted person. The book was published in 2012, a full decade after the official information released by the intelligence services that the threat level had been drastically reduced and the protection no longer necessary. Technically, Rushdie had stopped hiding several years earlier when he moved to the US. The years 2002 – 2012 are not covered in the book, although sporadically there are some references to the events after 2002, for example the death of Robin Cook, the foreign secretary in Tony Blair's government, and the failure of Rushdie's last marriage to Padma Lakshmi, which ended in divorce in 2007. One might have hoped that the considerable lapse of time which passed between the announcement of *fatwa* and the moment of the publication of *Joseph Anton* would encourage some critical reflection and careful reconsideration, that the sheer passage of time would create a new perspective, and that the occasion of speaking through a memoir would provide a chance for telling the audience something really important. Especially so, because, as Rushdie rightly points out, during the furore that accompanied the publication of *The Satanic Verses* "his voice had been too small to be heard above all the other voices bellowing from every corner of the globe, above the howling winds of bigotry and history" (2012: 227). Contrary to

the reader's expectations and disappointingly so, the potential of a memoir does not get fully exploited and the author fails to uncover any new dimension of the old battle which he was always fighting, the battle between secularism and religion, or shed some new light on debates of long-standing.

The predominant tone of *Joseph Anton* is that of grave injustice, the focus – on the writer's singular individual plight and the evil of others. Not for a moment can the reader wonder who the good and who the bad guys are. The division into 'our' camp (Rushdie and the people who helped or expressed support) and the 'enemy' camp (fundamentalists as well as writers, politicians and other public figures who argued against *The Satanic Verses*, or, generally speaking, all his adversaries) seems very straightforward, the dividing line clearly drawn. However, the us/them dichotomy, although always present, momentarily makes room for a more inclusive, though hugely imprecise, 'we'. Rushdie states:

The fundamentalist believes that we believe in nothing. In his world, he has his absolute certainties, while we are sunk in sybaritic indulgences. To prove him wrong, we must first know that he is wrong. We must agree on what matters: kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion, literature, generosity, water, a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, films, music, freedom of thought, beauty, love. These will be our weapons. Not by making war, but by the unafraid way we choose to live shall we defeat them. How to defeat terrorism? Don't be terrorized. Don't let fear rule your life. Even if you are scared (2012: 624).

The category 'we' pitted against 'the fundamentalist' and 'the terrorist' seems to envelop the neo-liberal Western world with its values and personal freedom, affirming the collective identity of the enlightened ones. But the mood and style of the passage seem to carry undertones of superiority. And no allowances are made for the fact that on both sides of the divide there might be some shared experience and thought.

Joseph Anton gives hope, though. Towards the end of his memoir Rushdie writes:

This in the end was who he was, a teller of tales, a creator of shapes, a maker of things that were not. It would be wise to withdraw from the world of commentary and polemic and re-dedicate himself to what he loved most, the art that had claimed his heart, mind and spirit ever since he was a young man, and to live again in the universe of once upon a time [...] and to make the journey to the truth upon the waters of make-believe (2012: 629-630).

Nothing would please Rushdie's readers more than his withdrawal from the world of polemic and his return to the world of fiction.

Joseph Anton's generic classification and disciplinary belonging is revealed in the second part of its title. Being a memoir, it can be approached as an act of self-representation rooted in a social context, and also "a tool for re-writing reality" (Buss 2002: xxii). Unlike autobiography, considered to be "the writing of one's own history" (OED 1991, vol. I: 801), and traditionally concerning a whole life, often becoming a way to chronicle various achievements and accomplishments, memoir tends to focus on "one moment or period of experience rather than on entire life span" (Smith and Watson 2010: 3), "a single theme or emotional arc" (Larson 2007: 17), creating "a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past" (Larson 2007: 19). Hart asserts that although memoirs are "of a person", "they are 'really' of an event" (in Buss 2002: xi). In the case of *Joseph Anton*, this event is the Rushdie Affair, the claim justified by the book's title and its time bracket. Thus, we can read Rushdie's memoir as his intended contribution to the debate on *The Satanic Verses* and a chance to reveal a new self. Being "a mix of the personal with the contextual" (Adams in Buss 2002: 1), memoir is

expected by its readers to offer "an author as guide, an informant whose presence lends a unique perspective to the historical moment or event" (Adams in Buss 2002: 1). Memoirs always give primacy to the viewpoint of the narrator and do not purport to be impartial, but they also demonstrate how their author/narrator relates to their community and the world, and how the self-reflexivity of the writing process gives strength to remembering and recollecting. The writing persona changes, repossessing the past and revisioning the selected historical moment, while the provided account is meant to bear witness to inner transformations, as well as serving as testimony to socio-political developments. Life-writing involves narrating the past "in such a way as to situate the experiential history within the present" (Smith and Watson 2010: 22). But the present which emerges from *Joseph Anton* lacks new knowledge and fails to reveal the world beyond the personal.

4. Concluding remarks

Looking back on the events following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* from today's perspective, we may argue that although the controversy over Rushdie's novel had serious social and political repercussions, the debate which it engendered did not lead to any deep and long-lasting soul-searching. Twenty-four years on, we find the world polarized and antagonistic on the same issues that divided public opinion in 1989. Although the present-day power of the Internet with its easy access to information creates a situation when banning or censoring news proves difficult, it is still paramount to consider whether there should be limits to artistic provocation and who has the ultimate decision on the publication of any material deemed to be of an offensive nature. If the Rushdie Affair teaches us anything, it shows the fragility of intellectual discussion and the strong possibility of unprecedented and damaging fallout as a consequence of a literary event. A book, not addressed to the average reader, written in English and published in the West, and mostly known through hearsay, mobilized masses. Its author, who valued freedom over fame, paid a very high price for his decisions, losing what he cherished most. His memoir reveals his suffering but it does not offer a voice strong enough to be heard "above the howling wind of history".

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