

Much ado about nothing:Rushdie's Satanic Verses

Commentary by Ramlal Agarwal

The Satanic Verses by Rushdie has been banned in many countries, and India was among the first countries to do it. Therefore, Indian readers only know from what they have heard that it is about Prophet Mohamammad and his sexual adventures. The present essay is based on unravelling its plot and my response to the novel.

EVER SINCE THE SATANIC VERSES BY RUSHDIE WAS PUBLISHED IN 1988, it has had horrendous ramifications. There have been a number of instances of arsenic and vandalism. A Japanese writer named Horoshi Igarari, who translated it, was stabbed to death. The novelist himself was murderously stabbed at Chautauqua Institution in New York on August 12, 2022, and has been struggling for life. J. K. Rowling received similar threats for sympathising with the writer. The book has been banned in many countries, and India was among the first countries to do it within a month of its publication in 1989. Therefore, Indian readers only know from hearsay that it is about Mohammad, the prophet, and his sexual adventures. The present essay is based upon unravelling its plot and its tapestry.

Two cloud-creatures, Gibreel Farishta and Salauddin Chamcha, want to be reincarnated and hurtle themselves towards Earth and fall into the English Channel. They are "creatures of the air, they root in dreams. They are clouds reborn in flight. So Gibreel is born as the son of Najmuddin and Naima Najmuddin in Poona who later migrates to Bombay. Gibreel becomes a young dabbawalla and then a famous movie star. Salauddin is born in a rich family and is sent to England for his school education. He hates Indian because he was sexually abused by an old Indian. In India, he tries to mimic English accents and begins to act as a voice-over artist in English plays. Both Gibreel and Saladin flourish in their careers for more than a decade and a half, but their careers begin to fade. Both begin to face political criticism. Frustrated, they find themselves on the same plane bound for London. Gibreel turns to spiritualism and starts considering himself an angel, whereas Saladin begins to turn into a goat. They get involved with a number of women Gibreel is infatuated with Rekha Merchant, the wife of a rich man. He then meets Alluluia Cone and falls in love with her. When Rekha comes to know about it, she commits suicide. Another woman who plays a role in Gibreel's life is Ayesha, the ruler of Desh. She is displaced by a man called Imam with the help of Gibreel. Another woman, also called Ayesha, is a religious woman and is mistaken to be Gibree's wife.

Saladin marries an English woman called Pamela Lovelace, but his married life is far from being happy, and he separates from Pamela. He comes back to India, but his father repudiates him for his anglomania. Another woman called Zeenat tries to wean him away from his excessive mimicry of British ways but fails. Gibreel, too, returns to India to win back his stardom but fails. Again, co incidentally, they board the same plane for London. Midway, the plane is hijacked and blasted, and the passengers

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die but they are tossed and fall into the sea. They are found on the shore in an unconscious condition. Rosa Diamond takes them home. However, some people had seen them on the shore and suspected that they were illegal immigrants and reported the matter to the police. The police arrive to arrest them. They arrest Saladin but spare Gibreel and torture and humiliate him, and send him to a hospital where patients undergoing strange transformations are treated. Saladin manages to escape from the hospital and reached London. Gibreel stays with Rosa but rooms in the streets of London after her death, lost in his reveries of being an archangel.

Jahilia, though built of sand and stone, was a thriving desert town because of Zamzam, a well built by Ibrahim, where people's wishes were granted, and its one hundred and sixty gods and goddesses. The Jahilians extracted money from simple pilgrims and even abducted their women to be sold into prostitution. Here, a man called Mahound, the son of a rich merchant, was gathering clout with his philosophy of monotheism. The Grandee of the Council, Karim Abu Simbel, felt threatened by Mahound because he and his wife Hind thought they would lose their income from the temples of three main goddesses, Lat, Manat, and Uzza if Mahound philosophy of monotheism pervaded. He, therefore, hires a rhymester named Baal to defame Mahound and also sends for Mahound and offers him a deal. He tells Mahound that if he conceded to the three goddesses the divinity and made them worthy of intercession, he would offer him a seat in the Council and wind up the temples of other gods and goddesses. Mahound is shaken by the offer and repairs to his followers to discuss it. His followers get wild and ask Mahound to reject the deal. Mahound tells them that he will seek guidance from the archangel and climbs Mount Coney, where he meets the archangel Gibreel, who gives him three verses and asks him to recite them in front of the Jahilians. Mahound climbs down the coney and goes straight to the poetry tent where Jahilians have gathered to hear him. Mahound faces them and recites the three verses. He says that Lat Uzza and Manat "are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed." On hearing this, there was dissension among the disciples of Mahound, which led to mayhem in Jahilia. Mahound faints, and Hind takes him to her house and encourages him to fight Karim Abu, calling him a coward and saying that Abu may go back on his promise. Mahound decides to climb the Coney once again, and when he gets back, he repudiates what he said earlier. He says that his verses were whispered in his ear by the devil. He calls them Satanic Verses and wants them removed from the Quran. Hamza advises Mahound to leave Jahilia to complete his message, and Mahound acts accordingly. The novel does not end here. It goes on to tell the other stories till, in a rage, Mahound kills Alleluia and commits suicide, and the reader closes the novel with a sense of relief.

The whole novel is full of a weird and eerie atmosphere. It is written in a surreal and satirical style and jaded with characters and incidents that, like its protagonists, seem to fall from the sky. It leaves the reader wondering whether it is to approve of the Satanic Verses or to condemn them, or to sympathise with the protagonists, or to remain untouched by what happens to them. However, the novel succeeded in creating a misunderstanding among the Muslims through its simulation of early Muslim culture and religion and by mimicking its most revered names and personalities.

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It may have enraged the Muslim world because, despite its bewildering narrative, it was presented as a masterpiece. The most tiresome aspect of the novel is its bulk. The reader wades through its pages without seeing its end.

At the end of the slog, one wonders whether the novel is about Zibreel and his hallucinations, or about his sexual encounters, or about Saladin's fetish or his succession to his father's wealth, or is "Mahound" only an extension of Gibreel, is it about or Satanic Verses or their repudiation, or about those airy female characters who appear like floating leaves in winter. It is difficult to say it is about any of these choices. Maybe it is about the absurdity of past and present life? If there is no satisfactory answer, let us ask whether the book was banned because it slandered Islam or the Prophet Mohammad. Even Islamic scholars don't believe it does. Then the only answer to the ban is that the governments wanted to save their citizens from a confusing experience.