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Author: Malik, Jamal

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Rushdie, migration, mysticism or the double vision*

Jamal Malik

Much has been written about Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and there seems to be no end to the discussions about the tragical consequences in the wake of this book's publication. Still, one may pose the question as to what could have been the intention of *The Satanic Verses* and as to who interpreted what in which way. Especially in a world where ideas and relationships are increasingly interwoven, the development of multi-dimensional cognitive interaction is welcome and necessary. Still, these demands may sometimes seem utopian under present circumstances of mutual discrimination and stigmatization, a prominent example of which is what happened to Rushdie and his novel.

In my commentary of *The Satanic Verses*, I will concentrate on the topoi of migration and their implications as well as on the Islamic mystical tradition. It should be mentioned here that, according to the theory of postcolonial literature, Salman Rushdie stands in the tradition of innovative authors who have enriched and molded post-colonial writing. Those authors write to push for processes of decolonization and decentralization and consciously seek to question and to remold the ruling thought patterns.¹

In this perspective, *The Satanic Verses* seems to tie into an innovative trend as it analyzes alleged religious and historical certainty from a humanistic perspective. The novel would therefore call on faith in people as a source of rational creativity, a faith which should supposedly build the foundations for a religion of freedom. The *cultural translation* necessary for this, which Rushdie himself programmatically calls for and which has been debated among Muslim intellectuals for a long time, finds its boundaries in the diverse interpretations of complex symbols and languages, whether they are inspired by the *sunna* or the *Mahabara-tha*, by Rabelais or by Joyce², or by the mystical reform movement, in which the Prophet plays a central role: the ethical concept of the Muhammadan path (*Tariqa Muhammadiya*)³, which goes beyond pure individual mysticism in calling for a mystical reform, and a sunnatization of the existential spheres. Mystical piety is therein replaced by prophetic piety; the individual seems to have moved into the center of social discourse. This concept sprang from a deep skepticism and facilitated the initial stages of liberation from a bond to authority and the overcoming of dogma, thus making possible a social process of individuation. In this way the Prophet becomes the sublimation of the sublime, a perfect individual, a moral

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¹See, for instance, Ashcroft et al. 1989.

²See, for instance, al-Azm 1991.

³See, for instance, O'Fahey/Radtke 1993.

and aesthetic ideal, as indicated for example, in the *dalā'il* and *shamā'il* literature: Muḥammad, the beautiful and spiritual model.⁴ The thus-striven-for *imitatio muḥammadi* finally leads via the Muḥammadan path (for instance by means of eternal recitation, dreams) to absolute truth (*dhāt muḥammadī* or *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiya*).⁵ Because of this identification, each attack -- no matter how small -- on the sublime appears to be an attack on one's own identity and on one's own values, morally and aesthetically. Thus, the German orientalist Rudi Paret opined: "In case of emergency, the Muslim might deny his faith, but he would never be willing to utter a word of slander against Muḥammad or to renounce him, even if he were facing death in case of refusal to do so." And the Canadian W. C. Smith explained: "Muslims will allow attacks on Allah; there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies; but to disparage Muḥammad will provoke a fanaticism of blazing vehemence even from the most "liberal" sections of the community."⁶ Hence, Rushdie's book was considered betrayal from the ranks of one's own [i.e., the Indo-Muslim] diaspora. Interestingly, the person of the Prophet has a far more central meaning in the so-called Islamic peripheries than in the Islamic heartland. Thus it may be justified when aesthetic elements are made responsible for the Muslim reaction.⁷ Rushdie, for his part, denies having attacked the Prophet.

A central theme of postcolonial literature is the conflict between faith and doubt (Rushdie 1988: 35, 92), here exemplified in the state of exile. With this, Rushdie stands in a modern tradition in contrast to religious fundamentalism (Rushdie 1988: 75ff, 205ff), which claims perpetual wisdom. Salman Rushdie embeds experience in exile partially in a symbolism of space, especially migration and the processes of individuation connected with it. For this he draws as much from the productive Indo-Pakistani sphere as from the poetic imagination and originality of Islamic mysticism (Brennan 1989: 72ff, 127f) which, as mentioned above, offered alternatives to the rigid interpretation of the written law. The catharsis inherent therein (*jihād fi n-nafs*) released new values -- *ijtihād*, if one so pleases -- and aesthetics as well, in accordance with the wishes of the *insān kāmil* of even of the Mahdī. Rushdie thus creates an alternative world, totally in line with the tradition of postcolonial literature.

He seems to ingeniously portray the Prophet as a perfect individual who experiences a humanization in the course of the story. In doing so, the author places himself, to a certain extent, on the level of the Prophet. The tension between the author and the Prophet is produced by means of various characters (three oppositional pairs) who represent negative values: they contrast with the Prophet and, at the same time, represent the author's alter ego. The oppositional pairs reflect the various problems of exile: identity conflicts and psychological and social changes -- operating in different settings and complementing each other. The cir-

⁴See, for instance, Schimmel 1995.

⁵See, for instance, Meier 1985; Radtke (in print).

⁶The quotations are taken from Schimmel 1985: 5.

⁷See, for instance, Werbner 1996.

cumstance that this does not directly follow from the title might be based in the fact that Rushdie wanted to cause a shock with the title. Or, it might be that Rushdie could express his experiences and those of the immigrants only through paradox or through an ecstatic exclamation: *shathiyāt*.⁸

The first pair -- the Anglicized Muslim migrant Chamcha in London/India, and the traitor Salman in Mekka/Persia -- represents, to a certain extent, the picture of Saidan Orientalism. Muḥammad stands in contrast to these deficiencies as a perfect and thus also forgiving individual who always insists on humanity.

The second pair -- the Indian movie star Gibreel in England/India/Mekka and the poet Baal in Mekka -- symbolizes creativity. Gibreel, however, becomes an agent of destruction, Baal a traitor. The poet is the only character whom the Prophet does not forgive, since the Prophet cannot tolerate the alternative order for which the poet calls. Here one might see the limits of being a Prophet and the limits of humanization.

The third pair -- the imam in Persia/London and Ayesha in India and on the way to Mekka -- stands for uncompromising religious fundamentalism.

The interaction between these figures and the Prophet leads through various stages to an identification with each other. All the characters are embedded in chronotopes, which undoubtedly possess similarities to the spheres of existence (place of creation, world of angels, levels of spiritual and divine existence) and to the levels of cosmic development (*shari'a*, *ṭariqa* and *ḥaqīqa*), and to the spiritual steps of the soul or to the levels of migration (Malik 1995: 94).

Even the complementary chronotopes are taken up by Rushdie himself; their connections are reinforced by three women (Hind, Thatcher, and Ayesha), all of whom want to reestablish the old order. Three levels of migration can be seen:

- 1) solely within fictional profane reality (modern world and current action: London, India, Persia);
- 2) solely within the fictional sacral ideal (historical levels in the dreams: Mekka, Medina, and Persia);
- 3) between these two worlds, which are connected by Gibreel's dreams alone.

Gibreel thus becomes a mediator, and his dreams actually make the interactive framework between the two poles possible at all, his dreams being variants of the intercultural journey and/or vehicle for experiencing the Prophet up to the level of the *fanā fi Muḥammad*, the dissolution of the searcher's soul into the Prophet (an important component of the Sufi reform movement). This intercultural interaction is reinforced by a number of stylizations, such as the use of polarities -- religiosity and secularity, North and South, etc. -- by puns, multilingualism, and code-switching, by magical realism, and by personal narration, all of them means

⁸On *shathiyāt*, see, for example, Ernst 1984.

of releasing language and literature from their ghetto and of decolonizing.⁹ In a certain way, Rushdie himself thus becomes mediator, *insān kāmil*.

Migrations within *one* world (that of fictional profane reality or that of the fictional sacral ideal) appear, according to my interpretation, to be fruitful in this one way. Migrations between the worlds (reality and ideal) fail, however. The tension between reality and ideal is here irreconcilable and cannot be positively integrated.

As for 1), Chamcha and Gibreel, for example, move within one -- here the fictional, profane -- world. In the end, the former finds true love, after the migration (the search for the self); the latter, however, fails and commits suicide. But both are purified by the mercy of the Prophet, or by his *baraka*.

As for 2), the Prophet moves within the boundaries of the ideal (Mekka/Medina). For this reason, he is not subject to any tensions of identification and can therefore live up to the characteristics of an *insān kāmil*, particularly as he can realize the various sides of the fictional ideal.

As for 3), migration between the different (profane, sacral) worlds produces various results, which are, however, only slightly distinct. The negative element dominates this migration:

a) Salman finds himself first in England and Persia but is transferred by Gibreel's dream to Mekka and "migrates". After experiencing the Prophet in dreams, he returns to Persia where he finds a certain satisfaction, however, without corresponding empathy.

b) The imam (between Persia/England and between London/Persia in the fictional ideal) stands out for his isolation in exile and for his rigid, tight hold on tradition. That is, he surpasses the boundaries of his - fictional - reality and wants to create the ideal Mekka/Medina; his own position is not sufficiently supported, he is alienated. This tension between reality and ideal is irreconcilable and can only be compensated for by static rigidity.

c) Then there is the migration which fails because of irrational action and mystical presumption. Ayesha's one-sided migration or attempt to migrate leads to disaster because of lacking self-adaptation; this is isolation through mystical rigor.

The only alter ego who does not migrate is Baal. He represents on the one hand profane creativity, which competes with the sacral perfect individual (the Prophet), but is static to the extent of remaining exclusively in Mekka. He consequently is not forgiven; he receives no *baraka*.

It seems noteworthy that the Prophet and Chamcha are the only two protagonists who, in spite of migration within one world (Mekka/Medina and London/India, respectively) do not move beyond the limits of their sacral and profane realities. They are both rewarded. Each migration in an imagined ideal or real world (India/Mekka or London/Mekka) brings, on the other hand, chaos and death.

⁹See, for instance, Mehrotra 1982; Kreutzer 1992; Kortbus 1995.

That is to say, migration - intercultural hybrid dialogue - can only occur on a consolidated level.

Seen in this way, migration in the widest sense -- in its different varieties and steps -- is movement; it opens up the possibility of a positive debate with the formation of one's own history and holds within it creative renewal and self-discovery. It is embedded in the traditional symbolism of the *riḥla* and *maqāmāt* as well as in myths and poetry. Through this multidimensionality, the protagonist opens himself to cultural translatability and to higher levels of consciousness, as in the sense of mystical ascent symbolism -- likewise a symbolism of space -- or rebirth: in this way Jahilia becomes a spiritual degree of immigration. Multidimensionality also holds, however, the danger of radical miscommunication, as in the case of *The Satanic Verses*.

An important aspect of the re-finding or being found (*wujūd*) suggested here is the motive of metamorphoses, which represents the immigrant's confused identity. It is these acquired characteristics (Gibreel, Salman, Chamcha, etc.) which enables an expansion and shifting of professed boundaries and a liberation.

Rushdie himself postulates the crossing of these boundaries and the thesis of intercultural hybridity -- "hybridity, impurity, intermingling". A dialogue so conceived may, however, only be guaranteed through empathy and above all through adapting or locating oneself in a tradition of science. Pure alienation or pure inactivity are not conducive to it (the imam, Ayesha, Baal). That seems to correspond to the conception championed in postcolonial literary criticism that migrants have positive catalytic effects on transformation processes in English (colonial) society. It is exactly the hybrid glance of the traveller between worlds -- *in-between two border conditions* -- that enables, according to Rushdie himself, historical and current reality to be elaborated upon from new perspectives (Rushdie 1991: 15) and the world to be read, written, and determined anew from the inside out (*re-reading, re-writing, and re-worlding*). As postcolonial author, the iconoclast Rushdie subversively rejects the dominant (imperial) discourse of power, and this he even does in two respects: European- as well as Islamic-imperial. As a migrated or translated man and through his double-vision (Bhabha 1994) he can set up a creative indigenous discourse, develop an aesthetic of liberation, and demythologize stereotypical thought patterns: "We are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed ... Indian, Pakistani ... we are other than we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans ... We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from bottom to the top. We shall be the hewers of the dead wood and the gardeners of the new. It is our turn now" (Rushdie 1988: 414). "Turning insults into strength" or "The Empire writes back". It is the "interstitial passage between fixed identification which opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy", "a third space" (Bhabha 1994: 4), so to speak, or an internal-colonial "fourth world" (Kreutzer 1995: 211). It is at these intersections that "newness" begins (Rushdie 1988: 8; Rushdie 1991: 394). In this respect, hybrid texts like *The Satanic Verses* na-

turally allow many interpretations; the intention or the objective meaning of the text admittedly oversteps the horizon of the individual reader and one can no longer speak of the mutual semantic household which could have, for instance, a solidarity- and identity-building effect. Therefore the interpretations should be taken up openly and emphatically in a modernistically designed dialogistic forum derived from each reader's own ethical and aesthetic tradition.

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