

Hassan Jamsheer

**Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.
A Second Decade of the Dispute?**

Salman Rushdie was an author of books well known all over the world¹, when in 1988 he published his next book fiction under the title of *Satanic Verses*. It was printed in Great Britain by Viking Penguin Inc. and distributed on the 26th of September 1988. As early as on the 5th of October 1988, on the initiative of Islamic parliamentary groups from Bombay, the distribution of the book was prohibited in India under the pretext of being blasphemous. The same opinion about the book was expressed by the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran āyatullāh Ḥōmeynī, who brought about a real row in international—and even inter-civilisation—relations by declaring on the 14th of February 1989 a religious verdict (fatwā). Ḥōmeynī considered the book blasphemous with respect to the Islamic creed, the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad; also he called to execute death sentences against the author and publishers.²

Since that time we have had a serious international and inter-civilisational dispute; British-Iranian diplomatic relations were severed, while the author—a British national of Islamic-Hindu affinity—went in hiding. In May 1995, when he was on a visit to Denmark, the Iranian ambassador to Copenhagen signed an official promise to the Danish minister of foreign affairs, that during the writer's stay in Denmark the death sentence upon him would be suspended! However, after the election of Muḥammad Ḥātāmī to the post of president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, we note an improvement in both Britain's and European Union relations

¹ Before the publication of *The Satanic Verses* the following novels of S. Rushdie appeared: *Grimus*, 1975; *Midnight's Children*, 1981; *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey*, 1987.

² A comprehensive documentation on the affair can be found in *The Rushdie File*, edited by Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, ICA, London 1989.

with Iran against the background of resignation from the implementation of the death sentence. Nonetheless, the deceased Hōmeyni's fatwa—analogue to any deceased spiritual leader' fatwā—cannot, according to the dominating in Iran Shi'i doctrine, be abrogated.

We have thus the personal drama of a hiding writer and—in the global scale—one of the cardinal problems of the open society, namely: the problem of toleration, or rather non-toleration, towards non-conformist views. In that concrete case, boundaries and rules were often imposed by radical Islamic spiritual leaders—and they deal with the arbitrary vision of sacrum and blasphemy. Repression against writers, and generally intellectuals (amongst others, against the Nobel literature prize laureate for 1988 Nağīb Maḥfūz, also Yūsuf Idrīs, Nizār Qabbānī...), was on the agenda for years before the publication of the of Salman Rushdie's novel.

With the passage of time, the dispute developed and covered wider areas of the broadly defined inter-civilisational dialogue (or conflict). In Europe, the issue was conceived decisively in favour of the author of *The Satanic Verses*, while in the Islamic world the dominant social factor were rather the radical elements, who managed—in fact not without resistance—to mobilise substantial numbers of believers on their own side, and even export the conflict to different areas of Europe, in the form of radical and terrorist actions. As examples of similar actions could serve: the burning of a copy of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford (England), terrorist actions or threats against the book's publishers. The hitherto quiet and integrated Muslim community of Great Britain (and not only Great Britain) started to show signs of radicalisation—in the negative, aggressive sense—as to their religious attitudes.

What do *The Satanic Verses* mean?

The story of the satanic verses is connected with the beginning of preaching the faith Islam by Prophet Muḥammad and with events, the date of which is at present time difficult to decide. They could have occurred sometime between the years 615 and 620 A.D. Moreover, their authenticity is questioned by interpreters.

Hence, after declaring the monotheistic faith of Islam by Muḥammad in the years 610-612, the situation of the believers of the new religion became extremely difficult in polytheistic Mecca. Rich and influential—also due to its shrine Al-Ka'ba—Mecca was sensitive about the possible loss of its position in Arabia. In conditions of intensified repression, the Prophet advised the followers of Islam to emigrate to Ethiopia, whose Christian ruler

cherished the opinion of a tolerant and just ruler. The real incentive of that ruler's deeds in this respect could have been the traditional desire on the part of Abisynia to weaken the leading role of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula.

Indeed, at the time when some of the believers were in Abisynia, there in Mecca took place—at least according to some biographers of Muḥammad—events called: the satanic verses story. One of its versions is the following:

In circumstances of intensified pressure upon Muslims of the Mecca ruling elite from the Qurayš tribe and also the lack of any substantial progress of the new faith, Muḥammad—with the intention of bringing about a favourable attitude of Mecca leaders—was said to have exceptionally parted from the categorical monotheism of Islam. The case precisely deals with few verses of the Qur'ānic sura An-Nağm ("The Star")³:

“Have ye seen
Lat and ‘Uzza,

And another,
The third (goddess), Manat?

What! For you
The male sex,
And for Him, the female?

Behold, such would be
Indeed a division
Most unfair!

These are nothing but names
Which ye have devised,
Ye and your fathers,
For which God has sent
Down no authority (whatever).
They follow nothing but
Conjecture and what
Their own souls desire!

³The Holy Qur'ān, Text, Translation and Commentary: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 3rd edition, Lahore 1938, LIII, 19-23.

Even though there has already
Come to them Guidance
From their Lord!”

The three mentioned goddesses belonged to the Mecca pantheon of deities. The polytheist Arabs believed that the three goddesses were daughters of one of the gods named Allah. Returning back to the narrative, it was told that Muḥammad, during a meeting with the Qurayšis, declared a different version of these verses. It was as follows:

“Have you seen
Lat and ‘Uzza,

And another,
The third (goddess), Manat?
They are swans (ḡarānīq; intentionally: goddesses) at the height.
Their grace (ṣafā‘a) is worthwhile to desire.”⁴

The rest of the wording was identical with the above-mentioned Qur’ānic text.

In other words, Muḥammad acknowledged the mentioned goddesses as worthy of worshipping, however subjected to the Leading God (Allāh). As a proof to the authenticity of this narrative, annalists of early Islam forward the fact that some Muslim emigrants returned from Abisynia. The event should have caused an improvement in relations with the Meccans and cessation of repression. The situation should have lasted long enough, since information about it reached the emigrants.

Other versions of this story give us a detailed narrative about Muḥammad’s attitude towards the goddesses. It was written that he could not have utterly ignored the request of Meccans to grant their gods a place in the Islamic religion in exchange for granting their support to his prophet mission.

The biographers write—in continuation of the Satanic verses story—how on a certain evening Muḥammad and Archangel Gabriel, who had come for that very purpose—thoroughly checked sura An-Nağm. When they reached at the doubted verses (They are goddesses at the height. Their grace is worthwhile to desire), Archangel asked where did they come from;

⁴ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ ar-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, Al-Maṭba‘a al-Ḥusayniyya al-Miṣriyya, 1st edition, Cairo (n. d.), vol. 2, pp. 226-229.

Muḥammad then answered: I should have acquired to God what He did not say. The verses were supposed to have been said by Muḥammad because of Satan, and that is why they are so called. Muḥammad received the next revelation, which in a sense ascertains indirectly the historical authenticity of the story:

“And their purpose was
To tempt thee away
From that which We
Had revealed unto thee,
To substitute in Our name
Something quite different:
(In that case), behold!
They would certainly have
Made thee (their) friend!

And had We not
Given thee strength,
Thou wouldst nearly
Have inclined to them
A little.

In that case We should
Have made thee taste
An equal portion (of punishment)
In this life, and an equal portion
In death : and moreover
Though wouldst have found
None to help thee against Us!”⁵

Finally, Muḥammad abrogated the verses called Satanic, and the accepted sounding of the sura is found today in the Qur’ān. This was a return to categorical monotheism. This is the story of goddesses in accordance with the narrative of more than one biographer. It was variously presented by interpreters of Islam and orientalist. Some experts on the history of Islam accept its truth, however the great majority of Muslim theologians reject the authenticity of the story. No wonder, because the dispute is a cardinal one and deals with the basic canon of faith—namely: the idea of the oneness

⁵ XVII, 73-75.

(tawhīd) of God. This on the one hand. On the other, however, the matter possesses deeper implications. If Muḥammad could permit himself to change Qur'ānic verses for earthly purposes—in other words, in order to win over the Qurayšis—then his prophet mission could become questionable.

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In his disputed book, Salman Rushdie not only acquires the title of the mentioned story of early Islamic times, but also—naturally in a literary manner—the history of the mentioned verses. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*—to present the realistic level of the story in great abbreviation—tell us about contemporary characters of Hindu-Islamic origin: Gibril Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. They are passengers of an hijacked aeroplane flying from Bombay to London. The hijacking lasts one hundred and eleven days, in which time the plane was seized in one of Arab emirates. When once again the plane takes the route to London and is situated above La Manche, an explosion takes place on deck, however as a result of disagreements among the hijackers. In this accident all passengers die with the exception of the two above mentioned persons. They were saved in unusual circumstances, and here the author introduced the surrealistic narrative convention, and the whole range of thoughts and elements characteristic for Hinduism and the civilisation of the Indian sub-continent.

Hindu gods and ideas are clearly present in the discussed story. There we find: the idea of reincarnation, the cycle of existence (called by M. Eliade *coincidentio oppositorium*). We have moreover archetypes of love, hatred, forgiveness, life, death, ...etc.

Rushdie returns to the life of his heroes since their early youth years. Alongside that we become acquainted with certain aspects of life in the great metropolitan town Bombay, and above all with the life and customs of its Muslim community—starting with individual carriers and ending with questions of Islamic identity in India (the Pakistani theme was tackled by him in his *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*) and among the Indian-Pakistani immigrants of London. Next we follow up the life and film star carrier of the two mentioned personalities; their difference and rivalry. The relationships between the English people and immigrants are a further field of interest for Rushdie, shown equally in *The Satanic Verses* and his later non-fiction book entitled *Imaginary Homelands*.

Indulging into the sphere of the sacred and profane, the author of *The Satanic Verses* decides upon coding the names of persons and places, however—deliberately for sure—the real names could easily be decoded.

Hence, Prophet Muḥammad appears as Mahound, Mekka as Jahilia, the new religion of Islam—Submission, Archangel Gabriel—Gibril, Muḥammad's companion Ḥālīd Ibn al-Walīd—Water-Carrier, and Mekka's Grandee Abū Sufyān—Abu Simbel.

In his *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie turns the time notion by conceiving the early Islamic tradition through the laic vision of our contemporary Londoner, and thereby disturbing—if not totally negating—the Islamic optics of the sacred. The sacredness of the Qur'ān and Prophet's person assumes as a matter of course the categorical submission of present time to the optics of the past, while the opposite (i.e. today's secular outlook of the past) qualifies to be described as profane.

Conceiving tradition in closed categories (since the eternal order of time was determined by God) Muslim radicals (most often named as fundamentalists) treat the secular vision as tantamount to the violation of tradition. It is worthwhile to add, that—regardless of any radical conceptions—the Islamic tradition should be conceived as a lasting and integral element of the civilisation—and sometimes national—identity of its believers. Such a statement does not close the path neither towards the continuous evolution in the understanding of tradition nor its changing components.

In fact, the laic vision of the past appeared to be dangerous to the hermetic concept of Islam; more so since the author of *The Satanic Verses* treated unceremoniously people and symbols of early Islam, regarded by Muslims as sacred.

Examples ascertaining the mentioned thesis are the following fragments and issues presented and dealt with in the discussed book:

– Muhammad “our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound. That's him. Mahound the businessman, climbing his hot mountain in the Al-Ḥiğāz. The mirage of a city shines below him in the sun.”⁶

– Amidst the displeasure of his companions Muḥammad becomes the prey of a conspiracy of the Meccan Grandee, who promises a mass conversion of town's inhabitants to the new belief if the Prophet would acknowledge the three local goddesses. Muḥammad accepts the conditions of the deal and solemnly proclaims the An-Nağm sura together with the Satanic verses, and thereafter festivities take place—something like a mask ball. In the morning of the next day Muḥammad wakes up in a silk bed sheet in the apartment of the Grandee's wife Hind, known—according to Rushdie—for her immoral behaviour:

⁶The Satanic Verses, Viking/Penguin, London 1988, p. 93.

“He recognises Hind’s voice, sits up, and finds himself naked beneath the creamy sheet. He recalls to her: ‘Was I attacked?’ Hind turns to him, smiling her Hind smile. ‘Attacked?’ she mimics him, and claps her hands for breakfast. Minions enter, bring, serve, remove, scurry off. Mahound is helped into a silken robe of black and gold; Hind exaggeratedly, averts her eyes. ‘My head,’ he asks again. ‘Was I struck?’ She stands at the window, her head hung low, playing the demure maid. ‘Oh, Messenger, Messenger,’ she mocks him. ‘What an ungallant Messenger it is. Couldn’t you have come to my room consciously, of your own will? No, of course not, I repel you, I am sure.’ He will not play her game. ‘Am I a prisoner?’ he asks, and again he laughs at him. ‘Don’t be a fool.’ And then, shrugging relents: ‘I was walking the city streets last night, masked, to see the festivities, and what should I stumble over but your unconscious body? Like a drunk in the gutter, Mahound. I sent my servants for a litter and brought you home. Say thank you.’ ”⁷

– After some time “Muhammad announces the abrogation of the verses which Shaitan whispered in his ear. These verses are banished from the true recitation of, al-qur’an.” “[...] It was me both times, baba, me first and second also me.” “ ‘First it was the devil,’ Mahound mutters as he rushes to Jahilia. ‘But this time, the angel, no question. He wrestled me to the ground.’ ”⁸

– It is striking both in this case as well as on other occasions the idea of the disposability of Archangel Gabriel, and of course the very act of revelation.⁹

– After the conquering of Mecca by the Muslims, the town’s house of ill fame, brothel, (called by Rushdie Hijab or The Curtain) was not—due to misunderstanding—closed at once. Until its closure on the Prophet’s orders, the house is organised likewise Muḥammad’s house. The anti-Islamic poet Baal, hiding there, acquires the name of Muḥammad, and more than a dozen of prostitutes are given the name of the Prophet’s wives.¹⁰

– Salman Rushdie poses for a long while at Baal’s court case and his sentencing to death: “So he was sentenced to be beheaded, within the hour, and as soldiers manhandled him out of the tent towards the killing ground, he shouted over his shoulder: ‘Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can’t forgive.’ ”¹¹

“Mahound replied, ‘Writers and whores. I see no difference here.’ ”¹²

⁷ Ibid., p. 119-120.

⁸ Ibid., p. 124.

⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 123-124.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 385-387.

¹² Ibid., pp. 376-387.

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It is worthwhile to make few remarks on the above cases:

We should separate the death sentence, being made in the form of the religious verdict (*fatwà*) of Hōmeynī against the author of *The Satanic Verses*, from issues related to religious sentiments of Muslims. Efforts undertaken on the part of Danish politicians on the path of moderating the Iranian attitude were already pointed out. The European Union, and lately Great Britain, are carrying out with Tehran direct talks, which on the whole bring positive results. Furthermore, the religious feelings of believers in Islam should be taken into account—a matter that cannot be considered in categories of a won or lost battle, because regardless of extremist conceptions Islam should be understood as a permanent phenomenon.

The statement about Islam as an integral element of civilisational and national identity of its adherents assumes an evolution in conceiving tradition, i. e. the possibility of interpreting the heritage in the spirit of modernism. In the world of Islam there is no scarcity of serious or tough polemics about the interpretation of tradition and law based upon this belief.

There are two important considerations with regard to the evolution of opinions about the past. On the one hand, the religious-civilisational tradition facilitates a fairly effective self-defence on the international arena in the face of the stronger; it grants a feeling of self-strength. On the other hand, Muslims—in the first place modernists—encounter the problem of boundaries of political or state authority, as well as the boundaries of parliamentary competence: evident providential or prophetic commands cannot be submitted to voting, not to mention alteration! The issue is put in this way at least by some Islamists.

The dispute has both an internal (i. e. inter-Islamic) and external (inter-civilisational) dimension. The conceptual categories of the Islamic world have been shaped—preserving a given specificity—on the basis of a faith derived from the Old and New Testament, however in the process of historical development Islam acquired traits and substance of a rival nature towards Christianity and the civilisation attached to this belief.

Thereby, it is worthwhile to think seriously about the need for the dialogue of all civilisations of the world as a path leading towards civilisational pluralism. Naturally, dialogue requires an understanding of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

mode and structure of thought of others—which is the logical consequence of respect for others, and an outcome of the idea and practice of toleration. Otherwise, the alternative for tolerance might be the closure of societies and cultures for others, and the subsequent application of the one-and-only criterion (i. e. its own) in its relations with the rest.

Consequently, attempts to force the introduction of a one-sided vision—or “the one-and-only correct model”—carry with them the danger of bringing about something of an opposite nature: the hermetic closure of cultures and their mutual mistrust. The sense of such a way of thinking is not based on postulating the erosion or liquidation of particular cultures or their peculiarities, but on removing of barriers existing on the path of natural and normal interaction or dialogue. The latter case would lead to the weakening of the positions of radical political and social forces, placing them on defensive positions; and simultaneously strengthening the positions of parliamentary democracy and pluralism in the world of Islam. There is no need for a detailed justification of the weight of such a development for Europe and the world.

Radical Islamic forces possess the whole range of arguments, which they derive from the negative experiences of many centuries of the historical conflict between Islam and Christianity; namely:

- battles waged between Muslims and Christians since early VIII century on the territories of Spain and southern Gaul (France), ending there with Islam as the losing side at the end of the XV century with the downfall of Grenada; in turn the endeavours of Ottoman Muslims, lasting until the end of World War I, also ends with defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire;

- The Crusades of the XI-XIII centuries, when both mentioned civilisations faced each other on the battlegrounds of the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea;

- The colonial expansion of modern times and the subjection of the Islamic world to the domination of the Christian West, ending only a few decades ago—sometimes as a result of bloody resistance—by granting the Islamic countries independence.

In an atmosphere generated by all what was pointed out, and moreover aggravated by the logic of the global conflict between the two superpowers at the time of the Cold War, populist and simplistic ideas find a fertile ground in circumstances of the domination of negative attitudes towards the Christian world, and occasionally the prevalence—among not insignificant parts of the community of believers in Islam—of the feeling of moral superiority upon the historic rival.

Extremism constitutes—from a point of view—a secondary question, although highly important, because it demolishes a given order and the positively evaluated hitherto-existing attainments of modern times, forces meagre actions, besides puts into motion regressive mechanisms, often damaging for the adherents of the democratic-parliamentary option.

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At the end of this paper, and for the sake of justice, it is worthwhile to return to Salman Rushdie against the presented wide background, considering the deeper strata and wider fields undertaken by that author in *The Satanic Verses* and other books—not only novels—of him, we reach to the conclusion that the talented author, especially in *The Satanic Verses* acknowledged by literary critics as a masterpiece, deals—alongside simple insignificant matters—with great affairs; and these include: the creation of Earth by God, the downfall of Iblis from the status of angel, the creation of Adam and Eve as well as their banishment from Paradise, the Biblical-Quranic story of Abraham and his first son Ismā‘īl, the building of the Shrine Al-Ka‘ba, Mecca as a metropolitan at ancient times, the era of Akbar The Great at late medieval times in India, the emancipation of India from British rule after World War II, the disillusionment of post-independence times and religious conflicts in the states of the Indian sub-continent, the role of the great metropolitans (Bombay, London and in the past Mecca) in the making of historical processes, the critique of the cultures connected with these metropolitans, the rich panorama of Hindu beliefs and ideas, ... also human inter-relationships, daily and vocational life. He strives to reveal key issues that facilitate understanding of civilisation, human collectives and individuals, and cognising the sense of creation and existence.

As an example we could give one of the questions formulated by Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*: “WHAT KIND OF AN IDEA ARE YOU?” (The question is directed to Islam called by him Submission, to the Prophet Muhammad, also to the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and Imam, implicitly Ḥōmeynī). He elaborates his intention by putting the next question: How will you behave and what will you do, when you win? Will you be tolerant towards the defeated, or not? Indeed, no empire is absolute, neither any victory complete!

ANNEXES

Chronology of events

- 26 Sept. 1988 The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie published in UK by Viking/Penguin.
- 5 Oct. 1988 The Satanic Verses banned in India.
- 8 Nov. 1988 The Satanic Verses wins the Whitbread 'best novel' award.
- 24 Nov. 1988 The Satanic Verses banned in South Africa.
- 14 Jan. 1989 Book burnings in Bradford, Yorkshire.
- 27 Jan. 1989 Hyde Park demonstration and petition to Penguin.
- 1 Feb. 1989 Douglas Hurd, Home Secretary, announces that the Government have no plans to change the blasphemy laws.
- 12 Feb. 1989 6 killed in rioting in Islamabad, Pakistan.
- 13 Feb. 1989 1 killed and over 100 injured in riot in Kashmir, India.
- 14 Feb. 1989 Āyatollāh Ḥōmeynī of Iran proclaims a fatwā on Salman Rushdie.
- 15 Feb. 1989 National day of mourning in Iran. Demonstration outside the British Embassy [in Tehran]. All Viking/Penguin books banned from Iran. Viking apologizes. 1,500,000 price placed on Salman Rushdie's life. Harold Pinter leads a writers' delegation to 10 Downing Street.
- 17 Feb. 1989 Iranian President suggest that Salman Rushdie apologize.
- 18 Feb. 1989 Salman Rushdie apologizes.
- 19 Feb. 1989 Salman Rushdie's apology rejected, and the death sentence reconfirmed.
- 20 Feb. 1989 Britain gets strong support from European Community foreign ministers' meeting.
- 22 Feb. 1989 The Satanic Verses officially published in USA. US PEN calls writers' meeting in New York.
- 24 Feb. 1989 Rioting in Bombay.
- 2 March 1989 World Writers' Statement in defence of Salman Rushdie and free speech.
- 7 March 1989 Iran breaks off diplomatic relations with Britain.
- 15 March 1989 Nobel Prize committee split.

16 March 1989 Islamic Conference Organisation refuses to support Iran over death threat.

29 March 1989 2 'moderate' imams shot in Brussels, Belgium.

[Source: The Rushdie File, edited by Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, ICA, London 1989, pp. ix-x.]

The *Fatwà* of Ḥōmeynī

[...] The announcement came on Radio Teharan just before 2 p.m. news. It was a 'fatwa' or decree from Āyatollāh Ḥōmeynī, the revered leader of Iran's 50 million Shi'i Muslims.

"In the name of God Almighty," intoned an announcer. "There is only one God, to whom we shall all return. I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Qur'ān, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death.

I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on the path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing.

In addition, anyone who has access to the author of the book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should refer him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all. Rūḥollāh Mūsawī Ḥōmeynī."

[From "The Observer", 19 Feb. 1989; the text, also in: *As-Sayyid 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Muhāğarānī, Mu'āmarat al-āyāt aš-šayṭāniyya*, Beirut 1993, p. 135.]

Rushdie novel banned in India: (From David Wigg in New Delhi)

The Indian government, bowing to pressure from Muslim groups, yesterday banned Salman Rushdie's latest book.

Satanic Verses, which has been short-listed for the Booker Prize, was described by Syed Shahabuddin, an opposition MP, as an 'indecent vilification of the Holy Prophet'. The MP said Mr Rushdie had admitted the

book was a direct attack on Islam. In one scene the Prophet's wives are portrayed as prostitutes. 'The Home Minister was shocked when I showed him the passage,' Mr Shabuddin said. 'The book should also be restricted to England. No civilised society should permit it.' [...]

[from "The Independent", 6th October 1988]

**An open letter from Salman Rushdie to the
Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi:**

Dear Rajiv Gandhi,

On Wednesday, October 5 the Indian Finance Ministry announced the banning of my novel, *The Satanic Verses*, under Section 11 of the Indian Custom's Act. Many people around the world will find it is the Finance Ministry that gets to decide what Indian reader may or may not read. But let us pass, because at the end of the notification of the ban an even stranger statement appeared. The ministry [...] 'added that the ban did not detract from the literary and artistic merit of Rushdie's work'. To which I can only reply: Thanks for the good review.

The book was banned after representations by two or three Muslim politicians including Syed Shahabuddin, MP, and Khurshid Alam Khan, MP. These persons, whom I do not hesitate to call extremists, even fundamentalists, have attacked me and my novel while stating that they had no need actually to read it. That the Government of India should have given in to such figures is profoundly disturbing. No wonder the Finance Ministry's statement sounded confused and defensive. [...]

[The letter appeared in many newspapers]

Rushdie's apology

As author of *The Satanic Verses* I recognise that Moslems in many parts of the world are genuinely distressed by the publication of my novel. I profoundly regret the distress that publication has occasioned to the sincere followers of Islam. Living as we do in a world of many faiths this experience has served to remind us that we must all be conscious of the sensibilities of others.

[Full text of Rushdie's apology, 18 February 1989; "The Sunday Times", 19 February 1989]

Nağīb Maḥfūz, the 77-year-old Egyptian writer who received the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, interview for "Der Spiegel":

Mr Mahfouz, why did Arab writers not protest as soon as Khomeini called for Salman Rushdie's death?

Protests are now taking place in the whole Islamic world.

But there are also literary figures who think it is right for Rushdie to be punished for his "Satanic Verses".

Of course there are people who do not agree with the content of the book because they see in it an insult to the Prophet Muhammad. But as far as I know, in this country no one has wished Rushdie's death.

Should Khomeini as a prominent Islamic Imam not have pronounced such a verdict?

Khomeini is a terrorist, who has precipitated millions of people towards destruction. Islam authorizes no one, not even spiritual leaders who meddle in politics, to impose a death sentence on other people.

Yet the old man in Iran has caused world-wide agitation and driven thousands of Muslims into the street.

Khomeini exploits the ignorance, the illiteracy of the masses. He displaces them into hysteria and misuses them to bring about acts that have nothing to do with Islam. Khomeini has already done more harm to Islam than many others in the history of our religion.

Yet he has become a factor to be reckoned with in the Islamic world, someone who can altogether poison the relations between Islamic and non-Islamic countries.

No. The Iranian phenomenon is not typical for the large majority of Islamic states. No country until now has copied Iran's theocratic system. If it weren't for ignorance and stupidity, we would pay no attention to Khomeini's agitation[...]

Critics say that Al-Azhar University, the foremost institution of Sunni Islam, has prevented the publication of your book.

The Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University has clarified that the only way to take objection with Rushdie's book must be to work out a learned argument, in other words to reply with a book - that is the correct way, not with a death sentence.

The hardline Islamic weekly, "Noor" (Light), in Cairo, several weeks ago compared you to Rushdie. Does this trouble you?

No. In Egypt, unlike Iran, we work according to the law of the state, and not according to the opinion of a cleric.[...]

Islamic fundamentalists say that human rights are the outcome of a Western system of thought and part of Western cultural imperialism. A well-known Egyptian lead article shocked readers with the sentence: 'The rights of Islam have precedence over human rights.'

Let's be clear: Human rights have nothing to do with what a critic calls 'cultural imperialism' or 'cultural invasion'. To be plain, I have no idea what some hotheads mean by this. When I take advantage of the cultural goods of others, I broaden my horizon, increase my knowledge. This is something positive. I take in what I like, build on it; refuse what doesn't speak to me. [...]

Is Western parliamentary democracy, the multi-party system, capable of being integrated with Islam? Prominent Islamic thinkers don't think so.

Democracy is the best system humanity has. Of course democratic structures are compatible with our religion.

[*"Der Spiegel"*, no. 9, 1989; in: *The Rushdie File*, edited by Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, ICA, London 1989, pp. 190-191.]

Nağib Maħfūz standpoint according to "The Economist":

In the continuing and widening row over Mr Salman Rushdie and "The Satanic Verses", where do Arab writers stand? The answer appears to be: on shifting ground. Mr Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel laureate and most celebrated figure in contemporary Arabic literature, began by supporting Mr Rushdie, a stand to be expected from the man whose writings have been attacked in the same way and banned in his own country; but now he has changed his mind. Complaining that his pro-Rushdie words have been 'misinterpreted', he is publicly backing the Egyptian government's decision to "The Satanic Verses". Although he does not support Ayatollah Khomeini's fetwa, he has found another fetwa he thinks reasonable, issued by the clergy of al-Azhar mosque, the keepers of Islamic orthodoxy in Egypt: "The Satanic Verses" should be considered as an 'insult to Islam and a threat to sectarian harmony', but Mr Rushdie should have been given a chance to repent before he was condemned, and should have been condemned only in a court of clergy.

[*"The Economist"*, 11 March 1989]