

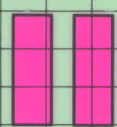
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THIRD WORLD TEXT

THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY ART & CULTURE

BEYOND THE RUSHDIE AFFAIR

SPECIAL ISSUE



SUMMER 1990 £6/\$12

Understanding the Postmodern World

Why Khomeini Wants Rushdie Dead

Sohail Inayatullah

The purpose of this text is to frame the Khomeini/Rushdie discourse in a politics of epistemology, in a politics of divergent constructions of the real. Generally, we seek neither to support the perspective of Rushdie nor that of Khomeini, but rather to attempt to understand how both construct the real. That is, while it is intellectually and politically *easy* to condemn either one — depending on one's views of 'Islam', 'human rights', 'intellectual freedom', 'violence', to mention a few dominant categories of present thought in which Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the ensuing death sentence have been constructed — it takes a great effort to empathetically see how each is creating his world. However, even as we distance our analysis by recourse to deconstruction, we do have interpretative anchors, largely the commitment to writing as reality construction and the view that we stand in between historic eras.

In many ways both Rushdie and Khomeini are ('were' as Khomeini is dead but the structure that created him continues), surprisingly quite similar to each other as both are responding to the modern condition.¹ Rushdie, in many ways, is similar to postmodernist writers, as he is not interested in celebrating the victory of the modern Enlightenment over the classical era of the priests, rather he seeks to deconstruct the present so as to show the peculiarity of all eras although, as we suggest, he too writes from a vantage point that is ideological, secular-pluralist, to say the least. Rushdie, as Michel Foucault² would like us to, denaturalizes the natural and makes the present remarkable. Everything must be shown to be limited, to be creations of man, even the creation of the category in human thought called 'man'. Man in this view is

1 I am indebted to Naeem Inayatullah of Syracuse University for this placement (Rushdie and Khomeini in relation to the modern world).

2 See Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed., Pantheon Books, New York, 1983. See also Michael Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1988.

3 Michel Foucault,
The Order of Things,
Vintage Books, New
York, 1973.

4 See Sohail
Inayatullah, 'Cycles
of Power', *Edges*
(March 1990).

5 Salman Rushdie,
The Satanic Verses,
Viking, New York,
1989, p 29-30.

6 See Gregory
Bateson, *Steps to an
Ecology of the Mind*,
Paladin, Frogmore,
St. Albans, Herts.,
1973.

7 See P. R. Sarkar,
*The Liberation of the
Intellect: Neo-
Humanism*, AMPS,
Calcutta, 1983.

only a recent invention, especially in the European epistème. Before, he lay sequestered in the divine classical worldview, his subjectivity floating above in the heavens or down below in hell, but with the development of the modern social sciences man becomes a self-constructed subject.³ With the European Enlightenment he became the center of the universe. But this 'man' for the postmodernist is about to end, not in the way Khomeini would like to end Western man or redeem this man, but a new man who lives alongside either the postmodern spiritual world of angelic vibrations or the postmodern world of personal robots and genetically engineered clones.⁴ But Rushdie's central aim — (of course, it is a mistake to privilege him with so much intentionality — that is, 'aim' as structurally he is utterly predictable; a lad from the colonies gone to the center where he becomes decultured, and no longer locates self in the *ummah*, in the classical world) is not to create a new man, but to make contentious the first man, Adam, and his final prophet, Muhammed. His aim is to make problematic not the Islamic world, not Islamic politics, but the subjectivity we call Muslim. That is why he is such a threat.

Moreover Rushdie mocks. In *The Satanic Verses*, health for Gibreel Farishta⁵ comes not through prayer to God, but when God is forsaken. With this change in self, health arrives, and he celebrates by going to a plush Bombay hotel where he downs truckloads of pork. The self of the religious era is left for the self of the secular era. But here Rushdie is clearly a modern writer. He does not give us an alternative construction of self, rather he remains caught within the secular/religious dilemma. He does not escape Islam; by mocking he calls attention to it. Attention that has led to intentions by others that have clearly not been good for his health. He merely rebels; no transcendence from the above dilemma are given as, for example, by recent postmodern efforts to deconstruct the self and allow the creation of new selves. Instructive here are postmodern writers from new age thinkers such as Gregory Bateson⁶ to Indians such as P. R. Sarkar⁷ who give us an ecology of consciousness wherein the self and mind are transcendental and immanent; a self wherein the intellect is liberated from ego, family, geography, social class and religion, and, indeed, speciesism, that is, a self that resides in an ecology of universal spirituality where nothing is sacred but everything is precious.

But Khomeini, too, is responding to the modern era. Like other spiritual leaders his goal is to recover frames of meaning or ways of seeing the world that have been hidden by the present materialistic worldview. He seeks to relocate the self back in family, civilization and God, not individuality, nation, and the capitalist marketplace. For Khomeini, the Enlightenment and the modern era have taken man away from the true faith. What then is required are not pleasant words, but a revolution in mind, heart and action. This to him is the Iranian revolution. To Khomeini, Rushdie and other Asians who are ambiguous about the religious era, who claim to be outside the cultural grid of West and East, are not harbingers of a new era wherein nationality and religion are delinked from culture and self; rather they are culturally confused, without a concrete self, their purity destroyed by the evils of modernity. They claim to be freed from the shackles of traditional man, but have joined materialistic/rational modern man. Their attempts at transcendence have merely been efforts to escape the essential self of the past. For Khomeini, by definition, these are failed attempts. Sensate culture has destroyed their hermeneutic anchors. They have lost their original culture and now mistakenly attempt to create new worlds outside the classic religions of the Crescent. The modern era has concealed the real, leaving the false, the satanic; leaving verses

of self that are not the original verses of the Angel Gabriel, but rather verses by the newly created modern man and his forces — science, technology and economics.

Rushdie, of course, believes there is nothing to recover, for the truth of Islam does not exist anyway; history cannot be ended, there can be no last prophet. Islam merely upholds the view of a particular tribe. Nothing more. Even if originally intended as a fraternity of Man, it has devolved into a narrow family of Arabia. But for the ancient, dialectics must continue. The cycle cannot end, the three Semitic religions have attempted to create a world where history ends at the level of the transcendental, but modernity has intervened, progress has made that vision of spiritual judgement ever illusive. For philosopher Eric Voegelin,⁸ the Gnostics reinterpreted the Christian trinity and created the stages of ancient, medieval and modern with liberalism, communism, hitlerism all taking turns in attempting to end history and create not spiritual perfection but worldly perfection. But for Islam, the faithful believes that history found its perfection on a hot dry day in Mecca.

But for the postmodern, deconstruction and reconstruction must continue. In this view, all truths are simply regimes of knowing that deny other truths. These truths are upheld in texts and made authoritative. Thus his attack on the text of Islam. But for Khomeini attacking the text is not a mere intellectual exercise; the intellect cannot be divorced from the spirit. Attacking the text is attacking God Himself. While the modern era asserts that words represent the world, in the classical worldview words participate in the creation of the world. Thus prayers. Prayers can change actual — ontological — material conditions partly because they lead to favors from Almighty and partly because the words recreate the world. They participate in the movement of the material world. Words are power and when rightfully given they are truth. Attacking a text thus has little to do with intellectual rights: it is attacking the body of God. For Khomeini, Rushdie has violently attacked God, and thus as in the classical model of law — ‘an eye for an eye’ — Rushdie too must be attacked.

For Rushdie, however, words are assets. Along with a select group of other non-Western writers, he has managed to utterly transform the English language to a previously unimaginable level. One uses language and is used by it; one does not merely reside in a particular language.⁹ Once language becomes an asset, then it certainly cannot be sacred. Language then becomes politicized; it becomes currency. Language becomes an interpretive battle; a fight of worldview for worldview. Since language can create the world and since humans create language, it is no longer authoritative; rather language like politics becomes pluralistic. God as the authoritative leader (Iran) transforms into the multiparty, multiple reality world (England, ideally, at least).

Unfortunately for Rushdie, Khomeini does not perceive the universe that way. Language, especially the words of the sacred text of Islam, cannot be easily thrown about. The word after all is the *direct* symbol of God, not a distorted mediated representation. Thus the destroyer of the sacred word destroys *the* religious way of seeing the world; a way that for Khomeini is not one truth among many, but the ultimate truth, the authoritative truth. For Khomeini and those who remain beholden to the text of the past: to the texts of the crescent, cross and star, this world must end. Among Khomeini's strategies was (and remains) to construct the West as evil. This creation of the Other as enemy aids in local political unification, it gives the social self a historical role. Iran and Islam now play a dramatic role in ending evil and recovering good; they are no longer on the periphery of history, rather they

8 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.

9 Michael Shapiro, personal communications, March 1989.

are instruments of the revival of the religious. Attacking Rushdie then is a sign of unity, of strength. Alternatively one can read the attack on Rushdie as not a sign of an Islam gaining strength, but as Ibn Khaldun¹⁰ might argue as an Islam (or a version of Islam) facing its own moral bankruptcy, its own death.

10 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal. N. J. Dawood, ed., Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1967.

Politics as the authoritative construction of the real has been made particularly obvious by the Rushdie affair. Among others, Muslims inside and outside of their home countries, when forced with the ravages of the new return to traditional unitary models of reality, go back to the basics, as it were. At a recent International Fair, among other nationalities the representation of 'Pakistaniness' was displayed. Organized by Pakistani women, this representation became problematic as many of the men who normally help with the booth refused to participate as it had been rumoured that the women were wearing jeans, dating Caucasian males, and in general doing it their own way — they had ceased to be 'Pakistani'. As per the classical view, they were to be ostracized and made to confess their faults, to reveal their evil Western ways and embrace the good of the religious order. Otherwise they were to be banished from the community. They were not to be jailed as the moderns would want, that is, placed in a prison bureaucracy or some educational site of correction, or punished and tortured as in the days of the empires and princes; rather, since they were disobedient to the truth and would not confess, they were exiled, their words rendered outside of the psyche. But as Rushdie has shown us, this banishment while physically possible is psychologically impossible, for the fear of the opposite of one's truth always lurks in the unconscious, instantly ready to spring up. Ready to show its face. Thus once one enters the metaphysic of good and evil, there can be no victors for both exist in complement, in the whole. Here one can live with contradictions, transcend them, or destroy the bringer of contradictions, or one can commit suicide. Recent Islam perhaps has taken the two latter paths.

But returning to the cultural Fair, the authoritative definition of 'Pakistaniness' became an even more painful event when a copy of Rushdie's book was found at the booth. Worse, a Christian foreigner had been tending the booth, drinking beer, and reading *The Satanic Verses* (creating a kind of a reverse Islam) while the other Pakistanis walked around the Fair. The national character had been insulted and Islam defamed by the situation of that text in the Pakistan booth. The counter argument was that 'Pakistaniness' should be a process definition, one that comes into being and changes through time, not one authoritatively constructed by the present Islamic Right (and its middle class supporters), but this perspective at this cultural Fair and surely others only heightened the anger. The problem then became one of open representation versus one of secret representation. While it was acceptable to read the book in private, to drink in private, to do all sorts of actions, given that behaviour was controlled not through internal morality or through institutional laws but through the ostracism of the community, it should not be public. And not in front of the servants, no; not in front of the foreigners. They will judge us badly. What will they think of us? In front of them, we have to act a certain way. We are already constructed as technologically inferior. Their modern history — Marx and Rostow, dialectics and developmentalism — shows us to be but from prehistory, outside of evolution. We can at least be united, be moral, and show that we still have something, that we are historical, modern and religious people. We dare not admit that we have

11 Edward Said,
Orientalism, Vintage
Books, New York,
1979.

12 Ziauddin Sardar,
Islamic Futures,
Mansell, London,
1985.

internalized their Orientalist structure of space, time and self.¹¹

And that is Rushdie's problem! It is the public attack of the Prophet at a time when Islam has been relegated by the Orientalists to a religion of the past, of the superstitious, of the backward, and of the poor. It is a break in sacred principle of community, of the *ummah*. The bond of authority has been broken by an insider to the outsider: the break reveals the already fragile state of the Islamic community, the break represents yet another sign in the decline of the Islamic world. Of course, creative reconstructionists like Ziauddin Sardar would see this not as a decline but a healthy transformation allowing a softer — self-reliant, technologically open, tolerant, spiritual — twenty-first century Islam to emerge.¹²

But Rushdie does not allow Khomeini and others that construction, for the project was flawed from the beginning. He will, not like many Muslims, assert that there were rightly guided caliphs or, like Shias, that it all was going well until Ali was not given his place as successor and Hussain was slaughtered at Karbala. Rushdie does not lay the problem with succession (a natural problem for tribal warrior people), but rather he lays it squarely on the founder, the ground of Islam that cannot be touched, that is non-negotiable, that can never be deconstructed. Rushdie, then, is not like other attackers of the faith. When outsiders attacked the Prophet it was understandable since they did not know better — the word had not reached them; but Rushdie knows and still he mocks. Finally Rushdie attacks with a weapon that is not acceptable/available to Khomeini, with the wordprocessor. Khomeini did not, let us remember, issue a press release denouncing Rushdie or, issue by issue, logically debating his allegorical critiques; rather, the defence was clear.

The use of allegory also is confounding. Scholars in Pakistan critique Rushdie for not using a more scholarly style forgetting that the Quran itself is a story, what better deconstruction style than that of a story of the story itself. An essay published in *The New York Review of Books* on the problems endemic in Islamic cosmology would not have received the commentary that resulted. These scholars also insist that now the task of criticizing the mullahs has been made even more difficult. The landlord-priestly class power has increased. Tolerance of dissent decreased. But in terms of possible futures we can give an alternative reading; perhaps it is the congealing of a structure about to collapse, about to deconstruct itself.

An alternative site of understanding would be geo-political. Islam is merely a superious variable, an explanatory excuse. The real problem resides in the contradictions of peripheral governance (in India and Pakistan, for example) created by the history of the world capitalist system.

Ibn Khaldun, 14th century Muslim historian and founder of modern sociology, has argued that those with *asabiya* (unity gained through collective struggle) gain and rise in power, but lose it once they develop a non-supporting superstructure. In his theory of the integration and disintegration of empires and dynasties, he reminds us that just before the fall of an empire there is a final glow of power. The flame lights up ever so brightly, but soon perishes, never to be seen again.¹³ While Islam is culturally not at its zenith, revitalization can also follow this pattern. Perhaps the rise of OPEC and the return of Khomeini was that short flame; however with OPEC's recycling petrodollars and further strengthening the world economy and its inequalities, and as well with the loss of the Iranian revolutionary cultural momentum, their

13 Khaldun, p 246.

possible cultural hegemony, with the Iran-Iraq war, the death threat of Rushdie is the type of response one might get when a civilization is in its final decline or when it is unable to reenvision itself. Like the end of communism, a possible reading then is that Islam as a political, cultural force is in its final days. The life of Muhammed is questioned (perhaps he always knew how to read); perhaps it was merely as Barbara Walker¹⁴ has argued the passing of matriarchy to patriarchy (from the goddess Al-Lat to the god Allah) — perhaps it was all one big mistake. A nerve that strikes fear into every Muslim. Like a marriage that suddenly seems to have been a mistake, the truth strikes deep and strikes painfully.

14 Barbara Walker, *The Crone*, Harper and Row, New York, 1985.

Text becomes spiritual test: insofar as transcendence is not an available option given the structure of Islamic cosmology into good and evil, what remains then is a battle of polarities. The holder of the ancient text is the good; the modern is the new and evil. Yet Islam does claim transcendence for now it alleges to be *the* third force as soon as capitalism joins communism in the dustbin of history. A critical view of Islam as *the* future would argue, however, that Islam has not resolved basic dilemmas of mind/body, growth/distribution, materialism/idealism, rather it remains a classical religious view trying to negate the modern not a postmodern view or a premodern view finding ancient cyclical mythologies to reenchant and rejuvenate the 21st century. Islam then is only gaining strength because of the present confluence of the politics with dominant ethnic groups, rather than anything fundamental with Islam itself. It is the deevolution of national politics, not the rise of a particular religiosity.

What is left in many Islamic countries is an attempt to stifle further dissension, to look for signs of Rushdieism (Naguib Mahfouz too has been sentenced to death, but with his age he commented, "I might receive a threat on Sunday and die on Monday of natural causes")¹⁵ and to hope that the number of Muslims continues to increase. For the West, Orientalism gains a further boost as Islam now is firmly sited in the irrational and the dogmatic. While poststructuralism privileges commentary, twenty years back this essay might have been empirical, asking a cross national audience, what percent believed Rushdie should die, what percent believed he should live, what percent did not know who he was.

15 Christopher Dickey, 'A Baedeker to Egypt's Soul', *Newsweek*, 26 February 1990, p 64.

In the days of the Prophet, re-citing the Quranic verses was punishable, now holding *The Satanic Verses* is illegal. While in the West, the *Verses* are available, in the East they are banned. The conscious dare not see its fears. In the home of the Meccan Truth, criticism of Truth is banned. As Sorokin¹⁶ has argued, each civilization expresses one aspect of either sensate or ideational truth (material or religious), but it exaggerates this truth, and eventually denies the other dimensions of the real, until the civilization itself contracts. Islam by denying a plurality of realities or a multiple view of reality hastens its own death, for it is the rigidity of a social formation, after all, one might argue, that leads to its disease.

16 Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1970.

Indeed, this whole affair is about death. Khomeini is already dead, although he hopes he has restored a civilization and his fame as Imam will be forever. Rushdie is sentenced to death although now his name will forever be remembered. Khomeini could have reconstructed Islamic society, but rather he let ancient battles between dynasties and between interpretations of Islam and the Prophet destroy any hope for a united Islam. The oil kingdoms could have used their riches for developing an alternative model of development, but money is money: God is God and in the structure that is the world capitalist system, these two rarely meet on the terms of the transcendental, rather it

is the desire for the material that reigns.

Rushdie has, then, merely added the final stab, an intellectual attack that in different times could have been used as information for the reconstruction task, but instead the information Rushdie gave Muslims was perceived as dangerous noise. As in the seventh century, the response was 'kill the messenger'.

However, the pain of this battle of opposites, of different regimes of knowing the world, of different epistèmes, can be forgotten when we are situated in the intellectual discourse — essays intrigue. But Muslims of all sorts feel the pain of the body and the heart, as do writers wanting free expression. What results are a range of politics and textual strategies, civilizational, geo-political and personal. By reading this event as a Khaldunian decline, we too increase this pain. But sometimes pain is an indicator of a needed change, for reconstruction to proceed, deconstruction is a necessity.

However, the pain of the Muslim should not be so easily lost in our postmodern discourse. In response to the text created on these pages it is but fair to ask should Khomeini's Islam be treated as the authoritative interpretation of Islam given Islam's rich diversity? Is it not merely the Western media that has made him the final arbiter of faith? Indeed, should the *Quran* and the *Verses* be placed in the same text, can they be compared; from the Muslim view, the former was a revolutionary event that created a culture and spirit in time, the latter is but an expression of an intellectual lost in time. Finally, while we attempt to frame the Rushdie/Khomeini discourse in an epistémic dialog, we too speak from an epistème; there is no place to speak from objectively, every writer creates a discourse that is essentially subjective. Discourses that include the possibility of Islamic cosmology as problematic — as this one — are certainly not immune from the virus of subjectivity. Clearly, our own writing, while it distances, brings us closer to pain: it creates and is created by pain.¹⁷

We have tried to situate this postmodern affair in a variety of places: (1) in the politics of *economics*: geopolitics, colonialism and the contradictions of the world capitalist system; (2) the politics of *meaning*: Orientalism and the modern symbols of rationality and logic; (3) in the politics of *rights*: the present evocations of non-violence and the human rights of the writer; (4) in the politics of *tradition*: the blasphemy of the classical good and the sacred; (5) in the politics of the *future*: Islam in expansion or contraction modes; (6) and in the psychology of the *unconscious*: in the battle of opposites and the fear of one's contradictions. Using these various sites, our own point of departure was the various epistèmes in which we all speak from. We hoped that speaking in this one can move beyond simply locating the other in 'fanaticism' or 'satanism'. One can then hope to begin the process of understanding the complexity of the world that is ours: a world that exists in many frames of meaning, in many value preferences. We also used this event to comment on the future of Islam. We did not, however, touch upon the technological, but information as shown through videos and telecommunications (re)present and make the difference in our differences more evident. But these new technologies do not resolve our suffering. They do show us, however, that many of the conflicts of today's world are a result of the existence of simultaneous epistèmes, or ways of ordering our knowing of the world, our knowing of the real. Technology makes a particular world more available to us, indeed, a death sentence without Cable News Network would have been far less dramatic. Rushdie merely would have disappeared one day, but technology makes intrigue globally accessible.

We end this essay not on the construction of the real, but on death; on the

17 Saba Khattak made these points after reading an earlier draft, particularly asking as to my own sites of understanding, the discursive space from which I write. James Monma, Joy Labex and Phil McNally edited earlier drafts.

death of the modern world, on the secular and the religious. With death we are left to search not for alternatives but for transformations: for disjunctive jumps in awareness, in thought and in material conditions. But where does that leave us? Maybe in anticipation of new possibilities of the possible. Maybe standing nowhere in the middle at a time when the middle may not exist.

Young muslim girls in *hijab* at an anti-Rushdie demo in Birmingham, England, May 1989. Photo: MAGNUM

