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## WESTERN MEDIA, ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT AND ANGLOPHONE PAKISTANI FICTION: A SKEWED TRIANGLE

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### **Abstract**

*In the historical context of 9/11, War on Terror and an increased divide between Islam and the west, the first half of this paper investigates the role of the western media in the projection of various anti-Islam writers and literature under the umbrella of freedom of expression. UK based Indian novelist Salman Rushdie and the French Magazine Charlie Hebdo are the two most notable examples in this regard. In the first half, the paper explores and questions British media’s unilateral discursive representations and hence a stereotypical construction of Muslim identity in the West, by focusing on the Rushdie issue. The second half of the paper situates these strategies of the Western media parallel to the work of some of the prominent Pakistani fiction writers in English, particularly Kamila Shamsie, Sara Suleri and Muhammad Hanif. These writers also use religion as a central trope in their writings but the religious content they use and the way they use it is what makes them stand apart from Rushdie and other such anti-Islamic writers and their works. This paper contends that the western media, press in particular, failed to understand why these Anglophone Pakistani fiction writers have not been criticized and reprimanded either for copying Salman Rushdie’s literary tradition or for using Islam, religious discourse or even Quranic verses as a central trope of their writings to reevaluate and reconstruct Pakistan’s socio-cultural and political history. The paper thus establishes that the western media had been following an imperialistic design while representing the Muslim community in terms of Islamic conservatism and fundamentalism.*

**Keywords:** Discourse, Media, Anglophone Pakistani Fiction, Islam, Rushdie

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The recent worldwide protests against the French president, Emmanuel Macron's remarks about Islam, recurrent publications of religious caricatures, release of Innocence of Muslims in 2012 and Rushdie's memoir Joseph Anton (2012) reminds the Muslims of The Satanic Verses (1988) that resulted in a global religious controversy and crisis. The paper situates the Rushdie controversy parallel to the works of Pakistani fiction writers and argues that the British media's imperialistic and irresponsible approach after the publication of The Satanic Verses led to a global crisis between Islamic and western civilizations. The idea of this article came from Political Studies Association Conference 2012 at University of Bedfordshire, England where I presented a paper comparing the use of religious tropes in Rushdie and Pakistani fiction writers. The response by various British media persons compelled me to expand the idea and look into the role of British press and media in the days following the publication of The Satanic Verses. The novel reshaped Muslim community's relationship with the west as Rushdie was accused of blasphemy and misrepresenting Muslims' prophet and religion. The Muslims were offended by its treatment of Muhammad, his wives and companions in a blasphemous manner. It has been a sensitive matter for them ever since. The whole Muslim Ummah was aggrieved by the fact that "prophet had been called an impostor who made up his revelations as he went along, made deals with the Archangel, and treated religion as a kind of business" (Parekh, 1990, p. 2). Protests erupted in many countries against The Satanic Verses with protesters burning its copies in India and the United Kingdom while demanding that printing and further distribution of the book must be banned. The outrage took the form of protests in India even before its publication in September 1988. The Muslims came to know of The Satanic Verses from Sunday and India Today in which excerpts of the book were published along with Rushdie's interview. Khurshid Alam Khan and Syed Shahabuddin, Muslim members of the Indian parliament highlighted the issue in the House. Rushdie complained that many were condemning his book without reading to which Syed Shahabuddin responded through a letter that, "[y]es, I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is" (The Times of India, October 13, 1988).

From India, the word reached England where Islamic Foundation of Leicester's Fayyazuddin Ahmed contacted other Islamic Centers throughout the UK and urged the Muslim community to raise voice so that the book may be banned. The Union of Muslim Organizations UK wrote a letter on October 20 to the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher demanding that the book may be officially banned.

The letter did not help much as the British laws for blasphemy were applicable only to Christianity and Thatcher responded that, “there are no grounds on which the government could consider banning” the book (Pipes, 2003, p. 22). The British government’s failure to consider and anticipate the growing anger and frustration forced the Muslim community to express their frustration more violently as they organized a ritual burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bolton. Even though there were thousands of Muslims present on the occasion but the burning of the book went unnoticed as it went unreported in the press. The British media failed to fathom the anger the book had sparked among the Muslim community, not only in UK but all across the world. The issue got public attention when next year on January 14 the book was burned publically for the second time in Bradford. This time the participation of the non-Muslim local politicians and the bishop forced the media to provide due space to the issue in its daily coverage. This led to a nationwide debate on the national level among various political and social commentators. The violence then reached Pakistan where on February 12 1989; a mob of protestors attacked the office of American Express and American Cultural Center in Islamabad and resulted in six casualties. A year later, in 1989, the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a legal judgment (*fatwa*) sentencing Rushdie to death. The *fatwa* read:

In the name of Him, the Highest. There is only one God, to whom we shall all return. 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.

(Khomeini, Bahman, 1989, p. 12)

Khomeini’s fatwa has haunted Rushdie ever after. Even the very first part of Joseph Anton foregrounds the post - *Satanic Verses* life and the fatwa episode. A BBC reporter called Rushdie and asked him how he felt to know that Imam Ayatollah Khomeini had decreed fatwa of death against him. His answer was: “It doesn’t feel good” (Rushdie, 2012, p.1). Because of love for and commitment to their tradition, the common Muslims cannot reason out Khomeini’s fatwa. Zia-ud-Din Sardar (2003) evaluates the legal position as, “The tradition of thought upon which the Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa relies, derives from *fiqh*, and not from the basic sources of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah” (p. 236). However, Sardar was against the imperialistic designs of the postmodernism that made the non-West null individualities: Whereas other scholars give up master narratives, reject the idea of universal truth and divine interventions in the history making process, and all the tenets of meaning constructing

processes which make the reason for future, self and nature clear; Sardar opines that there should be no deconstruction in the fundamentals of Islam. He argues that “[t]his would be lunacy, it would be civilizational suicide. This was exactly Rushdie’s mistake, the irreverent deconstruction of what is of fundamental value to at least a billion people on the planet” (p. 12). Since 1988 Salman Rushdie has lived his life in hiding when “senior police commanders decided to provide him with grade one protection by the Special Branch, the highest level of security” (Pipes, 2003, p. 28). He has been a controversial yet very popular personality especially among the western media and academia. Since 1988 the Rushdie affair has played a significant role in determining and reshaping position of the Muslim community in the west. Hoydis (2019) argues that the whole issue is seen as the, “prefiguration of the clash of cultures between the West and Islamic world ... the failure of British multiculturalism ... and the beginning of the discursive and medial construction of the ‘British Muslim’” (p. 155). Rushdie, like his writings, is himself a complex and a complicated personality. Born in a Kashmiri Muslim family he spent his early life in Mumbai and later moved to England for education. His works like *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1995) reflect his plural and multicultural identity where he seeks to explore his genesis and roots both in eastern and western cultural traditions.

*The Satanic Verses* (1988) highlights the shift that Rushdie underwent both as a writer and as an individual, because of his varied socio-cultural experiences and environment. The novel contextualizes the pain and the discomfort that migration brings with it. Brister (2014) also comments upon the national undertones when he contends that, “racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference continue to underwrite the national imaginary” (p. 13) in Rushdie’s writings. A paradox between longing for the past and exuberance of the future haunts an immigrant writer. Rushdie makes full use of this paradox combined with an exuberant yet an uncertain future to detach from his self and analyze the changes and the metamorphosis he underwent as an immigrant writer. Rushdie (1989), in *Between God and Devil*, explains his reasons for writing *The Satanic Verses* as:

I am fascinated by how the classic roots of the self in language, society and place are disrupted by the act of migration: you suddenly find yourself in a new culture with different rules, and a new language, and for a while you flounder. The self is forced to find different principles on which to invent itself. That’s what I was really trying to write about. (p. 17)

Disrupted from the roots and unsure of the present any immigrant writer is confronted with a conflict where he tries to redefine himself by rewriting his past life and reimagining his future. After being dislocated from India and migrating to UK, Rushdie chose fiction to deconstruct the problems and difficulties he faced in merging with the new foreign culture; a choice that changed his life for ever after. After Khomeini's *fatwa* Rushdie spent many years under the protection of the British government. Despite all the stress, Khomeini's legal judgment and the protests against The Satanic Verses brought international recognition and acclaim for Rushdie. A dispute, between Rushdie and Khomeini, based upon misuse of words and blasphemous representation of the Muslim religious personalities became a reason of disagreement and hatred between the liberal west and conservative Islamic forces. After the fatwa against him, Rushdie (2005) defended his position as, "I never thought of myself as a writer about religion until religion came after me ... At that time it was often difficult to persuade people that the attack on The Satanic Verses was part of a broader, global assault on writers, artists and fundamental freedoms" (p. 21). Rushdie, along with many other advocates of freedom of expression, argue that it is any writer's prerogative to explore the issues that shape and affect either the indigenous or global socio-cultural and political strata through their creative and philosophical writings. He blamed religious fundamentalism and conservatism as the major reason behind all the protests and anger that the Muslim community demonstrated in reaction against The Satanic Verses which he believed was a serious threat to humanity's dream of a progressive and liberal global world and anybody's right to freedom of speech and expression. Rushdie's response and explanations failed to subside Muslim community's anger and his words were downrightly rejected. As James F. English argues, "the Verses affair has less to do with content than with questions of tone or modality. The humor is the real problem: it is not that Rushdie wrote objectionable things, but that he wrote them with a smirk on his face" (p. 229). Edward Said (1989) has also denounced the writing in measured words:

What shocks Moslems is *Satanic Verses'* knowing intimacy with the religious and cultural material with which it so comically and resourcefully plays. There is also the further shock of seeing Islam portrayed irreverently and-although as a secularist I have difficulty in using this word-blasphemously by a Moslem who writes both in and for the West. (p. 17)

Said wondered how Rushdie had joined hands with the Western Orientalists in Orientalizing Islam. It was shocking for the global Muslim community to see their Prophet (PBUH) being represented in blasphemous way by a writer of Muslim origin



himself. Rushdie has spoken of “faith as something essentially childlike and naïve, a habit to be grown out of, a near-enough synonym for nationalism and capitalism, a myth that sometimes needs a good hard bump on the nose to be dispelled” (Almond, 2007, p. 95). Since the *fatwa* Rushdie has been a controversial figure and his name has resonated and reappeared innumerable times in international media and press whenever there is an argument about religion and freedom of expression or blasphemy and boundaries of creative expression. The Muslims all over the world have despised Rushdie since the publication of *The Satanic Verses* whereas the west has always supported and saved him from any threat, intellectual and physical both, never realizing that “... what Muslims read in *The Satanic Verses* does not leave them indifferent: for them, it reveals the abject poverty of an historical legacy that insists on demeaning their collective history, themselves and all that they hold sacred” (Sardar, 2003, p. 244).

The paper argues that the British press played an imperialist role in escalating the whole issue between the Muslims and the west. The issue was presented and highlighted by the British press as a threat to freedom of expression. The press not only failed to understand the pain that the publication of the novel caused for the Muslims but also did not make any effort to create space for a debate or dialogue where Muslims could present their viewpoint. On the contrary, the British press labeled the Muslims as fundamentalist, intolerant and fanatics. Copies of *The Satanic Verses* were burnt during a protest by the Muslims on 2 December 1988 in Bolton and on 14 January 1989 in Bradford. Such protests and the act of burning copies further provoked the British intelligentsia and the press further to which they reacted strongly. The reaction and the response of the Muslim community were compared with the fundamentalism of medieval times. The British intelligentsia even wondered and questioned whether it would ever be possible to civilize the creed. The right wing factions within the British society even started to question presence of the Muslims in the UK. In the mean while the protests by the Muslim community, in various countries, started to garner international audience and attention. Khomeini’s *fatwa* rationalized and justified Muslims’ anger and frustration as it was now stamped by the holy words of a religious scholar. Prior to this *fatwa* Rushdie was not under the protection of the British government nor any Muslim tried to harm him or someone associated to him. The *fatwa* provided the British Muslims with a sense of power and authority and they started to demand that *The Satanic Verses* must be withdrawn from public libraries, banned in UK and a law about blasphemy should be passed. Reporters

and correspondents from the British press started to interview the Muslim scholars, intelligentsia and the youth from the areas where Muslims were in majority. Unfortunately, the British press still failed to understand and contextualize the anger of the Muslim community and presented the Muslims as uncivilized, fundamentalist and disloyal to the British interests. It was appalling for the British that a foreign religious leader could have such a huge impact on the Muslims in the UK as they were even willing to murder or harm Rushdie, a British citizen at that time. Khomeini refused to withdraw his *fatwa* even after a formal apology from Rushdie. Instead of subduing and rationally managing the whole issue *The Guardian* (16-02-1989), one of the leading British newspapers, printed some offending passages from the novel. The newspaper did not put the published material in the right context and did not provide any commentary highlighting its offensive nature. Many of the prominent British columnists like Peter Jenkins, Anthony Burgess and Hugo Young condemned the reaction of the Muslims. Muslims were compared to Nazis by Burgess in *The Independent* (16-02-1989) whereas Peter Jenkins also from *The Independent* (01-03-1989) called the violent Muslim protests in Bradford as “barbaric act of intolerance”. *The Guardian* (18-02-1989), in one of its editorials, even showed a concern whether the British government had made a “mistake” by “letting in” too many Muslims. Surprisingly and unfortunately amidst all this mayhem the British press did not make any effort or showed concern to envisage and understand the Muslim viewpoint. No known Muslim scholar or theologian, British or foreign, was contacted for a detailed and comprehensive discussion about the whole issue. Instead Muslims’ anger and their way of protest was criticized and condemned in the British media. They simply could not understand and realize the Muslims’ love and affiliation with their prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and hence were bewildered by the unprecedented protests against Rushdie’s blasphemous content. The British media’s partial representation of the Rushdie affair led to a rise of feelings of neglect, frustration and anger amongst the British Muslims.

Publication of *The Satanic Verses* followed by Khomeini’s *fatwa* has made Rushdie an essential and indispensable part of the religio-political and literary discourse in Pakistan. Along with the political and religious debates, Rushdie’s influence on the Pakistani literary intelligentsia is very strong and obvious. Narratives of different Pakistani fiction writers, especially, Sara Suleri, Kamila Shamsie and Mohammad Hanif, are reflective of Rushdie’s viewpoint of politics in Pakistan and the way religious discourse dominates and is used to penetrate the masses. These Pakistani

writers, following Rushdie, highlight and condemn the fact that religious narrative has been used for decades to manipulate and maneuver the masses' popular sentiment, by the political and dictatorial elite of the country. Ian Almond (2007) in *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* elaborates Rushdie's views about Islam's political position in Pakistan as:

Rushdie in novels such as *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, often observes how Islam is invoked to facilitate the nationalisms proclaimed by the newly born states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Whether it is Commanders-in-Chief who quote the Quran, descriptions of Pakistan as 'Al-Lah's new country' (*Shame*, p. 69), Quranic promises of paradise and virgin *houris* to would-be war heroes or the Karachi TV chief who considers 'pork' to be a 'four-letter word' (*ibid.*, p. 70), Rushdie deftly delineates and comments upon the various hypocrisies involved when nation-states employ the faith of their peoples to justify and colour their own self-seeking policies. (pp. 100-101)

Rushdie's impact is remarkably noticeable in Sara Suleri's treatment of different socio-cultural, religious and political themes along with her writing style and narrative structure. Both Rushdie and Suleri's literary competence is rooted in similar political and social context; both of them come from the Subcontinent, both are migrants and hence displaced and both of them share a troublesome relationship with the past, memory, history and political crises of their nations. Rushdie in *Shame* (1995) criticizes the efforts to recreate the partition and early post-independence narratives of the past in Pakistan (p. 34) whereas Suleri sees the country hung over by the "patches of amnesia" (1989, p.3) like a fog, because of the unsuccessful yet repeated attempts to erase and rewrite the pre- and post-independence history. Suleri, like Rushdie, condemns and disapproves the way things were handled in post-independence Pakistan and expresses her dissatisfaction and disapproval in her memoir. Both Suleri and Rushdie intermingle the public and the personal and produce political fiction while highlighting how the public and personal are intertwined and affect each other. Both of them root their narratives in the socio-cultural and linguistic milieu of their countries and societies and excessively use words from Urdu language. Both of them believe that religious discourse and narrative has always been employed in Pakistan to serve the motives and agenda of the democratic and autocratic rulers alike who used Islam to prolong their unlawful rule. Genereal Zia-ul-Haq introduced many punitive laws, including *Hudud Ordinance*, based upon the basic Islamic principles which Suleri condemns and criticizes in *Meatless Days*. Major cultural activities like theatrical performances, music and dance were banned in Pakistan under the dictatorial rule of Genereal Zia-ul-Haq. Zia empowered various religio-political organizations and used



them and their religious discourse to perpetuate his otherwise illegal dictatorship in Pakistan. Suleri witnessed this religious metamorphosis of the Pakistani society and wrote that “the great romance between religion and the populace, the embrace that engendered Pakistan, was done” (p. 15). For Sulery, the arrival of Islamization was the departure of Islam. Islamization is a state –controlled ideological version of Islam. Political and personal domains essentially overlap due to the policy of Islamization. Furthermore, it was religion that gave birth to Two Nation Theory that in turn provided a basis for the independence of Pakistan. According to Suleri, religion was used as a tool of political and social power. She brought forward the fact how Zia had used Islam as an organ to justify his government by his policy of Islamization and introduction of religious laws. Suleri was of the view that this practice would give rise to religious extremism and result into ethnic and societal split. During Zia’s regime of Islamization, Z.A. Suleri who was the head of the family started saying his prayers regularly and turned from a secular person into a religious one. On the other hand, Dadi, who had God as her best friend, “forgot to put prayer back into its proper pocket, for God could now leave the home and soon would join the government” (p. 15). In this regard, Sardar opines that anybody who is making efforts for the establishment of Islamization should focus on “interconnection and interdependence” and in today’s modern – postmodern world any effort to “establish the Shari’ah without introducing social, economic and educational reforms makes little sense” (2003, p. 107).

Shamsie is more influenced by the structure, rather than the content, of Rushdie’s novels. Especially *Salt and Saffron* (2000) is a structural copy of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) where she interweaves different themes and presents multilayered narratives of a family which can simultaneously be seen in a much broader and larger religio-political context. Family functions as a microcosm for which the society is the macrocosm. One formal element is the extended metaphor of food. Food has been used by both the authors as a trope to convey the sense of history and archiving memory to construct cultural identity. Saleem Sinai, one of Rushdie’s character, is involved in such an action. He explains how:

[m]y chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings — by day I spend amongst the pickle-vats, by nights within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (p. 38)

In *Salt and Saffron*, salt as a food item has been used to maintain the identity of the marginalized classes. There are two such characters in the novel: Masood, the cook

and Taj who is the wet nurse. These characters may be marginalized and poor, but these characters are essential to the story like salt; the story remains incomplete without them. Inspired by Rushdie, Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* explores the past through family history and rationalizes today's Pakistan. Like Rushdie, she is also critical of the misuse of religion to justify Zia's political moves and unlawful hegemony. In *Burnt Shadows* (2009), Sajjad wonders that his mother "would have personally knocked on the door of Army House and told the President he should have more shame than to ask all citizens to conduct their love affairs with the Almighty out in the open" (p. 147). Pakistani Anglophone fiction writers recurrently profess that religion is a personal affair should never be imposed publically.

Muhammed Hanif in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) uses Quranic verses to reveal Zia's self-proclaimed and hypocritical obsession with Islam and (mis)use of religious narrative for his political gains. Zia consults the Holy Quran as a horoscope every morning. Established religious theologians like Maulana Maududi had forbidden such practices but the General could not resist the temptation. There are many episodes in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* where Zia consults the holy book for guidance to justify his otherwise unlawful decisions like overthrowing a democratically elected government, imposing martial law regime and hanging Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then prime minister of Pakistan. In a meeting with his subordinate army generals he snubbed them for using the word 'god' instead of 'Allah'. Hanif's satirical portrayal is remarkable:

All God's names were slowly deleted from the national memory as if a wind had swept the land and blown them away...Allah had given himself ninety-nine names. His people had improvised many more. But all these names slowly started to disappear: from official stationary, from Friday sermons, from newspaper editorials, from mothers' prayers, from greeting cards, from official memos...from cricket players' curses; even from beggars' begging pleas. In the name of God, God was exiled from the land and replaced by the one and only Allah who, General Zia had convinced himself, spoke only through him. (p. 34)

Hanif, on many occasions mocks Zia in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* for using religion and religious discourse to manipulate the sentiments and support of the masses, ensure his control over the crumbling political structure in the country and to run the affairs of state. Furthermore, verses from the Holy Quran have also been used by Hanif as a central trope of the novel. Episodes like Zainab rape case and the advice sought by Zia from the Saudi mufti and Zia's photo published in a newspaper where he was staring at an international press correspondent are used in the novel to criticize

and present Zia as a religious imposter. Hanif very clearly holds Zia responsible for decay of the socio-cultural fabric of the Pakistani society and rise of religious extremism in Pakistan.

The above quoted examples establish that Islam not only appears as an important theme in the works of Pakistani fiction writers but these writers also denounce and criticize the national leadership for misinterpreting religious discourse for personal benefits by many in Pakistan. These writers have even criticized religious personalities like Maulana Maududi and political leaders like Quaid-i-Azam and General Zia-ul-Haq either for their political decisions or for their conservative interpretations of Islam. Importantly, in spite of all of this criticism, they have never been threatened for their lives or presented as anti-Islamic or blasphemous by the Muslim community. They are highly acknowledged and celebrated writers both on national and international level as representatives of the Pakistani literary space. Their critical words and viewpoints are widely read, discussed and shared by the Muslims readers across the globe. This is precisely what the British press failed to understand. The British media did not realize that the Muslims did not have any issue with freedom of expression, their religion being discussed or Rushdie as an individual rather it was the content that Rushdie produced in *The Satanic Verses* that targeted and rebuked the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) along with other sacred Islamic personalities. International, especially the British, media did not understand the love and respect the Muslims have for the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Rushdie did not take into account the pain and anger that *The Satanic Verses* caused for the Muslims all over the world whereas the Muslims could not make the west understand how sensitive the issue of blasphemy was for them. The paper concludes that in order to avoid incidents involving publication or filming of blasphemous content and the resultant violent reaction by the Muslims, there is need for an active and comprehensive dialogue between the west and the Muslim world. Moreover, international media through all its form, press, electronic and social, needs to act more responsibly by playing its part in bridging the gap between the two hitherto confronting entities and bringing an end to possibility of clash of civilizations.

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