The Rushdie affair raised apparently intractable interpretive-cum-political issues. The present paper interrogates the possibility of cultural communication across disparate aesthetic traditions. Against prior class-oriented anthropological interpretations of The Satanic Verses, it locates the roots of the conflict in the opposition between religious and secular aesthetic grammars: an Islamic aesthetic of the sublime versus a modernist aesthetic of structurist and dialogic genres of narration. It demonstrates that a detailed semiotic analysis of the novel reveals it to be not an attack on Islam or its Prophet but a serious modernist vision of Islam as a universal, liberal, and tolerant tradition. The paper argues that a reframing on interpretive disagreements is a crucial political step towards a constructive dialogue with Muslims about ethical-cum-aesthetic issues within the framework of a multiculturalist “politics of recognition.” Against that, appeals to “freedom of speech” serve merely to underline the superior political power of the West, which has coerced Muslim believers into a resentful silence.

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In the beginning was the word. And the word was that of a global writer [Salman Rushdie], written in a global language [English], published by a global publisher [Viking-Penguin] for a global readership. Then, from half way across the world, separated by some 4,000 miles from the global city where the writer happened to be living, came a death sentence in the voice of a global religious leader [the Ayatollah Khomeini], addressed to followers of a global religion [Islam], through the media of boundary crossing sound and electronic waves. In response, the nations of the West withdrew into their boundaries and accused the Ayatollah of infringing upon sovereignty and meddling in the private affairs of other nations. And so our story begins.

The Satanic Verses is a book about image and self-image, communication and its breakdown, trust and alienation, loyalty and betrayal, passion and transcendence. But at a different level the book and the crisis it generated, as many have recognised, is about language and words, the meanings of words, the images these words conjure up. The meaning for whom? That, of course, is the key question. The Rushdie affair was not simply an instantiation of a double hermeneutic—it was an example of a triple hermeneutic leading towards an infinitely regressing hermeneutic. We ask not simply how the author interprets Islam, what the book means to its readers, but what his readers, Muslims and non-Muslims, believe about their counterparts’ interpretations. Speculation becomes fact, the reason for action. Readers read the book through the eyes of a non-existent other. And so interpretations have piled upon interpretations in an infinite hermeneutical spiral.

Multiple Readings and the Problem of Cultural Translation

The response to this intractable aesthetic impasse has been an outpouring of interpretive literature which is only now subsiding. The anthropological contribution to this debate has been to address the questions of authorial intention, multiple readings, and cultural translation—issues at the heart of the contemporary anthropological project [Asad 1990a, Fischer and Abedi 1990a].

Almost from the start, the publication of The Satanic Verses was a historic “event,” in the Ricœurian sense: it “imprinted” its mark on time and history [Ricœur 1981: 206–7], and it went “beyond” its original situation of aesthetic production, becoming “detached” from its author’s expectations or intentions during this produc-

1. Versions of the present paper were presented at the University of Manchester’s anthropology seminar, 1991; the Delphi Forum in Poros, 1991; the Pakistan Workshop at Seerwathwaite, 1991; and the John Logie Baird Centre of the University of Strathclyde, 1993. I would like to thank the participants at these forums for their challenging comments. I would also like to thank the editor of CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY and various anonymous readers for their very helpful comments on the paper. The research on which this paper is based was carried out in Manchester with support from the Economic and Social Research Council, U.K., during 1988–90, and I am grateful to the Council for its generous assistance.

2. None, perhaps, more eloquently than Carlos Fuentes [1989].
tion. It opened up unexpected new “worlds” of reference [p. 208] and came to be the subject of multiple readings.

In the anthropological debate on the affair, diametrically opposed interpretations both of the literary and of the social text were grounded in distinct constructions of time and history as bearing upon aesthetic appreciation. One possible approach to the affair was to interpret the confrontation as a clash between “expert” knowledge and “commonsense” understandings, the latter tending to conflate science, morality, and art within a single “communicative infrastructure,”* rooted in “everyday praxis” [Habermas 1985:9].

More radically, the clash could be construed as a class struggle between the popular aesthetic appreciation of a Muslim working class, which judged the novel from a moral and religious perspective, and the aristocratic tastes of a Western cultural elite. This was the approach adopted by Talal Asad [1990a].

Asad directs his critique against the “legitimate” or “refined” tasters of the dominant classes, the “aristocrats” of culture and its arbiters: writers, authors, critics, and journalists. This dominant group aligned itself, he argues, in response to Muslim protests, with the author against what they perceived to be the “barbaric” tastes of an irrational, semi-literate set of self-appointed Muslim critics. The latter read fragments out of context and judged the book without possessing the aesthetic sensibility required to appreciate its message.

By aligning himself with this Western intelligentsia and a globally dominant Western media, Rushdie, in Asad’s view, perpetrated the dehumanising and humiliating of a beleaguered, vulnerable black Muslim underclass in the name of Western “Enlightenment” values. Deconstructing the novel, he finds it “a weapon . . . wielded in the presence of a post-Christian audience—indeed with the seduction of that audience as a primary aim—it draws astutely on the long tradition of Christian anti-Muslim polemics” [Asad 1990a:252].

The theme of symbolic violence, as perpetrated by an intellectual elite on the plebeian masses, is also central to Bourdieu’s aesthetic theory. Advocating an “anti-Kantian aesthetic,”* he argues for a holistic view of taste as simultaneously economic, social, political, moral, and sensual [Bourdieu 1984]. Kant’s stress upon a detached “pure” judgement, rooted in “understanding” or “reason,”* is, according to Bourdieu, merely an expression of the philosopher’s own bias as a member of the emergent German middle class and its notions of Kultur [Elias 1978:8–16, 19]. From the perspective of such a holistic aesthetic, the pro-Rushdie lobbyists were merely defending a powerfully established hegemony:

What is at stake in aesthetic discourse, and in the attempted imposition of a definition of the genuinely human, is nothing less than the monopoly of humanity. Art is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non-humans: artistic experience . . . subject only to the laws of creative genius . . . is the closest approach to the divine experience . . . [p. 491]

Humanity, we are told, is claimed as a monopoly of “culture”, not only against petit bourgeois morality, but also against working class sensuality:

The opposition between the tastes of nature and the tastes of freedom introduces a relationship which is that of the body to the soul, between those who are “only natural” and those whose capacity to dominate their own biological nature affirms their legitimate claim to dominate social nature. [p. 491]

Art, naturalised since the Enlightenment as the new religion with creative artists as its priests, has been, Bourdieu argues, captured by the elite as their sole prerogative. The constantly shifting game of taste and symbolic practices is orchestrated from the top.

Yet this rendition of Kant’s work represents in my view a basic misunderstanding of his aesthetics of “the sublime.” Bourdieu fails to recognise that in his Critique of Judgement Kant’s primary interest was not art. His principal objective was to relegate religion from the realm of scientific knowledge to the realm of powerful aesthetic appreciation. In Kantian philosophy the aesthetic sublime, like the ethical sublime, is that which is beyond empirical verification yet nevertheless open to reflection and dialogue: an imaginative intuition of infinity or eternity which is powerfully moving, without, however, constituting knowledge in the scientific sense [on the sublime in Kant see Bergman and Rotenstreich 1965:15–70; Lyotard 1979:77]. Kant’s aim was not the Nietzschean one of sacralising art and literature—as Bourdieu would have it—or of separating aesthetic appreciation from bodily enjoyment. His primary aim was that of demarcating a space for religious knowledge as a realm of abstract yet powerfully moving experience.

Thus the central problem with the neo-Marxist aesthetic is that by translating taste into a cultural game of power it denies the power of the aesthetic religious imagination. Paradoxically, then, such a class-based aesthetic empowers secular cultural elites far beyond the Kantian aesthetic, by constituting this dominant class as the ultimate source of all positive culture. Hence Bourdieu, following Bakhtin, argues that “the popular imagination can only invert the relationship which is the basis of the aesthetic sociodicy” [p. 491, emphasis added; see also Barthes 1957:139]. Popular culture as resistance is compelled to constitute itself out of the bric-a-brac of mass culture [Hebdige 1979].

Yet turning culture into a mere power game fails to explain why the religious or artistic imagination moves people powerfully. Hence, rather than reinstating the division between “high” culture and “popular” culture, we need to consider further the passionate commitment and empowering potency of religion as a form of aesthetics for distinct—and sometimes opposed—aesthetic communities. Aesthetic communities are constituted

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through a sharing of both cultural conventions and quotididian knowledge (see Geertz 1983: chap. 5). The greater the social sharing, the more artistic products will echo and resonate with shared experiences and past associations; thus what is novel or borrowed in new works of art will be recognised as shocking or revelatory. It is nevertheless possible for modern-day aesthetic communities, despite their spatial dispersion, to continue to share intuitive aesthetic understandings. This was highlighted by the Rushdie affair.

Regarded as an aesthetic community, the vast majority of British Pakistani Muslims, from the moderately pious to the most orthodox, responded to The Satanic Verses not as an underprivileged underclass confronting the priests of an alien “high” culture. Nor was their passionate confrontation with a Western intelligentsia simply a clash between an antiquated morality and an enlightened aesthetic. It was, on the contrary, a clash between two distinct aesthetics and between two distinct moralities or world views. The confrontation was between equal, if disparate, aesthetic communities, each defending its own “high” culture: not “popular” versus “high,” or “low” versus “high,” but “high” versus “high.” As Asad himself points out, it was the boldness with which Muslims asserted their passionate commitment that generated some of the antagonism against them (see also Asad 1990b).

A further point needs to be stressed here: Bourdieu’s anti-Kantian aesthetic, like Asad’s criticism of Rushdie’s betrayal, relies upon a peculiar revision of the Enlightenment. Against this revision, it needs to be stressed that the Enlightenment did not represent simply a move, as is sometimes claimed, from one certainty [religious] to another [modern]. As a set of radical philosophical ideas it was grounded in scepticism and uncertainty. It thus remained throughout in tension with modernity, influencing it variably and dialectically (see Featherstone 1991, Habermas 1985 on “cultural modernity,” Jameson 1981: chap. 1; see also Lyotard 1986:71–83). As Cassirer has argued, “Not doubt, but dogma, is the most dreaded foe of knowledge; not ignorance as such, but ignorance which pretends to be truth and wants to pass for truth . . .” [Cassirer 1951:161]. If certainty was attacked, religious faith was reformulated:

The strongest intellectual forces of the Enlightenment do not lie in its rejection of belief but rather in the new form of faith which it proclaims, and in the new form of religion which it embodies. . . . All apparent opposition to religion which we meet in this age should not blind us to the fact that all intellectual problems are fused with religious problems, and that the former find their constant deepest inspira-

4. Bauman (1992) stresses the certainties of modernity. It is important to recognise, however, that it was the era of modernity that brought about the institutionalisation of scientific enquiry, political democracy, religious pluralism, and modern capitalism—all institutions founded on the tolerance of doubt and uncertainty. Postmodernity has, of course, witnessed a further casting of doubt on the rational consequences of scientific rationality and social planning.

tion in the latter. The more insufficient one finds previous religious answers to basic questions of knowledge and morality, the more intensive and passionate become these questions themselves. The controversy from now on is no longer concerned with particular religious dogmas and their interpretation, but with the nature of religious certainty; it no longer deals with what is merely believed but with the nature, tendency, and function of belief as such. [pp. 135–36, emphasis added]

Seen thus, I shall argue that The Satanic Verses can be understood as a modernist, not a postmodernist, text since it is, above all, an inquiry into the nature of religious belief and religious certainties from a humanist perspective. The novel’s ultimate message is one of faith in man as the source of rational creativity. Postmodernism, by contrast, is constituted by absolute uncertainty, a loss of the last remaining cornerstone of modernist faith in progress, a realisation of the irrational consequences of rationality itself.

A further point of Cassirer’s is relevant here: the Enlightenment’s philosophy was not utterly novel; it drew on earlier epochs and ages before and beyond the Christian West. In fact, at the very core of The Satanic Verses is the idea of the flawed prophet/hero/great leader, a fundamentally pre-Enlightenment idea which has its roots in Hindu mythology, the Old Testament, and ancient Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. It is equally evident that if the West sacralises literature, for Muslims it has perhaps an even greater value. In a similar vein, Fischer and Abedi (1990b) point to the fundamental place of uncertainty in Islam as a moral trial or crucible.

In attacking Rushdie’s apparent “betrayal,” Asad mistakenly renders the Enlightenment too Western, denying its broader, transcultural roots. From that flows the negative association between “enlightened,” “assimilated” Indians/Pakistanis who betray their own people/culture/religion by promoting bourgeois liberal ideals. Against this view it may be argued that to identify the values of the Enlightenment exclusively with the West is to deny many non-Western cultures their ethical autonomy. Indeed, Islamic “Modernists” (i.e., believers who have attempted to fuse modernist ideas with Islam) both in South Asia and elsewhere are moved by a recognition of these shared transcultural foundations.

The point I am making is simply this: Rushdie did not align himself with a present day liberal intelligentsia against his own people; if this seemed to be the case, it was because he was fighting precisely the same battles against dogma fought by the writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment and doing so by evoking earlier traditions. The Satanic Verses aims not at a loss of faith but at the creation of a foundation for a “religion of freedom” [Cassirer 1951:160].

Moreover, the battles of the Enlightenment did not result everywhere in the forging of a central role for intellectuals. In Britain, in particular, intellectuals failed to achieve the influence gained by their continental counterparts (see Turner 1992). The English response to
The Satanic Verses as an aesthetic work exemplifies this marginality. Outside a minority group of writers and journalists who sprang to the writer’s defence at some personal risk, the novel was regarded by almost everyone, including national political and religious representatives, as either offensive or a provocative nuisance. It was widely held to be dull and arcane. Beyond the circle of creative artists and the press, few if any invoked the sanctity of art or creative genius, and the crisis was quickly refocused around practical issues of law and order, national sovereignty, and the blasphemy law. The most common response was surprise that a novel could be taken so seriously.

Yet despite British pragmatism, aesthetic works do move people deeply. This brings me to the fundamental antinomy implied by the Critique: if aesthetic judgement and a sense of the sublime are both rooted in a subjective sensibility and a culturally constituted imagination, can disagreements in aesthetic judgement between aesthetic communities be bridged? Is cultural translation, a transcendence of parochial cultural values, possible?

Fischer and Abedi attempt to bridge the interpretive chasm by arguing that the novel’s thematic has its roots in traditional Islamic exegetical debate and that satirical representations of Islam have a long history in Persian literature. In a dazzling display of exegetical pyrotechnics, they demonstrate that the issues at the centre of the novel have been a focus of Muslim religious debate between doctrinal and non-doctrinal Islamic scholars for many centuries, that they were not Rushdie’s invention.

The problem of translation, they argue, is not merely across languages and cultural borders but among interest groups and discourses competing for hegemony within social arenas, be they local, national or transnational. Rushdie’s text and social text make vivid the point that in Muslim worlds the secular intelligentsia and the religious intelligentsia are engaged in cultural class-warfare, each using systematic discourses the other only partially understands. [1990a:108]

Against this view it can be argued that even if traditional Islamic literature satirises pompous religious clerics or lesser Muslim historical figures, by the same token the Prophet of Islam is rarely attacked. There are good reasons for this, I believe, rooted in the aesthetic/ethic of the sublime. Hence it cannot be argued that the passionate response of Muslims to the novel was due merely to a current religious dogmatism or to their lack of familiarity with the conventions of their own literature. It seems quite clear that their response was one of genuine moral and aesthetic outrage. This is, indeed, precisely the tragic impasse the Rushdie affair generated: while from an Islamic perspective the novel in its transgression is offensive, read in terms of modernist literary conventions it is possible to show that it is not an attack on the Prophet of Islam or on Islam as a great religion.

In interpreting the text from a secular modernist perspective I shall also be arguing that the Rushdie affair was not merely an instance of class or ethnic struggle for hegemony, even though it increasingly came to be perceived in those terms. Such a construction fails to appreciate the fundamental interpretive conundrum the novel raised. To analyse this conundrum fully, I attempt here to consider both sides of the interpretive chasm, the Muslim and the secular modernist. My exposition is necessarily schematic, given the limitations of space, and is narrowly focused on the problem of aesthetic interpretation and cultural translation as these bear upon the present-day anthropological project.

It is important to recognise in advance of my discussion that British Pakistanis’ anger at the book was magnified by the anomalies of religious minority citizenship it revealed: on the one hand, diasporic Muslims were constrained by the laws of their adopted land; on the other hand, the publication of the novel revealed that the law was discriminatory and protected only Christian feelings of offence. These anomalies were explained by a student of computer science on his way to the demonstration against Rushdie which took place in London in May of 1989. He was asked by my research assistant whether the death sentence did not infringe upon human rights.

A. Human rights and Islam are not two separate things [i.e., contradictory principles]. What this person [Rushdie] has done has hurt a lot of people. According to Islam this person should be killed but because he is living in a non-Muslim country this makes the job a lot more difficult. So I personally do not call for his killing, since we live in a non-Muslim country. If this was a Muslim country or there was Muslim law here then certainly he should be killed, but the most we can do is persuade this [British] government that there should be an equal law for the Muslims [of Britain] as there is [the blasphemy law] for Christians. So then, in future, no one else can take this action—to write in any form a book against Islam or, in fact, against any other religion in the world. That is what we should aim for—to ban the book, to persuade the country to draw up a law that would restrict any writing of this kind in the future.

Q. What do you think this whole demonstration will achieve?

A. The demonstration is a means of expressing your feelings to the community or the society in which you are living. If we are demonstrating peacefully, within the law, we are right to demon-

5. British policy makers have decided to abandon the author and condemn the novel in the interests of communal harmony, as was made clear in a recent speech by the outgoing Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Sir David Lane, who talks of the “sense of hurt and anguish suffered by Muslims because of the obscene attacks on all that they hold sacred” [emphasis added].

strate. What will it achieve? It will give an impression to both communities that Muslims are not weak, that they believe in their faith, they do have some rights, they do have some principles, and they stand for those principles, they are willing to demonstrate and fight for those principles; they should be treated equally to the Christian or the Jew or any other community in this country. What the government is saying is that Rushdie has freedom of expression. What is the point of millions of Muslims living in this country? They too have the right of freedom of expression. This is one way we can express ourselves to counteract what he has written, to show the world that we do care about our religion.

Religious and Secular Aesthetics

Muslims have been accused of extracting offending sentences from The Satanic Verses out of context. According to modernist literary theory "a text is a whole, a totality" [Ricoeur 1981:211]. Significantly, however, it is precisely this textual unity that lies at the root of the irreconcilable clash between a religious and secular aesthetic.

More even than their secular counterparts, religious Muslims too have responded to the novel in terms of its wholeness, even if they seem to be highlighting fragments and sentences out of context. Islam as a religion stresses the spatial separation of the sacred and the profane. Before entering a mosque or reading the Qur'an a Muslim must bathe his entire body, put on clean clothes, and leave his (polluted) shoes at the entrance. The space of the mosque is perfumed with incense, while the Qur'an is treated with particular respect [it is always placed above the ground, for example.] Menstruating women, in a state of pollution, are not permitted to enter a mosque or pray. For daily prayers, a Muslim spreads a praying mat on the floor to demarcate a space of sanctity. The very earth can be powerfully sacralised [see Werbner 1996].

A Muslim aesthetic is thus an aesthetic of separations. The Prophet as a subject of aesthetic delight is the epitome of a sacred Kantian "sublime"; he is the imaginative locus of platonically real absolutes: goodness, beauty, purity, infinity, power, magnificence, light, generosity. He is the al-insamul 'l kamil, the Perfect Man [see Nicholson 1978: chap. 2]. To contemplate the sublime aesthetically for a Muslim is to contemplate the persona of the Prophet. He is the sublime, objectified and made real, the subject of supreme love. His closest companions and consorts, those who occupy the same sacred space, are thus sacralised along with him. To a lesser degree all saints and prophets participate in this aesthetic of the sublime.7

7. Because he recognised the powerful emotional conviction evoked by the sublime, Kant aimed to separate aesthetic appreciation from scientific knowledge/truth. In Islam, as in all religions, the ethical, aesthetic, and empirical are fused. If the Prophet is an embodiment of the sublime, he cannot be conceived of simultaneously as an ordinary mortal.

A novel is a concrete, unitary physical entity. When Muslims I know read The Satanic Verses they are deeply offended not by the rational questioning of the Qur'an's divine source—they are used to such sceptical critiques—but by the juxtaposed contiguity of profane language and profane acts or persons with the image of the Prophet and his companions and wives. The book is perceived as a single and undivided physical space. Muslim critical response is not simply moral. It is an aesthetic response. The offence is a gut feeling of shock. All the Muslims with whom I have discussed the book feel certain that Rushdie as a Muslim, albeit a lapsed one, intended this offence. The aesthetic canons they deploy make this conclusion logical and inescapable. What they find difficult to comprehend is the West's incomprehension. Instead, they believe that a West which praises the book does so because it shares the author's desire to offend and ridicule them and their faith. This explains the religious Muslim intellectual response, articulated in English in a recent collection [Ahmad and Kidwai 1992]. It explains why even the moderately religious responded so violently. Their response was one of aesthetic "disgust" and shock, a response rooted in the imagination, intuitive and emotional rather than self-interested, analytic or jurisprudential.

More difficult to explain is why secular Marxist Muslim intellectuals such as Talal Asad, Rana Kabbani, and Ali Mazrui also responded by condemning the author and the novel. In great measure, of course, their response, like that of other moderate British Muslim leaders, can be understood as an attempt to deflect attention from Muslim support, in the moral panic following the publication of the novel, for the Ayatollah's death sentence. As the Western counter-moral panic reached its crescendo, these intellectuals refocused the debate around the media's demonising of Muslims. They blamed the author for releasing the demons, thus reflecting a familiar diasporic attitude which tolerates "internal" criticism but rejects the right to criticise publicly before a hostile world. The global reach of Rushdie's "internal" critique made it unforgivable.

The wide condemnation of the novel by both pious and radical Islamic scholars stemmed also, however, from Rushdie's "borrowing" of the highly offensive tropes of medieval Christianity to describe the Prophet, in a libelous language which echoed also a 20th-century Hindu "hate" literature against Islam8 [for many Pakistanis this compounded the widespread belief that Rushdie was an instrument of an evil Jewish plot to defame Muslims]. The present paper argues that in focusing on these passages Muslim critics failed to take account of the broader narrative structure of the book. The libels against the Prophet and his family are voiced or perpetuated in the novel by cunning traitors and are part of whole series of dramatic ordeals that the Prophet undergoes that move the action forward and underlie the nar-

8. I am grateful to Richard G. Fox for the latter point and for his comments on Chamcha's nickname ("Sala") below. I agree here also with Modood (1989) regarding the very widespread offence the book was felt to cause even among moderately religious British Pakistanis.
The Satanic Verses seems to be an attack on this image of the sublime. All of the critics—left, right and centre—have taken this for granted. Everyone except the author. But is it really such an attack? Rushdie has repeatedly argued that the Prophet himself would not be offended by his portrayal. To examine this claim, the following interpretation analyses the novel as a symbolic unity focused around the image of the Prophet, portrayed as the exemplary, perfect man.

The Satanic Verses

The Satanic Verses is constructed around the central figure of the Prophet who stands in opposition to six characters, who are, in fact, three paired characters. Four of the characters are counter-selves of Rushdie himself, and all four are partially or entirely flawed morally, negative figures who implicitly seem to lampoon and ridicule the author for his unprepossessing appearance, his cowardice in the face of adversity, his betrayal or jealousy of women, his scepticism, his arrogance, and his vindictiveness.

These four counter-selves stand in profane opposition to the Prophet, whereas the other two figures, also a pair, stand in extreme opposition both to Rushdie himself as well as to the Prophet. The third pair represents uncompromising religious absolutism. The important point to note, however, is that this is not simply a book about religious belief or about migration and its implications, although these are undoubtedly central political themes in the book. It is, above all, a book about fundamental moral values and the ordeals that human beings face and that test these values. It is, in other words, a book about personal and public ethics.

The book is built around two key space/time settings, Bakhtinian chronotopes, each of which also contains an internal division. One chronotope is that of the modern world split between London and India (or Iran), representing diaspora and home. The other chronotope is set in the Hijaz during the rise of Islam and is split between Mecca and Madina, representing home and diaspora. In each setting there is a migration and a return (with one minor exception). Of the four counter-selves, one of each pair lives in each of the chronotopes. The final pair appears in the modern chronotope and is opposed to the figure of the Prophet in the early Islamic chronotope (fig. 1).

The two chronotopes both mirror and comment upon each other. This is underlined by a further pair of women, one in each chronotope: Hind, the powerful wife of the ruler of Jahlia, the city of sin and ignorance before its purification by the Prophet and his followers, and Margaret Thatcher, Maggie the Bitch, Mrs. Torture, in the crumbling London of corruption and racism, trying to fight the tide of history and recreate Britain’s imperial glory. A third woman, Ayesha, Empress of Desh, counter-person of the Shah of Iran, parallels the other two women in attempting to reverse the tide of history by returning to a Zoroastrian calendar.

The book, in other words, is a structuralist’s dream, and the actions in both chronotopes parallel each other and throw light on the meanings implied by the events and actions each chronotope contains. I shall attempt to illuminate, through a structuralist analysis, the basis for Rushdie’s persistent claims that the Prophet of Islam would not be offended by his book, before arguing that in a deep sense his project partially fails.

The book is moved along by the known episodes in the life of the Prophet. Let me start, however, by representing the four main counter-selves and the values for which they stand (fig. 2). The first pair is composed of Chamcha, meaning “stooge,” “yes-man,” “slave,” or “spoon” (the shortening of his name from Salahudin to “Sala” also puns on the word for “brother-in-law” in Urdu, often used as a swear word meaning SOB, or worse, in English). He is the Anglicised Muslim Indian migrant who leaves home, rejects his father, marries a tweedy Englishwoman, and adopts a pakka English accent, lifestyle, and mode of dress. He is the background voice in various TV ads and puppet shows, a chameleon actor who can impersonate anyone. Chamcha represents self-denial, self-hatred, and hatred of his past, his religion, and his people; hence, although he is rational, he is without feeling or love, helpless against racism, which he does not believe exists. The man without integrity, he is opposed, we shall see, to the Prophet as the man of total integrity.

His reflection in the Meccan chronotope is Salman the Persian, the classic hypocrite (munafiq) of the Qur’an, the man who betrays the Prophet, secretly distorting the verses he is supposed to be writing down—and for a while getting away with it. Like Chamcha he is a coward, never confronting the Prophet openly, loveless and emotionless, too clever by half. He is also a slanderer, the man who carries the blasphemous message of the medieval Crusaders and depicts the Prophet maliciously as the anti-Christ, sexually insatiable and promoting sexual perversity and homosexuality, inventing rules for his own convenience.

To understand these figures one must go back to Fanon’s theory of colonial subordination and the effect it has on the colonised, according to which the oppressed (and especially their elites) become pale copies of their masters and thus inevitably take on the demonic stereotypes in which their masters cast them. Hence Chamcha, the perfect Indo-Englishman, falls from the sky in a Gramscian rebirth and becomes the devil—with
The modern Chronotope:
(a) Saladin Chamcha (stooge, yes-man, slave)
(b) Gibreel Farishta (angel)
(c) The Imam/Ayesha the butterfly Prophetess
(d) 'Maggie the Bitch'/Ayesha Empress of Desh

\[ \text{(Titlipur)(c,)} \hspace{2cm} \text{(Mecca)} \]
\[ \text{TEHERAN (c,d,)} \hspace{2cm} \text{LONDON (a,b,c,)} \]
\[ \text{BOMBAY (a,b)} \hspace{2cm} \text{d,)} \]

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The Meccan (Jahilian) Chronotope:

\[ \text{JAHILIA (a, b, c, d)} \hspace{2cm} \text{YATHRIB (a, c)} \]
\[ \text{(MECCA)} \hspace{2cm} \text{(MADINA)} \]

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(a) Salman the Persian
(b) Baal
(c) THE PROPHET
(d) Hind

**Fig. 1.** Major chronotopes in The Satanic Verses.

horns, tail, hairy body, and enlarged penis—and is arrested and beaten up by the British police. As the self-hating migrant he lacks integrity and thus assumes the image imposed on him by his racist hosts. Similarly, Salman the Persian, the hypocrite, adopts the libels and slanders of medieval Crusaders. Both act in their demonised capacity as satanic testers of the more positive and yet still flawed other pair of counter-selves. Both are forgiven. Chamcha is the luckier: he rediscovers himself when he feels hate for his oppressors and love for his own people, whereupon he loses his demonic appearance. In the end, he returns home, rediscovers his love for his father and his love for his Indian childhood sweetheart who has become a crusading secular Muslim fighting in India against communalism and sectarianism. For Rushdie she is the image of the true, organic hybrid: a liberal who yet retains her integrity and love for her country while fighting against archaic authenticities and the violence these unleash. Chamcha is forgiven and spared. His life is saved by the man he tempted and finally ruined. Salman the Persian is also forgiven by the Prophet; his life is spared and and he, too, returns home to Persia. A far worse character than bumbling Chamcha, however, he never feels emotion and hence never finds love.

The second pair—which is also one—represents true creativity and the artistic imagination, flawed by a passion that cannot transcend itself and ultimately ruins each of these characters. If the first pair represents the Islamic battle against hypocrites, the second represents the Islamic battle between nafs [the vital, passionate soul] and ruh [the reflective eternal soul], the internal jihad. Here the central myth is that of Shakespeare’s Othello: the noble Moor tempted by the Satanic Iago who, losing his soul in jealousy, ruins his beloved and himself. Gibreel, the first of these characters, is in many senses Othello’s double. Like Rushdie himself, he is a celebrity, an Indian film star who acts in theatricals, in the roles of various gods, both Hindu and Muslim—hence a tolerant man. He has great talent, integrity, and vision (p. 427), yet he betrays himself and everyone around him. Indeed, his life is a catalogue of betrayals,
and it is juxtaposed against the Prophet's life, the life of a man who is tempted only once and repents in time and who overcomes all the ordeals with which Satan and his fellow men test him.

The juxtaposition of Gibreel with the Prophet can be set out as a series of parallel and opposed events. Both are, or became, orphans and are adopted by loving 'uncles.' Whereas the Prophet sees a slave being flogged, stands up to his oppressor, and pays for the slave only to free him, Gibreel sees his friend Chamcha being carried off by the police and does nothing about it. For his act of courage and generosity the Prophet is rewarded by the loyalty of the freed slave, who becomes one of his most devoted companions. For his disloyalty Gibreel is later the target of revenge by Chamcha, who slaughters his beloved, Alleluia Cone [Gibreel's crucible as Cone mountain in the novel is the Prophet's crucible]. Chamcha, playing Iago to Gibreel's Othello, drives Gibreel to murder and suicide. Whereas Gibreel betrays his first mistress, Rekha Merchant, going off with another woman, the Prophet is totally loyal to his first wife, also a merchant, and only remarries after her death. Rekha Merchant takes her ghostly revenge on Gibreel for the rest of the book. The Prophet's wife provides him with support throughout his life, especially at the start of his prophecy, when he is fearful no one will believe him. In the third event, Gibreel believes the slander that his young mistress has betrayed him and goes mad with hatred. By contrast, the Prophet trusts his beloved young wife Aisha when she is left behind in the desert for several hours and brought back by a young shepherd. He refuses to believe the slander about her. Historically, this wife later became one of the pillars of Islam, an important person in her own right. Finally, Gibreel,

**Fig. 2. The juxtaposition of values in The Satanic Verses.**
driven mad by his passion and jealousy, becomes an agent of revenge and death, sparking off a race riot in London which leads to death and destruction. He finally kills his beloved and her supposed lover and then commits suicide. A redeeming feature in this otherwise negative character is that he saves Chamcha’s life, repaying revenge with kindness, and later does not kill him. The Prophet in his power, when he returns triumphant to Mecca, is compassionate and forgives all his adversaries with the exception of the poet Baal. One character uses his power for destruction, the other for purification and reconstruction.

The central episode in the book, that of the Satanic Verses, parallels Gibreel’s temptation by Chamcha. The Prophet is tempted by an offer by the ruler of Jahilia and thinks he hears the voice of the angel Gabriel telling him that he should compromise and recognise the three female idols of Jahilia as angelic daughters of God. Significant here I think is the role of his truly loyal companions who believe in his message, feel betrayed by him, and who ultimately enable, perhaps compel him to come to the realisation that he has erred. He goes back to the mountain and receives the true message, overcoming this one and only temptation he had succumbed to. Rushdie implies that it is this temptation which makes him human and thus ultimately compassionate and forgiving of the sins of others. He has, as it were, encountered the true reality of the devil, and he continues to recognise “his” power of temptation even to his death bed. Gibreel [who is also the Prophet’s tempter, travelling in his nightmares through space and time], succumbs, by contrast, to the Satanic voice and never fully repents. He thus becomes, as mentioned, an agent of destruction.

Gibreel’s counterpart in the Jahilia chronotope is the poet Baal. He, too, is opposed to the Prophet. Here Rushdie creates a second dualism between the antithetical worlds of the harem and the brothel, mosque and anti-mosque. Rushdie explains, in an article which initially appeared in the Independent on Sunday, that “the presence in the harem of the Prophet, the receiver of a sacred text, is likewise contrasted with the presence in the brothel of the clapped-up poet Baal, the creator of profane texts. The two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse, are juxtaposed, by making them echoes of one another; and finally the pure eradicates the impure” (1991:19, emphasis added).

More generally, the Jahilian chronotope divides internally into two subchronotopes, juxtaposing the pure and the impure in time, into Jahilia-before and Jahilia-after (fig. 3). Jahilia-before is a city of sand that hates water and perversely celebrates the Prophet Abraham’s betrayal of his wife (i.e., the biblical version of the myth). Jahilia-after is a city that worships water, and the sufferings of Hajira, Hagar, Abraham’s wife, an ordeal set by God, are no longer forgotten. In both the hajj and umra pilgrimages to Mecca, Hagar’s suffering and heroism are commemorated by all pilgrims who run between the two hills, Saf and Marw, seven times, as she was said to have done before the holy spring, the zamzam, miraculously appeared and saved her baby son’s life. According to Islamic traditions, she was later rejoined by Abraham who rebuilt the ka’ba with his son Ismail.

The brother is part of Jahilia-before. While the first Jahilia chapter, “Mahound,” portrays the ordeal of the Prophet in which he overcomes temptation and achieves his singular divine vision, the second Jahilia chapter, “Return to Jahilia,” portrays the ordeal of Mahound’s true challenger, Baal, the secular poet-genius, who transcends his cowardice and selfishness to find true feeling. The transformation is a gradual one, and, like that of the Prophet in the earlier chapter, it involves an initial failure. It begins with a transformation in the brothel itself: as the whores take on the names of the Prophet’s wives and adopt Baal as their “husband,” they also assume some of the qualities and values of those wives and expect Baal to behave accordingly as a loyal “husband.” As he changes he begins to understand and empathise with the Prophet and even defends him to Salman the Persian, when the latter slanders him. Baal, however, like Gibreel his counterpart, betrays his “wives” in his cowardice, watching them passively as they are bundled off by the police, desperately appealing to him for manly protection. To redeem this act of cowardice and achieve a final integrity he performs a deed of supreme courage: sought for by Mahound’s men, he nevertheless turns up at the jail now bursting with pimps and prostitutes, an absurd figure of fun, to recite magical, beautiful love poetry for his jailing “wives.” His poetry is so marvellous that the guards, their eyes running with tears, do not prevent him from nailing the text of the poems to the prison wall. This he does for twelve consecutive evenings, serenading the prostitute-namesakes of the Prophet’s wives while at the same time publicly dishonouring the Prophet and his family. Nor does he repent this act of public irreverence: “‘I am Baal,’ he announced. ‘I recognise no jurisdiction except that of my Muse; or, to be exact, my dozen Muses.’” (p. 391).

Is this apparent dishonouring of the Prophet and his family intended as such? Is the equation Baal draws between prostitutes and loyal wives really the offence it
is taken to be? For a religion that stresses family loyalty and sexual purity, a challenge to these is deeply insulting. For a secular religion of the individual, the celebration of love cannot be construed as offensive because it glorifies human values despite human frailties. Against this one may ask: is pluralism without offence to singularity possible? And is the infliction of offence to those holding other values, however irrational these may seem, permissible in the name of this pluralism? The Prophet’s answer is a resounding “no”: promiscuous poet and prostitutes must both be executed. And it is in this act that the unresolved contradiction in the book lies.

The confrontation between true, sincere religious vision and equally genuine secular inspiration, drawing upon a promiscuity of sources, many muses, high and low, rather than a divine singularity, is at the heart of this book. The religion of submission, Islam, Rushdie implies, cannot tolerate non-submissive yet ethical and aesthetic inspiration. Baal is executed by Mahound not simply because of the blasphemy and dishonour he is perceived to have inflicted upon the Prophet and his wives but because he speaks in the name of an alternative moral order. In executing him the Prophet signals the limits of his compassion and magnanimity in victory. He must use brute force to eliminate what is essentially unsuppressible: a morality that constitutes an attack against rule-bound love through a genuine, selfless celebration of earthly love. Yet the Prophet knows, as his followers do not, that while his own religious message is powerfully singular, what inspired not only his miraculous Qur’anic poetry but also the passion and feeling of his message was the part-devilish goddess he had publicly renounced, Al-Lat, the Muse. On his deathbed he faces this truth and, while choosing the singular ethical God once again, acknowledges his debt: “Still, I thank Thee, Al-Lat, for this gift” [p. 304]. This final moment of self-truth and humility is, Rushdie implies, what makes the Prophet a great human being, not a God, and Ayesha, his beloved wife, is first to recognise this truth about her husband.

The central chronotopes, Jahilia-before and Jahilia-after, contain the organising metaphors of the book and its key ideas linking agency with moral transformation (on these concepts see Fernandez 1982 and Werber 1989). By implication, there are also three further subchronotopes: London-before, the London of English imperial domination, Iran-before, the Iran of the Shah with its murderous secret service and religious revisionism, and India-before, a place of peaceful villages. None of these has a redeemative “after”: the London-after of migration and ethnic diversity, the Iran-after of the Ayatollah, and India-after of communal and sectarian hatred are all places in which chaos and violence are constantly close to the surface.

Hence, against the four characters of the central chronotopes, counter-selves of the author, and against the Prophet himself are set two other characters, a man and a woman. The “imam,” is the counter-self of the Ayatollah Khomeini, a man of absolute faith and no compas-
eral elevation of literature as the new religion, conveyed in the novel through the “sympathetic portrayal” of the figure of Abu Sufyan, eclectic reader of world literature. The unsympathetic portrayal of Pamela, the do-gooder white woman who marries Chamcha, is related, he argues, not to the fact that she betrays her brown husband by continuously hobnobbing with blacks but to her interracial marriage which undermines white supremacy assumptions. Rushdie, the assimilated Muslim Asian, adopts here in Asad’s view the “core values” of the English upper classes he aspires to.

This type of ad-hoc, representational, and fragmentary analysis simply reveals its inadequacy as an interpretive tool. Asad fails to recognize that these two characters, Abu Sufyan and Pamela, are neither good nor bad, but symbolically *one and the same*, part of a pantheon of misalliances and ecstatic figures (six in all) who remain passive, uncreative, unable “to change the world.” Rushdie mocks all these figures gently, rather than passing judgement upon them. The activities of well-meaning white liberals or the tolerance of Sufi world renouncers are commendable but fruitless, just as the various misalliances remain sterile. Such figures are opposed in the text to true hybrids, who are the only figures able to create, procreate, and act positively. Hence, Part V of the novel, “A City Visible but Unseen”, takes up the novel’s central theme of multiplicity versus unity (hybridity), disintegration versus integration, impotence/destructiveness versus creativity, from a postmodernist perspective.

What’s in a name? Rushdie makes names work for him. They disguise identities, demonise, and divinise inversely. They are external impositions or self-disguises: Saladin Chamcha is not the heroic Saladin, the historic Islamic conqueror, victor over the Crusader armies; Gibreal Farishita is no angel; Ayesha, the counter-self of the Shah of Iran, as well as the butterfly prophetess, is nothing like the original namesake who understood the true message of the Prophet (p. 392); Salman the Persian is entirely unlike the Prophet’s wise companion; Baal is not the false Canaanite idol his name implies; so, too, Mahound is not the anti-Christ monster medieval Crusaders made him out to be. By implication, real identities are hidden while character and action give meanings to names, whether positive or negative. Why use names thus? Why call prostitutes, whether in Jahilla or London, by the names of the Prophet’s wives (p. 460)? “Our names meet, separate, and meet again, Baal thought, but the people going by the names do not remain the same” (p. 359).

This play on names is, I believe, linked to the central project of the book: to reclaim Islam as an *ethical* religion for secular Muslims, a new breed. Rushdie does so by exploring the central ethical values of Islam as he understands them but also by rejecting Islam’s current stress on extreme purity and ritualised praxis at the expense of ethics. Thus in the end the book makes a claim for the sacredness of the profane, the whores in the brothel who are victims of exploitation: even prostitutes constitute the battleground of angelic and satanic forces; to condemn them outright is to deny their sacred humanity. The liberal credo desacralises the sacred in order to sacralise the profane—above all the individual, the locus of the cosmic battle between good and evil. By mixing the profane and the sacred, good and evil, the author is, it appears, asserting that all human beings are in some sense sacred—the liberal message—yet each is the product of her or his ability to overcome trials and ordeals—a central Islamic message. What differentiates between human beings is not their names, the external labels/identities which they assume or are imposed upon them by others, but how they meet the various crucibles they face. These trials and ordeals, the mountains they climb [Everest, Cone], reveal the angelic or satanic within them. Understood as a narrative, the book’s message is thus deeply pro-Islamic: Muhammad the Prophet—call him Mahound, call him Paki, call him black bastard—was the perfect man because he stood up to abuse and transcended his frailties, his inner desires and greed. This entitled him to become the agent of a supreme ethical revelation. The move from a religion of ritual purity to Islam as an ethical credo stressing the value of the individual [men and women alike] appears to be the central aim of the novel, whether or not it is convincingly achieved.

To interpret this message requires a recognition of the central paradigmatic myths and intellectual writings Rushdie draws upon, namely, the religious traditions, the *sunna* of the Prophet, Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello*, William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Hindu *Mahabharata*, with its tales of transformative gods and avatars; Gramsci’s notion in the *Prison Notebooks* of a hegemonic interregnum or crisis, of death and rebirth [“...the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (see Simon 1991:40)]; accounts of labels against Muslims and the Prophet as the anti-Christ in medieval Christianity (see Armstrong 1988); Muslim, especially Persian, traditions of satirical poetry (see Fischer and Abedi 1990b).

Given the diverse range of textual sources, it is not surprising that few readers, whether religious Muslims or secular Western intellectuals, crack the code. In addition to its central mythological sources, the novel contains a wealth of other literary references, from Melville and García Márquez to T. S. Eliot. It is, as many have recognised, a veritable minefield of unacknowledged literary allusions. Rushdie has attempted to create a true hybrid, an integral unity of Islamic and Western myths, a new organic whole. Most Muslims, however, do not see this as a valid project: they wish to retain their traditions in their compartmentalised purity. Hybridism, the response to change, novelty, and other cultures, and fundamentalism, a return to a past complete, whole, and unchangeable, stand in implacable opposition. Most British Pakistanis choose the middle-ground, keeping separate the pure and the impure, the Islamic and the Western, in discrete social domains.

If for Rushdie, inspired by Bakhtin, the profanation of the Prophet is humanising and revitalising (Bakhtin 1984:19–21), the conjunction of pure and impure is un-
acceptable to most Muslims. For the majority, the libelous, blasphemous thoughts of Salman, the Prophet’s treacherous scribe, set alongside the sanctified image of the Prophet sully that image contagiously. We might say that, going against the narrative message, this metonymic contiguity is “magically” polluting. The author reveals little about the suffering of the Prophet in the face of this treachery or of the mockery of his wives, leaving the voice of the blashphemers apparently paramount.

By imaging tolerance a multiplicity of muses) as sexual promiscuity Rushdie plays with powerfully dangerous Pakistani ethical-cum-aesthetic stock images: conjugal “arranged” marriage in a moral orderly world, romantic love in a world of dreams and the cinema, and sexual promiscuity in a world of fantasies/nightmares of social anomic. If for Rushdie dogmatic singularity is the cause of communal terror and intolerance, for Muslims it is Western sexual promiscuity that unleashes uncontrollable social violence. Their knowledge of the West, gleaned from films and television and from personal observations and experiences in deprived inner city areas, is one of moral, social, and aesthetic chaos [see Ahmed 1992]. Rushdie’s novel contains the message that love and compassion can transcend the dangers of cultural/sexual “promiscuity” and create a basis for real tolerance—purity encompasses impurity. Most British Muslims have concluded, by contrast, that liberal secularism inevitably leads to sexual promiscuity, which is the cause of social disintegration and uncontained violence.

The ultimate confrontation is between the Poet and the Prophet. Each respects and fears the other, yet, apparently, they cannot co-exist. This is the central unresolved and irreducible paradox at the heart of the novel: just as a singular, rule-bound, divine vision tolerates no pluralistic alternatives, so, too, tolerant pluralism, especially one grounded in unbounded emotion alone, cannot encompass singular vision, thus contradicting its claims to universal tolerance. The poet who asserts earthly love must do so by publicly insulting the most deeply held values and the loved ones of the Prophet and his followers. The Prophet asserting the love of God must destroy the creator of beautiful love poetry and punish some of society’s most wretched victims. Rushdie recognises the paradox without resolving it or allowing for the possibility of a truly tolerant Islam (or secular vision of it). And so we are faced with the renewed dilemma of what attitude to take towards the novel as a whole, given the enormous offence and humiliation it has caused.

From a literary modernist perspective, The Satanic Verses is, I believe, a great novel, brilliantly constructed, breathtakingly broad, an epic of modernity, of personal values in the context of disjunction and change. It brings Islam, as a great ethical religion, into the literary universe we share globally. But it is also a novel that has knowingly offended hundreds of thousands of people. In Britain the debate favours either the total abolition of the blasphemy law or the creation of a law protecting all major religions from religious incitement or hatred. It it not clear, however, whether anything at all will be done. The legal problems are so complex, the emotional underpinnings so sensitive.

The dialogic nature of the novel is profoundly prophetic: The Satanic Verses has raised questions regarding the limits of freedom of speech in the context of globalising communication systems and increasingly privatised censorship. What are the limits of religious pluralism, multi-culturalism, citizenship rights, equality before the law, race relations? How do we interpret, define, and judge great literature, and what value does it have in an increasingly secular world? If we deny protection to religious feelings, are we not guilty of “medicalising” such feelings as deviant or abnormal [see Asad 1990] and in so doing denying the fact that such feelings are widely and genuinely held? Yet legitimised and harnessed politically, those very same passionately held feelings have historically inspired terrible atrocities in the name of the very ethical ideas they claim to defend. At the same time, are we able to say with certainty that extreme liberal ideas cannot also be intolerant and dangerous? As some, like Asad and more recently Modood [1994], imply, can liberals also be “fundamentalist,” imposing anti-religious views on others coercively?

The ethical-cum-aesthetic impasse is thus rooted in the core imagery of the novel. The same key terms and organising metaphors evoke opposed emotional associations and fears in different readings and lead to opposed processes of ethical reasoning. Common ethical values held by both Muslims and liberals (love, compassion, loyalty, integrity, truth, faith) are embodied in polysemic aesthetic images which underline the social contradictions and dilemmas surrounding these values. A semiotic analysis of the text cannot resolve this cultural opposition between two worldviews, the aporia at the heart of the novel, all it can hope to do is illuminate its specificities for both readings.

Aesthetics and Cultural Translation

A detailed structural analysis of The Satanic Verses reveals shared polysemic images which “open up” different and opposing “worlds.” By evoking images and values significant to both worlds Rushdie has created the possibility of cultural translation—but also of radical miscommunication. This raises the question posed at the outset: can cultural translation form the basis for aesthetic persuasion? The present case suggests that cultural translation cannot in itself alter aesthetic canons or deeply held ethical convictions. What cultural translation can do, however, is to enhance self-awareness along with the consciousness of alternative aesthetic and ethical discourses.9

9. The intertextual complexity of the novel is so great and so dependent on a knowledge of Islam and Prophetic traditions that English readers have often failed to grasp its positive message [for a recent example of such a failed misreading see Brooke-Rose 1992].
The anthropological project is usually construed as one of explaining the rationality of the people we study to a Western audience at “home.” In doing so anthropology, it is argued, renders the bizarre normal, the exotic sensible and fitting, and the violent structurally logical [Asad 1986; Strathern 1987]. This paper, perhaps unusually, goes beyond this project, for it aims also to expose a Western rationality reflexively so that it might—at least hypothetically—illuminate the internal logic of the book for a Muslim audience, thus reversing the directionality of dialogical engagement. The paper, in other words, is not only an anthropological work representing another; it is also a work by an anthropologist [myself] addressed, in a persuasive mode, to that other.

My deviation from the usual practice arises from a personal predicament: as an anthropologist doing research on British Pakistanis, I found that my role as participant-observer came to be literalised during the Rushdie affair. I was, literally, both an observer and a participant: my research took place in a globalised world/nation state to which I, as a citizen, also felt a moral responsibility. If, as I believe, social anthropology is not merely a mode of accumulating knowledge but a critical project, then I could not deny my views as a participant in this wider moral field. My critical role entailed, among other things, the right to speak out publicly as a concerned citizen.

The Rushdie affair challenged this taken-for-granted right. On the one hand, British Muslims, who were the subject of my research, clearly felt themselves to be victims of a racist conspiracy. There was no doubt about the sincerity of their passion or the depth of their felt offence, as was evident in my daily interactions with them during the height of the affair. At the same time, I felt strongly not only that the author of the novel should not be condemned to death but, more radically, that he was blameless in the sense that his book had been misunderstood. The Satanic Verses, as I have argued here, is a serious book written from a humanist perspective about Islam as a great religion; it is not a superficial postmodernist text satirising and debunking Islam [for a similar view see Berman 1992].

Yet even to suggest this possibility to Pakistani friends and acquaintances elicited an extreme emotional response. Mild comments met with dramatic gestures; telephones were banged down by normally moderate, gentle friends in mid-conversation; an acquaintance threatened to punch me in the face, and I was warned not to attend political meetings by friends concerned about my personal safety. I found myself silenced also by the fact that the people I had studied trusted me not to misrepresent their community to a hostile world. In addition, there was my enormous debt of gratitude to Pakistanis for the help and generosity they had extended to me over the years.

I had never experienced this kind of silencing before during the course of my research, even though fieldwork is a practice which depends in large measure upon self-disciplined silence. In addition to the usual need for tact and discretion, the study of another culture entails a suspension of belief. To explore the logic of ideas about sorcery, kinship, ritual, or religion requires an empathetic identification with these ideas. Along with such empathetic silences, however, the ethics of anthropological fieldwork demand that personal identity and political commitments be made public. This ethic had been, in my own case, the basis for building up relations of trust across an all-too-real religious and political divide.

The Rushdie affair, in silencing me, challenged this ethic, producing a sense of extreme dissonance. The same dissonance is increasingly experienced by contemporary anthropologists studying Third World societies divided by violent ethnic or religious conflicts. The question inevitably faced in such contexts is how to fulfil a critical role, while acknowledging both the hospitality received and the historical roots of the present social malaise which almost everywhere has its origins in Western colonialist and postcolonialist policies [for recent works confronting this dilemma see Kapferer 1988, Dominguez 1989, Fischer and Abedi 1990b, Werbner 1991].

Initially the experience of dissonance was so great that I determined never to study Muslims again. As time went by, however, my sympathy with and understanding of the Muslim position grew, leading me to seek a way out of the impasse. One way, I thought, was to engage in a critical aesthetic argument with British Muslims about the meaning of the novel and its intention. That no one had undertaken this project appeared to be mainly due to the fact that the majority of Western readers believed that the novel was, indeed, intended as an attack on Islam, especially once its offending passages were pointed out and explained to them [on this process of “revelation” see Parekh 1989a].

It has become evident, however, that the perceived futility of such a project is also grounded in current literary theory which privileges the individual reader as the ultimate arbiter of interpretation. Deconstructionist, neo-Marxist, and neo-pragmatist approaches, while differing in important respects, are united in denying the possibility of a universalist yardstick of truth and hence also of texts as bearers of “objective” meanings, just as earlier structuralist and poststructuralist approaches had rejected the relevance of authorial intention to a disclosure of “correct” textual interpretation.

The questions of whether it is possible to establish commonly agreed upon interpretive parameters is of more than passing interest to anthropology as a discipline. The current postmodernist critique has questioned the very grounds for evaluating anthropological analyses or reanalyses. It casts doubt on whether it is possible to judge some interpretations superior to others or to agree on grounds for evaluation. By the same token, cross-cultural analyses, it has been argued, are merely a matter of perspective and selection, so that there are potentially an infinite number of such comparisons, each equally valid [see Strathern 1991]. Theoretically, then, we confront the possibility that we cannot, as experts, either challenge cultural interpretations or approaches or judge between them.
The tragic dimensions of this theoretical thrust were highlighted by the Rushdie affair. Exceptionally in this instance, the establishment of textual meaning and hence indirectly also of authorial intention was not merely a matter of abstract theorising but quite literally a matter of life and death. If neo-pragmatists, postmodernists, and deconstructionists were right, there was no ultimate objective ‘true’ textual interpretation of the novel to be considered intersubjectively. In other words, the novelist could not be saved through an analysis of the novel, since it was theoretically unsound to assume a universalist rational discourse which might bridge the evident interpretive chasm between Muslims and secular Westerners. Instead, each group was doomed to remain locked in its own language games, based on opposed premises and rules of interpretation. There was no code hidden in the text to be uncovered which might ‘explain’ it, no mode of cross-cultural communication which would allow for a rational debate about the meaning of the novel.

What remained, then, was to regard the novel merely as an extraordinary political ‘event.’ At the same time—quite inconsistently— the opposed protagonists continued to cite passages from it selectively, in order to ‘prove’ their particular positions. This was true even of anthropological discussions of the affair and the novel, as we have seen. Recently, in a growing critique of postmodernist approaches, some philosophers and literary theorists have begun to explore the centrality of argument or dialogue in reestablishing, in a modified form, Kantian ideas of universal truth and rationality. Habermas’s work on the public sphere is central to this counter-critique [Habermas 1985, 1989 [1962]; Holub 1991], and it has been followed by others attempting to formulate theoretical positions which would allow for the possibility of constructive dialogue across interpretive communities. Hence, MacIntyre (1988) argues that rational debate is necessarily conducted from within a specific culture or ‘tradition of enquiry.’ The moral convictions of one’s own tradition of enquiry enable one, through empathetic acts of conceptual imagination, to reach an understanding of other traditions of enquiry and enable logically grounded dialogue across traditions. Against postmodernists he argues that ‘the person who finds him or herself an alien to every tradition of enquiry . . . because he or she brings to the encounter with some traditions standards of rational justification which the beliefs of no tradition could justify . . . views the social and cultural order, the world of traditions, as a series of falsifyingly masquerades’ [MacIntyre 1988:395]. It is, in other words, only from a condition of non-alienation that genuine dialogue between members of two unlike traditions can be initiated. By implication, only by arguing from the conviction of a postmodernist aesthetic tradition can one both recognise the nature of religious Muslim aesthetic convictions and enter into a genuine dialogue with Muslim critics about the meaning of The Satanic Verses as a text and hence also about the intentionality of the author.11

In a similar vein, Christopher Norris argues against Rorty’s view that ‘truth is what’s good in the way of belief’ [Norris 1989:113] and against the Foucauldian notion that ‘truth is merely a localised effect of knowledge/power, of the will-to-truth that gives certain hegemonic discourses the power to impose their perspective on other, more marginal languages’ [Norris 1989:102]. He warns further against the ‘relativist trap of assuming that translation must be in some sense a radically impossible enterprise. [The relativists’] mistake is to suppose that these localised problems of linguistic and cultural grasp cannot in principle be sorted out by reference to the much wider areas of agreement that must exist between all communities of language use’ [p. 111, emphasis added]. In short, he concludes that ‘translation is a feasible project—whatever the distance of cultural horizons—because there exists this large central core of necessary presuppositions’ [p. 112]. The view taken is a neo-Kantian one which stresses the ultimate reliance within any language on epistemic evidence and logical rules of validation, argument, and enquiry. Citing Apel, Norris goes on to endorse a transcendental pragmatics that allows for the possibility of truth across languages through self-critical reflection and dialogue, despite the fact that all truths are ultimately framed within specific languages or language-games. Such an approach, he argues, ‘maintains the necessity of criticising false ideas and beliefs, no matter how widely accepted these may be in some given cultural context’ [p. 117]. In his work on hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur stressed that the ultimate objective of interpretive appropriation is one of self-interpretation, on the one hand, and a struggle to understand alien values, on the other [Ricoeur 1981:158–59]. Echoing this view, Umberto Eco recently attacks the anti-essentialist, postmodernist ‘Hermetic approach to texts.’ Eco reiterates his semiotic position which, like Ricoeur’s, distinguishes the ‘intention’ of the text (i.e., its structuralist ‘explanation’ in Ricoeur’s terms) from its multiple readings [Eco 1992]. It is by reference to this decoded intention that a ‘model author’ [by contrast to an empirical author] can be uncovered. Modernist works, Eco has argued [Eco 1980], are deliberately ‘open,’ allowing for multiple readings (just as cultural forms such as rituals may be said to be open), but at the same time such texts are not infinitely malleable: they contain a hidden code which, as it is progressively uncovered, reveals the coherence of more and more symbolic elements in the text. The text thus has an objective (if ultimately polyvalent) meaning (‘intention,’ ‘explanation’) that transcends

10. Some (see Berman 1993; Bhabha 1992:66) have begun recently to comment upon this peculiarity of the affair.

11. MacIntyre also raises issues of the nature of truth and ontology that go beyond the exposition of his views presented here. A disappointing feature of his recent work is that while his declared project is to show that translation is possible across [moral and aesthetic] ‘traditions,’ in the final analysis he draws upon physics to prove his point. He thus fails to address the Kantian antinomy that moral and aesthetic judgements are held with conviction yet are not subject to scientific proof.
its individual readers. From this it follows, he argues, that rival interpretations are subject to objective evaluation. Hence, in addition to an implicit model author, the text also posits a “model reader,” a reader who has decoded and grasped the text in its full complexity.

The “opening up” of the text to the world implies then also a parallel opening up of authorial intention. A text which has a positive ethical meaning in the world renders the producer of the text, personified by the text, a moral person, or, more precisely, a person grappling with ethical-cum-aesthetic issues. In the final analysis, then, ethics and aesthetics, author, text, and the worlds opened by the text cannot be kept apart.

I have tried to disclose why from a modernist perspective The Satanic Verses did not intend to defame Islam and mock Muslims or their Prophet. Nor is the novel, I have shown, merely an exercise in pastiche. Instead, it has to be read as a re-mythologising of myths, a secondary myth in Barthes’s terms, a re-vision of a past which is also a future. That future—hybrid, uncertain, impure—is as nightmarishly monstrous and threatening for many Muslim immigrants of the older generation as were Gibeon’s nightmares or Chamcha’s devilish horns, tail, and giant penis. For the younger generation, the Mishals and Zenas of this world, that future is the lived-in world they know, to look forward to with anticipation, to enjoy. Two pasts, two futures.

Conclusion: The Politics of Interpretation

It may seem naive to argue that the interpretation of a novel “matters” politically. In denying the political utility of such interpretation, however, Western intellectuals [and, indeed, politicians] have failed to recognise the political price which non-interpretation exacts. Only by using modernist tools of analysis—coherence, unity, exhaustive explanation—can we arrive at an alternative interpretation of the vision of Islam intended by the novelist and the novel. In abandoning our own ethical and aesthetic canons, we have, by default, endorsed the prevalent Islamic interpretation of the novel. From that vantage point, it seems self-evident that The Satanic Verses abuses all that is holy to Islam: the Qur’an, the Prophet, the laws of proper moral conduct. Hence the Western defence of the novel and novelist has been interpreted by Muslim critics quite logically as an attack upon their virtue, dignity, and honour. No appeal to freedom of speech can disguise the fact that words are, as Stanley Fish argues, actions, ones that can cause real damage [Fish 1992]. By preaching freedom of speech we merely exercise our superior political power to coerce and humiliate Muslim believers into a resentful silence.

However serious our disagreements over the interpretation of the novel may be, an argument about interpretation shifts the terms of the debate to ethical and aesthetic issues. This is a critical shift away from paternalistic coercion towards a politics of recognition and cultural dignity [Taylor 1992]. Pakistanis in Britain, and many Muslims worldwide, responded to the novel in a politically violent manner out of a sense of deep offence, a conviction that the novel was enjoyed by Westerners because it was an attack on Islam and its values. It is therefore politically necessary and expedient to demonstrate that from a Western perspective, the novel can be read quite differently, as a serious attempt to explore the possibility of a liberal more “open” Islam rather than as a mockery. The Satanic Verses compels Westerners to engage seriously with Islam as a great, global, monotheistic contemporary religion.

Comments

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Over the past few decades figures from the literary world—like Salman Rushdie and Edward Said—have been poaching on anthropological terrain. It is good to see anthropologists returning the favour. Several have written on the Rushdie affair—Michael Fischer, Talal Asad, and now Prina Werbner.

There is a danger of becoming entangled in deconstructions, hermeneutics, notions of postmodernity. We need to know the answer to the great mystery: why there seems to have been a total breakdown of communication over The Satanic Verses between Muslims in their fury and non-Muslims in their incomprehension of that fury. The two sets of responses were understandable in the context of normative behaviour. This was a genuine collapse of communication, a dangerous moment in history. The anthropologist is ideally placed to explore this.

At the height of the Rushdie affair it was almost impossible to challenge the stereotypes. Perhaps the anthropologist was the exception. This is supported by a personal example of an anecdotal nature. I was on the BBC TV’s The Late Show discussing the Rushdie affair with some of the most distinguished Western writers—Ian McEwan, Antonia Byatt, Sir Frank Kermode, and Professor Ernest Gellner. I was finding it difficult to convince them that Islam was not a barbaric civilization, that the tradition of dissent in Islamic literature was as old as Islam itself. I pointed out that some of the greatest writers and scholars had themselves incurred the wrath of the establishment. But what Rushdie had done was to violate the first principle of Islamic debate. He was seen to have mounted a personal attack on the holy Prophet himself. He was thus challenging the foundations of the faith not furthering thought and debate. Ian McEwan said, echoing Werbner in her article, that perhaps Rushdie was introducing a new kind of Islam, perhaps he was a new kind of prophet for Muslims. This to me was so absurd as to leave me speechless. At this point Ernest Gellner entered the debate. Sharply he explained that you cannot take the yardstick of one society and use it for another.
Muslims were then constantly on the defensive. Every time they opened their mouth to say that they had been hurt by *The Satanic Verses* they were dismissed as “fundamentalists.” Western scholars too reflected the attributes of the so-called fundamentalists: hysteria, intolerance, anger. For Western intellectuals and writers Rushdie became the embodiment of the principle of free speech. Voltaire, Rousseau—all the great literary names were associated with him. Even the usual champions of Third World causes like Edward Said were careful to give anything Rushdie wrote rave reviews after *The Satanic Verses*. Through this they were expressing solidarity.

Werbner correctly points out that all the Muslims she has talked to confirm that Rushdie as a Muslim, however lapsed, intended the offense. They find it difficult to comprehend the West’s incomprehension and see its support as reinforcing the author’s wish to ridicule them.

Those who knew Muslims understood this. Werbner quotes Sir David Lane who pointed out “the obscene attacks on all that they hold sacred” throughout the book. There is a paradox in what Werbner writes. She claims that the novel is so complex and so dependent on a knowledge of Islam that English readers failed to grasp its positive message. But if English readers have failed to grasp this positive message why have Muslim readers also failed to grasp it? I have not read any Muslim writer impressed with Rushdie’s Islamic learning.

Werbner accurately points out that interpretations have piled upon interpretations in an infinite hermeneutical spiral. The question is whether the book was meant to create the controversy it did. It is incorrect to imagine that Rushdie was unaware of what he was doing. One of the earliest reactions he got was from Khushwant Singh, the Indian writer, who warned him of the expected anger (in *Postmodernism and Islam* [1992] I had pointed out Muslim sensitivities).

We are discussing not only the book. In this particular case the author and his work are inextricably tied. In the interview specially arranged by The Guardian Rushdie had promised me several things which were aimed at improving Muslim relations with the West (17 January 1991). One was to pay compensation to the families of those that had died in India and Pakistan protesting the novel. This was four years ago. To the best of my knowledge no action has been taken.

Werbner gives us a clue to the problem. She claims “Rushdie did not align himself . . . against his own people.” But who are his people? The Indians? He had migrated to Pakistan. The Pakistanis? There was no love between the two. Or the British? His relations remain prickly at best with the British.

Werbner’s conclusion is correct. By preaching freedom of speech the West is able to exercise its political power to continue to humiliate Muslims. The West needs to “seriously” understand and engage with Islam “as a great global monotheistic contemporary religion.” However, the example that she has chosen, that of the *The Satanic Verses*, is not convincing. The hoped for “constructive dialogue with Muslims” does not materialize.

In her own case, too, Werbner cannot reconcile her anthropological intuition—she knows and gets on with Muslims famously well in Manchester—and her intellectual position rooted in the European notions of open speech and debate.

In the end, for all its claims to speak on behalf of and explain Muslims to the world, we need to ask several questions about *The Satanic Verses*. These questions are to be placed in the context of Britain where it was written and published and made its greatest impact. The furor is to be viewed in the context of worsening race relations, the fear of immigrants in the majority population and the rising Islamophobia and the fear of racist violence in the minorities.

The questions are: Did *The Satanic Verses* help anyone understand Muslim theology or Muslim society better? Did it increase Muslim—non-Muslim understanding? Did the resultant and not unexpected Muslim response of anger feed into the already existing negative stereotypes of Muslims? Did it encourage extremism among Muslims, driving the people of moderation against a wall? In the end will it all worsen relations between the communities, adding fuel to the growing racist flames in European society?

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If Salman Rushdie had recounted the tale of his own recent experience in one of his novels, even such an acknowledged master of fantasy could have been accused of stretching his reader’s imagination beyond the limits of credibility. Just consider: a British writer of Indian Muslim origins, much lauded by his South Asian fellow-countrymen for his vigorous critiques of the racist foundations of popular English attitudes and simultaneously lionised by the English intellectual elite for his literary prowess, publishes a much-hyped novel through which, so he announces, he aims to fill a “God-shaped hole” in his own experience.

Yet far from providing any kind of religious illumination, all hell soon began to break loose around the book and its author. Although *The Satanic Verses* was soon globally notorious, it achieved that status largely as an icon of resurgent polarisation between Christendom and Islam. This did wonders for sales as millions of punters rushed to make their contribution to civilisation, open-mindedness, and free speech. But rarely did they bother to look between its covers: just to buy the book was enough to signal resistance to the threat of fundamentalist Islam. Rather than a reaction to the actual contents of the book, this extravagant reaction was largely a response to the activities of two very specific groups of Muslims. Photocopies of two pages from the Jahiliya chapter were distributed to every mosque in Britain, and as far as most worshippers were concerned, little more needed saying. The deliberate use of lewd language whilst discussing the life of their beloved exemplar, the
Prophet Mohammed, was ipso facto outrageous; indeed from their perspective this transgression was the last straw, and in Bradford—where the local Council of Mosques was particularly well organised—a copy of the book was publicly burnt. This might have been overlooked, were it not for the fact that the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his condemnation fatwa soon afterwards, in a bid to regain some moral credibility following his shameful but necessary peace deal with Saddam Hussein.

But just as the initial spark was swiftly overwhelmed by the general mayhem of a forest fire, so the actual origins of the affair were soon obscured. Salman Rushdie and his book had the misfortune to be the spark which set the tinder of a long-incipient Euro-Islamic confrontation ablaze. Hence the more one side pasted him into the role of a free-speaking hero valiantly resisting the reactionary forces of fundamentalist Islam, the more their opponents wrote off the author as a renegade who had sold out everything they held sacred. Rushdie had become—and still remains—a prisoner of the very divide he had set out to confront.

Set against the huge amount of often overexcited commentary which these developments have precipitated, Werbner’s careful analysis of the symbolic logic of the offending text itself is an immensely welcome relief. Not only does she throw new light on Rushdie’s purposes, but her analysis also helps to illuminate his tragic fate.

All commentators are agreed that given its constant allusions to such a huge range of religious, linguistic, cultural, literary, and philosophic sources, no less in the Indian and Islamic than in the contemporary European traditions, The Satanic Verses is not an easy text of which to make sense. But since Rushdie is clearly familiar with the work of Lévi-Strauss, and particularly with the mythopoetic potentialities of structural inversion, this is a text just waiting for anthropological interpretation. From this perspective Werbner’s effort to crack the code seems to me to be most successful, and even if—as ever—the pieces might still be put together in a different way and/or the argument might be developed still further, the broad pattern revealed by her analysis is of immense significance.

In keeping with Rushdie’s stated intentions, his purposes emerge as deeply serious: a multifaceted meditation on the status of the Prophet Mohammed, as well as on the religious tradition his teachings inspired. Decoded, Rushdie’s contrast between Mohammed and his six variously flawed alters enables him to represent the Prophet both as an ideal exemplar and as profoundly human. In Islamic terms this is of course wholly exceptional. Islam has always rejected the Christians’ deification of their Prophet, and hence Mohammed’s exemplary humanity has always been a central component of the faith.

But if this is Rushdie’s message, why did it cause so much distress? Quite apart from most Muslim readers’ unfamiliarity with Rushdie’s literary genre, let alone the book’s use as a convenient vehicle for anti-Islamism, Werbner’s analysis suggests that a further component of his project was to deritualise—and thus to humanise in an ethical sense—a region and an experience which [post]modernism finds it impossible to comprehend: the sacred. Hence in filling his “God-shaped hole” Rushdie sets out to construct an ethical Islam which is viable in the contemporary world and therefore uncluttered by now-irrelevant medieval rules and regulations which separate the sacred from the profane.

Yet however reasonable that goal may be, Rushdie’s means of achieving it can now be seen to be both flawed and misguided. While European modernists fought vigorous battles with traditionalist Christian theologians to establish the legitimacy of a humanistic perspective, the parallel Islamic debate seems destined to follow a different trajectory, if only because of the very different status of their respective Prophets. While a deified Christ’s suffering offered Christians proof of God’s love, Muslims have always prized Mohammed’s exemplary humanity: the sacredness of mankind has therefore always been central to the Islamic tradition and, as Werbner emphasises, to Islamic worship. Hence Rushdie’s mistake is not his emphasis on the Prophet’s humanity but his misguided attempt to challenge Islam’s sacred spaces, from the Prophet onwards.

No wonder Rushdie is in such trouble. Even if grounded in only a partial decoding of the tale, the popular Muslim reaction to The Satanic Verses has been acutely sensitive to the profoundly transgressive character of Rushdie’s efforts to fill his “God-shaped hole.” Moreover, his offense has been redoubled by his deliberate use of precisely the vocabulary deployed by Western European critics of Islam since the time of the Crusades, most especially since this theme has been endlessly re-echoed by his supporters as the Satanic Verses debate has rumbled on.

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The friendly treatment that Mehdi Abedi’s and my work receives from Phina Werbner creates a desire to respond in kind, and indeed there is much that is complementary and parallel in her work and ours.

I do detect some problems particularly in the third and first parts of her article that I would like to open up as tokens of large challenges facing anthropology in a rapidly changing world, call these [a] “multiculturalism” or, as I have been urging, viewing the new challenges of anthropology as no longer merely domesticating the exotic (Malinowski) or defamiliarizing the domestic (M. Mead) but rather the new imperatives of speaking/writing to multiple audiences and doing “cultural translation” across antagonistic segments within societies [local, national, transnational] that are mutually unintelligible to their encapsulated members, and [b] the social formation of the late 20th century in
which powerful discursive formations compete, mutate, circulate, and eddy in a world quite different from that of earlier oral and print cultures, and in which individualistic interventions are less effective than Weberner's wishful conclusions would require, making her attacks on theorists of the conditions of postmodern (or late 20th century) knowledge and communicative structures quite displaced.

The three parts of her article fall around three issues: (1) how to situate the Rushdie affair ethnographically and in terms of what she calls contrastive aesthetic sublimes (of deeply moral modernist skepticism versus religious aesthetics that protect an immaculate core of belief or of ritualized compartmentalization of sacred and profane); (2) how not only to read the text of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* as profoundly moral within a modernist humanist aesthetic but to acknowledge its "central project" as being an effort "to reclaim Islam for secular Muslims, a new breed, as an ethical religion"; (3) how to communicate the morality of modernist and humanist aesthetics to those within the alternative aesthetic.

The structuralist reading of the novel (the middle part of the article) will have to await fuller presentation in her forthcoming book to judge how well it actually works. A reading after all is rewarding through its richness, comprehensiveness, and ability to illuminate details. But her reading seems intriguing and complementary to that which Mehdi Abedi and I have proposed. This is potentially the most rewarding part of her work, albeit only for readers of the text. For the others—for the moment at least the more important interlocutors—the various actors in the Rushdie Affair, the other two parts of the article are ethnographically more challenging.

Part 1: how to characterize the aesthetic sensibilities? Weberner writes with a finely nuanced feel for her field size, the situation in Britain, both of the responses of the "pragmatic" English [why should anyone take a novel seriously? a provocative nuisance should be dealt with as an issue of law and order] and of primarily Pakistani Muslim immigrants. It is not quite the case that there is a clash of civilizational aesthetics (of high versus high cultures) as she suggests because as she acknowledges [and as Mehdi Abedi and I argue at length] all the intellectual elements of the novel including the allegedly "blasphemous" ones have been repeated argued before in Muslim scholarly and moral debates and because modernism exists in the Islamic world as elsewhere. Indeed as she and we argue the novel seen from a modernist [or postmodern—her distinction between the two seems to me to unnecessarily caricature the latter] perspective is a struggle to deal with the sources of faith and rationality [a quite traditional religious intellectual issue]. No doubt it is the case that from the "conventions and quotidian" structures of community life in the British Pakistani community, the novel can easily [if not necessarily] be taken as transgressive, particularly given the immediately prior political struggles of the community in places like Bradford [such as the Honeyford affair during 1984 and 1985], and the dis-ease, even shame, of exposing to a hostile outside community [English speakers] moral debates normally dealt with only among insiders.

What I find intriguing rather is why some thoroughly secularized, Westernized, intellectual Muslims should simultaneously feel offended and yet acknowledge Rushdie's position. The clearest example for me is an Indian Muslim film critic who both helped promote Rushdie's early books and helped get *Satanic Verses* banned. He could not quite define the line that Rushdie transgressed, and as he talked his praise for Rushdie and even for the non-Mecca chapters of this novel kept increasing. Indeed he lamented the tragedy is quite profound that Rushdie was perhaps the only writer in this generation with the artistic gifts to be capable of expressing the feelings of post-Partition Muslims in India, but in the delicate balance of communal understanding and secularism, Rushdie unfortunately had stepped over into being too fully "liberated" to be able to render the authentic sensibility of Muslims in India. This deep ambivalence is what I would expect from more secularized, liberal Muslims, rather than what seems all too often a too quick "inability" to read the novel and consider its imagery and provocations. To call this a difference of aesthetic sublimes names the issue but does not explain the emotional and semantic structures in play. To reduce it to an "attack" on the Prophet [as Weberner is tempted to do] is to ignore the history of seeing the Prophet as a figure of moral struggle in traditional Muslim homiletics. Indeed while there is a contrast to be drawn between intellectual skepticism and a religious core of protected immaculate belief, the contrast is not between modernism and Islam but between intellectual Islam and conventional Islam, today made defensively brittle in many politicized settings such as Bradford, Manchester, or South and East London.

There is both more and less than meets the eye here. At one level one can say that the shock for an individual of first encountering the "juxtaposed contiguity of profane language and . . . acts" with the Prophet, His companions and wives, or of using the names of the Prophet's wives for those of a group of prostitutes is quite understandable, and leave it at that. But in social terms, one wants to know how the intellectual traditions of Islam have been neutralized and silenced. If "the central project of the book" is "to reclaim Islam for secular Muslims, a new breed, as an ethical religion," why is it that they do not recognize it as such or, insofar as some of them do, say so publicly! How satisfactory is it to return to an explanation based on "most British Pakistanis" and a ritual logic of compartmentalization? [Conjunction of pure and impure is unacceptable to most Muslims, says Weberner, but there are contexts in which this is not so, as for instance in the Zar cults, not strictly Muslim yet a therapeutic and transformative space for Muslim adherents; why not then similar "modernist" cults as indeed one might count modern popular music? Are the lower-class Pasdaran in Iran arresting wealthier lads for wearing Grateful Dead para-
pheromalia primarily jealous of not having access to these accessories, or is it only purity pure and simple? Who are the “new breed”? and why the continual slippage in Werbner’s explanatory structure to “most Muslims,” a different group?

The final section is even more problematic—or perhaps underexploited—with its contradictory assertions that cultural translation can only enhance self-awareness of the translator yet could illuminate the internal logic of the novel for a Muslim audience, albeit only hypothetically, that she writes in a persuasive mode to this Muslim other yet her efforts to explain were received by silencing her. Oddly, she displaces her ethnographic dissonance into a vague generalized attack on postmodernist theories.

I find such attacks somewhat dubious insofar as they fail to ask about the social conditions that the so-called postmodernists write out of and about (North African immigrants in France, Caribbean, African, and South Asian immigrants in Britain) and insofar as they fail to recognize the notion of “signature,” for instance, in Derrida, or the ethics of dialogue in the work of Levinas, or the gendered, bilingual, and other pragmatics of the relation between speakers/writers and addresses in Cixous or Irigaray, or Foucault’s insistence that competing and mutating discursive structurings are (like Werbner’s different aesthetics) not easily displaced by individualistic critiques. Thoroughgoing skepticism is not distinctive of these writers about the postmodern conditions of knowledge but something which many others in all strata of history have also shared from stoics and sophists to Muslim adepts of those intellectual skills and disciplines.

More to the point might have been to do more with the ethnographic dilemma she found herself in as one of a world in which discursive forms are highly disciplined in sometimes new ways and in which leveraging or para-sitism (à la Michel Serres) may perhaps have more effect than an individual effort to explain to a community the error of its discursive patterns or of its rage against British policies that denied it schools, threatened a head tax, etc. It was in this vein that Mehd Abedi and I attempted to ally ourselves empathetically with some historically powerful traditions in the Islamic world that are consonant with what Werbner calls modernism, that includes and invites Muslim interlocutors into the contemporary conversations about the ways in which massive demographic changes are restructuring the ways in which traditional discourses (British or Muslim) must deal with one another. It is in this context that Charles Taylor’s politics of recognition and Jürgen Habermas’s account of the evolution and dramatic changes in the public sphere can be facilitating, it is in this context that Derrida, Lyotard, and others write. Werbner’s materials, ethnographic situatedness, instincts, and intentions belong in this tradition as well, perhaps only she remains a bit too English in her hopes for authorial individualism as constituting the dialogic.

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Werbner has written an important essay not just for understanding Islam and the Rushdie affair but for several of the most vexing issues in our ongoing debate on modernity and postmodernity. Her reading of The Satanic Verses emphasizes that, situated within the genre conventions and intellectual horizons of literary modernism, the work’s “central project” is not an attack on Islam or the Prophet Muhammad but an effort to reclaim an ethical Islam for secular Muslims. However, one might add, like most reclamation efforts, this one inevitably involves some destruction. As Werbner herself notes, Rushdie rejects ritual purity in favor of an ethicized Islam; humanizes and proffanes the Prophet through the Prophet’s juxtaposition with liars and whores; and, perhaps most threateningly, opens up knowledge-making to a “promiscuity of sources” other than those of a finished revelation.

Though it was the profanatory liberties taken with the Prophet’s image that caused the greatest outcry among Muslims, it is the last of these radical gestures, Rushdie’s appeal for a pluralism of epistemological sources, that will likely present the most enduring challenge to Muslims struggling with modern pluralism. There are both parallels and differences between Rushdie’s solution to this problem and earlier Western proponents of Enlightenment. In an effort to legitimate science as a source of truth, the latter declared that the “Book of Nature” stood alongside the “Book of Revelation” as an equal point of access to divine truth (see Casanova 1994:24; Manuel 1983). Rushdie wants a similar opening or pluralization of sources. In the eyes of many believers, however, his appeal for epistemological pluralism is complicated by the fact that its primary source of meaning is to be the artist’s muse, not the authority of nature or, least of all, a natural science that regularly demonstrates its ability to transform the world in its image. Impressed by its achievements, modernist Muslims have largely accommodated natural science to revelation. But their efforts are made easier by their belief that science does not violate their conviction that religion is a publicly sustained truth rather than mere private belief. In Rushdie’s case, however, it is precisely this view of religion that the artist’s muse, and the intellectual “hybridism” which it legitimizes, destabilizes. It does so, moreover, without the corroborative achievements to which a modernist supporter of science can point. Rather than computers, medicine, and nuclear physics, the muse points to literature, love, and the life of the mind. Pace Asad, Werbner is right that Rushdie is engaged in a more complex project than the liberal elevation of literature as a new religion. But Werbner’s account reminds us that there are strikingly different avenues in the modernist city, some more easily traveled by modernist or posttraditional Muslims than others.
Werbner’s larger point—that the Enlightenment is not peculiarly Western but is a moral and intellectual project accessible from a variety of cultural routes—is, given the tenor of our times, a bold and important claim. At one level, a superficial one, Werbner is obviously wrong. Surely every culture is unique and every history its own. What is in question in Werbner’s claim, then, is not the historical Enlightenment. Among other things, it could be argued, the circumstances of the Western Enlightenment diverge from the contemporary Muslim world as a result of the illiberal deployment of Enlightenment values as instruments of colonial control. There are vestiges of this unenlightened practice of Enlightenment ideals still today in the Western media’s hostility to Islam and the French government’s refusal to allow young school girls to wear religious veils [hijab]. Those of us who share Werbner’s sympathy for some version of the project of modernity must remind ourselves that “real and existing” Enlightenment, always flawed, must be distinguished from our more enduring commitments to transcendent truth, social justice, and universal human dignity.

If it is not the historical Enlightenment that is in question, then, the issue Werbner raises must be whether Muslims can and will develop something which is its functional near-equivalent. Werbner is right, deeply right, to emphasize that knowledge is not just a localized effect of power or [I would add] of a free play of arbitrary signs. It originates in a creative work which, in the face of similar political and existential challenges, may develop profound affinities across languages and cultures. Here I would go a bit further than Werbner, emphasizing that human consciousness derives from an interplay of intelligences and practices more complex than language games alone. As Vygotsky and a number of contemporary ethical psychologists and philosophers have also emphasized (see Blum 1994, Flanagan 1991), this displacement or centering of knowledge beyond linguistic intelligence provides an additional measure of access—always partial, but real nonetheless—across cultural experience.

All this makes it easier to understand just why, as Werbner implies, the aspiration for something like Enlightenment is found not just in Rushdie’s work but among large numbers of modern Muslim thinkers. Perhaps we should not go quite so far as to say that such Islamic pluralists are “fighting precisely the same battles against dogma fought by the writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment” [my emphasis]. With Alasdair MacIntyre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Taylor, among others, Werbner recognizes that all of us must speak from a tradition when engaging another. We should not be surprised, then, to see that as Muslims grapple with epistemological pluralism they will develop languages and practices in line with the commitments and potentialities of their own tradition. In particular—and this is to disagree somewhat with Charles Taylor’s (1992:62) recent comments on the essentially Christian bases of ethical liberalism—a Muslim ethic of tolerance may well place greater emphasis on the “civic republican” [as opposed to ethically individualist] notions that politics requires civic virtue and virtue-making is in some sense a public responsibility (cf. Asad 1993:233).

In any case, Werbner is right: there is already enough similarity between the Muslim and Western experience to speak of something akin to an Islamic struggle for Enlightenment. It is seen in the dissatisfaction throughout the Muslim world with established mediators of the Word (see Eickelman 1992, 1993; Hefner 1993); this has given rise, in turn, to numerous (though not always compatible) efforts to open Islamic discourse and practice to alternative sources, readers, and readings. This parallel between the Western Enlightenment and the struggle for a civic pluralist Islam is the result not of a pale Muslim imitation of Western ways but of parallel efforts within both traditions to create a discourse of pluralism in a situation of growing moral and structural differentiation (cf. Casanova 1994).

In this effort both within and across cultures, we may not be able to speak of an absolutely “universal” truth, inasmuch as we continue to distinguish truth from ontensive reference and thus identify it as a quality of discourse not a thing-in-the-world. Truth is arrived at, and only inasmuch as people in some sense get there through functionally similar means can we talk of a truth that transcends culturally specific perspectives. The truth reached may not be universal, but, as Werbner points out, it may allow genuine mutual understanding. In this more limited but important sense, our knowledge can be said to be transcendent. With subtle insight, Werbner has reminded us of this important truth. With it too, she has demonstrated the possibility for, and the continuing urgency of, an endeavour many thought long gone: a critical and philosophically humanist anthropology. For this and its many other insights, this article is a most welcome achievement.

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For being alive to the Muslim sensitivities on the Satanic Verses affair Phina Werbner’s piece stands out above others, which is indeed gratifying. Her passing in silence over the following relevant aspects of the affair, however, strikes a jarring note:

1. Naive is her attempt to argue The Satanic Verses as a “serious book written from a humanist perspective about Islam as a great religion.” Werbner fails to take into account Rushdie’s several contradictory, nay opportunistic stances on the genesis and intent of The Satanic Verses.

To begin with, Rushdie exulted in having targeted Islam in his work, for he “knew the most about it” [British T.V. Channel 4 programme Bandung File, January 27, 1989]. When asked how far his novel was based on the Islamic history, he had the audacity to say: “Almost entirely. Almost everything in these sections [the chap-
ters dealing with Islam] starts from a historical or quasi-historical basis."

After Imam Khomeini’s *fatwa* on February 14, 1989, Rushdie, betraying a sea change in his outlook, recanted altogether his earlier position. Abandoning the self-appointed role of a historian writing on Islam he scurried, invoking the privileges and protection of an artist and pleading that The Satanic Verses be taken simply as a piece of fiction. In his article entitled “In Good Faith” [The Independent on Sunday, February 4, 1990], he declared: “I am not a Muslim.” Then there was another somersault in that in the same year in December 1990 he announced his “embracing” of Islam: “... religion for me has always meant Islam. . . . I am able now to say that I am a Muslim” [The Times, December 28, 1990].

A writer so unsure about his faith and so fickle about the intended thrust of his work cannot, even by any stretch of imagination, be credited for having authored a “serious” book from any “perspective.”

2. It is irksome to find Werbner applying quite unfairly, narrow and localized label “British Pakistani” to those who protested against the sacrilegious contents of The Satanic Verses, for it leaves out many—a host of non-Muslim and Western and non-Western intellectuals, academicians, and writers and literally millions of non-British non-Pakistani Muslims. [For the wide range of this protest see especially the “Voices of Civility” in Ahsan and Kidwai [1991:83—130].]

The above point assumes greater significance in that Werbner harps on the “global” credentials of only Rushdie and his work.

3. Throughout the Satanic Verses affair what rankled the Muslims most was that while the West took a strong exception to Khomeini’s infringling on the sovereignty of nation-states, no attention was given to Rushdie’s hurting the religious sensitivities of millions of Muslims. Werbner’s paper too, suffers from this lopsidedness.

4. More important, although Werbner speaks of liberal fundamentalism as a possibility, she does not observe the liberal Inquisition directed against the Muslims throughout the period.

As editors of Sacrilege versus Civility we bore the brunt of the Western liberal/secular “thought police.” Seeking permission to reprint certain extracts, particularly from British dailies, revealed to us the other face of the much-vaulted Western ideal of the freedom of expression. The very champions and custodians of this ideal who had supported Rushdie with all their might in presenting a sheer distortion of things Islamic literally prevented us from even reproducing what had been published day in and day out in their newspapers and magazines. Never had we anticipated such “thou shall not-ism” of the liberal establishment [for further details on the liberal Inquisition of the Muslims see Akhtar 1989].

5. Nor does Werbner make any reference to the numerous instances of censorship in the West. The Muslim demand for pulping The Satanic Verses was viewed with pious horror and dismissed summarily on the ground that censorship is not and cannot be exercised in a civilized society. I would restrict to only one highly instructive example of the post-Satanic Verses period. In 1991 Robert Maxwell, the publisher, ordered Fleetway, one of his publishing houses, to pulp 20,000 copies of an offensive, blasphemous novel True Faith, by Garth Ennis. Only a single letter from the Evangelical Alliance impelled the publisher to pulp the entire stock and redress the grievance of the Christian group [for details see New Statesman and Society 4[138]:19]. What a contrast! In the case of The Satanic Verses Muslim protest prompted even several Western states to support Rushdie in every possible way.

6. As to Rushdie’s deliberate and deplorable use of profane language about the Prophet and other holy figures in Islam, Werbner concedes the offence it caused to Muslims. However, she unconvincingly tries to explain it away as part of Rushdie’s “project” to “reclaim Islam for secular Muslims.” This project has been carried out by many writers, present and past, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, yet it never hurt the Muslims, nor have they protested against it. Incensed at the use of profane language the Muslim protest stemmed essentially from their belief in the primacy of civility over sacrilege. Most regrettable, in the din engendered by the liberal Inquisition and war cries against Muslims no heed was given the Muslims’ case for practising and upholding civility. It is a pity that Werbner, too, takes little notice of this highly significant aspect of the whole issue.

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Werbner’s articulate yet somehow belated defence of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* touches upon a number of significant issues such as Western and Muslim aesthetics, freedom of expression in the context of sacred and secular, and a modernist literary reconstruction of an allegorical nature. With her in-depth knowledge of Muslim diaspora in Manchester, familiarity with the Islamic ethos, and pertinent training in social anthropology, Werbner’s reinterpretation of the controversial novel is interesting and ground-breaking. The paper re-evaluates the novel, its plot, characters, and metaphorical details, largely against the backdrop of the European Enlightenment, and challenges its superficial reading by Muslims merely as a blasphemous attack on Islam.

The problem with Werbner’s arguments is that she sees Rushdie as a balanced, egalitarian humanist in the true tradition of the Western Enlightenment and, despite her understanding of the general Muslim anguish over the novel, puts the author on a rather higher pinnacle of literary creativity and humanistic aesthetics. One would have liked to see more empirical instances from her research, which, as she professes, has been conducted to the discomfort of many devout Muslims. However, the problem with her reconstruction of the novel is that, in a rather Euro-centric tradition, it defines
Enlightenment (and intellect) in solely West European terms and confined to the 18th century, with Muslims and others precluded from it. Such an attitude, not grounded in any hidden agenda, stems from a lack of knowledge of Muslim history — a problem confronted with many anthropologists, who in their fondness for contemporary primitiveness are indifferent or occasionally hostile towards historical continuity or even the very languages of the communities they may be researching. Such an anthropological essentialism — which I hasten to say is not all-pervasive — only posit an interdisciplinary inadequacy, making a scholar vulnerable to verbose yet ineffectual statements. The Islamic duality of sacred and mundane (I am intentionally avoiding “secular”) is evident from the Prophet’s pronouncements on his love for women, sweet odours, beauty, poetry, wit, children and animals. Following his degree of tolerance and mundaneeness, Ibn Sina, Maulana Rumi, Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazali, Omar Khayyam, Firdausi, Shah Wali Allah, al-Afghani, Syed Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman, and Ali Shariati tried to regenerate Islamic humanism based on reinterpretations, earthiness, and ijtihad. Despite contemporary totalitarian pressures stemming from various societal or political quarters, such individuals established powerful examples of innovation while being extremely critical of taqlid. However, without an iota of bitterness towards a technologically and politically powerful Western civilisation, Muslim reformists found their reference in the tolerant, humanistic, philosophically, creative, and forward-looking traditions of pristine Islam. It would have been more instructive if the paper could have delved into the intellectual debate on art, creativity, aesthetics, and innovation within the Muslim historical context.

One may disagree with the fatwa and its imposition by Imam Khomeini, but there is no denying the fact that many similar efforts in the past, especially in northern India, were considered blasphemous by Muslims. More than 12 Muslims were hanged over the years just in British India for retaliating to incidents of blasphemy, the best-known being the murder of Rajpal of Lahore in 1924 by Ilyam Din for publishing an Urdu book called Rangeela Rasal (The Merry Prophet). In other words, it is not simply a matter of Muslim experience in diaspora, the issue of izzat, tensions between various revivalist groups, or rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that underlined the protest; an overwhelming feeling of disgust with Western indifference to Muslim sensitivities also played a crucial role. The fatwa multiplied existing anti-Muslim sentiments in the West and proved a curious convergence for conservative right and liberal left to ventilate their feelings against Muslim cultures. To both these groups Muslims appeared illiterate, barbaric, and anti-intellectual. Long-time misimages of Muhammad as an anti-Christ and of Muslims as bloodthirsty and intolerant crowds of book-burners were invoked. The Muslim community in Britain in particular was confronted with a double sword of racism and anti-Muslim animus. The bulk of influential public opinion in Britain tends to dismiss most Muslims as fundamentalists and fundamentalism as a new form of barbarism. They are infantilised, ridiculed as iliterate peasants preferring the sleep of superstition to liberal light, and placed outside civilised discourse (Parekh 1989b:149).

In an ideological vacuum following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reconstruction of the cold war, Islam was being interpreted as a convenient enemy, and it is academic to conjecture whether The Satanic Verses generated the anti-Muslim sentiment or simply inflamed it. Anyway, in the post-1989 era of cleavages, Rushdie, the fatwa, and the Gulf crisis turned out to be important markers in a pervasive anti-Muslim idiom at both the intellectual and the cultural level. The Western “turkey shoot” in Iraq contrasted with inaction over Bosnia while keeping the Sarajevo government deprived of its basic right to defend itself, unilateral rejection of electoral politics in Algeria and elsewhere, and apathy on issues like Chechnya or Kashmir to a greater extent are grounded in the Western particularism whereby Islam is perceived as an old-time, monolithic, and potent threat. An increased accent on nationalism, exaggerated rhetoric on immigration when in fact it stopped several years ago, and use of Islamic fundamentalism as an easy ally by various regimes both in the West and elsewhere ironically highlight a multi-pronged Western assault. The exaggeration of the Muslim threat in the name of the clash of civilisations or as a destabilising factor has not only been exploited by the West but found convenient proponents from curious cases as Saudi Arabia, India, Israel, Egypt, and many others from amongst the Indian penal code proscribing any inflammatory material/action in the future. Rajiv Gandhi used the same law to ban the book in India in 1988. In general, South Asian Muslims define the novel as a recent addition to hate literature, but their hurt is deeper because of the author’s own Muslim background.

There are familiar scenes about Muslims varying from breast-beating Lebanese Shias to protesting Iranians and lines of believers prostrate in prayer. In popular cultural manifestations, Muslims are always shown en masse and violent. Beards, turbans, black robes, bloodied bodies, and hidden women translate extreme images of the community with a careless juxtaposition of Islamic with Muslim.

Many influential scholars are substantiating this theory of Islam versus the rest (see Huntington 1993).
Muslim countries. It was no wonder that following the destruction of the contentious Ayodhya Mosque on December 6, 1992, Hindu fundamentalists intensified their genocide of the Muslims even in such cosmopolitan cities as Bombay. This movement received impetus from a pervasive anti-Muslim idiom in contemporary global politics [for details, see Malik 1993]. Thus, a worldwide Muslim predicament in the wake of external negation has already engendered a deeper but resentful introversion which is ironically being articulated through social fragmentation and self-mutilation as seen in cases like Afghanistan, Karachi, Chechnya, Palestine, Kurdistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. No wonder there are so many angry young Muslims vulnerable to so many dangerous slogans and violent causes.

During 1989–90 some observers had felt that the future over The Satanic Verses was in fact mere power politics being exploited by political elites in India, Pakistan, and Iran. Accordingly, Rajiv Gandhi was seen as eager to win Muslim votes in the forthcoming crucial elections; opposition to Benazir Bhutto wanted to embarrass a woman-led regime; Imam Khomeini was manipulated by the extremists to reestablish their hold vis-à-vis the pragmatists [for details, see Ruthven 1990]. The search for a single-factor explanation of massive Muslim resentment, especially in diaspora in places like France and Britain, because no such political expediencies existed here, suffered from simplification and underestimation. Even after more than six years with a comfortable Congress-led government in India, a stronger Bhutto regime in Pakistan, and a stable pragmatist Rafsanjani administration in Iran, resentment of The Satanic Verses remains unabated, and there has been no pressure or demand whatsoever to withdraw the fatwa or retract the ban on the book. Similarly, the arguments about the peculiar nature of South Asian Islam, with its minority status seeking erstwhile protection from the nanny [Raj], extra-territorial affiliation with Muslims elsewhere, and fatalistic preferences [a false consciousness or Jahaliyya], only betray a sense of self-righteousness and intellectual arrogance towards Asian Muslim communities in Britain.

The Satanic Verses did amalgamate ethnic, regional, national, and sectarian Muslim identities under an overarching Muslim identity—maybe the only positive outcome of Salman Rushdie’s ferocious diatribe. In a plethora of confusing and localist identities, such a development has been quite opportune at least from the viewpoint of the second-generation, for whom geographical, national, or localist identities did not make any sense. One may not be able to predict the future course of such a process, but it is significant to suggest that Muslim identity is simultaneously cultural and ethnic. It equally affirms that Muslim and Islamic are not the same [either/or!] but two separate realms. Such a major demarcation speaks for a stride in identity formation and cultural transmogrification where the mosque may remain central to community organisation but biradari, mohalla, zat, and izzat may not persist as the major denominators for prestige in the community.

Werbner’s article appears to be more interested in assessing the literary and philosophical merits of the novel within the Western literary tradition, which is a challenging task not just because of the controversial nature of the book and its author but because of the less-traversed terrain she is keen to explore. However, her conceptualisation is based on European sources and lacks a framework that could be called nearer to Islamic tradition. This is not to underrate the power of her hypotheses, though one feels a scarcity of empirical data in terms of her acclaimed fieldwork among British Muslims. While Kalim Siddiqui and many other outright rejectionists might bask in the controversy surrounding the fatwa, many tolerant and moderate Muslims would still interpret the entire Rushdie imbroglio as a tormenting catastrophe.

Werbner’s contribution is an appeal to all sides to engage in dialogue. In a world of ideas and relationships that is becoming ever more interwoven, the development of pluralistically oriented, cognitive interaction is not only welcome but also necessary, even if these demands may sometimes seem utopian under the present circumstances of mutual discrimination and stigmatization.

Werbner’s powerful article is led by the hermeneutic
question what could have been the intention of The Satanic Verses and who interpreted what in what way. I wish to concentrate on the migration and its implications as well as on the Islamic mystical tradition. It should, however, be mentioned here that according to the post-colonial critique of the literature Rushdie stands in the tradition of innovative authors who have enriched and molded the postcolonial literatures, those who push for processes of decolonization and decentralization and consciously seek to rid themselves of the ruling thought patterns [Ashcroft et al. 1989].

With this aim in view, The Satanic Verses seems to tie into an innovative tradition when it analyzes, according to Webner from a humanistic perspective, religious—and historical—certainty. The novel would therefore call on faith in people as a source of rational creativity, a faith which should supposedly build the foundations for a religion of freedom. The cultural translation necessary for this, which Rushdie himself programmatically calls for and which has been variously debated among Moslem intellectuals for a long time, finds its boundaries in the diverse interpretations of complex symbols and languages, whether they are inspired by Sunna or Mahabaratha, Rabelais or Joyce [al-Azm 1991], or by the mystical reform movement, in which the prophet plays a central role: the ethical concept of the Muhammadan path [Tariqa Muhammadiya], which goes beyond pure individual mysticism in calling for a mystical reform (“Neo-Tasawwuf”) and a Sunnisation of the existential spheres. Mystical piety is therein replaced by prophetic piety, the individual has moved into the center of social discourse. This concept sprang from a deep skepticism and facilitated the initial stages of liberation from a bond to authority and the overcoming of dogma, thus making possible a social process of individualization. In this way the Prophet becomes the sublime of the sublime, the perfect individual, a moral and aesthetic ideal [Schimmel 1985]. The thus-striven-for imitatio muhammadi finally leads via the Muhammadan path (for instance, by means of eternal recitation, dreams) to absolute truth (dhāt muhammadi or haqqa muhimmadiya). Because of this identification, each attack—no matter how small—on the sublime appears to be an attack on one’s own identity and one’s own values, morally and aesthetically:

1. Webner’s article can be subdivided into three parts: (1) The theoretical section criticizes the analyses of The Satanic Verses up to now, which interpret the disagreements between Moslem and European receptors and the author as class-specific. The conflict, she claims, is founded rather in equally justified, coexisting aesthetic—religious and secular—attitudes: in an Islamic aesthetic of the sublime, which is founded on obsequiousness and lack of self-identity, and in a modernistic dialogistic one, which bases itself on equal rights and autonomy. (2) A semiotic analysis of the novel follows. In general, the result is that The Satanic Verses do not have to do with an attack on Islam and Muhammad but rather with a modernistic vision of Islam as a universal, liberal, and tolerant tradition. (3) The third part requires deeper interpretation of the text, only this, Webner claims, would make possible a fruitful dialogue in a multicultural context and a politics of mutual acceptance.

2. This was the opinion of German Orientalist Rudi Paret: “In case of emergency, the Muslim might deny his faith, but he would never

from the ranks of one’s own diaspora that would in addition be taken to the enemy public. Thus Webner may be right when she makes aesthetic elements responsible for the Moslem reaction. Rushdie, for his part, denies having attacked the Prophet. Webner subsequently attempts to prove this plausibly with reference to literary methodology.

A central theme of postcolonial literature is the conflict between faith and doubt [Rushdie 1988: 35, 92], here exemplified in the state of exile. With this, Rushdie stands in the tradition of the modern in contrast to religious fundamentalism [Rushdie 1988: 75ff., 205ff.], which claims perpetual wisdom. Rushdie embeds experience in exile partially in a symbolism of space, especially migration and the processes of individuation connected with it. For this he draws as much from the productive Indo-Pakistani sphere as from the poetic imagination and originality of Islamic mysticism [Brennan 1989: 72 ff., 127–28], which, as mentioned above, offered alternatives to the rigid legality of the written law. The cataract inherent therein (jihād fi nafs) released new values—jithād if you will—and aesthetics as well, in accordance with the wishes of the insān kāmil or even of the Mahdi. Rushdie thus creates—writes—an alternative world, wholly in the tradition of postcolonial literature.

Webner ingeniously portrays the Prophet as a perfect individual who experiences humanization in the course of the story in that the author places himself to a certain extent on the level of the Prophet. The tension between the author and the Prophet is produced by means of various characters [three oppositional pairs] who represent negative values: they contrast with the Prophet and at the same time represent the author’s alter ego. The oppositional pairs reflect the various problems of exile—identity conflicts and psychological and social changes—operating in different settings and complementing each other:

The first pair—the Anglicized Moslem migrant Chamba in London/India and the traitor Salman in Mekka/Persia—represents to a certain extent the picture of Saind Orientalism. Muhammad stands in contrast to these deficiencies as a perfect and thus also forgiving individual who always insists on humanity.

The second pair—the Indian movie star Gibreel in England/India/Mekka and the poet Baal in Mekka—symbolizes creativity. Gibreel, however, becomes an

be willing to utter a word of slander against Muhammad or to renounce him, even though he were facing death in case of refusal to do so.” And the Canadian W. C. Smith explained, “Muslims will allow attacks on Allah, there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies, but to disparage Muhammad will provoke from even the most ‘liberal’ sections of the community a fanaticism of blazing vehemence” [quoted in Schimmel 1985: 5].

3. Interestingly, the person of the Prophet has a far more central meaning in the so-called Islamic peripheries than in the Islamic heartland.

4. That this does not directly follow from the title might be grounded in the fact that Rushdie wanted to create a shock with it or perhaps was subject to a certain linguistic doubt—that is, could express his experiences and those of the immigrants only through paradox or through, if you will, an ecstatical exclamation (shahātār). On shahātār, see, for example, Ernst [1984].
agent of destruction and Baal a traitor. The poet is the only character whom the Prophet does not forgive, since the Prophet cannot tolerate the alternative order which he calls for. Werbner sees here the limits of being a prophet and of humanization.

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

The interaction between these figures and the Prophet leads through various stages to an identification between them. All the characters are embedded in chronotopes, which undoubtedly possess similarities to the spheres of existence [place of creation, world of angels, levels of spiritual and divine existence], to the levels of cosmic development [Shari'a, Tariqa, and Haqiqat], and to the spiritual steps of the soul or the levels of migration (Malik 1995:94).

Even the complementary chronotopes are taken up by Rushdie himself, their connections are reinforced by three women [Hind, Thatcher, and Ayesh], all of whom want to reestablish the old order. Three levels of migration can be seen: [1] solely within fictional—proflane—reality [modern world and current action: London, India, Persia]; [2] solely within the fictional—sacral—ideal [historical levels in the dreams: Mekka, Medina, and Persia]; and [3] between these two worlds, which are connected by Gibreel’s dreams alone. Gibreel thus becomes a mediator, his dreams—variants of the intercultural journey and/or vehicle for experiencing the Prophet up to the level of the fana fi Muhammad, the dissolution of the search’s soul into the Prophet (an important component of the “Neo-Tasawwuf”—actually make the interactive framework between the two poles possible at all.5

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

As for [1], within one—here the fictional, profane—world move Chamcha and Gibreel, for example. The former finds in the end, after the migration [the search for the self], true love; the latter, however, fails in his suicide. But both are purified by the mercy of the Prophet, of the baraka.

As for [2], within the boundaries of the ideal [Mekka/ Medina] moves the Prophet. He is for this reason subject to no tensions of identification and can therefore live up to the characteristics of an insan kamil, particularly as he can realize the various sides of the fictional ideal.

As for [3], migration between the different [profane, sacral] worlds produces varied results, which, however, distinguish themselves only gradually. The negative dominates this migration: [a] Salman finds himself first in England and Persia but is transferred by Gibreel’s dream to Mekka and “migrates.” After experiencing the Prophet in dreams, he returns to Persia and finds there a certain satisfaction, though without corresponding empathy. [b] The imam [between Persia/England and between London/Persia in the fictional ideal] stands out for his isolation in exile and for his rigid, tight hold on tradition. That is, he surpasses the boundaries of his—fictional—reality and wants to create the ideal Mekka/Medina; his own position is not sufficiently supported, he is alienated. This tension between reality and ideal is irreconcilable and can only be compensated for by static rigidity. [c] Then there is the migration which fails because of irrational action and mystical presumption. Ayesh’s one-sided migration or attempt to migrate leads to disaster because of lacking self-adaptation; this is isolation through mystical rigor.

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

It seems worthy of mention that the Prophet and Chamcha are the only two protagonists who, in spite of migration within one world [Mekka/Medina and London/India, respectively], do not move beyond the limits of their sacral and profane realities. They are both rewarded. Each migration in an imagined ideal or real world [India/Mekka or London/Mekka] brings, on the other hand, chaos and death. That is to say, migration—intercultural hybrid dialogue—can only occur on a consolidated level.

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

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

Rushdie himself postulates the crossing of these boundaries and the thesis of intercultural hybridity—“hybridity, impurity, intermingling.” A dialogue so conceived can, however, only be guaranteed, as Werbner
holds in her last section, through empathy and above all through adapting or locating oneself in a tradition of science. Pure alienation or pure inactivity is not conducive to it [the imam, Ayesha, Baal]. That seems to correspond to the conception championed in postcolonial literary criticism that migrants have positive catalytic effects on transformation processes in English [colonial] society. It is exactly the hybrid glance of the traveller between worlds—in-between two border conditions—that enables, according to Rushdie himself, historical and current reality to be elaborated upon from new perspectives [Rushdie 1991:15] and the world to be read, written, and determined anew from the inside out [re-reading, re-writing, and re-worlding]. As postcolonial author, the iconoclast Rushdie subversively rejects the dominant [imperial] discourse of power, and this he even does in two respects: European as well as Islamic-imperial. As a migrated or translated man and through his double-vision [Bhabha 1994] he can set up a creative indigenous discourse, develop an aesthetic of liberation, and demythologize stereotypical thought patterns: “turning insults into strength” or “The Empire writes back.” It is the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications which open up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy,” “a third space” [Bhabha 1994:4], so to speak, or an internal-colonial “Fourth World” [Kreutzer 1995:211]. It is at these intersections that “newness” begins [Rushdie 1988:8; 1991a:394]. In this respect, hybrid texts like The Satanic Verses naturally allow many interpretations; the intention or the objective meaning of the text admittedly oversteps the horizon of the individual reader, and one can no longer speak of the mutual semantic household which could have, for instance, a solidarity- and identity-building effect. I therefore fully endorse Webner’s call for the interpretations to be taken up openly and empathetically in a modernistically designed dialogistic forum derived from each reader’s own ethical and aesthetic tradition.

Since I agree with much of what she says, I shall concentrate on the question on which I find myself in disagreement with her.

Webner argues that The Satanic Verses is not an attack on Islam but an attempt to present a liberal, tolerant and more open vision of it. I am not sure that this is so, for it is not difficult to detect a strong anti-religious thrust to the book. Rushdie is critical of dogmas, moral certainties, monistic visions of the good, and presents a more or less post-modernist view of life according to which all moral choices are inherently tentative and ambiguous and made by moral agents devoid of religious guidance. It would seem, therefore, that for Rushdie religion by its very nature cannot be liberal or tolerant. Some religions, or some interpretations of every religion, may no doubt permit greater freedom of interpretation and moral choices than others but they all ultimately deal in moral certainties and retain a deeply illiberal and intolerant core. For Rushdie, the very attempt to create a tolerant Islam, or indeed any other religion, is therefore a futile and self-defeating exercise.

Even if one accepted Webner’s interpretation of The Satanic Verses, difficulties would remain. She reads the book one way, its Muslim critics read it quite differently. How is she to convince them that their reading is mistaken? She might show that they misunderstand Rushdie’s treatment of specific episodes in the Prophet’s life. They might agree but insist that the Prophet’s life should not be a subject of literary exploration at all or used as a material for the free play of literary fantasy. They might go further and contend that treating religion in this way subordinates it to the logic of literature, that it inescapably reduces the divine to the limited proportions of the human mind and thereby trivialises it, and that Rushdie’s profanity lies not in his treatment of specific episodes and language but in his very attempt to reconstruct the life, choices, constraints, etc. of the Prophet and to use them to explain the content of the Koran, I wonder how Webner would reply to such a criticism. The criticism rests on an aesthetic tradition sharply at variance with the one she prefers. I am not sure how one can conduct a dialogue between the two traditions, let alone arbitrate between their deep differences concerning what constitutes the legitimate object of literary exploration and how best to handle it.

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In her fascinating paper, Phina Webner raises several important issues, such as the best way to read Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, the possibility of a dialogue across different aesthetic traditions, and the most satisfactory way to formulate the nature of the disagreement between the defenders of the book and its Muslim critics.

6. “We are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed. . . . Indian, Pakistani . . . we are other than we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans. . . . We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top. We shall be the hewers of the dead wood and the gardeners of the new. It is our turn now” [Rushdie 1988:414].

7. I thank Christian Szyfska for his valuable comments and Emily Hillquist Davis for the English version.

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Phina Webner has provided us with an ingenious, structuralist reading of The Satanic Verses. For some curious reason, however, she seems to think that she has "cracked the code" and has arrived at an "objective meaning." One does not have to be a postmodernist to be taken aback by this extraordinary claim. The reading Webner provides is ingenious but not convincing. I
have argued elsewhere (van der Veer 1989, 1994) that the novel explores the sources of literary and divine inspiration and therefore, indeed, pits the Poet against the Prophet, as Werbner states. But the Prophet kills the Poet, and Werbner’s structuralist and humanistic reading of the Prophet as a great, almost perfect man collapses at this very point. Baal, the poet, shouts at Mahound, the Prophet: “Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can’t forgive.” Mahound replies, “Writers and whores. I see no difference there” (Rushdie 1988:392). Baal had been the poet of the earlier religion of the goddess Al-Lat which is repressed and replaced by masculine Islam. My reading of Rushdie’s portrayal of the Prophet is not that he is imagined to be an almost-perfect human but that he is seen as the one who has introduced an absolutist, masculine religion which is based on female submission. Baal is executed not so much because he had mocked the Revelation in his poetry as because he had invented an imitation of Mahound’s seraglio in a brothel where the twelve whores had taken up the names and attitudes of the twelve wives of the Messenger. It had been a tremendous success amongst the males of the city who had started to complain that the Prophet was allowed (by himself) to have more wives than other men. Baal had given the brothel the name “The Curtain,” an obvious reference to the effects of female seclusion on male sexual fantasies. Both in The Satanic Verses and in his earlier novel Shame Rushdie has written a narrative which connects the repression of women with other kinds of religious and political repression. Therefore, I do not see The Satanic Verses as a pro-Islamic book or as a “deeply Islamic book” as the literary critic Sara Suleri (1992:191) has it, because its obsession with Islamic themes does not make it Islamic.

These are the grounds for a different reading from that provided by Werbner. Moreover, I fail to see why we should need a master meaning to be able to discuss various interpretations in a rational manner. The journal Public Culture published in 1989 a lively debate between literary critics, anthropologists, and philosophers from different cultural backgrounds which showed strong differences of opinion but definitely also a willingness to engage each other’s arguments. These scholars did not need a neo-Kantian argument for universal truth and rationality to be able to do so. Perhaps one could object that this debate among academics did not amount to a dialogue across interpretive communities. However, if we looked for such a dialogue, we would be only hindered by Werbner’s invocation of a secular rationalist like Habermas, who has constantly ignored the religious circles in Europe which have played such an important role in the development of the Enlightenment and rational debate. In that way he has furthered the view that rational debate is impossible in religious circles and that secularization is a necessary condition for genuine discussion. In a fine essay on religious criticism in Saudi Arabia Talal Asad (1993:200–239) has shown that this view is mistaken and that religious criticism in that society amounts to an argumentative ex-change within a particular discursive tradition. It would have been very welcome if Werbner could have presented material from her fieldwork among Pakistani Muslims which might have allowed us to interpret the different arguments about the novel in these circles. But perhaps it has been impossible to collect such material in the highly charged political atmosphere of Britain, where Muslim demonstrations against the novel met an extremely hostile response from the state and the liberal intelligentsia. Asad (1993:239–69) has brilliantly argued that that moral panic among the British had much to do with a political discourse on British identity, felt to be under threat from a religious minority asserting its religious difference against the assimilationist or multicultural projects of the state. Contrary to what Werbner asserts, Asad (who, by the way, should be identified as an anthropologist and not as a secular Muslim, just as I am not a secular Christian) offers not a class analysis but a critique of the project of the modern nation-state.

The Rushdie affair is a telling example of how limiting modern liberalism can be for the debate about religious difference. Even in the Netherlands, where the stakes in this affair are so low, I have been attacked by colleagues for having “immoral views” when I argued in public that Muslims had every right to be offended by the book and demonstrate against it. A rational debate among academics as in Public Culture has become almost impossible in my country, which makes one hesitate about the possibilities of an open debate with Muslims. The most important and disturbing fact, however, is that the Rushdie affair has been incredibly damaging for the relations between Muslims and others in Western Europe. I appreciate Werbner’s intention to do something about that by providing her interpretation of the novel, but I am not convinced by the particulars of that interpretation.

**Reply**

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There is a temptation in addressing such a varied set of critical responses to answer each author separately, yet the emergent dialogue between the responses and the sheer brilliance with which several of the commentators recast my arguments call for a more synthetic approach. The central question raised—Is an interpretive dialogue possible (Ahmed, Ballard, Parekh)?—must necessarily begin with Jamal Malik’s quite brilliant interpretation of The Satanic Verses. Malik illuminates a Sufi-positioned, mystical approach to the novel, he locates its central thematic in the positive or negative journeys/migrations of protagonists between ontological spheres, a movement effecting transformation and transcendence, a new consciousness. This key idea explains the significance of [mostly failed] movements across chronotopes—a fea-
tured of the novel I did not attempt to tackle. Ironically, it was Barelwi mystic followers who reacted most passionately to the novel’s offensive attack on Islam and its Prophet. Yet this fact also holds a promise: with their sensitivity to symbolic interpretation and non-literal abstractions, these believers in Islamic mysticism might also, perhaps, be willing to contemplate the novel’s hidden meanings.

The problem has been, as Akbar Ahmed notes, that the symbolic complexity of the book renders its positive message inaccessible not only to Muslim readers but even to English readers. English readers have indeed been poorly equipped to interpret the central allegorical dimensions of the novel [for example, they are unfamiliar with the fable of the Prophet’s life, known to every Muslim child]. In the absence of a portrayal, in the second Jahilia chapter, of the Prophet’s suffering in the face of the abuse heaped upon him [by Salman the Persian and by Baal], readers must discover for themselves that the Prophet is constructed in the text as an embodiment of loyalty, commitment, mercy, and compassion. By making the plot so intricate, however, Rushdie appears to have obviated his own message and instead of communication created miscommunication. For this he has been punished by the hatred of his own people, compounded by the distorted vision of Islam Western critics come away with. Against that, a positive reading reveals the richness and breadth of vision captured by the novel’s specificity, the tapestry of East and West it weaves.

But how to convince Muslim critics of the book that such an engagement with the book is worthwhile? Is dialogue even possible [Parekh, Ballard]? To clarify first my own position: I am not arguing that Muslim critics have been “mistaken” in their response [Parekh]. I do not wish to “explain to a community the error of its discursive patterns or of its rage against British policies” [Fischer]. The nasty half-truths spewed out by Salman the Persian or Baal’s desecrating mockery of the Prophet’s wives are indeed intended to be offensive. The point of my paper is not to deny a Muslim aesthetic but to challenge Muslims to recognise the possibility of an alternative interpretation of the novel within a non-realism Western aesthetic tradition, one which is less sensitive to sexual imagery and, above, all, one which [as Ballard elegantly puts it] disguises its intention in structural inversions. From this perspective, the novel constitutes a serious exploration of the greatness of the Prophet of Islam and his unique historical achievement as the bringer of a new ethical message into the world. Indeed, as Jamal Malik demonstrates [and Itikhar Malik implies], reformist Islamic aesthetic traditions also utilise body imagery to convey qualities of spiritual love, compassion, and transcendence.

But can one rewrite history? The Rushdie affair is now well established in the political mythology of contempo-

1. Timothy Brennan’s excellent precursor of the present analysis and Sara Belcher’s interpretation are exceptions, although Saleri seems rather lazy about the dramatic structure of the book or the Islamic allegory it enacts. I am grateful to Peter Van der Veer and Jamal Malik for alerting me to these studies.

rary Islamic thought as an instance of Western rejection of Islam, of liberal “fundamentalism,” of racism, Islamophobia, and late-20th-century Orientalism. In a sense, the affair is dead, whereas the “truth” of East-West polarisation lives on.

Yet it is equally the case that the political stakes for interpretive dialogue remain high: not only is the life of a single human being still threatened but the unredressed shame experienced by a whole religious global community lingers on. To persuade Muslim critics that the book bears a positive message about Islam and its Prophet—as I believe it does—would surely reduce the sense of offence Muslims have come to live with. It would strengthen the hand of moderate Muslims, such as Akbar Ahmed, who seek to create bridges across the rupture the affair caused. It would also cast doubt on the [Islamic] legal case for the author’s death sentence as an apostate. Such a renegotiation of the meaning of the novel, whereby the author stands accused of criminal complexity rather than malicious hatred of Islam, would be part of a process of rapprochement. It would help reduce the sense of victimisation which the affair has created.

If Muslim critics can be persuaded that the book endorses a moderate, tolerant Islam, they can dispute its literary methods without the humiliating sense of being mocked by a hegemonic “West.” A double imperative is implied here: if Western readers must comprehend Muslim aesthetic sensibilities, so too must Muslim critics themselves appreciate contemporary Western aesthetic sensibilities—intellectuals from both traditions of literary expression have to find a way through the aporia the book has created.

But, even from a Western perspective, is my interpretation of the novel cogent and persuasive? Peter Van der Veer disputes this sharply. According to his reading of the novel, the Prophet is portrayed not as the “almost-perfect human” but merely as an uncompromising and bigoted male chauvinist. This is proved by the execution of Baal, the writer, for his brothel “joke.” While I appreciate Van der Veer’s willingness to engage with the text itself, he makes the same mistake which most critics have made: he interprets a fragment of the book out of context. Let me try to rephrase the interpretive insight afforded by Jamal Malik: Baal refuses to change in the face of the “newness” of monotheism which the Prophet brings into the world. Instead, he resorts to underhand mockery. Since he cannot change, he must die. To decode this message fully, the figure of the Prophet must be understood as being pitched against a whole pantheon of morally flawed actors [see fig. 2]. In the specific case of Baal, the poet fails all the tests: he is a man without moral commitment, except to his “muses” [idols]: a coward who hides in a brothel disguised as a eunuch [an unproductive, non-creative person] to escape arrest and who then proceeds to betray the women who hid him. From an Islamic point of view, he deserves to die for dishonouring the Prophet and his family. Yet built into the text is a key moral transformation: as Baal gets to know the women in the brothel better, his relation-
ship with them is reconstituted in the image of the Prophet who embodies familial love and loyalty. In other words, the Prophet sets the standard of moral excellence as a loyal and trusting husband. Baal’s “joke,” which mocks the Prophet’s relationships, stops being a joke only when he stands up heroically for his “wives” and becomes both compassionate and loyal himself. The implication is that literary genius without moral commitment is both impotent and irresponsible. If Baal does journey, however, his transformation comes too late: his change of heart cannot undo his actions. The brothel episode is one of the ordeals the Prophet—as leader, man, husband, and law giver—must face. Undoubtedly, Rushdie is fired by reformist zeal: against the strict seclusion of women in Islam and the zina laws with their draconian implications for marginal women; against literary censorship and the Islamic death sentence for apostasy. A reform of these laws would parallel, as Hefner points out, the acceptance even by Islamicists of the consonance of Islam with modern science.

But the central aporia of the novel, embodied in the confrontation between the Prophet and Baal, has to be recognised for what it is—an aporia: how to have tolerance, freedom of expression, sexual rights, while at the same time instituting a new civil order based upon moral commitments, marital loyalties, love, truth, and familial trust.

The question bears on the issue of public civility raised by Kidwai and Hefner and on the status of transgressive license in Islam stressed by Fischer in particular. Undoubtedly, there is a good deal of transgressive practice in Islam. Yet transgression in Islamic societies tends to take place outside the official public sphere of legitimate “high” culture, in the company of like-minded persons. This is true, for example, of zar spirit possession. The question is, Can Fischer cite instances of approved transgressive blasphemy in the official public sphere? Can he cite examples of offensive attacks on the Prophet even in the unofficial spaces of Islamic popular culture? The truth is that transgressive practices, where they exist, tend to be compartmentalised as a localised popular culture, a thing of women, young men, and poets, not as legitimate representations of a global Islamic culture. The Satanic Verses, published by Viking-Penguin for a worldwide English readership, transgressed beyond the space of localised Islamic popular culture. The illusion of a “private” localised reach could not be sustained when the real reach of the novel was public and global. Moreover, as Hefner argues in a broadly illuminating commentary, “a Muslim ethic of tolerance may well place greater emphasis on the ‘civic republican’ (as opposed to ethically individualist) notions that politics requires civic virtue and virtue-making is in some sense a public responsibility.” In a similar vein, Kidwai stresses that the Muslim outrage “stemmed essentially from their belief in the primacy of civility over sacilege. Most regrettably, in the din engendered by the liberal Inquisition and war cries against Muslims no heed was given the Muslims’ case for practising and upholding civility.”

I am particularly grateful to Kidwai for raising this point and for his continued willingness to engage in dialogue over the affair. Let me begin by making my own position quite clear: I am not against censorship in any absolute sense. I agree with both Richard Webster and Simon Lee that censorship in contemporary democratic societies is pervasive in being both self- and commercially imposed. If The Satanic Verses were simply sacrilegious pulp fiction, I would support its banning. But I genuinely believe that the book is intended not as an offence against Islam as a whole but only against Islamic extremism.

Every Muslim child is taught the history of the Prophet’s life: the curses and offenses which he and his companions had to suffer, the persecutions they had to endure. Many also learn of the evil blasphemous lies perpetrated about Islam and its Prophet by medieval Crusaders and clergy, while in the contemporary world Muslims as minorities suffer discrimination not only because of their appearance but also because their religion is distorted and slandered. Rather than appearing to foster “civility,” Islam is constructed as violent and fanatical, espousing terrorism, illegal assassinations, and the oppression of women. I put it to Kidwai that this is precisely the theme of The Satanic Verses. Read with care, the novel reveals that the Prophet is the target of sacrilegious attacks to which he responds in an exemplary Islamic fashion for the sake of social civility. When he returns as victorious conqueror to Mecca, he must decide how to judge those people who have abused not only him but the civil order of society. What is remarkable (and historically true) is that he forgives virtually all of them and creates a society of civility and public order.

Why does he not forgive Baal and the prostitutes? Can Islam tolerate transgressive poets and sexually promiscuous prostitutes? Baal’s unforgivable crime was to publicly desecrate the sacred domain (haram; harem) of relationships of intimacy and love, relations which Rushdie (drawing on the Othello fable) shows to be especially vulnerable to malicious attack. He thus created an impasse which only his death could resolve. He transgressed beyond the boundaries of blasphemy. At stake was not the personal shaming of the Prophet or even the poet’s plurality of commitments; it was the invasive destruction of a morally and rationally grounded civil order.

The dilemma facing Muslim intellectuals is that if one protects civility by punishing sacrilege and sexual license with violent death, then one denies civility. If one protests against a novelist by calling for his death, then the public sphere, as a civic sphere of argument and debate, becomes a violent sphere. Language unencumbered publicly is undoubtedly an action: inciters to violence must be punished. But how does one attack the language

2. Kidwai might be interested to know that in Britain it is legally permissible to extract up to 500 words from a published text without infringing copyright. To that extent, uncensored freedom of expression is safeguarded for all British citizens.
of racism and Islamophobia without reproducing it? As a novelist, how does one reproduce the experience of suffering and humiliation undergone by a prophet/community without invoking his/its ordeals? This linguistic paradox makes it risky to condemn writers to death. Rushdie did not use profane language simply “to reclaim Islam for secular Muslims.” He used profane language to make real to a contemporary readership the kinds of slanders Islam endures, the ordeals the Prophet had to face and overcome, and the moral aporias any faith must contend with in a postcolonial, postcapitalist society. The civility of the public sphere thus requires, paradoxically, that the author of what appears to be sacrilege should go unpunished. Muslim critics need to remind themselves also that the fear of religious censorship is pervasive in the West, historically rooted in Christian persecutions and wars. If such fears of religious dogma are displaced onto Islam, now part of the West, then they need to be addressed with sensitivity by Muslim activists. Kidwai’s co-edited reader stands out in this context as a shining light of civility and dialogue.

In his eloquent response, Hefner makes the point that the Enlightenment has to be understood in its historic specificity. I agree that as a philosophical movement which challenged the scientific foundations of religious knowledge the Enlightenment was indeed historically unique. But as a movement which continued to grapple with humanist ethical issues raised by the great monotheistic religions, by Greek drama and philosophy, and by Roman law, its sources lie in the Mediterranean and Near East, where humanist ideas along with trade goods circulated for millennia. The moral critique of religious dogmatism, irrationality, greed, and hypocrisy or of political tyranny is not unique to Enlightenment philosophers; it is the fundamental impulse animating all three great monotheistic religions of the Near East, a legacy which the Enlightenment, along with Jewish, Christian, and Islamic reform movements, revitalised (Fischer, Jamal Malik, and Iftikhar Malik). It should be remarked here that I did not wish to imply that an aesthetic of the sublime supposes “obsequiousness and lack of self-identity” (Jamal Malik). On the contrary, the sublime as I understand it presupposes a lifting of the human spirit or imagination beyond itself into the realm of abstract infinities.

Once the notion of “progress” espoused by the European Enlightenment was politicised, it perversely came to be used to justify all manner of atrocity, bureaucratic surveillance, economic exploitation, barbarism, enslavement, and conquest; but by the same token, the values of the Enlightenment were an intellectual weapon used to challenge slavery, colonialism, and political tyranny in a call for freedom and emancipation. A contemporary postmodern ethics pushes Enlightenment values towards a respect for cultural difference, but such an ethics is implicitly still grounded in humanist assumptions of individual equal rights insofar as it remains an ethics of freedom and emancipatory politics.3

If Rushdie rejects the irresponsible muse, how are we to explain his own vacillating behaviour [Kidwai]? Ahmed is surely right that if he wished to reach out to his community, a financial gesture was called for, especially in the light of the profits the novel raked in. Both the novel and his attempts to reconvert to Islam reveal a person in search of faith and roots (Van der Veer’s “identity”) who encountered a wall of hatred in response to his gestures. It is this fatal disjuncture which partly explains the puzzling outrage of Muslim intellectuals: Rushdie the novelist masqueraded as a representative Third World, postcolonial writer, yet he failed to gauge the mood of the vast majority of moderate diasporic Muslims because he was cut off socially from them. Had he been socially enmeshed in human relations with his fellow countrymen, the affair could never have happened. The question is, by what right did he, a lapsed Muslim, allow himself to sit in judgement of Islam or its Prophet?

This interest in the author’s moral persona is understandable, yet it seems to me that ultimately he can only be judged by his work. The novel he wrote needs to be set in the context of the rise of political Islam and the threat it posed to an Islamic liberal intelligentsia. Van der Veer mentions the “moral panic” which the book sparked among Muslim immigrants. But in reality, there were a series of agonistic moral panics which motivated the novel: the moral panic against the Shah and the United States by the Iranian clergy; the counter moral panic that the Iranian revolution generated in the West; the rise of President Zia, which led to the disenfranchisement of women and the reinstatement of the zina laws in Pakistan. Constitutional achievements since independence were being eroded throughout the Muslim world, with women as the iconic bearers of this newfound purity. While this has led paradoxically to an Islamic feminist politics which has partly turned the tables on the male initiative, this new development was not so evident at the time the novel was written. The contrast drawn by the author is between an absolutist [male] and a compassionate [male and female] Islam.

In this sense the book and the affair were from the start enmeshed in a Islamic modernist-democratic versus politico-religious polarisation which had its geopolitical expression as well (Ballard, Iftikhar Malik). My own sense is that these initial polarisations have diminished rather than sharpened. Public opinion in the West has been highly sympathetic to the Muslim plight in Bosnia, Kurdistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Ayodhya and to the Palestinian national struggle, while condemning Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria or the Sudan. What is more shocking is the impotence of Western and Third World [including Islamic] governments in the face of ethnic cleansing, civil wars, and genocidal regimes—a reminder that the world has no clear strategy for protecting innocent citizens against human rights abuses, whether by Buddhists, Hindus, Marxists, Muslims, Foucauldian anarchism, Derridian relativism, or Irigarian self-containment, all of which stand in opposition to the explicit humanism of Levinas.

3. Here it may be worth remarking, in response to Fischer, that there are real differences between the liberatory politics of
Jews, Christians, Confucians, Sikhs, military dictators, or tribalists. In the specific case of *The Satanic Verses*, the transnational reach of English literature meant that from the start, the offence created was a global one [Kidwai]. British Pakistani citizens felt particularly responsible to the Muslim world because Rushdie, himself a Pakistani national, happened to live in Britain. Despite the *fatwa*, their protests have elicited a good deal of sympathy for the Muslim sense of hurt, so much so that it is highly unlikely that offensive blasphemy against Islam will be used as a literary tool in the near future. In this context dialogue is surely possible; our subject positions are not immutably oppositional: we share a legacy of monotheistic and/or humanist assumptions which underpin our identity as equal and democratic citizens, whether of India, Britain, Germany, Holland, Pakistan, or the United States. All we need now is to convince ourselves that *The Satanic Verses* shares these basic assumptions.

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