

*“The Battle for the Enlightenment”:  
Rushdie, Islam, and the West*

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PhD

University of York

English and Related Literature

August 2014



## Abstract

In the years following the proclamation of the fatwa against him, Salman Rushdie has come to view the conflict of the Rushdie Affair not only in terms of a struggle between “Islam” and “the West”, but in terms of a “battle for the Enlightenment”. Rushdie’s construction of himself as an Enlightened war-leader in the battle for a divided world has proved difficult for many critics to reconcile with the Rushdie who advocates “mongrelization” as a form of life-giving cultural hybridity. This study suggests that these two Rushdies have been in dialogue since long before the fatwa. It also suggests that eighteenth-century modes of writing and thinking about, and with, the Islamic East are far more integral to the literary worlds of Rushdie’s novels than has previously been realised. This thesis maps patterns of rupture and of convergence between representations of the figures of the Islamic despot and the Muslim woman in *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and the changing ways in which these figures were instrumentalised in eighteenth-century European literatures. Arguing that many of the harmful binaries that mark the way Rushdie and others think about Islam and the West hardened in the late eighteenth century, this study folds into the fable of the fatwa an account of European literary engagements with the Islamic world in the earlier part of the eighteenth century. By complicating Rushdie’s monolithic Enlightenment with accounts of plural eighteenth centuries, Wests, and Islams, this thesis writes against the discourses of cultural incommensurability emblematised and catalysed by the Rushdie Affair.

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## Acknowledgements

The writing of this thesis was supported for three years by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which I acknowledge with thanks. In 2012 I was awarded a short-term research fellowship by the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library at Emory University which enabled me to spend several illuminating weeks in Atlanta studying the Rushdie Papers. For this, and for the expertise and friendliness of the staff there, I am very grateful. In 2013 the Humanities Research Centre at the University of York honoured me with a Doctoral Fellowship in recognition of my work, for which I would also like to express my thanks.

I would like to thank Jim Watt, who has shown me extraordinary intellectual generosity and personal kindness throughout my time at York. I could not have wished for a more inspiring and dedicated supervisor.

I would also like to thank Harriet Guest for all the support and encouragement she has offered me over the years. She and Ziad Elmarsafy helped me a great deal as members of my Thesis Advisory Panel. Claire Chambers has also been a wonderful mentor and friend, and I am indebted to her for the many insights into Rushdie and Islam which she has shared with me. Richard Harris, with his encyclopaedic knowledge of Islamic history, Urdu, and Hindi, has been a source of knowledge and friendship throughout the writing of this study, for which I thank him.

I feel very lucky to have been part of the vibrant research culture at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, and would especially like to thank Alison O'Byrne, Emma Major, John Barrell, and Joanna de Groot for the many stimulating exchanges which have enriched my understanding of the eighteenth century. Clare

Bond, the administrator of the Centre, has been a huge source of support, comfort, and fun, for which I would like to thank her too. Many of the ideas in this thesis coalesced in papers I wrote for conferences, and were informed by the valuable feedback I received. These conferences included the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies 2012, 2013, and 2014 at Oxford, the Postcolonial Studies Association's *Re-evaluating the Postcolonial City* at the University of Leeds and *History, Postcolonialism, and Tradition* at Kingston University, *Post-Empire Imaginaries?* at the University of Bern, *Re-inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis* at the University of Chemnitz, and *Transnational Relations in the Eighteenth Century* at Uppsala University. I am indebted to Uppsala University and to the F. R. Leavis Fund and the Department of English and Related Literatures at the University of York for the generous travel grants which allowed me to attend some of these events. I benefitted hugely from presenting and discussing work in progress at the CECS Postgraduate Forum, and I would like to thank the postgraduate students of CECS, past and present, for their inspirational scholarship and their kindness and encouragement. I am very proud to have shared my postgraduate journey with Arlene Leis, Joanna Wharton, and Sophie Coulombeau, and I must thank Ruth Scobie in particular for the support and friendship she has offered me throughout the process.

Finally, I would like to thank Maureen Lambert and Michael Talibard for their kind and insightful commentaries on earlier drafts of this thesis, and my marvellous friends Ashley Mauritzen, Ian Godden, and Olivia Piercy, with whom I have shared many frolics, breakfasts, ups, and downs, and without whom I never could have made it this far. Above all, I thank Lis and Colin Perchard: the best of parents, and the best of people. They have shown me boundless love and support

throughout my life, and my interest in many of the themes of this work grew out of the experiences we shared over the course of my childhood in Turkey and India.

This study is dedicated to them.



## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work. It has not been previously published nor submitted for any other degree at the University of York or any other institution.



## Introduction

# Battle Lines and the Joined-up World

“Do we have to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again?” laments the headline of a 2005 Salman Rushdie article for the *Independent*.<sup>1</sup> “Democracy is not a tea party,” it continues, “In the end a fundamental decision has to be made: do we want to live in a free society or not?”. The piece is protesting against the UK government’s Racial and Religious Hatred Act, which was later passed in 2006 – an “‘anschluss’ of liberal values in the face of resurgent religious demands”. The battle for the Enlightenment, we are told:

was about the church’s desire to place limits on thought. The Enlightenment wasn’t a battle against the state but against the church. Diderot’s novel *La Religieuse*, with its portrayal of nuns and their behaviour, was deliberately blasphemous: it challenged religious authority, with its indexes and inquisitions, on what it was possible to say. Most of our contemporary ideas about freedom of speech and imagination come from the Enlightenment. We may have thought the battle won, but if we aren’t careful, it is about to be “un-won”.<sup>2</sup>

The bellicose rhetoric of the article proclaims this battle to be nothing less than the struggle for a free society, and yet the nature of the battle itself is slippery: the

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Do we have to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again?” *Independent*, January 22, 2005, accessed January 24, 2011  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/salman-rushdie-do-we-have-to-fight-the-battle-for-the-enlightenment-all-over-again-6154315.html>

<sup>2</sup> Rushdie, “Enlightenment”.

Enlightenment, within the space of a few sentences, moves from being the cause over which the battle is fought to being the battle itself. The thought-limiting force which this battle is to be waged against is no longer the Church but the British government – and “[p]rivately,” he tells us in an aside, the government will “tell you the law is designed to please ‘the Muslims’”.<sup>3</sup> This notion of a Muslim-pacifying agenda partially concealed by the government, and of the fatal effect on freedom of expression this entails, has become something of a post-9/11 leitmotif in Rushdie’s non-fiction.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, casually sensationalist, uninterrogated rhetorical parallels between Nazi Germany and Muslim machinations, like his reference to the annexation of Austria above, have been slowly gathering force in his essays and articles since the time of the fatwa: a flirtation with the discourse of Islamofascism brought to prominence by his friend Christopher Hitchens.<sup>5</sup>

This article begins with a despairing account of the devout Christianity of a group of Republican senators that Rushdie had met just before the beginning of the war in Iraq. It is written from the same anecdotal, first-hand perspective that allows the “privately they’ll tell you” account of British government policy above, and is bolted uneasily to the account of Britain that forms the main body of the text with the assertion that this is “another ‘anschluss’ of liberal values”.<sup>6</sup> Rushdie positions himself as both political confidante and whistle-blower: emerging from the corridors of power with a secularist call-to-arms for freedom of expression. In the multivalent rhetoric of this, and many other non-fiction pieces written since the fatwa, and especially since 9/11, the Enlightenment becomes both the battle and the battled-for,

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<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, “Enlightenment”.

<sup>4</sup> See my discussion of Islamophobia in *Joseph Anton* in Chapter Six.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Hitchens, “Defending Islamofascism: It’s a valid term. Here’s why.” *Slate*, October 22, 2007, accessed January 20, 2014.

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2007/10/defending\\_islamofascism.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2007/10/defending_islamofascism.html) I discuss this point in further detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, “Enlightenment”.

and Rushdie both war leader and embodiment of the cause. His own traumatic struggle for survival against the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa in 1989 has, for him, enacted a kind of apotheosis, rendering him both incarnation of and spokesman for a set of abstract ideas about freedom of expression, secularism, and religious tolerance. These ideas form the core of Rushdie's vision of the Enlightenment: an Enlightenment which, as I explore in Chapter Six, centres firmly on simplified notions about the work of certain French philosophes, and particularly Voltaire. As Rushdie increasingly comes to view the twentieth and twenty-first century battle for freedom of expression against religious demands in terms of a battle for the Enlightenment, so, I will suggest, he comes to view himself as the successor to his eighteenth-century incarnation of Enlightenment: Rushdie begins to invent himself as the new Voltaire. The distance between Rushdie's idea of Voltaire, and the historical Voltaire is great – although, as I explore in my parallel reading of *The Satanic Verses* and Voltaire's *Mahomet* in Chapter Four, their discursive uses of Islam overlap in places – and it is worth noting here that in view of Voltaire's writings on war, he would be unlikely to approve of being mobilised in this battle rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

In *Joseph Anton*, his memoir of the fatwa years, Rushdie writes that his “real subject, the one he would worry away at for the rest of his life,” is “the great matter of *how the world joined up*, not only how the East flowed into the West and the West into the East, but how the past shaped the present while the present changed our understanding of the past”.<sup>8</sup> This, too, is my subject, although I am as interested in the disconnects in Rushdie's work between past and present, and between ideas of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, his account of war in the entry on “Good. Of Good and Evil, Physical and Moral” in Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. John G. Gorton (London: John and Henry Lunt, 1824) Vol. 3, 361.

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: a Memoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 68-69 (Rushdie's emphasis).

“West” and “East” as I am in the ways in which they join up. The dissonance between Rushdie’s worlds – the joined-up world and the world divided by battle-lines – is one of the central characteristics of his entire oeuvre. His earlier writings are still used, in undergraduate courses on postcolonial or global literatures, as a means of exemplifying (problematic) ideas about cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism – often through the study of *Midnight’s Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. These writings celebrating cross-cultural fertilization have, for many, proved difficult to reconcile with the pro-USA, anti-Islam stance that has marked much of his non-fiction writing since 9/11.<sup>9</sup> This has led to a curious dualism where perceptions of Rushdie are concerned: he is simultaneously lauded as a champion of cultural hybridity, and recognised as one of the most prominent voices in a discourse of cultural incommensurability between Islam and West. It is significant that even whilst charting the flow of the joined-up world, Rushdie habitually writes in terms of East and West. This dichotomy remains a constant throughout his career, though the ideas associated with these terms undergo substantial changes. More than anything, the “battle” in the title of this study is a battle for definition, and its pages chart the jostling of plural Rushdies, Enlightenments, Islams, and Wests.

In addition to a shift in his politics over the course of his career, there seems, at first glance, to be a genre divide at work: as Edward Said remarked in 2003, “[t]here’s a greater disconnect between his non-fictional prose and his fiction, now, than there was in the decade of the 1980s”.<sup>10</sup> This is, to an extent, true, and it is

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<sup>9</sup> For an influential early critique of Rushdie’s cosmopolitanism see Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Midnight’s Children Festival Events, “A Dialogue with Edward Said”, YouTube video, 1:28:39, posted by “columbiauniversity”, March 5, 2003, accessed June 7, 2014, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb9Ny-41C\\_I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb9Ny-41C_I).

important to think about this generic division both in terms of what Rushdie condemns and what he valorises. Over the course of the ten years of essays and criticism compiled in his 1991 collection *Imaginary Homelands*, beside his passionate invocations of transculturation, there are, among other things, powerful indictments of the racism of 1980s Britain, British imperial nostalgia, and Hindu fundamentalism in India, as well as his first pieces contesting the pro-Khomeini Islamic responses to the fatwa. Whilst I discuss this critical strain at length in Chapter Six, it is worth noting here that Rushdie's critiques of injustice in the 1980s and early 1990s range widely across national, cultural, racial, and religious borders. It is, of course, still true that Rushdie's dissent ranges beyond an opposition to Islam: in the article above, for example, it takes in the British government as well as the Muslims it seeks to placate, the Christianity of the Republicans as well as the Sikhs rioting over Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play, *Behzti*. Over time, however, the criticism of conservative Islam in his non-fiction moves from its being one form of despotism amongst many to its being a form of ur-despotism. In the years after 9/11, even the qualifiers of "conservative" Islam or "Islamism" begin to give way to an unashamed condemnation of Islam itself. So far, little of this account of Rushdie's politics moves beyond what might be seen as a broad critical consensus.<sup>11</sup> I will argue, however, that not only can this move towards placing Islam at the top of a global index of despotism be traced in his fiction, but its roots go as far back as *Shame*, published in 1983, and arguably even to *Midnight's Children*, in 1980.

Although his thoughts had been tending in this direction for some years, a crucial binary between positive multiplicity and negative singularity crystallises for

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Sabina Sawhney and Simona Sawhney, "Introduction: Reading Rushdie after September 11, 2001", *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 4, "Salman Rushdie" (2001): 431-443.

Rushdie in the first years after the fatwa. In the essay “In Good Faith,” written in defence of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), he states that:

[t]hose who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure... *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.<sup>12</sup>

It is this binary, “mongrelisation” versus “the absolutism of the Pure”, which, I will argue, offers us the means of charting Rushdie’s seemingly oppositional views of a joined-up world and a world riven by battle lines.<sup>13</sup> It also offers an important insight into the different ways in which the starkening geo-political visions expressed in his non-fictional prose may be at work in the richer, more elusive textual worlds of his novels.

As concerned with the cultural functions of Rushdie’s responses to Islam as with the texts themselves, this study takes as its core texts the novels which play the most pivotal parts in his changing relationship with the religion, and in the world’s changing cultural and political reactions to the author. Part I deals with *Shame*, Rushdie’s first novel in which his notion of despotic Islam finds full utterance, and Part II examines *The Satanic Verses*: the text in which this conception of Islam

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<sup>12</sup> Rushdie, “In Good Faith”, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 394.

<sup>13</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.



becomes a globalised metaphor for “the absolutism of the Pure” – and the book which triggered Khomeini’s fatwa. Part III then reads *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as a post-fatwa text and a modulation of the previous two novels’ constructions of Islam as the anti-mongrel, before the thesis concludes with an analysis of *The Enchantress of Florence* as a partial return to positive mongrelisation after the bleak visions of the death of hybridity in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury*, and *Shalimar the Clown*.

From as early as his first novel, *Grimus*, published in 1975, the idea of the conflict of “mongrel” and “pure” has been a central theme, as has the attendant struggle of the mongrel self to find utterance amongst the rigidity of “pure” religious and cultural identities. “All that is Unaxona is Unclean,” says the god/dess Axona to the hero Flapping Eagle when he confronts her in a vision. “Is it to commit sacrilege upon this holy place that you come, whiteskin, paleface, mongrel amongst the pure, traitor to your race, is it to commit your supreme act of defilement that you come?”<sup>14</sup> “[W]hen I defile you,” Flapping Eagle says before he rapes her, “I am cleansed... of the guilt and shame that possessed some hidden part of my mind”.<sup>15</sup> This strange and brutal act of misogynist iconoclasm (and I examine Rushdie’s treatment of women in Chapters One and Two) constitutes one of the first instances of a pattern that runs throughout his corpus: blasphemy as the wresting of freedom of expression from mind-controlling religious despotism. It is the pattern described in Rushdie’s summary of his idea of the Enlightenment in the article above: it “was about the church’s desire to place limits on thought... [it] was deliberately blasphemous: it challenged religious authority, with its indexes and inquisitions, on

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<sup>14</sup> Rushdie, *Grimus*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 99.

<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, *Grimus*, 102.

what it was possible to say”.<sup>16</sup> This fight for freedom of expression against religious despotism is inextricably linked, for Rushdie, with the struggle of the mongrel against the pure, the multitudinous against the singular, the heteroglossic against the monoglossic. What he later terms “the battle for the Enlightenment” is partly the battle for the joined-up world that he has waged throughout his literary career. Paradoxically, as this battle has raged, his rhetoric has essentialised the foe to the point where it has, itself, shut down the possibilities of mongrelization where Islam is concerned.

In *Midnight's Children*, when the Sinai family move to Pakistan we are told Saleem's parents said, ‘We must all become new people’; in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal. But Saleem was forever tainted with Bombayness, his head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah's (like India's first Muslims, the mercantile Moplas of Malabar, I had lived in a country whose population of deities rivalled the numbers of its people, so that, in unconscious revolt against the claustrophobic throng of deities, my family had espoused the ethics of business, not faith).<sup>17</sup>

Just as it does in the essays collected in *Imaginary Homelands*, the despotism ranged against the hybrid community of Saleem and the other thousand children of midnight has many faces, not least the lingering hegemony of the British Empire and the communalist violence of the “fanatical anti-Muslim movement” Ravana, and perhaps most memorably that of Indira Gandhi, “the Widow”.<sup>18</sup> As Rachel Trousdale reminds us, “[f]rom *Midnight's Children* onwards, Rushdie is concerned

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<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, “Enlightenment”.

<sup>17</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1995), 310.

<sup>18</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 72.

with the Nehruvian secular pluralist ideal (and its international pluralist correlates) and its Indian political counterweight, Hindu nationalism”.<sup>19</sup> Hindu nationalist despotism in India is, beside Islam, one of the forces against which Rushdie writes most passionately – here and in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in particular – and it is my regret that the scope of this study does not allow more of a comparative analysis of his representations of the two dominant religions of the Subcontinent. It is worth considering, however, that where the polytheistic nature of Hinduism allows Rushdie to riff on pluralism – as with passages like the one above, where gods outnumber people – the monotheistic nature of Islam provides almost a ready-made metaphor for despotic singularity, as does the fact that in Urdu and Persian “Pakistan” means “Land of the Pure”.<sup>20</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Three, Rushdie’s celebratory accounts of Islamic communities in India, and especially in Bombay, in works from the 1980s tend to centre on the kind of mixture of mercantile cosmopolitanism and inter-religious tolerance Saleem describes above. In the mongrel air of India, it seems, Islam as an intermingling cultural force can function as an enriching influence but only when its singularity, and indeed its religiosity, is adulterated by the religious cultures around it. Though it appears less regularly in his twenty-first-century accounts of Islam, this idea does persist: “[t]he Muslim population in India is, largely speaking, not radicalised,” he says in a 2006 interview, “[f]rom the beginning they were always very secular-minded”.<sup>21</sup> As I explore later in this introduction, this cosmopolitan Islam – very much bound up with Kashmir as well as Bombay – is

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<sup>19</sup> Rachel Trousdale, “‘City of Mongrel Joy’: Bombay and the Shiv Sena in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39 (2004): 95-110, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Believed to be first used by Choudhary Rahmat Ali in a 1933 pamphlet titled “Now or Never”, in *Pakistan Movement Historical Documents*, G. Allana, (Karachi: Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, nd [1969]): 103-110. Accessed October 17, 2014, [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt\\_rahmatali\\_1933.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_rahmatali_1933.html).

<sup>21</sup> Johann Hari, “Salman Rushdie: his life, his work, and his religion”, *Independent*, October 13, 2006, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/salman-rushdie-his-life-his-work-and-his-religion-419902.html>.

folded into Rushdie's idea of the hybrid-as-past, and dislocated from his critique of Islam by virtue of its secularism.

The creation of Pakistan in *Midnight's Children* is figured as the defeat of pluralism and the triumph of despotic singularity: Mian Abdullah's Free Islam Convocation – “a loosely federated alternative to the dogmatism and vested interests” of the pro-Partition Muslim League – falls after Abdullah “the Hummingbird” is murdered, in an act steeped in Islamic symbolism.<sup>22</sup> “Six new moons came into the room, six crescent knives held by men dressed all in black, with covered faces”.<sup>23</sup> Rushdie's play on the etymology of “Pakistan” is echoed by his instrumentalisation of a partial (in both senses) translation of “Islam” as “submission,” rather than “submission to the will of God”. Thus it becomes “Pakistan, the land of submission, the home of purity” – the antithesis, the implication goes, to its vibrant mongrel neighbour. Whilst I trace his complex mapping of ideas about Islam, despotism, and the oppression of women onto Pakistan in *Shame* in Chapters One and Two, it is important to register here the steady crystallisation of Islam as the ultimate form of “the absolutism of the Pure” in Rushdie's oeuvre, even before the fatwa.

Rushdie's conception of despotic Islam – in line with most strands of Islamophobic thought – hinges partly on the idea of its oppression of women. As Leila Ahmed wrote in 1982,

[j]ust as Americans ‘know’ that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that

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<sup>22</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 47.

women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women.<sup>24</sup>

As I argue in Chapters One and Two, this pervasive idea is, in large part, the legacy of eighteenth-century stadial views of history which use the relative positions of women in different societies as a means of creating an index of civilizational progress. The notion of the Islamic world as backward – historically removed from the West – is something that Rushdie often plays on. Couching his ideas about a conflict between Islam and the West in terms of a battle for the Enlightenment positions the Islamic world a good three hundred years behind the Western world – and this historical gulf between cultural hemispheres is widened by Rushdie’s participation in the formation of the cliché of Islamic cultures being not only opposed to modernity, but medieval. Early on in *Shame* he writes

[a]ll this happened in the fourteenth century. I’m using the Hegerian calendar, naturally: don’t imagine that stories of this type always take place longlong [sic] ago. Time cannot be homogenized as easily as milk, and in those parts, until quite recently, the thirteen-hundreds were still in full swing.<sup>25</sup>

This manoeuvre, which I will identify again and again in Rushdie’s novels, is an ironic wink at the reader: a postmodern get-out clause designed to highlight his awareness of the negatively charged cultural discourse in which he’s participating, and thus distance himself from it. These gestures, I will argue, do not sufficiently combat the reinscription of the view of Islam which Ahmed describes above.

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<sup>24</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem”, *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (Autumn, 1982): 521-534, 522.

<sup>25</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1983), 13.

Indeed, they generally mark the passages of his novels which promulgate anti-Islamic ideas most powerfully.

Whilst invocations of unhistorical ideas of the Enlightenment in discourses of difference between Islam and the West first gather force from Rushdie and his supporters in the years following the fatwa, Rushdie's conceptions of Islamic cultures and the modes in which he represents them had been shaped by eighteenth-century ideas about the Islamic world long before. The Eurocentric identification of ideas about freedom of speech, tolerance, and secularism as being of eighteenth-century European provenance is open to question, and I argue that the array of negative ideas about Islam martialled by Rushdie and others can be far more reliably traced to Enlightenment Europe. Rather than merely traversing the important historiographical arc drawn by Said in *Orientalism*, however, this study joins with the work of scholars like Ziad Elmarsafy, Humberto Garcia, and Srinivas Aravamudan to recover an eighteenth century in which increasing knowledge of Islamic cultures, and a burgeoning tendency to use Islam as a means of thinking about Europe, engendered a series of cultural metamorphoses which gave *rise* to many of the discourses which Rushdie figures as antithetical to Islam. By looking at eighteenth-century cultural responses to the Islamic world, I not only chart the crystallisation of negative ideas about Islam, like the oppression of its women and the despotism of its men, but work to elide what Garcia terms "the imaginary opposition between Islam and Enlightenment".<sup>26</sup>

### *Rushdie's Eighteenth Centuries*

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<sup>26</sup> Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment: 1670-1840* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 223.

In an interview with Una Chaudhuri in 1983, Rushdie remarked “I’m very keen on the eighteenth century in general, not just in literature. I think the eighteenth century was the great century”.<sup>27</sup> This early-career avowal of his interest in – and affection for – the eighteenth century has not gone unremarked by critics. And yet, for the most part, attention has centred on the eighteenth century as a source of literary influence – for example Clement Hawes’s excellent essay on *Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight’s Children*.<sup>28</sup> This is an interesting avenue of research, and there is a great deal more work to be done on unpicking the many vital intertexts between Rushdie and the eighteenth century. His notebooks are saturated with references to eighteenth-century texts – including, in an early journal from 1974, several lists of works by eighteenth-century authors including Defoe, Pope, Swift, Sterne, and Blake – all with little ticks beside them, implying the conscious construction of a programme of reading.<sup>29</sup> One of the earliest items in the archive is Rushdie’s prize-winning school essay of 1964, about the late-eighteenth-century French diplomat Talleyrand, which shows an extraordinarily detailed knowledge of European history of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras – youthful research that bubbles up again over twenty years later, with references to the French Revolution in *Shame*, and Talleyrand himself in *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>30</sup>

All of this indicates a deep, longstanding artistic and intellectual engagement with the eighteenth century, but beyond that, a very personal engagement with certain figures and discourses of this period that becomes inextricably, and vitally, bound up with the volatile dialectic of the Rushdie Affair – both for Rushdie himself,

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<sup>27</sup> Una Chaudhuri, “Imaginative Maps: Excerpts from a Conversation with Salman Rushdie”, *Turnstile* Vol. 2, no. 1 (1990): 36-47. [Interview conducted 1983]

<sup>28</sup> Clement Hawes, “Leading History by the Nose: The Turn to the Eighteenth Century in *Midnight’s Children*”, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 1, (Spring 1993): 147-168.

<sup>29</sup> Rushdie, Journals, Box 212, Folder 3, 1974-1978, Salman Rushdie Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>30</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 240; Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London, Vintage: 1998), 205.

and for his commentators. In an impassioned note on an undated early typescript of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* in the Salman Rushdie Papers at the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books library at Emory University is this eighteenth-century-inflected anticipation of *Joseph Anton*: “[t]he autobiography. Transcend the tittle-tattle obsessions of the Rushdie affair by the honesty of the bared soul. Conceal nothing, nothing. Do not spare myself or anyone else. The honesty of the book, its revelatory insanity, like Rousseau’s *Confessions*. 101% truth”.<sup>31</sup> In a 2005 interview he says of the fatwa years: “I found myself reading Enlightenment writers—Voltaire—and realizing that I was not the only writer who’d had a hard time. It may seem ridiculously romantic, but I was actually strengthened by the history of literature”.<sup>32</sup> As I suggest in the final section of this study, we should pay close attention to the way in which a certain historiography of the eighteenth century, telescoped into the term “Enlightenment,” is becoming increasingly central to the way in which Rushdie sees the Rushdie Affair, the conflict between Secular West and Islamic East, and, crucially, himself.

It seems significant that the Enlightenment to which Rushdie appeals so frequently in the years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the declaration of the fatwa is so firmly oriented around the philosophes – the thinkers of the Continental Enlightenment. It is possible that this is the product of his study of history at Cambridge in the late 1960s, a time when influential works by Norman Hampson and Peter Gay propounded a historiography of Enlightenment centred on the conflict between thinkers like Diderot, Rousseau – and of course Voltaire – and

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<sup>31</sup> Rushdie, *Ormus, dumbfounded*, “The Ground Beneath Her Feet”/02. Everything Else/Used notes. Computer: Performa 5400, Salman Rushdie Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

<sup>32</sup> Jack Livings, “Salman Rushdie, The Art of Fiction No. 186”, *The Paris Review*, no. 174, (Summer 2005), accessed 24 June, 2013, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5531/the-art-of-fiction-no-186-salman-rushdie> .



the Monarchy and Church.<sup>33</sup> Had more recent work, inclined to pluralise Enlightenment and think in terms of cultural dialogues between European and Islamic worlds, been available in the late 1960s, it is possible that a very different fable of Enlightenment might have been woven into the saga of the fatwa: a fable far more akin to Rushdie's celebrations of mongrelization than to the essentialist West-and-Rest discourse that has come to mark his recent writings.

Whilst Rushdie's eighteenth-century intertexts are not my primary concern, I will conduct an extensive analysis of the role that a text – or parcel of texts – partially of eighteenth-century provenance plays in both Rushdie's oeuvre and in wider Western perceptions and representations of the Islamic world: the *Arabian Nights*. His career is bookended with allusions to these tales, from the 1001 children of midnight that first shot him to fame, to “The Trillion and One Forking Paths” of *Luka and the Fire of Life*, published in 2010.<sup>34</sup> With its emphasis on the life-giving power of narrative, and the significance of narrative multiplicity over destructive despotic monoglossia, Rushdie's work constantly engages, both directly and indirectly, with the figures of Scheherazade and the sultan Schahriar. As the most influential fictional Muslims in Western culture – and arguably, as I shall demonstrate, in some Islamic cultures – and themselves emblems of (changing) discourses of Islamic despotism, Islamic misogyny, and Islamic female empowerment, they are central to my account of both Rushdie's and the West's engagements with Islam.

Home to migrant narratives from across South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, the collection of texts that Antoine Galland translated into French in

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<sup>33</sup> See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1969), and Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment: An Evaluation of its Assumptions, Attitudes, and Values* (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), 108.

the early eighteenth century was a textual cosmopolis that had been *borne across* national, religious, and cultural boundaries for centuries before it fell into his hands, and it took its place at the heart of European cultural life. Though Galland's translation of the *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* was published, serendipitously, in the midst of a craze for fairy tales in both the French and British courts, the obsession with the *Arabian Nights* in the eighteenth century was not based merely on an appetite for the fabulous, but on forms of curiosity about and desire for the cultures of the East – a desire which was, in turn, based on mercantile and diplomatic exchanges. Though the text's popularity has often been understood in terms of the axis of dominance Said describes in *Orientalism*, in recent years there has been a critical move towards re-evaluating the position of the *Arabian Nights* and the flood of oriental tales they inspired, with scholars such as Aravamudan and Ros Ballaster arguing that they occupy a much more complex cultural and formal position in eighteenth-century Britain than has previously been realised.

The focus on realism that characterised so many influential twentieth-century studies on the rise of the novel, like that of Ian Watt, tended, explicitly or implicitly, to marginalise the *Arabian Nights* and oriental tales to the status of frivolous pieces of exotica, and followers in Said's footsteps have viewed them as early steps in a process of hegemonic orientalism. However, Aravamudan makes a compelling case, in his essay "In the Wake of the Novel," for the "infra-literary or para-novelistic prose form of the oriental tale" to be considered "a counter-example to the English domestic realist novel".<sup>35</sup> Looking at oriental tales as forms of transnational allegory, he suggests that, freed from "realist posturing," they are "formally anchored within international networks of an imagined cultural exchange across geographical

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<sup>35</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan, "In the Wake of the Novel: The Oriental Tale as National Allegory", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 33, no. 1 (Autumn, 1999): 5-31, 10.

and historical distance. Antiquarian and orientalist knowledge enable a premodern cosmopolitanism that illuminates local conditions for what they are”.<sup>36</sup> In “Fiction/Translation/Transnation”, he suggests we could view them as “the multitudinous outside excluded by acts of enclosure around the novel”.<sup>37</sup> Already this (inter-)cultural zone begins to bear a close resemblance to the kind of territory in which Rushdie’s oeuvre tries to position itself – a translational *in-between* space in which the commingling of cultures leads to a vital, extra-national newness. It suggests a further generic similarity in terms of Rushdie’s use of magical realism (a genre fascinated with Scheherazade from its genesis) as a means of moving outside of a novelistic tradition saturated with a Eurocentric worldview.<sup>38</sup>

Ballaster goes a step further by writing that the act of reading the *Arabian Nights* and oriental tales might itself entail a process of being *borne across*, “might... be figured as a kind of transmigration: the projection of the reader’s ‘spirit’ into the place/space/time of an ‘other’ or many ‘others,’ which requires a constant shifting of consciousness and perspective that transforms the reading self in the process”.<sup>39</sup> Whilst this notion of transformative reading might lay itself open to accusations of utopianism, there is certainly a sense of openness between cultures at work in the way in which the East was consumed and ventriloquised by Britain and France. That there was, because of the number of oriental tales in the early-to-mid eighteenth century, a familiar (textual) oriental cultural zone which readers entered in order to

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<sup>36</sup> Aravamudan, “In the Wake”, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Aravamudan, “Fiction/Translation/Transnation: The Secret History of the Eighteenth-Century Novel”, in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 48-74, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Beyond Brennan’s influential analysis of Rushdie and magical realism in *Salman Rushdie*, for accounts of the relationships between Scheherazade, the postcolonial, and magical realism, see Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse” and Wendy B. Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 407-427 and 163-191.

<sup>39</sup> Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

glean fragments of knowledge about oriental cultures as well as to find shards of European political commentary even suggests a blurring of national-cultural boundaries. “Enlightenment Orientalism,” Aravamudan suggests, “was very much an imaginative Orientalism, circulating images of the East that were nine parts invented and one part referential”.<sup>40</sup> Whilst I return to the overlap of invented and referential representation of the East in Section II, there can be little doubt that there is a powerful sense at the beginning of the eighteenth century of what Said tentatively calls “selective identification with regions and cultures not one’s own”.<sup>41</sup>

This sense of an international, inter-cultural reading-space is fleshed out by the hybridity of the text itself: the *Arabian Nights* is emblematic of a premodern cosmopolitanism not only in terms of the inter-cultural encounter it provided the eighteenth-century European reader, but also in terms of its genesis as a cultural artefact, with its migrant narratives travelling along trade routes from India and North Africa, and in terms of the instances of cultural hybridity which appear within the stories themselves. Many of the tales present the great cities of the medieval Middle East as cosmopolitan melting-pots, centring on the activities of merchants as they trade in goods from across the world and, with narratives like “The Hunchback,” creating a picture of a multiplicity of faiths living inter-connected amongst one another.

### *A Return to History*

For Rushdie, even if he was not aware of the full richness of eighteenth-century responses to the *Arabian Nights*, the 1001 tales proved invaluable as “the

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<sup>40</sup> Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 120.

very essence of multiplicity” in *Midnight’s Children* and in *The Satanic Verses*, with frequent short-hand references like the “thousand and one chameleon changes of allegiance and principle” of the diplomat Talleyrand, or “the thousand and one dreams... [with] the terrifying quality of being serial, each one following on from the one the night before” that the migrant communities of London dream of Chamcha.<sup>42</sup> Beyond this, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, as I explore in detail in Chapter Five, this narrative conceit of the *Arabian Nights* as a marker of hybrid multiplicity wells up and saturates the text in the form of the waters of the Great Story Sea, “made up of a thousand, thousand, thousand and one different currents”.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the centrality of the *Arabian Nights* to Rushdie’s oeuvre, both as a touchstone for cultural multiplicity and, in the form of Scheherazade’s struggle with Schahriar, a paradigm for the battle of mongrelization against the absolutism of the Pure, he rarely ventures into the rich contextual seas which critics like Aravamudan and Ballaster are navigating around the tales. Whilst postcolonial theory has tended to conceive of hybridity – or, as Rushdie has it, mongrelization – as a contemporary lens through which to examine twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural phenomena such as migration and globalisation, much of the recent bloom in global eighteenth-century scholarship described above implicitly situates hybridity as a characteristic of early- or pre-colonial contact between peoples.<sup>44</sup>

“[T]he inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*”, Homi Bhabha asserts in *The Location of Culture*, is in “conceptualizing an *international* culture,

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<sup>42</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 229; Rushdie, *Verses*, 205, 285.

<sup>43</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, (London: Granta Books, 1991), 72.

<sup>44</sup> As I am primarily interested in Rushdie’s notion of hybridity, and as hybridity is a widely contested term in postcolonial studies, for the most part in this study I choose to think in terms of “mongrelization”.

based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures”.<sup>45</sup>

Pioneered in the nineties by Bhabha and Robert Young, hybridity has become an integral part of the fabric of postcolonialism.<sup>46</sup> Dennis Walder’s is a typical assessment of the discourse, defining it as “ideas of cross-fertilization, of the potential richness of traffic between and across boundaries,” and suggesting that it “can return postcolonial theorising to a more celebratory, even... liberatory mode”.<sup>47</sup>

Though hybridity and multiculturalism have been problematised as discursive structures which retain and re-inscribe the conception of cultures as discrete, incommensurable entities, a sense of futurity and optimism has permeated much of the theorisation of hybridity by postcolonial scholars.<sup>48</sup> Even in discussions of the fundamentally hybrid nature of culture itself, such as Bhabha’s formulation “[i]t is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture”, hybridity remains a cultural strategy for the future as much as a lens through which to examine existent cultural phenomena<sup>49</sup>. Hybridity, it is implied, is an idea born of our age of globalisation and migration: for Bhabha, it is implicitly linked to twentieth-century migrant borderline communities, just as for R. Radhakrishnan, for example, it is an “unprecedented ‘becoming’” situated in the (migrant’s) space “between ‘having been deterritorialized’ and ‘awaiting to be reterritorialized’”.<sup>50</sup> Celebrated as a late twentieth century phenomenon, there have been few attempts within the postcolonial

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<sup>45</sup> Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 38 (Bhabha’s emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> See Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Dennis Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p81.

<sup>48</sup> for a useful summary of critiques of hybridity, see Andrew Smith’s “Migrancy, hybridity, and postcolonial literary studies” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241-261.

<sup>49</sup> *Location*, p38.

<sup>50</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, “Adjudicating Hybridity, Co-ordinating Betweenness”, *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 5.1.

academy to source, or even ground, theorisations of hybridity in the past.

Successful hybridity in Rushdie, however, is almost always an historical rather than a contemporary, phenomenon. Rushdie's vision of hybridity – the “intermingling... [the] mongrelization... the change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining” he advocates in “In Good Faith” – whilst always embattled, became, in the post-fatwa years, with novels like *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a thing of elegies: a dream fading into history.<sup>51</sup> In *Shalimar the Clown*, permeated as it is with memories of the Second World War, terrorism, and religious conflict, the heart of the novel is Kashmir, a ruined paradise of hybridity “not so much lost,” as the publisher's blurb says, “but smashed”.<sup>52</sup> The symbolic marriage of Islam and Hinduism in the persons of Boonyi and Shalimar is ripped apart (partially through US-intervention), and the “mongrel” offspring of Max and Boonyi left in the dark, pointing an arrow at an avatar of hatred, forged in the fires of inter-cultural conflict. Hybridity, no longer a dream melancholically fading away, is an ideal visibly ravaged in front of the reader.

After such darkness, the dazzling celebration of cross-cultural fertilisation that is *The Enchantress of Florence* comes as something as a surprise. Hailed by many reviewers as a piece of political escapism – joyous, disappointing, or irritating, according to taste – Rushdie fed this sense of an Orwellian retreat into the whale of fantasy in many early interviews. “I'm feeling less political than I used to,” he told the *Times*, “I've spent so much of my life talking about these issues which take on the times we live in very directly. I've had enough of that for a bit”.<sup>53</sup> Such statements are perhaps rather disingenuous. Certainly, whilst the tissue of fantasy

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.

<sup>52</sup> Inside cover of Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Kate Muir, “An Exclusive Interview with Salman Rushdie”, *Times*, April 4, 2008.

running through the text is strong enough to tilt its genre more towards the magical than the realist, Rushdie is emphatic in his assertions that this is the novel which has involved the most historical research – a point underlined by his inclusion of a lengthy bibliography at the end of the book. *The Enchantress of Florence*, as I will argue in my conclusion, marks a powerful return to history: a plunge into the kind of culturally in-between space that the *Arabian Nights* occupies, not merely as a means of throwing the non-hybrid present into greater relief, but as a hopeful (though problematic) assertion that, as Rushdie’s friend William Dalrymple puts it, East and West “have met and mingled in the past; and they will do so again”.<sup>54</sup>

### *Thesis Outline*

As I have shown, with the doubleness of its inheritance from Eastern and Western cultures, frequent references to the *Arabian Nights* throughout Rushdie’s fiction function as an exemplar of his notion of redemptive mongrelization as “change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining”.<sup>55</sup> It is significant, then, that in *Shame*, his novel which engages most deeply with the lavish, problematic tropes of orientalist fiction, references to the *Arabian Nights* and its heroine Scheherazade should be more muted, more subtly encrypted, than in any of his other works. In the first section, on *Shame* and Scheherazade, I unpack this muting and *Shame*’s problematic feminist project in dialogue with the complex shifts in the representation of Islamic women in Europe over the course of the long eighteenth century. Itself migrating between centuries and geo-cultural hemispheres, this section charts the rise of Scheherazade and the Eastern-Islamic space she occupies as a key to

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<sup>54</sup> William Dalrymple, *White Mughals* (London: Harper Perennial, 2002), 501.

<sup>55</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.



exploring new feminist territories outside the bounds of normative patriarchal social structures in the first part of the eighteenth century, and her subsequent fall into voicelessness. The late-century axis of what Joyce Zonana has termed “feminist orientalism” in the work of authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft reversed the East-to-West flow of female emancipation, using the harem as a stage on which to explore, amongst other things, the despotism of (European) men rather than the agency of women. My reading of *Shame* as a continuation of this West-to-East feminist orientalism offers both an historical and cultural repositioning of the text, and a meditation on the Western-centrism of dominant feminist discourses. It also examines Scheherazade’s (re)emergence in the last fifty years as a figurehead for discourses of Islamic female empowerment that seek to position themselves outside certain Western-delineated channels of secular feminism.

In the second section I turn to the mobile figure of Islamic despotism in *The Satanic Verses*, in the Rushdie Affair, and in the eighteenth century. The journalistic tendency, in the furore of the Rushdie Affair, to reduce *The Satanic Verses* to a simple binary battle between Western freedom and Islamic despotism has been justly lamented by postcolonial critics. Much of the controversy surrounding the novel centres on the dream sequences that take place in the city of Jahilia, Rushdie’s fictionalisation of pre- and early-Islamic Mecca. As Rushdie has stated on numerous occasions, the three cities of *The Satanic Verses*, Bombay, London and Jahilia, are one – the outlines of the two postcolonial metropolises and the fictionalised medieval Middle-Eastern city shimmering in and out of one another as hybrid selves and communities are embattled by the various faces of despotic absolutism (Hindu fundamentalism, Mrs Torture, and Mahound). Where Bombay and London are anchored in the “realities” of contemporary inter-cultural politics, however, Jahilia is

the text's ideological battleground – the locale for a fable of despotic singularity versus multiplicity which spirals out to inform and determine the conflicts of the two modern cities.

Here, I read Rushdie's use of a fictionalised early Mecca and the birth of Islam as a metonym for despotism, alongside Voltaire's metonymic construction of early-Islamic Mecca in his 1736 play *Mahomet*. Complicating "Saidian" readings of eighteenth-century European representations of Islam as vilified Other, I examine the pre-/early-colonial use of the figure of Islamic despotism as a means of addressing the despotism of the Catholic Church and French and British political systems. In reading Rushdie's mobilisation of Jahilia and the figure of Mahound in the light of the complex discursive manoeuvres of Voltaire's representation of "Mahomet" and Mecca, I seek both to illuminate the subtle and problematic mechanisms of the deployment of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*, and to complicate and historicise the monolithic figure of Islamic despotism that has been invoked so often in the Rushdie Affair.

After this examination of Rushdie's two pre-fatwa "Islam" novels, I move on to the aftermath of Khomeini's proclamation itself. The third and final section reads *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in the light of the (historical) discourses of despotism and oppression explored in the first two sections. Examining the doubleness of Rushdie's literary sources, the way in which he instrumentalises the *Arabian Nights* and Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of Birds*, I suggest a turn, in this his first post-fatwa novel, towards the Manichean language of (Western) Enlightenment versus Islamic despotism that had increasingly come to mark his non-fictional prose. Less than a month after the proclamation of the fatwa, the *New York Times* published a message to Rushdie from Mexican author Octavio Paz: "We are seeing a

disappearance of the modern values that came with the Enlightenment. These people who condemn you are living before the Enlightenment. We are facing a historical contradiction in our century.”<sup>56</sup> This invocation of the Enlightenment is one of the first utterances in a dialogue between the Rushdie Affair and the eighteenth century that continues to gather strength to this day on both sides of the Secular West/Islamic East battle lines, appearing with renewed force in *Joseph Anton* and the spate of press articles that surrounded its launch. In the final section, I explore the way in which a powerful historiography of freedom of speech as the child of the European Enlightenment in general, and the child of Voltaire in particular, has been woven into the fable of the fatwa and the West by both Rushdie and commentators on either side of “the Affair”. As I trace his self-fashioning as a “philosophe for our times,” I mark a sense of nostalgia for the days of the “Enlightened despot” – a nostalgia which, I argue in my conclusion, informs his representation of the emperor Akbar in *The Enchantress of Florence*.

As Scheherazade and the transformative possibilities of the Eastern female space come to the fore in this, Rushdie’s most recent and most passionate evocation of a joined-up world, I examine the emergence of a doctrine of universalism mingled with positive mongrelization. Opening out from a discussion of the possibilities and limitations offered by this novelistic return to history, I conclude by reflecting on Rushdie’s idea that the past is “a light that if properly directed could illumine the present more brightly than any contemporary lamp”.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, I ask questions about the way the past is used, not only by Rushdie, but in popular histories like those of William Dalrymple and Jeremy Paxman, by scholars of the eighteenth

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<sup>56</sup> Octavio Paz, “Words for Salman Rushdie,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1989, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/specials/rushdie-words.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 251.

century, and, ultimately, by this study itself.



## Part I

*Shame and Scheherazade*

*(oh, for the voices of Muslim women to be heard!)*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, "Not About Islam?" *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002* (London: Vintage, 2003), 395.



## Chapter 1

# Scheherazade Embalmed

*Midnight's Children* opens with an invocation of Scheherazade: "I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something". Where the narrator-heroine of the *Arabian Nights* tells stories to stave off death, Saleem Sinai must struggle to tell his stories before his "crumbling, over-used body" gives out on him.<sup>1</sup> Both, however, are striving towards constructing a performative narrative: Scheherazade's tales must transform the murderous rage of a despot into forgiveness and tolerance, must win life for herself and for the young women of the kingdom, and, less tangibly, Saleem's stories must give meaning to his life and, in so doing, "allow the soul of a nation...[to find] utterance".<sup>2</sup> The lives of the two story-tellers are yoked both to the texts that they simultaneously create and are created by and, through synecdochic bonds, to the communities that depend on the transformative power of their narratives for salvation and utterance. As discussed above, the *Arabian Nights* is one of Rushdie's most regular literary interlocutors: a collection of texts whose multivalent cultural origins and international narrative scope he uses repeatedly to gesture towards cultural multiplicity and to register the doubleness of his own East-West cultural inheritance. One of the questions that Part I of this study will seek to answer is why, given Scheherazade's status as one of the most powerful female Islamic voices in history, she remains almost silent in this, the single Rushdie novel that addresses questions of

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, "Tryst With Destiny", YouTube video, 1:05, posted by "anukoolchavan," August 14, 2008, accessed June 18, 2014, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wUcw8Ufx\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wUcw8Ufx_Y).



the oppression and liberation of Islamic women most directly.

In this chapter I will examine the way in which Rushdie's uninterrogated use of late orientalist tropes in *Shame* perpetuates a vision of Islam as fundamentally oppressive to women. Using the silencing of Scheherazade as a metonymic means of examining the silencing of the female characters in the text, I argue that as he protests against the voicelessness of Muslim women he actively participates in a long historical process of denying them voice. In Chapter 2 I look at the genesis of this silencing – the emergence of a discourse of “feminist orientalism” in late eighteenth-century Europe. I argue that this discourse obscures a history that has been forgotten by many present-day commentators, looking back in detail at an earlier eighteenth-century Scheherazade whose unfettered narratives fed a sense of possible likeness between Islamic and Western worlds, and created Eastern literary spaces in which some European women could step outside European patriarchal power structures to enact dreams of emancipation. This metamorphic zone, though shut down by Rushdie in *Shame*, is vitally – though perhaps inadvertently – reactivated in one of his most recent novels, *The Enchantress of Florence*. It is this, I will return to argue in the conclusion to this study, which offers both Rushdie and his readers the chance to recover the possibilities of mongrelization threatened by his anti-Islam(ist) polemic; the chance for Rushdie's Scheherazade to recover her voice.

### *Narrative Embalming*

The Scheherazadian transformative power of narrative suffuses *Shame*, but in this novel it has lost its generative abilities: rather than giving rise to life and expression, here it is at best a means of codifying and preserving stories, and at worst

a means of gaining lethal control over the auditor. Bariamma, the matriarch of Raza Hyder's family, ritually recounts "the family tales" every evening, as her brood sits around her.

These were lurid affairs, featuring divorces, bankruptcies, droughts, cheating friends, child mortality, diseases of the breast, men cut down in their prime, failed hopes, lost beauty, women who grew obscenely fat, smuggling deals, opium-taking poets, pining virgins, curses, typhoid, bandits, homosexuality, sterility, frigidity, rape, the high price of food, gamblers, drunks, murders, suicides and God. Bariamma's mildly droning recital of the catalogue of family horrors had the effect of somehow diffusing them, making them safe, embalming them in the mummifying fluid of her own incontrovertible respectability. The telling of the tales proved the family's ability to survive them, to retain, in spite of everything, its grip on its honour and its unswerving moral code.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, this ritual of performative story-telling seems to constitute a rare moment of female empowerment in the text: here we have a strong woman forging the identity of herself and her family, in a similar synecdochic pattern to those observed above, with Saleem and Scheherazade. This oral history is a female province, and it appears to contain the power not only to transmute horror into security, but to offer hope for the future. In the possibility of survival that it holds out, then, it is consonant with Scheherazade's narrative – and yet, where Scheherazade's story-telling ultimately promises the end of horror, Bariamma's recital merely offers its preservation. One of the many avatars of deathly femininity that stalk the text, the matriarch's "embalming... mummifying" (note the pun – we

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<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 76.

will encounter it again later) narrativisation of violent crime, sexual transgression, and misogynist tragedy ensures that the family's view of itself is a catalogue of horrors rigidly preserved in the amber of an "unswerving moral code" reminiscent of the "iron morality that was mostly Muslim" that traps the three Shakil sisters in the fortress of Nishapur. These stories, we are told, "were the glue that held the clan together, binding the generations in webs of whispered secrets".<sup>4</sup> Rather than salvation, transformation, or utterance, Bariamma's tales offer secrets, stasis, and damnation.

When Raza's new wife Bilquis is "forced" to tell the story of the horrors that befell her during the violence of Partition, it becomes part of the matriarch's recitation.

Her story altered, at first, in the retellings, but finally it settled down, and after that nobody, neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed, sacred text. This was when Bilquis knew that she had become a member of the family; in the sanctification of her tale lay initiation, kinship, blood. "The recounting of histories," Raza told his wife, "is for us a rite of blood."<sup>5</sup>

With the heavy emphasis of the religiosity of this family narrative as a hallowed, sacred, sanctified, static text, Rushdie folds this "rite of blood" into a critique of a despotically rigid Islam that, as I shall demonstrate, courses through both this novel and its successor. Muhammad, especially in *Shame* and in *The Satanic Verses*, but also in moments throughout Rushdie's oeuvre, is configured as a kind of anti-Scheherazade: his recitation working to lock down believers in a steely, despotic mono-narrative that precludes multiplicity or freedom. From the queenly self-

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<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 13, 76.

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 76-77.

determinism of her youth in her father's secular Delhi cinema – an “Empire” he lost, along with his life, “because of a single error, which arose out of his fatal personality flaw, namely [religious] tolerance” – Bilquis has been bound, in a Qur'anic master-narrative, into an inescapable family enclosure which will, in the end, cause her death.

On the following page, seemingly discrete from the description of Bariamma's narratives, is one of *Shame's* few direct references to the *Arabian Nights*. Describing the Pakistani government's policy of announcing victory whatever the result of battles with India in the early years of the war over Kashmir, the narrator tells us “the national leaders, rising brilliantly to the challenge, perfected no fewer than one thousand and one ways of salvaging honour from defeat”.<sup>6</sup> This is more than an invocation of the *Arabian Nights* as a means of gesturing towards a multiplicity of stories, however: behind the rhetorical flourish, this is a representation of the power of narrative as propaganda – as a means of control wielded this time by the despotic sultan rather than by Scheherazade. Just as Bariamma binds her extended family together in “webs of whispered secrets,” so the nation's leaders cast a net of lies over the populace to hold them in place. Much later in the novel, Rani Harappa embroiders a series of eighteen shawls – an activity also directly linked to the *Arabian Nights* through the repeated motif of “miniscule arabesques [depicting] a thousand and one stories” – documenting her husband the dictator Iskander's infamy.<sup>7</sup> In “the hissing shawl... silver-threaded whispers susurrated across the cloth: Iskander and his spies, the head spider at the heart of that web of listeners and whisperers, she had sewn the silvery threads of the web, they

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<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 111.

radiated out from his face”.<sup>8</sup> Although Rani’s embroidery constitutes an articulation of female resistance to despotism, it is uttered – or rather stitched – after the death of her husband: a record of his wrongdoing sent to their daughter Arjumand, his political successor. It is another non-generative act of narrative embalming.

### *Mapping Peccavistan*

Beyond the deathly, mummifying effects of this axis of narrative-as-power, however, *Shame* is a text that seeks passionately to be transformative. Written in the early eighties, during the time of the first strength of the Thatcher government, and what Timothy Brennan terms “a period of renewed U.S. imperial ascendancy,” *Shame*, he suggests, was part of Rushdie’s campaign to champion “a brand of Left-Labour humanism bent on rehabilitating conscience in a frankly uncivil society”.<sup>9</sup> Zia ul-Haq had deposed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as President of Pakistan in 1977, and the “Islamisation” programme that he had introduced on taking power was at its height, introducing new legislation such as the Hudood Ordinance, which made women rather than men culpable in rape cases, and the law of Qisas and Diyat, which reduced compensation on the death of a woman to half of that payable on the death of a man.<sup>10</sup> Though Rushdie, at the time of its publication in 1983, denied that *Shame* was a political allegory, there seems little doubt that the character Raza Hyder represents Zia, and that Iskander Harappa and his daughter Arjumand are avatars of Bhutto and his daughter Benazir.<sup>11</sup> Though critics such as Andrew Teverson have

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<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 192.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Brennan, “The Cultural Politics of Rushdie Criticism: All or Nothing”, in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. Keith Booker, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1999), 107-128, 108-109.

<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion of the Zia “anti-women laws”, see Inderpal Grewal, “Salman Rushdie: Marginality, Women, and *Shame*,” in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. D. Fletcher, (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 123-144, 136-37.

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of *Shame* as allegory, see Ziauddin Sardar and Meryll Wyn Davies, *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*, (London: Grey Seal, 1990), 130.

been right to attribute “much of the bitter, brooding anger of the novel” to Rushdie’s outrage over the misogyny and oppression of Zia’s regime, the scope of the novel extends far beyond an excoriation of contemporary Pakistani politics.<sup>12</sup> As D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke points out, “the immediate subject of *Shame* is Pakistan, but the novel’s significance and relevance is not limited to that country. Rushdie is once tempted to name his fictional country Peccavistan (p.88). It stands for both Pakistan and the Third World”.<sup>13</sup> Goonetilleke is right to emphasise that the blurred boundaries of “Peccavistan” contain more than Pakistan, though rather than the tricontinental Third World, Peccavistan’s alternate signification is the “East” – that amorphous, super-geographical cultural space to which Rushdie so often refers. Specifically, it is an *Islamic* East or, as Rushdie put it in an interview shortly after *Shame* was published, “just... a kind of Muslim milieu”.<sup>14</sup> Mapping the idea of an Islamic East onto a country that is also palpably Pakistan is problematic enough, but this uneasy metonymic configuration is further complicated by the addition of a third territory: a moral zone.

Rushdie takes “Peccavistan” from the apocryphal colonial pun on the Latin word “peccavi”: “I have sinned” (or “I have Sind”). Sin and “-stan” combine to form, beneath a thin skin of British imperial humour, an expressly Islamic nation of wrongdoing.<sup>15</sup> Though Rushdie/narrator tells us in an early aside that “[s]hame... is not the exclusive property of the East,” and the novel is inspired by the murder of a Pakistani girl in East London by her father after she had sex with a white boy, the act itself – despite its dislocation from Pakistan – is firmly characterised as

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Teverson, *Salman Rushdie, Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 136.

<sup>13</sup> D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *Salman Rushdie, Modern Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Rani Dharker, “An Interview with Salman Rushdie”, *New Quest* 1983, in *Salman Rushdie Interviews: A Sourcebook of His Ideas*, ed. Pradyumna S. Chauhan, (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 51.

<sup>15</sup> This was attributed to Charles James Napier, but in fact first appeared in *Punch*.

Peccavistani.<sup>16</sup> The intrusion of a foreign (white) body into the body of his daughter, it is implied, constituted such an invasion of his familial, religious and cultural identity that only by ending her life himself, with the blade of a knife, could he shore-up the ruptured boundaries of his cultural and familial selfhood. In other words, to retain cultural, religious and familial sovereignty, he had to violate the sanctity of his daughter's body: to destroy the breached border in order to prevent the integrity of his exclusive racial/cultural domain from being compromised. Evidently Peccavistan exists in London too.

In his visceral description of the “imagined spectre” of the girl's corpse, Rushdie has her “lying in a London night across a zebra crossing, slumped across black and white, black and white”.<sup>17</sup> The zebra crossing proves a complex metaphor for the cultural liminality of the victim's position: her corpse is sprawled across the incommensurable states of black(ness) and white(ness), the fact of her positioning in death an oxymoronic double proof both that the boundaries of race and culture can be crossed (or else how would she be there?) and that they cannot (to cross is to die). Zoom out from the symbolism of her body lying on distinct yet mutually-defining blocks of colour, however, and the semantics of the zebra as crossing, the combination of black and white as the formation of a protective zone, become apparent. The injustice and pathos of her death are literally underlined by the idealistic implication that cultural harmony, with black and white working side by side for a common purpose without blurring into one another and losing their identities, is the only means of guaranteeing safety – or peace. This frail phenomenological gesture towards hybridity is immediately subsumed by the brutal way in which Rushdie dehumanises her. When his account reaches the death scene

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<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 29, 115-118.

<sup>17</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 116.

she becomes no longer a person, but a body with “its throat slit like a halal chicken”.<sup>18</sup> She has been the victim of a specifically Islamic violence: she has been slaughtered, the stark implication goes, according to the strictures of the Qur’an.

As Rushdie emphasises the inability of the non-Urdu-speaking Western reader to understand, and indeed the English language’s inability to express, the “encyclopaedias of nuance” contained in the term *sharam*, for which “this paltry ‘shame’ is a wholly inadequate translation,” he implies that the shame he writes of is something quintessentially Eastern, quintessentially Islamic.<sup>19</sup> Despite the theme of the novel’s east-London provenance, “to write about... shame,” he tells us in one of his frequent authorial intrusions, “I have to go back East, to let the idea breathe its favourite air”.<sup>20</sup> Though the full meaning of *sharam* may not be available to me as a Western reader, the form shame takes in the book is unquestionably the oppression of women. The “male” aspect of the plot(s), the patterns of betrayal and violence centred around Omar, Raza and Iskander, are products of “the opposite of shame... what’s left when *sharam* is subtracted... shamelessness”.<sup>21</sup> Thus the layers of metonymy at the heart of the novel’s thematic structure are further complicated: the individual narratives of the women in the text become synecdoches for a general Pakistani oppression of women, which in turn represents a general Islamic oppression of women. The uneasy circle of signification we are left with is this: that the oppression of women is shame, shame is Pakistan, and Pakistan is the Islamic East. The Islamic East therefore, in *Shame*’s feminist discourse, is synonymous with the oppression of women. Furthermore, as there are no instances of non-

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<sup>18</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 39.



Eastern/Islamic female oppression in the text, it is implied that the oppression of women is a phenomenon that is the province of the Islamic East.

This notion of an Islamic shame-culture recalls Raphael Patai's notorious text *The Arab Mind* – first published in 1973, but revised in 1983, the same year that *Shame* was published.<sup>22</sup> Described in an article by Seymour Hersh as “the bible of the neocons on Arab behaviour”, an anonymous academic claimed that the US Military had derived their strategies for the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib from two central themes in the book: “one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation”.<sup>23</sup> This belief, as Joan Copjec points out, is “nourished on the banquet of that crude... sociological division of the world into ‘guilt cultures’ and ‘shame cultures’”.<sup>24</sup> First coined by E. R. Dodds in 1951 in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, this binary has become entrenched in stadial theories of civilisation, making guilt the characteristic of advanced cultures with internalised moral principles and shame the province of cultures “forced to rely, for want of such principles, on the approving or disapproving gaze of other people to monitor morality”.<sup>25</sup> As Said refers to Patai's text several times in *Orientalism*, it seems likely that Rushdie would have been aware of the work – although at this point in his career he would have been swift to disavow any similarity in between its thesis and *Shame*.

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<sup>22</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Seymour Hersh, “The Gray Zone: How a secret Pentagon program came to Abu Ghraib”, *New Yorker*, May 24, 2004, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/24/the-gray-zone> .

<sup>24</sup> Joan Copjec, “The Object Gaze: Shame, Hejab, Cinema”, *Filozofski Vestnik*, no. 2 (2006): 11-29, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Copjec, “Object”, 13. For a compelling rebuttal of the notion of a shame/guilt division, see Silvan Tompkins, “Shame – Humiliation and Contempt – Disgust” in eds. Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank, Irving E. Alexander, *Shame and Its Sisters: a Silvan Tompkins Reader* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 1995), 133-179.

The extra-textual irony of the novel is that, in his eagerness to represent the cultural and religious structures that he sees as oppressing women, Rushdie shuts off any possible means of escape from this oppression. As Grewal points out, the text “consist[s] of a history of the unchanging subordinate position of Pakistani women”.<sup>26</sup> Rushdie’s narrative functions just as Barriama’s does: it embalms the women of Peccavistan in a rigid narrative framework of oppression. In *Shame* there is no Scheherazade to offer life and freedom to women tyrannized by despotic male power. Whilst the text yearns for her transformative narrative abilities, its determination that Muslim women must be powerless bars her from its discursive arena.

### *The Harem-Museum*

“Left-Labour humanist” as Rushdie’s polemical goal may be in this text, he is participating in a polarized discourse which locates female oppression squarely in the Islamic East and thus renders female freedom an inherently Secular Western phenomenon. This Manichean division of female emancipation into two hemispheres, the free West and the unfree East, began to coalesce towards the end of the eighteenth century, most notably through a process Joyce Zonana terms “feminist orientalism,” a discourse in which, she holds, “by figuring objectionable aspects of life in the West as ‘Eastern,’ ... Western feminist writers rhetorically define[d] their project as the removal of Eastern elements from Western life”.<sup>27</sup> As *Shame* manifests, and as we have seen Leila Ahmed assert with her account of the

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<sup>26</sup> Grewal, “Marginality”, 143.

<sup>27</sup> Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*”, *Signs* 18, no. 3 (Spring, 1993): 592-617, 594.

widespread Western view that “Islam monstrously oppresses women,” so successful was this rhetorical manoeuvre that it remained at the very heart of the way much of the West thought of itself and of the East into the 1980s – and, as continuing controversies about the veil demonstrate, into the twenty-first century.<sup>28</sup>

Ahmed goes on to speak of “those powerfully evocative words – for Westerners – harem, the veil, polygamy, all of which are almost synonymous in this country [the USA] with female oppression”.<sup>29</sup> Despite – or perhaps because of – his profession of being “a translated man,” engaged in “a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose,” Rushdie appears to be unwary of participating in such Western-centric discourses as he looks back over his shoulder to bid farewell to his old hemisphere.

*Shame* opens in the “high, fortress-like, gigantic residence which [faces] inwards to a well-like and lightless compound yard” that will later be christened Nishapur.<sup>30</sup> The house is positioned precisely between “the two orbs of the town’s dumb-bell shape: old town and Cantt, the former inhabited by the indigenous, colonized population, and the latter by the alien colonizers, the Angrez, or British, sahibs”.<sup>31</sup> Placed on the border of colonizer and colonized, old and new, it is no surprise that this is a hybrid, *in-between* space – and, indeed, one of the first things we learn about the three sisters who inhabit it is that they have been raised “with the help of Parsee wet-nurses, Christian ayahs, and an iron morality that was mostly Muslim”.<sup>32</sup> It swiftly becomes apparent, however, that the cultural doubleness that Nishapur enjoys is a far cry from the vitality of the “phenomenon of cultural

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 522.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 522.

<sup>30</sup> *Shame*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Shame*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 13.

transplantation” that Rushdie had been exhorting British Indian writers to embrace in the essay “Imaginary Homelands”<sup>33</sup>. Rather, it is a nexus of oppressive overlapping cultural and historical modes of representing the East – of representing what Teresa Heffernan has described as “the metonymic heart of the Orient”: the space of the Eastern woman.<sup>34</sup>

The three sisters, known as Chunni, Munnee and Bunny, have, we are told, spent their entire lives “kept inside that labyrinthine mansion... virtually uneducated... imprisoned in the zenana wing”.

This interminable captivity forged between the three sisters a bond of intimacy that would never completely be broken. They spent their evenings seated at a window behind a lattice-work screen, looking towards the golden dome of the great hotel and swaying to the sounds of the enigmatic dance music... and there are rumours that they would indolently explore each other’s bodies during the languorous drowsiness of the afternoons, and, at night, would weave occult spells to hasten the moment of their father’s demise. But evil tongues will say anything, especially about beautiful women who live far away from the denuding eyes of men.<sup>35</sup>

Crammed into this short span of three sentences is a wealth of orientalism of the sort that Said describes: the captive Eastern beauties gazing out of the rich lattice-work of their golden cage, reminiscent of the harem paintings of John Frederick Lewis, sensuously moving to forbidden music in oriental heat-inspired indolence, engaging in acts of incestuous sexual transgression and parricidal witchcraft. Rushdie is

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<sup>33</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Teresa Heffernan, “Feminism against the East/West Divide: Lady Mary’s ‘Turkish Embassy Letters’”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 2, (Winter, 2002): 201-215, 202.

<sup>35</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 13.

mobilizing a series of centuries-old European myths about the inhabitants of the Eastern female space – participating in a grand tradition of fictionalization, exoticism, and eroticism that stretches back to the first travellers’ accounts of the harem interior. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, for example, places Nicolas de Nicolay’s account of oriental sapphism, describing Turkish women as “as ardently amorous towards each other as if they were men,” frequently resorting to the baths “in order to carry out their voluptuous pleasures,” at least as early as 1567.<sup>36</sup> The passage begins with the (male) narratorial eye *inside* the zenana-harem, behind the lattice screen with the hidden women, and then withdraws into the would-be voyeuristic crowd outside, and with this change of vantage-point comes a tropological doubling: into the mix of orientalist myths is introduced the distancing-device of rumour. By making the titillating allusions to transgressive harem behaviour through the mouths of gossiping townsfolk, Rushdie signals his postcolonial – even “post-Saidian” – awareness of these myths as narratives imposed upon the occupant of the harem from the outside. This step back from omniscient, authoritative authorial voice to street-side rumour is a means of participating in the sensual, Ingres-like aesthetic of the orientalisised harem interior whilst simultaneously raising a knowing eyebrow with – and at – a reader who has just been made both observer of, and involuntary participant in, a hegemonic Othering process. In short, the rumour conceit is designed to allow both reader and writer (though perhaps particularly the latter) to have their cake and eat it: to enjoy the lavish aesthetic sensuality and eroticism of “Saidian” orientalism with the get-out clause of ironic post-modern self-reflexivity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nicolas de Nicolay, *Navigations*, 110. Quoted by Ruth Bernard Yeazell in *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 119.

<sup>37</sup> I use the somewhat unsatisfactory term “Saidian” orientalism in this thesis to indicate the kind of hegemonic systems of representation which Said was writing against in *Orientalism* – almost exclusively to refer to the nineteenth-century modes of representation which he discusses, but

This self-conscious instrumentalization of orientalist Othering shapes the text, with the title of the fourth chapter, “Behind the Screen”, referring both to the cinema screen of Bilquis’s youth and to the “screen of stone lattice-work” in the Red Fort behind which her fiancé installs her, and acting as another signpost of Rushdie’s awareness of the harem-screen’s dual capacity to act as voyeuristic vantage-point and veil of suggestive concealment, and thus as a site for the literal and figurative projection of the reader/viewer’s desires.<sup>38</sup> These gestures towards self-scrutiny in the production and consumption of Western-centric myths about the Eastern female space offer the opportunity to reappraise negatively-charged orientalist modes of representation; however, in this novel they remain tantalising nods towards a discussion that never happens. As Aijaz Ahmad writes of a get-out clause issued in relation to the imperfection of Rushdie’s memories of Pakistan, just before the musings on being a translated man that opened this chapter, “[t]hat he begins the passage with a suggestion of self-mockery does not really retrieve the banal character of the assertion, since the whole book is replete with all sort of banal statements about ‘the East’”.<sup>39</sup> His self-reflexivity is insufficient to rescue Rushdie from this dangerous banality and serves merely to frame his participation in what Said describes as “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” more starkly.<sup>40</sup> Though this claim of Said’s is also about empire, and though Rushdie’s politics, at this point, are still a long way from the almost neo-imperialist pro-USA stance he will adopt in the years following 9/11, in drawing upon this “style” of orientalism he buys into the idea that the Muslim woman occupies a stifling space which is at an historical remove from the modern

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occasionally as a means of indicating the late eighteenth-century origins of such modes.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, “Rushdie’s *Shame*: Postmodernism, Migrancy and Representation of Women”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 24 (1991): 1461-1472, 1464.

<sup>40</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

world. Nishapur, as I explore in the following chapter, is a harem-museum.

### *Building the Harem-Museum*

Ahmed cautions Western feminists to be aware that “negatively charged speculations and statements about harem life form the pre-history of their impressions. Although the specific detail and content of what was said has long ago faded, the negative charge has passed into the culture and become part of the cultural surround”.<sup>41</sup> It is partly in the interest of folding the “specific details and content of what was said” back into contemporary debates about feminism in the East/West interface that I submit, in the following chapter, an examination of changing representations and instrumentalizations of the figure of the Islamic woman over the course of the eighteenth century. Though the one-dimensional perception of the harem in eighteenth-century literature as a prison and its occupant a passive, sexualised victim of despotism has been usefully complicated and supplemented by scholars such as Felicity Nussbaum, Yeazell, and Ballaster, this is an area of scholarship which requires further attention.<sup>42</sup> Beyond the implications of this work for the field of eighteenth century studies, it offers theorists in the fields of postcolonial and women’s studies the opportunity to recontextualise a whole host of ideas about feminism, secularism, orientalism, and cultures of Islam that are in wide circulation in both the academy and the media.

Zonana’s influential formulation, which builds on Ahmed’s intervention, has proved a useful foundation for many studies of interactions between Western and Islamic Eastern women in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries –

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<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 526.

<sup>42</sup> See Felicity Nussbaum’s *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995).

notably those of Reina Lewis, Charlotte Weber, and Rokhsana Bahramitash.<sup>43</sup> Zonana, whose main concern in the article is feminist orientalism at work in the nineteenth century, in the structure of *Jane Eyre*, uses a compelling reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* to set up the idea. After a brief reading of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), and a swift nod to Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), she concludes that "[t]o the extent that Montesquieu demonstrates for Western readers that the oriental institution of the seraglio can shed light on Western practices, one can say that his text inaugurates feminist orientalist discourse," but that *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* provides "the fullest explicit feminist orientalist perspective".<sup>44</sup> Needless to say, this seventy-one-year leap she makes, from a rather wobbly start in Montesquieu's *Letters* in 1721 to *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, with barely a halt at *Rasselas* in 1759, misses out a large volume of literature that engages with the East and its women. The failure of Zonana's theory of feminist orientalism, like its Saidian progenitor, to engage with this rich and volatile history of eighteenth-century writing on the orient has been perpetuated by the many subsequent studies that have used it as a point of departure rather than a point of enquiry. As I shall discuss in the following chapter and in my examination of oriental despotism and *The Satanic Verses* in Part II, the assertion that Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* uses "the oriental institution of the seraglio... [to] shed light on Western practices" is unquestionably true, but telescoped and largely obscured within this phrase is a long tradition of using the East as a means of thinking about the West that exists outside of the tight

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<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Weber, "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950", *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 125-157; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Rokhsana Bahramitash, "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2, (Summer 2005): 221-235.

<sup>44</sup> Zonana, "The Sultan", 599.



axis of Othering at work in late-century works like Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.<sup>45</sup>

My contention is that the “negatively charged speculations and statements about harem life” that, as Ahmed says, “form the pre-history” of much Western feminist engagement with women in the Islamic East, were not always negatively charged.<sup>46</sup> In the earlier part of the eighteenth century the harem was a zone in which to explore ideas of openness as well as otherness, a dynamic space in which transformation was as much a possibility as stasis, and the Eastern woman who occupied it could be in some ways more free than the European woman reading about her – indeed, could offer the possibility of equal emancipation to her European sister. In Chapter Two I not only examine the development of the trope of the oppression of the Muslim woman which Rushdie perpetuates in *Shame* but, by looking at those tropes of Islamic female liberation which precede it, draw attention to its contingency. This history – forgotten by most postcolonial critics and commentators upon relations between Islam and the West – can and should be folded into our reading of Rushdie. Doing so illuminates both the limitations of his engagements with Islam and the possibilities of the metamorphic Islamic woman who emerges in the discussion of *The Enchantress of Florence* that concludes this study.

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<sup>45</sup> Zonana, “The Sultan”, 599.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 526.

## Chapter 2

# Scheherazade Submerged

This chapter registers patterns of both convergence and rupture between Rushdie and eighteenth-century visions of Islamic worlds and the women who inhabit them. Whilst my account of the historical shifts in representations of Scheherazade and the Muslim female space in Europe is staged here in terms of a dialogue with *Shame*, it informs my discussion of Islamic despotism in *The Satanic Verses* in Part II and, in turn, my examination of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and mobilisations of Enlightenment as responses to the fatwa in Part III. It is worth remembering that this study treats of multiple Rushdies, just as it charts multiple Enlightenments: that not only have Rushdie's views and representations of Islam and Islamic cultures undergone significant shifts over the course of his career, but that his novels themselves are unstable, dynamic zones in which multiple modes of representing the Islamic East can overlap and bleed into one another. Hence, whilst I continue my argument that *Shame* is the twentieth-century product of the discourse of feminist orientalism – that Rushdie is repeating negatively charged modes of thought about Islamic womanhood that have flowed strongly through Western worldviews since the late eighteenth century – I also argue for the presence of an earlier eighteenth-century legacy in the novel. In a way which mirrors the submergence of Scheherazade's feminist agency towards the end of the eighteenth century, the transformation of the Shakil sisters in their harem-museum constitutes the muted, twisted echo of the female metamorphoses which took place in the literary orients constructed in early responses to *The Arabian Nights*. Rushdie's

notion of mongrelization is a form of positive metamorphosis and yet, as I explore in my account of *The Satanic Verses*, this process of “change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining” becomes a form of monstrous mutation under the influence of despotism.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, there is an extra-textual irony to the Shakil sisters’ “monsterization,” as it constitutes a negative change very similar to that which discourses like feminist orientalism enacted on Scheherazade and her early eighteenth-century sisters. That this irony exists outside the text – that is, in this case, outside the consciousness of the author – is manifest in Rushdie’s collusion with feminist orientalism. Crucially, however, this will change in *The Enchantress of Florence* which, I argue in my conclusion, marks a decisive, though problematic, reactivation of the positively metamorphic intercultural space Scheherazade creates in the literature of early eighteenth-century Europe. Though the Scheherazadian triumph over feminist orientalism in *The Enchantress of Florence* is partial, she is playing an increasingly important role in challenging certain modes of modern feminism which tend, implicitly or explicitly, to exclude female Muslims.

### *The Return of Scheherazade*

In 1988, Chandra Talpade Mohanty wrote of the Western idea of the “third-world” woman that she

leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394

over their own bodies and sexualities, and the “freedom” to make their own decisions.<sup>2</sup>

She concludes her essay by asserting that “[w]ithout the overdetermined discourse that creates the *third* world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world. Without the ‘third-world woman’, the particular self-presentation of western women... would be problematical. I am suggesting, in effect, that the one enables and sustains the other”.<sup>3</sup> In her seminal 1985 essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, Spivak had written of Charlotte Bronte’s instrumentalisation of Bertha, Rochester’s mentally ill, demonised Creole wife, as a means of figuring Jane Eyre as an ideal feminist subject: a stark reminder, as Deepika Bahri has it, that “speaking for women does not always entail speaking for the marginalised or silenced in general”.<sup>4</sup> We have seen Ahmed argue in “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem”, published in the same year as *Shame*, that beyond other reasons for global gender inequalities, Americans “believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women”.<sup>5</sup> This binary between free Western woman and unfree Islamic woman persists today in popular culture as well as governmental policy in the West, with the European Court of Human Rights upholding the French government’s so-called “burqa ban” on July 1, 2014. The axis of mutual constitution that Mohanty describes remains powerful, with the figure of the oppressed Islamic woman often remaining the dark sororal twin with, and upon, whom Western feminisms enact a process of negative self-definition.

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<sup>2</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88, 65.

<sup>3</sup> Mohanty, “Western Eyes”, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, *Critical Enquiry* (1985): 243-261; Deepika Bahri, “Feminism in/and Postcolonialism” in ed. Neil Lazarus *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, 199-221, 205.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 522.

In large part the legacy of feminist orientalism, this opposition between female emancipation and Islam is being ever more fiercely resisted by many Muslim thinkers. Mahnaz Afkhami, Minister for Women's Affairs in the government of the last Shah of Iran, asserts that "Muslim women are not giving up their faith, they're not giving up their traditions or their culture, but they are re-imagining them in ways that let them build on that and get strength and nourishment from it".<sup>6</sup> Looking back to the earlier part of the eighteenth century, when, beside the "negatively charged" ideas about Islam and women which Ahmed describes, nascent feminist ideas were crystallising between and over national and cultural borders as well as within and against them, offers a chance of dissolving the binary of Western freedom and Eastern unfreedom that continues to blinker the Secular West to the possibility of female emancipation in the Islamic East. Beyond the prospect of reconfiguring some feminisms in the West, this look back into history also carries with it the potential to ease anti-feminist tensions in the East – for the polarity set up by feminist orientalism has become more than a unidirectional, West-to-East discursive practice: the idea of feminism as an exclusively secular, Western phenomenon has helped to engender the oppression of women in many Islamist societies. As Ahmed has it,

the Islamic movement, which now seems everywhere to be gaining ground, designates feminism among all the aspects of the West and of Westernization that it generally abhors, as most specifically worthy of its hatred... the leaders of the Islamic movement blur the actuality of women's lives in the West with Western feminism. Thus practices that feminists battle against, such as the exploitation and objectification of

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<sup>6</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, quoted in Barbara Crosette, "Muslim Women Hear the Call of a Storyteller" the *New York Times*, February 6, 1999, accessed June 20, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/06/books/muslim-women-hear-the-call-of-a-storyteller.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm\\_](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/06/books/muslim-women-hear-the-call-of-a-storyteller.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm_)

women's bodies by fashions, and in advertisements, are labeled part of that alien and abhorrent invention, feminism.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the movement towards a feminism which can operate within the Islamic faith, or rather within and against cultures of Islamism, can frequently be, as Sharda Patel points out, a battle on two fronts: against both Western secularist and Islamic “traditionalist” prejudices.<sup>8</sup>

This battle is often also a class-based conflict (a question that Rushdie consistently fails to engage with – all of the main female characters in *Shame*, for example, are middle- or upper-class). Robert Young reminds us of the emphasis on “modernisation” in feminist movements in Asia which sought to remove undesirable traditional institutions such as *sati* and polygamy from colonial and postcolonial societies as they fought imperialism. This, however, was not a manoeuvre carried out evenly throughout the social strata of feminist resistance movements. A “substantive problem arising from the association of women's rights with modernization,” Young writes, “was that reforms often did not penetrate further than the upper classes who increasingly defined themselves by being ‘modern’, while for lower-class women things went on much as before”<sup>9</sup>.

Significantly, the figurehead that an ever-increasing number of Muslim women are mustering behind in the battle for a female empowerment consonant with cultures of Islam is none other than Scheherazade herself. In a 1999 article in the *New York Times* entitled “Muslim Women Hear the Call of a Storyteller,” Barbara Crossette hails Scheherazade as “a feminist icon, a provocative role model and an

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism,” 532-533.

<sup>8</sup> Sharda Patel, “Brent Asian Women's Refuge and Resource Centre”, *Feminist Review* 17 (1984): 96-99.

<sup>9</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 375. See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 135-55.

inspiration for Muslim women who are seeking to take a stronger role in Islamic society without abandoning their religion or their culture”.<sup>10</sup> In a series of interviews with female academics from across the Arab world and Iran, Scheherazade – or Shahrazad – is invoked again and again as a symbol of an Islamic female ability to speak out and, in speaking, change the world around her. Fatima Mernissi terms her “a fighter for the right of free expression,” and Bouthaina Shaaban finds in her a symbol of Arab women’s ability to use “language as a way of fighting their battles, whether these are social or educational or political battles”.<sup>11</sup> Afkhami ends the article with the conclusion “that the salvation of our part of the world lies in our being able to recreate our culture and our beliefs in ways that are conducive to the life we must live... The prototype is Scheherazade... who made her world as she talked about it”.<sup>12</sup>

Somaya Sami Sabry argues that it is because “the ‘Sheherazadian narrative’ is one narrative that resists patriarchal traditions and colonialist domination, in varying degrees” that works such as Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Fall of the Imam* (1989), Assia Djébar’s *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993) and Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* (1994) have become “representative texts in women’s studies and Middle East study courses”.<sup>13</sup> For the post-9/11 Arab-American Muslim female authors and performers whom Sabry examines (including Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Laila Farah, and Maysoon Zayid), the revival of Scheherazade and her narrative techniques enables the depiction of a process whereby “the individual is constantly

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<sup>10</sup> Crossette, “Muslim Women”.

<sup>11</sup> Crossette, “Muslim Women”.

<sup>12</sup> Crossette, “Muslim Women”.

<sup>13</sup> Somaya Sami Sabry, *Arab-American Women’s Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of The Arabian Nights* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 7. See Nawal El Saadawi, *The Fall of the Imam*, trans. Sherif Hetata, (London: Minerva, 1989); Assia Djébar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1993); and Fatema Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

processing new experiences and representations in the new homeland and attempting to correlate and understand them in the context of an ‘Other’ homeland,” creating a double consciousness “configured through its subversion of the binary paradigms shaping the post-9/11 political climate”.<sup>14</sup> Scheherazade, then, is not only an important figure in literatures of resistance but, through the narrative multiplicity she offers, also opens up a space in which complex inter-cultural standpoints can be explored. These are cultural positions which resonate with those Scheherazade came to occupy in Europe in the earlier part of the eighteenth century.

### *Scheherazade Digested*

Scheherazade is more than the prototype of a late twentieth-century re-imagining of the Islamic female self; she was also, as Ros Ballaster hails her, one of “[t]he two founding and most familiar voices of the oriental tale-teller in the eighteenth century”.<sup>15</sup> Far more than that of Mahmut, Marana’s Turkish Spy – the second of Ballaster’s “founding voices” – Scheherazade’s voice echoes not only through the many editions of the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* and their numerous offspring and offshoots over the course of the long eighteenth century, but into the novels, poetry, plays, operas, and eventually movies, of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. It was not only her narrative world that Scheherazade “made as she talked about it,” but in many ways also the rich cultural imagination of the world of the orient that characterised so much of eighteenth-century literary production. Though the stories of the *Arabian Nights* were far from the first oriental

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<sup>14</sup> Sabry, *Arab-American*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ballaster, *Fables of the East: Selected Tales, 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.



tales to reach British readers, and the information about Islamic cultures encoded within them was far from the first point of inter-cultural contact between Europe and the East, the publication of the Grub Street edition of the *Arabian Nights* – an anonymous translation of Galland’s *Mille et Une Nuits* that appeared in 1706, swiftly after the publication of the French original in 1704 – offered, as Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum have it, “a new world of cultural and aesthetic contemplation”.<sup>16</sup> Thus if, in Galland’s preface, the “whole Orient is telescoped into the confined chronotope of the harem, indeed to the sultana’s bedchamber,” it would not be too much of an exaggeration to view Scheherazade and her position in the *Arabian Nights* as occupying a similarly chronotopic space at the heart of most British fiction written about the East in the long eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Yet if Scheherazade was central to the construction of the eighteenth-century European literary orient, she was instrumentalised and (re)constructed by that literature in her turn. From the 1790s onwards, as Robert L Mack notes, the *Arabian Nights* became a corner-stone in nascent traditions of children’s literature:

for well over a hundred years volumes with such titles as *The Oriental Moralists, or The Beauties of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* (1790), *Oriental Tales, Being Moral Selections from the Arabian Nights Entertainments calculated both to Amuse and to Improve the Minds of Youth* (1829), *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, Arranged for the Perusal of Youthful Readers* (1863), and – somewhat startlingly – *Five Favourite Tales from the Arabian Nights in Words of One Syllable* (1871)

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<sup>16</sup> Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum, Introduction to *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, ed. Makdisi and Nussbaum (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1-25, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ballaster, *Fabulous Orientals*, 12.

made their ways into nurseries throughout Britain and North America.<sup>18</sup>

As the *Arabian Nights* are abridged, bowdlerised, and adapted for the consumption of children, the figure of Scheherazade and her frame narrative are systematically marginalised and reduced – a recession into voicelessness and passivity that mirrors the shrinking of the Islamic woman into the mute signifier of female oppression that takes place at the hands of feminist orientalism in texts like Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* without necessarily taking part in the same discourse. It is a retreat into passivity and childhood which in some ways, as well shall see, mirrors the fate of Sufiya Zenobia in *Shame*.

Ballaster suggests that the infantilisation of the *Arabian Nights* at the turn of the century may be linked to the fact that “Oriental empire increasingly came to be identified as a primitive model of government superceded by new forms of European colonialism,” a shift in cultural perception mirrored in the transformation of the *Arabian Nights* into “childhood reading, a shaping influence upon the primitive imagination”.<sup>19</sup> Be that as it may, this transformation certainly operated as part of the shift in the political significance of literary orientalisms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as “Britain’s imperial project slowly re-emerged... in a properly modern form and with a new set of approaches – informed and sustained by the emergent cultural logic of modernization – to colonized and subject peoples”.<sup>20</sup>

Scheherazade and her frame-narrative are at the very heart of all seventeen editions of the Grub Street *Arabian Nights Entertainments* and its later reprintings, generating, enfolding, and pervading every one of the tales. When each night ends

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<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Mack, Introduction to *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* ed. Mack (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009), ix-xxiii, xv.

<sup>19</sup> Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient*, p. 361.

<sup>20</sup> Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205.

the reader is returned to the chamber in the seraglio, reminded of the threat of death and the inextricable link between story and life in Scheherazade's narrative strategy – a link that permeates the collection in a series of metatextual ripples, as character after character is saved from execution by the interposition of storytelling.<sup>21</sup> The setting up of the frame-narrative in the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* stretches for over thirty pages, providing a detailed exposition of Schahriar's discovery of his wife's infidelity, his reaction to it, and the reasoning that leads to his "bloody vow" to marry a new woman each night and have her executed the next morning. The stage set by the city's grief over its lost daughters, Scheherazade is finally introduced into the text. She had, we are told,

Courage, Wit, and Penetration infinitely above her Sex; she had read abundance, and had such a prodigious Memory, that she never forgot any thing. She had successfully applied her self to *Philosophy, Physick, History*, and the Liberal Arts; and for Verse exceeded the best Poets of her Time: Besides this, she was a perfect Beauty, and all her fine Qualifications were crown'd by solid Vertue.<sup>22</sup>

After the moral bankruptcy of almost every figure in the text so far – the "incontinence" of the sultanas, the agonised, but unreasonable response of the two princes to their wives' infidelity, the evil genie who abducts a woman from her wedding and keeps her locked in a glass box, the woman herself, who delights in sleeping with as many men as possible behind the genie's back – Scheherazade seems not merely "infinitely above her sex," but, in her wisdom and heroism, infinitely above her fellow characters. "I have a Design to stop the Course of that

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, "The Story of the Genie and the Merchant," *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, Vol. I, Edition IV (London: Andrew Bell, 1713), 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 19.

Barbarity which the Sultan exercises upon the Families of this City,” she declaims, “I know the Risk I run, but that do’s not frighten me. If I perish, my Death will be Glorious; and if I succeed, I shall do my Country an important Piece of Service”.<sup>23</sup> Refusing to be cowed by her father’s threatening tale of a farmer’s wife being beaten into acquiescence to her husband’s will, she steps out of patriarchal power-structures with an assertion of her independence and superior knowledge:

I am nothing mov’d by the Story of that Woman. I can tell you  
abundance of others to perswade you that you ought not to oppose my  
Design. Besides, Pardon me for declaring to you, that your opposing me  
would be in vain, for if your Paternal Affection should hinder you to  
grant my Request, I would go and offer myself to the Sultan.<sup>24</sup>

This ability both to participate in and to counter gender-prescribed behaviours and power-play is central to her textual potency: in her manipulation and negotiation with her father and Schahriar, she moves between subject and object positions just as she does in her dual narrative roles of narrator and narrated. As in the descriptive sequence of her introduction in the text, her internal “qualifications” are her primary and most powerful attributes, and yet “besides this” her success is also determined by the shell of her (male-perceived) beauty. “As soon as the Sultan was left alone with her, he order’d her to uncover her Face, and found it so beautiful, that he was perfectly charm’d with her”.<sup>25</sup> The subtle currents of power and powerlessness between the agency and passivity of Scheherazade that this text sets up set the tone for the interplay between discourses of transformation and stagnation that

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<sup>23</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 31.

characterises representations of the Eastern female over so much of the course of the eighteenth century.

The female playwright Delarivier Manley took up the character of Scheherazade almost at the moment of her arrival in London, in 1706. Her plot of her tragedy *Almyna: or, The Arabian Vow* is taken, we are told in the preface, “from the Life of that great Monarch, *Caliph Valid Almanzor*, who Conquer’d *Spain*, with something of a Hint from the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*” – yet, as Yeazell points out, “the play itself offers more than ‘a Hint’ of the *Arabian Nights* and very little evidence of the known facts about Almanzor”.<sup>26</sup> Published ten years before Galland’s final volume of the *Arabian Nights* would reveal whether or not Scheherazade’s storytelling would succeed in the transformation of Schahriar, *Almyna* is the “very first in the long line of England’s imaginative responses to these influential tales” – and, significantly, this first response is almost the opposite of those at the end of the century.<sup>27</sup> Here, rather than removing Scheherazade from the tales, as we will see later editors of the nights do, the tales are removed from Scheherazade and she takes centre stage. Her situation is unchanged: Almanzor has taken the same “*Bloody Vow... to marry a Lady every Day, and have her cut off next morning, to avenge himself for the Disloyalty of his first Sultanness*” as was advertised on the cover of the Grub Street edition of the *Arabian Nights*, and *Almyna*, like Scheherazade, has determined to marry the sultan and “save the innocent Lives/ Of Virgin-daughters, and their Parent’s tears,/ To stop the Coarse of such Barbarity”.<sup>28</sup> Although this final, “Coarse... Barbarity” line is a direct

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<sup>26</sup> Delariviere Manley, *Almyna or, the Arabian Vow: a Tragedy as is acted in the Theatre Royal at the Haymarket by her Majesty’s Servants* (William Turner: London, 1708), 3; Yeazell, *Harems*, n. 5, 293.

<sup>27</sup> Yeazell, *Harems*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Manley, *Almyna*, 28.

quotation from the *Arabian Nights*, Manley's heroine functions as an expansion, rather than a quotation, of her predecessor. Almyna is Scheherazade extended and writ large: where Scheherazade tells her father "[i]f I perish, my Death will be Glorious; and if I succeed, I shall do my Country an important Piece of Service", Almyna gives heroic orations, pages long.<sup>29</sup> "I to Glory have resign'd my Life," she cries, "That Spiritual Pride of Noble Hearts!"

...Glory the strongest passion of great Minds!

Which none but Souls enlarg'd, can entertain

Uncommon, wonderful, and Excellent!

Heroick! Which Excites; nay, more, Commands!

Our admiration, Homage, and Applause.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the greatness of her mind and the largeness of her soul are this Scheherazade's stock-in-trade. Where, in the *Arabian Nights*, she is an autodidact, and "had successfully applied her self to *Philosophy, Physick, History*, and the Liberal Arts", Almyna has spent years studying with the chief dervish at Memphis and "What ever *Greek or Roman Eloquence/Egyptian Learning and Philosophy* can teach;/ She has, by Application, made her own" – adding to the autodidactic virtue implicit in "made her own" the credentials of a formal, classical education.<sup>31</sup>

Almanzor, in his fury over the betrayal of his wife, centres his many lengthy excoriations of women on the longstanding Islamophobic myth that in Islam they are

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<sup>29</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 19-20.

<sup>30</sup> Manley, *Almyna*, 27-28.

<sup>31</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 19; Manley, *Almyna*, 10.

“Form’d as our Prophet says, without a Soul”.<sup>32</sup> “Though,” as Yeazell indicates, “Manley makes her drama turn on a vulgar misconception of Muslim belief, she also represents an East that is itself significantly divided on the subject... the chief dervish implies that it is the imperial will rather than the Koranic text that demands this reading”.<sup>33</sup> It is in this heterogeneous, disputational East – an East, I will argue in Part II, that is not only very close to Rushdie’s nostalgic evocations of his secular-Muslim Bombayite and Kashmiri family, but to his Enlightenment-inflected celebrations of argument – that Manley has Almyrna win over Almanzor, the avatar of male despotism, through scholarly argument. Rather than using the subtle, transformative power of narrative to change him over the course of a thousand and one nights, this Scheherazade confronts the Sultan head-on. Beginning with the tart “Since then my gracious Lord, permits me speak,/ Let me, at th’original Mischiefs strike,” she dismantles his Qur’anic justifications for his murderous rage with lethal intellectual precision: “Revenge, and Jealousy, arrests the Text:/ Thus taught to speak, to put a gloss on Murder”.<sup>34</sup> She follows this with a philosophical disquisition on the nature of conception, birth, and death as proofs for the existence of a female soul, and finishes by drawing on her encyclopaedic knowledge of classical history with “cou’d the *Roman Ladies*, their *Virginia*,/ *Lucretia*, *Portia*, *Clelia*, thousands more,/ Without a Soul, have gain’d such endless Fames?”<sup>35</sup>

It becomes clear that in Scheherazade Manley has found a powerful spokeswoman for her own proto-feminist agenda – indeed, considering the fact that “Almyrna” is a near-anagram of the playwright’s name, it seems that in her reading of the *Arabian Nights* narrator, Manley found something of herself; and in the Sultan’s

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<sup>32</sup> Manley, *Almyrna*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Yeazell, *Harems*, 189.

<sup>34</sup> Manley, *Almyrna*, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Manley, *Almyrna*, 46.

seraglio, something of the world she inhabited. Yeazell suggests that Almyna's use of argument rather than storytelling may be a result of the "constraints of genre... since [her] ability to talk her way to victory can only be granted a limited exhibition on stage, the dramatist must perforce find some alternative to the *Arabian Nights*' dilatory tale-spinning". She also posits the possibility that "Manley also wants a heroine less concerned with delaying action than with taking it".<sup>36</sup> Although both points are well taken, Manley's celebration of Scheherazade's intellect, scholarly knowledge, and thirst for glory also places a heavy emphasis on her ability to step outside prescribed gender bounds. Whilst it is true that Almyna's intellectual powers are coupled with great beauty, just as Scheherazade's are, and the impact she makes on Almanzor is similarly double ("Is it her Eyes, or Tongue, this Change has caus'd?"), Manley ensures that in the end it is her heroine's internal, rather than external, assets that win out.<sup>37</sup> Moved to declare that Almyna will be the last woman he ever puts to death, Almanzor plans a fake execution. The final proof he requires of her worthiness is her courage in facing her death, and her ability to "by Reason rein the Passions".<sup>38</sup> In short, she must live up to her words, meeting narrative with action, to prove that if "Glory [is] the strongest passion of great Minds," her mind truly is great, and her soul correspondingly "enlarged".<sup>39</sup>

Scheherazade's agency, and this "largeness" of mind and soul which so inspires Manley, ebb away in later adaptations of the *Arabian Nights*, and she is moved away from the centre of her stream of narrative and into the margins. In *The Oriental Moralist, or The Beauties of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, adapted from the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* in around 1790 by the hack writer Richard

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<sup>36</sup> Yeazell, *Harems*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> Manley, *Almyna*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Manley, *Almyna*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Manley, *Almyna*, 27.



Johnson in the guise of “the Rev’d Mr Cooper,” and “accompanied with suitable reflections adapted to each Story,” Scheherazade’s frame-narrative is practically severed from the tales of the nights themselves.<sup>40</sup> It appears in an almost self-contained “introduction” – playing itself out from beginning (the first night) to end (Schahriar’s forgiveness) before a single tale has been told, separated from the main body of the text by the implicitly supplementary formal nature of a literary introduction and by the lack of pagination, which only begins with the first tale. The enumeration of her qualities is lifted almost word-for-word from the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, but is followed by the neoclassical addition of “to complete the portrait, nature had given her the figure and beauty of a Venus, the wisdom of a Minerva, and the chastity of a Diana”.<sup>41</sup> If the figure of Scheherazade appeared super-sexually virtuous and heroic in the Grub-street text, here she is deified to the point where she is culturally naturalised into the Roman pantheon. In the crucial confrontation with her father, however, much of the impact of her heroic defiance is lost: rather than the knowledge, independence, and transgression of gender roles evinced by their exchange in the earlier text, here she is merely presented as intractable. “All the arguments the vizier could make use of were to no purpose,” Johnson sighs, “and, finding his daughter inflexible in her purpose, he at last yielded to her importunity”.<sup>42</sup>

The twelfth and final volume of the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* ends with this conclusion of the frame-narrative, which I will quote at length:

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<sup>40</sup> “Rev’d Mr Cooper” [Richard Johnson], *The Oriental Moralist*, (London: E. Newbury, circa 1790), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralist*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralist*, 10-11.

The Sultan of the *Indies* could not but admire the prodigious Memory of the Sultanness/ his Wife, who had entertained and diverted him so many Nights with such new and agreeable Stories, that he believed her Stock was inexhaustible.

A thousand and one Nights had passed away in these agreeable, and innocent Amusements, which contributed so much towards removing the Sultan's fatal Prejudice against all Women; and sweetning the Violence of his Temper, that he conceived a great Esteem for the Sultanness *Scheherazade*, and was convinced of her Merit and Great Wisdom, and remembred [sic] with what Courage she exposed herself voluntarily to be his Wife, knowing the fatal Destiny of the many Sultaneses before her.

These Considerations, and the many rare Qualities he knew her to be Mistress of, induced him at last to forgive her. I see lovely *Scheherazade*, said he, that you can never be at a loss for these Sort of Stories to divert me; therefore I renounce, in your Favour, the cruel Law I had imposed on my self; and I will have you to be looked upon, as the Deliverer of the many Damsels I had resolved to have sacrificed to my unjust Resentment.<sup>43</sup>

In *The Oriental Moralist* this is contracted to the span of a single sentence:

We must not... conclude this Introduction without observing, that after this amiable lady had passed a thousand and one nights in telling her tales, the sultan became so much delighted with her, that he renounced in

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<sup>43</sup> *Entertainments* (1713), 143-145.

her favour the cruel law he had imposed on himself, and ordered her to be considered as the deliverer of so many damsels he had resolved to sacrifice to his unjust resentment.<sup>44</sup>

Almost all of Scheherazade's agency in her manipulation and reformation of Schahriar – the merit, wisdom, and courage, the rare qualities that she shows she is *mistress* of – is elided into near-passive “amiability”. He is “delighted” by her, the emphasis being on charm rather than esteem.

In the main body of the text, beginning on the following page under the title *The Oriental Moralist* in large print, (thus emphasising that the book proper has now begun), Scheherazade’s influence gradually ebbs away. It begins with Dinarzade asking her to tell her story, in much the same words that she uses in *Entertainments*, and the frame-narrative recurs for the next few chapters in much the same way as it does in the Grub Street editions, but by the ninth chapter references to Scheherazade have become increasingly sparse and, when they appear, are cursory gestures like “[t]he next morning, at the usual time, a little before day-break, the Sultana, beginning a new story, thus addressed the Sultan”.<sup>45</sup> Hereafter, Scheherazade does not feature until the end of the sixteenth chapter where, having “finished the story of the Wonderful Lamp,” she moralises briefly and rather rapidly to Schahriar, calling the African magician “a man abandoned to the passion of possessing immense treasures by the most horrid and detestable means”.<sup>46</sup> Needless to say, this is one of Johnson’s “added moral reflections” – Scheherazade’s narrative moral education of the Sultan functions far more subtly than this in *Entertainments*. It is, however,

<sup>44</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralist*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralist*, 72. For a discussion of the sororal relationship between narrator and marginal interlocutor as a means of constructing a redeeming imperial national identity, see Ros Ballaster “Playing the Second String: the Role of Dinarzade in Eighteenth-Century Fiction” in Nussbaum and Makdisi, *Arabian Nights in Historical Context*, 83-103.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralist*, 230.

significant that this is the last we ever hear from her in this text. When Sinbad's voyages are over, on the last page of the book, her place is taken by Johnson's voice. "During the whole course of these voyages made by Sinbad, my youthful readers will everywhere observe the interposition of the hand of Providence".<sup>47</sup> It is a final, formalised narrative *coup-d'état* – her story has been taken away from her, her readers annexed, her voice silenced. Not only Scheherazade, but her sister, and by extension "all the Eastern nations, Persians, Tartars, and Indians," advertised in the preface to the Grub-Street edition have been entirely excluded from the text's rigorously mono-cultural, prophylactic borders. Telescoped into the phrase "my youthful readers" is not only the infantilisation of the *Arabian Nights* and the limitation of its sphere of influence, but the (faux-)reverendness of Johnson's pen-name: Sinbad's God is Christian providence. Along with Scheherazade, Islam has been decisively written out of the text.

Two years later, in 1792, another four-volume edition of the *Arabian Nights* appears which, at first glance, looks to be yet another reissue of the Grub Street text (which continued to be printed into the early nineteenth century). The main title is the same – *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* – but as the eye moves down the title-page, it falls upon the space that M. Galland habitually occupies, which now contains the words "freely transcribed from the original translation".<sup>48</sup> While there are similar patterns of narrative enclosure and exclusion in this "freely transcribed" edited and abridged version, Islam is in fact written *into* the text beyond anything in the Grub Street editions. In a move that could perhaps be read as testimony to an implicit awareness of the revolution in France as much as to the late-century impulse

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<sup>47</sup> Cooper, *Oriental Moralists*, 281.

<sup>48</sup> *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* (London: C. D. Pignenit, 1792), hereafter referred to as *Entertainments* Pignenit, Vol. 1, 1.

to gloss the orient, the “editor” adds to his account of the pre-Scheherazade despair of the populace the explanation “[t]he implicit obedience which good Mussulmen owe to the Commander of the Faithful, had as yet restrained the inhabitants of Bagdad from rebellion”.<sup>49</sup> Here Scheherazade is an even more markedly diminished figure than she was in *The Oriental Moralist*. In this text she is almost entirely stripped of her erudition and strength: she is merely introduced as “the beautiful and accomplished Scheherazade, daughter of the grand Vizier”, a figure seemingly better equipped to attend a society ball than to temper the murderous impulses of a tyrant.<sup>50</sup> Armed, if with anything, with a hint of coquettish sexual self-consciousness (“The lovely Sultanness [was] pleased to see she had made an impression on his savage heart”), she now has the humble passivity of an Ann Radcliffe heroine. “When Scheherazade was introduced to the Sultan, he was struck with her beauty, and modest sensibility. Perceiving her in tears, he for a moment forgot his barbarous resolution, and endeavoured to comfort her”.<sup>51</sup> The externality of her beauty and perceived feminine fragility, which we saw working in dialogue with her internal qualities in the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, has now entirely replaced them. Rather than the bold intellectual who walks boldly into the seraglio, here, like a lamb to the slaughter, “the charming Scheherazade suffered herself to be conducted to the fatal couch, and became a devoted bride to the cruel Schahriar”.<sup>52</sup> Even her narrative success is subtly undermined by the introduction of a marked keenness on the Sultan’s part to hear her stories in the first place: “the Sultan, wondering at so singular a request, consented, at the desire of his bride, and even expressed a wish to

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<sup>49</sup> *Entertainments Piquenit*, Vol. 1, 9.

<sup>50</sup> *Entertainments Piquenit*, Vol. 1, 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Entertainments Piquenit*, Vol. 1, 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Entertainments Piquenit*, Vol. 1, 17.

hear stories which must be singular indeed to be asked for at such a moment. Scheherazade, encouraged by this wish, began...<sup>53</sup>

Whilst the editor of this text does not go quite as far as Johnson towards the removal of the frame-narrative (it is incorporated into the main body of the text rather than in an introduction, and the forgiveness of Schahriar is delayed until the conclusion of the collection), Scheherazade disappears even more rapidly from these pages than she does from those of *The Oriental Moralist*. After she becomes “a devoted bride” she appears less and less in the spaces between stories, and the threat that her life-sustaining narrative is pitted against is almost entirely removed. On page twenty-seven the reader is assured that “[t]he Sultan was delighted with these stories. He requested Scheherazade to proceed next night to another: and going into the Divan, the Vizier, his Family, the Court, and the people in general, were overjoyed to find that he gave no orders to put the beautiful Sultanness to death”.<sup>54</sup> And this is the last we hear of Scheherazade for three volumes, until the final paragraph of volume four, where she is given the rather cursory send-off of “[t]he Sultan of the Indies could not but admire the memory of his Sultanness, who had now, for a thousand and one nights, entertained him with these agreeable stories. Her beauty, her patriotism, in exposing her life to his unreasonable revenge, had long since obtained her possession of his heart”.<sup>55</sup> His admiration for her memory is the only acknowledgement of her intellectual or narrative achievement – and even then it is a recognition of her Bariamma-style retentive rather than creative abilities – and the very notion of her patriotism in “exposing her life” to him is laced with passivity.

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<sup>53</sup> *Entertainments* Piquenit, Vol. 1, 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Entertainments* Piquenit, Vol. 1, 27.

<sup>55</sup> *Entertainments* Piquenit, Vol. 4, 240.

Scheherazade, by the turn of the nineteenth century, has lost her voice – her transformative power to “make her world as she talked about it” removed, along with her encyclopaedic knowledge, her extraordinary intellect, and her indomitable will. What is left is an oriental doll. In the span of the hundred years from when Scheherazade first drew breath to tell her tales in Europe, until her voice was silenced and her stories taken from her, she contributed to the construction of a dynamic literary space in which fantasies of female liberation could be explored.

### *Liberation in the Harem*

Scheherazade’s frame tale is, at its heart, the story of a women’s revolution. In the act of storytelling in the seraglio she saves herself and the women of the nation from death, and replaces a despotic regime of male violence with a reign of tolerance. As I explore in more detail in Part II, the East had long been a literary locale in which Europe could think about itself before the *Arabian Nights* reached France and England, but the colossal cultural impact of Scheherazade’s narrative reconfigured the harem as a zone in which to think about a gendered sense of liberation. The theatricality implicit in the title the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* was immediately embraced, as we have seen, by Manley as she masqueraded in the narrative garments of Scheherazade to propound her proto-feminist assertions of intellectual equality on the London stage, and this sense of the liberation to be found through theatrical engagement with the East, or through oriental masquerade, permeates early eighteenth-century culture on either side of the channel.

Montesquieu’s highly influential epistolary novel *Persian Letters* (1721) follows two Persian travellers as they journey through Europe. Through their letters

to one another and to Mullahs back home, they enact a comparative commentary on society, culture, and government in Persia and Western Europe – a commentary I engage with in detail in the following chapter. In an early letter from Paris, Rica expresses his weariness of being the oriental Other: “I found portraits of me everywhere; I saw myself multiplied in all the shops, upon all the mantelpieces, so fearful were they of not having seen me enough!”

I therefore resolved to set aside my Persian clothing and dress instead as a European, to see whether anything in my appearance would still astonish. From this text I learned my true worth: stripped of my exotic finery, I found myself appraised at my real value, and I had good reason to complain of my tailor, through whom I’d lost, in an instant, the attention and esteem of the public; for suddenly a dreadful void surrounded me; sometimes I’d pass an entire hour in a group of people without anyone looking at me...<sup>56</sup>

This sense of identity as a form of masquerade resurfaces periodically throughout the text, not just in terms of the perception and reception of Otherness, but in terms of simply existing in society – indeed, in a sense in terms of the perception of Likeness.<sup>57</sup> In a later letter, Rica overhears two Frenchmen talking in the next room. They are hatching a plot to create a reputation for themselves as wits, and decide to create a performance of wittiness: “we’ll protect one another with prearranged signals; today you’ll shine, tomorrow you’ll support me”.<sup>58</sup> In six months, they decide, they will have seats in the Academy, at which point they will be able to

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<sup>56</sup> Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40-41.

<sup>57</sup> See Kader Konuk, “Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu”, *Criticism* 46:3 (2004): 393-414.

<sup>58</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 70.



abandon their performances because then “you’ll be a wit whatever you do”<sup>59</sup>. As Andrew Kahn points out, this exchange “displays conviction in the notion that only appearance is authenticity. This Parisian is no more a native of his world than Rica, unless he can satisfy social expectations of his identity”.<sup>60</sup> This notion of identity as something created by the wearing or removing of a turban, a pair of breeches, a set of mannerisms, or a badge of membership is, beneath its primary function of satirising French society, a further inscription of a doctrine of universalism that runs through Rica’s and Usbek’s exchanges – and which we will see reinscribed by Rushdie in *The Enchantress of Florence*. Beneath the clothes, beneath the social masquerading, it suggests, people may be the same.

Interspersed with these letters, however, is a correspondence between Usbek and the women and eunuchs of his seraglio that seems, at first reading, to be participating in a completely oppositional discourse. The harem is not solely a space for positive change in the early eighteenth century. Whilst Aravamudan’s claim that “imperial conquest turned Orientalism malefic” is well taken, it is important to remember that there was a strong negative charge operating in European representations of the orient beside and bound up with the literary use of the East as zone of liberatory experimentation.<sup>61</sup> The first sentence of Usbek’s first harem letter, addressed to his chief black eunuch, is awash with the language of despotic oriental misogyny: “You are the faithful custodian of the most beautiful women in Persia; to you I have entrusted the worldly possessions I hold most dear; you guard the keys to those fateful doors which open solely for me”. Each of the three clauses lowers the reader progressively into a rendering of the harem as an eroticised heart of oriental

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<sup>59</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Kahn, “Introduction” to Montesquieu, *Letters*, vii-xxi, xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 11.

darkness. We are taken from the ambivalence of “custodian,” with its doubled significations of care-taker and prisoner, to the cold objectification of women as “worldly possessions,” to the dark, prolepsis-laden “fatal doors”. He is addressing his eunuch as the guardian of stasis: “the scourge of vice, the pillar of fidelity,” “equally in the silence of the night as in the bustle of the day,” he is responsible for ensuring that the women remain in a state of suspended animation until Usbek’s return.<sup>62</sup> Over the course of *Persian Letters*, Usbek travels simultaneously in both directions along Schahriar’s trajectory from despotism to tolerance. As his sense of inter-cultural similitude grows stronger, so the tenor of his letters to the seraglio grows more and more thunderously despotic.

The women are rebelling. As the novel progresses, unrest in the harem builds to the point where it begins to tear itself apart, and Usbek’s frantic attempts to transfer his despotic power to his eunuchs (“I grant you unlimited power over the entire seraglio... may fear, may terror be your companions”) can do nothing to halt it. “I do not know what is happening,” writes the eunuch Solim, “but everything is turning out wretchedly... it is as though anything is permitted”.<sup>63</sup> “I no longer observe, on the faces of your wives, that resolute, severe virtue that I used to see; a new joyfulness, which is everywhere evident, is to my eyes infallible proof of some new satisfaction; I notice, in the smallest things, a bold freedom hitherto unknown”.<sup>64</sup> These letters to and from the harem become more and more frequent as the text wears on, until in the end they completely subsume any other

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<sup>62</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 206; 207.

<sup>64</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 207.

correspondence in the novel. The final letter of the book is from Roxane, the one wife that Usbek has never doubted.<sup>65</sup>

Yes, I have deceived you; I have bribed your eunuchs, I have played upon your jealousy, and I have managed to make of your dreadful seraglio an abode of delights and pleasures.

I am about to die: soon the poison will be coursing through my veins, for why would I remain here, when the only man who gave me a reason for living is dead?

...How could you suppose me so credulous as to believe that the sole purpose of my existence was to adore your caprices? That while you refused yourself nothing, you had the right to frustrate every desire of mine? No: I may have lived in servitude, but I have always been free: I have rewritten your laws to conform to those of nature, and my spirit has always remained independent.<sup>66</sup>

In this letter she makes it clear that she has been the author of the seraglio's destruction. Scheherazade's dark twin, through a stream of destructive narrative she has shattered his despotic hold over the denizens of the harem and, in a phrase that strikingly anticipates Mahnaz Afkhami's statement that "salvation... lies in our being able to recreate our culture and our beliefs in ways that are conducive to the life we must live," she has "rewritten [his] laws" that she might remain independent.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Though Montesquieu did add supplementary letters to the mid-century edition, including a further ten letters after Roxane's.

<sup>66</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 213.

<sup>67</sup> Crossette, "Muslim Women"; Montesquieu, *Letters*, 213.

In a chilling love letter from Usbek to Roxane earlier in the text, he lyrically and affectionately recalls having raped her. “Fortunate Roxane!” he exclaims several times, as he speaks of her sequestration in the seraglio, “heaven gave you to me to ensure my happiness, yet with what difficulty did I gain possession of the treasure which you defended with such resolution!”<sup>68</sup> He writes fondly of the tears she shed on the many occasions when he tried to rape her, as proof of her “frightened modesty,” and how he found himself “intoxicated” by the way in which, after he finally managed to “vanquish” her, she saw him as “an enemy who had violated [her] and not as a husband who loved [her]”. He then goes on to contrast the brazen behaviour of European women to her example of chaste Eastern womanhood, assuring her that “if you were here you would be outraged at the ignoble disgrace into which your sex has fallen”.<sup>69</sup> Except the passage that follows, describing Roxane’s charms – “you enhance the brilliance of your complexion with the most beautiful hues... you perfume your whole body... you put on your prettiest garments” – reads almost identically to that which catalogues the shamefulness of the women of Europe, with “their artfully painted complexions, the ornaments with which they adorn themselves, the care they lavish on their persons”.<sup>70</sup> The position of the women in the seraglios of Persia and the polite drawing rooms of Paris is, it seems, perhaps not as different as it may initially appear. As Alain Grosrichard puts it, it is “[a]s if the novelist had wanted to lead us to imagine, in the features of the Oriental seraglio, a future which the historian dare not foresee”.<sup>71</sup> Montesquieu capitalises on the harem as an existing literary zone of rebellion, set in a reassuringly

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<sup>68</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron (London & New York: Verso, 1998) 29.

distant cultural and geographical locale, to criticise inequalities in his own society – in particular, as I explore in the following chapter, the despotism of Louis XIV.

The use of oriental masquerade as a means of liberation is not merely a formal phenomenon, however. In Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*, published three years after *Persian Letters* in 1724, the sexually liberated heroine creates a series of different identities for herself – using masquerade as a means of making her way to the top of a patriarchal society. As manifested by the novel's full title, *The Fortunate Mistress: Or, A History of the Life and Vast Variety of Fortunes of Mademoiselle de Beleau, Afterwards Called the Countess de Wintelsheim, in Germany, Being the Person known by the Name of the Lady Roxana, in the Time of King Charles II*, she is a mistress of self-transformation of all kinds, and yet the most significant of the various masquerades and deceptions Roxana employs whilst sleeping her way to becoming Countess, is her "habit of a Turkish princess".<sup>72</sup> The usage of the term "habit" here is self-consciously doubled – for Roxana is at pains to inform the reader that she "learned the Turkish language; their way of dressing and dancing, and some Turkish or rather Moorish songs" from "a little female Turkish slave... taken at sea by a Maltese man of war".<sup>73</sup> Like her predecessor Moll Flanders before her, Roxana is a polyglot: able to learn the languages and cultures of both foreign nations and social classes at will, she navigates her way through the world by a process of continual self-fictionalisation that is reminiscent of Scheherazade's power to "make the world as she talks about it" – as, perhaps, is the frame-tale of the mature Roxana's repentance, which surrounds it.<sup>74</sup> "It must be confessed," she tells us, "that

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<sup>72</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana* (London: T. Warner, 1724), 185.

<sup>73</sup> Defoe, *Roxana*, 115.

<sup>74</sup> This is an adaptation of the Afkhami quoted in Crossette, "Muslim Women". Also, I should note that, whilst the idea of a Scheherazadian influence at work in the frame-narrative of contrition is seductive, the many contemporary "autobiographical" accounts of penitent criminals are a far

the [Turkish] habit was infinitely advantageous to me,” and indeed she achieves royal favour through a combination of a French dance which, she admits, “being perfectly new... pleased the company exceedingly... they all thought it had been Turkish”, and her Oriental costume.<sup>75</sup> This French-Turkish masquerade, a combination also reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights*’ mingled Eastern and French provenance, materially alters both her fortune and her identity: so potently erotic is the sight of a white woman in “Mohametan” garb dancing in an “oriental” fashion, that one of the men of the audience cries out “Roxana! Roxana!” – possibly, as Zonana notes, remembering Montesquieu’s Roxane.<sup>76</sup> “Upon which foolish accident,” the heroine complains, “I had the name of Roxana fixed upon me all over the town, as effectively as if I had been christened Roxana”.<sup>77</sup> As she instrumentalises the garb of the Muslim woman and capitalises on the erotic power of the harem in order to achieve agency and step over polite gender boundaries, it is significant that the name her male audience chooses for her is redolent of female rebellion.<sup>78</sup> As much as she is buying into the sexual allure of the oriental woman, she is buying into her capacity for change – although, once changed by this act of branding, she finds her own orientalised history hard to shrug off.

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more obvious influence.

<sup>75</sup> Defoe, *Roxana*, 187; 189.

<sup>76</sup> For a useful account of “Roxane” fictions, see Ballaster, *Fabulous Orients*, 59-69.

<sup>77</sup> Defoe, *Roxana*, 187.

<sup>78</sup> The life of the historical Roxolana or Hurrem Sultan and many of the European literary re-imaginings thereof are charted in Galina Yermolenko’s *Roxolana in European Literature, History, and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Roxolana moved from being a harem slave and concubine to being the legal wife and advisor of Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). Suleiman and Roxolana exchanged many passionate letters whilst the emperor was on campaign, with Roxolana detailing the domestic life of the harem as well as the political situation in the capital. Whilst this correspondence is echoed to an extent by the letters exchanged in *Persian Letters*, however, the figure of Roxolana as a harem rebel in much eighteenth-century European literature constitutes a significant redirection of the power the historical woman wielded as an imperial advisor and companion to the sultan. Part of a pattern of politicised European appropriation of Eastern female agency which this chapter has traced in relation to the figure of Scheherazade.

The possibility for personal and social metamorphosis in the harem had been experienced first-hand six years earlier by another self-fictionalising – though not, in herself, fictional – female polyglot: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Montagu, rather like Scheherazade herself, was an autodidact, teaching herself Latin and Greek as a child and retaining a passionate interest in languages, literature and history throughout her life.<sup>79</sup> When her husband was appointed Ambassador to Turkey in 1716, she determined to travel with him, and the collection of letters she wrote back to England, to members of the aristocracy and literary friends – including Pope – became a runaway success when they were published in 1763, after her death. This doubleness of release makes this a difficult text to place in a cultural history of the eighteenth century, for whilst these letters – or versions of them – were in circulation amongst the *haute monde* of London in the late 1710s, it is only in the 1760s that they enter mainstream British cultural consciousness. It is also worth noting that whilst she had many admirers, amongst them towering figures like Johnson and Voltaire, her reception amongst her peers was often hostile, particularly towards the end of her life. Whilst her views of the Eastern female space cannot be said to have directly influenced much of the early eighteenth-century vision of the harem, however, her experience of it as an inspiring and powerfully metamorphic zone is significant, not merely because of the stark contrast it makes with later feminist orientalist texts, but because of its long afterlife: her letters have been in wide circulation ever since their first publication.

Masquerade is a crucial point of engagement with the East for Montagu – both literally and figuratively. Soon after her arrival in Constantinople, she writes to

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<sup>79</sup> See Isobel Grundy's biography *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

her sister “I am now in my Turkish habit... ’tis admirably becoming”.<sup>80</sup> Her use of the word “habit” is, if less self-consciously so than Roxana’s, just as doubled: like Defoe’s heroine, she learns Turkish and plunges herself into Turkish culture to the point, she would have Lady Rich believe, where she begins to forget her English.<sup>81</sup> This opportunity to immerse herself in Turkish culture is the product of her own aristocratic credentials, and it is important to remember that, however valuable her insights, the culture into which she is admitted is that of the Turkish elite. “’Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have,” she writes of Turkish women,

no woman, of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head... You may guess how effectually this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. ’Tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her; and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street. ... This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger or discovery.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, Montagu takes advantage of this liberating masquerade on several occasions, taking the opportunity, like the Caliph from the *Arabian Nights*, of wandering the streets incognito – visiting “the Exchange in [her] own Turkish dress, which is disguise sufficient”, and, “dressed in [her] Turkish habit”, being admitted to mosques “without scruple”.<sup>83</sup> This freedom through anonymity – the scandalous essence of the masquerade balls that remained popular for much of the eighteenth century –

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<sup>80</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters* (London: William Pickering, 1993), 145.

<sup>81</sup> Montagu, *Embassy Letters*, 224.

<sup>82</sup> Montagu, *Embassy Letters*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> Montagu, *Embassy Letters*, 183; 187.



whilst evidently exaggerated (she admits, at one point, “I believe they guessed who I was”), is a powerfully suggestive notion to Montagu. Through it, as Srinivas Aravamudan points out, she “invents a female subjectivity existing without subjection, a sexual agency without concomitant object status, and generalized public privileges abiding with few corresponding obligations... The compulsory “disguise” that women wear in public, a restriction that keeps their social participation to an unindividuated minimum, paradoxically enhances their unfettered agency”.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond this individual liberation that Montagu experiences within the sartorial space of the veil is the atmosphere of homosocial freedom she finds within the hammam. “It is,” she writes, “the women’s coffee-house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented, & c.”.<sup>85</sup> Aravamudan suggests that

Englishwomen themselves could not come up with an alternative to the coffeehouse’s resolutely masculine monopoly of sociopolitical space.

The exclusively male preserve of the coffeehouses has been identified by historians of modernity as a vital innovation that created a public sphere of free political discussion, leading to the invention of liberal democracy.

In this precise sense, the bathhouse simulates the Habermasian sphere of communicative freedom.<sup>86</sup>

Whilst the link between coffee-house and hammam is worthy of note, Aravamudan’s claim that there is a precise parallel to be drawn between bathhouse and Habermasian public sphere is perhaps a little stretched. Freedom of communication there may have been, but the implication that the Ottoman female hammam was a

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<sup>84</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688 – 1804* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 171.

<sup>85</sup> Montagu, *Letters*, 129.

<sup>86</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 175.

zone in which substantial political reform could be enacted does not bear much weight. Nevertheless, this notion of a complete freedom of exchange between women in a zone of male exclusion where “women thrive without men and find pleasure in living together without rancour and dissent” is highly significant, and has been termed a “feminotopia” by Nussbaum, who theorizes it in terms of Mary Astell’s proto-feminist community for unmarried women in *A Serious Proposal for the Ladies* (1694) as an “exclusively female [space]” which “[contests] masculine versions of experience”.<sup>87</sup> Montagu’s experience of this space and Nussbaum’s theorization of it, are strikingly reminiscent of Leila Ahmed’s feminist reading of space in Saudi Arabia in the nineteen-eighties:

Saudi society not only designates and demarcates men’s space, it also designates and demarcates women’s space, and furthermore declares it – women’s space but not men’s space – inviolable. In their space, women can be, and often are, freely together, freely exchanging information and ideas, including about men, without danger of being overheard by men. For just as this space is accessible to women across class lines, so it is also absolutely and unconditionally barred, when women other than kin are present, to men.<sup>88</sup>

Montagu’s writings, then, anticipate a feminism that extends beyond cultural boundaries, and overlaps self-Other binaries between Eastern and Western womanhood: a feminism that is still, three hundred years later, struggling to gain momentum.

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<sup>87</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, 135; 142.

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 528.

*The Fossilisation of the Harem*

By the time Montagu's letters were published in 1763, the transformative power of the Eastern female space was weakening in the literary orient. Samuel Johnson's novel *Rasselas*, published in 1759, marks the beginning of the turning of this tide of embryonic proto-feminist cultural relativism. A rhetoric of likeness is still in operation in this text, with the Ethiopian protagonists, Imlac, Rasselas, Rasselas's sister Nekayah and Pekuah, her maid, all moving fluidly between positions of "'oriental' subjectivity" and Christian morality, and the cultural aggrandization of Europe.<sup>89</sup> Though highly problematic, Johnson's use of his East African characters as mouthpieces through which to propound his views on morality and society implies at the least a notion of potential parallelism between Europe and the East. This is complicated by the intersect between East and West, Islam and Christianity, however: his protagonists are Coptic Christians, and as such exist in a liminal zone between Easternness and Christianity, offering Johnson the opportunity to explore distance and difference, but also sameness. Although Christianity and the East are by no means mutually exclusive, Christianity, however riven by schisms, was central to a sense of European identity – and the geopolitical idea of Christendom in Europe (though by this point only really a cultural memory) had become, by this point, more associated with the occident than the orient. The cultural dialogue that Johnson sets up between orient and occident is a far cry from the occidental acknowledgement of oriental cultural equality, even superiority, which Montagu, also problematically, sought to promote in her letters. His characters' (E)nlightenment is manifested through their frank acceptance of European supremacy: "[t]hey are more powerful, Sir, than we," Imlac tells Rasselas, "because

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<sup>89</sup> Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, 127.

they are wiser; knowledge will always predominate over ignorance, as man governs the animals”.<sup>90</sup> Johnson’s is a proto-historicist rendering of the East: the orient is archaic and *behind* the West both culturally and socially, but the behindness it exhibits appears to operate in a completely discontinuous temporality to that of the West. Western superiority is “the unsearchable will of the Supreme Being”; the East is static in its backwardness, there is no question of it being in “the waiting room of history”, it is an inalterably historical zone.<sup>91</sup> The harem Pekuah inhabits when she is abducted by a band of Arabs, therefore, is almost diametrically opposite to the feminotopian zones of engaging, liberated womanhood which Montagu describes. Indeed, the principle of womanhood as a unifying factor between Islamic and Christian (Eastern and Western) females is directly addressed and refuted:

“There were women in your Arab’s fortress,” said the princess, “why did you not make them your companions, enjoy their conversation, and partake their diversions?”... “The diversions of the women”, answered Pekuah, “were only childish play, by which the mind, accustomed to stronger operations, could not be kept busy... They had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view, and had hardly names for any thing but their cloaths and their food.”<sup>92</sup>

This constitutes a wholesale rejection of the trope of harem sensuality on Johnson’s part. As Arthur Weitzman explains, he is systematically destroying “the hedonistic and romantic notion of the voluptuous lives led by Moslem men, which had become

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<sup>90</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abbyssinia* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1759), 47.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *Rasselas*, 47; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson, *Rasselas*, 204-206.

a staple of Oriental fiction in the eighteenth century”.<sup>93</sup> The lack of conversation shuts down the Eastern female space as a zone of Habermasian communicative freedom. Johnson is destroying the dynamism of the (imagined) Eastern woman, and the world of the seraglio; methodically stripping away the layered myths of oriental magnificence, eroticism and sexual transgression to reveal a newly-neutered harem, a barren womb in which no metamorphoses take place, but only stagnation.

This new mode of representation becomes increasingly popular as the century wears on: the theatricality of the harem, the sense of potential masquerade-affiliated liberation within its walls, is replaced with stasis and fossilisation. The sterilization of the harem seems to have been instrumental to the development of the eighteenth-century project which Karen O’Brien terms “the historical investigation of human sociability and the historicising of women”, which gathered force in the lead up to “the demand, first made at the end of the very end of the century, for equal civil and political rights for women”: the birth of feminism.<sup>94</sup> The Eastern woman is a constant point of reference, for example, in William Alexander’s *The History of Women* (1779): whilst the women of Europe oscillate between wantonness and chastity in response to the changing historical perceptions of them by their menfolk, “the women of the East,” we are told, “have exhibited always the same appearance: their manners, customs, and fashions, like their rocks, have stood unaltered the test of many revolving ages”.<sup>95</sup> There is also, at this time, a distinct desexualisation of the Eastern woman’s plight in operation within mainstream literary production or, rather, the perception of their oppression moves from the specifically sexual to the

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<sup>93</sup> Arthur Weitzman, “More Light on *Rasselas*: The Background of the Egyptian Episodes”, *Philological Quarterly* 48 (January 1969): 44-58, 50.

<sup>94</sup> Karen O’Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>95</sup> William Alexander, *The History of Women. From the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time; Giving Some Account of almost every interesting Particular concerning that Sex, among all Nations, ancient and modern.* (London:W. Strahan, and T. Cadell, 1779), 13.

general – and to the spiritual. The myth that Muslims believed women to have no souls had been in operation in the West for centuries, indeed it is something that Montagu makes a point of tackling in a letter to the Abbé Conti in 1718.<sup>96</sup> It had, however, remained largely subordinate to the erotic aspect of the harem scenario until this point when, as the feminist voice began to find utterance, it also sought its shadow in the East. The interchangeable terms “Turkish,” “Eastern,” and “Mahometan” were used as signifiers for phenomena which would eventually come to be called “sexism” and “misogyny” and used as tools with which to interrogate Britain’s social and cultural past. In his *Life of Milton*, published the same year as Alexander’s *History of Women*, Johnson muses “there appears in his books something like a Turkish contempt of females as subordinate and inferior beings”, and Wollstonecraft, writing ten years later, says of Milton’s representation of Eve: “I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience”.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, “it is ‘Mahometanism’ – and the ‘Mahometan’ institution of the seraglio or harem – that Wollstonecraft singles out as the grand type for all oppression of women,” as Zonana points out.<sup>98</sup>

Wollstonecraft is amongst the first, and certainly the most influential, of the proponents of feminist orientalism. To go back to Heffernan’s formulation, the space of the Eastern woman that had been for so long the metonymic heart of the European conception of the orient had given birth to a parallel space closer to home. By the end of the eighteenth century, the space the European woman occupied had become, in a sense, the metonymic heart of the occident: she had become central to

<sup>96</sup> Montagu, *Embassy Letters*, 109.

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *Lives of the English poets: A Selection* ed. John Wain. (London: Everyman, 1975), 85; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: Penguin, 1982), 100-101.

<sup>98</sup> Zonana, “The Sultan,” 605.

Europe's understanding of itself. Furthermore, as the rhetoric of empire grew stronger in Europe, so its definition of progress grew to resemble its definition of itself: Alexander's formulation that "the rank... and condition, in which we find women in any country, mark out to us with the greatest precision, the exact point in the scale of civil society, to which the people of such country have arrived" became central to the way in which Europe, soon to begin to thinking about itself as "the West", positioned itself in the world.<sup>99</sup> Alexander's ideas derive from stadial theories of social progress expounded by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. European women came to define the top of an index of civilization, the end of a timeline of human progress, and Eastern women came to be seen as the living embodiments of earlier points in history. Whilst clichés about Islamic culture, and especially about life in the harem, had been in widespread circulation for centuries, it is during this period that negatively charged shorthand ideas about the oppression of women in the Islamic world began to become fixed in the imagination of the nascent West. The harem became a tableau rather than a performance, a static counter in arguments the West had about itself. What had briefly been configured as a feminotopian place of agency, of cultural interchange that could augment European life and even improve it, became a femino-dystopia: receptacle of everything the West most wanted to distance itself from. The West's harem became a museum, and the women in it, exhibits of a shameful past.

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander, *History*, 151. For an insightful recent account of the rise of "the West" as form of occidental self-fashioning, see Makdisi's *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

*Inside the Harem-Museum – or – “The woman in the veil: a horror story”*<sup>100</sup>

In a 1984 interview, Rushdie commented that “*Midnight’s Children* was a book that was deliberately constructed to be very open; *Shame* describes a very closed society... and so *Shame* is a closed system”.<sup>101</sup> Himself a powerful generator of cultural shorthand, the closed system Rushdie describes goes beyond his structural attempt “to write a novel without a central character... [with] the characters of the novel standing in a circle facing inwards,” through to the physical and emotional spaces the characters inhabit, and to the abstract notions of religion and culture which are collapsed into them and which they, in turn, are trapped within.<sup>102</sup> Aijaz Ahmad characterises this sense of enclosure as a “cage-like quality,” and roots it in the novel’s conception of the nation and the impermeability of its boundaries: “[t]he sense that Pakistan is a cage... [the] sense of being trapped,” he writes, “permeates the whole book right up to the final denouement where we find that even dictators cannot cross the ‘frontier’ and escape their cage”.<sup>103</sup> He goes on to state that “any representation of women, whether in fiction or in life, has to do, surely, with gender relations, but also with *more* than gender relations; it is almost always indicative of a much larger structure of feelings and a much more complex social grid”.<sup>104</sup> As I have demonstrated, this is particularly true of *Shame* – and, indeed, recalls the late eighteenth-century use of the position of women in society as an index of relative civilization – however Ahmad fails to trace the “larger structure” of the nation-cage

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<sup>100</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 216.

<sup>101</sup> Kumkum Sangari, “Interview with Salman Rushdie”, *The Book Review* No. 8:5 (Mar./Apr. 1984), in Chauhan, *Interviews*, 63.

<sup>102</sup> Rushdie and Sedge Thomson, “Interview at San Francisco State University”, recorded at SFSU, March 26, 1987, in Chauhan, *Interviews*, 83.

<sup>103</sup> Ahmad, “Rushdie’s *Shame*”, 1465.

<sup>104</sup> Ahmad, “Rushdie’s *Shame*”, 1469 (original emphasis).



inwards, rather than outwards, down to the metonymic heart of the “social grid”: the woman-cage.

Whether incarcerated in attics, mouldering bungalows and marble palaces by fathers and husbands, hermetically sealed inside the bodies and minds of other (imprisoned) women by the narrator, trapped inside their own maimed and cauterised psyches, or the determined occupiers of self-made world- or men-excluding chrysalises, all women in the text are contained within prophylactic envelopes of one kind or another. The Eastern female space, the harem-veil-prison, is the cage that haunts the text – the cage that *is* the text. As Catherine Cundy points out, Rushdie’s fiction is often “a case of content dictating form,” and in *Shame* the theme of female containment is also a textual practice.<sup>105</sup> The book consists of a set of overlapping, but not interlinking, enclosures, each with a woman inside it. It works like a mismatched set of Russian dolls, all straining to fit inside the shape of one monstrous female imprisonment, the “Mother Country”.<sup>106</sup>

We have seen Ahmed remind Western feminists that “negatively charged speculations and statements about harem life form the pre-history of their impressions. Although the specific detail and content of what was said has long ago faded, the negative charge has passed into the culture and become part of the cultural surround”.<sup>107</sup> I would suggest that whilst this may be particularly true of the negative charge of feminist orientalism, older tropes of the harem as a transformative, metamorphic space, have also become negatively charged. The three sisters, Chunni, Munnee and Bunny, with whom this section started, live in a space

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<sup>105</sup> Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie, Contemporary World Writers*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 44.

<sup>106</sup> The first section of the novel, where Nishapur is first depicted, is titled “Escapes from the Mother Country”.

<sup>107</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 526.

that is clearly the legacy of late eighteenth century texts like *Rasselas* and *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: not so much “the waiting room of history,” but history’s cabinet of curiosities.<sup>108</sup> Nishapur is effectively a museum: it is a place of “positively archaeological antiquity,” with “outsized chambers stuffed brim-full with the material legacy of generations of rapaciously acquisitive forebears”.<sup>109</sup> As Brennan points out, “[t]he Shakil household betrays a history of collaboration, in which many of the English imperial habits are symbolised”.<sup>110</sup> What he does not articulate in his analysis, however, is that whatever its past before the sisters’ self-imprisonment, Nishapur as we see it in the text is a place “beyond history,” an extra-temporal zone of history-defying pastness. Murmurs of colonial memory and imprints of a colonial past do exist there, but they are rendered simultaneous to “the impossible forms of painted Neolithic pottery in the Kotdiji style,” and “bronze implements of utterly fabulous age”.<sup>111</sup> This sense of temporal polyphony and disjunction is emphasised by Rushdie’s use of the Hegiran calendar. “All this happened in the fourteenth century”, Rushdie-narrator tells us, neatly (if unconsciously) summarizing Scottish Enlightenment notions of comparative civilizational temporality, “...[t]ime cannot be homogenized as easily as milk, and in those parts, until quite recently, the thirteen-hundreds were still in full swing”.<sup>112</sup> Amidst this extra/poly-temporal “thing-infested jungle... [this] mother-country,” the three sister-mothers are merely one more “oblivion-sprinkled” relic of a previous age: exhibits in a museum they were born into and in which, in the final passage of the novel, they will die.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 31; 33.

<sup>110</sup> Brennan, *Salman Rushdie*, 87.

<sup>111</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 31.

<sup>112</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 31, 32.

*Monsters in the Harem-Museum*

And yet the barrenness of this *Rasselas*-style harem-museum, in which “nothing new seemed capable of growth,” is also a zone of monstrous metamorphosis.<sup>114</sup> In his chapter on Montagu and the hammam, Aravamudan writes:

Architecturally labyrinthine, the enclosed hammam... became a more generalized allegory for psychosexual interiors. The dreamscape of the bathhouse may suggest a uterine memory of the mother – or the figure of “our General Mother,” as Montagu formally states it.<sup>115</sup>

Nishapur, otherwise referred to as the “mother-country”, represents another intersect in the text’s woman-Islam-nation metonymic structure.<sup>116</sup> Whilst Pakistan in *Shame* is never directly personified as a mother in the way that India is in *Midnight’s Children*, it is frequently referred to in the feminine – as, significantly, is history itself – and, as discussed above, is mapped onto the same territory as the Islamic East and zones of female oppression and imprisonment. The mother-nation as a place of origin (birth) and a place of confinement (the womb) looms large in the text’s chain of metonymic female spaces, and the labyrinthine corridors of Nishapur constitute not so much a “uterine memory” as a uterine “presence” of a monstrous mother.

As the Shakil sisters begin to display the symptoms of pregnancy (one real, two phantom) they, “by virtue of dressing identically and through the incomprehensible effects of their unusual, chosen life, [begin] to resemble each other

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<sup>114</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 30.

<sup>115</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 181.

<sup>116</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 31.

so closely that even the servants made mistakes”.<sup>117</sup> Their individual features masked by the carapace of mysticism hardening around them, the sister-mothers become a faceless trinity, “the simultaneity of their behaviour suggest[ing] the operation of some form of communal mind”.<sup>118</sup> The longer they remain inside their manless zenana, their sultan-free harem, the further they retreat into the uniformity of the imagined woman: the blank canvas, the projector-screen. Gradually the depiction of their weird-sisterhood, their “three-in-oneness,” becomes more nightmarishly physical: rather than three identical entities they become a single, many-limbed, many-headed, many-breasted individual or goddess. “[Y]ou drank from half a dozen [nipples]”, they tell their son Omar and, later, “six hands fly to three heads and take up hear-no-see-no-speak-no evil positions”.<sup>119</sup> This is mythologisation in the truest sense of the word: the six breasts recall both beast-mother (Mowgli, Romulus and Remus, “suckled... on the feral multiple breasts of a hairy moon-howling dam”) and fertility goddess; the multiple limbs, Hindu gods; the multiple heads, Hindu demons, hydras, and perhaps even a “hell-bitch”, Cerberus’s mate-mother guarding the portal to hell.<sup>120</sup> The primitive God-Demon-Beast-Mother figure which emerges from the mythical depths of the harem is all the more insidious because of the light-hearted, engaging way in which Rushdie produces it. Made cuddly by the sister-mothers’ comic “trialogue”, and the narrator’s roguish “nudge-nudge-wink-wink” pattern of allusions, the bestial demon-god-mother is only revealed in its true, terrifying power during the final “Judgement Day” section of the text.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 20.

<sup>119</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 36, 37.

<sup>120</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 30.

<sup>121</sup> For an example of comic “trialogue,” see Rushdie, *Shame*, 37.

Trapped in the monstrous uterine “mother-country” of Nishapur, the sisters’ son Omar begins to hate his mothers and himself becomes deformed by the pressures of his life in their harem space. The *Shame*-cage, as we saw Ahmad indicate earlier, is not a space with exclusively female occupants. Its boundaries, however, are always echoes of the central theme of female imprisonment, always echoes of a suffocating, monstrous womb. The cell in which Raza incarcerates Iskander at the end of the book, is “death’s belly, an inverse womb, [the] dark mirror of a birthplace” and Iskander’s execution by hanging is an echo of the death of Raza’s son, strangled by the umbilical cord during Bilquis’s labour. The machinations of the male despotic Islamic state are revealed, in the end, to be trapped in the same deathly, deforming walls of the female enclosure that it created. Death is implicitly a woman: Iskander is “death’s baby, travelling down the death canal,” and the threat of deadly violence lurks within the women of *Shame*. Rushdie’s feminism in the text, as Grewal points out, is predicated on “a patriarchal fear of women,” and operates through “playing on and by showing the potential for destruction that is contained within women”.<sup>122</sup> Sufiya Zinobia, the brain-damaged daughter of Raza and Bilquis, is mentally deformed by her parents’ disappointment that she is not a son and becomes, as Ambreen Hai summarizes, “the retarded, monstrous, increasingly degenerate allegory of female rage, the repository of a culture’s inability to feel shame”.<sup>123</sup> “[D]isorder’s avatar,” she stalks the night raping men and then ripping their heads off, the incarnation not only of shame and female rage but, as Ahmad explains, “the oldest of the misogynist myths: the virgin who is really a vampire, the irresistible temptress who seduces men in order to kill them, not an object of male

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<sup>122</sup> Grewal, “Marginality,” 138.

<sup>123</sup> Ambreen Hai, “‘Marching In from the Peripheries’: Rushdie’s Feminized Artistry and Ambivalent Feminism” in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. Keith M. Booker (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999) 16-50, 29.

manipulation but a devourer of hapless men”.<sup>124</sup> She is the incarnation of patriarchal fear: she effeminizes, emasculates, and kills men.

Sufiya is, in fact, a far-off echo of Montesquieu’s Roxane – the negative charge left over from the early female revolution in the seraglio. Her duplicitous description of the wreckage of the harem in her penultimate letter to Usbek reads like an excerpt from anywhere in roughly the final quarter of *Shame*:

Horror, darkness and terror hold sway in the seraglio, which is shrouded in ghastly mourning; at every moment a tiger gives vent in it to all his rage... He keeps us locked up separately in our rooms; although we are alone, he makes us wear the veil; we are no longer permitted to speak to one another; our sole remaining freedom is in tears.<sup>125</sup>

When it becomes clear that Roxane has been the instrument of the harem’s undoing, her image of the tiger – superficially representing Usbek’s vengeful eunuch – begins to look like a self-portrait, shaking the walls of the seraglio as she roars “with all the violence of loathing”.<sup>126</sup> In a final, dark modulation of Scheherazade’s narrative-as-life formula, as the poison courses through her veins, the pen drops from her hand and her life ends, the book ends with her. Two hundred and sixty-one years later, Sufiya’s rage has transformed her into a mythical “white panther” with “fiery eyes” and she is, “[f]or the first time in her life... free”.<sup>127</sup> Her female fury builds up inside her until, as she stares at her husband Omar Shakil, she explodes, “the fireball

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<sup>124</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 219; Ahmad, “Rushdie’s *Shame*,” 1468.

<sup>125</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 211.

<sup>126</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 213.

<sup>127</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 254.

of her burning, rolling outwards to the horizon like the sea,” and with her dies the narrative.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 286.

## Part II

*Islamic Despotism and*  
The Satanic Verses

*Messenger, do please lend a  
careful ear. Your monophilia,  
your one one one, ain't for Jahilia.  
Return to sender.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 106. "Jahilia": literally "ignorance" – the name traditionally given to the time before Islam.



## Chapter 3

# Mahound and Mahomet

Though the narrative of *Shame* may die with Sufiya, the novel's vision of Islamic despotism and its power monstrously to deform the people it oppresses is perpetuated and expanded in *The Satanic Verses*. A few months after the declaration of the fatwa in 1989, Srinivas Aravamudan lamented that:

[t]he multiple generic, discursive, literary, historical, and cultural protocols imbricated with this novel have been largely abandoned in favour of journalistic yet highly phantasmagorical simplifications, yielding the well-worn dichotomy of religious fanaticism battling secular free speech: (Western) democracy crusading against (Oriental) tyranny.<sup>2</sup>

Aravamudan's reservations are well-founded. With the advent of the fatwa the novel ceased, for much of the world, to be a cultural artefact and became a cultural banner – a mustering point for fundamentalists from both sides of the dividing globe: “a symbol of the violation by one culture of something fundamental in the other culture”.<sup>3</sup> And while the widespread appropriation of the text as a rhetorical pawn in “clash-of-civilizations” debates frequently relied (and continues to rely) on the scantiest acquaintance with the novel itself, we can read its global reception not only as an indication of the widening gap between the cultural hemispheres of East and West, but as a catalyst to this process of inter-cultural division. If the dichotomy Aravamudan describes was well-worn when he was writing in 1989, it seems yet more Manichean now, and although the many such appeals for more nuanced readings of the text are justified, the old East/West, Secular/Religious,

<sup>2</sup> Aravamudan, “Being God's Postman Is No Fun, Yaar: Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*”, *Diacritics* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1989): 3-20, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Claes Kastholm, “The Crime of Silence”, trans. Anne Born in *Freedom of Expression: The Acid Test*, ed. Niels Frid-Nielsen (Stockholm and Copenhagen: Nordic Council, 1995), 121-125, 123.

Tyranny/Freedom binaries that *The Satanic Verses*, willingly or unwillingly, has invoked are too important to be read over. Whilst we must approach the novel with eyes keen to see all of the nuances and ambiguities obscured by years of journalistic simplifications, part of our reading must also be along the very lines of the debate that the novel provoked. As carefully as we examine the text, we must examine the cultural function of the text. “In our beginnings we find our essences,” Rushdie tells us: “[t]o understand a religion, look at its earliest moments”.<sup>4</sup> This appeal to history, as I will demonstrate, is made again and again throughout his corpus and, just as Chamcha “makes himself whole by returning to his roots”, we must both “return... to the actually existing book,” as Rushdie begs us to, and to the roots of the “struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom” in which the book is entangled.<sup>5</sup> This examination of both the book’s ideas and the histories of the book’s ideas in some ways goes against the advice of critics such as Sara Suleri by addressing the very “unhelpful oppositions between fundamentalism and secularism” which, it is alleged, have masked among other things “his engagement with both cultural self-definition and Islamic historiography”.<sup>6</sup> My sense is, however, that the destructive simplicity of the monoliths constructed on either side of the battle lines drawn in the Rushdie Affair can best be complicated by addressing them directly, and that doing so has the potential to reveal, rather than to mask, a great deal.

As we have seen with the creation of Peccavistan in *Shame*, Rushdie is not shy of the notion of Eastern – specifically Islamic – zones of unfreedom. The mapping of despotism in *The Satanic Verses*, however, is a more complex affair than the process which takes place in his previous novel. If Scheherazade was the key

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<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, “Is Nothing Sacred?” *Homelands*, 415-29, 424.

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 319-414, 398, 395, 396.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Suleri, “Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the Embodiment of Blasphemy”, in Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 221-236, 222.

figure in my critique in Part I, my analysis of *The Satanic Verses* in these chapters takes place, in a sense, in dialogue with the figure of the Sultan Schahriar. In the following pages I examine Rushdie's participation in the discourse of oriental despotism, not merely arguing that he is promulgating an Islamophobic discourse which characterises Islam as antithetical to freedom, but suggesting also that his use of oriental despotism as a metonym for other forms of oppression echoes its origins in the eighteenth century.

Much of Rushdie's work concerns the dissolution of binaries – he sets them up, as M. Keith Booker describes, “like the snakes and ladders of Sinai's children's game, only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent”.<sup>7</sup> And yet Rushdie, whilst he plays with binaries, never quite demolishes them. “*It was so, it was not,*” “*it was and it was not so... it happened and it never did*”.<sup>8</sup> With these leitmotifs Rushdie positions *The Satanic Verses*, just as all his novels are positioned, in the intersect between fiction and reality: as he says of *Shame*, “[t]here are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality”.<sup>9</sup> This double-vision occurs throughout Rushdie's fiction, replicating the liminal cultural space it seeks to inhabit, making the textual space a mass of refracted histories, narratives, realities; and yet the shimmering profusion of overlapping worlds is bounded, in the end, with the bookends of reality and fiction. The action may take place within the “and” between *it happened* and *it never did*, and yet the notion of the *so* and the *not so* is never quite deconstructed. “From Nietzsche's transvaluation

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<sup>7</sup> M. Keith Booker, “Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie”, in Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 237-254, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 275, 35 (Rushdie's emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 29.

of values to the dialogics of Bakhtin to the deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida”, Booker summarises,

a number of modern thinkers have argued that the dualistic thinking so central to the history of Western civilization has tended inevitably toward the establishment of hierarchies – one term in a pair is privileged over the other so that what is “good” becomes defined from its difference to what is “bad.” Dualistic thinking thus allows complex issues to be reduced to questions of black-and-white, good-and-bad. It allows the identification of the opposition as the Other, as evil, and provides a justification for the violent oppression of that opposition.<sup>10</sup>

Booker is right to ally Rushdie’s work with this modern critical discourse at this point in his career and yet, just as they did in *Shame*, Rushdie’s attempts to distance himself from – and thus implicitly problematize – Islamophobic orientalist tropes founder in *The Satanic Verses*.

### *Dissent and Islam*

As I have suggested, the doubleness of his vision when it comes to fiction and reality is matched by the doubleness of his cultural vision, not only in terms of the rich, conflicted interface between East and West that his characters inhabit in *The Satanic Verses*, but in terms of the cultural wellsprings he draws on. Much valuable scholarship has centred, in the wake of the fatwa, on repositioning Rushdie within Islamic literary traditions: Suleri, for example, places *The Satanic Verses* within the Urdu *ghazal* form, bound up, she says, with “the rejection of Islam for some new object of epistemological and erotic devotion”; Feroza Jussawalla links the text to

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<sup>10</sup> Booker, “Beauty and the Beast”, 250.

the Urdu/Persian *dastan* tradition, specifically the *dastan-e-dilruba*, “a love story created for the beloved,” which he argues is, in this case, Islam; and Rushdie himself asserts that “doubts, uncertainties, even shocks... have... long been a legitimate part even of Islamic literature”.<sup>11</sup> Beside such moves to categorise *The Satanic Verses* as Islamic in genre and trope, comparisons between Rushdie and individual Islamic writers through the ages come thick and fast – from Daniel Pipes, who compiles a check-list of medieval Islamic poets including Abu Nuwas, Al-Mutannabi and Abu'l-‘Ala al-Ma’arri, all of whom “penned some very daring statements,” to Timothy Brennan, who (more convincingly) writes that *The Satanic Verses* is “under the shadow of Iqbal, the Milton of Urdu poetry”.<sup>12</sup> Khomeini and the book-burners of Bradford are not the only face of Islam, and dissent, satire – even blasphemy – the message goes, have long been part of Islamic literature. Readings of the novel can certainly be illuminated by the long, rich, multivocal Islamic literary heritage of dissent, but I would suggest that, in their eagerness to foreground the novel’s Islamic credentials as a means of writing against Khomeini’s proclamation, some such critical interventions overstate the case. My argument is that Rushdie’s dissent is far more closely bound up with eighteenth-century literature opposing the despotisms of Church and state than has previously been realised. It is a dissent which, as I shall demonstrate in Part III, he increasingly comes to identify with the Enlightenment – indeed, I will argue that the quality of dissent itself comes, for him, to join the raft of other such ideas he locates in his notion of the world of the philosophes. What he does not perhaps realise, however, is how firmly certain eighteenth-century discourses of dissent grew out of cultural dialogues with the Islamic East.

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<sup>11</sup> Suleri, “Contraband Histories”, 224; Feroza Jussawalla, “Rushdie’s ‘Dastan-e-Dilruba’: *The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie’s Love Letter to Islam”, *Diacritics* 26, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 50-73, 63; Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 396.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1990), 151; Brennan, *Salman Rushdie*, 143.

Rushdie frequently invokes the doubleness of his literary and cultural inheritances, both through intertextual references in his novel, and in his non-fiction and interviews. As he says himself, “Islamic culture is the one in which I grew up – I know it well. Its narratives are my narratives”, and *Midnight’s Children*, as Brennan points out, started life as the story of a Muslim holy man.<sup>13</sup> The move from so many liberal critics to reincorporate Rushdie into an implicitly monolithicised Muslim literary fold is, however, problematic. I would complicate the suggestion that his is an essentially Islamic dissent, or that *The Satanic Verses* is “a deeply Islamic book,” as Suleri asserts, or a love letter to Islam, as Jussawalla holds, or even that it is “a novel whose questions are essentially religious,” as Brennan claims.<sup>14</sup>

The confusion that lies behind many of these critical moves to Islamicise Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses* is the conflation of the Islamic faith with Islamic cultures – and it is, as evinced by his post-9/11 writings, a confusion Rushdie has come to share. In his 1991 essay “One Thousand Days in a Balloon”, he writes:

[a]nd I said to myself: Admit it, Salman, the Story of Islam has a deeper meaning for you than any of the other grand narratives. Of course you’re no mystic, mister, and when you wrote *I am not a Muslim* that’s what you meant. No supernaturalism, no literalist orthodoxies, no formal rules for you. But Islam doesn’t have to mean blind faith. It can mean what it always meant in your family, a culture, a civilization, as open-minded as your grandfather was, as delightedly disputatious as your father was, as intellectual and philosophical as you like. Don’t let the zealots make *Muslim* a terrifying word, I urged myself; remember when it meant

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<sup>13</sup> Gerald Marzorati, “Salman Rushdie: Fiction’s Embattled Infidel”, *New York Times Magazine*, January 29, 1989, 47, cited by Jussawalla in “Dastan-e-Dilruba”, 60; Brennan, *Salman Rushdie*, 146.

<sup>14</sup> Suleri, “Contraband Histories”, 222; Brennan, *Salman Rushdie*, 151.

*family and light.*<sup>15</sup>

Although the narrators of Rushdie's non-fictional writing should be approached with the same pinch of salt that we afford the unreliable narrators of his novels (and this piece, ending with "Ladies and gentlemen, the balloon is sinking into the abyss," is an example of his would-be performative anti-fatwa writing at its most fervent), this account of his relationship with Islam is, though rose-tinted, consonant with the way certain cultures of Islam are represented in his pre-fatwa works. As Jussawalla points out, the "facts of Mughal-Islamic religion, history, culture and literature as they were syncretized in India" are central to *The Satanic Verses* – even more so, I would add, to *Midnight's Children* – but the accounts of Muslim life in Bombay that they inform, the upbringings of Saleem and Saladin in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* respectively, are accounts of the world that Rushdie grew up in:

while both my parents were believers neither was insistent or doctrinaire. Two or three times a year, at the big Eid festivals, I would... go with my father to the great prayer-*maidan* outside the Friday Mosque in Bombay, and rise and fall with the multitude, mumbling my way through the uncomprehended Arabic much as Catholic children do – or used to do – with Latin. The rest of the year religion took a back seat. I had a Christian ayah (nanny), for whom at Christmas we would put up a tree and sing carols about baby Jesus without feeling in the least ill-at-ease. My friends were Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and none of this struck me as being particularly important.<sup>16</sup>

The Islam that Rushdie is really embracing is the hybrid culture of secularised, specifically Bombayite, middle-class Indian Muslims. The Faith, as we see from the

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<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, "One Thousand Days in a Balloon", *Homelands*, 430-439, 435.

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, "In God We Trust", *Homelands*, 376-377.

passage above, is quite marginal. Indeed, even in the clutch of apology essays published in the first year after the fatwa – “In God We Trust”, “In Good Faith”, “Is Nothing Sacred”, “One Thousand Days in a Balloon” – Rushdie’s views on religion are damning: where “most political discourse... can be seen as a dream of adequacy... The great universal religions, by contrast, ask us to accept our inferiority”.<sup>17</sup> “Religion,” he says, “places human beings beneath history. In this world we are not masters, but servants”. His stark translation of Islam as submission consciously carries with it the other great opprobrious abstract nouns of liberalism: oppression, tyranny and, as we shall see, despotism.<sup>18</sup> Though he acknowledges “the rifts, the lack of homogeneity and unity characteristic of present-day Islam,” he uses the figure of Islam as a metonym not only for religion, but for the despotism of any monologic creed or narrative.<sup>19</sup>

When the Islamic faith moves in from the margins of secular life, in the Pakistan passages in *Midnight’s Children*, in *Shame*, in *The Satanic Verses*, it is a long way from the delightedly disputatious civilization of Rushdie’s upbringing, it is an avatar of “the absolutism of the Pure”.<sup>20</sup> Whilst his novels feature non-Muslim despots like Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher (as the Widow and Mrs Torture respectively), the mobilization of Islam in Rushdie’s discourse of anti-despotism is far subtler, more pervasive and wide-reaching than his use of individual despotic figures like these.

Rushdie’s dissent, when it comes down to it, is not the dissent of a Muslim trying to reconstruct Islam from the inside, but the protest of a secular humanist looking at what he sees as an oppressive regime from the outside. Beyond this,

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<sup>17</sup> Rushdie, “In God”, *Homelands*, 378.

<sup>18</sup> He states this explicitly in “In God”, *Homelands*, 378, and, significantly, Mahound’s religion in *Verses* is known only as “Submission”.

<sup>19</sup> Rushdie, “In God”, *Homelands*, 383.

<sup>20</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.



however, the way in which Islam shimmers in and out of being the signifier only for itself, the representative of the despotism of religion in general, and the sign for despotism at large in *The Satanic Verses* recalls the way in which certain eighteenth-century texts instrumentalise Islam and the figure of the oriental despot. It was the discourse of oriental despotism which, in the end, partially produced the list of well-worn dichotomies that began this chapter, but also contained within it the seeds of the oppositional discourse that postcolonial criticism has mobilized against them. The legacies of discourses of oriental despotism are not only interwoven with “the actually existing book” *The Satanic Verses* and the polarised “struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom” that has surrounded it, but with the rhetoric of likeness with which liberal writers have sought to undo the schism of East and West.<sup>21</sup>

### *Mahound and Mahomet*

Voltaire’s play *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* (written in 1736 and first performed in 1741) has been considered alongside *The Satanic Verses* in commentary on the Rushdie affair since a performance in Geneva in 1994 was shut down under the weight of Muslim protests.<sup>22</sup> Although Voltaire would later decry the way in which Montesquieu deliberately misread and deformed the travellers’ accounts of Islam and Islamic nations that were his primary archive in order to create a convenient vehicle for his deist ideas, in *Le Fanatisme*, Voltaire is guilty of much the same crime. In a letter to the King of Prussia in 1742, he admits:

It may perhaps be objected to me, that, out of my too abundant zeal, I have made *Mahomet* in this tragedy guilty of a crime which in reality he

<sup>21</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 398, 395, 396.

<sup>22</sup> See Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair*, 268.

was not capable of committing... It was not my design merely to represent a real fact... it was my intention to shew the horrid schemes which villainy can invent, and fanaticism put in practice.<sup>23</sup>

Voltaire was using the Islamic East as a zone in which to propound his rationalist views – and like both Montesquieu and Rushdie, Voltaire deliberately fictionalised and deformed Islam and its history in order to further his own aims. The similarities between *Le Fanatisme* and the Mahound sequences of *The Satanic Verses* are remarkable, both in terms of the political furore of their critical receptions, and in the way in which both texts configure Islam as despotism itself, metonym for the despotism of religion in general, and metaphor for despotism at large.

In 1744, Voltaire's controversial play was translated into English as *Mahomet the Impostor*, by James Miller.<sup>24</sup> Banned after three performances in France, its excoriation of the despotism of Mahomet was considered too close to the bone by members of the court of Louis XV – the absolute court was often critiqued in terms of oriental despotism, as I discuss later – and, although dedicated to Cardinal Fleury, its indictment of religious fanaticism was considered an attack on the Catholic Church. Though there are a few token references to rumours of Christian doctrines of gentleness and tolerance in the text, the play raises reason, not God, as the antithesis of the murderous despotism of Mahomet and the corrupting webs of fanaticism with which he enmeshes his hopeless victims. The ban on *Le Fanatisme* in France was lifted in 1745 when Pope Benedict XIV, at Voltaire's personal request,

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<sup>23</sup> Voltaire, *The Works of M. de Voltaire: Mahomet. Socrates. Alzira*, trans. Thomas Francklin (Salisbury: Newbery, 1763), 13.

<sup>24</sup> I choose to work from Miller's text here, which might be more properly termed an adaption than a translation (characters' names are changed, and there are a few slight plot modifications), because of its popularity in eighteenth-century London, and the opportunity it provides to demonstrate the facility with which the Islamic East was viewed by the populace as a zone in which to explore European realities. For a closer, more recent translation, see Hannah Burton's *Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet: A New Translation*. (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2013).

agreed that the play could be dedicated to him. Voltaire's letter to the Pope, written with more than half an eye on posterity, is an outrageous piece of satire:

Your holiness will pardon the liberty taken by one of the lowest of the faithful, though a zealous admirer of virtue, of submitting to the head of the true religion this performance, written in opposition to the founder of a false and barbarous sect. To whom cou'd I with any more propriety inscribe a satire on the cruelty and errors of a false prophet, than to the vicar and representative of a God of truth and mercy? <sup>25</sup>

The fact that the play had been banned in France was a great selling-point in London: playbills appeared in many of the London papers announcing, beneath the title "Mr. Miller's *Mahomet the Impostor*",

*N.B.* Mons. VOLTAIRE's Tragedy of MAHOMET, on which this is Founded, was Suppress'd at Paris, after the Second Representation, on account of the Free and Noble Sentiments, with regard to Bigotry and Enthusiasm, which shine through it; and which the French Nation found full as Applicable to itself, as to the Bloody Propagators of Mahomet's Religion.<sup>26</sup>

These "free and noble sentiments" are neatly folded into British national identity by James Miller's prologue, in which Voltaire is figured as "*Our Gallick Bard*," on a "Crusade" against "*th'Enthusiast's Rage*". "*France was deaf - for all her Priests were sore,*" but "*On English Ground she makes a firmer Stand,*" we are told, for "*No Clergy here usurp the free-born Mind*".<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is striking how little attention is paid to the Islamic content of the play in the prologue: beyond a reference to

<sup>25</sup> Voltaire, trans. Francklin, *Works*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Classified ads, *Daily Gazetteer (London Edition)* (London, England), April 30, 1744; Issue 3170.

<sup>27</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet the impostor. A tragedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, by His Majesty's Servants. By a gentleman of Wadham-College* 2nd edition, trans. James Miller, (Edinburgh, J. Baillie and Company: 1755), prologue.

imposture in the fifth line – a reference which, but for the title of the play, would not have conjured a vision of Muhammad especially vividly in the mind of the auditor – its anti-fanaticism rhetoric is entirely composed of Catholic European referents:

*Hooded and train'd like Hawks th'Enthusiasts fly,*

*And the Priest's Victims in their Pounces die.*

*Like Whelps born blind, by Mother-Church they're bred,*

*Nor wake to Sight, to know themselves misled.*<sup>28</sup>

This withering away of Islamic content from the prologue underlines how directly Voltaire was targeting the Catholic Church, and how transparent a metaphor for clerical despotism Islam was as it appeared to the English public.

Like Montesquieu and Voltaire, Rushdie partially uses Islam and oriental despotism as a means of talking about the West. *The Satanic Verses* is superficially a tale of three cities: London, Bombay and Jahilia – pre-Islamic Mecca – and yet, as Rushdie has said on many occasions, the three cities are one. Whilst the outlines of all three cities blur and shift in tides of myth and magic, where Bombay and London are anchored in the realities of contemporary politics, Jahilia is the text's ideological battleground – the locale for a fable of despotic singularity versus multiplicity which spirals out to inform and determine the conflicts of the two modern metropolises. The Submission of Jahilia at the hands of Mahound is a metonym for the deformation of hybrid identities at the hands of absolutist master-narratives like Thatcherism and Hindu fundamentalism that is taking place in London and Bombay, and yet it is also the literal account of the rise of the most powerful of these despotic narratives: Islam. Like both Montesquieu's and Voltaire's, Rushdie's critiques of Western and Islamic despotisms are uneven. Both Voltaire and Rushdie locate their

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<sup>28</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet*, prologue.

representations of Islam at the moment of Muhammad's triumph over Mecca. Just as we will see Rushdie make much of pre-Submission Jahilia as a dynamic city of multiplicity in order to emphasise the desolating effect of Mahound's despotism, Voltaire makes pre-Islamic Mecca a republic in order to starker his portrayal of Mahomet's tyranny. By making the birth of Islam the birth of despotism, both authors are deliberately making Islam inseparable from despotism: they are conjoined twins.

*Mahomet* opens with the Priam-like leader of the Meccan senate, Alcanor, raging against the imminent invasion of the city by Mahomet's armies. From the outset, the despotism of Islam is figured in terms of its elision of the rights of the individual: Alcanor curses his fellow senators as "those Vipers,/Who, singled out by a Community/To guard their Rights, Shall... sell 'em to the Foe!"<sup>29</sup> Rather than the shrill, solipsistic rhetoric of the Mullah that we shall see in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, however, this Islam is characterised by its horrifyingly adept command of language. When Mirvan, Mahomet's general, takes the stage in the opening scene to parley with Alcanor, far from appearing the murderous traitor that Alcanor has lead us to expect, he seems almost more reasonable than the distraught old man. His rhetoric, when he speaks of Mahomet, is that of republicanism, of meritocracy –

*Mahomet's Grandeur's in himself; he shines not*

With borrow'd Lustre...

Born of himself, Himself's the only Fountain

Of all the flowing Honours that adorn him.<sup>30</sup>

The auditor is left momentarily disorientated, even partially seduced by the notion of

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<sup>29</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet*, 9.

the self-made-man (beneath which is encrypted the fact of his false credentials as the hand of providence), but after this moment of seduction, Mirvan's mask slips:

“[e]mbrace our Faith then,” he exhorts Alcanor, “reign with *Mahomet*,/And, cloath'd in Terrors, make the Vulgar tremble”.<sup>31</sup>

This is the same terror of the reason-suppressing seductiveness of absolutist rhetorics that haunts the pages of *The Satanic Verses* as the people of Jahilia have their individuality stripped away from them by Mahound's despotic legislative master-narrative of “rules, rules, rules... no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free”, and as the Khomeini-Imam and Ayesha-the-prophetess swallow their followers.<sup>32</sup>

This is the aspect of the depiction of Islam in *The Satanic Verses* that, alongside Rushdie's account of the Submission of Jahilia, places Islamic despotism beyond the analogy of any of the other avatars of despotism in the text: whilst what is represented as the white-supremacist rhetoric of Thatcherism has the power to transform immigrants into animals, it is only the master-narrative of Islam that has the power to unmake people. As the multitudes are lost inside the dark maws of Ayesha and the Imam, Gibreel is torn apart by the despotic monoglossia of Islam: his last, fragmented utterances before he kills himself, his narrative stripped away from him, are searing images of Islamic violence.

always vengeance      why

I can't be sure      something like this      for the crime of being  
human

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<sup>31</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 363.

especially female but not exclusively people must pay.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the final act of *Mahomet* sees the Prophet triumphing over both the destruction of Zaphna, the hero, and of the agency of the people of Mecca:

Go then, and thank your Pontiff and your Prince

For each Day's Sun he grants you to behold.

Hence, to your temples and appease my Rage.<sup>34</sup>

In both texts, we see the death of the individual at the hands of the despotism of the master-narrative, and in both texts this is intended as a parable for the destructive inhumanity of organised religion – although the ultimate face of this inhumanity is, for Voltaire, the Catholic Church. Ironically, both texts have deliberately deformed the history and teachings of Islam in order to promulgate a discourse of reason over the deforming effects of religious faith. And yet, whilst both Voltaire and Rushdie manipulate and vilify Islam in order to further their wider aims, their very use of Islam to talk about Western – or global human – frailties positions them at least partially outside of the binary structures of East-West Othering that hardened towards the end of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>33</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 544 (spacing an approximation of Rushdie's own).

<sup>34</sup> Voltaire, *Mahomet*, 68.

## Chapter 4

# Thinking with Islam

*From the end of the seventeenth century and all through the eighteenth, a spectre was haunting Europe: the spectre of despotism... Whether they were nostalgic for the past or were builders of the future, all of them saw the Absolute One as the instrument of an always deadly uniformity.*<sup>1</sup>

When Shabbir Akhtar, in his anti- *Satanic Verses* polemic *Be Careful with Muhammad!* wrote “[a] man who brought a book that directly inspired a major world civilisation is here portrayed as an insincere impostor with purely political ambitions”, he could have been describing any number of works on Islam from the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> “Muhammad” in *The Satanic Verses*, he says, “is an unscrupulous politician – ‘a smart bastard’ in Rushdie’s phrase – whose enemies, particularly ideological ones, are victims of a ruthless anger discrepant with his official professions of mercy”.<sup>3</sup> As he points out, much of this catalogue is consonant with what he terms “the unoriginal biases of traditional Christian polemic”, and yet the representation of Islam as despotic, hypocritical and misogynist has often functioned, as we have seen, as a means of interrogating flaws in European societies.<sup>4</sup> Turn back to the eighteenth-century beginnings of the well-worn dichotomy of Oriental despotism and Western liberty, and it becomes apparent that beside and behind the destructive, simplistic Othering-process that many have identified lies an axis of rhetorical likening. The Islamic East was, for Montesquieu, Voltaire, and many other eighteenth-century thinkers, a place in which to explore anxieties about Europe, and tales of the despotism of Islam and Islamic rulers a

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<sup>1</sup> Grosrichard, *Sultan’s Court*, 3. “Thinking with Islam” adapted from Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur’an*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad!* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Akhtar, *Muhammad*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Akhtar, *Muhammad*, 27.



means of critiquing the arbitrary power of Church and crown at home. Alongside this runs a strong stream of British Protestant thought that celebrates Muhammad as a wise legislator, the phenomenon of “Islamic Republicanism” that I am unable to explore within the scope of this study, but is brilliantly argued for in Garcia’s recent study *Islam and the English Enlightenment: 1670-1840*. The crucial point for Garcia and others is that the representation of Islam – *Islams*, whether representative of despotism or republicanism – had a dialectical function in the eighteenth century. The Islamic East, whether eroticised, demonised, idolised, or narrativised, was first and foremost a locale in and with which to think.

Writing, with Garcia, against “the imaginary opposition between Islam and Enlightenment”, here I open out from English engagements with Islam to reconsider those of Rushdie’s Enlightenment: the Enlightenment of the French philosophes.<sup>5</sup> As Montesquieu charts Europe and its frailties through “Islamic” eyes in *Persian Letters*, as we saw Voltaire map the rise of Christian fanaticism onto the cityscape of early Islamic Mecca, we see the landscapes (both physical and cultural) of Europe and the Islamic East overlap, producing a cultural in-between space in which these authors explore cultural Likeness whilst participating in discourses of cultural Otherness. And it is this same uneasy double-vision that is central to Rushdie’s mobilisation of Islamic despotism in *The Satanic Verses*.

### *Reading and Writing Despotism*

The discursive figure of oriental despotism has long functioned as

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<sup>5</sup> Garcia, *Islam*, 223.

“something good to think with”.<sup>6</sup> Long before Montesquieu codified despotism in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) as one of the “three species of government: republican, monarchical, and despotic”, ideas of despotism – most frequently Eastern despotism – had been used by political theorists, theologians and propagandists to illustrate an extraordinarily diverse range of social, religious, cultural and political standpoints.<sup>7</sup> The historiography of despotism has often concentrated on the notion of an eighteenth-century “insight that Western Europe was not only geographically but also politically and culturally different from the Orient, and that the political liberty and restraints on the exercise of power in the West starkly contrasted with the restrictions on personal and political liberty in the Orient”.<sup>8</sup> This rhetoric of difference is certainly a common feature of European writing on the East, from the pre-modern period to the present. As Makdisi and Nussbaum write,

For all the variety... what mattered to the development of Orientalism was not, for example, whether there was one orient or many, or even whether the otherness of the Oriental was celebrated and valourized... or scornfully condemned... What mattered, rather, was the sense of otherness itself, and the creation and maintenance of a sense of radical difference between West and East(s): a project that was initiated in its modern form in the eighteenth century and that continues to this very day in the resurgent Orientalism that has had such influence on United States foreign and military policy after the events of 11 September 2001.<sup>9</sup>

Beside and bound-up-with this axis of Othering that Makdisi and Nussbaum identify

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<sup>6</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “animals are good to think [with]” from Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 89.

<sup>7</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York: The Colonial Press, 1900), Vol. 1, Book 2, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Makdisi and Nussbaum, *The Arabian Nights*, 6.

at the heart of Orientalism, however, there is a discursive mechanism that we could term likening, that operates in European writing on the Islamic East during the long eighteenth century.

Beyond the recent flowering of scholarship on the global eighteenth century from scholars such as Aravamudan, Ballaster, Elmarsafy, Garcia, Makdisi, Nussbaum, and many others, much important work is being carried out that is eliding the old crusader/Saracen, “embattled believers facing barbarian hordes” conception of the binary history of East-West relations in the pre- and early-modern period.<sup>10</sup> As studies such as Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton’s *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* show, “the boundaries between... East and West were thoroughly permeable in the Renaissance, and... even in situations of conflict, mutual recognition of icons and images could be used adversarially with creative verve”.<sup>11</sup> As reciprocal knowledge between the Ottoman empire and the countries of Western Europe grew over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through a combination of trade, conflict, captivity, diplomacy, travel and increased linguistic, theological, cultural and historical research, the figures of the Turk, Islam, Muhammad and the Qur’an became increasingly common referents, mobilised by both sides of schisms in the Church and the state. Both Cavaliers and Roundheads likened one another to Muslims and Turks during the Civil War, and the same technique, as Michael Curtis notes, was in currency amongst “intense theological disputes on the origin and nature of Christianity. During the Christian religious ferment in Europe at that time, Catholics and Lutherians accused one another’s religion of possessing Islamic characteristics and its adherents of being Turkish

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<sup>10</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 120.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 8.

infidels”.<sup>12</sup>

As the century wore on, critics of Louis XIV were increasingly arguing “that he was introducing an alien, arbitrary, Turkish form of government by humbling the nobility, reducing the authority of corporate bodies, and undermining provincial autonomy,, whilst “apologists for the Sun King, notably Bishop Bossuet, were at pains to show that absolute government should not be confounded with arbitrary government, or in other words that assertions of royal power in France were not tantamount to the establishment of oriental despotism”.<sup>13</sup>

As the figure of the “Turk” became more and more an established (if ventriloquised) interlocutor in religious and political debates in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, scholarship on the subjects of Islam, Muhammad and the Qur’an proliferated. Whilst some of it remained vehemently hostile to Islam – Humphrey Prideaux’s influential *True Nature of Imposture Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* (1697), for example – an increasing number of thinkers, like Henry Stubbe and Pierre Bayle, came to view Islam in a more positive light. As Elmarsafy writes of Adrian Reland’s *De religione Mohammedica* (1705):

Reland compares the false claims thrown at Islam with those that the various Christian sects use against each other, thereby demonstrating his lucidity as to where the real gist of the quarrel about Islam lay in the early eighteenth century. Catholics and Protestants, says Reland, accuse each other of resembling Muslims, but whether these polemics bring either side to a clearer comprehension of Islam is very much in doubt.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A poem in a 1647 Cavalier pamphlet, for example, opens with the lines “Come Mahomet, thy Turn is next;/ New Gospel's out of date,/ The Alcoran may prove good Text/ In our new Turkish State.” *Mercurius Pragmaticus* (London: 1647); Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> David Young, “Montesquieu's View of Despotism and His Use of Travel Literature”, *The Review of Politics* 40, No. 3 (July, 1978): 392-409, 403.

<sup>14</sup> Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: the Politics of Translation and the Construction of*

The pursuit of a clearer comprehension of Islam both led to and was enabled by more faithful translations of the Qur'an, like that of George Sale (1734), and yet the old myths of the essentially violent nature of the Islamic faith and Muhammad's impostorism – that his revelatory trances were in fact epileptic fits, that he had conned Meccans into believing that a pigeon collecting dried peas from his ear was in fact the angel Gabriel reciting the Qur'an – continued to be widely circulated. This is partly as a result of the fear and hatred of Islam which prevailed amongst many Western Europeans until late in the century, partly because they were entertaining stories, and partly because, quite simply, they were useful. By the early eighteenth century, Islam was an essential part of the vocabulary that Europe used to talk and think about itself and, as I shall illustrate, thinkers such as Montesquieu and Voltaire were quite prepared to make generalisations and mobilise myths about Islam that they knew were untrue in order to propound their ideas.

### *The Self through Other Eyes*

The immediate success of Montesquieu's hugely popular and influential *Persian Letters* springs not only from the interlocking early eighteenth-century desires for knowledge of the East and for oriental exotica, but from a new-found desire to view European metropolitan society through the eyes of an uninitiated Other. As Andrew Kahn notes in his introduction to *Persian Letters*, the arrival of four Iroquois chiefs in London in 1710 prompted Addison to write an account of the capital and its society through their eyes in the *Spectator*.<sup>15</sup> The ethnographical speculations of the chiefs on British society and religion, whilst titillatingly primitive

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*Islam*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Khan, "Introduction", *Persian Letters*, xxii; Addison, *Spectator* 50, 27 April, 1711, in *The Spectator*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1926), Vol. 1, 184-187.

in their referents (“Instead of those beautiful Feathers with which we adorn our Heads, they often buy up a monstrous Bush of Hair, which covers their Heads, and falls down in a large Fleece below the Middle of their Backs”), are satirically critical of British irreligiousness.

And indeed, there are several Reasons which make us think, that the Natives of this Country had formerly among them some sort of Worship; for they set apart every seventh Day as sacred: But upon my going into one of these holy Houses on that Day, I could not observe any Circumstance of Devotion in their Behaviour; There was indeed a Man in Black who was mounted above the rest, and seemed to utter something with a great deal of Vehemence; but as for those underneath him, instead of paying their Worship to the Deity of the Place, they were most of them bowing and curtsying to one another, and a considerable Number of them fast asleep.<sup>16</sup>

The early eighteenth-century reader’s appetite to have his/her world opened and described by a foreign voice, in the same way that travellers like Jean Chardin (*Journeys in Persia*, 1711) and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (*The Six Journeys of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier... in Turkey, in Persia and in the Indies*, 1719) were describing the East, is notable for the interest it implies in reciprocal cultural analysis between Europe and Other civilisations.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the fundamentally playful nature of Addison’s text should not be overlooked, the notion of the foreign eye as a lens through which to identify the frailties of European society was a powerful one during this period, and I would argue it partially derives from the awareness of the Islamic –

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<sup>16</sup> Addison, *The Spectator*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> This interest prevails through much of the century, as exemplified by Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World, or Letters from a Chinese Philosopher* (London: T. Vernor et al., 1792), first published in the 1760s.

specifically the Ottoman – eye that was trained on Europe. There was a huge demand for captivity narratives, the first-person accounts of Europeans captured by Ottoman ships, at this time.<sup>18</sup> Joseph Pitts’s *Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans*, published in 1704, had to be re-issued in 1731 because “pirated editions had appeared as a result of the ‘great’ demand for his captivity account”.<sup>19</sup> In it, amongst the traditional short-hand vilifications of Islam, are many home truths about European culture reported coming from Muslim lips: “I have heard them oftentimes condemn the Christians for the little regard they have to their books: ‘For,’ say they, ‘you’ll use the paper of them to burn, or light your pipes, or to put to the vilest uses [lavatory paper]”.<sup>20</sup> Pitts himself compares European religious practice unfavourably with that of the Ottomans, lamenting “I wish to God that Christians were as diligent in studying the holy scriptures, the Law and the Gospel, wherein we have eternal life, as those infidels are in poring upon that legend of falsities”.<sup>21</sup> Apart from the excitement and the frisson of horror such narratives provoked, the notion that superior religious piety (however skewed by “falsities”), and a greater love of learning could be found in a Muslim society than in Britain added to the sense of the decentring of Europe and Christendom as (by default) the global locus of virtue that the work of scholars like Stubbe and Bayle had begun, and further opened Europe’s way to a more complex pattern of inter-cultural analysis.

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<sup>18</sup> In *Captives, Empire and the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), Linda Colley estimates that as many as twenty thousand Britons had been taken captive by Ottoman corsairs by the 1730s, though some doubt has been cast on the accuracy of her figures: see Richard Drayton, “Putting the British into the Empire”, *The Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (January, 2005): 187-193.

<sup>19</sup> Nabil Matar, “Introduction: England and Mediterranean Captivity, 1577-1704” in *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captive Narratives from Early Modern England*, ed. Daniel J. Vitkus and Nabil I. Matar (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1-54, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Pitts, *Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans*, in Vitkus and Matar, *Piracy*, 220-340, 244.

<sup>21</sup> Pitts, *Religion*, 244.

### *Montesquieu and the Rise of Despotism*

“The noun *despotism*,” as Grosrichard points out, “entered the [French] language fairly late. The first dictionary to refer to it is Trévoux’s, in 1721. The dictionary of the Académie Française included it in its 1740 edition, defining it as ‘absolute authority, absolute power’”.<sup>22</sup> Alongside the accounts of travellers like Chardin and Tavernier and the literary productions of Marana and Galland, French theorisations of Eastern realities also crossed the Channel to take root in the British imagination – and none more firmly than the idea of oriental despotism. Although it was Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws* that “gave the term its theoretical accreditation as the name for a form of government, illustrating the concept with the governments of Asia”, in 1748, notions of despotic Eastern rule had been circulating through France and Britain for much of the previous century.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, accusations of “Islamicness” were being thrown around, not just between warring factions of Christianity, but at rulers and would-be rulers like Louis XIV and Cromwell. The conception of despotism as a specifically Eastern form of tyranny truly coalesced at the turn of the century, partly via Galland in the form of Shahriyar from the *Nights* (as we saw in the previous chapter), and partly due to the accounts of travellers such as Chardin, Tournefort and Rycout.<sup>24</sup> By the time Montesquieu writes that “[t]he king of France... has frequently been heard to remark that of all the governments in the world, that of the Turks, or that of our august sultan, would suit him best, so high is his opinion of the oriental political system” in *Persian Letters*,

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<sup>22</sup> Grosrichard, *Sultan’s Court*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Asli Çirakman’s study of the idea of despotism in Europe in the pre-modern period examines the “orientalisation” of the term during the early eighteenth century. “From Tyranny to Despotism: The Enlightenment’s Unenlightened Image of the Turks”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, No. 1 (February, 2001): 49-68.

<sup>24</sup> It is significant that Karl A. Wittfogel, in *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), is still using the *Arabian Nights* as evidence of the existence of oriental despotism in pre-modern Islamic societies in the mid twentieth century. See 138.



there can have been no doubt in the mind of the reader that he was referring to a specifically *oriental* despotism.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant to note that, consonant with the previous century's tendency to talk about itself in terms of the East, barely had the idea of oriental despotism crystallised before it was applied to Europe. Through the eyes of the Persian travellers Usbek and Rica, Europe is both strange and familiar. Just as narratives of Britons kept captive by the Ottomans, like that of Joseph Pitts, call mosques "churches" and imams "priests" ("I knew not well otherwise how to express myself so as to be understood"), the Persians call monks and priests "dervishes".<sup>26</sup> This exchanging of names is similar to a process Homi Bhabha describes when writing on the "misnaming" of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*, "Mohamed referred to as Mahound; the prostitutes named after the wives of the Prophet":

It is the *formal* complaint of the fundamentalists that the transposition of these names into profane spaces – brothels or magical realist novels – is not simply sacrilegious, but destructive of the very cement of community. To violate the system of naming is to make contingent and indeterminate what Alisdair Macintyre, in his essay on "Tradition and translation", has described as "naming *for*: the institutions of naming as the expression and embodiment of the shared standpoint of the community, its traditions of belief and enquiry".<sup>27</sup>

The contingency and indeterminacy of religious naming in *Persian Letters* deliberately manoeuvres "shared standpoints" of European and Persian communities

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<sup>25</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Pitts, *Religion*, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 321-322; citing Alasdair Macintyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 378.

into the same space: priest and imam overlap, either jarring the reader with the sense of their difference or surprising her/him with their likeness. Where Rushdie's misnaming often functions to ally different forms of despotism, Montesquieu's is a more sophisticated version of the opprobrious rhetorical likening that characterised the seventeenth-century use of Islam and despotism to vilify opponents – "Cromwell/Charles I is like Muhammad," "Louis XIV is a despot," "the Catholic/Protestant Church is like Islam" – and yet this time the critique works in both directions; questions are asked about ecclesiastics of both faiths. At one point a "dervish" (monk) shows a surprised Rica a wall of "commentaries on the scriptures" in a library by authors who approached them as "a work that could provide authority for their own ideas; that is why they have corrupted every meaning and twisted every phrase; it's a place which men of every sect swoop down upon and plunder".<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, Usbek tells a "dervish" "[i]f the Great Sophy had a man like you in his court, who behaved towards him as you do towards your God, who differentiated among his commands, and instructed his subjects in which circumstances they must obey them and in which other circumstances they may violate them, he'd have him impaled on the spot".<sup>29</sup> Thus the self-serving hypocrisy of the Church is laid bare through the (imagined) Islamic lens, leading Usbek to observe that "for Christians there exists a great distance from profession to belief, from belief to conviction, from conviction to practice".<sup>30</sup>

Christianity and Islam are represented as having different frailties. At one point Usbek writes to a mullah to ask "[w]hy is it that our Legislator forbids us the flesh of the pig... and commands us to wash our body constantly in order to purify our soul?" reasoning that

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<sup>28</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 75-76.

<sup>30</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 102.

Mud looks dirty to us, because it offends our sight, or another of our senses; but in itself it is no dirtier than are gold and diamonds...

Therefore the senses, divine Mullah, must be the sole judges of the purity or impurity of things; but, since objects do not affect all men in the same way... it follows that the evidence of the senses cannot serve us as the rule; at least, unless it is said that each of us may decide this matter, and distinguish, as far as he personally is concerned, what is pure from what is impure.

But would not that very statement, Oh holy mullah, overturn the distinctions established by our divine Prophet, and the basic tenets of the law inscribed by the hand of the angels?<sup>31</sup>

Rather than with any nuanced theological response to his question, however, he is greeted only with thunderous and rather solipsistic assertions of his ignorance: “your understanding is like the shadowy darkness of the abyss”, “when you do not grasp why certain things are unclean, that is because there are many other things that you do not know”, and a faux-Qur’anic tale about the pig being born from the “vast quantity of excrement” that the elephant produced on the Ark.<sup>32</sup>

As Christianity is portrayed as riven with conflict, doubt and hypocrisy, Islam is characterised as inflexible, absolutist and anti-reason: the reader is left between two religious cultures which seem equally futile. David Young’s assertion about *The Spirit of Laws* holds equally true for *Persian Letters*: “Montesquieu was a deist in his personal beliefs, and his attacks on the social consequences of Mohammedanism, or what he took to be such, often served as a convenient method for condemning the

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<sup>31</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 25.

social implications of Christianity”.<sup>33</sup> Cloaked in the frivolity of (oriental) fiction, in *Persian Letters* Montesquieu is able to attack the foundations of both Christianity and Islam in almost equal measure. This is an important “almost”, however – though both religions are portrayed as fundamentally absurd, their frailties are of very different natures. Where Christianity’s frailty is that it has become “less a subject of sanctification than a subject of disputation in which anybody may participate”, Islam, whether through (one-sided) philosophical exchanges between Usbek and the Mullah like the one quoted above, or through the insidious irony of repeated exclamations such as “[b]lessed ignorance of the children of Muhammad! Gracious simplicity so beloved by our holy Prophet, you remind me always of the innocence of ancient times”, is characterised as backward, fossilised and – crucially – anti-disputatious.<sup>34</sup> In other words, while Christianity suffers from a surfeit of intellectual inquiry and debate, Islam suffers from the lack of it. To put it bluntly, the seeds of the monoglossic Islam versus heteroglossic West that Rushdie writes in *The Satanic Verses* have been sown: the partitioning of the globe into the hemispheres of Gup (“gossip” or “nonsense”) and Chup (“quiet”) that we will observe in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in the next chapter, is the reformulation of a three-hundred-year-old discourse.

It is important to note, parallel to my discussion of harem politics in *Persian Letters* in the previous chapter, that over the course of his stay in Paris, Usbek’s missives to the seraglio become progressively more despotic as order breaks down in his absence and the women and their warders struggle for power. In an almost schizophrenic break from the subtle, philosophe-like tone of his letters on the vagaries of cultural relativism and universalism (my terms, not Montesquieu’s), even

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<sup>33</sup> Young, “Montesquieu’s View”, 403.

<sup>34</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 102, 103, 141.

his language is transformed into the cliché of the oriental tale: “May this letter fall upon you like a thunderbolt that strikes amid lightning and tempestuous rain!”<sup>35</sup> It is significant that, in his despotic rage, his language recalls that of the Mullah’s response to his philosophical questioning of the Qur’an at the beginning of the text: “[y]our empty philosophy is the lightning that heralds a storm and darkness; you live in the heart of the tempest, and drift at the will of the winds”.<sup>36</sup> Far from his musings on common, super-cultural humanity (“Everybody knows, and everybody feels, that man, in common with every creature that strives to survive...” etc.), Usbek becomes the incarnation of the Other, the personification of the rhetorics of difference (“liberty is made for the spirit of the peoples of Europe, and servitude for that of the peoples of Asia”) which, though proleptic presences in this text, come to the fore in *The Spirit of Laws*<sup>37</sup>. As he writes “[w]ith this letter I grant you unlimited power over the entire seraglio; command there with all the authority that I myself would wield; may fear, may terror be your companions; hasten from room to room bearing punishment and retribution”, he assumes the mantle of the enduring figure of oriental despot that Montesquieu will codify some twenty years later, and will come to haunt the pages of Western writings about the Islamic East for over two hundred years.<sup>38</sup>

### The Spirit of Laws *and the Spirit of Injustice: the Mobile Locus of Despotism*

Aside from the rendering of the harem correspondence, *Persian Letters* is remarkable for its reliance on travellers’ accounts of the East, rather than on the

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<sup>35</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 199, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Montesquieu, *Letters*, 205-206.

many generalised myths about the Islamic world that were in circulation. The writings of Chardin, Rycaut and Tournefort were the most authoritative sources on Eastern societies available to Montesquieu, and much of the material on Eastern governments in *The Spirit of Laws* was also taken from their works. Although there is much less fluidity in his representations of Eastern and European cultures in this later work, governments and cultural norms being anchored to some extent by climate, much of his discourse on despotic governments is still a ciphered response to fears of arbitrary rule in Europe, and much of his anti-Islamic rhetoric is a coded attack on the Catholic church.<sup>39</sup> What is, perhaps, surprising in such a comprehensive and serious dissertation on governance is the extent to which Montesquieu distorts the evidence gleaned from his sources in order to further his theories. As Young points out in the conclusion to his minutely detailed study of Montesquieu's construction of oriental despotism and the travellers' accounts that were his primary archive, "Montesquieu... misread his sources, or rather he read them selectively. Though he could find evidence to support his view of despotism, one is inclined to suspect that he read the travelers with that view at least partially formed".<sup>40</sup>

*The Spirit of Laws*, though it specifically names nations without Muslim majorities like China and Japan as despotic, repeatedly figures Islam as the crutch of despotism. If the essence of despotism is fear, then Islam is the codification of fear: in despotic states "religion has more influence than anywhere else; it is fear added to fear. In Mahomedan countries, it is partly from their religion that the people derive

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<sup>39</sup> For accounts of the effect of climate on culture see, for example, Montesquieu, *Spirit*, Book 5, Chapter 15 and Book XIV; "Montesquieu's purpose in describing despotism was, of course, at least partly polemical; he meant to criticize French statesmen and their policies quite as much as to describe Asiatic states. He was using a traditional form of argument to condemn the absolutism of Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV; he was trying to show to what a dreadful state of affairs unlimited royal power could lead." Young, "Montesquieu's View", 404-405.

<sup>40</sup>Young, "Montesquieu's View", 403.

the surprising veneration that they have for their prince”.<sup>41</sup> If the propensity of peoples of despotic governments for complete submission to arbitrary power is engendered by the climate, it is compounded by Islam. With this fusion of Chardin’s notion that “[t]he climate of each people is always, I believe, the chief cause of men’s customs and inclinations”, with Ricaut’s assertion that “[t]he Turks teach the obedience which they owe their emperor more as a principle of religion than of state”, Montesquieu forged an enduring interdependence between the ideas of despotism, Islam and heat that would become almost a given in much later writing on the East.<sup>42</sup> Alexander Dow, for example, would write in his *History of Hindustan* in 1770 that “the seeds of despotism resulting from the Indian climate and soil” had reached “perfect growth by the Muhammadan religion”.<sup>43</sup> If Islam and despotism were a partnership of oppression, however, Montesquieu holds Islam to be the only thing that can moderate the despot’s arbitrary power: “it is religion that amends in some measures the Turkish constitution”.<sup>44</sup> This is an acknowledgement of the assertions that Ricaut, Chardin and Tournefort all made on the subject, “that Mohammedan divines taught that God’s law was above the decrees of the ruler”, and yet, as Voltaire was quick to point out, it is a deliberate elision of the fact that civil and religious laws overlapped in Muslim countries.<sup>45</sup> As Young illustrates, the travellers are “at one in affirming that the Koran, interpretations of its teachings, and precedents of earlier cases decided on such principles were the guides to the ‘men of law,’ the judges of Turkey and Persia” and, as such, “[t]o say that religion limits

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<sup>41</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> John Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673-1677* (London, Argonaut Press, 1927) Vol. 2, 40, 275-276; Paul Ricaut, *Histoire de l’État present de l’Empire ottoman* trans. M. Briot (Amsterdam, 1670), 24, both cited in Young, “Montesquieu’s View”, 399-400.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindustan* (New Delhi: Today & Tomorrow, 1973), Vol. 3, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Young, “Montesquieu’s View”, 399; Voltaire, “A, B, C” in Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 503-504.

capricious power, but that law does not, would be meaningless in a Turkish or Persian context”.<sup>46</sup>

Although Montesquieu’s manipulation of the “facts” of Eastern governance as recorded by the travellers was noted in certain quarters, the agenda which he had whittled them to fit transpired to be convenient for a wide range of different thinkers and institutions, not least to the East India Company. Writers like Dow used Montesquieu’s assertions as mental and governmental templates with which to process the East in general and Mughal India in particular. This did not go unnoticed at the time – Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in France, and his correspondent, Charles William Boughton Rous in Britain, both produced tracts that not only indicted Montesquieu for generalisation and falsification of information but, strikingly, argued that oriental despotism was a fiction devised by Europe to justify the conquest of Asia and that if despotism was endemic to any countries of the world they were Britain and France.<sup>47</sup>

This constitutes another change of direction for the extraordinarily mobile discourse of oriental despotism over the course of the century: from the complex manoeuvres of Montesquieu’s subtle encryption of Western despotism as Eastern, to the crystallisation of despotism as something intrinsically oriental, to the characterisation of Western proto-colonial practice as orientally despotic. The conceit of oriental despotism has been inverted and applied to its creators. Whilst Anquetil-Duperron and Boughton Rous’s dissent is powerful, however, we can read in its very fervour the strength of the discourse to which it was opposed. This notwithstanding, oriental despotism did remain a relatively mobile rhetorical weapon during the 1780s and early 1790s: Daniel O’Quinn, for example, offers a nuanced

<sup>46</sup> Young, “Montesquieu’s View” 401.

<sup>47</sup> See Franco Venturi, “Oriental Despotism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24, no. 1 (1963): 133-142, 137.



reading of the mobilisation of Montesquieu's theorisations "by all sides in the debate over the East India Bill", an attempt to regulate the East India Company.<sup>48</sup> Parallel to the growth of the discourses of feminist orientalism that we saw in the last chapter, however, a steady process of ossification was enacted on the idea of oriental despotism towards the end of the century; as Ballaster has it, "Enlightenment preoccupations with analogy, shared history, and sameness of self and culture, give way to an increasingly racialised sense of difference".<sup>49</sup>

Though much of the rhetoric of the Rushdie affair is the product of this "racialised sense of difference", the text at the centre of it, as we have seen, mobilises despotism in a far more complex way. Whilst *The Satanic Verses* engendered the replication of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discourses of oriental despotism and Islamophobia in the Western press, its multi-layered configurations of Islam as despotism itself, metonym for the despotism of religion in general, and metaphor for despotism at large, recall the deist, anti-establishment writings of Montesquieu and Voltaire earlier in the century.

### *Despotic Description*

The vision of hybridity as mongrelization that Rushdie offers us in "In Good Faith" is, as we have seen, self-confessedly celebratory. It is, he tells us, "*how newness enters the world*". It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it".<sup>50</sup> The key term here, however, is "possibility". Healthy, mongrelized cultural spaces are fragile entities in Rushdie's pre-fatwa novels, either shown in retrospect, tinged with the sadness of nostalgia – as with the Bombay of

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel O'Quinn, *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 131.

<sup>49</sup> Ballaster, *Fables*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, "Faith", *Homelands*, 394.

Saleem's childhood and the glory days of the supernatural conference of the 1001 children of *Midnight* – or as vulnerable, fledgling futures: the extra-textual whisper of Salahuddin's new life on the final page of *The Satanic Verses*. Positive mongrelization can take place only in the spaces where the permeable borders of cultural, national and religious zones overlap. As soon as any of these zones attempt to make rigid their boundaries, to demand exclusive allegiance from their adherents and assert their singularity (to despotically enforce their mastery, we might say), mongrelization becomes a process of monstrous mutation. In *Midnight's Children*, artificial dividing-lines snake across the country: first the arbitrary state borders drawn by the British, and later the “walls of words” Nehru's government builds as it compartmentalises the nation by language.<sup>51</sup> Most monstrous of these lines is the fatal pen-stroke of Partition, drawn as communalist hatred flares and deforms the many gods of Hinduism into the many-headed demon Ravana, “a fanatical anti-Muslim movement” that extorts money from Muslim businessmen “who were offered the choice between paying a single, once-only cash sum and having their world burned down”.<sup>52</sup> The communalist hatred continues into *The Satanic Verses*, when the pilgrimage of village-girl-turned-prophetess Ayesha is interrupted by “certain religious extremist groupings” who issue statements denouncing the *haj* as “an attempt to ‘hijack’ public attention and to ‘incite communal sentiment’” and distributing leaflets “in which it was claimed that ‘Padyatra, or foot-pilgrimage, is an ancient, pre-Islamic tradition of national culture, not imported property of Mughal immigrants... Purloining of this tradition by so-called Ayesha Bibiji is flagrant and deliberate inflammation of already sensitive situation’”.<sup>53</sup> The absurd rhetorical Othering of the Muslims through this wholesale elision of centuries of Muslim

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 189.

<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 72.

<sup>53</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 488.

habitation and culture in India in order to exclude them from national culture, to render them cultural intruders, and their “tradition-purloining” activities perversions of “pure” Hindu culture, is typical of the grotesquely distorting effect that the despotic language of cultural purity has in Rushdie’s textual worlds.

In *The Satanic Verses*, however, this incident is almost lost amongst the lurid emblems of mongrelization-turned-monsterization. The pages of the novel swarm with monsters: “gigantic flowers with human breasts”, “winged bulls”, a tiger-headed man, a half-woman-half-water-buffalo, a skeleton-woman and, of course, Satan-Shaitan himself, the goat-man.<sup>54</sup> Hybrid creatures, they are the representatives of impurity, intermingling, change-by-conjoining, broken and deformed on the rack of despotic cultures of absolutism. The novel is a kind of polyphonic *bildungsroman*, a chorus of overlapping, interlocking struggles to attain self-hood, spiralling out from the struggles of the two protagonists, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, to find themselves, to establish their individuality, in the face of dehumanising tyranny.

“When we are born we are not automatically human beings,” Rushdie explained in an interview of 1989, “[w]e have to learn how to be human. Some of us get there and some of us don’t”.<sup>55</sup> As ever in Rushdie’s oeuvre, the quests for selfhood – the search for humanity – that the two protagonists of *The Satanic Verses* undergo are symbolic of the struggles of wider communities, migrants, Muslims, to find themselves in a postcolonial world. In “In Good Faith,” he tells us

*The Satanic Verses* is the story of two painfully divided selves. In the case of one, Saladin Chamcha, the division is secular and societal: he is torn, to put it plainly, between Bombay and London, between East and

<sup>54</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 6, 117, 167, 168, 255.

<sup>55</sup> Ameena Meer, “Salman Rushdie”, *BOMB Magazine* 27 (Spring 1989), accessed March 14, 2012, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1199/salman-rushdie> .

West. For the other, Gibreel Farishta, the division is spiritual, a rift in the soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so. The novel is “about” their quest for wholeness.<sup>56</sup>

This, as a Rushdie narrator might say, *is so and is not so*. What he writes of Saladin is true up to a point, and yet as the battle between East and West rages within him, it is sublimated and subsumed by the battle of immigrant communities in London against what is represented as the racist despotism of Thatcherite Britain. Saladin, at the opening of the novel, appears (or aspires) to be a stark throwback to Macaulay’s imperial vision of a class of interpreters, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” or, as Zeeny puts it, “[a] deserter is what, more English than, your English accent wrapped around you like a flag”.<sup>57</sup> On his return to Bombay, the carefully crafted shell of his British identity begins to fall apart, and he is plunged into uncertainty about his cultural identity. On his return journey to London, his plane is hijacked by Sikh terrorists and blown up over the Channel, and as he and his fellow traveller Gibreel fall from the sky towards British soil they undergo a miraculous transformation: Gibreel metamorphosises into his namesake, the archangel, and Saladin into his infernal counterpart. He is arrested by immigration officials who, assuming from his bestial appearance that he is an illegal immigrant, beat him up, sexually abuse him and force him to eat his own faeces. Repelled by his Otherness, they refuse to allow the possibility that he could be “a British Citizen first class,” member of the same society as they: “Who’re you trying to kid? ...Look at yourself. You’re a fucking Packy billy. Sally-who? - What kind of

<sup>56</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 397.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education” in *Bureau of Education. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)* ed. H. Sharp (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1920): 107-117; Rushdie, *Verses*, 53.

name is that for an Englishman?” When Saladin responds by pointing out that the names of the officers, Bruno, Novak and Stein “don’t sound so Anglo Saxon to me,” he is met with a blank “I’m from Weybridge, you cunt. Get it straight: *Weybridge*, where the fucking *Beatles* used to live”.<sup>58</sup> With the absurdity of the notion of national and/or cultural purity thus, once more, ironically laid bare, Saladin is knocked unconscious and awakes in the Babel of an immigration-run hospital ward, surrounded by animal noises. It quickly becomes apparent that the ward contains the physical manifestations of all the racial anxieties of “purist” Britain: the animal babble of foreign languages, the hated smells of the immigrant, “jungle and farmyard odours mingled with a rich aroma similar to that of exotic spices sizzling in clarified butter – coriander, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamoms, cloves”. It is inhabited by hybrid mutants, the tiger-man, the buffalo-woman: immigrants who have been transformed, made monstrous, by the performative utterances of the racial slurs of the white British state.<sup>59</sup>

“But how do they do it?” Chamcha wanted to know.

“They describe us,” the other whispered solemnly. “That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.”<sup>60</sup>

This act of performative description has its discursive roots in a variety of sources, from Foucault’s theorisation of the sovereign gaze in *Discipline and Punish*, itself drawn from Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Bentham makes a cameo appearance towards the end of the novel, as the librettist for a musical based on Dickens’s *Our*

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<sup>58</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 163-164.

<sup>59</sup> My use of the idea of the “performative utterance” comes from J. L. Austin’s *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975): “to utter one of these sentences in appropriate circumstances is not just to ‘say’ something, but rather to perform a certain kind of action”, Austin, *Words*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 166.

*Mutual Friend*), from the idea of domination-through-description that permeates Said's *Orientalism*, and from ancient creation myths like Genesis (in the beginning was the word). "Animal," the immigration officers curse Saladin when they first meet him, "You're all the same. Can't expect animals to observe civilized standards".<sup>61</sup> It is the imperial axis of control-by-naming, redolent of ethnographical and cartographical categorisations: peoples and cultures catalogued, national borders drawn, cities named. In the crucible of British racism, Saladin Chamcha is transformed from human being, semblable, to animal Other by the mechanisms of despotic description.

Here, then, is one half of despotism's divided self in *The Satanic Verses*: the tyranny of Mrs Torture's government. What of its other Janus-face, the despotic power that grips Gibreel, the thing that reduces him in the end to insanity, murder and suicide? I would argue that Rushdie's post-fatwa assertions that Gibreel's story is about the crisis caused by his loss of faith, "his need to believe and his new inability to do so" are misleading.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, I would challenge Brennan's assertion that "*The Satanic Verses* is not (like the earlier novels) a rational critique of religious charlatanism by a Westernised Bombay Muslim".<sup>63</sup> Although Gibreel's loss of faith is arguably the pivotal point in his narrative, it is represented as more of an atheist awakening than a theist bereavement. When he loses his faith during a mysterious illness in which he begins "to haemorrhage all over his insides for no apparent reason," the moment of his loss reads like a kind of atheist Damascene moment:

During his illness he had spent every moment of consciousness calling upon God... Then it occurred to him that he was being punished, and for a time that made it possible to suffer the pain, but after a time he got

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<sup>61</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 159.

<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, "Faith", *Homelands*, 397.

<sup>63</sup> Brennan, *Salman Rushdie*, 151.

angry... The anger with God carried him through another day, but then it faded, and in its place there came a terrible emptiness, an isolation, as he realized he was talking to *thin air*, that there was nobody there at all, and then he felt more foolish than ever in his life, and he began to plead into the emptiness, ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be. But he felt nothing, nothing nothing, and then one day he found that he no longer needed there to be anything to feel. On that day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began.<sup>64</sup>

This anti-revelation, and the feast of pork – “the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig’s trotters of secularism” – with which he celebrates it recall Rushdie’s account of his own loss of faith:

God, Satan, Paradise and Hell all vanished one day in my fifteenth year, when I quite abruptly lost my faith... to prove my new-found atheism, I bought myself a rather tasteless ham sandwich, and so partook for the first time of the forbidden flesh of the swine. No thunderbolt arrived to strike me down. I remember feeling that my survival confirmed the correctness of my new position.<sup>65</sup>

“Don’t you get it?” Gibreel shouts, “spewing sausage fragments from the corners of his mouth. ‘No thunderbolt. That’s the point.’”<sup>66</sup>

With the recovery which his new-found godlessness seems to have prompted come dreams, visions in which “he was always present, not as himself but as his namesake... the bloody archangel, Gibreel himself, large as bloody life”.<sup>67</sup> These are the dreams of revelation, the passages at the heart of the controversy of the Rushdie

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<sup>64</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 29; Rushdie, “In God”, *Homelands*, 377.

<sup>66</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 83.

Affair, in which Gibreel finds himself caught by the will of the Prophet Mahound (who is also somehow himself), and ventriloquised into reciting words forced into his mouth: “my lips moving, being moved by. What, whom? Don’t know, can’t say. Nevertheless, here they are, coming out of my mouth, up the throat, past my teeth: the Words”.<sup>68</sup> Gibreel’s transformation is less easily decodable than Saladin’s: he goes from being a Bollywood film star, famed for his representations of a multiplicity of gods in the theological blockbusters of the day, whose “religious faith was a low-key thing, a part of him that required no more special attention than any other”, to an unbeliever, transported to London by his love for the glacial blonde mountaineer, Alleluia Cone.<sup>69</sup> The text offers us little in the way of explanations for the dreams and the Blakeian visions of London that ensue when they bleed into his waking life. They could be caused by schizophrenia, a punishment from God for his faithlessness (this is a possibility which, as we have seen, Rushdie is keen to stress in his post-fatwa essays), or Satanic deceptions. When he returns to Bombay at the end of the book, by now certainly driven insane by his visions, no matter what caused them, there is a suggestion that they might be sort of elliptical flash-backs (or flash-forwards) from his ill-fated pseudo-theological films. There can be little doubt that Rushdie intends the textual source of the dreams to remain in darkness: when Gibreel finally comes face-to-face with his maker (or perhaps the maker’s opposite number) in the novel, it is Rushdie himself, dandruff and all.<sup>70</sup> “Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* [above] and *Neechay* [below],” the apparition declares, “or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here”.<sup>71</sup> This metatextual play makes clear

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<sup>68</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 112.

<sup>69</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 318.

<sup>71</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 319.



that, beyond the oblique “in-text” possible explanations for the provenance of the dreams, the one ultimately responsible for them is the author: an author who has advertised many times which side of the union-by-hybridization/pure-stark-extreme binary he stands on. Gibreel’s tortured visions of the vibrant, hybrid city of Jahilia reduced to “unfreedom” by the “prophet-motivated” Mahound’s creed of Submission, are stark warnings from a secular, liberal author-deity.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 93.

### Part III

## *The Fatwa and the Philosophes*

*The affair erupted into a conflict between the European Enlightenment – reason, tolerance, dialogue, secularism – and radical Islam – theocratic, literalist and incompetent.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The lesson of Rushdie’s Fatwa Years,” *Financial Times*, September 14, 2012, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://blogs.ft.com/the-a-list/2012/09/14/#axzz2gVXNe8bf>.

## Chapter 5

# Scheherazade and the Sea of Stories

Over the course of the first two parts of this study we have seen Rushdie mobilise the discursive figures of the oppressed Muslim woman and the Islamic despot which coalesced towards the end of the eighteenth century. We have seen, in the two novels which preceded the fatwa, the half-thought, unarticulated echoes and resonances – the submerged *presence* – of the earlier eighteenth century and its use of the literary Islamic world as a means of exploring European oppression and the possibilities of increased European freedom. The third and final part of this study moves to examine the open evocation of the Enlightenment as the birthplace of the Western self, either as incarnation of freedom of expression or of tyrannical secularism, in the Rushdie Affair. Though eighteenth-century discourses – partly acknowledged, partly unseen – had marked his novels from the beginning of his career, amidst the furore of the fatwa Rushdie and his defenders triumphantly excavated an artefact they called “Enlightenment” (of doubtful eighteenth-century provenance) that would act as both shield and weapon in the battle of Secularism against the dark forces of Faith. To the defenders of Islam, this same artefact would become an emblem of the West’s tyranny – a talisman of the historical and cultural despotism of the Occident.

By 2005, when Rushdie writes the article from which this study takes its title, ideas about the Enlightenment roots of contemporary ideas about freedom of speech have been joined by an open assertion of the similar provenance of that most precious of Rushdiean ideals, the freedom of imagination. “Most of our contemporary ideas about freedom of speech and imagination come from the

Enlightenment,” he proclaims, “[w]e may have thought the battle won, but if we aren’t careful, it is about to be ‘un-won’”.<sup>2</sup> This problematic link between the West, Enlightenment, and the stuff of life – Scheherazadian imaginative narrative – has long been a vital, if under-critiqued, aspect of Rushdie’s worldview. Similarly, the rhetoric of a Manichean battle between secularism and religion (and all the familiar abstracts imbricated within them) stretches back to before the fatwa, at least as far as the declaration in *The Satanic Verses* that “[b]attle lines are being drawn up in India today... Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on”.<sup>3</sup> But the powerful discourse of Enlightenment-West against anti-Enlightenment-East has gathered force in the years since 9/11 to the point where Rushdie’s tendency to view the Islamic East as the locale of unfreedom has crystallised into an often brazenly totalising axis of West-Good, Islam-Bad.

In this chapter, I turn to Rushdie’s first post-fatwa work of fiction, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. In it I trace not only the presences of some of the eighteenth-century Scheherazades and Schahriars discussed in Parts I and II, but the literary origins of Rushdie’s move towards identifying the conflict of the Rushdie Affair in terms of a battle for the Enlightenment.

### *Locating Haroun*

Published nineteen months after the declaration of the fatwa, in the storm of the Rushdie Affair, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* split its literary commentators along very similar lines to *The Satanic Verses*. Many critics seem to have felt compelled, by the violence of Rushdie’s detractors, to commit themselves to reading

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<sup>2</sup> Rushdie, “Battle”

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 537.

the text either in a sort of wilful political and social isolation, or squarely autobiographically, as a politico-personal response to Khomeini's edict. "In this tale, sorrow causes one to forget one's name and lose the ability to speak," writes Alison Lurie in her tellingly entitled review "Another Dangerous Story from Salman Rushdie", "and no wonder, considering the recent life of its author...".<sup>4</sup> "In fact the book contains no messages for Ayatollahs," asserts Dean Flower, "no topical nudges. It is wiser and deeper than that... What the story is really about is the story".<sup>5</sup> Inevitably, perhaps, it is the ground between these two critical furrows that has proved most fertile and – from the account in *Joseph Anton* of the novel's genesis– the closest to the truth of the author's self-positioning in this text. Amidst threatened writer's block and fatwa-induced doubts about his abilities as an author ("If that was what he got for making his best effort, then he should perhaps try doing something else"), Rushdie's son Zafar reminds him of his promise to write him a book:

It was the only time in his working life that he knew almost the whole plot from the beginning. The story dropped into his head like a gift. He had told Zafar stories while the boy took his evening bath, bathtime stories instead of bedtime ones. There were little sandalwood animals and shikara boats from Kashmir floating in the bath-water and the sea of stories was born there, or perhaps reborn. The original sea was to be found in the title of an old Sanskrit book [the *Kathasaritsagara*]... usually rendered in English as the Ocean of the Streams of Story. In

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<sup>4</sup> Alison Lurie, "Another Dangerous Story From Salman Rushdie", *New York Times*, November 11, 1990, accessed September 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/specials/rushdie-haroun.html> .

<sup>5</sup> Dean Flower, "Not Waving but Drowning: Review of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", *Hudson Review* 44 (1991), 310.

Somadeva's huge book there wasn't actually a sea. But supposing there was such a sea, where all the stories ever invented flowed in intertwining streams? While Zafar was having his bath, his dad would take a mug and dip it into his son's bathwater and pretend to sip, and to find a story to tell, a story-stream flowing through the bath of stories.

And now in Zafar's book he would visit the ocean itself. There would be a storyteller in the story, who lost the Gift of the Gab after his wife left him, and his son would travel to the source of all stories to find out how to renew his father's gift. The only part of his original vision that changed in the telling was the ending... A happy ending had to be found...<sup>6</sup>

It is, as I shall illustrate, significant that it is a collection of Kashmiri souvenirs (memories) floating on the waters of this very personal collection of moments with his son, and the *title*, rather than the body, of the *Kathasaritsagara*, that are the basis for this inspiration. And typically for *Joseph Anton* – this multivalent piece of life-(re)writing – one need only turn the page to detect, beneath the neat anecdotal arc, an uneasy narrative disjunction or temporal overlap. His assertion, after this account of the fully-formed “gift” that fell into his head at his son's demand, that the only part of this “original vision that changed in the telling was the ending”, is immediately called into question for the careful reader. Firstly by the triumphant “and *now*” (my emphasis) of the following paragraph: it is a *now* that seems to make the storyteller's “Gift-of-the-Gab”-lessness the echo, or product, of “the bleak, defeated idea of becoming *not a writer*” that had haunted Rushdie for the first months of his time in

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<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 166, 167.

hiding.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, we are told on the following page of a short story called “The Princess Khamosh” (the Hindi for silent) written “many years earlier” as an imaginary fragment from the *Travels* of the fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta, in which he “comes to a divided country in which two tribes are at war, the Guppees, a chatterbox people, and the Chupwalas, among whom a cult of silence has grown up, and who worship a stone idol called Bezaban, that is, *without a tongue*. When the Chupwalas capture the Guppee princess and threaten to sew her lips shut as an offering to their god, war breaks out between the lands of Gup and Chup”.<sup>8</sup> The connection of the genesis of this then-rejected tale with the bathtime stories is unclear. Certainly, it contains many of the major plot points of the central Kahani story of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but is this a story that is then fitted into the bathtime frame-tale, or is it itself “a story-stream flowing through the bath of stories”?<sup>9</sup> There follows another significant *now*:

Now he realised that this little tale about a war between language and silence could be given a meaning that was not only linguistic; that hidden inside it was a parable about freedom and tyranny whose potential he finally understood. The story had been ahead of him, so to speak, and now his life had caught up with it.<sup>10</sup>

Although the story of this early fragment finding sudden resonance in the tempest of the fatwa is compelling (and I have no reason to think it untrue – though there is nothing relating to it in the material in the Salman Rushdie Papers at Emory University), this representation of a sudden Damascene realisation that it could act as

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<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 167, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 168.

<sup>9</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 167.

<sup>10</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 168.

a parable seems a little disingenuous in the light of Rushdie's longstanding interest in the notion of narration as freedom and silence as oppression. Whilst the following chapter in part examines the shifts in Rushdie's politics and ideology brought about by the fatwa, and later 9/11, the parable of freedom and tyranny told in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* has, as we have seen, been told before.

### *Scheherazade vs. Schahriar*

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is, in many ways, merely a more prominent staging of the battle between mongrelization and absolutism, multiplicity and monophilia, that runs throughout Rushdie's pre-fatwa oeuvre. The dark theme of heteroglossic cosmopolis ranged against despotic master-narrative is brightened, in this text, by the desperately hopeful rhetoric of cultural hybridity as salvation that we saw in his post-fatwa defences. It is worth revisiting "In Good Faith" here – the essay he wrote to mark the first anniversary of the edict, as he was in the midst of writing *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*:

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the



absolutism of the Pure... *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.<sup>11</sup>

As I illustrated in Part II, this functions in some ways as more of a re-branding exercise than a faithful account of the *The Satanic Verses*' discursive aims. It does, however, work well as a kind of manifesto for *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Indeed, as he is writing "In Good Faith", the change-by-conjoining he describes is taking place viscerally within the bodies of the "plentimaw fish" that inhabit the story sea of the parallel textual world of his novella. "They swallow stories", we are told, "through every mouth, and in their innards miracles occur; a little bit of one story joins on to an idea from another, and hey presto, when they spew the stories out they are not old tales but new ones".<sup>12</sup>

Haroun, on a quest to return his Father Rashid's story-telling abilities, finds himself on the world of Kahani (Hindi for "story"), a second moon, most of the surface of which is covered by the life-giving waters of the Great Story Sea. It has been bisected by a great war between its two hemispheres, the Land of Gup and the Land of Chup. Gup is populated by a lovably noisy and argumentative assortment of different creatures who go by the collective name of Guppees and Chup is, by contrast, occupied by a race of shadowy, hooded creatures who have "fallen under the power of the 'Mystery of Bezaban,' a Cult of Dumbness or Muteness, whose followers swear vows of lifelong silence to show their devotion" to a despot called Khattam-Shud.<sup>13</sup> The Guppees, in an oppressive act of Partition enabled by their superior technology, have halted the rotation of the Story Moon, so that the land of Gup is bathed in perpetual sunlight and the Land of Chup is permanently blanketed

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<sup>11</sup> Rushdie, "Faith", *Homelands*, 394.

<sup>12</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 101, 39.

in darkness and, between the two lands, they have “constructed an unbreakable (and also invisible) Wall of Force”.<sup>14</sup>

The opposition between the mongrelized and the pure looms even larger in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* than in *The Satanic Verses*, with the Guppees’ wall of force partitioning the globe into a map of binaries, with freedom of speech, secularism and progress in one hemisphere, and tyranny, censorship, religious fundamentalism and stagnation in the other. What we are faced with is very much the same conflict that will later be branded “The Battle for the Enlightenment”. And yet the artificiality of these polarities, the fundamental unnaturalness of a culturally partitioned globe, is seemingly underlined from the first by the swirling currents of narrative that wash the coasts of Gup and Chup alike: the waters of the Sea of Stories, “made up of a thousand, thousand, thousand and one different currents... all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented”.<sup>15</sup>

This kaleidoscopic profusion of narratives constitutes both the “Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest” of Zeeny’s hybrid cultural history and the multiple selves that Saladin finds “jostling and joggling” inside him in *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>16</sup> The Sea of Stories is a sea of metonymy, standing for the currents of narrative that move between and across global cultures, the tides of history out of which nations build themselves, and the streams of story that flow within us, creating us as individuals. These are truly international waters – and, like many international waters, national/cultural rights to them have been contested, with critics locating

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<sup>14</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 52, 519.

their source within a range of cultural territories. The most significant (and problematic) of these sources is, I will argue, the *Arabian Nights*.

Haroun's name and that of his father, Rashid Khalifa, derive from one of the most prominent recurring characters in the *Arabian Nights*, Haroun al-Rashid, the Caliph of Baghdad. Indeed, the entire text is swimming in references to the *Arabian Nights*: the Story Sea, as we have seen, is "made up of a thousand, thousand, thousand and one different currents", the story that the Water Genie gives Haroun to drink on his arrival at Kahani turns out to be "Princess Rescue Story Number S/1001/ZHT/420/41(r)xi": a subtle encryption of the *1001 Nights* with the "S" and the "ZHT" possibly signifying, as Andrew Teverson suggests, Scheherazade, and the capital of the Land of Gup is "built upon an Archipelago of one thousand and one small islands".<sup>17</sup> And, beyond the many textual surface-references to the *Arabian Nights*, the discursive opposition of Scheherazade's multiple narratives and King Shahriar's genocidal master-narrative is starker even than it was in *The Satanic Verses*.

The despot Khattam-Shud, we discover, is methodically destroying the streams of story in a bid for world-domination. In order to restore his father's story-telling abilities and save the world of Kahani, Haroun must travel to the Old Zone, to find "the Wellspring, or Source of Stories", where it is believed "that all the streams of Story had originated long ago".<sup>18</sup> Making a meta-textual play on the multiple meanings of "source" as point of origin and document or archive, Haroun's quest to find the Source of Stories is the source of his own story, the novel itself – and also the source of the writer. The metatextual element of Haroun's quest to find and

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Teverson, "Fairy Tale Politics: Free Speech and Multiculturalism in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 4, (2001): 444-466, 454.

<sup>18</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 86.

preserve the source of his father's creative powers (Rushdie/Rashid's Gift of the Gab, threatened by Khattam-Shud/Khomeini) signposts the literary traditions Rushdie draws on as the heart of the novel's cultural-critical intervention.

### *In Search of the Source*

In his influential essay "Fairy Tale Politics: Free Speech and Multiculturalism in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", Teverson joins Jean-Pierre Durix in placing the novel within the subgenre "the children's story which only adults can understand".<sup>19</sup> The two members of this subgenre that *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* most resembles (and, the implication goes, is indebted to), Teverson writes, are Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865).<sup>20</sup> After a meditation on the connections between the three texts, however, he indicates an important departure on Rushdie's part:

Despite the similarities between *Haroun* and texts such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Alice in Wonderland*, however, Carroll's and Swift's tales, unlike Rushdie's, both derive from a predominantly English storytelling tradition... Rushdie's fantasy, by contrast, demonstrates a resistance to the tradition's exclusive reliance on European narrative forms and European modes of perception by taking this tradition, saturated in British folklore and fairy tale, and merging it with an equivalent tradition in Indian storytelling that derives from Indic, Persian, or Arabic oral and literary sources. In addition to a host of character types and scenarios

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, "The Gardener of Stories': Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*" in Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 342-351, 343.

<sup>20</sup> Teverson, "Politics", 454.

reminiscent of Western fairy tales, for instance, Rushdie gives us plot motifs and expressions from *The Arabian Nights*, Bhatta Somadeva's eleventh-century *Ocean of Streams of Story* (*Katha Sarit Sagara*), and... Attar's *The Conference of Birds*.<sup>21</sup>

The *equivalence* of this tradition – both in terms of positioning it as parallel to the European tradition outside Rushdie's work, and in terms of rendering it of equal weight as a narrative source within *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* – is key to Teverson's analysis, making the novel an equal hybrid of Eastern and Western narratives, one-part-West-to-one-part-East, and thereby a literary manifestation of the triumph of mongrelization over absolutism. This is a conclusion drawn – often rather casually – by many critics, and is undoubtedly something that Rushdie sets out to court.<sup>22</sup> And yet the breakdown of literary allusions and resonances within the book is in fact far more heavily weighted towards the European than the Eastern.

Beyond readings like Suchismita Sen's which focus on the postcolonial Indianness of Rushdie's diction and its debt to authors like R. K. Narayan, the Eastern texts that Teverson names above are the main three mentioned in critical writings on *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* – and they are name-checked in practically every work written on the novel.<sup>23</sup> On close examination, however, the influence of two of the three on the text is almost nominal – in one case, literally.

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<sup>21</sup> Teverson, "Politics", 454-455.

<sup>22</sup> Suchismita Sen, "Memory, Language, and Society in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", *Contemporary Literature* 36, No. 4, (Winter, 1995): 654-675, 666. See, for example, Catherine Cundy, "Through Childhood's Window: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*" in Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 335-342, and M. Mukherjee, "Politics and Children's Literature: A Reading of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*", *Ariel* 29 (1998): 163-177.

<sup>23</sup> Madhumita Roy and Anjali Gera Roy make an interesting case for the *Hamzanama* cycle of paintings and the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza* tales as influences on the fantastical world of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but they admit that "specific references to... [them] are completely absent in *Haroun*" and I would suggest that their account of the influence of the *dastan* form on *Luka and the Fire of Life* is more convincing. Roy and Roy, "*Haroun and Luka: A Study of Salman Rushdie's talismanic stories*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2014): 174-187, 175.

The *Ocean of the Streams of Story* gives the text one of its central metaphors, and its name, but, as we saw Rushdie put it in *Joseph Anton*, “[t]he original sea was to be found in the *title* of an old Sanskrit book ... In Somadeva’s huge book there wasn’t actually a sea. But supposing there was such a sea, where all the stories ever invented flowed in intertwining streams?”<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge, this is the only formal intertextual connection between *Haroun* and the *Kathasaritsagara* – beyond the image taken from the title and then expanded upon, there are no “plot motifs and expressions” taken from the body of the text.<sup>25</sup> Its position as regards the novel is to exist as a marker of diverse cultural inheritance rather than as a(n inter)cultural inheritance in its own right: it functions as another form of Rushdiean shorthand.

The centrality of Farid ud-din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* is, I would argue, similarly open to debate. In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie summarises the text thus:

In the poem – a sort of Muslim *Pilgrim’s Progress* – a hoopoe led thirty birds on a journey through seven valleys of travail and revelation towards the circular mountain of Qaf, home of their god the Simurg. When they reached the mountain top there was no god there and it was explained to them that the name Simurg, if broken down into its syllables *si* and *murg*, means “thirty birds”. Having overcome the travails of the quest they had become the god they sought.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst it is true that *Grimus*, his first novel (an anagram of “Simurg”), is based on this work, and, as I shall explore later in this chapter, this parable holds a special place in Rushdie’s view of religion, the only direct reference to it in *Haroun and the*

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 167 (my emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 454.

<sup>26</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 50.

*Sea of Stories* comes early in the text, when Iff the genie offers Haroun a choice of magical creatures to transport him to Kahani, the story moon.

...[H]e decided not to argue and pointed at a tiny crested bird that was giving him a sidelong look through one highly intelligent eye.

“So it’s the Hoopoe for us,” the Water Genie said, sounding almost impressed. “Perhaps you know, Disconnecter Thief, that in the old stories the Hoopoe is the bird that leads all other birds through many dangerous places to their ultimate goal.”<sup>27</sup>

For Teverson, the hoopoe in *The Conference of the Birds* “comes to represent both the ancient tradition of Sanskrit storytelling from which Attar has taken him and the narrative arts in which he is adept”.<sup>28</sup> In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Teverson continues, “[a]s in Attar’s poem, this hoopoe signals Rushdie’s connection with an ancient Sanskrit tradition. It also – at an early point of the narrative – introduces two of the primary objectives of the novella: to reassert the value of storytelling after the fatwa, and to defend free speech against what he sees as the forces of silence and oppression”.<sup>29</sup> Again, what is significant is the external cultural inheritance to which this brief allusion connects Rushdie and his text, rather than any deep-seated intertextual relationship. Whilst the character of Butt the wisecracking Hoopoe-boat with the robotic brain physically transports Haroun to the Wellspring of the story sea, and therefore literally *takes* him on his quest, he is no more of a spiritual guide than Iff the Water Genie or Mali the Floating Gardener, his other companions. The links Teverson makes between the hoopoe and the importance of storytelling and

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<sup>27</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 447.

<sup>29</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 447.

free speech refer back to the biographical account of Attar with which he opens his essay, rather than to anything in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. His point is that the life of the poet, like that of Rushdie, was beset with violent struggles against censorship and accusations of blasphemy, and that *The Conference of the Birds* is “replete with examples of Sufis who have been dubbed heretics for their unorthodox beliefs and either driven into banishment or murdered by jealous tyrants”.<sup>30</sup> He concludes this biographical passage with rather less certainty than that with which he makes his later assertion about the hoopoe’s link to free speech and oppression:

It is tempting to believe, on this basis, that Rushdie makes reference to Attar’s work in *Haroun* either because he is aware of Attar’s persecution and wishes to draw strength from the fact that he is not the first (or the last) to suffer for expressing opinions in a fictional form or because he is unaware of Attar’s fate but recognizes in *The Conference of the Birds* the work of a man who is... [intimate] with the mechanisms of earthly oppression.<sup>31</sup>

It seems difficult to believe that Rushdie would be unaware of the biographical resonance between his own experiences and those of one of his literary heroes, and yet it is not a point that I have seen him make in any of his writings. As my later examination of invocations of Enlightenment figures in the fatwa will indicate, Rushdie found comfort and strength in the experiences of other embattled thinkers – in “the history of literature” – at this time, but he markedly makes parallels almost exclusively between himself and European writers.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that beyond using this brief reference to Attar as a means of connecting himself to

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<sup>30</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 444.

<sup>31</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 445.

<sup>32</sup> Livings, “The Art of Fiction”.



Eastern cultural networks – to Sufism as well as Sanskrit literature – Rushdie’s sense of kinship with the author of the *The Conference of the Birds* (though less central than Teverson indicates) lies more in the sense of a shared, almost secular, humanism (“they had become the god they sought”) bound up with ideas of Enlightenment, than to devotional Islam.<sup>33</sup>

This leads us back to the last and most important of the trinity of Eastern sources of the story sea: the *Arabian Nights*. Of the Eastern literary-cultural inheritances that *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* lays claim to, the *Arabian Nights* is the only one to find widespread expression within the text – indeed, the Great Story Sea, though drawn from the title of the *Kathasaritsagara*, could almost be seen as a mere nomenclative alternative to the *Nights*. Not only does the tide of references from and allusions to the *Nights* flood the text, overwhelming the single nod to Attar and nearly subsuming Somadeva’s titular position, but the central discursive framework of the novel is in fact that of Scheherazade’s frame tale: fatal despotic censorship overcome by a profusion of stories.

### *The Return of Scheherazade*

After the systematic silencing of her voice in *Shame*, and the appropriation and despotic abuse of her power of performative narrative in *The Satanic Verses*, Scheherazade makes an *almost* triumphant return in this text. The power of her narratives, as we have seen, is freed in the overthrow of the despotic Khatam-Shud – though, significantly, rather than transforming him into a benign ruler, this text destroys its despot. Her role as storyteller is taken over, however, in a manoeuvre

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<sup>33</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 50.

which recalls her marginalisation in late-eighteenth century versions of the *Arabian Nights*. The teller of tales in this text is the Rushdie-esque figure of Rashid. The action of the novel begins with the curtailment of a woman's song:

Haroun grew up in a home in which, instead of misery and frowns, he had his father's ready laughter and his mother's sweet voice raised in song.

Then something went wrong. (Maybe the sadness of the city finally crept in through their windows.)

The day Soraya stopped singing, in the middle of a line, as if someone had thrown a switch, Haroun guessed there was trouble brewing. But he never suspected how much.<sup>34</sup>

This break in the flow of free expression constitutes the halt of life as Haroun knows it – and even the halt of time. On the news that his wife, tired of his stories, has run away with the neighbour upstairs, an enemy to literature and the imagination (“What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” he spits), Rashid breaks every clock in the house, leaving them all stuck at exactly eleven o’clock. This leaves Haroun unable to concentrate on anything for longer than eleven minutes at a time – “stuck in time like a broken clock”.<sup>35</sup> For Rushdie, the links between time and narrative, and between narrative and *The Arabian Nights* run deep: one need only think of the thousand and one children born at the stroke of midnight. The notion of despotism as the enemy of time as well as narrative was central to *The Satanic Verses*, with the terrible victory of the Imam over Ayesha marked by the conjunction of an *Arabian Nights* allusion and the image of broken clocks: “and now every clock

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<sup>34</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 20, 24.

in the capital city of Desh begins to chime, and goes on unceasingly, beyond twelve, beyond twenty-four, beyond one thousand and one, announcing the end of Time”.<sup>36</sup> This early cessation of time in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* marks the loss of more than the protagonist’s mother; it is at this point that “an Unthinkable Thing” happens: “Rashid Khalifa, the legendary Ocean of Notions, the fabled Shah of Blah... found that he had run out of stories to tell”.<sup>37</sup> It is this silence – marked by the Death of Time, resonating with the extra-textual echoes of Rushdie’s Khomeini-induced writer’s block, and proleptic of the giant plug that the villain Khattam-Shud is constructing to block the Wellspring of the Story Sea – that necessitates the voyage to the Story Moon Kahani. It is a silence that will end only with the halt of the tyrannical censorship of the story sea, with the triumph of Scheherazade’s wealth of stories over Khattam-Shud’s despotic mono-narrative. And the end of the silence, and the restoration of time, will be marked by the continuation of the woman’s song. The novel ends with Haroun looking at his clock: “‘Yes,’ he nodded to himself, ‘time is definitely on the move again around these parts.’ Outside, in the living room, his mother had begun to sing”.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst the figure – or at least the paradigm – of Scheherazade and her life-giving narrative has returned to the fore in this text, this is not the reappearance of the dynamic, metamorphic, liberating Scheherazade of early eighteenth-century Europe. Her agency has been taken over by the two male protagonists, and her generative narrative abilities have become a natural resource – the story sea. The woman’s song, broken at the beginning of the book and resumed at the end, is not the song of Scheherazade, but effectively the metonymic voice of the women she

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<sup>36</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 214.

<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 211.

intervenes to save: it is the sound of a world operating as it should. It is also, in some ways, the sound of Rushdie's childhood – or at least one version thereof. “I grew up in a literary tradition,” Rushdie said in a conversation with Günter Grass in 1985, “That’s to say that the kind of stories I was told as a child, by and large, were Arabian Nights kind of stories. It was those sort of fairy tales... And the belief was that by telling stories in that way, in that marvellous way, you could actually tell a kind of truth which you couldn’t tell in other ways”.<sup>39</sup> *The Arabian Nights*, then, is a tradition – a cultural inheritance perhaps more personal than those represented by Attar or Somadeva – that Rushdie equates with a form of fantastical truth-telling. Beyond that, as Teverson argues, and as borne out by its association with life-giving narrative and resistance that I have traced through Rushdie's corpus, it is emblematic of a sense “that storytelling, when unfettered, becomes the antithesis of totalitarian thinking, because it resists the fascistic (or Platonic) drive to control society by limiting potential definitions and controlling interpretations”.<sup>40</sup> But it is also, I would argue, a tradition that comes to Rushdie filtered, to a large extent, through Western culture.

Whilst the text, as I have indicated, is saturated with allusions to the *Nights*, Rushdie never references *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or even *The 1001 Nights* (though the number 1001 does recur throughout the text), he only ever mentions *The Arabian Nights* – the name for the tales cemented in Western memory and culture by Galland's 1706 translation. This can partly be put down to an impulse to appeal to the Western literary market. Certainly the cover and flyleaves of my Granta paperback edition are awash with celebratory quotes from the great and the good

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<sup>39</sup> Rushdie and Günter Grass, “Fictions are Lies that Tell the Truth”, the *Listener*, June 1985, 15.

Cited in Teverson, “Politics”, 449.

<sup>40</sup> Teverson, “Politics”, 449.

hailing the novel as “a whole Arabian Nights entertainment,” (Nadine Gordimer in the *Times Literary Supplement*), or excitedly telling potential readers that “[i]n it, you notice not just the Arabian Nights but stray strands of *Alice* and *The Wizard of Oz*” (Victoria Glendenning, the *Times*). These cover-quotes are clearly participating in the continued infantilisation of *The Arabian Nights* that began, as I outlined in Part I, in the final decades of the eighteenth century; a tendency perhaps exacerbated by the classification of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as children’s literature.

This is not Rushdie’s intention – though *The Arabian Nights*’ place in the Western children’s canon is certainly something he is playing on. Rather, his privileging of the *Arabian Nights* as an intertext over non-Western collections might be read as a continuation of his earlier novels’ representations of the tales as occupying a colonially-inflected in-between space in the dusty bookcases of the educated middle classes in India. “The Burton translation of the *Alf layla wa layla*” that Omar Khayyam (himself named for “a translated man”) finds in the library of Nishapur in *Shame*, for example, becomes the “ten-volume set of the Richard Burton translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which was being slowly devoured by mildew and bookworm” in Changez’s “teak-lined study” in *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>41</sup> However, whilst these references to Burton’s edition of the *Arabian Nights* foreground the texts’ complex and problematic inter-cultural postcolonial status, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* such awareness gives way to an unproblematised blurring of translational and historical lines: his direct textual allusions to the text are markedly casual.

The houseboat from which Haroun and Rashid begin their journeys into the world of Kahani is called “*Arabian Nights Plus One*, because... ‘even in all the

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<sup>41</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 33, 29; Rushdie, *Verses*, 35.

Arabian Nights you will never have a night like this.’ Each of its windows had been cut out in the shape of a fabulous bird, fish, or beast: the Roc of Sinbad the Sailor, the Whale That Swallowed Men, a Fire-Breathing Dragon, and so on”.<sup>42</sup> The Land of Gup, the hemisphere of the Story Moon which they arrive in from this Burton/Grub-Street-inflected point of departure, is also a place strikingly redolent of European visions of the Orient. As Daniel Roberts points out in his excellent essay “Rushdie and the Romantics: Intertextual Politics in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*”, the reader’s first sight of the City of Gup is through the shimmering intertextual vision of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan: or A Vision in a Dream” (1797). Coleridge’s famous dream-vision of Xanadu, the summer palace of Kublai Khan (invoked in the opening line of the acrostic poem that prefaces *Haroun* – “Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:/All our dream-worlds may come true”) begins

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
 Down to a sunless sea.  
 So twice five miles of fertile ground  
 With walls and towers were girdled round;  
 And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan, or A Vision in a Dream”, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 512-513.

Meanwhile, in the citadel of the Guppees, “a gigantic formal garden came down in terraces right to the water’s edge. In this Pleasure Garden were fountains and pleasure-domes and ancient spreading trees”.<sup>44</sup> “Within the Oriental sublime of this garden, however”, Roberts notes, “we encounter an oddly democratic intrusion. Whereas Kublai’s palace is the sole architectural feature within the wild and expansive garden that he decrees (Coleridge follows his source, *Purchas’s Pilgrimage*, quoted in his 1816 introduction to the poem, in depicting it thus), Rushdie introduces three important buildings in fairy-tale mode” – the Palace of King Chattergy, the Parliament of Gup, and “the towering edifice of P2C2E [Processes Too Complicated To Explain] House, a huge building... in which were concealed one thousand and one Machines Too Complicated To Describe, which controlled the Processes Too Complicated To Explain”.<sup>45</sup> Roberts, reading *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* firmly as an allegory of the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, interprets this as “[t]he text [speaking] back to and [inverting] the Orientalized politics of Coleridge’s poem very explicitly by introducing a parliament building into the Great Khan’s private gardens”.<sup>46</sup> “The despotic Orient of the Romantic period,” he continues, “is now displaced by the bungling bureaucracy of modern and democratic India”.<sup>47</sup>

I would argue, however, that beside this familiar gesture of self-conscious (and therefore apparently playful or ironic) Orientalism, Rushdie is also using this Romantic lens to evoke the “delightfully disputatious” culture that he equates with both eighteenth-century Europe and his middle class, “secular Islamic” upbringing in

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<sup>44</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 87-88.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Roberts, “Rushdie and the Romantics: Intertextual Politics in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*”, *Ariel* 38, no. 4 (2007): 123-142, 128; Rushdie, *Haroun*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, “Romantics”, 128.

<sup>47</sup> Roberts, “Romantics”, 128.

Bombay.<sup>48</sup> The three buildings that Rushdie introduces can in fact be read as marking Gup City as an orientally-inflected occidental space. The triumvirate of royal palace, parliament, and government office suggests that Gup is a constitutional monarchy – an implication borne out by the comic asides made by Guppees about the largely ceremonial function of their royal family (“‘After all,’ Iff the Chief Water Genie whispered to Haroun... ‘it’s not as if we really let our crowned heads do anything very important around here’”).<sup>49</sup> Gup City is an idealised cosmopolis, its waterways “thronged with craft of every shape and size, all packed with Guppee citizens, who were similarly diverse”, and yet there is no mention of any place of worship.<sup>50</sup> This is a hybrid society run along the lines of a British democracy, with the secularism of post-Revolutionary France. And whilst the *Arabian Nights* are an integral part of Gup’s literary world, and indeed instrumental to its representation as the embodiment of a nation where freedom of speech reigns absolute, it becomes increasingly apparent as the novel wears on that this is a vision of *The Arabian Nights* which has almost lost touch with the Islamic world from whence it first came.

In the Pleasure Garden, Haroun noticed large numbers of Guppees of an extraordinary thinness, dressed in entirely rectangular garments covered in writing. “Those,” Iff told him, “are the famous Pages of Gup; that is to say, the army. Ordinary armies are made up of platoons and regiments and suchlike; our Pages are organised into Chapters and Volumes. Each Volume is headed by a Front, or Title, Page...”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, “One Thousand”, *Homelands*, 435.

<sup>49</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 193.

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 87.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 88.



On closer examination, Haroun realises that written on the garment of each Page is a story, each starring Bolo, the prince of Gup: “[o]ne Page wore the tale of ‘Bolo and the Wonderful Lamp’; another, ‘Bolo and the Forty Thieves’. Then there was ‘Bolo the Sailor’, ‘Bolo and Juliet’, ‘Bolo in Wonderland’”.<sup>52</sup> His friend the Page Blabbermouth, herself wearing the tale of “Bolo and the Golden Fleece” explains that the Princess Batcheat has had “all the greatest stories in the *world* rewritten” onto the Pages, with her beloved Bolo as the hero.<sup>53</sup> This bibliographical army, emblematic of the forces of literature, history, and learning ranged against the deathly monism of Khattam-Shud (and, as I shall illustrate, the heart of Rushdie’s vision of a free (speech) society) is literally covered in references to *The Arabian Nights* – and yet the tales of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad, whilst the most abidingly popular stories from the *The Arabian Nights* in the West, are precisely the narratives that Galland added to the original collection of texts that came into his possession.

The fable-world of Kahani is not – despite its Hindi-Urdu-Arabic nomenclature – a necessarily Eastern space (though, significantly, it does offer Rushdie a similar sense of safety and imaginative distance as the Oriental locale offered eighteenth-century satirists), it is an allegory of the divided globe. It is a globe divided according to the precepts of the late eighteenth-century characterisation of the Islamic East as a zone of stagnation; Scheherazade’s life-giving narrative is now literally the province of the Occident. It is a globe upon which a geo-political battle is being fought between a despotism that looks very much like Rushdie’s vision of Islam, and an ideology that looks very much like Rushdie’s vision of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 106.

### *Haroun, Islam, and the Enlightenment*

Again, parallel to the critical reception of *The Satanic Verses* in the Rushdie Affair, a popular interpretative manoeuvre amongst many left-wing commentators has been to read *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as a celebration of Islamic cultures, and even Islam itself. Taken to their extremes – as with Aron R. Aji’s scholarly “‘All Names Mean Something’: Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun* and the Legacy of Islam” – this can entail removing questions of East and West, Orient and Occident, from consideration at all.<sup>54</sup> For Aji, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is one lengthy meditation on Islam: “[t]he fairy tale’s celebration of stories and storytelling, going back to *The Arabian Nights*,” he claims, “allows us to align the text with Islam’s cultural tradition, while the characterizations and setting descriptions in *Haroun* also compel us to recall core concepts of doctrinal Islam”.<sup>55</sup> He reads the multiplicity of the story sea and the hybridity of Gup as representative of cultural diversity within the Islamic world, and Khattam-Shud as *Iblis*, or Satan. “*Iblis*’s method,” he explains, “forments relativism and doubt, thus serving to annihilate the Absolute Oneness (*Wahdad al-Vujud*) of God’s universe”.<sup>56</sup> Whilst Aji’s analysis makes some suggestive points and his assertions about the pluralism of the cultures of Islam are well taken, his reading of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as the triumph of oneness over relativism is, I would argue, an inversion of the text’s doctrine of disputational multiplicity over doubt-free singularity. Beyond this, I would suggest, the foe that Haroun and the armies of Gup

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<sup>54</sup> Aron R. Aji, “‘All Names Mean Something’: Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun* and the Legacy of Islam”, *Contemporary Literature* 36, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 103-129.

<sup>55</sup> Aji, “All Names”, 105.

<sup>56</sup> Aji, “All Names”, 114.

must face is a figure steeped in the negative imagery and ideology which Rushdie associates with Islam in his pre-fatwa novels.

Khattam-Shud “is the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech” – the very incarnation of censorship.<sup>57</sup> Not only is he clearly being figured in terms of Khomeini, but in the same anti-literary rhetoric with which Mahound the poet-silencer is portrayed in *The Satanic Verses*.

The Land of Chup has fallen under the power of the “Mystery of Bezaban”, a Cult of Dumbness or Muteness, whose followers swear vows of lifelong silence to show their devotion... In the old days the Cultmaster, Khattam-Shud, preached hatred only towards stories and fancies and dreams; but now he has become more severe, and opposes Speech for any reason at all. In Chup City the schools and law-courts and theatres are all closed now, unable to operate because of the Silence Laws... Bezaban is a gigantic idol... It is a colossus carved out of black ice, and stands at the heart of Khattam-Shud’s fortress-palace, the Citadel of Chup.<sup>58</sup>

Not only does this vision of Bezaban and the censorship-crippled society vividly recall the Imam and the Submission of Jahilia sections from *The Satanic Verses*, but the language Rushdie uses is strikingly reminiscent of that he uses to describe the God of Islam in *Midnight’s Children*: “that God who had been named after a carved

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<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 79.

<sup>58</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 101.

idol in a pagan shrine built around a giant meteorite: Al-Lah, in the Qa'aba, the shrine of the great Black Stone".<sup>59</sup>

My emphasis throughout this chapter has been upon the stark presence of Rushdie's vision of despotic Islam at large in the complex allegory of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Similar to the way in which zones of Islamic wrongdoing overlap in Rushdie's representation of Peccavistan in *Shame*, however, in this text Chup's oppressive society is partly a refraction of Pakistan, indicated by the presence of the (P)artition built by the Guppees. This implies both a Britishness and an Indianness to the Guppees: British due to the hand of the retreating imperial power which drew the line of Partition across the Subcontinent, and Indian by virtue of the states' proximity to one another. The Manichean binaries of the text's discursive battleground are etched onto the surface of the story moon by the Guppee-built wall which bisects it into permanent hemispheres of light and dark – rendering the Land of Gup literally a state of Enlightenment.. “Thanks to the genius of the Eggheads at P2C2E House... the rotation of Kahani has been brought under control. As a result the Land of Gup is bathed in Endless Sunshine, while over in Chup it's always the middle of the night”.<sup>60</sup> This despotic manoeuvre brings a note of unease to the representation of a land which is otherwise shown almost entirely in a celebratory light. It is an unease compounded, though subtly, by the enigma of Gup's machinery of government. However comically they are depicted, processes-too-complicated-to-explain suggest a government of secret machinations and mystification at odds with a land that seems otherwise to enjoy an Enlightened public sphere. This would suggest that the Gup aspect of the allegory of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is not simply a celebration of mongrelization taking place within a

<sup>59</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 334.

<sup>60</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 80.

Western-inflected secular zone of freedom, or indeed a meditation on what Roberts terms the “bungling bureaucracy of modern and democratic India”.<sup>61</sup> Just as *The Satanic Verses* did, this text engages with more than one form of despotism. The despotisms in this text are presented as far more uneven than they were in *The Satanic Verses*, however: here, Islamic despotism is represented as a force dark enough to make the shady political dealings of the liberal West seem almost light.

This part of the allegory is anchored in the non-Kahani sequences of the novel, in Rashid and Haroun’s journey to the Dull Lake in “Kache-Mer”<sup>62</sup>. Once again, Kashmir is represented as a broken mongrel paradise, this time enmeshed in the corruption of the politician Snooty Buttoo.

Guppee society is the vibrant, chaotic embodiment of a freedom of speech completely untrammelled by any constraints, its loveable citizens in constant, amiable disagreement, and showing no respect for authority. When Haroun sees the freedom with which members of the Guppee army insult their general, he muses “if any soldiers behaved like this on earth, they would be court-martialled quick as thinking”. “But but but what is the point of giving persons Freedom of Speech,” Butt the Hoopoe replies, “if you then say they must not utilize same? And is not the Power of Speech the greatest Power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the full?”<sup>63</sup> The Land of Gup is not an allegory of an Actually Existing West, it is a vision of a land governed according to the precepts of a familiar series of abstracts: equality, liberty, and fraternity. The Land of Gup is the heartland of the fictitious

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<sup>61</sup> Roberts, “Romantics”, 128.

<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Rushdie, *Haroun*, 119.

Enlightenment that Rushdie was to invoke so many times over the course of the next twenty years.

## Chapter 6

# The Enlightenment Affair

*I just felt this is much bigger than me: it's a fight that's been going on for hundreds of years. And, oddly, many people, including me, thought it was over – that this battle against religion for free expression was something that the Enlightenment finished 200 years ago. Then here I am in another episode of this fight. And I thought, I'm not going to be the one who caves in, because it matters too much.<sup>1</sup>*



**Figure 1.** “[M]e and the two Voltaires”: Christopher Hitchens and Salman Rushdie with a bust of Voltaire, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2011.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, “Salman of Knowledge”, *Irish Times*, September 22, 2012, accessed November 22, 2012, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2012/0922/1224324252366.html> .

<sup>2</sup> Image by Michael Zilkha, [salmanrushdiearchive.com](http://salmanrushdiearchive.com), accessed December 9, 2012, <http://salmanrushdiearchive.com/tag/enlightenment/> . Caption quotation, Rushdie, “Christopher Hitchens, 1949 – 2011” *Vanity Fair*, February 2012, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/02/rushdie-on-hitchens-201202> , 2.

In his February 2012 obituary of Christopher Hitchens for *Vanity Fair*, Rushdie writes with emotion of the way in which the furore of the fatwa drew the two men together. “I have often been asked,” he says, “if Christopher defended me because he was my close friend. The truth is that he became my close friend because he wanted to defend me”.<sup>3</sup> As Hitchens “leapt unbidden into the fray”, attacking John le Carré for his criticism of Rushdie, he became deeply embroiled in the Affair, outstripping other supportive voices from the ranks of the intelligentsia to become, so the rhetoric goes, almost a twin voice for the embattled author.

He and I found ourselves describing our ideas, without conferring, in almost identical terms. I began to understand that while I had not chosen the battle it was at least the right battle, because in it everything that I loved and valued (literature, freedom, irreverence, freedom, irreligion, freedom) was ranged against everything I detested (fanaticism, violence, bigotry, humorlessness, philistinism, and the new offense culture of the age). Then I read Christopher using exactly the same everything-he-loved-versus-everything-he-hated trope, and felt ... understood.<sup>4</sup>

Though clearly a heartfelt testimony of grief for a much-loved friend, this obituary also functions as a reiteration of Rushdie’s fatwa story as newly standardised by *Joseph Anton*, which was by this point approaching the final stages of publication. It is preceded, at least in the archived online version, by a photographic portrait of Hitchens taken by Gasper Tringale and, inset at an intimate, family-photo-album angle, the image of Hitchens and Rushdie posing with a bust of Voltaire reproduced above. Though separated from Rushdie’s account of their oneness in their response

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<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, “Christopher Hitchens”, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, “Christopher Hitchens”, 1(Rushdie’s ellipsis).



to the fatwa by an account of – and excuse for – Hitchens’s flirtation with the George W. Bush administration, the image of the two friends on either side of Voltaire returns to conclude the piece.

On his 62nd birthday—his last birthday, a painful phrase to write—I had been with him and Carol and other comrades at the Houston home of his friend Michael Zilkha, and we had been photographed standing on either side of a bust of Voltaire. That photograph is now one of my most treasured possessions: me and the two Voltaires, one of stone and one still very much alive. Now they are both gone, and one can only try to believe, as the philosopher Pangloss insisted to Candide in the elder Voltaire’s masterpiece, that everything is for the best “in this best of all possible worlds.”

It doesn’t feel like that today.<sup>5</sup>

Complex patterns of self-positioning are clearly visible here, in both text and image. In a piece that centres so pointedly on the intellectual and ideological similitude of Rushdie’s and Hitchens’s stance in the well-rehearsed clash of “literature, freedom, irreverence, freedom, irreligion, freedom” with “fanaticism, violence, bigotry, humorlessness, philistinism, and the new offense culture of the age,” the characterisation of Hitchens as Voltaire becomes an implicit but powerful self-portrait.<sup>6</sup> Rushdie’s physical stance in the photograph underlines this (tacit) statement of kinship with the philosophe: where Hitchens faces the camera squarely, his face ambivalent, Rushdie assumes precisely the same three-quarter view angle as the bust – his right shoulder tucked firmly behind Voltaire – his lips quirked in an

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, “Christopher Hitchens”, 2. (Rushdie’s spacing).

<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, “Christopher Hitchens”, 1.

exact replica of the sculpture's, his expression knowing. Even the description "one of stone and one still very much alive," coming as it does at the end of a eulogy, sets up an uncanny layering of (self-)representation, with the dead–living figures of Rushdie, Hitchens, and Voltaire overlapping and shimmering in and out of one another.<sup>7</sup> The final, rather puzzling, invocation of Pangloss's relentlessly satirised idealist refrain from *Candide* ends the piece on a yet more unsettling note; a (presumably) satirical reference to a satirical leitmotif, queasily replicating Voltaire's satirical manoeuvre by parenthetically demanding us to imagine what the sceptical Hitchens would have made of it, to infer what Rushdie himself thinks of it, and to position ourselves as readers in relation to it. Unsettling it may be, but it acts as a final blurring of the boundaries between the three thinkers: a knowing trinity, conjoined in a prism of humorous rationalism.

The irony which haunts this act of self-fashioning is that the more Rushdie has come to identify with – and as – Voltaire, the less like the historical Voltaire he has become. The marked proximity between the two authors that I charted in my reading of *Mahomet* and *The Satanic Verses* in Part II – the complex patterns of opprobrious likening between Islamic and "Western" despotisms – have given way to a much less subtle axis of approval and opprobrium in Rushdie's writing. Voltaire, over the course of his long life, was at least as "chameleon" in his writings as we saw Rushdie describe Talleyrand as being in his politics.<sup>8</sup> Rushdie has dehistoricised Voltaire, just as we will see him dehistoricise Islam. He has moved from active engagement with historical Enlightenment discourses to rehearsals of a series of myths of the Enlightenment. In a 1992 speech to the International Conference on Freedom of Expression in Washington DC, Rushdie asserted that

<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, "Christopher Hitchens", 2.

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 205 – quoted in my introduction.

blasphemy and heresy, far from being the greatest evils, are the methods by which human thought has made its most vital advances. The writers of the European Enlightenment, who all came up against the stormtroopers at one time or another, knew this.<sup>9</sup>

In this rhetoric of philosophes versus stormtroopers lies the seeds of a flirtation with the Hitchens-inflected discourse of Islamofascism that comes increasingly to mark his view of the West's relationship with the Islamic East.<sup>10</sup> The everything-he-loves versus everything-he-hates binary that he so celebrates and identifies with in Hitchens is worlds away from the multivalent historical engagement with Islam that characterises Rushdie's early writings and the writings of Voltaire and his contemporaries. Indeed, look back at the photograph of "the three Voltaires" above in the light of the eighteenth century's dialectical engagements with Islam, and the Voltaire in the middle of the trio seems almost embarrassed by his companions. Rushdie's relationship with Islam is moving away from self-reflexivity, towards an increasingly totalising Self/Other binary. Indeed, his visions of Islam and himself are becoming mutually exclusive.

### *The Enlightenment of the Rushdie Affair*

Whilst the Hitchens obituary might constitute one of Rushdie's more startling assertions of kinship with an "Enlightenment" philosophe, it is by no means the first. From the earliest years of the fatwa, selective (self-)identification with eighteenth-century thinkers and the deployment of an essentialised view of the Enlightenment

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<sup>9</sup> Rushdie, "from a speech to the International Conference on Freedom of Expression, Washington, DC, April 1992", *Step Across*, 232-233.

<sup>10</sup> See Hitchens, "Defending Islamofascism".

has been a key manoeuvre for both Rushdie and his supporters. Less than a month after the proclamation of the fatwa on Valentine's Day 1989, the *New York Times* published responses from "28 distinguished writers born in 21 countries... [spoken] to him from their common land - the country of literature".<sup>11</sup> Among them was a message from Mexican author Octavio Paz: "We are seeing a disappearance of the modern values that came with the Enlightenment. These people who condemn you are living before the Enlightenment. We are facing a historical contradiction in our century".<sup>12</sup> In "One Thousand Days in a Balloon", published in 1991, Rushdie himself writes "[o]ne day they [Muslims] may agree that – as the European Enlightenment demonstrated – freedom of thought is precisely freedom from religious control, freedom from accusations of blasphemy".<sup>13</sup> A year later, in a speech to the International Conference on Freedom of Expression in Washington DC, he asserted that

It was because of his nervousness of the power of the Church, not of the State, that Voltaire suggested that it was advisable for writers to live in close proximity to a frontier, so that, if necessary, they could hop across it into safety.<sup>14</sup>

Later in the same text, he identifies with "Denis Diderot, the great novelist-philosopher of the French Enlightenment", and the "dispute within him between aesthetic, materialistic rationalism and a profound need for spiritual and moral

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<sup>11</sup> "Words for Salman Rushdie".

<sup>12</sup> "Words for Salman Rushdie".

<sup>13</sup> Rushdie, "One Thousand", *Homelands*, 432.

<sup>14</sup> Rushdie, "Freedom of Expression", *Step Across*, 232-233.

depth”, quoting an undated fragment of a letter to Sophie Volland.<sup>15</sup> This view of Diderot seems significantly more nuanced than the invocations of Voltaire that increasingly come to litter his texts, a suggestion perhaps that in the early years of the fatwa Rushdie’s notion of Enlightenment retains the same self-reflexive subtlety as his inter-cultural critique. It is also likely that Rushdie’s more nuanced historical invocations of Enlightenment and eighteenth-century thinkers in the early years of the fatwa were influenced by the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989. Diderot is name-checked, as is *The Nun* (sometimes more grandly, as we have seen, as *La Religieuse*), in several subsequent texts, and yet his name never attains the talismanic importance that is attached to Voltaire’s (despite the fact that the only mention of a specific Voltaire text I can find is the somewhat opaque *Candide* reference above).<sup>16</sup> The curious telescoping of Enlightenment thinkers into Voltaire is neatly encapsulated by an aside of Rushdie’s in an interview with Jack Living: “I found myself reading Enlightenment writers—Voltaire—and realizing that I was not the only writer who’d had a hard time”.<sup>17</sup> Self-reflexivity is replaced with autobiographical self-identification – an unhistorical appeal to history, or to myth in historical dress.

These invocations of the Enlightenment and its thinkers are some of the first utterances in a dialogue between the Rushdie Affair and the eighteenth century that continues to gather strength to this day on both sides of the Secular West/Islamic East battle lines. Neatly summarized by Claes Kastholme’s essay “The Crime of Silence”, a powerful historiography of freedom of speech as the “child of the

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<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, “Freedom of Expression”, *Step Across*, 232-233. Rushdie does not cite the provenance of his quotation, “It infuriates me to be enmeshed in a devilish philosophy which my mind is forced to accept but my heart to disown”, but exactly the same translation of the sentence is attributed to the Volland letter fragment in Leonard Tancock’s introduction to Denis Diderot, *The Nun*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin Books, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, “Enlightenment”.

<sup>17</sup> Livings, “The Art of Fiction”.

European Enlightenment” in general, and the child of Voltaire in particular, has been woven in to the fable of the fatwa:

A straight line runs from the 18<sup>th</sup> century vision of the free enlightened human being to the finest flower of western culture, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948. Article 19 of the Declaration states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.<sup>18</sup>

“The Crime of Silence” is one of a collection of essays published by the Nordic Council in defence of Rushdie and his Scandinavian publishers, and this “straight line” of thought runs through all of them, “clearly and solidly formulated by Voltaire”, as Kastholm says: “I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend your right to say it to the death”.<sup>19</sup> “Democratic relativism”, Else Kleveland, Norway’s then Minister of Culture, tells us, “means that we allow those with differing views *the same rights as we allow ourselves*. That we defend the rights of others to say something with which we disagree, to paraphrase Voltaire’s classic maxim”.<sup>20</sup> Voltaire “is the very personification of the Enlightenment,” and “it is Western Enlightenment itself that is threatened by ethnic nationalism and the fundamentalist exercise of religion”.<sup>21</sup>

Although Kleveland quotes from the opening of the entry on tolerance from Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (“What is tolerance? It is the prerogative of

<sup>18</sup> Kastholme, “The Crime of Silence” in *Freedom* ed. Frid-Nielson, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Kastholme, “Crime”, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Else Kleveland, “Freedom of Expression – the Most Demanding of All Freedoms”, in *Freedom* ed. Frid-Nielson, 60-71, 69. (original emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> Kleveland, “Freedom”, 63.

humanity. We are all frail and given to making mistakes. So let us forgive one another's acts of foolishness; that is the first law of nature"), it is this "classic maxim" of his – the one she paraphrases and Kastholm quotes – that forms the heart of this story of Western Enlightenment, and thus Western democracy, and thus Western selfhood. *I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend your right to say it to the death.* It is the principle at the centre of practically every single defence of Rushdie, whether directly referred back to Voltaire or not. And yet Voltaire never said or wrote these words. Surely one of the most widespread of apocryphal quotations, it in fact stems from a misreading of a 1906 biography *The Friends of Voltaire*, written by S. G. Tallentyre (Evelyn Beatrice Hall), in which she coins the phrase as a loose, first-person summary of the writer's attitude towards Helvetius in the furore following the publication of *De L'esprit* in 1758.<sup>22</sup>

The apocryphal nature of this central tenet renders it all the more appropriate as emblem of the discourse of Enlightenment-as-freedom-of-speech-as-West: parallel to the "phantasmagorical simplifications" Aravamudan notes taking place in discussions of the novel at the heart of the furore are essentialising myths about East, West, and the Enlightenment. The temporal-cultural disjunction of Paz's bald "historical contradiction" (itself the product of Marxist stadial notions of history which grew out of the late eighteenth-century discourses of historical and civilizational progress), subtly echoed by the play of tenses in statements from Rushdie like "[o]ne day they may agree that – as the European Enlightenment

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<sup>22</sup> "What the book could never have done for itself, or for its author, persecution did for them both. '*On the Mind*' became not the success of a season, but one of the most famous books of the century. The men who had hated it, and had not particularly loved Helvétius, flocked round him now. Voltaire forgave him all injuries, intentional or unintentional. 'What a fuss about an omelette!' he had exclaimed when he heard of the burning. How abominably unjust to persecute a man for such an airy trifle as that! 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,' was his attitude now." S. G. Tallentyre, *The Friends of Voltaire* (London: John Murray, 1906), quoted in ed. Elizabeth Knowles, *What they Didn't Say – A Book of Misquotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55.

demonstrated...” (their modal future is our simple past), has set the tone for a discourse that makes both Secular West and Islamic East the product of a mythical Enlightenment.<sup>23</sup> As an identity is created for the Secular West on the unsteady fictional foundations of a mingled ideological and historical myth of origin, the Islamic East, as Clement Hawes and others have suggested, is constructed in its turn as the historical and ideological Other of that self, forced to converse – or at least protest – across the rift of history. And in protesting against the terms of this discursive manoeuvre, the Islamic East has frequently shored up the construction of an Enlightenment-determined West, positioning itself in terms of processes of cultural and historical Othering like Orientalism in such a way that discourses are reinscribed as they are critiqued. Hawes describes this in terms of a strategy for “constructing oneself, in the name of some tradition or fundamentalism, as the inverted mirror-image of the ‘West’” and goes on to argue that

This familiar nativist gesture often forces anti-imperial opposition to repeat that historical fallacy which annexed science and rationality as the essence of an ahistorical “West.” Thus glib attacks on the Enlightenment, whether postmodernist or neo-traditionalist, often merely invert the values of Eurocentric historiography without challenging its fundamental premise.<sup>24</sup>

The misleading emphasis that Rushdie places on the secularism of Enlightenment in such assertions as “[i]ntellectual freedom, in European History, has mostly meant freedom from the restraints of the Church, not the State” becomes another dominant strand of this historiography, again centred on a simplified idea of Rushdie’s

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<sup>23</sup> “Words for Salman Rushdie”; Rushdie, “One Thousand”, *Homelands*, 432.

<sup>24</sup> Clement Hawes, “Leading History by the Nose”, 164.



favourite philosophe: “[t]his is the battle Voltaire was fighting”.<sup>25</sup> As Michel Foucault points out, the idea of freedom of speech or “parrhesia” has been by no means separable from State control since the time of Euripides:

[M]ost of the time the use of parrhesia requires that the parrhesiastes know his own genealogy, his own status; i.e., usually one must first be a male citizen to speak the truth as a parrhesiastes. Indeed, someone who is deprived of parrhesia is in the same situation as a slave to the extent that he or she cannot take part in the political life of the city.<sup>26</sup>

The complex negotiations between freedom of expression, and patterns of interlinked political and religious suppression that have marked the Western history of the discourse from its outset, are completely elided, reducing it to a battle between writers and religion in which the State is at worst a slightly oppressive onlooker, and at best a flag-waving secularist cheering its intellectuals on.<sup>27</sup> Defences of the Islamic East in the Rushdie Affair have frequently centred on this aspect of the Western-Enlightenment narrative – consonant with the strategy outlined by Hawes above – with texts like Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies’s *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* identifying the death of God in the Age of Reason as the defining moment for both Western selfhood and the irrevocable divergence of the Islamic World from that self.

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<sup>25</sup> Rushdie, “Imagine There’s No Heaven”, *Step Across*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1985), accessed November 11, 2012, <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>.

<sup>27</sup> For useful accounts of the history of freedom of speech and its constant (re)definition in terms of political and religious climates, see Robert Hargreaves, *The First Freedom: A History of Free Speech* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002); David A. Copeland, *The Idea of a Free Press: the Enlightenment and Its Unruly Legacy*, (USA: Northwestern University Press, 2006); and the introduction to Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

For Muslims, the context is provided by secularism, its history, and its rise as *the* dominant worldview. In a secular world, where religion is relegated to personal preference and minor matters of conscience and where God has been killed, people who take their religion seriously appear not only out of step with modern times but quite abnormal. Their actions are judged against the backdrop of a bloody conflict between organised religion and forces of reason and liberty that has nothing to do with their own history. The secularization of European history and religion is one where gains have been secured after an intense physical, political, and intellectual war. Understanding secularism and its history is, therefore, the prerequisite for Muslims to make themselves understood; it is also the prerequisite for their survival as Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

Using the same emotive rhetoric of survival and extinction as we saw at play in the essays collected in *Freedom of Expression: the Acid Test*, Sardar and Davies consolidate the Enlightenment as the locus of destructive – even fatal – global cultural difference: the key figure in a mirror image of the conflict invoked by Rushdie and Hitchens.

The terrible irony of this stance – what Garcia, paraphrasing Archbishop Rowan Williams, calls “the imaginary opposition between Islam and Enlightenment” – is becoming more and more apparent in recent scholarship on eighteenth-century relations between Islamic and European worlds.<sup>29</sup> It seems significant that the Enlightenment to which Rushdie appeals so frequently in the years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the declaration of the fatwa is so firmly

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<sup>28</sup> Sardar and Davies, *Distorted Imagination*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Garcia, *Islam*, 223.

centred around the French Enlightenment and the philosophes. As I suggested in my introduction, this may be the result of the philosophe-centric historiographies of Enlightenment by scholars like Hampson and Gay that came out during his study of history at Cambridge in the late 1960s, which stage the Enlightenment in terms of a conflict between thinkers like Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire, and the Monarchy and the Church. Far from viewing eighteenth-century doctrines of secularism as a point of departure between Islam and Europe, Garcia uncovers a powerful narrative of “the emergence of Islamic-*inspired* secularization in eighteenth-century Britain”.<sup>30</sup> And, beyond the arena of British Protestantism, Voltaire himself – later in the same entry from the *Philosophical Dictionary* that we saw Kleveland quoting from above – celebrates the state-enforced religious tolerance of the Islamic world: “[l]ook at the great Turk, he governs Guebres, Banians, Greek Christians, Nestorians, Romans. The first who tried to stir up tumult would be impaled; and everyone is tranquil”.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in his *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763) – a text that must rank alongside *Candide* and the dictionary as one of Voltaire’s most influential works, certainly as far as historiographies of a continental Enlightenment go – Ottoman religious tolerance is hailed as even more of an exemplar for European states:

Let us reach out of our narrow little sphere for a moment, and examine what goes on in the rest of the globe. The Turkish prince, for example, rules peacefully over twenty races of different religious conviction; two hundred thousand Greeks live in Constantinople in perfect safety, and the Mufti himself nominates and presents the Greek patriarch to his emperor;

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<sup>30</sup> Garcia, *Islam*, xi (my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. H. I. Woolf, (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), 303.

there is even a Roman Catholic patriarch living there... This empire is stuffed with Jacobites, Nestorians, Monothelites, Coptics, Christians of St John, Jews, Gebers and Banians. The annals of Turkey bear no record of a revolt raised by any of these religious communities.

Go to India, to Persia, to Tartary, and you will find the same evidence of tolerance and mutual respect.<sup>32</sup>

As we have seen, this engagement between European and Islamic modes of thinking and governance has been submerged and almost entirely forgotten in the totalising historiographies of Islam and West that found voice in Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, and the Rushdie Affair.<sup>33</sup> The history of religiously and culturally hybrid Islamic societies, incompatible with the powerful figure of the un(E)nlightened, absolutist Muslim despot that emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century, was written over by dominant Western historiographies to the point where defenders of conservative Islamic responses to *The Satanic Verses* like Sardar and Davies almost obscure it further by replicating the Western-centric terms of "a conflict between organised religion and the forces of reason and liberty that has nothing to do with their own history".<sup>34</sup>

Once more, the early history of Islam is at the centre of this process – the same history which we have seen Rushdie and Voltaire exploit to explore semi-abstracted notions of despotism and absolutism, and which, through Garcia, we have seen eighteenth-century and Romantic-era writers configure as a time of republican

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<sup>32</sup> Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, trans. Brian Masters (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 2000), 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> "Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards. The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power." Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 50.

<sup>34</sup> Sardar and Davies, *Distorted Imagination*, 3.

promise. In twentieth-century historiographies of Islam such as Maxime Rodinson's influential Marxist study *Muhammad* (1968) and then in 1990s accounts of religio-cultural incommensurability like Bernard Lewis's "The Roots of Muslim Rage", the separation of state and religion within the Islamic world becomes an impossibility – due to the very same notion of Muhammad as legislator that is so central to eighteenth-century British Protestantism and to Voltaire.<sup>35</sup> This view (perhaps inevitably, as Rodinson occupied a similar niche in the study of Islamic history when Rushdie was at Cambridge as Peter Gay did in eighteenth century studies) is central to both *The Satanic Verses*'s representation of the birth of Islam, and Rushdie's early writings in the teeth of the fatwa. Indeed, in his journals from the time he was writing *The Satanic Verses*, Rodinson's *Muhammad* is the only source he quotes amongst his notes for what will become the Jahilia dream sequences.<sup>36</sup> "[F]rom the earliest times," he writes in "In God We Trust",

we see in Christianity a willingness to separate Church and State, and admission that such a separation is possible and maybe even desirable.

In the world of Islam, no such separation has ever occurred at the level of theory. Of all the great sacred texts the Qu'ran is most concerned with the law, and Islam has always remained an overtly social, organizing, political creed which, again theoretically, has something to say about every aspect of an individual life.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, trans. Anne Carter (London: Tauris Parke, 2002); Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage", *The Atlantic*, September 1, 1990, accessed October 12, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>. See also Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Rushdie, Journals, Box 212, Folder 9, 1985, Salman Rushdie Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, "In God We Trust", *Homelands*, 380.

Encoded in this – what purports to be a “neutral” historical account of the birth of a religion – is the same preoccupation with Islam as the despotic enemy of tolerance and individualism (“It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free”) that I have charted in *The Satanic Verses*, and yet this is a point in Rushdie’s post-fatwa career in which his cultural critique is still operating on a more-or-less Voltairian level of inter-cultural likening.<sup>38</sup> Timothy Brennan holds that Rushdie’s opposition to Conservative Britain – articulated in the Mrs Torture sections of *The Satanic Verses* – remained central to his politics, but had to be submerged in his prose for tactical reasons after the fatwa was declared in 1989 and he was forced to rely on the British state for personal protection.<sup>39</sup> This is not articulated in *Joseph Anton*, perhaps because it would interfere too much with the image of a free-thinker unbowed by gross political pressures that Rushdie is so keen to create (and which he may consider already undermined by his temporary avowal of faith in “Now I Can Say, I Am a Muslim” in the December of 1990). It does, however, still seem a reasonable assumption. In “In God We Trust” his account of Islam is balanced, almost evenly in terms of column inches, with a critique of the West – this time as America – and the rise of fundamentalist Christianities in the face of a “crisis of liberalism”.<sup>40</sup> “In its way, the religious fundamentalism of the United States is as alarming as anything in the much feared world of Islam”.<sup>41</sup> Argued, or re-argued, a year after the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s seminal essay “The End of History”, asserting the universal triumph of Western liberal democracy, this “crisis of liberalism” is brought about, in Rushdie’s narrative, by the

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<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 363-364.

<sup>39</sup> See Brennan’s “Nativism” in Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 65-92.

<sup>40</sup> Rushdie, “In God We Trust”, *Homelands*, 391.

<sup>41</sup> Rushdie, “In God We Trust”, *Homelands*, 389.

crumbling of the USA's belief in the idea of progress.<sup>42</sup> What emerges is a vision of struggling nation-states on either side of the secular/religious divide: India, Pakistan, Iran, Poland, the United States, all simultaneously created and destabilised by the overlapping and yet oppositional forces of religion and politics.

Where this essay differs significantly from the discourses of *The Satanic Verses*, is that it espouses a self-consciously Saidian account of the vilification of Islam by the West – a doctrine that looks suspiciously like the liberal discourse protesting Islamophobia that Rushdie was to attack so furiously in his later writings.

### *Rushdie's Islams*

Rushdie's relationship with and conception of Islam has undergone remarkable changes over the course of his career. Whilst this thesis does not aim to add substantively to the vast volume of literature already generated in and about the Rushdie Affair, it seems apposite here briefly to chart his political and ideological trajectory with regard to Islam in the years following the fatwa. "In God We Trust", a 1990 reworking of an 1985 essay, offers a commingling of an old academic interest in Islam derived from his study of the early history of the religion at Cambridge, and the first instance of the impassioned rhetoric of self-defence sparked by the proclamation of the fatwa. His Rodinson-inflected account of Muhammad's life quoted above is folded into a liberal narrative of Western monolithicisation of discrimination against Islam:

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<sup>42</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest* (Summer 1989). See also Fukuyama's book-length study, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Illinois: Free Press, 1992).

The sloganizing of the term “Islam” by the West in recent years has been extensively examined by Edward Said in his book *Covering Islam*. What “Islam” now means in the West is an idea that is not merely medieval, barbarous, repressive and hostile to Western civilization, but also united, unified, homogenous, and therefore dangerous: an Islamic peril to put beside the Red and Yellow ones. Not much has changed since the Crusades except that now we are not even permitted a single, leavening image of a “good Muslim” of the Saladin variety. We are back in the demonizing process which transformed the Prophet Muhammad, all those years ago, into the frightful and fiendish “Mahound”.

Whereas – and, like Said, I must make clear that it is no part of my intention to excuse or apologize for the deeds of many “Islamic” regimes – any examination of the facts will demonstrate the rifts, the lack of homogeneity and unity characteristic of present-day Islam.<sup>43</sup>

It is difficult, with the double-authorship of pre- and post-fatwa Rushdies, to pin down his ideological position here with any clarity, but it is tempting to read this text as spanning a gap between earlier, more liberal accounts of the difficulties faced by migrants in the West, and the growing sense, gathering force from *The Satanic Verses* and through the first years of the fatwa, of Islam as Other to Western concerns rather than semi-*semblable*. Sneaking into his Saidian portrayal of Islamic victimisation is the self-justifying reference to the naming of *The Satanic Verses*’ Muhammad-figure “Mahound” (a move which, as we saw in the preceding section, he inadequately attempts to gloss as a participation in the transformative reclaiming of opprobrious naming), as well as the reference to Saladin, here signifying the

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<sup>43</sup> Rushdie, “In God”, *Homelands*, 383.



historical figure celebrated by both Christendom and Islam, but subtextually underlining the cross-cultural naming of one of *The Satanic Verses*'s protagonists.

“In God We Trust” and its companion piece “In Good Faith” are notable for their emphasis on the non-unified nature of Islam. Indeed, in “In Good Faith” Rushdie very deliberately distances his attackers and detractors from the main body of Islam: “many Muslims up and down the country find it embarrassing, even shameful, to be associated with such illiberalism and violence”. Beyond this, he renders them part of the same anti-Islamic movement that he described, via Said, in the passage quoted above: “I have never given the least comfort or encouragement to racists; but the leaders of the campaign against me certainly have, by reinforcing the worst racist stereotypes of Muslims as repressive, anti-liberal, censoring zealots”.<sup>44</sup> He twice makes appeals – in the same words – to “that great mass of ordinary, decent, fair-minded Muslims” who, he says, “have provided much of the inspiration for [his] work” and whom he begs “not to let Muslim leaders make Muslims seem less tolerant than they are”.<sup>45</sup> Filtered into this appeal are the beginnings of Rushdie’s self-identification as a secular Muslim, examined in the previous chapter, which come into full bloom in “One Thousand Days in a Balloon” written the following year (“Islam doesn’t have to mean blind faith. It can mean what it always meant in your family, a culture, a civilization... open-minded... delightedly disputatious”).<sup>46</sup> The impression we are left with is that Islam is not a unified entity: there is a “bad Islam”, which is to say fundamentalist, which is the province of “Muslim leaders” and a “good Islam”, which is represented by the benevolent

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<sup>44</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 411.

<sup>45</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 395, 413.

<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, “One Thousand”, *Homelands*, 435.

Muslim masses and which – the implication goes – is not so much religious as cultural or civilizational.<sup>47</sup>

In *Faith and Knowledge*, Jacques Derrida writes

Our common “culture”... is more manifestly Christian, barely even Judaeo-Christian. No Muslim is among us, alas... just at the moment when it is towards Islam, perhaps, that we ought to begin by turning our attention. No representative of other cults either. Not a single woman! We ought to take this into account: speaking on behalf of these mute witnesses without speaking for them, in place of them, and drawing from this all sorts of consequences.<sup>48</sup>

In response to this absence of Islam, he suggests the notion of “the Abrahamic” as a means of reconsidering the pervasive, problematic tendency to consider Europe as Greco-Roman, Christian, and secular. By “unsettling” this identity, as Garcia points out, “the Abrahamic resists the West’s cultural, political, and linguistic monopoly over prophetic history”.<sup>49</sup> This offers the possibility of a recuperation of history beside, beneath, and beyond the bi- or tripartite patterns of religio-historiographical division that produce and promulgate narratives of Otherness. This is a possibility that lurks tantalisingly in the wings of *The Satanic Verses*, but is precluded by the text’s preoccupation with a specifically Islamic prophet: with *recitation* rather than

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<sup>47</sup> This is a common move in Islamophobic discourses. See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (London: Pantheon Books, 2004) and Andrew Shryock ed., *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone” in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-78, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Garcia, *Islam*, 1.

pan-Abrahamic *revelation*.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the sense of convergence between forms of religious and political despotism in both Rushdie's fiction and non-fiction in the pre- and early-fatwa years speaks of a sense of cross-cultural and -religious universality of experience when it comes to oppression.

Almost all of this is to be contradicted in Rushdie's post-9/11 rhetoric – both in the essays immediately following the attacks on the twin towers and in the retrospective gaze of *Joseph Anton* – but the most significant divergence is exemplified by an italicised sentence in the middle of “In Good Faith”, and a phenomenon Rushdie comes to term “Actually Existing Islam”. “*The responsibility of violence lies with those who perpetrate it...* There is no conceivable reason why such behaviour should be privileged because it is done in the name of an affronted religion”.<sup>51</sup> In “One Thousand Days in a Balloon”, he tells us, “I... found myself up against the granite, heartless certainties of Actually Existing Islam, by which I mean the political and priestly power structure that presently dominates and stifles Muslim societies. Actually Existing Islam has failed to create a free society anywhere on Earth”.<sup>52</sup>

It is at this point that I must collapse the post-fatwa, post-9/11, and present-day Rushdies into one another for a moment. Whilst *Joseph Anton* is a valuably complete account of the fatwa years, featuring large sections of the published post-fatwa non-fiction writings as well as detailed information and snippets of conversation clearly recorded in his journals at the time, it is also, as I have indicated, a work of retrospective self-fashioning couched firmly in terms of

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<sup>50</sup> See Louis Massignon on revelation and recitation in “The Three Prayers of Abraham” (1923), in *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, trans. Allan Cutler, ed. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989): 3-20.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 411.

<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, “One Thousand”, *Homelands*, 436-437.

Rushdie's post-9/11 political agenda. In it, he writes of attending a meeting of the Parliament of Writers in Strasbourg in 1993, where he met Jacques Derrida.

He soon realised that he and Derrida would not agree about anything. In the Algeria session he made his argument that Islam itself, Actually Existing Islam, could not be exonerated from the crimes done in its name. Derrida disagreed. The "rage of Islam" was driven not by Islam but by the misdeeds of the West. Ideology had nothing to do with it. It was a question of power.<sup>53</sup>

Adapted from the phrase "actually existing socialism" itself saturated with negative connotations of despotic soviet regimes in the Eastern Bloc, "Actually Existing Islam", when it makes its appearance in "One Thousand Days in a Balloon", marks a starkening in Rushdie's view of the separation between (despotic) Muslim leadership and (oppressed) Muslim people. It recalls and re-contextualises his assertion in "In God We Trust" about the intrinsic inseparability of state from religion in Islam – recasting what was couched in neutrally scholarly terms as a point of societal difference into a searing polemical assertion of the impossibility of freedom in an Islamic state. It is difficult to say whether this speaks of unspoken prejudice lurking beneath the 1990 text, a residual mid-eighties distance from the material at hand, or a shift in political outlook in the year between the publication of the two texts.

Certainly the phrase "he made his argument" in the *Joseph Anton* account of the 1993 meeting suggests that by this point the notion had become an intrinsic part of his stance on Islam, or at least that is how it seems to him now. Most significantly, the distance between Islam as an ideology, despotic Islamic leaders, and oppressed Islamic peoples has been collapsed by the point of his encounter with Derrida. The

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<sup>53</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 438.

idea that “[t]he responsibility of violence lies with those who perpetrate it” has now been completely overturned: violence committed in the name of Islam is no longer to be distinguished from Islam itself and considered the work of wrongful individuals, it is now to be linked inseparably to Islam. And this is not an Islamic world that is to be considered as operating dialectically (even in the violent dialectic of war) with the West. This is a consolidated, fundamentally abhorrent entity. Indeed, the notion of an Islamic world – an Islamic East – has been stripped of its geo-political borders and collapsed into an abstract: Islam.

This tendency crystallised further – and only found full voice in his published writings – after the attack on the World Trade Centre. In his essays which followed 9/11, this conception of an ideologically, politically, culturally, and geographically consolidated Islam is ranged against a “West” into which, as we have seen, abstracts such as freedom of expression, freedom of imagination, freedom, and Enlightenment had been telescoped. In “Not About Islam?” he writes that Islam, for the vast majority of Muslims, stands for “the fear of God ... the sequestration ... of their women,” and a “loathing (and fear) of the prospect that their own immediate surroundings could be taken over – ‘Westoxicated’ – by the liberal Western-style way of life”.<sup>54</sup> Where the pre-9/11 Rushdie had been careful – at least in public – to temper his anti-*fatwa* rhetoric with assertions that “the great mass” of Muslims were “ordinary, decent, fair-minded,” for the post-9/11 Rushdie “fair-minded” Muslims had become the minority, and liberalism was intrinsically Western<sup>55</sup>. Statements naming “the authority of the United States... the best current guarantor of... freedom,” and declaring that “to oppose the spread of American culture would be to take up arms against the wrong foe,” in an uneasy cultural-geographical transposition

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<sup>54</sup> Rushdie, “Islam?” *Step Across*, 395.

<sup>55</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 395.

or collage, render the USA the new location of Rushdie's continental vision of Enlightenment: the new Gup.<sup>56</sup>

Beyond any of this, the move in *Joseph Anton* to vilifying the notion of Islamophobia moves Rushdie the furthest away from his philosophe ideal.

Something new was happening here: the growth of a new intolerance. It was spreading across the surface of the earth, but nobody wanted to know. A new word had been created to help the blind remain blind: *Islamophobia*. To criticise the militant stridency of this religion in its contemporary incarnation was to be a bigot. A *phobic* person was extreme and irrational in his views, and so the fault lay with such persons and not with the wide belief system that boasted over one billion followers worldwide. One billion followers could not be wrong, therefore the critics must be the ones foaming at the mouth. When, he wanted to know, did it become irrational to dislike religion, any religion, even to dislike it vehemently? When did reason get redescribed as unreason? When were the fairy stories of the superstitious placed above criticism, beyond satire?<sup>57</sup>

Rushdie's vision of the Enlightenment, whilst not specifically referenced here, resonates beneath the repeated invocation of his watchwords – reason, unreason, superstition and satire. It is a final, even shocking, move away from the discourses of intercultural tolerance that he had propounded, in diminishing measures, through the 1980s, 1990s, and even into the early twenty-first century. The Saidian awareness of the vilification of Islam that still glimmered in his early-fatwa rhetoric

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<sup>56</sup> Rushdie, "Islam?" *Step Across*, 392, 297.

<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 344-345.

has now not only been extinguished, but rendered illogical – reactionary and extremist. The Voltaireian doctrine of tolerance (“I may not agree with what you say...”) which lit and shaped early responses to the fatwa from Rushdie and his supporters has become, bizarrely, a call to arms for the intolerance of tolerance. The gap between Rushdie’s vision of himself as the new Voltaire and the philosophe credentials of his literary output have been stretched to breaking point.

### *Joseph Anton: Philosophe?*

In the final pages of *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie launches a final, impassioned paean to the power of literature:

This is what literature knew, had always known. Literature tried to *open the universe*, to increase, even if only slightly, the sum total of what it was possible for human beings to perceive, understand, and so, finally, to be. Great literature went to the edges of the known and pushed against the boundaries of language, form, and possibility, to make the world feel larger, wider, than before. Yet this was an age in which men and women were being pushed towards ever narrower definitions of themselves, encouraged to call themselves just one thing, Serb or Croat or Israeli or Palestinian or Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Baha’i or Jew, and the narrower their identities became, the greater was the likelihood of conflict between them. Literature’s view of human nature encouraged understanding, sympathy and identification with people not like oneself,

but the world was pushing everyone in the opposite direction, towards narrowness, bigotry, tribalism, cultism, and war.<sup>58</sup>

Literature, then, is the pathway to inter-cultural accord – beyond that, to the Derrida-like dissolution of harmful and arbitrary religious, political, and cultural boundaries between people. Literature is the road to universal (E)nlightenment, a panacea offering the antidote to oppression and, ultimately, a kind of humanist apotheosis. Noble as this sentiment is, *Joseph Anton* as a wider text raises worrying questions about who has the ability – even the right – to access this humanist paradise. The trope of literature versus Islam which we saw burgeoning in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in the previous chapter, has found full voice in the memoir long before this final idealist meditation. “The love of literature,” we are told, “was a thing impossible to explain to his adversaries, who only loved one book, whose text was immutable and immune to interpretation, being the uncreated word of God”.<sup>59</sup> Not only is Islam antithetical to literature but, crucially, Muslims are constitutionally unable to practice literary criticism – that is to say, they cannot read properly. As Zoë Heller points out in her review of *Joseph Anton* in *The New York Review of Books*,

[i]n a departure from the standard, liberal notion that literature must be free to offend, he proposes that literature, properly understood, *cannot* offend. Muslims who were insulted by *The Satanic Verses* were guilty of a category error: just like Anis Rushdie, in his

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<sup>58</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 628.

<sup>59</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 213.



“unsophisticated” reading of *Midnight’s Children*, they had confused fiction with other sorts of speech...<sup>60</sup>

This comes down once more to Rushdie’s vision of the early history of Islam. In a speech at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2008, amidst another invocation of the idea of a battle for the Enlightenment – this time, tellingly, with the US-oriented (and mathematically questionable) “the French Enlightenment 200 years ago, out of which this country was founded” – he dwells on the specifically Islamic resistance to literary interpretation:

“Islam is the only religion born inside a political culture,” he told the USCB audience. “If the Quran is written by God (as conservative Muslims believe), than that becomes irrelevant.” The practical meaning of that interpretation, he said, that what is written in the Quran can’t be changed. “You can’t edit God,” Rushdie said, eliciting laughter from the audience.

In Christianity, he said, man is presumed to be created in the image of God, so the Bible is theoretically open to interpretation. Since the Quran is not open to change, Rushdie said, it leads to political tyranny, intellectual stagnation and collapse.<sup>61</sup>

This appeal to a vision of the foundational precepts of Islam as anti-literary renders his argument in *Joseph Anton* that there is a dark Islamic “project: the stifling of heterodoxy and dissent” – even a “global Islamic assault on free thinkers” – a matter

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<sup>60</sup> Zoë Heller “The Salman Rushdie Case” *New York Review of Books*, December 2012, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/dec/20/salman-rushdie-case/?pagination=false> .

<sup>61</sup> Margo Kline, “Salman Rushdie Urges Enlightenment”, *Noozhawk*, May 6, 2008, accessed January 18, 2014, [http://www.noozhawk.com/article/salman\\_rushdie\\_urgens\\_enlightenment/](http://www.noozhawk.com/article/salman_rushdie_urgens_enlightenment/).

of historical and cultural inevitability.<sup>62</sup> Literary ability, either to read or write, is stripped from any Muslim thinker whom Rushdie sees as hostile: a scant six pages after the above indictment of Islam's stifling of dissent, he describes the way in which

the *Independent*, which was becoming a sort of house journal for British Islam, carried an article by the "writer" Ziauddin Sardar who said, "The best course for Mr Rushdie and his supporters is to shut up. A fly caught in a cobweb does not draw attention to itself." The fly in question called the editor of that newspaper to tell him he would no longer write reviews for its book pages.<sup>63</sup>

What is especially notable here is not merely the hypocrisy of Rushdie's attempts to smother dissent from his own position, but the inverted commas around the word "writer". Sardar, seen by Rushdie to be writing from inside the envelope of Islam, is to be denied even the name of "writer", for literariness and Islam are mutually exclusive. Similarly, a few pages earlier, Tariq Modood is deprived of his eligibility to be considered a thinker by being glossed as an "intellectual" in inverted commas.<sup>64</sup> Rushdie has come to police the borders of an exclusively Western province of freedom of speech.

### *The Accidental Philosophe*

In a speech at the 2012 India Today Conclave replicated almost precisely in

*Joseph Anton*, Rushdie declaimed:

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<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 303, 390. It is worth noting that the Islamic concept of *ijtihad*, or reasoning about scripture would challenge Rushdie's rather simplistic account.

<sup>63</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 309.

<sup>64</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 282.

At the time of the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, the great writers and intellectuals of that movement, Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, knew that their real enemy was not the state but the Church. Earlier, when the mighty Rabelais was under fire from the Church, it was the King of France who defended him on the grounds of his genius. What an age that must have been, in which a writer could be defended because of his talent! After Rabelais, the 18th century writers of the Enlightenment insisted that no Church, even a Church with an inquisition at its disposal, could be allowed to place limiting points on thought. The so-called crimes of blasphemy and heresy were the targets because those were the methods used by the Church to limit discussion; and the modern idea of free speech was arrived at by defeating the notion that these were offences and that these could be used as ways of silencing expression.<sup>65</sup>

This movement towards a benevolent dictatorship founded upon principles of erudite literary appreciation marks, perhaps, an inadvertent move back towards the worldview of the philosophes – one less consonant with the idea of figures like Voltaire as mouthpieces for republicanism, universal freedom of speech, and the rights of man which more frequently characterises Rushdie’s notion of the Enlightenment. As Robert Hargreaves writes of the philosophes,

[f]ew of them believed in democracy – Voltaire repeatedly referred to the common people as a “rabble” and on the whole put his trust in an enlightened and educated monarchy, his ideal being a “benign despot”

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<sup>65</sup> Rushdie, “India Today Conclave Speech”, March 12, 2012, accessed October 30, 2013, [http://conclave.intoday.in/conclave2012/speechtranscript.php?id=3429&issueid=38\\_](http://conclave.intoday.in/conclave2012/speechtranscript.php?id=3429&issueid=38_)

like his friend Frederick the Great. Freedom, in which he passionately believed, would be imposed from above by the few enlightened men who were capable of thinking for themselves. Free speech was reserved for the educated elite, and still considered to be too dangerous to entrust to the masses.<sup>66</sup>

In 2003, as we have seen, Said remarked of Rushdie that “[t]here’s a greater disconnect between his non-fictional prose and his fiction, now, than there was in the decade of the 1980s”.<sup>67</sup> In the conclusion to this thesis I examine this widening gulf, which Rushdie would have us believe is a move away from the politicised fictional text towards a form of politically engendered, yet apolitical, aesthetics. Certainly, with its idealised representation of the Mughal emperor Akbar, *The Enchantress of Florence* seems to speak of a yearning for the days – or at least the idea – of the Enlightened despot. It is a far cry from his 1980s and 1990s war cries of “Outside the Whale”, and yet I would argue that what Rushdie bills as his retreat from the political into history could be the means by which we might recuperate possibilities of positive intercultural engagements – both within Rushdie’s oeuvre and within the wider, and even more conflicted, political and cultural arena in which it sits.

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Hargreaves, *The First Freedom*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Said, in Waheed, “Salman Rushdie”.

## Conclusion

# Back to the Future: History as Futurity in *The Enchantress of Florence*

*What we are seeking to know is a portion of human history. It is not a history of the past, however, but a history of future times, i.e. a predictive history.*<sup>1</sup>

Writing amidst the mass slaughter of the Second World War, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno turned to history in search of a cause for the near-global descent into violence that took place over the first half of the twentieth century – famously settling, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), on an idea associated with the eighteenth century. Twenty-two years later, Adorno wrote that:

After the catastrophes that have happened and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it... No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.<sup>2</sup>

9/11, the catastrophe with which *this* century opened, was described by Rushdie as “the worst-case scenario [come] true”.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, it marked a turning point in Rushdie’s view of inter-cultural relations: a polarising of his conception of Islamic East and Secular West that surpassed even the impact of the fatwa. In “Not About Islam?” he distances his position from Samuel Huntington’s clash-of-civilisations

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin Books, 2009; 1784), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond (New York: Continuum, 1981), 320.

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie, “October 2001: The Attacks on America”, *Step Across*, 391.

thesis only in so far as “the Islamists’ project is not only turned against the West and ‘the Jews,’ but also against their fellow-Islamists”, citing tension between the Taliban and Iranian regimes.<sup>4</sup>

The pessimism and despair of this maelstrom of rhetoric is reminiscent of another author writing amidst “the appalling manifestations of politics-gone-wild”, George Orwell.<sup>5</sup> In his 1984 essay “Outside the Whale”, Rushdie challenges the fatalistic doctrine of political quietism Orwell expresses in “Inside the Whale”, but is sympathetic to the bleakness of the historical moment he was writing in. “I do not blame him”, he says, “[h]e lived in the worst of times”.<sup>6</sup> If, in the 1980s, the war of Orwell and Adorno seemed the worst of times, with Rushdie’s assertion in 2001 that on 9/11 the “worst-case scenario came true” it seems that he found himself at a similarly catastrophic point of global crisis. Whilst his next novel, *Shalimar the Clown* in 2005, marks a turn away from the apocalyptic journalistic outpouring of the immediately post-9/11 years, back to familiar questions of communalism, globalism, and the deforming effects of religion in general, there can be no doubt, as I suggested in my introduction, that it is a text born out of the ashes of the twin towers.

After these dark years, in which one mongrel space after another is destroyed by monophilic despotism, *The Enchantress of Florence* is one long celebration of “hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas”.<sup>7</sup> If the mongrelization passage from “In Good Faith” was disingenuous about *The Satanic Verses*, it could, I

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<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, “Islam?” *Step Across*, 395.

<sup>5</sup> Rushdie, “Outside the Whale”, *Homelands*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Rushdie, “Whale”, *Homelands*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.

would suggest, be applied to his 2006 novel with complete accuracy. “It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure”. *The Enchantress of Florence* “is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves”.<sup>8</sup> Notably, however, in this text Rushdie’s ideals of mongrelization are embodied partly in the figure of an oriental despot: the Mughal emperor Akbar.

This conclusion does not mark an ending so much as an unfolding: it examines Rushdie’s return to history in this, his self-proclaimed most historical novel, as a means of recovering the possibilities of his earlier visions of a joined-up world. It investigates the possibility that this novel is what Kant, in the epigraph to this chapter, terms “a predictive history”.<sup>9</sup> As Catherine Cundy and Nicole M. Gyulay have pointed out, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is the only text in which we see the triumph of hybridity, with the commingling of the cultural hemispheres of Gup and Chup.<sup>10</sup> Cundy posits that this is because of its genre, that writing a fantasy tale for children allows Rushdie the kind of “wish-fulfilment” denied to him by his adult fiction: what Roger Young Clark terms “an escape from the real-world threats of dogma and fatwa”.<sup>11</sup> It seems significant that *The Enchantress of Florence*, written in the wake of a similar crisis-point (though admittedly not so soon after), should constitute a similar break from the rest of his canon – both ideological and generic. If *Haroun* was an escape into fantasy, and the childhood world of happy endings, *Enchantress* is a return to history – a far more potent destination in terms of Rushdie’s inter-cultural discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *An Answer*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Cundy, *Salman Rushdie*, 86-87; Nicole Gyulay, “‘Multiplicity Destroyed by Singularity’: Rushdie and Religious Hybridity” in *Spiritual Identities: Literature and the Post-Secular Imagination*, ed. Jo Carruthers and Andrew Tate (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 149-160, 156.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Young Clark, *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie’s Other Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 183.

*The Enchantress of Florence* is set in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries – a tale of two journeys across the world culminating in inter-cultural penetration, one the West-to-East voyage of a mysterious yellow-haired storyteller from Florence to Fatehpur Sikri, the capital of the Mughal emperor Akbar, and one the East-to-West journey of the beautiful Mughal princess and enchantress Qara Koz, from India to Florence. Whilst he may side-step the issue of the text’s direct involvement with contemporary politics in interviews, the narrative that Rushdie weaves again and again about the genesis of the book is telling. Setting out to create a fictive encounter between the two golden ages taking place simultaneously in India and Europe, he tells successive interviewers that “the more I read about these two worlds, having set out thinking that I was bringing together two worlds that had very little in common with each other, I discovered that they were actually almost mirror images of each other”.<sup>12</sup>

Bearing in mind his self-professed near-lifelong fascination with these twin Renaissances, this tale of a discovery of similitude seems likely to be just that – a typical example of Rushdie’s appetite for a good story and, perhaps more cynically, its marketing power. Certainly the text’s emphasis on cultural mirroring is not slow to make its appearance, with the emperor Akbar’s early infatuation with “his female mirror image” Elizabeth I.<sup>13</sup> And we are not quite a third of the way through the book before its central thesis of universalism is boldly stated in italics: “*This may be the curse of the human race... Not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike*”.<sup>14</sup> Florence and Fatehpur Sikri are both bustling cosmopolises, hybrid communities full of a Babel of “half-understood tongues”, and “pomaded

<sup>12</sup> Rushdie, in Ramona Koval, “The Book Show”, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 21, 2008, accessed 7 March, 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/salman-rushdies-enchantress/3268052>.

<sup>13</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 74.

<sup>14</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 137.



exotics, weather-beaten merchants [and] narrow-faced priests”, recalling his representation of pre-Islamic Jahilia in *The Satanic Verses*, discussed in the second chapter.<sup>15</sup> Fatehpur Sikri is home to Hindus, Persians, Turanis, and Indian-born Muslims, and the very warehouses of Florence are hybrid communities of “wild Slav harlots... melancholy Polish doxies... loud Roman strumpets... thick German tarts... [and] Swiss mercenaries as ferocious in bed as their male counterparts were on the field of battle”.<sup>16</sup> As the citizenry of Fatehpur Sikri become obsessed with the traveller’s tales of “the drink-sodden daily life and sex-crazed nocturnal culture of far-away Florence”, so the Florentines fall under the spell of the Mughal princess, “*a princess not only of faraway Indy or Cathay, but of our own Florence too*”.<sup>17</sup> Not only are they mirror images of each other but, with a more requited passion than Akbar’s for Elizabeth, his mirror-queen, the two cities fall in love. “We are their dream,” one of the emperor’s queens tells him, “and they are ours”.<sup>18</sup>

Though his humanist musings are paralleled by Machiavelli’s in Florence, Akbar’s internal monologues about selfhood, religion, and society are Rushdie’s primary vehicle for his own doctrines of secularism, freedom of speech and hybridity. “In the heart of his victory city he would build a house of adoration”, the emperor decides, “a place of disputation where everything could be said to everyone by anyone on any subject, including the non-existence of God and the abolition of kings”. He wants, we are told, “to be able to say, it is man at the centre of things, not God... man the angel and the devil, the miracle and the sin... man and always man, and let us henceforth have no other temples but those dedicated to mankind”.<sup>19</sup> It becomes evident, then, that although the novel may be removed in time from the rest

<sup>15</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 34, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 28, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 200, 278 (Rushdie’s emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 36, 83.

of Rushdie's corpus, it is no less passionately engaged with the contemporary discourses at the heart of his oeuvre than any of his other texts. Indeed, in one interview he is prompted to say that:

The part of this book that deals with ideas — I suppose there is an unsaid subtext here, which is that there are such things as universals. There are ideas which grew up in the West, and in a slightly different form they grew up as well in the East — the idea of freedom, of open discourse, of tolerance, of sexual freedom even to the level of hedonism, these are things which human beings have come up with as important ideas everywhere that there have been human beings. So to say that that we must now consider them to be culturally specific... is a denial of human nature. If there is an author's message in this book, it was actually the discovery that I made that the worlds of the book were more like each other, than unlike.<sup>20</sup>

The widening gulf between Rushdie's non-fictional prose and his fiction that we saw Said remark upon in 2003 seems to have grown yet wider.<sup>21</sup> In *The Enchantress of Florence* and the interviews he gives to promote it, he is not only celebrating cultural hybridity as mongrelization in a manner unseen since his pre-fatwa years, he is propounding an Enlightenment-inflected doctrine of universalism that seems entirely at odds with the stark vision of cultural difference espoused in his non-fiction.

This novel marks a return to the themes which have marked both my account of Rushdie's literary and political careers, and the wider cultural discourses going

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew D'Ancona, "We Have Been Wimpish About Defending Our Ideas", *Spectator*, April 9, 2008, accessed 5 March, 2012, [http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/600936/part\\_3/we-have-been-wimpish-about-defending-our-ideas.shtml](http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/600936/part_3/we-have-been-wimpish-about-defending-our-ideas.shtml).

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Waheed, "Salman Rushdie", *The Margins*, September 26, 2013, accessed January 25, 2014, <http://aaww.org/salman-rushdie-edward-said-and-moral-courage/>.

back to the eighteenth century which I have identified at work in relations between Islam and West. Scheherazade, the Eastern female space, the power of narrative, heteroglossic hybridity, and monoglossic despotism – all are reconsidered here; all are modulated, and yet remain as problematic as they ever were. But beyond any of these returns, I will argue, the most significant characteristic of this novel is the way in which it constitutes a powerful return to history. This return, although it presupposes a singular, consolidated history, is a move which in a sense is the mirror of my own critical manoeuvre in this study. Although cautious of Rushdie's casual use of what might be characterised as an Actually Existing past as a means of understanding the present, my own sense is that it is through pluralising our ideas of history that we can best challenge the monolithic views which so threaten our present.

### *Enlightened Despotism*

Despotism once more forms the heart of Rushdie's ideological framework in this novel – and yet, far from the hydra-like cross-cultural monster of oppression that despotism represents in *The Satanic Verses*, in *The Enchantress of Florence* it seems to offer not only harm, but a possibility of redemption. Key to navigating the seeming gap between Rushdie's recent fiction and politics is the nostalgia for the idea of the kind of Enlightened despot who defended Rabelais from the Catholic church: "What an age that must have been", we saw him sigh to the India Today Conclave in 2012, "in which a writer could be defended because of his talent!".<sup>22</sup> In the figure of the emperor Akbar, as we have seen, Rushdie creates a powerful mouthpiece for his own views of secular humanism, and yet – perhaps

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<sup>22</sup> Rushdie, "India Today".

unsurprisingly – this Rushdie figure seemingly also represents the kind of regime under which Rushdie himself would like to write. Akbar surrounds himself with philosophers, artists, poets, and musicians. Not only does he go out of his way to find and foster new talent – as with his discovery of the great artist Dashwanth, the lowly son of a palanquin bearer – but he involves artists in the very creation of his empire, his world. “So it was Dashwanth whom Akbar summoned when he had his idea about undoing his grandfather’s harsh deed and restoring the hidden princess to the history of her family at last. ‘Paint her into the world,’ he exhorted Dashwanth, ‘for there is such magic in your brushes that she may even come to life, spring off your pages and join us for feasting and wine’”.<sup>23</sup> In the artists’ studios of Akbar’s court, the artistic elite of the empire come together in a hybrid Persian and Hindustani community:

The hero in Dashwanth’s pictures became the emperor’s mirror, and all the hundred and one artists gathered in the studio learned from him, even the Persian masters, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad. In their collaborative paintings of the adventures of Hamza and his friends, Mughal Hindustan was literally being invented; the union of the artists prefigured the unity of the empire and, perhaps, brought it into being.<sup>24</sup>

This performative artistic-historical syncretism recalls one of Rushdie’s few postergirls for successful cultural hybridity, as discussed in chapter Four. Zeeny Vakil from *The Satanic Verses*, is an art critic who writes a book on “the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-

<sup>23</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 118, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 119.

the-best-and-leave-the-rest?”<sup>25</sup> Whilst I will return to the significance of Zeeny’s retroactive identification of hybridity later in my conclusion, it is important to mark the consonance of these moments here: arts and the successful, culturally-hybrid state are mutually constitutive. Indeed, the state-patronised world-building of the artists, poets, and musicians of Akbar’s court amounts to the same process as state-building itself.

As Justin Neuman points out in “The Fictive Origins of Secular Humanism”, “[t]here is a fundamental, unaddressed tension at the heart of *The Enchantress of Florence* – and indeed in much of Rushdie’s fiction and prose – between his explicit and implicit endorsements of secularism, humanism, and pluralism, on the one hand, and his equally pervasive argument for the power of fiction on the other”.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the power of fiction, and particularly fantastical fiction, seems at odds with Rushdie’s rationalist views. Akbar, we are told, is “the Enchanter. In this place he would conjure a new world, a world beyond religion, region, rank, and tribe... An emperor was the bewitcher of the real, and with such accomplices his witchcraft could not fail”. The accomplices that will aid him in this act of magical world-building are “the Nine Stars, the nine most brilliant of the most brilliant” – recalling the nine muses – a selection of thinkers and artists from across the empire. Selected for special mention, beside geniuses of governance and finance: “[t]he songs of Tansen could break open the seals of the universe and let divinity through into the everyday world. The poems of Faizi opened windows in the heart and mind through which both light and darkness could be seen”.<sup>27</sup> Surrounded by his constellation of artistic, philosophical, and political *lumières*, it becomes clear that it is not only his

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<sup>25</sup> Rushdie, *Verses*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Justin Neuman, “The Fictive Origins of Secular Humanism”, *Criticism* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 675-682, 680.

<sup>27</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 43.

secular humanist principles that Akbar shares with Rushdie: it is his status as enchanter, as a conjuror of worlds. Of all the many avatars of the author, with his god-like ability to transform and invent reality through narrative, which crowd the text, Akbar is the most powerful: a poet as acknowledged legislator of the world:

Queens floated within his palaces like ghosts, Rajput and Turkish sultanas playing catch-me-if-you-can. One of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of the presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real. He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him. Within the privacy of the women's quarters, within the silken corridors of her palace, her influence and power grew. Tansen wrote songs for her and in the studio-scriptorium her beauty was celebrated in portraiture and verse. Master Abdus Samad the Persian portrayed her himself... and after this visionary work by the master of the emperor's atelier had been exhibited, the whole court knew Jodha to be real... all acknowledged not only her existence but also her beauty, her wisdom, the grace of her movements and the softness of her voice.<sup>28</sup>

Through the powerful fusion of art with more mundane structures of control, Akbar's rule is rendered truly absolute: he is, quite literally, a god-like emperor. In the beginning is his word.

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<sup>28</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 27-28.

Enlightened he may be, in his commitment to philosophy, the arts, and secular humanism, but there is no question that the emperor is a despot. One of our first encounters with him finds him quelling an uprising on the Kathiawar peninsula from “a feudal ruler absurdly fond of talking about freedom”. “This time... he had irritably torn the insolent Rana’s moustache off his handsome face, and had chopped the weakling dreamer into garish pieces – had done it personally, with his own sword, just as his grandfather would have”.<sup>29</sup> Whilst this episode demonstrates the despotic violence Akbar is capable of, however, it also signposts the text’s readiness to engage with the kind of questions about progress and universal history we saw Adorno answering sadly above. “History repeats itself,” the young prince says to the emperor, as he kneels at his feet, “Your grandfather killed my grandfather seventy years ago”. “Our grandfather,” Akbar replies, “was a barbarian with a poet’s tongue. We, by contrast, are a poet with a barbarian’s history and a barbarian’s prowess in war, which we detest. Thus it is demonstrated that history does not repeat itself, but moves forward, and that Man is capable of change”.<sup>30</sup>

What makes Akbar perhaps a particularly Enlightened despot in eighteenth-century terms is not so much the rationalist ideals he propounds, but his status as a man in the process of a *journey* towards (E)nlightenment: “The king was not content with being. He was striving to become”. Not only does Akbar decide to build the house of disputation, but “He would teach himself humility in that house. No, now he was being unfair to himself. Not ‘teach’. Rather, he would remind himself of, and recover, the humility that was already lodged deep in his heart”.<sup>31</sup> This is an Enlightenment – although never addressed by Rushdie in such specific terms – that

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<sup>29</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 32-33.

<sup>30</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 36.

owes much more to Kant's famous definition than to the unhistorical invocations of the philosophes that we have seen in Rushdie's non-fictional prose. "*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another*".<sup>32</sup> In his determination to find enlightenment – and to find it "lodged deep in his heart" – Akbar is enacting a process of self-improvement very consonant with late eighteenth-century philosophical ideals.<sup>33</sup> Where the emperor's process of (E)nlightenment is derailed from its Kantian trajectory, however, is that it does in the end rely on the guidance of another: the Scheherazadian figure of Mogor the storyteller.

Akbar is at a point of crisis: "[h]e trusted beauty, painting, and the wisdom of his forebears. In other things, however, he was losing confidence; in, for example, religious faith". This doubt provides fertile ground for – indeed, is part of – the process of enlightenment, and yet what he yearns for is an interlocutor: "[a]bove all... I yearn for a young man I can trust". Sure enough, "[t]hat very day a yellow-haired young man was brought before him wearing an absurd long coat made up of particoloured leather lozenges, and holding a letter from the Queen of England in his hand".<sup>34</sup> Amidst the "constant hubbub" of the Tent of the New Worship, with "the kingdom's finest thinkers gashing one another dreadfully with their words", Mogor triggers silent terror by publicly contradicting the emperor. When he is warned by the crown prince that he could be killed for saying such a thing to the king, Mogor replies "If I can die for such a thing in this city... then it's not a city worth living in.

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<sup>32</sup> Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*, 1 (Kant's emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 59-60.



And besides, I understood that in this tent it was reason, not the king, that ruled”.<sup>35</sup> For all the novel’s emphasis on the sixteenth-century doubled East-West provenance of secular humanism, the centrality of rhetorics of reason – reason, in fact, paradoxically deified (“reason was a mortal divinity”) – to Akbar’s Fatehpur Sikri owes a great deal to Rushdie’s broad-brushstroke historiography of the Enlightenment as the Age of Reason.<sup>36</sup> Into this space, in which “[a]rgument itself – and no deity, however multi-limbed or almighty – would... be the only god”, Mogor strides, “a man of reason who in reason’s name [takes] unreasonable risks”.<sup>37</sup>

Like Scheherazade, his intention is to enchant the emperor with stories – to enchant him, and as he does so, enact a form of civilising process. In this case, as Scheherazade did on her arrival in Europe through Galland in 1704, he brings with him exotic cultural freight: life-giving narratives of far-away cultures that will be the catalyst for new heights of cultural hybridity in Akbar’s capital. Scheherazade’s power returns in full force in *The Enchantress of Florence*. No longer is the power of narrative used to deform and twist the lives of the oppressed, as we saw it do in *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses*, no longer is it in a battle for its very survival, as it was in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*; in this novel, narrative – migrant narrative – is the life-blood of the world. And yet, once again, Scheherazade herself is disenfranchised, her narrative power co-opted by men.

### *Scheherazade Ensnared*

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<sup>35</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 79, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 80, 82.

*Woman... is the very sum and matter of my story.*<sup>38</sup>

*The Enchantress of Florence* is the story of a woman told by a man, to a man: the female space, contained and constructed by walls of male narrative, is once more Rushdie's central figure. Beginning on the book's cover, with the words "*The Enchantress of Florence* [by] Salman Rushdie", woman after woman is created and encased by the minds of men in a structure that is reminiscent not so much of the mismatched set of Russian dolls of *Shame*, but of the infinite, diminishing reflections of a hall of mirrors. The many women of the text all spring from male imagination(s). The God-like force of the author's imagination as (textual) world-creating becomes, as we have seen, a metaphor for the world-shaping force of the patriarchal imagination. Women and the female space, therefore, once more occupy a metonymic position, each one a synecdochic emblem of the larger forces which have constructed them: history, culture and the desires of men. The women of *The Enchantress of Florence* are both singular and plural, both encompassing and being encompassed by multitudes. This is echoed by the material reality of the book: its title implies that it is a single woman, *The Enchantress*, who contains a world and yet, either held open in the hands of the reader or closed on a shelf, amongst other books, is *of* the world. The female space is still bounded, but unlike the *Shame*-cage it is not a place of stagnation and death, but a zone of possibilities: here, once more, we see the harem as liberating as well as constricting. The individual women of the text, whether Eastern or Western, all open out into a single, mystical, "world-swallowing," yet "world-swallowed" feminine space.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 142.

<sup>39</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 30; note the reference to Saleem's repeated assertion in *Midnight's Children* that "to understand me you have to swallow a world".

Rushdie uses this conceit in order to propound his doctrine of universalism, seeking to elide myths of difference between East and West, and, with a familiarly self-reflexive pre-emptive gesture, implicitly invokes the Subaltern Studies movement with the central notion of “the theft of [women’s] histories” by men.<sup>40</sup> This gesture is rendered impotent, however, by the fact that the Subaltern Studies project is never allowed to come to fruition: the true histories of the women in *The Enchantress of Florence* are never revealed. Qara Köz, the most significant of all the enchantresses in the novel, has her story told for her by Mogor, the Scheherazade-supplanter. Calling himself “Mogor dell’ Amore” (“Mughal of Love”), he claims that the princess Qara Köz, youngest sister to Akbar’s grandfather, gave birth to him after working her way across Asia to Renaissance Florence by enchanting a series of powerful men. The novel alternates between the depiction of the traveller’s reception in the imperial court and the Scheherazade-tales he tells of his “mother”, which, whilst they spark the Enlightenment of king and court, are designed to (vicariously) win the emperor’s love as much as to prove the story teller’s credentials as a member of the imperial family. Qara Köz’s story has no parameters but itself, no concrete intersection with a discrete textual reality, and thus the reader can never be sure whether the lost princess ever existed outside of a male fiction. The portrait of “the enchantress” as a beautiful, empowered woman, it is implied, could be merely the mirror of Akbar’s desires held up for him to admire. Certainly, by the end of the text Akbar has fallen hopelessly in love with the imagined image of Qara Köz, who, as her story has circulated through the court, has become a city-wide obsession. Mogor, with his spellbinding narrative, is not just a Scheherazade figure, but another avatar of Rushdie.

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<sup>40</sup> See, for a seminal example of the Subaltern Studies project, Ranajit Guha’s “Chandra’s Death”, *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society* ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135-165.

### *Imagining Women*

The figure of the enchantress does not derive its power over the collective imagination of Fatehpur Sikri from its newness, but from its status as an exoticised avatar of the familiar. Qara Kōz is not the first imaginary woman to walk the halls of the Mughal capital: as we have seen, long before the arrival of the traveller, Akbar had created his imaginary wife Jodha. This perfect woman is a hybrid being, a composite whole made up of fragments of his other wives, her “limitless beauty... from one consort, her Hindu religion from another, and her uncountable wealth from yet a third”.<sup>41</sup> Having begun life as the abstract fantasy of the emperor, she is given flesh by the pens and brushes of the male artists of the court, and gathers reality through a multiplicity of male representation until the whole city “knows her to be real”. Qara Kōz is similarly “realised” through male representation: Mogor narrates her, Akbar imagines her, and Dashwanth “paint[s] her into the world”.<sup>42</sup> As she enchants the people of Florence in Mogor’s narrative, she enchants the people of Fatehpur Sikri, who begin to “dream of her all the time... courtiers as well as guttersnipes, *sadhus* as well as whores”:

[She] was becoming all things to all people... she was being used as one of those vessels into which human beings pour their own preferences... their unrealized selves, their shadows.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 28, 120.

<sup>43</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 199-200.

This “vesseldom” is to be both the enchantress’s fate and the source of her power wherever she goes: as she enters Florence, she immediately becomes the city’s “new symbol of itself”.<sup>44</sup> Qara Kōz is a mobile signifier, a shape into which anything can be poured, that can be made to represent anything: just as the name “Qara Kōz” is merely a new term for the vessel of human preference which had been called “Jodha” in Fatehpur Sikri, in Florence she is simply the exotic reincarnation of two other “enchantresses” who have gone before, Simonetta Cattaneo and the courtesan “La Fiorentina”. Where Qara Kōz’s non-threatening “easternness” causes a frisson of sexual thrill in her Florentine public, her “Westoxication” is seen by the inhabitants of Fatehpur Sikri as “a little shocking but entirely delightful”.<sup>45</sup> With the equivalence of these responses to her Otherness, Rushdie makes a point of de-exoticising the exotic, indicating a universal thirst for familiar strangeness which dislocates Said’s theory of Orientalism from its Western point of origin and gestures towards a fundamental universality of human nature.

### *Dislocating Orientalism: A Universal Other*

Women, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, are the universal Other: whilst Qara Kōz, Jodha, and the two previous enchantresses of Florence are the receptacles of the fantastic, the unknown, of myth, “unrealised selves” and “shadows”, Akbar is the embodiment of the empirical, the known, “of all his subjects, of all his cities and lands and rivers and mountains and lakes”.<sup>46</sup> The projection of (patriarchal) society’s abstract fantasy into the passive female interior is an extension of the

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<sup>44</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 275

<sup>45</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 200.

<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 200, 31.

projection of sexual fantasy into the voluptuous darkness of Aravamudan's uterine, psychosexual harem interior which we met in Chapter Two. In this, Rushdie's (self-professedly) most sexually charged novel, female eroticism is bound up with the mysterious and the hidden rather than the corporeal and the known.<sup>47</sup> The first mention of women in the text comes at the end of a long, visceral description of the material wealth, "raucousness" and grandeur of Fatehpur Sikri. Amidst the corporeality of the scene comes suddenly a suggestion of otherworldliness: "were those women's voices the traveller could hear on the wind, ululating, teasing, enticing, laughing at unseen men?"<sup>48</sup> The perception of women is, from the first, half an act of imagination, and the act of imagination is firmly bound up with sexual fantasisation.

Mogor's first impression of the women of Akbar's harem is "fluttering movements behind curtained windows and latticed screens".<sup>49</sup> Immediately, the machinery of male fantasy clicks into gear and we are told that "[i]n the darkness of the windows," he "imagined that he could make out a host of shining eyes".<sup>50</sup> Rushdie is once more portraying the harem in the Saidian Orientalist language of the voyeur, of insinuation, the reader glimpsing fragments of an imagined interior through the same lattice-work screen that s/he first saw the Shakil sisters in *Shame*. Once more, rumours of harem lesbianism permeate the text: when Akbar is away, we are told, "[t]he queens lay together and moaned, and what they did to distract one another, what entertainment they found in one another in their veiled quarters, will not be described here".<sup>51</sup> Not only is the *language* of the Nishapur sequences of

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<sup>47</sup> Rushdie, in Muir, "Salman Rushdie".

<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 9-10.

<sup>49</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 27, 66.

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 29.

*Shame* being repeated but, with the narratorial pattern of assertion through refusal to describe, the same old self-reflexive get-out clause as I identified, with Ahmad, in Part I.

In this novel, however, the cloistered zone of female seclusion and male fantasy is not merely an Eastern phenomenon. Immediately after a description of Akbar's harem, the reader is transported to a courtesan's palace in Florence, where we find a young man catching "a glimpse through an idly opened door of La Fiorentina in her private sanctum, reclining on a gilded chaise". The language of glimpses, voyeurism and "Oriental" splendour is again collocated with rumours of lesbianism: the courtesan's "midget agent," Giulietta Veronese, is, "some say, also [her] Sapphic lover".<sup>52</sup> This western echo of the Mughal harem constitutes another piece of Rushdiean double-edged cultural commentary. On one hand, the very drawing of a parallel between the harem and the house of a prostitute is an act of classic western-centric "Orientalism", rendering the Eastern Islamic female domain a whorehouse, and the Eastern Islamic woman a whore. On the other hand, however, by using the trope of "Oriental" harem eroticism in relation to certain western female spaces, he is making a post-*Orientalism* gesture towards redistributing the balance of agency between East and West, making the East less of a passive object in the Saidian discourse of Orientalism, and the West more so. If the eroticisation of the female enclosure is an act practised by Western men on the Eastern harem, it is also an act practised by Eastern men on the Western female space. Problematic to this attempt at registering an equivalence of erotic perception and description of the woman's quarter is the fact that the deliberate practise of "Orientalism" I have traced in the description of La Fiorentina's "private sanctum" is a western literary trope

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<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 157, 151.

used by a western narrator, Mogor. We must consider his audience, however: his description of this western female space is designed to titillate Akbar, which we can infer from his enthusiasm for the tale it does. The eroticism of the sequestered female and the mythicisation of her enclosure is, therefore, a phenomenon which spans both East and West, a universal male fantasy.

### *A Zone of Infinite Possibilities*

We saw Leila Ahmed argue, in the first chapter, that the western definition of the harem is as “a system that permits males sexual access to more than one female”.<sup>53</sup> This is certainly consonant with Rushdie’s representation of Qara Kōz and Jodha as pinnacles of desirability: as composite women, they are extensions of the harem fantasy. Where matters become more complex, however, is his representation of this progression of fantasy as circular, leading back from plurality to singularity: the harem fantasy in *Enchantress* is the fantasy of a single, composite woman. On the one occasion Mogor is invited into the emperor’s harem we are told that “[t]he concubines... blended into a single supernatural Woman, a composite Concubine, and She was all around the two men, besieging them with love... [t]he single woman of many arms and infinite possibilities”.<sup>54</sup> We have an echo, here, of the Shakil sisters’ many-breasted, many-armed simultaneous plurality and oneness, however where they were the monstrous product of oppression, characterised by their incarceration, the composite Concubine of Akbar’s harem is a woman of infinite possibilities, a figure of universal womanhood. When Mogor thinks of “other women far away and long ago,” the women of Florence, the women of

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<sup>53</sup> Ahmed, “Ethnocentrism”, 524.

<sup>54</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 156.



history, he realises that they are “part of the Concubine too”: the harem, the marvellous Concubine, the woman, the female space, is a zone that transcends temporal, cultural and geographical boundaries. Transcendent though it may be, however, it remains a space delineated by the male imagination: whilst Rushdie uses the idea of a universal fantasy of perfect womanhood to erode the myths of difference which separate East and West, he seems to be replacing them with a unifying myth of universal, libidinous misogyny. If all the men of the text are linked in lustful imagination, women, whilst defined by male desire, are not so unproblematically homogenised in passive subjugation.

### *The Liberation of the Concubine*

When Qara Köz is liberated from the clutches of her abductor, the “Uzbek warlord”, by the Shah of Persia, she has the choice to return with her sister to the Mughal harem. Rather than return to the tedium of a life of respectable royal womanhood, however, she uses her abilities as “a born Enlightened One, who instinctively [knows] what to do to protect herself, and also to conquer men’s hearts” to seduce her liberator.<sup>55</sup> In turn, at the downfall of the Shah, she changes allegiance and becomes the lover of “Argalia The Turk”, a young Florentine who, after being kidnapped by Barbary corsairs, had become general to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Qara Köz’s ability to conquer men’s hearts and her progression across Asia to the splendours of Florence through the seduction of powerful and influential men is strikingly reminiscent of Defoe’s *Roxana*. Like Roxana she is a polyglot, learning Turkish “almost overnight, or so it seemed,” and intuitively discerning which avatar

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<sup>55</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 121.

of “the Concubine” to transform herself into to best capture the hearts of the men she uses to further herself.<sup>56</sup> Her power lies in her ability to manipulate the male imagination, to embrace and capitalise on the power of the universal Concubine to bend men to her will. Figured as such, her progression across the globe is a form of conquest and her enchantment of Florence a colonisation of the hearts of a people. Nevertheless, she is operating within the strictures of a male-delineated world, cannily pandering to male desires in order to achieve her own goal – which seems merely to be widespread adoration. Fundamentally, she is manipulating male narratives of feminine desirability in order to place herself at the centre of them: during her conquest of Florence she tells Argalia “I am just trying to become what I have it in me to be,” which is no less (and no more) than the ultimate face of the Concubine.<sup>57</sup> Stripped of the agency her magical powers lend her characterisation, Qara Köz would be simply capitulating to – rather than manipulating – male narratives.

Though she is an almost exclusively male-oriented woman, however, her narrative does intersect with other women: as she walks the streets of Florence, “making herself visible as no great lady of Florence had ever allowed herself to be”, she becomes a symbol of potential liberation to the other women of the city.<sup>58</sup>

[S]lowly her fearlessness shamed the city’s young women of breeding into following her out of doors. Breaking with tradition, they began to come out of an evening to promenade in twos and fours, to the delight of

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<sup>56</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 226.

<sup>57</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 280.

<sup>58</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 277.

the city's young gentlemen, who finally had good reason to stay away from the bordellos.<sup>59</sup>

We have, then, an example of Islamic Eastern womanhood teaching freedom to western women: though Qara Köz is by no means an example of typical Mughal female liberation, Rushdie's decision to use her as a positive East-to-West catalyst for feminism of any kind marks a considerable movement away from any of his previous representations of female liberation and/against the East. I say "feminism of any kind" because the positive nature of the liberation she incites in the women of Florence is, once more, undercut by the implication that its primary benefit is for "the city's young gentleman". Their "delight" we can read as libidinous (and possibly financial), as the desequestration of the young women of breeding negates their need to go to brothels. Be that as it may, an Eastern woman has become a model for "progressive", rather than "regressive", womanhood: a move which vividly recalls the proto-feminist orientalist responses which Scheherazade inspired on her arrival in Europe in 1704.

Indeed, early eighteenth-century representations of the Eastern female space – and those of Montagu in particular – reverberate throughout the text, both in terms of the opportunities for intercultural feminism that they offer, and their limitations. Rushdie's depiction of the performative representation of Jodha and Qara Köz through the art of men echoes Montagu's ekphrastic ventriloquisation of male artists in order to describe the women of the hammam, and the novel's central conceit of female liberation and transcultural (albeit still problematic) equality within a representative framework of maleness is effectively a version of Montagu's interpretation of the Eastern female space writ large. Even Rushdie's notion that

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<sup>59</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 277.

within the (male-centred) feminotopia there is to be found a primal, atemporal, transcendent composite woman could be viewed as a libidinous variant of Montagu's perception of "our general mother" (Eve), behind the multiple bodies of the women of the hammam.<sup>60</sup>

The two accounts of the interior of the eastern female space are fundamentally separated, however, by the positions of the authors: Montagu is, though briefly, inside writing out, whereas Rushdie is outside writing in. In another familiar gesture of self-reflexivity, this authorial externality is his point. *The Enchantress of Florence* is, amongst other things, an examination of the process of men manufacturing myths of difference between themselves and women, and East and West. The silence of the text's women as they are created, and their stories narrated, by men is intended as an implicit feminist comment on the effacement of female voices and the delineation of the role of women by a universally patriarchal society. Like the feminist project of *Shame*, however, this amounts to an inequality described rather than an inequality materially contested. His cry of "(oh, for the voices of Muslim women to be heard!)" from "Not About Islam?" remains firmly within the parentheses of Rushdie's self-consciously male discourse, within the parenthetical harem walls of the (now globalised) Eastern female space.<sup>61</sup>

### *A Predictive History*

In a 2008 interview, Rushdie spoke of his decision to return to history in *The Enchantress of Florence*:

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<sup>60</sup> Montagu, *Embassy Letters*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Rushdie, "Islam?" *Step Across*, 395.

This [period] is the beginning of the engagement between the East and the West, this is when India and Europe really first found out about each other... I thought, if you're going to look at now, we're all talking about this whole East-West engagement, and how complex it is – in some ways very enriching, in some ways very disturbing – let's go back to the beginning, let's see how this started and maybe... this'll be interesting.<sup>62</sup>

Here, in a break from the publicity material characterising the novel as a retreat from the political, Rushdie asserts the importance of examining historical points of encounter. It is curious, however, that he chooses to speak in broad terms of East and West – contentious terms that are called into question by the notion of cultures flowing into one another – rather than in terms of the encounter between India and the West. By doing so, he skips over the history of the crusades, of the Moors in Europe, of the Ottoman Empire – in fact, he skips over much of the history of close engagement between Europe and Islamic worlds. In the context of his promotional activities for the novel, this seems like an attempt – if not quite to rewrite history, then at least to re-brand it. For all the fanfare of the unprecedentedly *historical* nature of this Rushdie novel – all the many mentions of the lengthy bibliography it is published with, and Rushdie's humble references to going back to his Cambridge training as a historian, this is an imaginative journey into the past which seeks to shed light not so much upon what it finds there, but upon the world of the present from which it has come. As Rushdie puts it in the novel, “The past [is] a light that if properly directed could illumine the present more brightly than any contemporary lamp”.<sup>63</sup> This manoeuvre, Rushdie would have us believe, has always been central

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<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, “The Charlie Rose Show”, YouTube video uploaded by “TheCharlieRoseShow”, June 30, 2008, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIOXORYIILs>.

<sup>63</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 251.

to his oeuvre and, with the implication that he is the one who should be directing the lamp, he renders himself literally the agent of (E)nlightenment. It is a gesture which recalls his claim in *Joseph Anton* that “his real subject, the one he would worry away at for the rest of his life, [is] the great matter of *how the world joined up*, not only how the East flowed into the West and the West into the East, but how the past shaped the present while the present changed our understanding of the past”.<sup>64</sup>

The problem is that there is no single impartial lamp of history that can be wielded in order to illumine the present: to borrow a phrase from Rushdie, “time cannot be homogenised as easily as milk”.<sup>65</sup> In its accounts of the ruptures and convergences in Rushdie’s engagements with the eighteenth century, this study has identified multiple pasts: pasts which he has drawn upon directly, pasts which echo un- or partly uttered beneath the textual surfaces of his novels, and pasts which he has clung to that never quite happened. Anyone who wishes to use history as a means of illumining the present must choose from a multiplicity of lights, and once she has chosen one, she must remember that it can never shine with an impartial white light. Instead, at whichever present she points it, it can only shine with a light coloured by her own experiences and ideas. All this does not prevent it from being a worthwhile undertaking, however.

*The Enchantress of Florence*, for all its faults, marks an important realisation of the significance of history as a lens through which to consider futurity – specifically the futurity, rather than the futility, of positive cultural hybridity in the form of mongrelization. Towards the end of the novel, Akbar is faced with a choice: should he adopt the foreign storyteller he loves, and who claims to be his uncle, into his family?

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<sup>64</sup> Rushdie, *Joseph*, 68-69.

<sup>65</sup> Rushdie, *Shame*, 13.

Would his elevation to high rank result in the empire being blessed, or would it, by offending against some dark law of Fortune, bring down disaster upon the realm? Was foreignness itself a thing to be embraced as a revitalizing force bestowing bounty and success upon its adherents, or did it adulterate something essential in the individual and the society as a whole, did it initiate a process of decay which would end in an alienated, inauthentic death?<sup>66</sup>

This is a familiar Rushdian dichotomy: “mongrelization” vs. “the absolutism of the pure” once more.<sup>67</sup> In the end, Akbar makes the wrong decision. He strips the storyteller of his privileged access to the royal person, and the man calling himself Mogor dell’ Amore, *The Mughal of Love*, leaves the city to its ruin. As the life-giving lake, symbol of fluidity and metamorphosis and echo of Haroun’s famous story-sea, dries up, Akbar faces the aridity of the future:

[it] would not be what he hoped for, but a dry hostile antagonistic place where people would survive as best they could and hate their neighbours and smash their places of worship and kill one another again in the renewed heat of the great quarrel he had sought to end for ever, the quarrel over God. In the future it was harshness, not civilization, that would rule.<sup>68</sup>

This is a far cry from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*’s happy ending and yet, as the hybridity and religious tolerance symbolically ebbs away from the once-vibrant cosmopolis of Fatehpur Sikri, we are not left with quite the same sense of hopelessness that we are at the end of his other novels. We have seen hybridity

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<sup>66</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 319.

<sup>67</sup> Rushdie, “Faith”, *Homelands*, 394.

<sup>68</sup> Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 347.

work, we have seen the triumph of tolerance, we have watched East and West merge and mingle and be enriched. This is different from the frail hope held out to us at the end of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* that, amidst the ever-more-frequent murders of the *rai* singers and the “pre-impact vibrations” of a possible “Big Crunch”, “ordinary human love” will stand its ground.<sup>69</sup> Rushdie’s return to history to find, in Florence too, but especially in Akbar’s Fatehpur Sikri, a functioning culture of hybridity, of disputation, of religious tolerance – indeed, of a kind of secular humanism – is a powerful message of hope for our global postcolonial futures. It is a statement that, as his friend William Dalrymple puts it at the end of his 2002 book *White Mughals*, “East and West are not irreconcilable, and never have been. Only bigotry, prejudice, racism and fear drive them apart. But they have met and mingled in the past; and they will do so again”.<sup>70</sup>

As attractive as these visions of the past are, they must be approached with caution. Rushdie’s choice of the sixteenth century as the setting for his fable of mongrelized universalism neatly bypasses many of the problems which European imperialism presents to the historian in search of an undivided world. Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*, on the other hand, chooses to write a narrative history of the relationship between James Achilles Kirkpatrick, British representative at the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad in the late eighteenth century, and Khair un-Nissa, a Mughal princess. Equipped with a cover-quote from Rushdie hailing it as “brilliant and compulsively readable,” the blurb on the back of the paperback edition prominently states that “Kirkpatrick’s story was not unique. By his time one in three British men in India were living with Indian women, many taking on Indian ways,

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<sup>69</sup> Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 573, 575.

<sup>70</sup> Dalrymple, *Mughals*, 501.



clothes, habits, and even religions, crossing cultures to become ‘White Mughals’”.<sup>71</sup> “I hope that if I’ve done my work properly it should be quite clear that this has a contemporary relevance,” he says in an interview published with the text, “...[w]hat’s so strange, I suppose, is that the British in the last ten years or so have woken up to the idea of multiculturalism, but this is something that’s a part of our history”.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, so properly does Dalrymple do his work of creating an eighteenth-century Indian exemplar for contemporary global hybridity, that he arguably elides much of the dark undercurrent of burgeoning British imperialism which lies behind Kirkpatrick’s appointment to the Nizam’s court.

There seems to have been, particularly in the years since 9/11, a wider movement towards identifying what could be termed pre- and early-colonial cultures of hybridity. Dalrymple’s *Begums, Thugs, and White Mughals* is another example of this, an edition of early nineteenth-century travel writer Fanny Parkes’s accounts of her wanderings across the subcontinent, brought out in the same year as *White Mughals*. She is important, he tells us, “because she acts as a witness to a forgotten moment of British-Indian hybridity, and shows that colonial travel writing need not be an aggressive act of orientalist appropriation... but instead an act of understanding”.<sup>73</sup> As Felicity Nussbaum says, eighteenth century studies has, in recent years begun to “usefully and intelligently complicate the picture of a unilinear progress from Europe outwards”.<sup>74</sup> Whilst postcolonial theory has tended to conceive of hybridity as a contemporary lens through which to examine twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural phenomena such as migration and globalisation,

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<sup>71</sup> Dalrymple, *Mughals*, cover.

<sup>72</sup> Dalrymple, *Mughals*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Dalrymple, “Lady of the Raj”, *Guardian*, June 9, 2007, accessed March 10, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/jun/09/featuresreviews.guardianreview35>.

<sup>74</sup> Nussbaum, “Introduction” in *The Global Eighteenth Century* ed. Nussbaum, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1-20, 11.

much of the scholarship Nussbaum describes implicitly situates hybridity as a characteristic of early- or pre-colonial contact between peoples. Inevitably, most of these historical and critical interventions take place in dialogue with Said's *Orientalism*, with some critics weighing in with an almost wilful urge to see hegemonic motives behind every early point of contact between Europe and another culture, and other scholars at times seeming to ignore the possibility of acquisitiveness or nascent dominance in cultural encounters of the same period, indeed seeming to overlook the patterns of trade and conflict which made the encounters possible in the first place. There are similar moves taking place within popular culture, not just in Dalrymple-style popular histories, but in television documentaries such as Richard E Grant's recent "Secrets of the Arabian Nights".<sup>75</sup> Such attempts to unpick the complex webs of inter-cultural contact and connection between early European, Middle Eastern, Asian and African worlds are undeniably useful, and offer a valuable and potentially transformative view of our global futures.

Perilously close to such studies, however, are the many popular history books still being published in Britain that justify and glorify the British Empire. It is sobering to note that we still live in an age when the British celebrity journalist Jeremy Paxman can write an article in a leading British newspaper which was given the headline "Our Empire was an Amazing Thing" and, in a BBC TV series called *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British*, walk into a Croquet Club in Cairo and ask an Egyptian man, "so what did the British do for Egypt?".<sup>76</sup> This was followed, after a long pause during which his interlocutor, Ahmed Hamroush, stared

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<sup>75</sup> Richard E. Grant, "Secrets of the Arabian Nights", BBC, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Jeremy Paxman, "Our Empire was an Amazing Thing", *Telegraph*, February 16, 2012, accessed May 10, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9085936/Jeremy-Paxman-Our-empire-was-an-amazing-thing.html>; conversation quoted in Stuart Jeffries, "TV Review: Empire; David Hockney; The Art of Seeing", *Guardian*, February 27, 2012, accessed May 11, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2012/feb/27/tv-review-empire-david-hockney>.

fixedly at the croquet lawn, with an incredulous “did the British really do nothing good during seventy years in Egypt?” Rushdie’s “Outside the Whale” begins with a powerful indictment of the Raj revivalism taking place on British cinema and television screens in the mid-1980s. “The creation of a false Orient of cruel-lipped princes and dusky slim-hipped maidens, of ungodliness, fire and the sword,” he writes, “has been brilliantly described by Edward Said in his classic study *Orientalism*, in which he makes clear that the purpose of such false portraits was to provide moral, cultural and artistic justification for imperialism and for its underpinning ideology, that of the racial superiority of the Caucasian over the Asiatic”.<sup>77</sup> In the years since 1984, as we have seen, Rushdie has often instrumentalised this very same literary locale, falling into an old-school oriental aesthetic which he remains attracted to in spite of the negative charge of racism and imperialism it carries.

As his ideas about Islam have become increasingly intolerant and absolutist over the course of his career, the Rushdie of the mongrelized, joined-up world and the Rushdie as war leader in the so-called Battle for the Enlightenment have become increasingly difficult for critics to reconcile. In this study I have sought not only to illustrate the ways in which these two Rushdies have in fact been in constant dialogue with each other, but to show that the discourses mobilised in and around Rushdie’s work are part of a long, and too-often neglected dialogue with eighteenth-century ways of thinking with and about the Islamic East. Whilst I remain wary of accounts of mongrel pasts which elide histories of oppression, distrust, and inequality, I must admit that the course of this work has in some ways mirrored Rushdie’s move to illumine the present with the past. By taking the two figures at

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<sup>77</sup> Rushdie, “Whale”, *Homelands*, 88-89.

the heart of harmful Western perceptions of Islamic worlds, the Islamic despot and the fundamentally oppressed Muslim woman, and examining their eighteenth-century European provenances; by folding back into the discourses of the Rushdie Affair the forgotten histories which preceded the crystallisation of these figures; by shining the light of multiple eighteenth centuries on the monolithic Enlightenment that has come to mark Rushdie's understanding of the present, I have tried to contribute towards the dissolution of the damaging binaries which have come to mark, and threaten, our world.



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