

Interrogating multiculturalism, free speech and minority cultural rights in *The Satanic Verses* controversy

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the controversy over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 that outraged Muslims across the world, resulting in the issuing of a fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini for Rushdie's murder on grounds of blasphemy. The Rushdie affair became an important event for political philosophy to negotiate competing claims over freedom of expression within Western liberal thought and outraged religious sentiments by Muslims who invoked their cultural rights to feel religious offense. I trace the political dimensions of this outrage by analysing how it tested the boundaries of liberal multiculturalist discourse propagated by political theorist Will Kymlicka. British Muslims sought to invoke British blasphemy law as a form of external protection from the dominant political community for safeguarding its religious and cultural identity as a form of reciprocal obligation. The liberal interpretation of minority rights viewed this affair as apostasy which denied the acknowledgement of minority cultural rights by terming their dissent as a form of internal protection to prevent members of the community from straying from their religious practices. It presents an ossified view of minority culture that *The Satanic Verses* writes against. I argue that the rights-based notion of individual autonomy in liberal thought often lies in sharp conflict with minority cultural rights. The paper highlights the need to move beyond binary oppositions of liberal and illiberal to a nuanced understanding of the materiality of belief structures within communities shaped around religion to maintain the justness and inclusiveness of culturally diverse political communities.

Key Words : Multiculturalism, Minority rights, Cultural rights, Free speech, Rushdie, Censorship

INTRODUCTION

The publication of British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in Britain in September 1988 caused a furore among British Muslims for his alleged blasphemy against Islam, with demands for the withdrawal of the book. In the weeks after its publication, the import of the book was banned in India by the Congress government as a measure of appeasing Muslim public sentiment. Large-scale protests among Muslims led to a gathering of British Muslims in Bradford, one of the largest Muslim communities in the United Kingdom, on December 1988 where they symbolically burned the book. Protests and rioting against the book in India and Britain, along with the import ban, caught the attention of Islamic countries and came under the scrutiny of the religious leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who imposed a *fatwa* in Rushdie's name, calling for his

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murder by Muslims. This launched the book into public memory across the world and created a decade in exile for Rushdie. This was accompanied by threats to his life, riots and bombings in different parts of the world, the murder of the book's Japanese translator and attacks on its Italian and Norwegian translators. There were also casualties in Pakistan, Turkey and India during riots over the book.

The Rushdie affair, as it came to be known, became an important event for political philosophy to negotiate competing claims over freedom of expression and the outraging of religious sentiments. The affair is essentially a debate on cultural rights which brings into question the set of shared assumptions that regulate modes of acceptable behaviour in a multicultural society. Multicultural societies allow for diverse cultures to follow their religious beliefs without infringing on the rights of others. What happens when this infringement calls into question the religious and cultural practices of minority cultures, especially by someone from the same community? This paper examines the tension between free speech, multiculturalism and the rights of minority cultures by examining the debates surrounding the demand for banning *The Satanic Verses* in 1989.

The Satanic Verses is dialogical and multilocational, exploring the experience of migration through the complex relation between faith and doubt within a migrant community. Using its central characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, the book foregrounds questions of Muslim faith and identity through hybridity of narrative. Imbued with parody, tragedy and irony and marked by a playful irreverence towards genre, the novel interrogates the pull of religious orthodoxy, love and the temptations of integration by using historical narratives and non-linear dream sequences through which the complexities of the immigrant experience in Britain are mapped onto contemporary public discourse on Islam. Its use of magic realism harked back to his other magnificent novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) that interrogates the discourse of nation-building and construction of postcolonial identity through India's turbulent transition into independence and its experience of the Indira Gandhi-led Emergency years.

Literary critics have commented that Rushdie's earlier works aspired to write fiction "that competes with history and law" (Chakravorty, 1995, 2233) to create an imaginative universe that ran parallel to the official narrative of events and social processes. His fiction has been described as a "quasi-legal instrument of political and social change" (Ibid, 2214) that seeks to articulate the many positions from which the constitutive realities one lives in can be comprehended. Through its fragmentary narratives, the book explores alienage and brutality, love and faith, addressing enduring debates between belief and agnosticism, absolutism and dialogue. The novel uses as source different historical accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's life, of the beginnings of Islam, as well as invokes the *Satanic Verses*, a set of pagan verses included in the Quran by the Prophet Muhammad (referred to as Mahound in the novel) and later removed. These verses were an intercession to three pagan goddesses from Mecca and indicated a temporary recanting from the monotheism espoused by Islam. This and other "controversial" parables were interpreted as blasphemy by the Ayatollah, who held the position of an expert in Islamic studies areas of jurisprudence, philosophy and ethics.

The Rushdie Affair is also a classic example of the merging of law and religion through the imposition of the fatwa, a fatwa being both a legal and religious judgment. The novel outraged the Muslim community around the world and members of the faith rallied together for the banning and burning of the book. In this paper I examine the cultural and political components of this outrage. The incident defines an important political moment where liberal political theorists were forced to test their theories in a context heavy with claims to group identity and cultural pluralism within

Western liberal thought. I will understand *The Satanic Verses* as a precedent for what Bhikhu Parekh (1990) calls a research agenda that forms a challenge for political theory when applied to the context of free speech, blasphemy and what was termed a charge of apostasy against Rushdie. This was a charge that liberal theorists like Will Kymlicka accepted as part of the liberal interpretation of minority rights. This understanding sought to preserve the definition of a multicultural society while contending with a non-negotiable liberal core that was defined by ideas of individual autonomy, freedom and tolerance. It is this tension between the liberal position and the religious proclivity of an “illiberal” culture that I wish to scrutinize.

Freedom of speech is a human right as recognized in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It falls under the basic protections that a liberal democracy offers to its citizens. If freedom of expression is the sign of a law that defends a culture, this question becomes complicated in the understanding of a minority culture that seeks to maintain its self-identity and cultural beliefs while simultaneously being incorporated within a dominant political community. The debate on assimilation versus integration problematizes the question of identity in the process of cultural transition. This is what I propose to think through using the concepts of cultural pluralism, liberal individualism and demands for minority cultural equality. Will Kymlicka says “In all liberal democracies, one of the major mechanisms for accommodating cultural differences is the protection of the civil and political rights of individuals. It is impossible to overstate the importance of freedom of association, religion, speech, mobility, and political organization for protecting group difference” (1995, 26). This respecting of group difference accounts for the maintenance of diversity and harmony within multicultural communities.

The Rushdie Affair has been identified by liberal political theorists Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Stanley Fish and Bhikhu Parekh as the beginning of the cultural rights theory because it begs the core question: whether the right to express oneself especially in terms of a religious question conflicts with cultural rights within minority groups to express outrage at blasphemy over religion when this falls within the purview of a dominant majority community. Even as Rushdie countered allegations of blasphemy, British Muslims demanded their right to invoke freedom of religion and freedom of speech regarding their religion. The British Muslim community attempted to invoke the existing blasphemy laws in England to defend their right to take the case to court to protest blasphemy against Islam, a right they were entitled to as British citizens. But British blasphemy laws only applied to blasphemy against the Church of England.² The terrain of critical inquiry on multiculturalism versus religious identity was hotly debated by British Muslim scholars who made a firm distinction between the religious fervour aroused by *The Satanic Verses* among Islamic countries and the position of Western Muslims whose aim was to focus on the hurt caused to their religious sensibilities, inspired by the contents of the book which was in contravention of their rights. Their arguments debated the right of free speech, its affront to religious communities within the context of multiculturalism, and their right to invoke legal mechanisms to validate their dissent against such practices. It is crucial to note that the Khomeini fatwa was not the position of Western Muslims, whose opposition lay not in punishing Rushdie and validating the death sentence but in arguing that free speech had crossed its boundaries in Rushdie’s satirical depictions of Islam. The debate was about a minority community that must integrate itself with the mainstream political community while maintaining its own cultural proclivity, negotiating the portrayal of Islam in the book as crossing the line between acceptable and unacceptable expression. This was a contention that British Muslims felt a multicultural society must contend with in the formulation of its laws.

Kymlicka has understood the British Muslim position as adhering to what he classifies as

internal restrictions as opposed to external protections that a state can offer. Kymlicka says: “It is important not to confuse the legal form with the underlying motivation. The initial Muslim response to Rushdie focused on his apostasy.... It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this proposed law grew out of, and is partly intended to discourage, public acts of apostasy” (in O’Neill, 1999, 230). The issue of religious tolerance takes on multipronged dimensions in the Rushdie Affair. I will highlight the issues that I focus on: the first question is one of blasphemy versus apostasy. The second issue is the catapulting of the cultural pluralism debate into a blurring of lines between integration and assimilation. The third is a question of tolerance and equality of a minority community within a larger political community. The larger question that emerges from these debates is their implications for liberal multiculturalism.

Kymlicka makes two distinctions between multicultural communities: multinational and polyethnic states, the two terms he uses to refer to the main forms of cultural pluralism. Stating that most liberal democracies fall under either of these two heads, often coalescing both, the question is how to deal with their varying rights and ethnic differences in “a stable and morally defensible way” (Kymlicka, 1995, 26) while at the same time upholding the tenets of a liberal democracy. This question of moral defense is important because at the heart of it lies the moral justification that liberalism espouses towards integration of minority communities. Group rights fall under the category of polyethnic rights which “protect specific religious and cultural practices.... or which are disadvantaged (often unintentionally) by existing legislation...” (Ibid). This idea has often taken the shape of controversy when existing legislation, usually located within a secular framework, poses a deterrent for religious practice, as famously seen in the 2004 French legislation after the 1989 controversy over the suspension of three Muslim schoolgirls from their public school for wearing hijabs.

Debates of this variety lead to an essential question of integration versus assimilation. Polyethnic rights are meant for protection of the cultural practices of a minority ethnic group but when that interferes with the dominant ideology of the political community that one lives in, the practice has been one of maintaining the liberal stand on personal autonomy and individual freedom. The question of individual freedom leads to the philosophical concern over a “good life”. The former becomes a cultural precondition from which members of a minority culture must operate to have a sense of solidarity and ownership towards the shared community. At this point the question of freedom of expression asserts itself to promote a liberal, inclusive society. Liberals believe in prescribing individual freedom to make informed choices about what may enrich one’s life while allowing access to information about other modes of life encoded in social norms and values that are immersed in cultural traditions. But what comprises the “good life” has been debated by British Muslim scholars who argue that for certain cultures, their “particular definition of the good life is constituted in religious terms” (O’Neill, 1999, 229) and must be defended by legal frameworks and cultural tolerance.

For Kymlicka, “Liberals can only endorse minority rights in so far as they are consistent with respect for the freedom or autonomy of individuals” (Ibid, 75). He goes on to argue that both are mutually reinforcing. He understands that certain ethnic and minority groups that have been integrated into mainstream Western cultures have illiberal principles that suppress rather than support the basic freedoms guaranteed to individuals. Kymlicka’s position on the Rushdie affair needs to be understood through some distinctions he has made in the understanding of group-differentiated rights. He creates a vocabulary of internal restrictions and external protections through which to understand collective rights, which are in place to protect the stability of ethnic communities and

minorities but towards different ends. He understands internal restrictions as involving intra-group relations where to preserve group solidarity, a community may invoke the use of state power to curb the liberties that members of that group may take. Kymlicka's stance implies a defense of personal autonomy and introduces a language of rights within a larger discourse of identity. His fear is that state power may be called upon by groups that seek to reinforce existing inequalities, say, in the treatment of women who belong to illiberal cultures.

External protection is where the group "may seek to protect its distinct existence and identity by limiting the impact of the decisions of the larger society" (Kymlicka, 1995, 36). The effort of British Muslims to facilitate the banning of Rushdie's book under the archaic British blasphemy law was to invoke this demand from the larger society for the protection of its religious and cultural identity. This was viewed by Muslim scholars as a form of reciprocal consent and obligation that the political community should engage in that would accord them respect and dignity. Modood (2011) says in his defense of multiculturalism as different modes of integration that erstwhile immigrants, now citizens, should be free to choose their version of citizenship, be it assimilation, maintaining of group difference, or absorption into a cosmopolitan identity. It is the upholding of these processes of integration that go into the making of a national identity.

In their larger interpretation of action to be taken against *The Satanic Verses* it was not the person Rushdie and the charge of apostasy but the manner of his writing that accorded the book its blasphemous status among British Muslims. Kymlicka, however, interprets the group's attempt to use the legal system as a way of regulating internal dissent amidst its own community and controlling the community from straying from its religious practices. This departed from the liberal strand of autonomy and created moral ground to dismiss the community's claim for banning the book, legally as well as politically. Kymlicka's claim was largely challenged by British Muslim demands which established that the charge of apostasy was a mistaken one. Shabbir Akhtar states that "banning the book would be one means of protecting the collective dignity of those groups—such as Muslims and Sikhs—whose members... do define their own ideals or the worth of their lives in terms of irreducibly religious notions" (in O'Neill, 1999, 228). The British Muslim demands held that respect for the identity of an ethnic minority was one of the founding tenets of a multicultural, pluralist society.

In this context, it is important to measure the political climate in which the British Muslims reacted to Rushdie's book — a response which almost became synonymous with the illiberalism of Islam — and analyse the issue of cultural rights against the limitations of a liberal multicultural framework. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Davies in their analysis of the Rushdie affair state that the liberal conception of free expression takes on a form of "militant secularism" that frequently undermines the conditions for the cultural flourishing of non-Western (especially religion-based) worldviews (Ibid). What are the limits of tolerance within multiculturalism when accounting for the preservation of various minority cultures in relation to freedom of expression? I argue that the rights-based notion of individual autonomy in liberal thought often lies in sharp conflict with the cultural composition and materiality of belief structures of communities that are shaped around their religion. It is this deeply imbricated association of religion with culture that lies at the heart of the British Muslim protests.

More recently, the Danish Cartoon Controversy threw into question the multicultural values and liberal ideals of free speech in the West when read against the Muslim demand for protection of religious feeling, which becomes a demand for political and cultural rights. Saba Mahmood responded to the question of religious offense by arguing that reckoning with moral or religious pain needed to move away from the law and understand religious hurt as "a structure of affect, a

habitus, that feels wounded. This wound requires moral action, but its language is neither juridical nor that of street protest because it does not belong to an economy of blame, accountability, and reparations” (Mahmood, 2009, 89). In response to Mahmood, Judith Butler posits that blasphemy “exists precisely at the crossroads of competing, overlapping, interruptive and divergent moral frameworks” (Butler, 2009, 104) and it is through the acknowledgement of these multiple frameworks that the “hegemonic secularism” (Ibid, 105) of one normative framework can be challenged.

Feroza Jussawala argues that culture in the Cliffordian sense is dynamic, especially in the age of transnational flows of labour and capital. She says, quoting James Clifford, that “cultures ‘travel’, literally and metaphorically, spatially and temporally, and any site of interrogation is an intersection of various fluid and dynamic cultures” (in Jussawala, 2001, 970). It is also these preconditions that must be accounted for when presenting a liberal account of multiculturalism, when arguing for polyethnic and cultural rights, and how they present challenges to liberal conceptions of culture. O’Neill criticizes Kymlicka saying that he “interprets culture in such a fashion that misses the point of minority cultural rights claims and robs them of their unique force” (1999, 235). For O’Neill, the concept of autonomy embraced by liberalism “does not float freely above culture but finds its particular meaning on the ground embedded in different, and sometimes conflicting, cultural elaborations” (Ibid, 236). Moreover, Kymlicka’s liberal position on autonomy in his outlining of internal restrictions conflicts with his own understanding of cultural integration and equality that marks cultural pluralism. It contradicts his own conception that “a liberal view requires freedom within the minority group, and equality between the minority and majority groups” (Kymlicka, 1995, 152). His position on tolerance is again defined by an individual freedom of conscience and freedom to worship freely. He draws a line between the liberal concept of autonomy and tolerance and that of non-liberal minorities as static under the condition that the latter is unshakeable, and their religious beliefs are not open to revision. If minority cultures and cultural rights are only defensible if they adhere to liberal principles, there is a fundamental contradiction in terms and an assertion of liberal cultural hegemony that belies the plurality that is espoused by multiculturalism, underscoring its own fixity and rigidity.

Conclusion :

Stanley Fish uncovers the limitations of multiculturalism as “an incoherent concept that cannot be meaningfully either affirmed or rejected” (Fish, 1997, 388). Analysing the positions of various proponents of multiculturalism, Fish highlights how even with liberal scholars who adopt positions of strong multiculturalism, the premise of multiculturalism balks at accepting contentions formulated on principles of religious and philosophical difference. Interestingly, both Rushdie’s book and the Rushdie affair challenge the fixity of religious and political ideology. The hybridity of Rushdie’s narrative uses literary technique and different genres of writing to dislodge the dominance of the founding myth of Islam and bring it into contemporary political discourse. This also challenges the dominant discourses of Islamic politics after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that seated the Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini in power and heralded Islamic theocracy. The Rushdie affair all too soon became imbricated within the language of Islamic fundamentalism generated by the fatwa. Those who came out in defense of the call for banning the book became implicated in a politics of religious fanaticism that did not account for arguments hinged on the defense of cultural rights but concluded that a perceived illiberality would fall at the altar of rational choice and personal autonomy. The affair generated an important political moment that questions the claims of liberalism, representing the voices of a diverse range of Muslim communities across the world in response to the crisis —

what Mufti refers to as an “Islamic public sphere” (Mufti, 1991, 107). Moreover, it created a discursive space for exposing the hegemonic political position of Western liberal thought and demanding a politics of inclusion. The interaction and integration of Muslim cultural beliefs and practices within dominant political communities presents an ongoing challenge towards the interpretation of cultural rights in the continuing debate between Islam and the West. It is a timely reminder of the need for moving beyond binary oppositions of liberal and illiberal to a nuanced understanding of the materiality of belief structures within communities shaped around religion to maintain the justness and inclusiveness of culturally diverse political communities.

Notes :

1. Even prior to the book’s publication, news of the book had reached Indian soil after two Indian magazines published an interview with Rushdie discussing his new book, *The Satanic Verses*. The invocation of hurt religious sentiment was begun by Indian Muslim MP Syed Shahabuddin, who actively campaigned for the banning of the book, prompting the Congress government under Rajiv Gandhi to ban its import on October 5, 1988. This would fuel British Muslim demands for banning, instigating a member of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester (United Kingdom), Faiyazuddin Ahmed, to circulate photocopied sections of the allegedly blasphemous pages from the book among Muslim organizations across the country. He also mobilized the Islamic Conference Organization in Saudi Arabia to take up the cause against the book. The leader of the Union of Muslims in London, Syed Pasha, wrote to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for the banning of the book in Britain and the prosecution of Rushdie but was rejected. Rushdie was prevented from attending a writers’ conference on censorship in Johannesburg in 1988 due to threats on his life. South Africa subsequently banned his book. December saw the famous book-burning protests by British Muslims in Bradford. The clamour for the book ban would acquire global currency, culminating in the issuing of the fatwa by Khomeini.

2. The blasphemy law of the United Kingdom was a common law offense instituted against charges of heresy relating to the Church of England. The law states: “Every publication is said to be blasphemous which contains any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relation to God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible, or the formularies of the Church of England as by law established.” The erstwhile blasphemy law was repealed by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. The incitement to hatred by causing religious offence would henceforth be tried under the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006.

3. In 2004, under the guidance of French President Jacques Chirac, a bill was passed in the French national assembly banned the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in French primary and secondary schools, outlawing any overt display of religious affiliation in educational spaces. More recently, the 2016 French ban on burkinis worn by Muslim women at the beach as an effort to guard the principles of French secularism became controversial, gathering censure from human rights organizations which viewed the ban as a threat on the freedom of religion and belief. For a comprehensive analysis of the headscarf issue, see Winter, Bronwyn. *Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. Syracuse University Press, New York (2008).

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