

Joseph Anton

S.Rushdie

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'Joseph Anton' is the name chosen by Rushdie on the request of his police protectors to prevent an accidental spilling of his name after Khomeini had pronounced the Fatwa against him, surely the most momentous event in his life.

Rushdie came from a wealthy ¹Muslim family in Bombay and was sent to England in his early teens. The experience was not a happy one, public school is seldom something that appeals to bookish people, but he endured, stayed on to get a degree in history at Cambridge, and during the time of Swinging London eking out a living as a copy-writer, with a few felicitous slogans on his CV. As many people he dreamt about becoming a writer, something which is akin to being an actor or a singer, only requiring a more sedate kind of talent. It is to a great extent about fame and celebrity status. To belong to a charmed circle of likewise famous people with connections living in the spotlight, being seen and admired. Thus the book is invariably tedious as it chronicles his social and professional life. There is inevitably a lot of name-dropping, luncheons with distinguished friends, as well as documentations of the frustrations of getting your work published and a keen awareness of sales-figures and paper-back introductions, coupled with book-tours and the receiving of prizes. It is a very competitive venture, with events like the Booker-Prize playing an central role. About the process of writing itself there is very little. This is to a large part understandable, when it comes to writing it is the finished product that should speak for itself, not the process. In fact the process itself is tedious, long-winded and to a large extent subconscious, too much introspection may interfere too much. Then of course there is sex, or at least intimation of it. Three wives are mentioned and a few affairs, be they brief. However, center stage in his emotional life is occupied by his son, his eldest son to be exact, of the youngest there is not much mention. Part of this is of course sincere, any father can sympathize with the concerns and worries, while some part at least must be due to a bad conscience and a fear of being an absent and indifferent father, especially given the circumstances in which the memoirs are played out.

The facts are simple when it comes down to the basics. On February 14 1989 Rushdie is made the object of a Fatwa. A price has been put on his head, and there is more than a credible threat to his life, as the state of Iran sponsors it. What kind of defense can a single man put up against a whole state willing to allow considerable resources to track him down and kill him? He is put under police protection, his whereabouts are kept secret to the public, and he has to change addresses continuously, especially in the initial stages. When driven in a car, all kinds of tricks, referred to as vacuum-cleaning, are employed to identify, and hence get rid of, possible pursuers. People not under such protection, but associated to his Great Crime, fare less well. A Japanese translator is killed, an Italian

¹ His father supposedly wasting all the wealth his father had accrued. On the other hand by Indian standards they surely belonged to a very comfortable strata.

one severely maimed, and a Norwegian publisher shot three times through his body but miraculously surviving. To that one should, perhaps a bit incongruously if ironically, add all the names of people within his circle, who succumb to disease and death. He is the one who is targeted, but not the one who is hit by death. Everything is made to avoid his death, while those of the others, somehow remind us, that death, far from being something that is exceptional and externally ordered, is after all part of everyday life. No big deal so to speak.

So what is his Great Crime? He has written and published a book called 'The Satanic Verses' which is purported to constitute an unforgivable offense against Islam. In what way is it offensive? He has treated the foundation of Islam as a proper subject for fictional speculation, in the spirit of historical scholarship, which has been the standard academic attitude towards religion at least for the last two hundred years in the West. Now, it is not clear why this particular book merited such attention. As noted a historical approach to religion is standard, at least in the West. Clearly most people that protested, be they passive mobs brought to demonstrations, or fire-brand speakers, had not read the book, but relied on hearsay. The instigator Ayatollah Khomeini himself most likely had not read it. Why should he have the time for such diversions? But its existence must merely have been pointed out to him and he seized a political opportunity. Clearly the book was a pretext for something much bigger. The vulnerable and insecure Muslims, or rather their leadership, found an excellent way to channel xenophobia towards the West and express their inferiority complex by being seen as victims, having their Muslim identity belittled and put in question. Rushdie was also a Muslim, if not religiously at least culturally, and could be painted as a renegade, and thus liable to generate even more bitterness. The attitude of the West was vacillating. On one hand there was a lot of understanding for the Muslim reaction, after all in the prevalent climate of multi-culturalism, freedom of religion had been perverted from being a personal right of worship to an ethnical affirmation, and any criticism seen as an assault. Every creed as good as any other creed, and religious sensibilities holy and not to be trifled with. In short to make fun of somebody's religion would be on par with racism. Thus religious communities, even if normally at loggerheads with each other, now closed rank against the ungodliness of an atheist. After all regardless of creed there is one God we all worship.

Rushdie defended himself on many points. First, he did not do this on purpose, as was being widely alleged. His intention was not to blaspheme but to treat the subject in a literary way, and it should be judged on its literary merits alone. Secondly he had a right to do so, it was part of the tradition of free speech, regardless of the literary worth.

Now the notion of free expression is never really understood. Usually it comes with the qualification that it should not offend, which of course totally nullifies it. In English law it is circumscribed by the provision that it does not offend the Royal Family or the Anglican Church. As both institutions are marginal this does in fact not make too much of a difference, but it sets a dangerous precedent, as the list of exceptions can easily be expanded once it is set in place. Then, and this is actually not as relevant to the present issue, the right to free speech is confused with the right to be heard and to be published. There is no such thing, freedom of expression means simply that you cannot be punished

(let alone killed) for your views².

Rushdie was seen as a trouble-maker as well as a hero. Did he not bring it on himself and does he not in that case have to suffer the consequences? Many years later there were deliberate provocateurs set out to inflame Muslim communities and thus achieving some spot in the limelight. This becomes morally ambiguous, akin to shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre. If you know that a certain action will have dire consequences, and for that very reason you commit them, you do not express anything, just as shouting 'fire' be it in a theatre or to a firing squad, is not a disinterested act of speech. Rushdie is an atheist, he has the perspective of an atheist, and of course he wants to promote his conviction. That he has a right to, it then becomes an act of expression. On the other hand if he is not genuinely interested in what he wants to express, if he is no atheist, or at least has no desire to convince people of his atheism, but only expresses such views to inflame and produce a desired effect of violence, it is not expression of opinion, but an act. The issues are thorny when delved into, but the basic thing to consider is not the contents of expressions, but to what extent they are expressions or acts. A man may try to instigate a crowd to commit violence, a so called hate speech, but his audience, unlike a firing squad is not bound to obey him, they will have to decide to act on their own volition taking in account the strength of the arguments. The ultimate responsibility rests with them to take action, which is not the case with a firing squad, each of whose members are just cogs in a larger machinery. Of course no deeper philosophical discussion is made on the subject of free speech and what it really means in the book. It is simply taken for granted.

It was hard on Rushdie to have his freedom so curtailed. The British Government riddled with conflicting agendas, such as normalization with Iran, hostages in Lebanon, showed no enthusiasm for Rushdie's cause, but nevertheless they did their duty, and in retrospect, successfully so. Of course it would have been much easier for them to put Rushdie in a military base, in effect treating him as a prisoner, than to allow him to lead a more normal life, meaning being able to live in regular apartments and have a social life with friends and relatives. Yet they did the latter, if occasionally with a bad faith. Having the police around day and night was of course a pain. They were uneducated fellows, well-trained and handsome, more interested in sports and such things, having very little understanding that Rushdie as a writer was in need of private space, that mindless socializing they well-meaningly intended was a distraction to be resented. As times goes by he manages to get more and more space, and especially when visiting foreign countries, although the ban on his presence imposed by most commercial airlines makes travel a bit difficult. There is a campaign for him going, riddled though by internal dissent, and there is some, if luke warm diplomatic activity on his behalf. Of course he is costing the British tax payers a lot of money, which is resented in the tabloid press. Eventually the threat from Iran fizzles out and after ten years he is more or less released so to speak. He divorces his third wife, with whom he has managed to sire yet another son, seeking out a new life in

² The case of censorship is ambiguous. One may view it as punishment, and of course if there is only one venue of publication, it becomes gagging. On the other hand any kind of editorial intervention can be seen as a form of censorship. To make free speech not just an empty word, there has to be independent actors in the publishing market.

the States, living in L.A. (hobnobbing with the Hollywood crowd) and New York, involved with a stunningly beautiful young Indian actress, blowing hot and cold, as the expression goes. He flies out of Boston three days ahead of that fateful day of September 11 (the real beginning of the third millennium), and is in Huston on a book-tour when the towers are hit. Just imagine if he would have been on one of this planes. The coincidence would have been rejected as such, and the attack seen as the culmination of the Rushdie-Fatwa, something he is careful not to spell out.

The book goes on and on and we are treated to his life in far more detail than we can really stomach. He takes the technical decision to refer to himself in third person, a device that does not work. One does not get the impression of detachment at all, it could as well have been narrated in the first person. In fact, technically the solution is bad, as the pronoun 'he' is a local one, while the 'he' of the protagonist is global. Thus many times, it is not immediately clear to whom the 'he' refers. To the incessant authorial presence, or to a person just mentioned? The technique requires that he refers to himself by the chosen name much more often. That would only have been made it worse in other ways, and clearly the author does not particularly relish his provisional code name, although Joseph stands for Conrad and Anton for Chekov, two authors he admire.

It is a thick book, and hence it becomes tedious, while at the same time being a page-turner. As very little of substance is presented on each page, it is easy to turn them and race through. As a piece of writing it falls halfway between being a transcript of his journal³ and a literary work. Clearly as it was meant to be neither this is an expected compromise. It makes for easy reading without really engaging. Of course the book is a piece of gossip, giving the curious reader glimpses of the life of the rich and famous, that charmed circle of celebrities, and as such continually, and at times enticingly, promising new rewards on the coming page. However, in retrospect, less if of course revealed than promised. Yet it forces you into sustained contact with the ego of the author, who comes across as a fun-loving character occasionally petulant and trying. Would you like to know him? Have him as a friend, regardless of the tantalizing consequences such a friendship would involve? He is but a human being, with weaknesses and strengths. He settles scores and everyone who is not unqualified for him is disparaged and resented. This is not nice, of course, but human in the sense that this is how most of us would react. His situation is of course not enviable, how much does he not yearn for normality, on the other hand he is privileged, his plight evincing sympathy and enhanced celebrity status, meeting heads of states, and must naturally have increased his sales, although he had made it well before writing his Satanic Verses.

Does he dream about the Nobel Prize? Of course he must have, any writer winning prizes must secretly at least dream about the ultimate accolade, anything else would bespeak inhuman discipline or a stunning lack of imagination. But is he of that material? Is he in the category of Garcia Marquez, whose magic realism he has made his own, or Günther Grass, or even Harold Pinter? Clearly there is bound to be less worthy authors than him who has been awarded, and surely he must have been nominated and discussed seriously, but is he in the league of say Borges, who has made a real imprint? The books

³ The fact that journals are read without permission between spouses has tragic-comic consequences in his narrative

by Rushdie are media events, sold in tall figures, and with raised titles, available in airport lobbies. Bestsellerdom invariably brings suspicions of superficiality and hype, and to be honest there is little in the memoirs to make such suspicions go entirely away.

When all is said and done, is this not the story of a nice fun-loving guy, hitting it rich in the lottery of literary success, his path to contemporary celebrity being diverted in a rather absurd way. Surely, reality, magical or not, transcends fiction in this case. As a bit of fiction it would be unbelievable, as he very much realizes, rejecting any idea of fictionalizing his experience. He admits to one basic weakness, and as such lovable, as it is his desire to be loved, which also fits well into the ambition of an author, who wants to be not only seen but also loved by a large audience. This weakness led to his greatest mistake during his career as a victim of the Fatwa. At one point he tried to apologize, and thereby to present himself in a sense not natural to him, just for the sake of being loved, of achieving a reconciliation of sorts with his hysterical adversaries, to show that he was after all a nice guy, not the Satan into which he had been demonized. He realizes immediately that it puts him in a wrong position. He is the one who is being wronged, not the wrongdoer. But of course to maintain his innocence may seem easy from the outside, yet most people would feel rather mortified by causing offense, especially if unintended. Not to give way shows a certain strength of character, maybe one stiffened after all with a big dose of egotism.

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