

## JOSEPH ANTON: FREEDOM OF LITERATURE IN TROUBLED TIMES

Avijit Ghosh

Ph.D. Scholar

University of North Bengal

[avijitghosh331@gmail.com](mailto:avijitghosh331@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The paper conducts a close study of Salman Rushdie's memoir Joseph Anton (2012) to understand his ideas of the freedom of literature in violent times, the nature of fiction and the character of assaults on literature that determines the perceived nature of the subject of the text. It also explores how such attacks are well organized and well strategized through manipulation, misinterpretation, circulation, demonstration and other violent means. In this process the language of literature and fictionality of fiction are questioned. The paper finds out how ignorance, irrationality and prejudices facilitate such philistine episodes creating distance from the truth and how power suspect writer's faith in the absolute freedom of expression and literature with their potential to trigger internal change in human outlook. The paper tries to conclude that the desire of understanding the world through story is absolutely central to human nature. So any attempts to limit what stories are proper to tell, even to limit what kind, what manner stories can be told in, how shall the story be told, who has power over the story is not just censorship, it is a kind of existential crime.*

**Keywords:** Freedom of Literature, Violence, Fiction, Writer, Censorship, Truth

The poet Ovid was exiled by Caesar Augustus to a little hellhole on the Black Sea called Tomis. He spent the rest of his days begging to be allowed to return to Rome, but permission was never granted. So Ovid's life was blighted; but the poetry of Ovid outlasted the Roman Empire. The poet Mandelstam died in one of Stalin's labor camps, but the poetry of Mandelstam outlived the Soviet Union. The poet Lorca was killed by the Falangist thugs of Spain's Generalissimo Franco, but the poetry of Lorca outlived Franco's tyrannical regime. Art was strong, artists less so. Art could, perhaps, take care of itself. Artists needed defenders. (Rushdie 628)

Salman Rushdie growing up in a Muslim family of Bombay in 1950s and 1960s was never forced into religion by his parents. In fact there was very little religion in his family. But his not-so-religious father, a Cambridge-educated lawyer-turned-businessman had a particular intellectual inclination towards the study of the birth and growth of Islam. The same interest

was transmitted to Rushdie. When he was studying History as a subject in Cambridge, during a specialization on exactly that he came across the so-called incident of *The Satanic Verses*. What Rushdie was trying to do in *The Satanic Verses* is essentially twofold: first to investigate into the phenomenon of Revelation and secondly, to understand how new ideas are born in this world. But on the Valentine's Day 1989, the subject changed into something different when Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran launched a Fatwa against him. The subject immediately stopped being about literature and became associated with medieval crimes like blasphemy and apostasy which were being pursued with modern weaponry.

The idea of writing about his problematic years, as he claimed, although was alluring and awaited by both readers and publishers, didn't seem a very good one to him as a writer until that over emotional stage of his life moved out of the haunted platform after more than a decade. And then the form and narrative premise fell into place and *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* was born in September, 2012. Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* besides its nominal borrowing, bears precious resemblance to the very different worlds of Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekov. Chekov's world of alienation and loneliness and Conrad's underworld of intrigues, secret agents and spies teamed up to make him discover a life he never expected to live.

Conrad, the translingual creator of wanderers, lost and not lost, of voyagers into the heart of darkness, of secret agents in a world of killers and bombs, and of at least one immortal coward, hiding from his shame; and Chekhov, the master of loneliness and melancholy, of the beauty of an old world destroyed, like the trees in the cherry orchard, by the brutality of the new; Chekhov, whose *Three Sisters* believed that real life was elsewhere and yearned eternally for a Moscow to which they could not return: These were his godfathers now. It was Conrad who gave him the motto to which he clung as if to a lifeline in the long years that would follow. In his now-unacceptably-titled *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, the title character, a sailor named James Wait, stricken down by tuberculosis on a long sea voyage, was asked by a fellow sailor why he came aboard, knowing, as he must have known, that he was unwell. "I must live until I die, mustn't I?" Wait replied. So must we all, he had thought when he read the book, but in his present circumstances the sentence's power felt like a command. (Rushdie 165)

What's especially arresting about this book is how Rushdie evinces noise- the deafening rattle of the controversy to talk about the issues of freedom of art and literature as well as the restrictions of space in human life imposed by the unwanted and disastrous forces.

The book very carefully resists being an account of a series of pathetic self-justifications and instead concentrates on the noise of the environment as it was, as much as it concentrates squarely on characters even with a touch of comedy and mockery thrown in. Nobody is spared, including himself. Though it's tempting to see *Joseph Anton*'s contributions as mere wings to the emotional odyssey of Rushdie throughout his problematic years, it was his

offerings of lustrous and extraordinarily textured ideas of the freedom of literature that holds my attention. Although some kind of security crisis seems to be affecting the author as if he is in a scene chillingly reminiscent of countless war-set scenarios, his literary space never looked confused, intimidated or even frightened despite an irritable presence of a scent of madness in the air. Such determination assured a comfortable seat for 'Literature' for the long duration in the mad journey.

*Joseph Anton* incontestably manifests the fact that there remain certain troubles with the truth. When literature becomes a critical investigation towards knowing the truth of something supposedly of universalisable validity like religion which is believed to legitimise our interpretive strategies and territoriality, some don't like it. The investigation demands a 'decolonised' mind- a mind not privileged to pry into either demonizing or idealizing anything in question without launching a rational scientific investigation into it. Those who made known to be utterly perturbed and unsettled with the book in question did so without requiring to browse through the book. Clearly, there exists this problem of irrationality, fear and blind surrender to the so-called unchangeable rules of grand narratives which try to impose limits to the freedom of art, literature, behaviour etc. What is truly unnerving is how it aims to do this through absolute misinformation and by orphaning the audience from the text, and largely generating an ill-advised brain-mob which feeds on the conveniently crumpled opinions of those agenda driven fanatics who've skimmed pages of the book in merciless search for 'erroneous' content, without any stray intention of reading the book for reading's sake.

Such fetish for the purity of grand narratives is not so spontaneous and chaotic as it is made to appear. The campaign against *The Satanic Verses* was very subtly strategized and well-organized through provocations and misinterpretations in religious institutions, mosques and other places. Forces working against the book teamed up to provoke people by telling lies and manipulating their religious sentiments. Many were hired, paid and appeared under contract to stage disproportionate melodrama like book burning, threatening publishers and translators, and destroying bookshops. An enormous network of people was used for the campaign to take place. Religious obsession became the easiest tool to jell over into a terror drama. People were circulated with a single sheet of paper with 'dirty bits' on, the bits they were supposed to be offended by. The truth is *The Satanic Verses* is not primarily a novel about Islam. Most of it concerns mass-migration-people coming from the Indian subcontinent and settling in England in the 1980s with tremendous consequences. In the middle of which there is a dream sequence in the mind of somebody going insane. Nobody bothered to talk about the actual question of looking at those things in context of the fictional characters having opinions rather than the author.

If one pays attention to the history of eventful assaults on famous works of literature, this is almost always the case. People who accused the Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov of being a paedophile because of the contents of *Lolita* (1955) clearly had not

looked at this kind of deeply moral human implication of the book. The people who accused the Irish novelist James Joyce of pornography for *Ulysses* (1922) had obviously not bothered to read the book. It seems to be almost normal when there are these kinds of philistine episodes that people don't feel the want to inform themselves of their said criminal. A lot of people have fixed pictures and commodified theories in their mind about what might or might not be in *The Satanic Verses*. And that decided the attack. It is not the case that such attacks on literature took place in alarming frequency only in the distant past. The Egyptian writer, professor and human rights activist Farag Foda was shot dead by extremist group in 1992. Algerian poet and fiction writer Tahar Djaout was assassinated for his support of secularism and opposition to fanaticism in 1993. Naguib Mahfouz the Egyptian Nobel laureate in literature was stabbed in the neck outside his home in 1994.

When the South African government banned *The Satanic Verses*, the order disparaged the work as "work thinly disguised as a piece of literature," criticized its "foul language," and said that it was "disgusting not only to Muslims but to any reader who holds clear values of decency and culture" (121). The attempt to categorize the language of liberty as improper and uncivilized is a general tendency of such accusations. Fixity is not adequate a parameter for a proper understanding and appreciation of language and culture. The ability to flow easily into new and changing specifications of an emerging culture should be considered for a living language. The philistine effort to be true to the old by following antediluvian prescriptions discourages the acknowledgement of the vitality of the language of literature. Edward Said writes, "What is interesting about *literature*, and everything else, is the *degree to which it's mixed with other things, not its purity*" (81). Rushdie recalls:

That night, still irritable with each other, they went to see Harold Pinter's play *Mountain Language* at the National Theatre. He came away feeling that like the people in the play he, too, was being forbidden to use his language. His language was improper, even criminal. He should be tried in court, hounded out of society, even killed. This was all legitimate because of his language. It was the language of literature that was the crime. (122)

Fiction is not disguised facts. One should look at the art of fiction as a practice of unveiling the truth and rejuvenating the arid corpuscles of meaning instead of summing it up as something behind which one can hide. The most peculiar aspect about the nature of such allegations against literature is that there is a suspicion about the very 'fictionality' or the nature of fiction itself. What can be distinctly disconcerting is that the art of storytelling itself is being projected as being something which disguises the true motives of the writer. There is a conscious attempt to see the fictiveness of storytelling as a forbidden enterprise of manipulation and falsehood. The obvious argument that emerges from this conflict lead to some serious questions: Who has the right to tell a story? Who has the right to decide in what terms that story can be told? The grand narratives, of which religion is one inherits the notion of collective grip from their popular underpinnings. These are the stories that we all, whether

we're religious or not, recognize as an indissoluble share of our culture and heritage. These stories belong to all of us. And we all belong to these stories. We have always adapted-adopted them in our lives and narratives. All of us possess the right to tell the story. All of us own the privilege to tell the story in any way we choose-seriously, comically, respectfully, satirically, realistically, fantastically, etc as we wish. The freedom to make agreements about the grand narratives and to remould and change them is one of the definitions of breathing in a free society.

Finding himself in a sinking boat with a tremulous mind as hurricane of delusion rages on every side Rushdie immediately stood still realising that to move from his aesthetics to forge a secondary career writing little books of apologies is death. With no further escape planned he became determined to continue what he was supposed to do: to continue to tell stories he wanted to tell. Almost single-handedly he resisted any escape into the world of fake perfection coolly aloof from the world of sufferings. He brought his readers firmly back to the real world of pain and conflicts. Insistence on the truth was his strength. Literature to him was not mere gratuitous illustration of life; it was engraved on the hard surface of the realities of the world. Hence, telling stories of world in collision where multiple incompatible narratives or voices fighting for the same space becomes a vital part of his existence:

He had never believed in the novel as a place to escape into. He must not begin to believe in escapist literature now. No, he would write about worlds in collision, about quarreling realities fighting for the same segment of space-time. It was an age in which incompatible realities frequently collided with one another, just as Otto Cone had said in *The Satanic Verses*. (Rushdie 534)

Rushdie favoured the idea of life as something miraculous which is dulled by habituation of ordinary life. An artist can wipe away the blinding dust of dailiness and renew our capacity for fresh wonderment of life. People want to escape into a world of ordinariness "inside which they cocooned themselves" (Rushdie 104). It is the task of art and literature to make us see life as "not normal, but surreal; not humdrum, but filled with event not ordinary, but bizarre" (Rushdie 104). Thus, literature makes us look at things differently.

Shelley called writers "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Rich 422). Writer, according to him remains unacknowledged though his creation delivers lofty ideas thus working "as the proper counterweight to power" (Rushdie 78). Maybe books can't change the world but they have the power to make little changes in individuals and thus in Bellow's great formulation, "open the universe a little more" (Rushdie 78). When one reads a book, it opens up little rooms in him. The vision of the writer becomes integrative inside his vision. The act of reading happens inside the reader. That intimacy with books creates sometimes quite profound shifts in the way in which people perceive the world. When one reads book, one feels a door opening onto new possibilities.



When the Pakistani film *International Gorillay* (International guerrillas) released in 1990 depicted Rushdie as a drunk and a sadist, the British Board of Film Classification refused the film a certificate, on the grounds that it was libellous. Rushdie could sue for defamation, but he formally gave up his right of legal recourse, allowing the film to run in theatre. The film being a distorted and inferior piece of work, soon vanished without trace. The film being a piece of hatred and negativity immediately disintegrated, while the book in question is still remembered and read as a piece of courage that monumentalises the unsung labours and courage of a writer in crisis. Hating and banning something make it attain exoticism and glamour. Putting it out in fresh air makes it disintegrate. The most remarkable aspect of freedom of speech is that it safeguards the freedom of the opponent. Joseph Anton represents a hardline belief in the absolute freedom of expression.

It is less a story than a state of mind. It shows that books are the little settlement on the edge of humanity, which is precariously caught between shifting, shape-changing elements, not always for the good, everyone is poised in a state of transience. Literature assures a feeling that people are trying to reach out, and make connections. But that may at any moment be severed. In such a time being a writer is being the most important man in the world.

Despite living in a troubled and feverish atmosphere he tries his best to capture the bright and energised depth of human life. The propaganda aimed at rousing hatred beneath the cacophony of other discourses, and attempted to entrap him. But he, like Latin American writers always knew that “literature is a life and death matter” (Rushdie 351).

He wanted to make it a part of his mission to insist on the vital importance of books and of protecting the freedoms necessary to create them. In his great novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino said (speaking through his character Arkadian Porphyrich): “Nobody these days holds the written word in such high esteem as police states do. What statistic allows one to identify the nations where literature enjoys true consideration better than the sums appropriated for controlling it and suppressing it?” Which was certainly true of, for example, Cuba. Philip Roth once said, speaking about Soviet-era repression, “When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters.” (Rushdie 351-352)

Books are not misunderstood; they are incorrectly described in this world of manufactured outrage with the sole intention of misleading people and directing their unjust and unwarranted hatred to the book, and by extension, its author for political, religious and other gains. But the strangest phenomenon is the fact that the nature of the attack smears the book with its dirt. As the attack on *The Satanic Verses* was religious and grim the book was perceived to be about religion and lacking in humour. The incomprehensibility and obscurity of the accusation made the book thought to be incomprehensible and obscure. People were

led to believe that the book was something other than its actual being, because of the nature of the attack against it and it was drowned beneath the noise of other discourses:

Soon enough the language of literature would be drowned beneath the cacophony of other discourses, political, religious, sociological, postcolonial, and the subject of quality, of serious artistic intent, would come to seem almost frivolous. (Rushdie 114)

Literature doesn't promote certainties. It promotes possibilities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, "let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be altogether salutary that it is so" (26). Rushdie's memoir about the troubled years becomes an account of the possibilities of literary art in a world which is becoming increasingly phobic about many things including that aspect of literature that admits that there are no limits to the literary imagination. This love for the multiple and multitude is beyond the grasp of any form of singularity and rigidity:

The love of the art of literature was a thing impossible to explain to his adversaries, who loved only one book, whose text was immutable and immune to interpretation, being the uncreated word of God. (Rushdie 213)

Writers for the longest time has been thought of as dangerous by tyrants, authoritarian rulers or any form of illiberal entity. Why are books so often seen by powerful people and authorities with armies and guns, secret policemen and torture chambers as being dangerous to them? One of the reasons for fearing a book is that it doesn't have anything to do with the act of possessing anything. A book is a sign of absolute freedom. It doesn't belong to any interest group. Neither does it speak on behalf of anyone. It's just out there completely free with a single voice speaking whatever it damn well pleases. And unfortunately that kind of liberty seems dangerous and alarming to a lot of people who want to silence it, perhaps out of the fear that others might demand it of them in other spheres of their life. This may, in turn, expose their intrinsically imperialistic ventures as a power structure to modulate whatever goes around, and muffle rights of those who may seem to be even a faint threat to their own dogmatic ways; curtailing the voices of these fringe elements of the society allows them to dictate a uniform manufacturing unit of a poorly read herd. However, the hunger for story, the desire of understanding the world through the medium of story is absolutely central to our nature as human beings. It involves us into a seemingly indifferent discourse of the world, and makes us believe that we, as individuals, too are a part of its narrative, and can even fractionally affect the course of human history through singular thoughts, expressed powerfully without hesitation and strong resistance to any equalizing forces who seek to mar the happy participation simple reading brains have to offer. So any attempts to limit that, to limit what stories are proper to tell, even to limit what kind, what manner stories can be told in, how shall the story be told, who has power over the story is not just censorship, it is a kind of existential crime. It is an attack on human nature itself because it is in our nature to tell and read stories as we choose.

‘...The fundamentalist believes that we believe in nothing. In his worldview, he has his absolute certainties, while we are sunk in sybaritic indulgences. To prove him wrong, we must first know that he is wrong. We must agree on what matters: kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion, literature, generosity, water, a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources, movies, music, freedom of thought, beauty, love. These will be our weapons. Not by making war, but by the unafraid way we choose to live shall we defeat them. How to defeat terrorism? Don’t be terrorized. Don’t let fear rule your life. Even if you are scared.’ (Rushdie 624)

The account of *Joseph Anton* indicates a fundamental problem which exists at the root of the novel. Thousands of years ago when Heraclitus said character is destiny he meant that the kind of being one is determines the kind of life one lives. The entire art of the novel having flown from that idea of eruption of chance into human life, suddenly finds it acutely problematic to deal with a world where character is not necessarily destiny, where thousands of people are killed for reasons unconnected to their character and where the public sphere intrudes so much more on our private lives than it ever did that the kinds of lives we have are shaped from outside our lives rather than from inside. What appeared to be medieval and bizarre at that time now fit together into the major narrative of our time: the rise of extremism in the world. This tyranny of the outside was glimpsed in the Satanic Verses affair and Rushdie was in a prologue to a story which now has become monstrous ready to engulf all of us anytime with an ease of violence.

In “Is Nothing Sacred” Rushdie talked about how literature gets born at the connecting point of the self and the world and how the frontier separating the two also becomes a connecting point melting into each other. Such interflow creates melodies you love and noises you hate. But you can’t sieve them separate. They exist inseparably with each other. That’s the point of human existence as well as of literature. Literature endeavours to expand this space so that more such voices can exist together. I choose to end the article with a beautiful long quote from the memoir:

This was 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 toward 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, toward narrowness, bigotry, tribalism, cultism and war. There were plenty of people who didn't want the universe opened, who would, in fact, prefer it to be shut down quite a bit, and so when artists went to the frontier and pushed they often found powerful forces pushing back. And yet they did what they had to do, even at the price of their own ease, and, sometimes, of their lives. (Rushdie 628)

**Works Cited:**

Rich, Adrienne. "Legislators of the World." *Community Development Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2007, pp. 422. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44259071](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44259071).

Rushdie, Salman. *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*. Jonathan Cape, 2012.

---. "Is Nothing Sacred?" *Granta Magazine*, 12 June 2017, [granta.com/is-nothing-sacred/](http://granta.com/is-nothing-sacred/).

Said, Edward. "Beginnings: An Interview." *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*. Ed. Gauri Viswanathan. Vintage, 2001.3-38.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. Columbia University Press, 2003.