

SALMAN RUSHDIE’S “SHALIMAR THE CLOWN”: A SECULARIST MANIFESTO?

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie’s commitment to secularism is a constant across his entire work, both fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, he may be described as a secular intellectual in the sense proposed by Edward Said in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994). In his non-fiction, Rushdie has clearly and repeatedly affirmed secularist principles as he sees them, in a range of essays to be found in the volumes *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) and *Step Across This Line* (2002), and, most recently, in his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012). This paper will endeavour to show how, in his novel of 2005 *Shalimar the Clown* (arguably the most secularist of all his fictional works), Rushdie puts forward the traditional culture and artisanal skills of Kashmir as embodying a kind of parallel or non-formal education, while also constituting a metonym for secularism in the Indian sense of neutrality between religious groups; and how this narrative, which, if centred on Kashmir, fans out in space and time to Nazi Europe, and to the contemporary US with its death penalty and its global interventionism, further implies a broader, transcultural vision of secularism as a libertarian world-view that is grounded in both the rational and the creative.

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Shalimar the Clown is Salman Rushdie’s ninth novel, published in 2005. It is not its author’s best-known work of fiction, though more than one reviewer at the time hailed it as a major achievement or even as its author’s masterpiece (Tharoor 2005; Aguado 2005). At all events, it is very arguably that of his novels

in which the author of *The Satanic Verses*, known the world over as an icon of free speech and secularism in, more often than not, a rather non-literary context, gets to grips in the closest and most challenging fashion with the secular ideal as he sees it. In addition, Rushdie does so in a context which also promotes traditional popular culture as a metonym for a tolerant, non-theocratic form of alternative education. *Shalimar* tends to be described as Rushdie's *novel of Kashmir* – a region with which, while Rushdie has made it clear that the novel is not autobiographical (Rushdie, interview with Gandillot, 2005), he indeed has personal links, as his maternal grandparents hailed from there. While it certainly centres in its core passages on that strife-torn but culturally rich territory and bone of contention between India and Pakistan, the novel also fans out, in a global sweep typical of its author, to take in, with a harshly critical eye, today's insecurely cosmopolitan contemporary US, as well as the Europe of the 1930s and the rise of Nazism.

Rushdie has always considered himself a secularist, and before embarking on discussion of the novel it is important to establish what the terms 'secular', 'secularism' and 'secularist' signify for him. His position has scarcely changed, if at all, over time, though his faith in secularism's existence as reality has varied with events. Rushdie has by his own account never been a practitioner of any religion, the Islam he was born into not excepted (his notorious 'conversion statement' of 1990, 'Why I Have Embraced Islam', extracted under duress was rapidly suppressed). Among his novels, *Midnight's Children* pays homage to the creative potential of Nehruvian-secularist post-Independence India, while narrating the damage done to India's founding ideals by Nehru's own followers and descendants; while, as is more than sufficiently known, *The Satanic Verses*, both in its text and its unprecedented intertext, found its author occupying the fault-line between secular and theocratic discourses. If *Shalimar* represents the most sustained exploration of the secular in Rushdie's fiction, it is in his non-fiction – the essay collections *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*, and his recent memoir *Joseph Anton* – that his explicit discussions of the concept should be sought.

Rushdie's self-definition as intellectual – that is, as public and secular intellectual - may be approximated to the model exemplified by his friend and defender Edward Said and set out in detail in *Representations of the Intellectual*, the volume collecting Said's Reith lectures from 1993. For Said, the intellectual is by definition public and, to use a favourite Saidian term, 'worldly': a figure at once politically and ideologically engaged, independent and beholden to no party or movement, and fiercely secular. If in this conception, "uncompromising freedom of expression and opinion is the secular intellectual's main bastion" (as Said says directly referring to Rushdie – Said 1994, 65-66), the intellectual is also someone "in a state of constant alertness" and one "whose whole being is staked on a critical sense" (17). On this view, it is the intellectual's duty to cast a sceptical eye on power on all sides. This includes the critique of religion, since for Said "the true intellectual is a secular being" (89), and the defence of a public intellectual such as Rushdie known for non-compliance with religious criteria hence becomes an "absolutely central" issue (66). Secularism, for Said, implies a rationalist view of the world that rejects accommodation with any religion and subjects all discourses without exception to a relentless critical gaze.

Rushdie's stance across his career as public intellectual may be considered to be in line with Said's. His secularist credentials are in no doubt, and he has explicitly referred to secularism as a way of being in his non-fictional prose. However, one needs to distinguish between the two senses in which he uses the concept: in a global sense, and in a specifically Indian sense. The global sense prevails in his essay of 1990, 'In Good Faith' (reprinted in *Imaginary Homelands*), one of several texts of that time in which he restated his anti-theocratic position in the face of Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa. There, Rushdie defines himself as a "wholly secular person", inspired by "the great traditions of secular rationalism" (with its political and aesthetic corollaries of socialism and modernism) (Rushdie 1992, 377), and affirms secularism as "life without God" (412-13). In the same essay, however, he also invokes the more specifically Indian notion, in the tradition of "Nehru's vision of a secular India", of secularism as state neutrality between religions (and thus, unlike the more global

concept, not standing in contradistinction to religious observance)¹. For Rushdie, in the Indian socio-political context secularism in this sense is “a question of survival” as against communalism (404).

Later, in a speech delivered in Cambridge in 1993² (reprinted in *Step Across This Line*), Rushdie effectively combined the two senses. Here, he defends *The Satanic Verses* as “a committedly secular text that deals in part with the material of religious faith”, and, while upbraiding “religious fanaticism’s scorn for secularism and for unbelief”, recalls ‘the secular ideal of Nehru and Gandhi’ and the particular ‘importance of secularism’ in that sense for India’s Muslims (Rushdie 2002, 252). He laments what he sees as the latter-day “decay of that ideal” and the resultant “sectarian confrontations” in the subcontinent. Rushdie makes it clear here that since the fatwa, his own ‘commitment to that ideal, and to the ancillary principles of pluralism, scepticism and tolerance, has been doubled and redoubled’. This stance is borne out by further restatements almost two decades later, in *Joseph Anton*. In that memoir, Rushdie again condemns the decline of “India’s much-trumpeted secularism” (116), also opining that with the *Verses* controversy “the secular world” yielded “much vital ground” to religion (124) and (citing an article of his from 2001)³ calling on the Islamic world to “take on board the secularist-humanist principles on which the modern world is based” (625⁴). It is in this context of a consistently affirmed secularism that we may examine *Shalimar the Clown*.

The novel begins with the murder of Maximilian Ophuls, a former US Ambassador to India of Alsatian Franco-Jewish origins,

¹ This Indian model of secularism is classically explicated by Sunil Khilnani in *The Idea of India* (1998).

² Rushdie gave this speech at his alma mater, King’s College, where – as he recalls in *Joseph Anton* - the British educational system had allowed him, as a history undergraduate, to study the rise of Islam as a special subject (Rushdie 2012, 38-45).

³ The article was originally published in the *New York Times* on 2 November 2001, and was reprinted with a slightly modified title in *Step Across This Line* (2002).

⁴ Quoting Rushdie 2002, 397.

in Los Angeles, his throat slit outside the apartment block where his natural daughter, India, lives. The killer is his chauffeur, a Kashmiri known as Shalimar the Clown. A subplot recounts Ophuls' parents' deportation by the Nazis to a concentration camp and his own exploits in the French Resistance before moving to the US, where he settles and takes American citizenship. The main story concerns two families in an imaginary Kashmiri village called Pachigam, headed respectively by the Hindu Pandit Pyarelal Kaul and the Muslim Abdullah Noman. The Pandit's daughter, Bhoomi alias Boonyi, a dancer, is courted by Noman's son, who as a performer in the traditional Kashmiri theatre goes under the name of Shalimar the Clown. The romance is discovered, but rather than kill them, the village council or *panchayat* agrees to marry them. However, on a visit of her dance troupe to Delhi, Boonyi is seduced, and subsequently abandoned, by the then ambassador Ophuls. She gives birth to Ophuls' daughter and leaves her in the charge of the ambassador's estranged wife, returning herself to her village, where she dies. The daughter, India alias Kashmira, ends up living in the US. The emotionally scarred Shalimar converts to jihadist terrorism, his metamorphosis running parallel with an inexorable Islamist mutation that gradually overturns the once-syncretic lifestyle of Pachigam and district. Shalimar is eventually sent to the US, where after locating Ophuls and entering his service he kills him. He is put on death row but escapes, and the novel ends ambiguously with an unresolved confrontation between Shalimar and India-Kashmira, on her doorstep.

Rushdie presents traditional Kashmiri society as a space where intercommunal tolerance and syncretist practices flourished amidst a vibrant and creative folk culture, and where Hindus and Muslims, not to mention Sikhs, lived in peace side by side. In Kashmir's past, "all crafts flowered, all gurdwaras, temples and mosques were cared for, and everything in the garden was lovely" (Rushdie 2005, 357). Hindu and Muslim lifestyles intermingled, and Kashmiri Islam took on a mystical, Sufi hue: "The pandits of Kashmir ... happily ate meat. Kashmiri Muslims, perhaps envying the pandits their choice of gods, blurred their faith's austere monotheism by worshipping at the shrines of the valley's many local saints" (83). In Rushdie's vision, that subcontinental utopia

was torn apart after Independence and Partition by communalist forces, above all by a philistine Islamic fundamentalism, alien in its rigidity to Kashmir's own Muslim heritage but encouraged by the heavy-handedness of the Indian army. Ultimately it was a fragile way of life, liable to disturbance from the outside, as emblematised in Ophuls' totally pointless seduction of Boonyi. That act appears as a metonym for the cynical neo-imperialist operations of a US sublimely indifferent in practice, in the exercise of its "overweening amoral might" (336), to the values of pluralism and tolerance it claims to defend in the world.

Culture, in its manifestation as folk or popular culture, is a major presence in Rushdie's novel. Popular arts offer an alternative non-formal model of education: the passing-on of traditional skills is a form of induction into the community's creative heritage - a heritage effectively presented by Rushdie as *secular in the Indian sense*, shared by the different religious groups and permitting participation and enjoyment by all.

Theatre, dance and cuisine feature prominently in this traditional Kashmiri culture, which also embraces music, storytelling (132) and herbal lore (229) - not to mention the making of rugs, shawls or papier-mâché boxes, processes which the novel expounds in attentive detail (358-59). Artisanal culture appears as a force for syncretism and tolerance: to take music, "the *santoor*, the *sarangi*, the *rabab*, the harmonium were nonsectarian instruments" (112-13). Theatre defines Shalimar's initial career, as dance defines Boonyi's. Shalimar has "learned the art of the clown" which lies at the heart of the Kashmiri popular theatre (363), instructed at the age of nine in "the secret of airwalking" (55). For Boonyi, dancing was "her first love and greatest gift" (57): the two complement each other in skills as in religious backgrounds. Meanwhile, Kashmir's refined, spice-rich cuisine, with its *wazwaan* or "Banquet of Thirty-Six Courses Minimum" (61), is the pride and joy of Bombur Yambarzal, the celebrated cook from the next-door village, Shirmal. All these are artisanal skills that have to be transmitted and learned, with patience and perseverance.

The union of Shalimar and Boonyi should ideally have been a triumph for both Kashmir's syncretism and its folk culture. The decision of the *panchayat* to marry them is apparently a generous burst of liberalism. Shalimar's father declares: "A love match is acceptable to both families and so a marriage there will be" (110). However, the victory for tolerance that an approved cross-cultural marriage might be hoped to represent does not materialise. Clouds loom even before, when a much-heralded special "festival banquet" (71), a circus-and-cuisine event bringing both Hindu and Muslim village popular arts to Srinagar's famed Shalimar gardens⁵, is snowed on and fizzles out (84-89). The marriage itself is soon blown apart by Ophuls' ambassadorial depredations, which turn the aggrieved Shalimar from an easy-going artist into a fanatical jihadist who imbibes an ideology of hate at a camp where the only book permitted, "training manuals excepted", is a dehistoricised Koran (265).

Meanwhile, the fundamentalists, egged on by the dehumanised Bulbul Fakh or "Iron Mullah", launch their onslaught on Kashmiri culture, undoing a centuries-old fabric of parallel education and forcing the inhabitants to unlearn both their skills, rendered useless and their syncretism, turned non-viable. If we turn to the geopolitical intertext, Rushdie's novel reflects the actual history of a Kashmir undergoing the imposition of a Wahhabi or Salafist model on a local Islam of totally different cultural traditions. In the real world, similar events occurred in Mali in 2012, when Islamist insurgents destroyed Sufi shrines and persecuted traditional musicians. In Rushdie's Kashmir, the burqa is forced on proud women "who had scorned the veil all their lives" (364); the arts of theatre, clowning and dance are stopped (one jihadist declares: "I would immediately order the execution of all entertainers" – 272); even the famed Kashmiri cuisine is suppressed as "ungodly" (365). The episode in *Shalimar* where Bombur Yambarzal the cook is placed under house arrest by the "militants" and told that

⁵ Origin of the protagonist's assumed name.

... if he ever again cooked the ... disgusting Banquet of Thirty-Six Courses Minimum, they would cut off his head and cook it in a stew and the whole village would be forced to eat it for dinner (365)

concur eerily with an actual occurrence from the Malian town of Kidal reported in October 2012, when Islamist militiamen entered a local musician's house:

He wasn't home, but the message delivered to his sister was chilling: "If you speak to him, tell him that if he ever shows his face in this town again, we'll cut off all the fingers he uses to play his guitar with". The gang then removed guitars, amplifiers, speakers, microphones and a drum kit from the house, doused them with petrol, and set them ablaze (Morgan, 2012, Internet reference).

In cases like this, the dividing-line between fiction and reality starts to look thin indeed.

Rushdie's world-view in *Shalimar the Clown* has not escaped questioning by critics, on the grounds of a selective or oversimplified portrayal of Islamism. Thus, the critic Maurice O'Connor argues that Rushdie fails to engage in depth with the "jihadist mind-set of Islamic fundamentalism" or to contextualise the phenomenon vis-à-vis US hegemony, dismissing parts of the book as "mere pastiche of the airport novel" (O'Connor 2011, 217, 218). Another Rushdiean critic, Andrew Teverson, more positively foregrounds the strength of the novel's geopolitics and its fusion of themes previously kept separate in the author's fiction, namely "South Asian politics" and "the globalisation of the power of the United States" (Teverson 2007, 218). It is true that the post-*Verses* Rushdie often, though not always, expresses his commitment to rationality and libertarianism in a register more 'Western' than 'Eastern', affirming the values of the First Amendment and the Enlightenment⁶. Nonetheless, and although our present discussion

⁶ Rushdie's position on Islam vis-à-vis the Enlightenment is a subject that – also in relation to current debates in France – merits a close examination, albeit remaining outside the necessarily brief scope of the present paper.

of *Shalimar* has focused mostly on its core Kashmiri element, not only Ophuls' neo-imperial exploitation of Boonyi but also the non-subcontinental episodes (Nazism and anti-Semitism in 1930s Europe; the death penalty in today's US) should make it clear that Rushdie's vision is far indeed from exonerating the West from all responsibility for violence and oppression worldwide. Neither of the above readings offers a fully integrated consideration of the novel's intertwined locations in time and place, even though, as Rushdie himself declares narratorially, it reflects a world where everywhere is "a mirror of everywhere else" (Rushdie 2005, 355). Equally, as far as the tale's Kashmiri centre is concerned, neither critic sufficiently prioritises the key role of popular arts in the novel and the implicit message of hope and creativity that such an artisanal tradition embodies.

In our emerging globalised world order, the dialogue between secularism and education is necessary and urgent. The issue has recently been raised in acute fashion, in a context both subcontinental and global, by the remarkable life-story of Malala Yousafzai, the schoolgirl and activist for girls' education shot in Pakistan by the Taliban who – with life here too imitating art but felicitously, in a dénouement worthy of a Rushdie novel - is now, miraculously recovered and attending school in England, the protagonist of a world fund for female education⁷. In *Shalimar the Clown*, Salman Rushdie, by foregrounding traditional culture as a path of parallel learning in a framework of pluralist communal values, perhaps more than in any other of his novels strikes a blow for secularism, as a way of being and a necessary condition for humanity's future.

⁷ For Malala's story up to early 2013, see Brenner (2013); for her return to school in England, see 'Malala Yousafzai attends first day at Edgbaston High School in Birmingham' (BBC, 19 March 2013, Internet reference), and for the Malala Fund, see 'Malala Yousafzai Speaks Today and Announces Malala Fund to Support Girls' Access to Education' (4 February 2013, Internet reference).

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