

CONTEXT

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Shabbir Akhtar, *The Verses and the Fury Be Careful with Muhammad! Salman Rushdie and the Battle for Free Speech* (2nd Edition with a New Preface). BIJAK Publishing, 2020. pp. 187. ISBN: 978-623-94742-2-5.

In the absence of a plausible and well-argued response by Muslim intellectuals to the neoliberal inquisition and the “hegemonic ideology”, the second edition of *Be Careful with Muhammad! Salman Rushdie and the Battle for Free Speech* is welcome for several reasons.

To remind ourselves, this book by British writer Shabbir Akhtar presents a concise account of the complex reception of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, as well as the repercussions Rushdie’s whimsical screed had around the world at the twilight of the twentieth century.

Shabbir Akhtar was an active participant in the Muslim response to this malicious parody of Muslims and their religion and, more particularly, of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, so in outline the book is actually his deeply intimate recollection of a time when Muslims “wrote off the Empire” from its centre. His book is thus an illustrative example of contemporary Muslim culture of memory. In this sense, *Be Careful with Muhammad!* offers a panoramic picture of the Muslim polemic with Rushdie and his devotees. The geography of the polemic was firmly fixed and value-marked from the beginning. Muslims were pre-marked as a group of angry and unreasonable demonstrators (a kind of wicked mob). At the same time, Rushdie and his supporters were defenders of freedom and the most advanced human rights (a civilised aristocracy).

Shabbir faithfully conveys the experience of diasporic dislocation and otherness first-hand. He worked as a local coordinator of the initiative to ban the publication and promotion of *The Satanic Verses* and was a participant in debates in Bradford and London. He was also a (primarily censored) guest or an author on the many media that followed the Rushdie “affair” closely. His autobiographical testimony contains what are perhaps the book’s most valuable messages regarding the complex field of absolute freedom of expression and Muslim (non) conformism within the global cultural context.

Indeed, absolute freedom and Muslim (non)conformism form the narrative backbone of Shabbir's book. The author uses them to crystallize the neuralgic points of Rushdie's *Verses*, while also questioning the position/image of Muslims in the modern geopolitical arena. These phenomena are elaborated in six relatively short chapters.

The first chapter, "*Be Careful with Muhammad!*", describes the role and presence of Muhammad, peace be upon him, in the daily lives of Muslims. Akhtar believes that such knowledge can help in understanding Muslims' heightened sensitivity about their beloved Prophet, peace be upon him. Only on this basis can the unprecedented reaction to Rushdie's *Verses* be discussed. In the chapter of the book entitled "From Tehran with Love", the author contrasts this picture to the analysis of sacrilege and blasphemy from a diplomatic perspective. He shows how a malicious narrative has been used to augment political power and provoke global hysteria, while the demand not to allow a particular group of people to be publicly degraded and their sanctities ridiculed from the viewpoint of the neoliberal dictate of the supremacy of the individual has passed unnoticed, under the radar. Shabbir then analyses the mechanisms of the liberal inquisition, which is the title of the third chapter. In it, he looks at how Rushdie's book was promoted and the iconization of his personality in the West. With somewhat less persuasiveness, the author then turns to the field of literary theory and the artistic (un)foundedness of Rushdie's novel in the chapter on "Art or Literary Terrorism?"

Shabbir reveals his intellectual anchorage most clearly in the concluding chapters, "What's Wrong with Fundamentalism?" and "Faith and Power". These chapters offer meticulous observations on religion as a proactive subject and the forceful destruction of such a viewpoint from the Enlightenment down to the present. The author recognizes the contemporary "guilt" of Islam and Muslims for their resistance to the mental and moral fashions the West prescribes the rest of the world and which represent the only ticket for admission to the fold of advanced modern civilization. As Muslims in Britain opposed self-degradation disguised as emancipation, Islam came to represent a subversive and destructive force seeking to destroy Britain as a multicultural society. Ordinary civic activism and looking for protection from unjust and malicious provocation were transformed, over ("Rushdian-Satanic") night, into a demand for theocracy. Such distorted images and propaganda phantasms have, unfortunately, become canonical in media infinity, as well as in geopolitical concepts.

The affair over Rushdie's *Verses* seems distant and foggy today, but its repercussions and the unresolved issues that emerged with it onto the fragile surface of our time have proven their enduring significance many times over. A prominent Muslim thinker, Shabbir Akhtar, recognized these questions at the time and has

articulated them and conveyed them convincingly and with unique narrative charm. The new edition offers a kind of intellectual recapitulation of the phenomenon of the verses of the powerful and the anger of the subordinate. The preface to this edition functions as a *post-festum* chapter in which the author offers an overview of the situation three decades after the book was first published. The new edition may thus be considered a kind of philosophical epic. As with every epic, this one has to do with verses, oppression, rebellion, and rage. Indeed, in *Be Careful with Muhammad! Salman Rushdie and the Battle for Free Speech*, Shabbir succinctly depicts the evolution of a struggle, writing a valuable historical and cultural document on civic resistance, diasporic uneasiness, and introversion within British society, the visible and hidden domains of censorship, the power of disobedience, and the many facets of freedom of expression. Thirty years after Rushdie's *Verses*, one question remains unanswered: Was there a winner?

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