

Publish and be damned? *The Satanic Verses* controversy as a turning point in British publishing history

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Abstract

The article argues that *The Satanic Verses* controversy represents a turning point in British publishing history. In the post-*Satanic-Verses* era, publication of works, fiction and non-fiction, in Britain and abroad, has taken place within a new narrative structured by the dichotomies of the west versus Islam, freedom of expression versus duty not to offend and (most pertinently for publishing students), to publish versus not to publish. Two recent controversies highlight the continuing difficulty of publishing works which are deemed offensive to religious sentiment. More significantly, ought publishers to publish regardless of the sentiments of some readers, or should they be sensitive to the feelings of those whom the book might offend?

Key Words: publishing; *Satanic Verses*; Penguin; censorship

I

The Satanic Verses was written by Salman Rushdie and published in 1988 by Penguin imprint Viking Press. Rushdie had previously authored a number of works including *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983). Both these works were controversial, but *The Satanic Verses* provoked the strongest reaction. In Chapter Two, Mohammed, Islam's founder, removes from the Qur'an two verses (which apparently approved the intercession of three Meccan deities), claiming that they were inspired by Satan (Rushdie, 1989, 114). This and other scenes in the book caused it to be banned in some countries, Islamic and non-

Islamic. Eventually, on 14th February 1989, Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a *fatwa*:

“I inform all zealous Muslims...that the author of *The Satanic Verses* ... and all those involved in its publication ... are sentenced to death” (Jones, 2001, 2073).

Rushdie vanished “into the front pages” (Amis, 1993, 172), and into hiding for a decade. The Japanese translator was killed. Bookstores in Britain and the US were bombed, and, it was rumoured, executives at Viking Press wore bulletproof vests to work (Jones, 2001, 2073). In 1998, Iran declared it would not “threaten the life of the author of *The Satanic Verses* or anybody associated with the work” (Jones, 2001, 2074). The *fatwa*, however, remains; Khomeini died without revoking it.

The Satanic Verses controversy was a crucial moment in the history of British publishing. Paul Weller writes it was a “controversy ... that became paradigmatic for the issues of ... religion, values and art in contention” (2009, 1). Publication of fiction and non-fiction in the UK and abroad now takes place in a new narrative dichotomy of west versus Islam, and in a publishing-specific dichotomy particular to works about religion: to publish or not to publish. The validity of such a Manichean view can be questioned, but it is undoubtedly the paradigm in which publishers and the wider literary world operate.

Recent controversies, in 2008 over the publication of Sherry Jones's *The Jewel of Medina* in Britain and the United States (US), and in 2014 in India regarding a new history of Hinduism, demonstrate that it is now more difficult to justify the publications of books about religion. Whereas before controversy centred on publishers for publishing the book, (and the author for writing it), firms can now expect criticism for *not* publishing. The journalist Nick

Cohen put it succinctly: “No young artist of Rushdie’s range and gifts would dare write a modern version of *The Satanic Verses* today, and if he or she did, no editor would publish it” (2012, 42).

II

Publishers are increasingly inclined not to publish works which could be deemed offensive to religious sentiment. To grasp why this is at a theoretical level, it is instructive to consider the ideas of Robert Darnton, and to apply these to a recent publication controversy.

Darnton argued that: “[...] printed books generally pass through the same life cycle. It could be described as a communications circuit that runs from author to publisher ... the printer, the bookseller and the reader”. A communications circuit helps to comprehend why the *Verses* controversy is important in publishing history. “The reader ... completes the circuit because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition.” Author and reader are interconnected and indeed interdependent: “Authors are readers themselves” (Darnton, 2002, 11).

Clearly the publisher, the crucial connection between author and reader, is missing. So, the model ought to be corrected to read: “the reader completes the circuit because he influences the author *and the publisher* before the act of composition”. A recurring point about both *The Satanic Verses* and *The Jewel of Medina* controversies is that few of the books’ critics bothered to read, or had a chance to read, them: “I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is”, said Indian MP Syed Shahabuddin in 1988 (Malik, 2012, 2). Therefore, “reader” must function for these purposes as a loose term that encompasses not

simply the *act* of reading, but the broader notion of being affected by, or feeling affected by, a book.

The Jewel of Medina was written by a former journalist, Sherry Jones, and bought by Random House (RH) for \$100,000. The book is a romantic novel set in the early days of Islam, and relates the story of the Prophet Mohammed and his wife Aiesha. Prior to the book's publication, RH circulated the text to academics to secure promotional quotes. One academic was Denise Spellberg, professor of Middle Eastern History at University of Texas. Spellberg read the manuscript and found it offensive. She warned an RH editor, Jane Garrett, that the novel was "a "national security issue" and "far more controversial than the *Satanic Verses*" (Malik, 2012, 193). To reference the *Verses* highlights how important a moment in British publishing history its publication and subsequent controversy was for the intellectual, cultural and commercial framework in which publishers operate.

To develop the above point about the broadening of the term 'reader', it is useful to consider what happened when Spellberg had passed the manuscript to Shahed Amanullah, a guest lecturer. Spellberg told Amanullah that the book "made fun of Muslims and their history". He emailed his students to alert them to the forthcoming book and requested further information. His email was re-posted on a website for young Shias, with one contributor proposing "a seven point strategy for getting an apology from the author of the BOOK for writing such stuff". The strategy, notes Kenan Malik, "involved nothing more sinister than getting 'one volunteer to draft an email and send to people, another volunteer to get a copy of the book and share details with the group'". This, apparently, was what Spellberg meant by "national security concerns". RH decided to "postpone publication for the safety of the

author, the employees of Random House, booksellers, and anyone else who would be involved in the sale and distribution of the novel” (2012, 195).

In the communication circuit above, one academic’s perception of what a novel would mean to Muslims was transmitted to RH as a concern about national security. Combined with their fear about the reaction of Muslims (apparently gleaned from the email and blog exchanges between Amanullah and his students), this persuaded a major international publisher to refuse to publish *Jewel*. Communication depended on a complex set of perceptions and assumptions about a book’s meaning to its readers. Darnton’s circuit, though intended to explain the eighteenth-century publishing world, remains useful; particularly for placing in the centre “political and legal sanctions” and “intellectual influences and publicity” (2002, 12) as the suns around which the author-publisher-reader relations orbit.

Jewel was published in the US by Beaufort Books without incident; but UK publication was cancelled by independent British publisher, Gibson Square, after their offices were firebombed (on the twentieth anniversary of *The Satanic Verses*’s publication).

III

Publishers assume a vital role in the production and dissemination of ideas, values and norms in society and in culture. The decision about whether to publish or not to publish an author is theirs. It is relatively easy, therefore, to see publishers as a kind of censor; the ones who allow only a selection of texts into the market and onto the field of cultural exchange. Yet, censorship is a complex term to conceptualise.

Deana Heath has carefully traced the development of the meaning of this diffuse term. Heath argues that “censorship cannot...be reduced purely to prohibition or equated simply with silencing” (2007, 510).

Heath distinguishes four different kinds of censorship:

- 1) Juridical regulation – “in which power limits and constrains the object on which it operates”
- 2) Productive regulation – “in which power contributes to making the object it constrains”
- 3) Liberal approach to censorship – “[...] censorship is viewed as the suppression of individual liberty by the state”
- 4) Multicultural approach to censorship – “[...] censorship is regarded as the intimidation of marginalized groups by the dominant culture” (2007, 512).

The problem with the multicultural view is that it does not account for the way in which a subset of a marginalised group, or the perception of the likely reaction of the group, can influence a publisher’s decision not to publish. The *Jewel* controversy shows how a small group of people can influence a firm such as Gibson Square not to publish (Edgar, Publishing History blog, 2014).

Self-censorship by publishers is increasingly the case in the post *Verses* era. More so than at the time of the controversy when, despite the *fatwa*, publishers combined to ensure the publication of the paperback edition. “Since the *Satanic Verses* affair, fear of giving offence, especially to the religious, has become a major source of the most insidious form of censorship, self-censorship (Petley, 2009, 27).”

Censorship, like the objects it censors, is productive. “Thus, terms like obscenity and indecency are socially determined concepts that, as far as those responsible for regulating them are concerned, change according to who is reading or viewing the work in question, and when and where they are doing so” (Heath, 2007 510).

Heath cites Colin Manchester’s discussion of the 1757 trial of Edmund Curll for publishing *Venus in the Cloister*: “The court was not concerned with penalizing obscenity in literature as obscenity but with obscenity’s relationship with two other factors, religion and breach of the peace” (2007, 510).

Applied to publication controversies such as *The Jewel of Medina*, this view of censorship is more helpful than a standard, liberal approach which regards censorship as the suppression of individual liberty by the state. Stanley Fish’s argument that “RH is free to publish or decline to publish whatever it likes, and its decision to do either has nothing to do with western traditions of free speech, or any other high-sounding abstraction”, is an example of this. According to Fish, it must be “the government that is criminalizing expression” (*New York Times*, August 8, 2008). Because RH is not a part of the state, it could not censor Jones’ work by refusing to publish it.

An illuminating comparison can be made with the decision in the early 1990s to publish the paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*. Penguin CEO Peter Mayer recalled “I feared it might inflame, like a poker in the eye of the critics. I told Rushdie, we will publish, but only when it is safe to do so” (Malik, 2012, 14). Similarly, Richard Webster argued at the time that “the atmosphere in which such an edition could be published constructively does not exist ...

Penguin should have the good sense to stay their hand on the question of the paperback edition” (Webster, 1990, 146).

Penguin decided to publish a paperback edition without publicity, however the offices were firebombed and publication was delayed. “We just could not publish it at that time (2012, 14).” Rushdie bought back the rights to the paperback edition and created a consortium to publish it.

What this episode demonstrates is the tense, dynamic and delicate environment in which publishers operate. The publishers had to anticipate the likely reaction to a paperback edition of an already incendiary book, and weigh their responsibilities to their staff and to notions of freedom of expression. It is a template which publishers such as Random House, Penguin and OUP have followed since.

The fragmented, socially-determined character of censorship is shown by Penguin India’s decision to pulp outstanding copies of *The Hindus: An Alternative History* by Wendy Doniger following a court settlement. The law in India makes it a criminal offence to publish anything which offends religious sentiments (*The Satanic Verses* was banned in 1988). Such a state of affairs evidences the liberal approach to censorship and the idea of juridical regulation.

IV

What *The Hindus* example also shows is that even works of non-fiction can be censored. *The Myth of the Holy Cow* also faced a court order which regulated where it could be sold. Its publisher had also decided at the last minute not to publish (Pye, 2002). Oxford University Press (OUP) withdrew *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* in 2004 from the Indian market (Complete Review, February 2004). This did not prevent an attack on the Bandhakar Oriental Research Institute by members of the Hindu Sambhaji Brigade.

Since *The Satanic Verses*, publishers are frequently criticised for cowardice in not publishing books about religion. Arundhati Roy criticised Penguin thus: “Have you forgotten who you are? ... You existed long before publishing became just another business and long before books became products” (Roy, 2014). Doniger defended Penguin, arguing they knew the book would be controversial but nevertheless: “as a publisher’s daughter, I wince at the knowledge that the existing books ... will be pulped” (Doniger, 2014).

The role of Penguin in the Rushdie affair was different. Peter Mayer, then CEO, said “[...] politically it was important not to give in to terror. It was important to defend the right to publish freely” (Malik, 2012, 15). This is most likely because the full effects of the controversy were yet to be experienced. “How we responded to the controversy over the Satanic Verses would affect the future of free inquiry, without which there would be no publishing as we knew it ...” (Malik, 2012, 14).

Conclusion

“After the fatwa, reception was more focused on the conflict between *literary freedom* or autonomy and *literary restriction* in the interests of sacrosanct beliefs.” (Fowler, 2000, 48)

The publishing world in 1988-89 was more united in its response. “You cannot not publish a book because it will cause offence”, argued Clive Bradley, Chief Executive of the Publishers’ Association. The Booksellers Association issued a statement asserting “Tolerance should be allowed in the expression of ideas”. (Weller, 2009, 19)

The contours of the post-*Verses* landscape are, in hindsight, easy to see. Public protests, riots, book-burnings, attacks on booksellers and publishers – or the *perceived* threat of such responses – now feature as part of any conflict over whether or not to publish.

Yet it is also important to note that these conflicts are not universal, much like the response of Muslims and Islamic countries to *The Satanic Verses*. *The Jewel of Medina* has been published in Italy, Serbia, America, Germany and Denmark, with plans to publish in Eastern Europe, Spain, and Brazil. (Petley, 2009, 172) *The Satanic Verses* remains available in any bookshop in Britain – on the shelves and not under the counter as the paperback edition was at first. It was not even banned initially in Iran. (Malik, 2012, 6) Publication controversies concerning books deemed offensive to religious sentiment are often confined to particular countries. Yet here is a paradox: the issue may be local and particular in origin (Bradford in Britain, Texas and New York in the US), but global and abstract in its meaning. Nick Cohen writes: “The fatwa ... redrew the boundaries of the free world. It ensured that

London, New York, Paris, Copenhagen and Amsterdam could no longer be places of safety for writers tackling religious themes.” (2012, 16)

As *The Satanic Verses* controversy made clear, the publishers’ role as disseminators of ideas, values and norms is a complex mode of being to inhabit. It has become more complicated now. The publishing environment is structured dynamically; it is forged by the decisions its principal agents take, the most important one being whether or not to publish a book. Increasingly, the decision is being taken *not* to publish. “Before Rushdie, publishers praised themselves for their business acumen in buying a book that offended the authorities. After Rushdie, the smart move was for a publishing house to turn down books that might offend religious zealots.” (Cohen, 2012, 48)

The word “might” in that sentence is important. As publishers know, the decision to publish is a commercial risk (it can be cultural, too). “It would be absurd to think that a book can cause riots.” (Malik, 2012, 1) Rushdie’s remark was soon proved to be somewhat inaccurate. But it is now the assumption that it is absurd to think a book would *not* cause riots (or worse) that seems to hold sway amongst some publishers. *The Satanic Verses* changed the way decisions about publishing are taken: it is the frame of reference that agents – publishers, authors, religious groups – operate in. Much uncertainty troubles certain publishers and makes them choose critical censure over feared fundamentalist action. This article should be called “Do not publish, and be damned”.

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