

## Writing In/About Exile: A Close Reading of Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*

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"Memoirs are typically written by celebrities, world leaders, pro athletes, etc. But anyone can write a memoir, and sometimes they turn out to be great works of literature even when the author hasn't led a particularly unusual life"(Literary Terms).Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* is a memoir wherein he narrates in third person,the events that occurred during and after his 'fatwa' period. The compelling element in the book is how Rushdie pens out the feelings of "double unbelonging" he experienced during his religio-politically induced exile. The paper "Writing In/AboutExile:A Close Reading of Salman Rushdie's*Joseph Anton*." attempts to understand and underscore how the writeris affected by the exile thrust upon him by an external agency. Rushdie had to face persecution as a result of the publication of his work *The Satanic Verses*.During the eleven years of total curtailment he had to be always on the move because of the huge danger to his life, in addition to being known under a fictitious name Joseph Anton.The fatwa period presents Rushdie with an opportunity to see the beauty within the beast.The paper also delineates the elements of alienation,the use of the bird image to highlight trauma or disjunction,the third person narrative pattern and the change of personality inherent within this captivating memoir. The paper points out how the whole period transformed Rushdie the writer, father, husband, son, brother and friend by exploring the characteristics of the exile through the following sub points.

### a) Double unbelongingness

Rushdie speaks about the feeling of being "cursed by a double unbelonging" right from his boyhood days (54). He left India when he was thirteen years old but the love he has for the country where he was born seeps through the pages of his memoir. He was born in Bombay (20) but his parents migrated to Karachi because they felt "alien in India as muslims" (53). Rushdie learns that he was an outsider when he attends school at London He goes on to say that "The migrated self became, inevitably, heterogeneous instead of homogeneous, belonging to more than one place, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being..." (54).His sole wish was to become a writer just to reclaim his weakened Indian connection and his *Midnight's Children* provided him with the right platform for that (58). On the fortieth anniversary of India's independence ,his friend "persuaded" (80) him to write and present a documentary on the real India. He reaches India and embarks on a long journey through different states. When his work was over, he was overwhelmed with feelings ,but, he mentions in the memoir that he did not know then that "He would not be allowed to come back, to *come home*, for twelve and a half years" because,India had become the first country to ban *The Satanic Verses* and they even refused to give him a travel visa (84). Although his parents were in Karachi, he "felt profoundly alien" (86) in Pakistan. He reflects with hurt and pain many reasons that made him dislike Pakistan ,one being that because of the ban, he could not attend the funeral of his little sister and mother (86-87).

During the fatwa,he never thought of giving up writing, but the reception of the novel disappointed his spirits. And so he started writing book reviews to distract himself and when the reviews were published,the newspaper "published a fascsimile of his handwritten note on page one" because he had already drifted into non existence (166) . The novel *The Satanic Verses* was a novel focussing upon the essence of migration (74). He was sure of the fictional element in his text but the religious fundamentalists claimed that it was a conscious attack upon Islam.

Being in exile deemed a nonexistent position and this could be done by creating another identity. The police ask him to come up with a false name to make it convenient for them to keep him under covers. The protection team was named "Operation Malachite" (163) For the next eleven years, he was known as Joseph Anton (164) His alienation is doubled by this naming act because " Now by naming himself he had turned himself into a sort of fictional character as well" (165).The author however mentions that to be

alienated was a decision solely taken by him at the young age of thirteen(27) ,hence he did not and could not complain about the racial discrimination he had to undergo at Rugby school(29). He learns to express his will not to participate in games that were against his principles and this provided him an opportunity to delve into world of science fiction (31).The feeling of alienation helps the writer to understand a great truth andthat was the power of literature.Towards the end of the memoir, he cites the case of many poets who were exiled because of their writings, but, their works outlived their lives (628)

### **b) Externally Imposed Exile**

Salman Rushdie flags off his memoir *Joseph Anton* by stating how on Valentine's Day, 1989, he receives the bleak news "that his old life was over and a new, darker existence was about to begin" (3). Rushdie published the book in 2012 and it narrates the traumatic experiences he had to undergo on different planes during his officially declared fatwa. Rushdie goes on to present each event in his life by wisely interpolating it with incidents of his boyhood days .The whole narration is autobiographical but written from a third person narrative persona. The sole reason for the death sentence that hung upon Rushdie's head was his book *TheSatanic Verses*.Rushdie the writer realizes the silliness behind the proclamation made by Khomeini. He wanted to contend that people were misinterpreting the meaning of the word "fatwa". Right from the time the word was uttered, it would be regarded "as if it were a synonym for 'death sentence' and he wanted to argue,pedantically,that that was not what the word meant"(5). Section two of the novel ends with an account of the irrationality behind the official pronouncement made by Ayatollah Khomeini's son, who was the spokesperson for his old and bedridden father. Rushdie writes that "A fatwa or edict was usually a formal document, signed and witnessed and given under seal, but this was just a piece of paper bearing a typewritten text. Nobody ever saw the formal document, if one existed, but the son of the mortally ill old man said this was his father's edict and nobody was disposed to argue with him"(35). Rushdie the writer's basic freedom of expression is what is limited by this decree. Exile in his case, was of a weird nature because, he was living in London, born in India, but officially declared culprit by another country. "His life was like a severe diet regime: Everything that was not expressly *allowed* was forbidden" (309). He even learns a new word aptly defining his condition-"extraterritoriality" (15).

The exile imposed upon Rushdie was actually a religio-political construction. Rushdie emphasizes this when he says "...*The Satanic Verses* was being used as a football in a political game that had little or nothing to do with it"(134). Soon after the declaration, Rushdie realizes how his world changes. "Rapidly, ruthlessly, the world of religion was setting the terms of the debate .The secular world, less organized, less united and, essentially, less concerned, lagged far behind..."(124). His publishers (150) and wife started receiving threat calls.The raging public were actually "performing anger for the cameras" and Rushdie noticed "in their eyes the excitement they felt at the presence of the world's press"(128). The whole world had teamed up into different groups on this issue(131). He was granted extra protection by the British government because the threat upon his life.As per the protection procedure, he was given two special officers, two drivers and two cars (139). Much before things worsened, Rushdie knew that "the furore over his book was created from the top down, not from the bottom up" (61), because although the Iranian religious leader had declared the decree ,the Iranian booksellers had already brought in many copies of his book right from its first publication in September 1988 and "these copies remained on sale for six months,without arousing any opposition,until the fatwa of February1989"(61)

The fatwa was actually weak in justifications. The fickleness of the mob was being cashed upon by the dying imam. His revolution had lost its spark and he was looking for a way to regain his lost glory, which he found in the book written by Rushdie. " The book was the devil's work and the author was the devil and that gave him the enemy he needed"(11). The threat imposed upon Rushdie was for Khomeini a means "of regaining political momentum, re- energizing the faithful" after the failure of his Iranian Revolution (142). It was his sister Sameen who provided Rushdie with the political innuendo behind his fatwa and she was ready to be his spokesperson .Sameen was skilled enough to throw light upon the hypocritical nature of the instigators and make the public realize that these men were actually driving a communal sword through the society.Rushdie feared her safety,hence he asked her not to take the risk.This brings us to the next aspect of the exile period-which is a re positioning of relations.

### **c) Disjuncture induced fears.**

The news of him being sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini, disturbs his mind and fear starts seeping in although he keeps up a tough exterior (4). The image of black birds augments the fear felt by the narrator and the writer's visionary insight of his oncoming dark days. The prologue of the book is titled "The First Black bird". Fear looms over his life in the image of the blackbird (3). He gets the image

from Alfred Hitchcock's classic "The Birds". For Rushdie, the blackbird was a harbinger of bad news, it was a forewarning that his life would not be the same from that moment onwards (16). There are a number of bird images in the text highlighting the feeling of migration, fear of extinction (97) alienation and attack experienced by the writer (341).

Another fearful episode is that the protection force dictated or charted the writer's life. He was not permitted to be at the same place for more than two days and it was his responsibility to find secure places. Although friends and acquaintances helped a lot, he personally believed that "To skulk and hide was to lead a dishonourable life" (147). Running from place to place in search of safety made it very taxing for the writer. He notices how his near ones shift allegiance. The group of writers who had joined together to support him was slowly cracking and he could only cry out from within his confines helplessly (157). Another disturbing event is when he could not converse with his son Zafar. He starts imagining that "his loved ones had paid the price" for his misdeed (159).

The fatwa period was one when he had to fight fearlessly and solitarily against many forces—one was his secret life, the second was his public life where he had to face the irk of the publishers and the third one was "the harsh and violent world of politics" (241). Fear loomed everywhere in the form of threat calls, death threats or false alarms (384). It is then that Rushdie realizes that he had to "reclaim his voice" (303). He received an invitation to speak at Columbia University but the protection force did not want to invite trouble by letting him go out of the country. It is then that he "understood that before he could be free again he would have to overcome other people's fears as well as his own" (305). He received the Writer's Guild Award but he was not, at first instance, permitted to attend the ceremony. Rushdie takes up the bold decision to attend the ceremony on his own, to which the protection force conceded. At the ceremony he openly declared the grave truth that he was not a free man in "this free country", which was received by the audience by a standing ovation (307). Years later, when the battle was over, he notices that this exile did not suppress the book but "a climate of fear had grown up that made it harder for books like his to be published, or even, perhaps to be written" (629).

#### **d) Intimacy through Expulsion**

A strong point of the exile period for Rushdie was that he realized the worth of his good friends. The fatwa provided him with an opportunity to recognize his sincere supporters. He remembers with gratitude that "people who had not been close to him before drew closer, wanting to help, and acted with astonishing generosity, selflessness and courage" (191). When the fatwa was pronounced, he was going through a strained relation with his second wife Marianne Wiggins who was also a writer. The fatwa actually gives Rushdie a break to re-view his relations. He establishes a strong bond with his first wife and mother of his son Zafar. What hurt him most was the fact that his being under constant threat made it impossible for him to meet his son Zafar. He even feared his sister's life "would become a thing of klieg lights and microphones" (142). Rushdie then devises the strategy to separate the people he knew into private and public camps. He was strongly supported by his family. Marianne, his second wife was slowly moving out of his complicated life and she leaves after cooking up a series of lies (240). The fatwa was a period when his voice was not to be heard, he was given strong instructions "not to speak out and further inflame the situation" (143). This makes it difficult for Rushdie when people were raining lies about him and his book. His helplessness is best expressed in the statement, "In the eyes of the world he himself was the great Defamer and as a result it was permissible to defame him back" (152).

They were living in hiding and it was primarily because of the support he got from his well-wishers and friends (146) that they could pull on. Rushdie expresses his gratitude to all his friends when he comments that "He wouldn't have survived six months without them" (155). The world's greatest writers had published a collective statement voicing their full support to Rushdie and this gives him "some comfort" (153). The special branch team also underwent a change. They were initially rough and doubtful about Rushdie and his friends but by the end they turn out to be very good friends. A remarkable point noted by the writer is that although the ban was imposed because of the controversial book, it did not in any way cease to be printed, neither did it cease to be read (150). Meanwhile, there were attempts from the Iranian faction, at easing the terms of his judgement on the condition that he should apologise and make alterations in his text (144). While the fatwa was going on, the support he received from artists around the world in his struggle for freedom of speech helps Rushdie realize that, "He would try to do the same for others in need from now on, others who pushed boundaries, transgressed and, yes, blasphemed; all those artists who did not allow men of power or the cloth to draw lines in the sand and order them not to cross" (628).

The fatwa period was a period of relearning many things and maintaining trust amongst loved ones was what he learnt. He broke up with his first wife on account of his cheating upon her. Marianne, his second wife kept avoiding him because she always felt that she was under his shadow. His third wife Elizabeth, mother of his second son was "a brave and loving woman" (374). Later on when Padma enters his life things become much different (577). Rushdie changes through each marital connection. A common point he notices is that each of the women who came into his life had a missing parent (106). He learns to regard and respect the feelings of the women who came into his lives. He has a special bond with the mothers of his sons and his memoir is specially dedicated to the two women- Clarissa and Elizabeth along with his sons- Zafar and Milan. The loss of his first wife pains Rushdie and he makes a very touching statement at her funeral ceremony, "*We never disagreed about you, Zafar, and now she lives in you. I look into your face and see her eyes*" (584). He was conscious of the hurt he inflicted upon his wife Elizabeth and he kept vacillating between love and fidelity. Elizabeth was eager to have their children but things were not smooth between them and he decides to separate (589). However they turn out to become good friends and "better parents" (591). By the end of the memoir Rushdie sums up the state of his near and dear ones and is even able to remark with composure that things had worked out "far better than he had been able to hope on that dark Valentine's day in 1989" (630).

He always maintained a strong bond with his family. He loved his father and mother and when the fatwa was imposed he fears for the safety of his family (7). His mother came to London to be near him (151) and this makes him feel safer. He was glad that his father passed away without knowing about the fatwa and his mother "supported him staunchly" (122). He was the only brother for three sisters. The memoir records the death of the youngest sister, the estrangement of another and the bonding with another. "He had loved his sisters, and they had all loved one another, but most of those relationships, too, had come apart" (568).

#### e) Freedom of Expression

The artist's freedom of expression was curtailed by this ban and the irony behind this is that the ban was imposed because of the controversial book, but the book did not cease to be printed nor did it cease to be read. However many courageous writer's factions and publishers came up with full support for Rushdie's creation. The fatwa throws light on the dark side of power- the power of debilitating creativity. There were mixed responses from different corners of the world, regarding the novel (132). A committee was set up in support of Rushdie (198). It is only after thousand days of the implementation of the fatwa that he gets to travel to America to speak on the freedom of speech. There he describes about his "one thousand days in a balloon" after which "he felt cleaner" (314). The American talk was in December and that New Year he made a few resolutions of which getting the fatwa "cancelled" was included (316). This gives him an extra resolve and he turns out in the coming years as "an ambassador for himself" (355). When he received the Kurt Tucholsky Prize, he got the occasion to speak for himself at the Swedish Academy and he debates about the freedom of writers and remarks poignantly that, "The storytelling animal must be free to tell his tales" (361). Just before the fifth anniversary of the fatwa, The International Parliament of Writers in Stasburg had elected him President and he was asked to write a "declaration of intent", in which he wrote that, "The creative spirit is all too frequently treated an enemy by those mighty or petty potentates who resent our power to build pictures of the world which quarrel with, or undermine, their own simpler and less open-hearted views" (419). The declaration appeared in the *Independent* on the fifth anniversary day but not on the lead page but "on page three next to the news story about the anniversary" while most of the central page was given to the article written by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's article on the "good, positive outcomes" of the fatwa (420).

Isolation and solitude are essential for writer's to expand their creative spirit. Rushdie was not disturbed by the solitude that he was forced to experience. Even in this trying period, he craved for solitude but his companions were "unused to inactivity, the polar opposites of bookish, indoorsy types" (207). He even narrates how the review of an Indian journalist turns things against him (112) while his son's honest remark after reading the first draft of the story written for him again revives his writing spirit (209). Rushdie notices the sudden foray upon his work by commenting that "The book about migration and transformation that he had written was vanishing and being replaced by one that scarcely existed..." (114). He then says that for many years the work was regarded as an "insult" and "he became the Insulter; not only in Muslim eyes, but in the opinion of the public at large" (115).

The ban imposed on the book by a secular country like India was what disturbed Rushdie the writer. He believed that banning of books was something "that happened all too frequently across the border in Pakistan. It wasn't the Indian way" (117). Writer's freedom was something he strongly believed,

existed in India but the “embargo on the importation of *The Satanic Verses* was a painful blow”(118). Years later,he decides to go to India to attend the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize ceremony at New Delhi,for his work he decides to go to India but even then the Indian ban on his *The Satanic Verses* was still there (597) and this made the Delhi police anxious.They feared the rise of protest marches,riots and killings but what actually happened was a homecoming party of joy .The next day’s paper headlines highlighted the “party spirit”(603) so much that there was a sudden poll on allowing the publication of the novel in India.

f)Perceiving the beauty behind the whole event

The positive outcome of the exile period was he learned to “rediscover as Beauty did,the beauty in the Beast”(105). The birth of his second son Milan adds a lot of joy and colour to his fear ridden life.Rushdie even speaks of the protection officers excitement over the birth of the child (510). That year on Father’s Day he gets a card,which he regards as “one of his most prized possessions”(513), featuring the outline of Milan’s hands inside Zafar’s hand. He bonded close to his son and theirs was a relation much unlike what he shared with his father. “They did ordinary,everyday,father-and-son things and it felt like amiracle”(167). He owes his return to writing to his son,because he wrote a book for Zafar during this complicated period of his career(168). He wrote many books and won a few awards for his books too.The protection team provided him with ample space and freedom breaking “the rules to help him”(172). They bond on well after long years of association (177). They wanted to throw a party in his honour because his was their longest protection duty and one of the officers even gives him a bullet as a souvenir of the whole event(632)

Thirteen years of the fatwa brought about many changes in him.The memoir clearly records the day he received the official declaration of fatwa (3) and also the date of the ending of protection because he was now free of threats(631). Life had offered him much, he lost many loved ones through death and separation ,but he even made new ones during the exile period. He acknowledges the support and advice he received from all the people who were with him through the whole ordeal in the “Acknowledgements” section (636). Migration is a compelling element in the memoir. He says that “He was one of those who had ended up in a place that was not the place where he began”(53). The plausible outcome of the fatwa was that he leaves his home without knowing that he would not be able to go back to that place (4)and years later, when the shroud of the fatwa was lifted, he had no house of his own (631). Thus exile helps Rushdie to be able to write about and speak about home, family, friends and critics from the perspective of a third person narrator. He does not judge anyone nor does he accuse anyone for anything that happened during that time. He once remarks in an interview that he remembers “the nobility of human beings acting out of their best selves, far more vividly than the hatred...”(91). Soren Frank remarks in his book *Migration and Literature* that, “Rushdie may epitomize the migrant writer par excellence with all its potential for reinventing the world and the subject of human identity, butthe Rushdie affair also places him in a position in which he seems to personify the flip side of globalization—that is, the clash of civilizations, theincreasing gap between cultures, and the proliferation of fundamentalism”(132).

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