

**THE DESECRATED SHRINE: MOVABLE ICONS AND
LITERARY IRREVERENCE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S
'THE PROPHET'S HAIR'**

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Over the twelve years since the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie has been lauded as a martyr for free speech, demonized as a mocker of Islam, and most recently, since the lifting of the *fatwa* in 1998, recreated as an icon of popular culture. His transformation into an icon is curiously apt, since it is largely due to his treatment of what might be termed iconic material in his fiction. This article examines his short story, 'The Prophet's Hair' as an exploration of the status of the iconic in Rushdie's writing: that is, his fictional treatment of images, symbols or words which carry recognizably sacred connotations. It illustrates the extent to which the icon's meaning is determined by the context in which it is placed, and its ability to subvert and destabilize the limits placed upon its meaning by such a framing. It will contend that the political implications of hybridity in Rushdie's work are best understood in terms of this engagement with and recontextualization of iconic material, which is not only a 'bearing across', in the words of Rushdie's essay 'Imaginary Homelands', but also a theft, and an act of wilful irreverence.

The term icon is used because of its ability to slip between sacred and popular culture, so that we speak as easily of Monroe as an icon of twentieth century female sexuality as we do of figures of the Virgin Mary as religious icons. Rushdie himself used the word 'icon' to describe Hamlet, Columbus and the Wizard of Oz: the figures at the centre of three of the stories in *East, West*, the collection in which 'The Prophet's Hair'

appears (Niven 1997: 54). This slippage implies the transferability of religious ideas into the secular imagination: by using it to describe figures such as Hamlet and Columbus Rushdie suggests a parity between these objects and the holy relic which is the subject of 'The Prophet's Hair'. There is an inbuilt irreverence in the transposition, of which Rushdie, by choosing to use this term, and the reader, through comprehending it, are guilty, since the items are clearly not equivalent in terms of the values they represent; the one being a symbol with sacred, eternal connections, the others variably transient items of secular culture.

Furthermore, lurking close to the word 'icon' is always its nemesis, 'iconoclast', meaning a destroyer of sacred images. Baudrillard argues of iconoclasts that 'their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousness of the people' (Baudrillard 1990: 169). On this reading, iconoclasm is a highly reverent impulse driven by a belief that abstraction detracts from proper devotion. This impulse, however, soon leads into its dangerous opposite: the suggestion that icons are no more false than the value they purport to represent: 'it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them' (ibid.). Icons and iconoclasts are not linked merely by virtue of their antagonism, but are necessary corollaries in a logic of reverence and a paradox of sacral representation.

The interdiction against his representation means that the figure of Muhammad in Islam cannot be said to be iconic, but Rushdie has been charged with something similar to iconoclasm in his representation of the Prophet in the fictional figure of Mahound in *The Satanic Verses*. I will argue that Rushdie's treatment of icons is not iconoclastic in the sense of being simply destructive, but rather that it reveals something dangerous

about the icons themselves — by recontextualizing them in alien environments, which is a very similar practice to looking behind them to see what their facade hides. What is hidden may be nothing, as in Baudrillard's formulation, but conversely may be the ability to represent different interests in a potent appearance of absolute truth.

As the academic John McLeod has noted, this recontextualization in Rushdie's writing takes place 'within the context of a tension between postmodernism and postcolonialism'(McLeod 1985: 2).¹ The different anxieties over representation suggested by postmodern and postcolonial criticisms inflect upon traditional ideas about representing the ineffable in material signs, and different concepts of truth are at stake in each case.

The story 'The Prophet's Hair' has itself appeared in a number of contexts which subtly altered its meaning. It was first published in journal form in 1981, but attracted little attention.² Then, immediately following the declaration of the *fatwa* in February 1989 the story was republished in a special edition, with a companion piece, 'The Free Radio'. Taking the form of seventy-two signed, illustrated and hand-printed copies, its timing and the exclusive, luxury nature of the publication made it an object whose meaning was not simply contained within the words of the story, but in its appearance and form. It was a defiance of the *fatwa*, in a form which accentuated its stature as an artistic object; the dignity and autonomy of artistic expression being one of Rushdie's chief defences for his contentious novel.³

By the time of the story's collection into the compendium *East, West* in 1994, the story's symbolic status as a declaration of defiance against the *fatwa* was being emphasized by its author:

‘The Prophet’s Hair’ is the answer to the intimidation question. If I was being scared off writing about Islam it wouldn’t be in the collection, would it? (Niven 1997: 55).

The meaning of the story is at least partially dependent upon its form and the context in which it appears; an important aspect of this meaning is the defiance of restrictions on the use of iconic material in fiction.

‘The Prophet’s Hair’ is the factually based story of the theft of a relic containing a hair of the Prophet Muhammad. The tale is a fantastic account of the miraculous but disastrous events befalling all those who come into contact with it. The stolen relic is found by a moneylender, Hashim. Instead of returning it to the mosque from which it was taken, he keeps it. Under its influence this previously secular Muslim becomes orthodox to the point of extremism, and traumatizes his family by adopting, in excessive manner, some of the least liberal of the Qur’an’s strictures. His children decide that the hair is to blame, and try to get rid of it. Eventually deciding that it will have to be stolen they hire a thief, ‘Sheikh Sín’, who takes the hair amid a scene of carnage in which the moneylender and his entire family die. The thief is hunted and shot by police, but his crippled sons and blind wife have miraculously been cured by their contact with the relic.

The story is concerned with an iconic object, the Hair; and its relocation from a holy place, the shrine, to the profane space of the outside world, then to a secret hiding place in the moneylender’s locked study, and finally back to the shrine again. Each of these relocations alters its meaning.

Firstly, the Hair’s theft from the shrine, and its transportation to the profane world outside runs the risk of questioning its holy nature. In the story the relic is formally authenticated upon its return by the holiest men

of the valley of Kashmir. In an interview at the time of *East, West*'s publication Rushdie described the factual events upon which that part of the story was based thus:

then they announced that they had found it and everybody believed them. Then they had a meeting where all the peers, and the holy men of Kashmir were all brought to the mosque and were asked to authenticate it. It was passed along and they said, 'Yes, that's unquestionably it.' Then it was put back in the shrine and there it is again. So that incident, which as I say happened in the early '60's, I'd remembered as being rich in comedy. (Niven 1997: 56)

Rushdie describes the banality of the most respected men of a province solemnly playing pass the parcel with a hair. This banality springs from the very ordinariness of the hair; the suggestion is that it is a ludicrous object of veneration precisely because it could belong to anyone.

To see comedy in this incident is absolutely irreverent, since it acknowledges not only the possibility that the revered could be confused with the ordinary, but more importantly that there is no real way of telling them apart. The potency of the hair has been replaced by banality through its transplantation by profane means to the secular world, which highlights its similarity to objects which are judged solely by their material characteristics. This is the aspect of the Hair's relocation which comes closest to iconoclasm as the revelation of the icon as a facade hiding an absence.

In the story itself however, the effects of the purloined relic are far from banal. Reverence for the icon is represented as hypocritical and socially catastrophic once it is removed from the safety of the shrine. The

hiding of the stolen icon in Hashim's collection of artefacts represents more than the simple irreverence of bringing the sacred object into the profane space. It reinstalls the relic in a shrine, but one whose values are completely different to those which it originally symbolized.

The story makes it clear that the moneylender's occupation is not compatible with the values of the Qur'an (Rushdie 1995:47)⁴, and suggests the simple turning inside-out of value as the money lender professes to value the case more than the hair it holds:

Naturally, I don't want it for its religious value [...] I'm a man of the world, of this world. I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty. In short, it's the silver vial I desire more than the hair (44).

This protestation allows us to read the conventional moral lesson suggested by the juxtaposition of earthly and spiritual values. But more importantly, Hashim's desire to divorce the religious icon from its originating context, in which its meaning is securely determined opens up the possibility of literary irreverence. Once freed from the context which determines their meaning as sacred and unalterable, such objects become capable of communicating meanings which are volatile and unpredictable.

The Hair becomes the centrepiece of Hashim's collection of objects from all over India, many of which have religious or ceremonial associations:

All around him in his study was the evidence of his collector's mania. There were enormous glass cases full of impaled butterflies from Gulmarg, three dozen scale models in various metals of the legendary canon of Zamzama,

innumerable swords, a Naga spear, ninety-four terracotta camels of the sort sold on railway station platforms, many samovars, and a whole zoology of tiny sandalwood animals, which had originally been carved to serve as children's bathtime toys (43-4).

The bringing together of these items in one place divorces them from their original contexts and makes it necessary to attempt to reconstruct meaningful contexts for them by looking outside the story. The faithful reader is sent scurrying to Rushdie's other writings, to encyclopaedias, and religious histories for hints to the significance of these objects.

There they will find that the Naga spear is an object of religious and military significance: the Nagas are a military subset of devotees belonging to the Dadu Panthi Hindus of Jaipur, vowed to celibacy and to arms (*OED*). The sandalwood in which the toy animals are carved suggests religious incense, the 'innumerable swords' are probably Sikh, and therefore of religious importance. The samovars are objects used in social ritual. Butterflies are a sign of destructive prophecy in Rushdie's writing, as in the story of Ayesha, the orphan girl who eats, and is clothed in, butterflies in *The Satanic Verses*. Ayesha (who is the namesake of Muhammad's favourite wife) leads a pilgrimage to Mecca which culminates in the drowning of an entire village in the Arabian Sea. Hashim's shrine frames but does not define these objects; in forcing us to look beyond the story for their meaning, their naming and collection together also forces us to break that frame and question the motive of their collection.

The clearest demonstration of what this motive might be comes in the form of Hashim's obsession with owning models of the canon of Zamzama. 'Zamzam' is the name of the sacred well at Mecca. Abd-al-Muttalib, an ancestor of Muhammad, rediscovered the well after it had

been filled in by pagans. Like the moneylender's shrine, it contained a mixture of religious and military icons: swords and cuirasses and two golden gazelles. These objects were melted down and used to make the door of the sanctuary.⁵

The models of this 'legendary canon' are also a direct reference to the opening lines of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, where the 'English' boy sits disrespectfully astride the canon 'in defiance of municipal orders' (49). In Kipling's novel the canon of 'Zam-zamah' stands opposite the Lahore Museum, known to the natives as 'the Wonder House'. Hashim's shrine is just such a wonder house of relics; and like all museums it is a collection of objects of cultural and military significance, whose ownership and exhibition is not neutral as it seems, but evidence of the power to collect, categorize and display.

Kun-liang Chuang dispels the appearance of neutrality projected by such places, suggesting that in addition to vaunting their power to appropriate and control the items they display, they reinscribe hierarchical models of colonial difference, 'fetishiz[ing] [...] "otherness" in the name of cultural preservation' and instilling a 'regressive notion that entices the natives to identify with their primitive cultures, instead of the present reality' (Chuang 1995: 12). In addition to pretending neutrality, then, collections of artefacts such as these take on meanings of affiliative representation and difference; they are at once presented as value-free conduits to empirical knowledge, and lodestones of an authentic former culture.

The canon Zam-zamah is, Kipling says, 'always first of the conqueror's loot', for those 'who hold Zam-zamah [...] hold the Punjab' (Kipling 1987: 49). Kim has dispossessed an Indian child of his seat on the canon with the justification that 'the English held the Punjab and Kim

was English' (ibid.). The cultural artefact — Zam-zamah — becomes a token which denotes both the possession of the Punjab by the English, and Kim's own cultural affiliation. He is a true son of Empire, despite being born in India, apparently of an Indian mother. In Rushdie's story Hashim metaphorically ousts Kim from his perch as Kim ousted Lala Dinanath's boy before him. Owning the token becomes a means of owning a place in the culture.

The room where Hashim keeps his relics is a model of the appropriation of legendary military and religious treasures from several cultures within India, and the deliberate reference to *Kim* makes it clear that this appropriation is a cultural as well as a material pillaging. The looted items maintain a measure of their original cultural worth in addition to their material value. Their appropriation changes what they mean, both to their current owner and to their dispossessed previous owners; they become symbols of unjust appropriation (or triumphant capture), in addition to their original symbolic significance, and their claim to immanent meaning is consequently distorted and destabilized.

In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie uses pieces of broken pottery as a metaphor for the incompleteness of memory, and comments on the potency of this partiality:

of course I'm not gifted with total recall, and it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects (Rushdie 1991: 11–12).

What is interesting in the description of these fragments is their relation to meaningfulness — Rushdie even uses the word ‘numinous’, with its associations of divine awe. These fragments seem to be remnants of some sacred value whose aura still clings to them, despite their incomplete nature. Rushdie lays a heavy emphasis upon their antiquity; they may be powerful because they gesture toward an ideal whole, but this complete entity is displaced into the past. This attraction to the lures of a numinous but anterior and decayed idea is nothing other than an attraction to the idea of the sacred, which nevertheless has inscribed into its terms the fact of its own obsolescence.

In Rushdie’s commentary on fragments of the numinous, the possibility of such a transcendent unity has already been relegated to the past. The splinters of it which remain can only gesture toward an idea of what it might have been. Their potency in generating meaning, it is suggested, is connected to their bearing across a breadth of time, from the past to the present, which is also a fragmentation.

Linda Hutcheon has commented upon the tendency of museum exhibitions to ‘smooth over gaps and unite fragments into a systematized cultural totality’ (Hutcheon 1994: 181). Chuang also remarks on the illusion of ‘adequate representation’ created by museums, out of objects lifted from their specific contexts, which are then made to stand for ‘abstract wholes’ (Chuang 1995: 12). In both cases incomplete representation finds a way to hallucinate entirety through meditation on the artefact, which at this point can truly be said to have become an icon. Chuang’s concern is the political motivations of representation in a post-colonial situation, and he does not link this kind of partial representation to the numinous shards of Rushdie’s essay. But on his reading, the myth

of an original and unified national identity takes on the value of a sacred and potent essence.

Rushdie's totemic shards cast strange shadows on the present from a past which persists stubbornly in the material form of physical, yet disembodied relics; the object is transferred from its originary context, where it may or may not represent sacred unity, and transplanted into a new context which changes its meaning, and gives it the status of an icon. The meaning of its old context clings stubbornly and partially to it, and is transformed, disrupting the new.

In another story in the collection, 'The Harmony of the Spheres', the bringing together of numinous articles from several different cultures is rehearsed in terms of the occult as subversive counter-culture. These objects are not appropriated by a dominant power — as the reference to *Kim* suggests is the case in 'The Prophet's Hair' — but excluded. The occult as underground religion is linked to the occult as counter-culture through marginalization. The former is a repository of hidden wisdom from different cultures, gathered together under this umbrella term because it shares the characteristic of claiming a knowledge of the powers that influence earthly events which is not the dominant one. In other words, occult religion contains culturally marginalized ways of understanding the order of the world. In this sense, it is a site of cultural resistance to dominant ideologies.

Rushdie's suggestion that occult, through its function as repository, may be a vehicle for circumventing cultural marginalization casts a different light upon the fusion, overlaying, and juxtaposition of motifs and symbols from different cultures in his writing. His 'fusion of world-views' is not only a gesture toward cultural hybridity, it is overlaid with two different kinds of defiance — the accusation that such hybridity

levels at the authorities responsible for cultural marginalization ('writing back', in Rushdie's famous formulation), and the defiance of the controllers of this world by an appeal to a higher authority.

However, the disparate elements brought together under the umbrella term 'occult' do not make for a pluralistic harmony of world wisdom, but a 'Babel', a 'cacodemonic crowd' (Rushdie 1995: 142). Each secret and potent sign that is brought into the text has the ability to clash with the others. As the example of the Prophet's hair demonstrates, the cultural potency of numinous items transported from their originating context can have stunning, destructive effects, even in an apparently neutral zone, like the secular household of the moneylender, or like the space of literature.

Unlike literature, the moneylender's shrine is a closed room to which only two people possess a key. The disruptive potential of the other relics is safely locked away in here, just as the story attempts to contain the discord caused by the hair. In an interview with Rushdie, Alastair Niven called the story a Jacobean tragedy, and Rushdie assented (Niven 1997: 56). Goonetilleke repeats the description without commenting upon the staging of discord and its containment that the term suggests (Goonetilleke 1998: 127).

The analogy is an interesting one, as it too suggests a segregated space where rituals of meaning may be played out, but whereas the museum and the shrine claim to house objects representing different kinds of truth (empirical and spiritual respectively), the stage flaunts its artificiality. In 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie suggested that 'fragmentation made trivial things *seem* like symbols' (Rushdie 1991: 12; my emphasis). The sacred can only be believed in, even partially, because it is in the past, because it has no place in the physical present,

existing only notionally, and at the safe remove of antiquity. The fragments which motion towards it are complicit in an act of deception; by their incompleteness they imply an anterior completeness, an ideal, pre-lapsarian plenitude.

Their partial nature, so important to their numinosity, is not an accident, but a device, and Rushdie went on to admit that he used such fragmentary symbols as devices to weave his fiction.⁶ The symbolic elements are deliberately double-edged, both pointing to a lost, meaningful essence suspended somewhere beyond their terms, and slyly intimating, through jarring effects and knowing insinuations, the fictiveness of their own gesture, implying in so doing that the lost essence is also an illusion.

Furthermore, the formal staging mechanisms of Jacobean tragedy offer an interesting comment upon the way that meaning is staged and limited in museums and shrines, and how that limitation can be escaped. Jacobean tragedy was arguably a safety valve for turbulent times, where the vicarious violence on stage was enclosed by a clear ending and a falling curtain. In his *Radical Tragedy* Jonathan Dollimore asks whether this ritualized inversion in Jacobean drama was ‘licensed misrule acting as the safety valve for social conflict and thus perpetuating the dominant order – or did it endanger it, stimulating rebellion?’ and concludes that ‘it could be either depending on occasion and context’ (Dollimore 1984: 26–7).

He goes on to talk about ‘double-inversion’ (in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*), as an example of a ‘*formal* restoration of providentialist/political orthodoxy, a compliance with its letter after having destroyed its spirit’ (ibid.: 28). The idea of the letter killing the spirit of orthodox closure turns formal control against itself in order to defeat it. It is this

kind of formal closure that 'The Prophet's Hair' effects, and the idea of double inversion is also apparent. Hashim's duty as a citizen upon finding the hair is clearly identified in the story as a moral imperative: 'the hair must be restored to its shrine, and the state to equanimity and peace'(43). The conclusion of the story does precisely this. Therefore, despite the moral inversions it contains, its entire structure works systematically toward the fulfilment of its professed moral duty; the restoration of the status quo, with the holy object replaced in its rightful locus.

However, the story presents and exceeds a simple inversion of morality. The inversion is begun by the misappropriation of the relic. The 'good' family of the moneylender is forced, by the disruption signalled by the intrusion of a holy object into the profane world, into contact with the 'bad' family of Sheikh Sín in an attempt to restore order. The original transgression which brought the sacred object out of the shrine and abandoned it in the secular world must be repeated in order to reverse it. The relic must be stolen, because an illegal act is the only kind which is effective in transporting the relic over the line from the holy place to the profane, and vice-versa. Religious transgression can only be effected by transgression of the moral and legal laws against stealing, and of course in Islam religious, legal and moral laws are closely bound, deriving from the same source, the *Shari'ah*. As the Islamic scholar K.J. Murad explains, 'The *Shari'ah* is not merely a collection of "do's" and "don'ts", nor just a set of criminal laws prescribing punishments for certain crimes. Though it does contain both, its sweep is much broader and deeper, encompassing the totality of man's life'.⁷ The model is one of simple inversion, emphasized through the necessity of repetition: inversion is the repetition of a term in precise negative.

Spaces are demarcated as no-go zones; they are, in effect, consecrated, and this setting out of spaces as sacred, open only to a select few who are both privileged and excluded from the profane masses, is an important adjunct to the icon. It enables the icon to be situated in its correct context, and suggests that if such a numinous item were to come into contact with something that it ought not, the effects would be severe. It therefore, of course, opens up the conceptual possibility of just such a destabilizing transgression.

It is Hashim's 'collector's mania', which is most irreverent, as I have suggested. Such covetousness leads to the collection in one place of contending fragments of the numinous from different systems, whose illegal appropriation inverts and destabilizes their meaning, recontextualizing them in a morally and symbolically volatile setting. Their reinstallation into this environment, which echoes the consecrated and exclusive character of a shrine, yet allows their contamination by representatives of other systems of meaning, makes a mockery of the consecrating gesture.

In 'The Prophet's Hair' Rushdie focuses upon the icon transplanted from its original context. This transportation changes its meaning, creating the possibility of new, ungovernable meanings through unanticipated correlations with other symbols from different systems, and in doing so disclosing some of the mechanisms by which meaningfulness and numinousness are constituted. Finally, in his stagey presentation of these mechanisms, his exaggeration of formal constraints upon meaning and their ineffectiveness, Rushdie hints at the artificiality of the icon; never absolutely denying its claim to faithful representation of an absolute meaning, but opening it to radical doubt; suspending it at the very extreme of the line between the sacred and the profane, where it is

capable of the most potent, the most volatile, and the most questionable meanings.

¹ McLeod focuses upon this tension in relation to the rewriting of history; I am interested in its related but distinct link with the representation of ineffable value.

² 'The Prophet's Hair', *Atlantic*, June 1981, pp. 23-9. Timothy Brennan lists the story in his bibliography to *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, but passes over it without comment. Uma Parameswaran remarks on the story in *The Perforated Sheet* (2) then dismisses it as 'readable but not particularly noteworthy'.

³ This defence is a recurrent one; see for example Rushdie's essay 'In Good Faith', where he insists upon both the fictionality of fiction and its artistic and philosophical importance: 'At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature [...] I do not believe novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word novel seems to insist upon: to see the world anew' (Rushdie 1991: 393).

⁴ All subsequent references to 'The Prophet's Hair' refer to this edition and are cited in brackets without author reference.

⁵ Brill 1987: 1212.

⁶ Rushdie equivocates between declaring this method deceptive or distorting, and endorsing it as verisimilar and faithful. He admits using 'partiality', but quotes one of his own characters to aver that 'the illusion itself is reality' (13).

⁷ K.J. Murad (McDermott and Ahsan 1986: 29).

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