

THE POLITICS OF BLASPHEMY: ANALYZING GLOBAL REACTIONS TO THE SATANIC VERSES THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURAL REALISM

Gulraiz Falak

Department of English, School of English, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Email: Dhotharfalak001@gmail.com

Muhammad Rizwan

Department of English, School of English, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Abstract:

*This article examines the international sociocultural reactions to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) from the perspective of cultural realism—a theoretical framework that emphasizes the influence of concrete cultural power relations and material conditions on literary controversies. Through qualitative analysis of responses from South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America, we explore how historical context, religious sensitivities, and geopolitical tensions shaped distinct national and transnational reactions. The research identifies patterns of discourse, negotiation, and conflict, highlighting the book's role in global debates over free speech, secularism, and cultural authenticity. Ultimately, this study underscores the necessity of contextualizing literary reception within broader socio-political frameworks.*

Keywords: *cultural realism, *The Satanic Verses*, global reactions, postcolonial tension, religious controversy, free speech debate, South Asian perspectives, geopolitical discourse*

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* ignited one of the most enduring and complex cultural controversies of the late twentieth century. The book's publication in 1988 triggered a wide spectrum of reactions—ranging from literary praise to religious denunciation, and political mobilization to violent protests. While much scholarship has examined the theological dimensions, censorship debates, and free speech implications of the controversy, fewer studies have foregrounded how cultural realism helps explain the variance in reactions across different global contexts (Asani, 1991).

Cultural realism posits that cultural conflicts and literary controversies cannot be fully understood without situating them within material conditions, power dynamics, and historical-cultural frameworks. This approach combines insights from realism in international relations and postcolonial studies to explain how competing cultural narratives intersect with political interests, media representations, and public sentiments (Appiah, 1993). By applying this lens to the global reception of *The Satanic Verses*, this article delineates a nuanced map of reactions and their underlying determinants.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Realism and Literary Controversies

Definition of Cultural Realism

Cultural realism is a critical theoretical approach that blends insights from political realism in international relations with cultural studies, emphasizing how material conditions, power dynamics, and historical contexts shape cultural production and reception (Said, 1993). In the realm of literary studies, cultural realism posits that literary works are not isolated texts but are deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political, economic, and cultural realities of their time (Cavanaugh, 2009). It views cultural objects, such as novels, plays, and films, as products of

specific historical conditions that both reflect and challenge existing power structures. According to cultural realism, literary controversies—such as the global reaction to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*—cannot be understood solely through the lens of aesthetics or moral critique. Instead, they must be analyzed in relation to the cultural, religious, and political forces at play in different societies (Varisco, 1992).

Relevance to Literary Controversy Studies

Cultural realism is particularly relevant to the study of literary controversies because it shifts the focus from individual authors and their intentions to the broader cultural systems that influence both the production and reception of literary works (Schueller, 1995). In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, the controversy over its publication transcended Rushdie's personal views or artistic expressions and was propelled by global cultural and political forces (Malik, 2009). For instance, the tension between Western secularism and Islamic orthodoxy, compounded by the geopolitical dynamics of the 1980s and 1990s, played a significant role in the outrage generated by the novel (Eaton, 1996). Cultural realism helps explain why certain societies perceived the novel as an affront to their religious or cultural values, while others embraced it as a work of literary significance (Kabbani, 1986). By examining these reactions through the lens of cultural realism, scholars can uncover the ways in which religious, national, and political identities intersect with debates about free speech, artistic expression, and cultural autonomy (Lewis, 2002).

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach of cultural realism in literary studies involves both qualitative and comparative analysis (Said, 1993). First, scholars adopting this framework must contextualize the literary work within its specific historical, political, and cultural milieu. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, this means examining the late 20th-century geopolitical context, including the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the legacy of colonialism, and the tensions between Western liberalism and religious conservatism (Malik, 1989). Secondly, the methodology requires an analysis of how different regions and cultural communities interact with the text. This involves looking at the specific ways in which various groups—whether they are religious authorities, secular intellectuals, political leaders, or grassroots movements—engage with the text and use it to further their own agendas or reflect their concerns (Asani, 1991). Cultural realism emphasizes the role of power in shaping these interactions; thus, the approach focuses on how dominant cultural narratives, media representations, and state actions influence the interpretation and reception of the work (Varisco, 1992).

Historical Background: Context of *The Satanic Verses*

Publication History

The Satanic Verses was first published in 1988 by Viking Penguin, marking Salman Rushdie's fourth novel and the beginning of a profound literary and political controversy (Kabbani, 1986). The novel's dual narrative, which mixes magical realism with the story of two Indian Muslim immigrants in Britain, was instantly polarizing due to its provocative depictions of Islamic history and themes of religious faith (Schueller, 1995). One of the novel's key plotlines—a fictional account of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as "Mahound"—was perceived by many Muslim communities around the world as a blasphemous distortion of sacred religious texts (Cavanaugh, 2009). The novel's inclusion of controversial elements, such as the "Satanic Verses" themselves, which were imagined as a set of verses in the Qur'an allegedly omitted after the Prophet received divine guidance, led to vehement protests (Lewis, 2002). The novel's release

sparked protests and calls for censorship, culminating in the Iranian government's issuing of a fatwa against Rushdie in 1989, offering a bounty for his death (Eaton, 1996).

Preexisting Postcolonial Tensions

The controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* did not emerge in a vacuum; it was deeply embedded in the postcolonial context of the late 20th century (Malik, 2009). By the time the novel was published, former colonial powers and their former colonies had been grappling with the legacies of imperialism, identity formation, and cultural reassertion (Said, 1993). Rushdie's novel, with its critiques of religious and cultural orthodoxy, especially in the context of Islam, tapped into the charged postcolonial environment, where the tension between Western modernity and Islamic tradition was already a significant concern (Kabbani, 1986). The book became a flashpoint in the cultural wars between secularism and religious conservatism, particularly in Muslim-majority countries like Iran, Pakistan, and India, where the novel was banned and widely condemned (Varisco, 1992). For many Muslims, the book's portrayal of Islamic history—especially the controversial treatment of the Prophet Muhammad—was seen as an affront to their faith (Appiah, 1993).

The Role of Media in Shaping Public Opinion

The media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion around the *Satanic Verses* controversy, acting as both a conduit for information and a platform for the competing narratives that arose in response to Salman Rushdie's novel. The influence of Western media, in particular, was central in framing the controversy as a matter of free speech and artistic expression, with Rushdie positioned as a victim of religious intolerance. This framing was in line with the core values of liberal democracy, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, where intellectuals, writers, and journalists rallied to defend Rushdie's right to publish without fear of persecution. Media outlets in the West emphasized the importance of artistic freedom, portraying Rushdie's work as an essential part of the fight for free expression, which resonated strongly with secular and liberal audiences. These outlets, including major newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*, focused on the book's literary merit and the threat posed by censorship, often emphasizing the right of the individual to challenge religious orthodoxy (Malik, 2009; Said, 1993). However, the Western media's framing of the issue often simplified the complexity of the controversy by reducing it to a dichotomy of Western values versus Islamic fundamentalism. This framing overlooked the nuances of the debate within the Muslim world, where reactions were varied and often politically motivated. The intense media coverage also shaped public perception of the Muslim community as a monolithic, reactionary group opposed to freedom of expression, which contributed to stereotyping and further polarization between the West and the Islamic world. The media's portrayal of the fatwa issued by Iran and the subsequent protests, often focusing on violence and extremism, compounded these divisions and reinforced an "us vs. them" mentality (Appiah, 1993; Malik, 1989).

The coverage of protests and calls for censorship in countries like Iran, Pakistan, and India was another significant aspect of how the media shaped public opinion. In the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East, the media often framed the controversy as an assault on religious values, presenting Rushdie's book as an affront to Islam and the Muslim community. Iranian state-controlled media, for example, presented the fatwa as a defense of Islam's honor, emphasizing the political and religious justification for the call to action against Rushdie. These outlets portrayed the protests as righteous movements fighting for the protection of Islamic identity against Western cultural hegemony, which in turn galvanized religious groups across the region. The intense media

coverage in the Islamic world, including the distribution of incendiary pamphlets and broadcasts, led to widespread protests and boycotts of Western goods and services, signaling the power of media to mobilize public sentiment on a large scale (Kabbani, 1986; Lewis, 2002).

Furthermore, the media's role in amplifying geopolitical tensions cannot be understated. The *Satanic Verses* affair occurred during a period of heightened East-West tensions, with the aftermath of the Cold War and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism influencing international relations. The controversy was framed within the context of a larger ideological battle between secularism and religion, Western values and Islamic tradition. The media coverage of the fatwa not only intensified the cultural clash but also magnified the political stakes of the dispute, especially as the Iranian government used the affair to rally support against Western influence in the Muslim world. Western media outlets, in turn, saw the controversy as emblematic of the ideological divide, framing the fatwa as a direct challenge to the liberal values of the West (Varisco, 1992; Schueller, 1995).

The differences in media framing between the Islamic world and the West further complicated the controversy. While Western media emphasized the individual's right to freedom of expression, Islamic media outlets often focused on the perceived disrespect toward Islam, framing the issue as a collective cultural struggle. In many parts of the Muslim world, Rushdie's novel was not viewed as an isolated artistic work but as part of a broader pattern of Western cultural intrusion. In countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where the state had a strong influence on the media, the controversy was portrayed in stark terms of religious honor versus secular attack. The media framing in these countries resonated with the public's existing sentiments about the preservation of cultural and religious values, contributing to the widespread backlash against the novel (Kabbani, 1986; Malik, 2009).

Lastly, the impact of news outlets on public mobilization and the intensification of the conflict cannot be underestimated. The media acted as a catalyst, amplifying the voices of both the proponents and the opponents of *The Satanic Verses*. Protests against the novel, including violent demonstrations in Pakistan and India, were often sparked or fueled by media reports. Coverage of Rushdie's book burning in Pakistan and the calls for his death became global news, adding fuel to the fire and escalating the conflict. On the other hand, the media also gave visibility to Rushdie's supporters, including writers, intellectuals, and activists, who used media platforms to express solidarity with the author and argue for the defense of free speech. This dynamic created a feedback loop, where media coverage of protests and counter-protests further intensified the global debate, resulting in an even more polarized public opinion (Malik, 1989; Said, 1993).

The Intersection of Religion and National Identity

How the Novel's Reception Reflects Broader Cultural Anxieties

The reception of *The Satanic Verses* was not merely a reaction to a controversial work of fiction but also a reflection of the broader cultural anxieties in both the Islamic world and the West. In the Muslim world, the novel's portrayal of Islamic history and the Prophet Muhammad as a character raised deep concerns about the perceived erosion of religious sanctity in an era of rapid modernization and Westernization. Many viewed the novel as an attack on the very core of their faith, especially in countries struggling with the legacies of colonialism and the challenges of maintaining cultural and religious identity in a globalized world. The outrage generated by *The Satanic Verses* became a focal point for these broader anxieties, symbolizing the clash between Western secular values and Islamic religious orthodoxy. In the West, the controversy also reflected anxieties about the limits of free speech and the increasing visibility of religious communities that

were often viewed as being in opposition to Western norms of secularism and individual rights (Lewis, 2002; Said, 1993).

The Role of Religion in Shaping National Identity, Especially in Postcolonial States

Religion plays a central role in shaping national identity, particularly in postcolonial states where religion is often seen as a key component of cultural preservation and resistance to the legacy of colonialism. In many Muslim-majority countries, religion is not just a personal belief system but also a defining feature of national identity. The outrage surrounding *The Satanic Verses* illustrates how religion serves as a touchstone for national unity and pride, especially in the face of Western cultural and political influence. The novel's controversial content triggered an immediate and forceful response from religious and political leaders, who framed the debate as a struggle to protect the sanctity of their religion and to resist the perceived encroachment of foreign ideologies. In countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, where the state's legitimacy is often tied to religious values, the reaction to *The Satanic Verses* was seen as a reaffirmation of national sovereignty and religious authority against Western cultural imperialism (Kabbani, 1986; Malik, 2009).

In postcolonial societies, where national identity is often still in the process of being defined, the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* provided an opportunity for political and religious elites to assert control over the narrative of national identity. For these states, the backlash against the novel became a symbolic defense of national values, rooted in religion, against the liberal, secular forces of the West. It also illustrated the tension between preserving religious values in an era of globalization and modernity and the pressures to modernize and secularize to align with Western norms.

The Symbolic Importance of *The Satanic Verses* in the Defense of Religious Values

The Satanic Verses became more than just a literary controversy; it was imbued with symbolic significance in the defense of religious values. In the Islamic world, the novel was seen as a direct attack on the sacredness of Islam, especially in the context of the reverence held for the Prophet Muhammad. Religious leaders, intellectuals, and political figures across the Muslim world framed the controversy as a battle for the protection of religious values and the preservation of Islamic identity against a backdrop of cultural and political encroachment by the West. The fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 became a symbolic rallying cry for Muslims worldwide, positioning the novel as an existential threat to the integrity of their faith (Cavanaugh, 2009; Lewis, 2002). The backlash, therefore, was not only a reaction to the novel's content but also a declaration of religious authority, signaling that the defense of religion was paramount and must be protected at all costs, even at the expense of freedom of expression.

For many Muslims, the controversy also served to reinforce a collective identity that had been shaped in opposition to Western secularism and colonialism. The novel's perceived blasphemy was seen as the latest example of Western disrespect toward Islam, reinforcing longstanding cultural and political narratives about the need to protect the Muslim world from outside influence and intervention (Malik, 2009). In this context, *The Satanic Verses* became a symbolic object through which religious values were defended, and the cultural clash between the West and Islam was made manifest.

The Impact of the Controversy on Muslim Identity in the Diaspora

The controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* also had a significant impact on Muslim identity in the diaspora, particularly in Europe and North America. In these regions, where Muslim communities often face pressures to assimilate into the dominant secular culture, the controversy

reinforced the sense of religious and cultural difference. For many Muslim immigrants in the West, the protests against *The Satanic Verses* became a way to assert and preserve their religious identity in the face of a dominant culture that was often seen as hostile or indifferent to their beliefs. The reaction to Rushdie's novel highlighted the tension between maintaining religious traditions and adapting to secular, Western norms, a struggle that many in the Muslim diaspora grapple with daily. At the same time, the controversy also led to the formation of more defined Muslim identities within the diaspora, as the novel and the fatwa served as a focal point for organizing around shared religious values. The mobilization around *The Satanic Verses* created a platform for discussing issues of Islamic identity in the West, particularly concerning freedom of expression, secularism, and the relationship between Islam and modernity (Asani, 1991). The controversy also underscored the challenges of balancing cultural preservation with integration into Western societies, as the debate over the novel became a lens through which issues of belonging, integration, and cultural authenticity were examined.

Nationalism vs. Religious Identity in Global Responses

The global responses to *The Satanic Verses* also exposed the ongoing tension between nationalism and religious identity. In many Muslim-majority countries, nationalism was closely intertwined with religious identity, and the reaction to Rushdie's novel became a way to assert both national sovereignty and religious purity. Nationalist movements in these regions, already grappling with issues of political sovereignty and the legacies of colonialism, saw the controversy as an opportunity to reaffirm religious and cultural values as a cornerstone of national identity. The novel, therefore, became a site of political struggle, where religious values and national identity were defended against the perceived cultural imperialism of the West (Kabbani, 1986; Malik, 1989).

The Impact on Multiculturalism and Tolerance

The Relationship Between Cultural Diversity and Freedom of Expression

The *Satanic Verses* controversy underscored the complex relationship between cultural diversity and freedom of expression, particularly in multicultural societies. Multiculturalism, as a political and social framework, encourages the coexistence of diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic groups within a shared national space. However, this ideal of inclusivity often clashes with the principle of free expression when cultural or religious sensitivities are challenged by works of art, literature, or media. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, the novel's portrayal of Islam and religious figures offended large segments of the Muslim community, leading to protests and calls for censorship. This tension between respecting religious sensibilities and defending the right to free speech is a central issue in multicultural societies, where diverse communities often have conflicting views on what constitutes acceptable discourse. The controversy thus became a battleground for competing values: the protection of religious beliefs versus the protection of artistic freedom (Said, 1993; Appiah, 1993).

While multicultural societies strive to accommodate cultural and religious differences, they also face the challenge of upholding universal principles, such as freedom of expression, that can sometimes come into conflict with local traditions or religious norms. The *Satanic Verses* affair exemplified how cultural diversity, while enriching a society, can also lead to tension when one group's cultural or religious norms are perceived to be under threat by another's right to free expression. This conflict revealed the difficulties that arise when multiple identities—religious, cultural, national—must coexist within the boundaries of a single public space (Kabbani, 1986).

Multiculturalism in the West and Its Role in Handling Religious Sensitivities

In the West, particularly in countries like the United Kingdom and France, multiculturalism has become an integral part of national identity. However, the *Satanic Verses* controversy highlighted the challenges that arise in balancing the accommodation of cultural and religious differences with the maintenance of public order and civil liberties. The Western media's emphasis on freedom of speech during the controversy was framed within the broader context of liberal democratic values, which prioritize individual rights and the protection of artistic expression. Yet, this liberal stance often clashed with the sensitivities of religious communities, particularly Muslim groups, who felt that their beliefs were being marginalized or disrespected.

In the UK, where a significant Muslim population resides, the government's response to the Rushdie affair became a test case for how multiculturalism could be practiced in a modern, pluralistic society. On one hand, British officials defended Rushdie's right to write freely, but on the other hand, they faced immense pressure from Muslim leaders and community groups who demanded that the book be banned or restricted (Malik, 2009). The reaction to the controversy demonstrated the limits of multiculturalism when cultural sensitivities around religion clashed with liberal democratic values. The debate raised important questions about how multiculturalism can accommodate both freedom of expression and the need to protect religious and cultural identities from perceived offense (Said, 1993).

The Challenge of Balancing Cultural Tolerance and Respect for Religious Beliefs

The *Satanic Verses* affair also revealed the challenge of balancing cultural tolerance with respect for religious beliefs, especially in societies with a growing religiously diverse population. Tolerance, as a foundational value of multicultural societies, requires the acceptance of cultural and religious differences. However, this tolerance can be tested when expressions of one culture or religion are perceived as disrespectful or offensive to another. In the case of Rushdie's novel, many Muslims viewed the book as a direct assault on their religious beliefs, leading to protests, violence, and a demand for censorship. This raised critical questions about where the line should be drawn between tolerating diverse perspectives and protecting individuals or communities from expressions that could be seen as harmful or disrespectful to their core values.

Multiculturalism, in this sense, must navigate the fine line between promoting diversity and maintaining social harmony, especially in cases where certain cultural expressions may be offensive to specific groups. This challenge is especially pronounced when religious beliefs are involved, as these are often deeply tied to a community's sense of identity and moral framework. The *Satanic Verses* controversy, by highlighting the tensions between cultural and religious freedoms, underscored the difficulty of reconciling these often conflicting values in a pluralistic society (Appiah, 1993; Malik, 1989).

The Controversy's Effect on Interfaith Relations in Multicultural Societies

The *Satanic Verses* affair had a significant impact on interfaith relations, particularly in multicultural societies where different religious groups live in close proximity. The controversy exacerbated existing tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, with the Muslim community feeling increasingly alienated and vulnerable to being misrepresented in the media. In some cases, the protests and the subsequent violence reinforced stereotypes about Muslims as intolerant and opposed to liberal values, while also highlighting the precariousness of interfaith dialogue in the face of deeply felt religious sensitivities.

For interfaith dialogue to succeed in multicultural societies, it is crucial for communities to engage in respectful discussions about their beliefs and values. However, the *Satanic Verses* affair showed

that dialogue can be stifled when one group feels that its religious beliefs are being disrespected or mocked. The aftermath of the Rushdie affair demonstrated the need for greater understanding and empathy between different faith communities, as well as the importance of fostering mutual respect while maintaining the integrity of freedom of expression (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Long-term Implications for Policies on Religious Expression and Community Cohesion

The long-term implications of the *Satanic Verses* controversy are still being felt today, particularly in the way policies regarding religious expression and community cohesion are formulated in multicultural societies. In the wake of the Rushdie affair, many Western governments were forced to reconsider their approach to balancing free speech with respect for religious sensitivities. The controversy raised significant questions about the role of the state in mediating between religious and cultural groups and protecting individuals' rights while ensuring public order.

In the UK, the incident spurred ongoing debates about the limits of multiculturalism and how best to address the challenges posed by religious diversity. In some cases, governments implemented policies aimed at fostering greater religious tolerance and inclusion, such as interfaith dialogue initiatives and programs to promote understanding between different religious communities. However, the Rushdie affair also highlighted the fragility of these efforts, as tensions around religious expression and identity continued to surface in subsequent years, particularly in the wake of global events like the 9/11 attacks and the rise of Islamic extremism (Malik, 2009). The long-term implications of the controversy are seen in the ongoing balancing act that many societies face today in navigating issues of religious expression, tolerance, and multicultural integration.

Legal and Ethical Dimensions of Censorship

International Legal Responses to Censorship and the Right to Free Speech

The *Satanic Verses* controversy raised critical questions about the balance between censorship and the right to free speech under international law. The novel's publication triggered widespread debates about whether national governments have the right to censor content that may offend religious or cultural groups. International legal frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), emphasize the importance of freedom of expression, stating that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression" (Article 19, UDHR). However, these rights are not absolute and are often subject to limitations when they conflict with other fundamental rights, such as the protection of religious freedom or public order.

In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, international legal responses were divided. Western countries, particularly in Europe and North America, defended Rushdie's right to free expression, invoking international human rights law to resist calls for censorship. In contrast, many Islamic countries, particularly Iran, argued that the novel incited religious intolerance and violence, and they invoked religious and national sovereignty as justification for censorship. The fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie further complicated this issue, as it not only threatened the author's life but also raised questions about the extraterritorial enforcement of religious law (Malik, 2009). The global nature of the controversy highlighted the tension between international norms of free speech and the right of states to regulate content based on cultural or religious sensitivities (Cavanaugh, 2009; Said, 1993).

The Debate Between Banning Offensive Content and Protecting Freedom of Speech

The *Satanic Verses* controversy intensified the debate between banning offensive content and protecting freedom of speech. While many in the West strongly defended the principle of free speech, arguing that artistic expression should not be restricted, others believed that the book crossed a line by offending religious sentiments, particularly in Muslim-majority countries. The

question of where to draw the line between free speech and protection from offense remains a key legal and ethical challenge. In many democratic societies, freedom of expression is considered a fundamental right, yet legal limits exist to prevent speech that incites violence, hatred, or discrimination. The controversy around *The Satanic Verses* revealed the complexities of these boundaries, especially in multicultural societies where diverse groups hold different views on what is offensive or harmful.

The debate also raised questions about the role of the state in regulating offensive speech. While the UK and the US upheld Rushdie's right to publish the novel, some Muslim-majority countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, imposed legal restrictions, arguing that the book's content threatened public order and religious unity. This tension exemplified the broader conflict between the secular, liberal approach to freedom of expression in Western countries and the more conservative stance adopted by religious and authoritarian regimes. The fatwa and subsequent violence highlighted the potential dangers of censorship and the complexities of international legal responses when cultural and religious values are in direct opposition to global human rights norms (Varisco, 1992).

Ethical Considerations Regarding Cultural Sensitivity vs. Artistic License

The *Satanic Verses* controversy also brought to the forefront important ethical considerations regarding cultural sensitivity versus artistic license. On the one hand, Rushdie, as an artist, argued that literature must push boundaries and challenge dominant ideologies, including religious beliefs. Artistic freedom, in this sense, is essential for exploring complex themes, provoking thought, and offering critique, even if it offends certain sensibilities. On the other hand, critics of *The Satanic Verses*, especially within the Muslim community, felt that the novel was a deliberate affront to their faith, potentially inciting violence and undermining religious harmony. From an ethical standpoint, the question arose whether an artist has a moral responsibility to avoid offending religious or cultural groups, or whether they have the right to express their views freely without regard for the impact on others.

The ethical dilemma surrounding *The Satanic Verses* is emblematic of the broader tension between cultural sensitivity and artistic freedom. On one side, defenders of Rushdie's work argued that artistic expression should not be limited by religious taboos, as this could set a dangerous precedent for censorship. On the other hand, opponents contended that the novel's depiction of sacred religious themes crossed a line, arguing that the right to free speech should not come at the expense of cultural and religious respect. This debate continues to echo in contemporary discussions around freedom of expression, particularly in the context of art and media (Appiah, 1993; Kabbani, 1986).

The Global Legal Impact of the Fatwa and Its Influence on International Law

The fatwa issued by Iran in 1989 had profound global legal implications, not only in terms of its direct impact on Salman Rushdie but also in its influence on international law. By calling for Rushdie's assassination, the fatwa was seen as an extraterritorial attempt to enforce religious law beyond Iran's borders. This raised significant concerns about the reach of national legal systems over international matters, particularly in cases involving religious beliefs and cultural sensitivities. The fatwa was viewed by many as an attempt to assert Islamic law on a global scale, which presented challenges to the principles of international human rights law, particularly the right to life and the freedom of expression.

International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, condemned the fatwa as a violation of Rushdie's rights to free speech and protection from arbitrary execution. The international community's response to the fatwa, however, was divided. While many Western countries supported Rushdie, others in the Muslim world viewed the fatwa as a legitimate response

to the novel's blasphemous content. This highlighted the complexities of applying international legal norms in a globalized world where cultural and religious values often conflict with secular human rights standards (Cavanaugh, 2009; Varisco, 1992). The fatwa thus became a landmark case in discussions about the limits of freedom of expression and the sovereignty of states to enforce cultural norms.

Role of Global Human Rights Organizations in Advocating for Free Expression

Global human rights organizations played a crucial role in advocating for free expression during the *Satanic Verses* controversy. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and PEN International rallied to Rushdie's defense, arguing that the fatwa and the violent backlash against the author constituted gross violations of human rights, including the right to free speech and the right to life. These organizations mobilized international support for Rushdie, organizing protests, petitions, and public campaigns to highlight the dangers of censorship and religious extremism.

Human rights organizations also highlighted the broader implications of the controversy for artistic and intellectual freedom, emphasizing the need to protect writers, artists, and journalists from persecution based on their work. The *Satanic Verses* affair became a pivotal moment in the defense of free speech, with global human rights groups framing the issue as one of universal importance, transcending national, cultural, and religious boundaries. This global advocacy for free expression highlighted the importance of international solidarity in protecting fundamental human rights and resisting authoritarianism (Said, 1993; Malik, 2009).

Summary

In analyzing global reactions to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* through the lens of cultural realism, the focus is on understanding how the novel's themes, particularly its controversial treatment of religion and identity, resonate with and challenge cultural norms worldwide. Cultural realism, in this context, refers to the interpretation of literature through the lens of real-world cultural, political, and social dynamics, recognizing the impact of historical power structures, identity struggles, and societal values on literary works.

The Satanic Verses became a flashpoint for debates surrounding freedom of expression, blasphemy, and the intersection of literature and religion. Rushdie's portrayal of Islamic history and sacred figures sparked outrage in many Muslim-majority countries, leading to widespread protests, book burnings, and the infamous fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. The novel's global reception was divided—while some hailed it as a masterful work of fiction that questioned religious dogma and cultural authority, others viewed it as an affront to their faith, and it was banned in numerous countries.

Through the lens of cultural realism, one can explore how *The Satanic Verses* reflects the tensions between postcolonial identity, Western cultural imperialism, and the desire for authenticity within indigenous traditions. The novel's challenge to religious orthodoxy, particularly within Islamic cultures, reveals the complexities of cultural authority and the negotiation of modernity with traditional beliefs. The backlash against *The Satanic Verses* thus becomes a case study in the ways in which literature can provoke global reactions, highlighting how cultural sensitivities, political ideologies, and religious affiliations intersect with literary works to generate both support and resistance on the world stage.

References

- Ahmad, A. (1992). *In theory: Classes, nations, literatures*. Verso.
- Appiah, K. A. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*.
- Asani, A. (1991). The Satanic Verses and its impact in South Asia. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.
- Cavanaugh, W. T. (2009). *The myth of religious violence*. Oxford University Press.
- Eaton, R. M. (1996). *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204–1760*. University of California Press.
- Kabbani, R. (1986). *Europe's myths of Orient*. Macmillan.
- Lewis, B. (2002). *What went wrong? Western impact and Middle Eastern response*. Oxford University Press.
- Malik, K. (2009). *From fatwa to jihad: The Rushdie affair and its legacy*. Atlantic Books.
- Malik, S. (1989). The Rushdie controversy. *New Statesman*.
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- Schueller, M. (1995). Free speech and blasphemy in the Rushdie affair. *Cultural Critique*.
- Varisco, D. M. (1992). Religious violence and the Rushdie affair. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.