Salman Rushdie's splendid novel

Edward Ellis reviews 'The Satanic Verses' by Salman Rushdie (Viking Penguin)

Falling 30,000 feet from a terrorist-exploded aeroplane, Saladin Chamcha, TV voice-over specialist, and Gibreel Farishta, star of Indian movies, undergo extraordinary transformations, the first into a horned and cloven hooves, the second into his own archangelic namesake.

Across the centuries (or maybe not), these two foes confront each other in Satan's Room's 'Satanic verses', possibly the most famous book in the world, discounting religious texts.

It is an extraordinary novel, weaving past and present into a story dealing with almost innumerable subjects: the identity of the immigrant from the Indian subcontinent in Britain; what life is like here; his confusion confronted with second-generation Asians who don't conform at all to his image of them: fascism, racism, police violence, inner-city chaos; religion: fundamentalism, the 'revolution against history' in which clocks are abolished; the pants and the pants; the joy of fiction. Really, it covers all the mythology past. One character says, on a night of 'purifying fire': 'I'll stay with me. The world is real. We have to live in it; we have to live here, to live on.'

Possibly rather more offensive to the pious, although less commented upon, is the whole of himself appearing in the story, his description is obviously of Rushdie (who as author, you see, is God, and can turn people into devils with the head of goats). That the 'Satanic Verses' could be construed as racist, however, is a travesty. It is not accidental that Douglas Hurd found the book offensive. It is an impasioned andlavish attack on Thatcher Britain and the position of black people in it. In an Asian disco, youth burn an effigy of Thatcher. 'Maggie-Maggie-Maggie,' bays the crowd, 'burn-burn-burn... And how pretty she smells, from the inside out...'

Tories wouldn't like it.

The emphasis on Satan, too, derives from this. Hearing of the existence of a real live devil in London, Asia, youth(adapt him as their symbol, and devil horns become trendy. A teenage Asian girl says to the beheard Chamcha, 'You're a hero. I mean, people teach you to really identify with you. It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it. I thank it, I reclaim it and make it our own.'

It is a heavily allegorical book, by no means easy to understand. But Rushdie tells his story (or rather, he tells it with such power that) over the first few chapters it really is difficult to put down, fully comprehended or not. He is a writer of spectacular ability, if sometimes a little too self-consciously brilliant. One critic complained that this is a book "to study, not to enjoy"; but even at its most bewildering it is, in fact, exciting and entertaining. What makes it stranger even than its contents, however, is the eerie sense of self-prophecy. The Imam haunts its pages, "grown monstrous,lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates; as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole."

And Gibreel, the movie star, embarks on a cinematic "remake of the (Hindu) Ramayana story in which the heroes and heroines have become corrupt and evil, instead of pure and free from sin... 'Gibreel is playing Ravana,' George explained in fascinated horror."

So looks like he's trying deliberately to set up a final confrontation with religious sectarians, knowing he can't win, that he'll be broken to bits."

It is to be greatly hoped that Rushdie himself is never blown to bits by the religious sectarians he has so implacably offended.

alarmed southern Irish bourgeoisie, having been in power for half a century, felt an increasingly urgent need to cut away its own revolutionary past.

That is hardly surprising. Far more surprising is that they left it so late; surprising too is the tepid and small-minded rulers of the right-wing and intensely Catholic 26 County state had been saying about themselves and their history.

Until well into the '60s, at least, the southern Irish schools taught a version of Irish history more or less identical to what the Provisional IRA today teaches its recruits. They told the terrible story of the ancient subjugation of the Irish, of the repeated massacre and confiscations. They taught us how Ireland's Catholics were outlawed and persecuted in the 18th century using the 'Penal Laws', a system of helotry very like South Africa's apartheid.

They taught history as the struggle of oppressors and oppressors, whose heroes were the revolutionaries. They gloried in the various risings — often exaggerating their scope and importance, seizing on anything that could be construed as evidence of national virility and proof that the Irish never accepted their incorporation into the 'English system'.

Where British school children learned the dates of kings, we learned the dates of risings — 1641, 1689-90, 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867, 1890. Our liberation struggle for liberation; our heroes were not conquerors but rebels and freedom fighters whose glory lay in leaning on a rising, and then bearing their martyrdom bravely, defying their enemy with a 'scream from the dock'. They were good speeches, too, some of them, which we were taught to recite.

Of course there was a heavy overlap here with religious ideas of martyrs bearing witness for the faith. Protestantism inherited the line of a parallel tradition, but we didn't hear about that, and for us the national cause and Catholicism were entwined like tendrils of ivy on an ancient wall.

The ideas and symbols were interchangeable. They cast a glow on each other. The cause of Ireland was the cause of the Catholic Church; the cause of the Catholic Church was the cause of Ireland.

To this day we sing 'Faith of our Fathers' at All-Ireland Hurling Finals, as they sign you 'You'll never walk alone' at Wembley: "Faith of our fathers living still, in spite of kings, priests and sin.'

The great modern Irish hero was Padraig Pearse, the President of the Republic proclaimed in 1916, shot by the British after he surrendered — one of the highly visible Messiah complexes, who in his poems and plays more or less openly aspired to play the role of Christ-like redeemer to the suffering Irish nation.

Pearse wrote together disparate strands of Catholicism, 19th century Fenian nationalism, 18th...
century Republicanism, and the intense and sometimes violent nationalism that swept over Europe in the early part of this century, into the ideology of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie's peak of influence, and for which it won independence from Britain in 1922. The social revolution, the dismantling of the landlord system in favour of peasant proprietorship, had been made from above by British Tory and Liberal governments at the turn of the century.)

How come the Southern state was teaching its children the same history that the Provisional IRA now teaches? Both the dominant Southern Irish parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, and the Provisionals, have common roots: they are splinters from one party, the second Sinn Fein of 1917-1922. Of course, the Southern state had a shortish way in individuals who got the wrong message, who decided that it was not just a matter of ancient heroes from the dim and distant years and that they themselves should carry on the tradition of rebellion that they had been taught to revere. For the state had the jail, the firing squad, and the concentration camp, in which young men were interned without trial in several periods 1959-9.

Yet people did take that tradition of rebellion seriously, and not only Irish people. Irish Catholic missionaries took the message of Ireland's struggles to them all over the world. There are many examples of the influence of Irish nationalism in Africa; Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, for example, came under the influence of Irish missionaries, and one of the first things he did after he won power in 1980 was to go over Ireland on a state visit, and to call for political pilgrimage. In Ireland, the logic of the version of history we were taught could lead not only to the IRA but further. You perceived that picture of history to the world around you in the '50s and '60s — with the Algerians fighting the French, the Greek Cypriots fighting the British, the Africans demanding their freedom and organising 'Mau Mau' in Kenya — then you would arrive at general anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist politics.

And if you went from the Irish countryside or small town to industrial society, and saw your place in the lower orders of the proletariat, then the step from concern for national freedom to concern for working-class freedom or socialism or communism, was a very short one. Many made the transition; that many more didn't is probably to be accounted for by the part of our Catholic strand in the mixture.

No wonder the Southern state began to change its official history. Now a posse of historians was ever-roving away. They are trying to replace the heroic myths with dry-as-dust facts and statistics, and to banish, like mist from the morn, all vestiges of the revolutionary outlook on life.

James Connolly has a strange place in all this: a national hero of Catholic Ireland who was also a Marxist! But he was a man full of contradictions: the Marxist who lost his life in a forlorned nationalist rising, the militant socialist who made his peace at the end with the then very reactionary Catholic Church.

In the pantheon of the 26 counties State Connolly was accorded an important place, but one definitely subordinate to Pearse. The Marxist and revolutionary socialist (communist, in later parlance) was reduced to the 'labour leader'. Only the left, sight of.

For Austen Morgan, Connolly was a socialist who abandoned socialism to go over to nationalism after World War I broke out. Morgan seized the idea of the Connolly 1916 that there could be a socialist struggle by way of the national struggle, within it and coming out of it. Whether Connolly said that the trade union leader O'Brien saw Connolly said before going out on Easter Monday: "The odds against are a thousand to one, but in the event of victory hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached." Whether Connolly said it or not, the words reflect the spirit of Marx's advice to his comrades in 1850: that socialists and communists should strike together in national-democratic revolutions, but march separately. It seems to me impossible to doubt that Connolly was in that spirit.

The same idea was to be repeated in one of the key documents of revolutionary socialism in the 20th century — the Communist International's 1920 Theses on the National and Colonial Question.

To be sure, the great and immediate task for Connolly was to work for votes and the ballot, which Connolly saw in the context of the sectarian-communal divide.

Connolly did have many of the faults of his generation of Marxist socialists, and some, like his Catholicism, which was in no sense alien to himself. But he was right to base himself on the just struggle of the great majority of the Irish people against their national oppressors. Connolly was a man who made a step forward from the political common stock of his generation of Marxists, who generally had little interest in the revolts of oppressed nationalities.

That Connolly was, so to speak, politically gobbled up by the bourgeois nationalists after his death and made into one of their platoons of Party saints, proves only that he lost, not that he was wrong to make the attempt.

The early Communist International did much to ease the problem of dealing with nationalistic revolutions, and even its ideas, based on far wider experience and discussion than Connolly had access to, did not prevent the Chinese Communist Party making errors similar to Connolly's, and of catastrophic proportions, in the 1920s.

There is an implicit assumption in Austen Morgan's criticism of Connolly that he should have championed the struggle of the Irish working class by fighting for socialism within the old United Kingdom and having no truck with Irish separatism. But that would have meant Connolly turning his back on the democratic demands fought for by the big majority of the Irish people for many, many decades (for example, the struggle of the labour movement to do the same.

No Irish labour movement could have been built with such people as one of the (Ireland) sterile Unionist sects. On that road there was no possible solution to the Unionist/Nationalist division — only the self-interest of the bourgeoisie and the strengthening of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalists.

Connolly's understanding of the character and depth of the Catholic/Socialist tradition in Ireland was inadequate. On the other hand, no-one has ever written with more biting class hatred of the imperialist oligarchs than did Connolly in his writings against the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the old Home Rule party.

Robert Mugabe's book reads to me too 'academic' and a bit too summary, as if it has been cut down too brutally from a much longer draft. This is a pointed assault on the image of Connolly held today by the revolutionary left; in fact, though from a different viewpoint, Morgan's version of Connolly is more like that of our schools in De Valera's Ireland. For Morgan too, Connolly ceased to be a socialist when he became the prophet of the Northern Irish Crown and became 'hard-headed' — and reconciled to capitalism.

For a while, strangely, a big section of the bourgeois-oriented intelligentsia was cutting against the Narodnik revolutionary tradition. The Russian Marxists had to fight both Narodnik and opportunism, the revolutionary negation of Narodnism by the 'Legalists'.

What will replace the now discredited idealist-nationalist version of history, with its tremendously positive and wise core of that history — the necessity and justice of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor; the struggle not to just reform the system to serve the ascendant class? Or will it be incorporated into an adequate and comprehensive Marxist history of Ireland, as the heroic tradition of Narodnism was absorbed into Russian Marxism?

The critical work of the revisionists can help with the creation of a new version of the proletarian, account of Irish history. It depends on what the Marxists do with their work.
Gorbachev won’t make a revolution

Stan Crooke reviews ‘Beyond Perestroika’ by Ernest Mandel (Verso)

Ernest Mandel locates the roots of policies in the prolonged economic crisis and social stagnation which characterise the Soviet Union. Gorbachev’s reforms are not the initiative of one individual, but the response of a section of the Soviet bureaucracy to that social and economic crisis.

The government’s economic reforms, covered by the general heading of ‘perestroika’ (reorganisation), seek to regenerate the Soviet economy on the expense of the Soviet working class. Mandel cites a series of examples of economic reforms, often involving the re-introduction of market mechanisms which have worsened workers’ living standards and working conditions.

Hence the policy of ‘glasnost’ (openness), as a complement to the economic policies. By allowing, and even encouraging, a limited liberalisation, the government hopes to displace the working-class unrest provoked by its economic measures. As Mandel puts it, “it is therefore necessary to ensure that the pill of perestroika is swallowed through making political changes.”

It is here that the regime runs into trouble, given that the working-class (or sections of society, such as the oppressed nationalities, or the ecological movement) is not prepared to restrict itself to the liberalisation sanctioned by the government. The outcome is increased social instability and a further weakening of the regime’s standing - the very opposite of the intended goal of the economic and political reforms.

Mandel rules out the possibility of a ‘revolution from above’. The Soviet Communist Party, he writes, “is a party of the bureaucracy; it is not a party of the working class.” And, whatever the changes which have resulted from ‘glasnost’, the government remains a “regime of bureaucratic dictatorship”. Hence Mandel looks forward to “the triumph of the political revolution (from below), in the Marxist sense of the term”.

Mandel also describes Soviet society as “a combination of the dynamic and the immobile”. Nothing in Mandel’s book would justify using the term ‘dynamic’ in relation to the Soviet Union. So why does Mandel describe Soviet society as a “combination” of these two factors?

The answer is that Mandel continues to apply Trotsky’s definition of the 1930s ‘degenerated workers’ state’ - to the Soviet Union of today. However implausible it may sound, the ‘dynamic’ element in Soviet society is the workers’ bit of it, while the ‘immobile’ element in it is the degenerated bit.

A related problem crops up when Mandel deals with the nature of the Soviet bureaucracy. In line with Trotsky’s writings of half a century ago, Mandel rejects the notion that the bureaucracy is a ruling class. At the same time though he writes that “in the Soviet Union the central state apparatus, that is to say, the bureaucracy, controls the social surplus product.”

But Mandel cannot have it both ways. From a Marxist point of view, what defines a class as a ruling class is whether or not it has control over the surplus product. Mandel cannot simultaneously claim that the bureaucrat merely exercises such control (in fact, it does not; but that is a separate argument) but nonetheless is not a ruling class.

Mandel goes on to rule out the possibility of any capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. 90% of the bureaucracy would lose more than they would gain under such circumstances, and it would be the equivalent of collective hari-kiri by the bureaucracy, he suggests. But, given the extent to which market mechanisms have already been re-introduced, such a possibility surely deserves more discussion than the limited amount it receives in the book.

Mandel also writes that “the bureaucracy has not completely cut its umbilical cord (after over 60 years!) with the working class.” Again, such an assertion flows out of the notion of the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state”. Given that logic applied to reach such a claim, Mandel would have to argue the same with regard to the bureaucracy in Poland — and even China!

The book concludes with a lengthy quotation from Trotsky, from a work of 1927. Mandel’s selectivity in assembling quotes from Trotsky allows him to declare that the current evolution underway in the Soviet Union is a continuation of Trotsky’s analysis of the Soviet Union and of his predictions about its future.

While there is much of value in Trotsky’s writings on the Soviet Union, it should not be forgotten that he did not expect it to survive — still less to expand — beyond the aftermath of Second World War. Unfortunately, however, Mandel would appear to prefer backdATING his views on that. But the Union to up-dating Trotsky’s analysis.

But such points are secondary to the fact that, whatever, Mandel’s aside about the logic of the ‘dynamic’ of the process in the Soviet Union, his book brings out the nature of the economic and social crisis in the Soviet Union and successfully challenges the idea that Gorbachev is attempting to establish democratic socialism in the Soviet Union.

Kim candidates Kim, Kim: The Sequel, and Kim: The Early Years, Panama, Nicaragua, Disneyland, Poland, the Mexican border, and then the flight for the America’s Cup, wisecracking all the while, clutching as many drinks and cigarettes as he can get his hands on. He’s convincing but failing to convince himself he’s just a good ole boy who loves truth, justice and the American Way. I predict a serious liberal reaction for P.J. O’Rourke.

In a different key, but also well to the political right, is Joe Bob Briggs, the world’s first drive-in movie critic.

Joe Bob was the invention of John Bloom, a film reviewer on the Dallas newspaper, the Times Herald. Supposedly a twice-married, nineteen year old Texas redneck who had seen more than 6,000 drive-in movies, Joe Bob became a cult by reviewing the kind of movies other reviewers wouldn’t touch — exploitation movies, the blood, beast and breast flicks. Joe Bob’s plot summations became famous:

“Two heads roll. Maggots in the throat. Great slime gloopola lizard-face genetic-DNA attack. An eight-inch high meter. Twelve gallons blood. One beast. Two breasts...Joe Bob says check it out.”

Most film reviewers ignore films like ‘Monkey Kong Fu’, ‘I Dismember Mama’, and ‘Bloodsucking Freaks’. But Joe Bob only liked that kind. If we have a choice between art/derivative gore films in the mainstream cinema circuit now (‘Nightmare on Elm Street’, ‘Friday the 13th’) in the sequel arena it’s partly because Joe Bob rescued this kind of drive-in flick from obscurity and made it news. He also made money.

But he offended people too. Joe Bob’s views were openly sexist, racist and homophobic. Of course it was all done tongue-in-cheek, but that was partly the problem.

Opponents of Joe Bob found him hard to tackle, since he had a way of getting his way.

When Dallas feminist Charlotte Taft complained about his column, he challenged her to a nude match in his own way of settling their differences. (When Taft later ran into trouble funding her abortion clinic, she wondered whether she had been right all along. She might have struck it rich on sponsorship.)

Joe Bob made his critics look like hypocrites, who didn’t even take a joke. After all, the column was supposedly satire, not to be taken seriously.

But Joe Bob’s column a satire of ignorance and prejudice, or was it actually pandering to prejudice? Hard to say. Many people found the column offensive, and the protests of the black community in Dallas finally killed it. Joe Bob was dropped by the Times Herald. We need to keep an eye on what the right are up to. So, as Joe Bob would say, “Check these suckers out.”