

Literature and Cultural Diplomacy: An Essay on Cultural Readings

1. Introduction

In 2003 Helena K. Finn, a senior American diplomat, argued that "[c]ultural diplomacy is one of the most potent weapons in the United States' armory, yet its importance has been consistently downplayed in favor of dramatic displays of military might."¹ As much as I am supporting her argument I am of the opinion, that cultural diplomacy needs to stand on firm theoretical ground. Especially, if one wants to persuasively argue for its proliferation. By examining literature as a tool of cultural diplomacy I will try to contribute to such a firm ground. The website of the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy features a concise definition of cultural diplomacy:

the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs, and other aspects of culture, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding.²

From a theoretical perspective, literature can work for cultural diplomacy as it can allow readers to imagine foreign countries or foreign cultures; characterizations of protagonists can invite us to empathize with people we would usually never meet or even fear, and even fictitious societies can potentially make us understand the workings of distant cultures. In reality, however, this potential of literature is complicated due to a variety of factors.

Along the analysis of two novels, their reception and instrumentalisation, I will show that it is less the text itself and its qualities but the institutional structure, which needs to be in place and supportive of literature to reach greater audience and function as cultural diplomat. But most importantly, it is the nearly manifold practice of reading and interpretation which is the root of literature's failure or success as cultural diplomacy. For this task, I chose *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie, two books that share a variety of similarities. Both are written by non-Western authors (admittedly Rushdie was a reluctant UK citizen at the time), both were published by established Western publishing houses, both achieved critical acclaim in the West and were broadly received by culturally diverse audiences. In terms of content they are offering chances of insight for readers into foreign cultures or problematic cultural relations.

¹ Helen K. Finn. "The Case for Cultural Diplomacy: Engaging Foreign Audiences." *Foreign Affairs* 82.6 (2003): 15-20. Print.

² The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. "What is Cultural Diplomacy?". 12 August 2011. <http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy>.

Nevertheless, the novels in question experienced different reactions toward their publication, and while one could argue for a successful cultural diplomacy in the case of Hamid, Rushdie's novel caused an uproar which led to riots, killings, and a break of diplomatic relations. Rushdie's case brought to light readings that are incommensurable and raise the question, if literature can work as cultural diplomacy if political situations shape a big amount of the reading public and even our interpretation of literature and its standing in society.

2. The Reluctant Diplomat

On March 1st, 2007 the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid was published in Britain by Hamish Hamilton and a month later by Harcourt in the United States. The novel is set in a part of Lahore, Pakistan where the narrator Changez meets an American, and relates to him his brief life, success and failure in the United State before and after September 11, at a time marked by anti-Muslim prejudice and fear.³ It was published in 29 languages, received numerous awards and became an international bestseller. It was selected as "Notable Book of the Year" by the *New York Times*, and as "Book of the Decade" by the *Guardian* in 2009. Next to a Booker Prize shortlisting, the novel won or was nominated for a number of English and American literary prizes such as the South Bank Show Annual Award for Literature and the Ambassador Book Awards by the English-Speaking Union of the United States. The Ambassador Book Award is remarkable as the institution intends to award "authors whose books make an exceptional contribution to the interpretation of life and culture in the United States" and its award is embedded in the goal "to celebrate English as a shared language to foster global understanding and good will."⁴ Such an award consecrates the book and labels it as one that fosters understanding. It is surely also PR for the novel but one which labels it at the same time as working diplomatically between cultures.

However, it is impossible to draw conclusions about a novel's potential participation in cultural diplomacy by simply analyzing its institutional treatment. Such an analysis falls short, if it does not take into account the process of interpretation. In the end, the choice of the Ambassador's Book Award jury was the result of a specific reading of the novel, namely that of its jurors. Certainly, this was not the only possible reading.

³ Dominic Casciani. "Islamophobia pervades UK - report." *BBC News* (2 June 2004). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3768327.stm>.

⁴ "Ambassador Book Awards: Recognizing the Best in American Literature". The English-Speaking Union of the United States. 13 August 2011. <http://www.english-speakingunion.org/Programs_Books_Across_Sea_Ambassador_Book_Awards.htm>.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist was widely read and reviewed and often considered an eye-opening reading:

In the wake of 9/11, the international political landscape has become warped through mutual distrust and political hyperbole. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an elegant and sharp indictment of the clouds of suspicion that now shroud our world.⁵

The novel begins with the recreation of a fictitious scene of encounter in Lahore between the narrator, the Pakistani Changez, and an American whose identity is gradually revealed in the course of the novel. The first page reveals how the structure plays with cultural perspectives and assumptions.

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.

How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; a European tourist could as easily have purchased in Des Moines your suit, with its single vent, and your button-down shirt. True, your hair, short-cropped, and your expansive chest -- the chest, I would say, of a man who bench-presses regularly, and maxes out well above two-twenty-five -- are typical of a certain type of American; but then again, sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike. Instead, it was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation.⁶

Throughout the whole novel Changez remains the focaliser and the American never speaks in direct speech but his words are reported by Changez. Considering Changez' ambivalent experience, his intentions towards his listener are uncertain and his status is one of an unreliable narrator. Nevertheless, he remains a polite and attentive acquaintance until the disturbing but ambiguous revelation at the end of the novel. His reported reactions of the American, such as his fear of Changez' beard, make allusions to American iconography of the Taliban since 9/11 which is contrasted by Changez' polite behavior. Changez' recognition of typical American looks and "bearing" is a clever reversal of the Western stereotyping of Muslims. Changez simultaneously deconstructs and affirms the typical American stereotype as light skinned, in business attire, with cropped hair and military-like physique when he reveals to the American that it was actually his behavior, something that you usually are not aware of yourself, which gave him away. The American's unease is one that characterizes him throughout the book and reveals his post-9/11 induced mindset. In setting the exposition in Lahore, Hamid cleverly reversed the position of immigrant and native by placing the American in a foreign country next to a former "foreigner". At the same time he occupies the

⁵ Jim Ottewill. "Mistaken Identities". *The Observer*. (11 March 2007).
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/11/fiction.features>>

⁶ Mohsin Hamid. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007. Print. 1.

space of "invader" into a foreign culture. The scene invites Western readers to reflect their image outside the "West". Though the reader follows Changez into his memory of the United States, we frequently return to Lahore which contrasts past and present, home and the alien. For the reader the question if the novel is mediating or separating cultures is decided in the communication between Changez and the American, whether or not they eventually understand each other.

For Marina Budhos of the *Brooklyn Rail*, the novel seems to have had an effect of abstraction and critical self-reflection. She takes on a self-critical perspective but also the perspective of immigrants according to which American society and politics appear in a different light:

Hamid, in this sly form, gives us the opportunity to experience our own changing, confused reactions as part of this fluid moment. Are we imperialists, as his narrator indicates? Are we a beacon of opportunity for the talented or ruthless emissaries of global business? Must immigrants shed their allegiances and perspectives as our country invades?⁷

In the *New York Times* Karen Olsson argued :

We are prodded to question whether every critic of America in a Muslim country should be labeled a fundamentalist, or whether the term more accurately describes the capitalists of the American upper class. Yet these queries seem blunter and less interesting than the novel itself, in which the fundamentalist, and potential assassin, may be sitting on either side of the table.⁸

For her the novel criticizes a post-9/11 rhetoric which too easily obliterates the differences and particularities in Muslim countries. Even more so, according to Olsson, the novel reverses the rhetoric and highlights for the reader that for non-Americans, the American way is as fundamentalist, as the image of Muslim fundamentalists which the American rhetoric projects. I would argue that the invitation to self-reflection is a good starting point for cultural diplomacy.

But the novel did not have a mediating effect on all readers. Saeed ur Rahman of the Pakistani *News International* also thought Hamid's book was "about global geopolitical alliances and civilizational solidarity [...]" but found much to criticize it for:

What is not very encouraging is that the narrator ultimately ends up believing in the division of identities. Either one can be subsumed in the West or withdraw into fundamentalism. This either-or problem is solved reluctantly by an intellectual rejection of the West (represented here by the USA) and uncritical solidarity with the Orient (represented by Pakistan): hence the title 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'.⁹

⁷ Marina Budhos. "Fiction: Runes of Ruins." *The Brooklyn Rail* (May 2007).

<<http://brooklynrail.org/2007/5/books/runes-of-ruins>>.

⁸ Karen Olsson. "I Pledge Allegiance" *New York Times: Sunday Book Review* (22 April 2007).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/books/review/Olsson.t.html?_r=1&oref=slogin>.

⁹ Saeed ur Rahman. "Success of Understatement." *The News International: Literati (Karachi)* (29 April 2007). Print.

Saeed ur Rahman does not see the bridges built by the novel and, instead, reads it as an incentive to take sides. Such a reading cannot be easily streamlined with the claim that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a successful case of cultural diplomacy. As Changez relates, he felt the US – after discrimination and prejudice – made his life unbearable. He tries to make his listener understand how he realized that it was the American way which he once aspired, that was the root of fundamentalism.

Nevertheless, two US and one Scottish University valued the book highly enough as to include it in remarkable student programs. Within its *Tulane University Reading Project*, Tulane University in New Orleans distributed the novel to its entire new undergraduate student corpus in 2008. Hamid was invited for a lecture, next to an Arab-American comedian. The reason for choosing the book was the conviction that it "leave[s] the reader pondering themes of national identity and prejudice, American hubris, and the immigrant experience in the post-9/11 world."¹⁰ *The Washington University in St. Louis* did the same and gave it to all of its incoming freshmen, as a part of the "First Year Reading Program." The program's mission was:

- to introduce students to the spirit of inquiry and debate that is integral to the Washington University in St. Louis academic community.
- to provide a common intellectual experience for incoming students, as well as participating members of the faculty and staff.¹¹

A similar program was created in Scotland. In 2009, the University of St Andrews launched its *St Andrew's Booker Prize project* with Hamid's novel and provided "every new entrant undergraduate with a copy".¹² In an interview in 2009, Louise Richardson, the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, explained the project: The idea was that "students coming [to St Andrews] [...] from a hundred different countries, from very different social backgrounds, having [...] this one book that they had all read, so that when they arrive here" Hamid's novel could be "a way of engaging one another intellectually".¹³ On its website the university gives another reason why it picked the book: it was "a controversial book that stimulated the kind of academic debate upon which universities thrive." In this essay I cannot address the question how the fictitious nature of the novel was discussed in these programs but will focus on the possibility of cultural diplomacy. Even though the *St Andrew's Booker Prize project* does not

¹⁰ "2008 Reading Project: The Reluctant Fundamentalist". New Orleans. Newcomb-Tulane College. 13 August 2011. <<http://tulane.edu/reading/archives.cfm>>.

¹¹ "First Year Reading Program". Washington University in St. Louis. 13. August 2011. <<http://firstyear.wustl.edu/TransferExchange/Pages/FRP.aspx>>

¹² "St Andrews' Booker Prize project". *University of St Andrews*. 13 August 2011. <<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/orientation/bookerprize/>>.

¹³ *St Andrews' Booker Prize Project*. *Vimeo.com*, (2009). <<http://vimeo.com/6431862>>

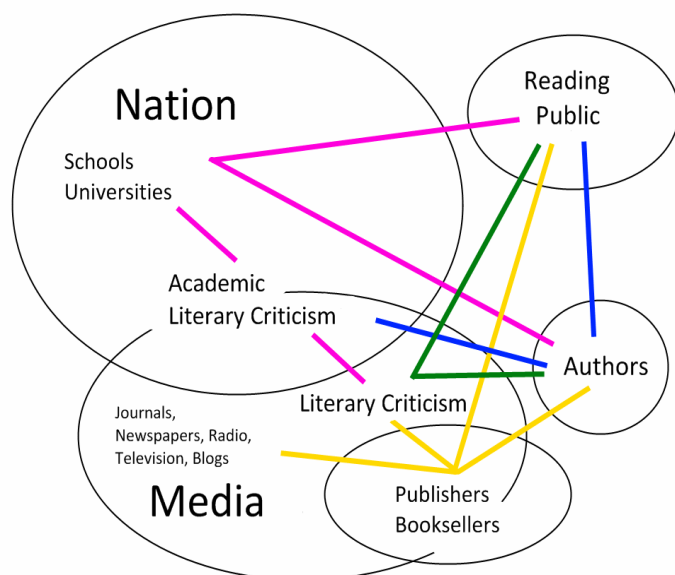
make any statement towards cultural diplomacy, Ms. Richardson and the University's explanation for picking the novel suggest that they hoped to engage students over debate. *St Andrews* and *Washington University* seem to have called for an international and intercultural understanding through the debate over different interpretations of the novel. Thus, even the review by Saeed ur Rahman in the Pakistani *News International* could be reconciled with the idea that novels work as cultural diplomats.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist seems to invite readers to look at their societies through the eyes of the *Other*. It asks both sides to critically reflect their assumptions about the "Other" but also reflect on their self-perception as a nation. I would argue that in these instances and in such reading we can speak of a case of successful cultural diplomacy. The attempts by *St Andrews University* and *Washington University in St. Louis* to incorporate and even invite deviating readings support this hypothesis.

However, Saeed ur Rahman's interpretation, one that understands the book as dividing readers rather than bringing them closer together, requires serious consideration. The idea that the discussion of our subjective reading experience will bring us closer is based on a dangerous disregard of the system and communication surrounding Western literature. It presupposes a freedom of reading, which literary communication does not allow or at least tries to streamline.

3. Literary Communication in Democratic Societies

Established democratic societies regularly evoke the right of freedom of speech. Though in itself not unproblematic, freedom of speech was also the guiding principle of the criticism raised against the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. I will address the case of Rushdie in the following section of the chapter. For now I will try to expose the discrepancy of the proclaimed principle of freedom of speech and the underlying constraints with which institutions control the extent of this freedom by looking at literary communication. My argument is that reading is not free nor is it democratic. If we look at how institutions such as schools or universities but also individuals such as reviewers, publishers and authors try to interfere in our constitution of subjective meaning it becomes clear that we need to look much closer at the instances and system of interference when speaking about literature as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Anna Auguscik und Olaf Simons have developed a communication model which is very useful in this respect as it comprises all the interfering actors.



(Graphic 1: Literary Communication Model)¹⁴

Schools and universities are the first major meaning generators and their pedagogic approach leaves with some freedom but the necessity to grade "good" and "bad" reading allows only a limited freedom of subjective meaning generation when reading a book. If we now reconsider the reviews on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* it is striking that

none of the reviews offers their reading as one under thousands of other possible readings. The language and tone is one of finality. Not one begins with a humble admittance to stating an opinion on the novel. They all present themselves as last words regarding the book's meaning. Even blurbs and summaries on back covers are similar tools of guidance for the reading public. Certainly, it is true that the reading public is free to not read or listen to these voices. But taking this freedom comes at a price and that is exclusion. Neither the *New York Times* nor the University of St. Andrews will employ literary scholars or critics who did not receive schooling in English Literature. This means that the professional system excludes and selects on the basis of a literary curriculum vitae. So even if we choose to ignore the various attempted interferences we cannot deny the created frames in which freedom of reading is at best relative.

This has consequences for cultural diplomacy. It needs to be aware of these influences and the respective literary communications. Remaining with the example of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I argue that the respective institutions do not simply bring a text to a group of young students and hope for cultural exchange over its meaning. All students are raised in and come from specific systems of literary communication and have differing notions even of the concept of literature itself. These concepts are developed within their literary communication and will culturally differ greatly to the extent of becoming incommensurable. Based on the

¹⁴ A German version of this model was recently published online at Medienobservationen "Arvind Adigas The White Tiger (2008). Zwischen Repräsentanz und Kontroverse" (July 2011) <www.medienobservationen.lmu.de/artikel/kontrovers/avguscik_tiger.pdf>; an English version is in preparation within an edited book for the conference "Literature as Communication" at the University of Turku, Finland, under the eponymous title.

example of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and its incommensurable readings, I will show how literature's mediating capabilities were shattered.

4. The Rushdie Affair

Salman Rushdie's fourth novel was published on September 26, 1988, seven years after his critically acclaimed *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's novel is complex and layered, with a main plot about two Indian men, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, who fall to earth in England after a terrorist induced plane explosion. The subplots, mostly dream visions of Gibreel Farishta, deal with the story of the prophet Mahound (Books 2 and 6), parts which were crucial to the blasphemy argument. Soon after its publication, it was banned in India on October 5 and in South Africa on October 24. After inefficient calls to the UK government to ban the book, parts of the Muslim community in Bradford, Yorkshire, took to the streets in demonstration against the book and its author in January 1989. During the protest, one copy of the book was burned. Pictures of the event were widely reproduced by the media and invited commentators to make comparisons with Nazi book burnings. The beginning of 1989 saw riots sparking over the book in Islamabad, Kashmir, Bombay and Iran, which resulted in a number of deaths and injuries. On February 14, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran proclaimed a *Fatwa* on Rushdie and everyone involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Soon, £1,500,000 was placed on Salman Rushdie's life.¹⁵ In the meantime, the literary community has received *The Satanic Verses* with much appraisal: it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Novel Award, and received critical acclaim in a wide range of daily and weekly papers.

The blasphemy outrage focused on a scene offset within Gibreel Farishta's dream. In his dream a kind of angel "halfway between Allahgod and homosap" by the name of Mahound, a variant term for Mohammed which also means "false prophet"¹⁶, comes to the city of Jahilia to found a new religion. Through the protagonist's dream Rushdie's narrative re-imagines the beginning of Islam and describes Mahound as a "joke tyrant", whose "disciples [...] fear him, and begun to discover his weakness."¹⁷ John Walsh argues, that "[a]t no point in these imaginings does Rushdie refer to the prophet Muhammad by name, nor to the city of Mecca, nor the Sheria law, nor anything directly concerned with Islamic faith." Surprised, Walsh

¹⁵ Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, eds. *The Rushdie File*. London: Fourth Estate, 1989. Print. ix-x.

¹⁶ John Walsh. "Words that outraged Islam." *The Rushdie File*. Eds. Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland. London: Fourth Estate, 1989. 31-33. Print. 31.

¹⁷ Walsh. "Words that outraged Islam." 32.

notes in regard to the novel's fictitious nature, that, "[w]hat is altogether odd is that the book's status as a novel cuts no ice with its Muslim critics".

Even if this summary construes the conflict as one between a secular West and a religious Iran or the Muslim world, it was, in reality, much more layered, differentiated and complex. Talal Asad who analysed the "political debate surrounding the publication"¹⁸ of *The Satanic Verses* even comes to the conclusion that "for many people the book has largely had the effect of weakening the possibility of a politics of difference in Britain today."¹⁹ For my argument regarding cultural diplomacy, it is less important to look at the novel itself than at two readings of the debate that positioned themselves as counter-discourses and resist mediation: that of religious fundamentalism vs. liberalist claim to freedom of speech in order to discriminate Muslims as pre-modern.

On February 14, 1989 Radio Teheran broadcasted a *Fatwa* of decree by Ayatollah Khomeini, the revered spiritual leader of Iran's 50 Million Shia Muslims. It read:

In the name of God Almighty, [...] there is only one God, to whom we shall return. I would like to inform all intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compile, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death.²⁰

Following the *Fatwa*, an article in the *Observer* on February 19, 1989 formulated a direct response to Iran and declared:

Neither Britain nor the author has anything to apologize for. Both can, as Rushdie has done, regret the offence caused or the anger stirred, but not the act itself. For the right to perform that act, to create and publish a book, has been fought for too painfully to be tossed aside in a desire for a quieter life. Those who ask that it should be are forgetting their own history – from Socrates to Stalin. [...] In the end, Mr Rushdie must have the right to publish his book and the freedom and security to publicize it. He is entitled to nothing less.²¹

The concept of progression towards a freedom of art is clearly located in a history of the West. Even moderate Muslim's who feel offended by the representation but might be against the *Fatwa* will find themselves in the position of feeling offended by this liberal concept of Western hegemony.

Similarly, Rushdie's argument, though correct from the perspective of Western literary tradition, excludes any reading that does not share this assumption about literature:

¹⁸ Talal Asad. "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*." *Cultural Anthropology* 5.3 (1990): 239-69. Print. 240.

¹⁹ Asad. "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics." 243.

²⁰ Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, eds. *The Rushdie File*, 84.

²¹ Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, eds. *The Rushdie File*. 122.

Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its own concerns, which are only tangentially historical. Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history.²²

Asad observes that this argument is shared by many participants in the affair.²³ However, such an argument loses power since the critique is as much directed at the act of representation as it is an act of treating a fictitious character as real. Equally, the proclamation of the liberal right to freedom of speech made in the *World Writers Statement* for the author (itself not unproblematic as it conflicts in this case with the right to religious freedom) is much more interested in fierce defense than mediation.²⁴ Such a standpoint has merely two options: either to claim these rights in awareness of offending culturally deviating readings, or to declare them as inappropriate, maybe even backward.

It is true that statements by Rushdie, Ayatollah Khomeini and other prominent figures cannot be taken at face value, as they were driven by strategic political considerations, which are impossible to retell here and be given their due space. Also, it seems that many critics do not seem to have read the book as such. But as Asad argues, few Western readers can argue they understand the book fully, with all its references and allusions.²⁵ My point is in no way to defend the *Fatwa* issued against Rushdie nor to condone the deaths that followed the publication. Also, the examples I refer to are not representative of the whole conflict. But they are, in my opinion, incommensurable because of the status the author and, most of all, literature inherits in the different cultures.

The question I want to raise here is if the Rushdie affair or the entanglement of politics and interpretation around the book exhaust cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy needs to be able to address these instances where political struggles influence the understanding of literature. Is cultural diplomacy at an end when translators die and the partner in communication is accused of being culturally in the Middle Ages? How can cultural diplomacy address these instances where literature becomes an "expression of politics by other means", to paraphrase Clausewitz?

²² Salman Rushdie. "In Good Faith." *The Independent on Sunday*, (4 February 1990). Print.

²³ Asad. "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics." 248.

²⁴ "World Writer's Statement." *The Rushdie File*. Eds. Appignanesi, Lisa and Sara Maitland. London: Fourth Estate, 1989. 137.

²⁵ Asad. "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics." 248.

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