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The Search for Salman Rushdie:
Migration and Identity in *The Satanic Verses*

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The *New York Times* nearly burst its seams with commentary following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as the self-proclaimed "capital of the world" discussed the meaning of the tragedy in its signature publication. One such opinion article on November 2 addressed the role of religion in the attacks, arguing that such tragic actions and other radical political projects derive from a sickness at the heart of many people’s Islamic belief and concluding, “The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization, is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern” (“Yes, This is About Islam”, A.25). These remarks would seem fairly standard in a newspaper like the *New York Times* given the American enthusiasm for maintaining a distinct church and state and resultant desire to recommend this model to the international community.

However, the identification of the writer as Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie greatly complicates the interpretation. Not simply another pundit, Rushdie’s voice is of particular interest because of his own encounter with religious fundamentalism following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. Banned in many countries, the novel created fierce controversy and forced Rushdie to go into hiding under the protection of British police for a decade. Thus, reading his current commentary, we cannot but help to listen to him in terms of his experience underground after the Iranian death sentence. As a result, his call for the restoration of religion as private and personal faith contains within it an unspoken concomitant call for the restoration of reading literature as a depoliticized act, an attempt to salvage *The Satanic Verses* from the furor of the Rushdie
Affair. Readers of this copy of the New York Times would have noted the column with particular interest given the context of its publication. However, the identification of Rushdie as the author does not satisfy an even more fundamental question: Who is Salman Rushdie? This question remains critical to the interpretation of his work, particularly The Satanic Verses, and an examination of the novel illuminates Rushdie’s own vision of his identity as a migrant writer and hybridized human.

Published in the United Kingdom on September 26, 1988, The Satanic Verses quickly came under fire for an allegedly blasphemous representation of the birth of Islam. Through the dreams of one of his main characters, Rushdie re-imagines the revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Mohammed, questioning the integrity of the words of God and the motivation of his Prophet. Later in the novel, twelve prostitutes from Jahilia, an Arabian city with striking parallels to Mecca, take on the names of Mohammed’s twelve wives and thereby increase their business. Rushdie spares nothing in working out all the comic possibilities of this insulting arrangement. On February 14, 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa condemning Rushdie to death for blasphemy and called for devout Muslims to kill this “enemy of God.” Violent protests around the world and attacks on translators and publishers of the novel drew it into an immense international debate that profoundly impacted its interpretation.

Writing in response to Khomeini’s decree in 1989, Rushdie hoped that “years from now, people may wish in the much cooler light of that distance of time to reappraise what the book actually is and is not.” Thirteen years later, the air has seemingly cleared. In September 1998 the Iranian government declared that it “has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life of the author of The Satanic
Verses or anybody associated with his work” (Pipes 51). Rushdie, understandably excited by the statement, predicted, “The whole issue will now very rapidly fade into the past.” However, concerned critic Daniel Pipes has “no reason to think anything in Iranian policy has changed” and argues that the belief that danger no longer exists only intensifies the threat to Rushdie’s life (52).

Although the degree of Rushdie’s safety may be debatable, the impact of the affair on readers has hardly diminished. According to Jaina Sanga, “The political strife that surrounds The Satanic Verses, has, to a large extent detracted from considering the novel’s literary merit” (107). The protest mounted against the novel represents particular ways of reading. In some cases, the objectionable sections of the novel were printed and distributed for those not willing to tackle the novel’s quarter million words. Readers were able to catch a quick glimpse of the “blasphemy” without engaging in the more difficult and time-consuming process of starting from the first page. In this way, the offensive passages become severed from their context within the novel. Every published novel functions in a larger political and social context and many have sparked controversy and motivated censorship, but very few of have had their readers so fundamentally distracted. Readers have not read The Satanic Verses; they have read the book that started the Rushdie Affair.

From the very beginning, Rushdie’s identity has been a determining factor in the interpretation of the novel. Feroza Jussawalla argues that Rushdie wrote The Satanic Verses from a Mughal-Islamic tradition as a dastan, or “complaint to the beloved.” Rushdie’s novel, she claims, has deep cultural and religious roots in this specific Muslim tradition, a distinctly Indian and hybridized form of Islam which the fundamentalist
majority of the Middle East misunderstood (81-82). Rushdie’s look back into Islamic history operates as a celebration of heritage with the intention of affection and respect (88). *The Satanic Verses*, according to this argument, must be read with a deep understanding of Islamic tradition, and Jussawalla grounds her reading in an identification of Rushdie as an authentic, if not devout, Muslim.

On the other hand, Timothy Brennan argues in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World* that the novel’s “English-centeredness” caused the international stir as Muslims perceived Rushdie as vending “Islamic wares” under the guise of secularism, essentially just an act of “literary colonialism” (*Third World* 144). Rushdie blasphemes by translating profoundly religious ideas involving the Qur’an and the Prophet Mohammed into the uncertain and fabricated realm of fiction, or more specifically, the realm of the postmodern novel (Sanga 113). A reader of the novel may easily grasp the insider references to Islam, argues Brennan, and, indeed, Rushdie is not the subtlest of writers at times.

Even as the fundamentalists searched for the offending author and intimidated his publishers, the critics attempted to pinpoint his allegiances in order to guide interpretation, and the tug-of-war over Rushdie’s identity in terms of his parody of Islam has obscured a consideration of the primary focus of *The Satanic Verses*. Brennan notes that the protests and media coverage distorted the reading of the novel, which is “primarily about a very secular England” (*Third World* 147). In fact, the religious issues at the center of the controversy are “dwarfed in importance by the novel’s larger need to ground the reader in the look and sound of diasporic London” (“Cultural Politics” 120). Rushdie’s primary narrative tells of two Indian actors, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin
Chamcha, who migrate to London and find themselves changed quite literally into the traditional embodiments of good and evil. The tortured Gibreel dreams the scenes of Mahound in Jahilia; “Is this really intended to be gratuitously insulting to the Prophet, as outraged Muslims insist, or is it not rather an imaginative way of charting the migrant’s path from faith to skepticism?” (Ruthven 16) More than anything else, *The Satanic Verses* is about “contradiction, conflict, and confusion; it is a representation of the ambivalent positions of migrants and minorities who must create their identities out of shifting perspectives” (Sanga 129). An Indian-born writer settled in the West, Rushdie writes about migration because he himself is a migrant. He claims the novel to be a “migrant’s eye view of the world” that was “written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture, and metamorphosis” (“In Good Faith” 52). The “migrant’s eye view” not only describes the perspective of the protagonist but also that of the narrator. The Rushdie Affair prompted efforts to label Rushdie—Indian, British, Muslim, agnostic—eclipsing the primary focus of *The Satanic Verses* on the nature and effects of postcolonial migration. Rereading the novel in terms of a migrant’s odyssey greatly clarifies Rushdie’s vision of his own shifting identity.

As *The Satanic Verses* opens, terrorists explode the airliner carrying the two Indian migrants to London. The migrants of Rushdie’s imagination do not check in at Heathrow Airport but tumble, without parachutes, toward the English Channel. Falling out of the sky, the angelic Gibreel Farishta and the increasingly devilish Saladin Chamcha find themselves metamorphosing, a rebirth in a way. Gibreel sings the first line in the novel: “To be born again . . . first you have to die” (3). Describing the debris from the cracked jetliner, Rushdie suddenly inserts a question: “Who am I?” (4). Gibreel
continues with his song: “O, my shoes are Japanese... These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart’s Indian for all that” (5). Saladin counters with verses of his own and “what Farishta heard wafting across the improbable night sky was an old song, too, lyrics by James Thomson, seventeen-hundred to seventeen-forty-eight. ‘... at Heaven’s command’” (6). Saladin, doing his best to be English, sings as English a song as he can muster. The duel of the Indian and the English continues as they plummet toward the British main. However, this battle of the nationalistic tunes seems to take on new dimensions with the reappearance of the curious question at the end of the chapter: “Who am I? Let’s put it this way: who has the best tunes?” (10) The issue is clearly the one that the two protagonists face as Indian migrants to Britain, yet the question of “Who am I?” does not specify either protagonist. Rushdie seems to be asking it of himself as the author and in so doing inserts himself in his text.

As a result, The Satanic Verses cannot be neatly contained and analyzed but rather it tends to leak out of the realm of fiction and into the real world, and Rushdie’s question of “Who am I?” becomes featured in his main characters, making the novel as much about Rushdie himself as about Gibreel and Saladin. An understanding of Rushdie’s own experience as a migrant becomes critical to an interpretation of the novel. Born in Bombay in 1947, Rushdie describes how he fell in love with the idea of England through the books he encountered and says, “I remember that The Wizard of Oz—the film, not the book—was my very first literary influence” (“Out of Kansas” 93). He moved to England for schooling at the age of fourteen and described his cultural transition as a relatively easy ride, although he can’t help but feel that this was due to his “freak fair skin,” social class, and English accent (“Imaginary Homelands” 18). After his family moved to
Pakistan, he would visit during school holidays, developing what Sanga calls a unique double vision: “The ability to communicate experiences from disparate worlds, from the position of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider in both worlds, is what gives his fiction a polemic tension” (15). After many years in Britain, several of them in hiding under the protection of the British police, Rushdie currently resides in New York City.

This brief account of his life highlights the difficulty of assigning him a fixed identity. Indeed, Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands*, “To be an Indian in this society is to face, every day, problems of definition” (18). He admits that the cost of straddling the cultural fence in this way is a “plural and partial” identity (“Imaginary Homelands” 18). He perceives the multiplicity of his allegiances and the subsequent incompleteness of each one. Nevertheless, the greatest danger, argues Rushdie, is “to forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong” (“Imaginary Homelands” 19). Despite accusations of being a “Brown Uncle Tom” who attempts to align himself with Euro-centric constructs of “rational” and “civilized” ways of thinking, Rushdie emphasizes his “mongrelness” rather than the genuineness of his Indianness. According to Rushdie, “I was already a mongrel self, history’s bastard, before London aggravated the condition,” shaping the “secular, pluralist, eclectic man” that he became (“In Good Faith” 56).

Thus, Rushdie sees his identity as not fixed but fluid, neither British nor Indian, but both, and more—a hybridized self. The concept of hybridity, which involves the formation of cultural identity through the fusion of two or more worlds, has proven to be a contentious one in postcolonial critical discussion. Nativists express doubt about hybridity as a viable subject position, claiming that recapturing a precolonial identity
takes precedence over syncreticism, which involves embracing integrated cultures. Nevertheless, Homi Bhabha suggests that hybridity is not a true reflection of the reality of the postcolonial subject, but an exciting, or even beneficial, approach, especially for formerly colonized subjects, as they can draw the best from the overlapping worlds they find themselves between. Bhabha writes, “What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race” (219). Drawing on the theories of Derrida, Bhabha also describes the way in which ideological hybridity and the ambivalence it entails expose slippage in authoritorial communication and opens up space for colonial subversion of the colonizers’ master-discourse (Loomba 89). Thus, argues Bhabha in The Location of Culture, “Hybridity is heresy” in that it opens up this “irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny disjunctive temporality” (225). J. Michael Dash agrees, proposing that the stir caused by the publication of The Satanic Verses was not so much due to Rushdie’s irreverence for the Koran as it was his celebration of the hybridity and impurity of integrated culture (45).

Drawing on Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, Rushdie examines the various strategies of migrant in The Satanic Verses, and his self-conscious narrative voice interrogates his own identity an Indian British writer. In his own words, “The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs” (“In Good Faith” 52). His two main characters face a crisis of identity occasioned
by the disruptive consequences of migration: severance from roots, loss of native language, and subjection to foreign social and moral codes. However, plummeting through shifting clouds toward the English coast, their transformations become quite abrupt and literal rather than the gradual adaptations initiated by more typical cultural displacement, and *The Satanic Verses* assumes an allegorical function through the intricate symbolism of their distorted physiques. Saladin Chamcha transforms into a goatish, Satan-like figure with cloven hoofs, enlarged genitalia, and a hellish case of halitosis, while Gibreel Farishta finds himself with a developing angelic halo and the power, if not to fly, at least to break the pair’s fall by flapping his arms. Following their miraculous survival, these impromptu arch-nemeses wash up on the cold beach of an England deeply embroiled in very real crisis of racism, a climate that reacts even more explosively to creatures smacking of not just the foreign but the extraterrestrial. It is within the framework of the resistant and creative possibilities of hybridity that Rushdie weaves his tale, and Gibreel and Saladin take entirely opposite approaches to the conditions imposed by their cultural displacement, Gibreel rejecting the possibility of hybridization in favor of a notion of maintaining the “absolutism of the Pure” and Saladin attempting to identify with the English way of life and finding himself demonized by the very culture he hopes to mimic.

Gibreel’s disappearance from Bollywood, the site of Bombay’s prolific movie industry, and creates quite a stir among the moviegoing population. His career as an Indian movie star involved “incarnating, with absolute conviction, the countless deities of the subcontinent in the popular genre movies known as ‘theologicals’” (*Verses* 16). Nevertheless, Gibreel, in a period of sickness, lost his belief in God and sealed his
decision by feasting on the forbidden food, “stuffing the dead pigs into his face so rapidly that bacon rashers hung out of the sides of his mouth” (30). Thus begins his “nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams” (32). While polishing off his unclean repast, Gibreel encounters the Polish-English mountaineer Alleluia Cone. The two launch a vigorous affair, and he eventually drops his career to follow her to England. His rejection of his religious tradition continues to trouble him, and as he migrates to England the anxiety of cultural displacement manifests itself in his troubled psyche as a series of blaspheming nightmares in which he perceives the pressure for the migrant to culturally adapt in terms of temptation.

In his first dream, a “businessman” named Mahound founds a monotheistic religion in the sandy town of Jahilia after claiming to receive revelations from the angel Gabriel, who is actually the dreaming Gibreel. Mahound, which even the narrator admits is “a dream-name, changed by the vision” and substituted for the Prophet Mohammed (95), claims that he has “learned how to listen. This listening is not of the ordinary kind; it’s also a kind of asking” (108). Indeed, as the Prophet falls to the ground to receive the revelation, the angel/dreamer Gibreel feels the words pushed from his vocal cords as Mahound “did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again” (125). The migrant’s blasphemous dream continues. The temptation of Mahound comes in terms of an offer of political power as the Grandee of the town proposes that the new religion make a doctrinal compromise in exchange for increased protection. Speaking to his handful of followers, Mahound says, “He asks for Allah’s approval of Lat, Uzzah and Manat (Jahilia’s three favored goddesses). In return, he gives his guarantee that we will be tolerated, even officially recognized; as a mark of
which, I am to be elected to the council of Jahilia. That’s the offer” (108). Mahound does indeed return with the revelation that the town’s three goddesses are the “exalted birds,” much to the dismay of his followers. But after returning to the mountain, Mahound announces the abrogation of these “satanic verses,” claiming that the Devil had come to him on his previous visit disguised as Gabriel.

In the second major dream sequence, a young woman named Ayesha leads a group of villagers on a foot pilgrimage to Mecca after receiving visions from the archangel Gibreel, again the dreaming migrant. The wealthy and skeptical Mirza Saeed, whose wife Mishal joins the pilgrimage in order to cure her cancer, offers this compromise to Ayesha: “So here’s the deal. I gave a tinkle to Mishal’s papa and he agreed to underwrite half the cost. We propose to fly you and Mishal, and let’s say ten—twelve!—of the villagers, to Mecca, within forty-eight hours, personally.” Ayesha says, “I must think”, but returns with renewed commitment to the foot pilgrimage (512-13).

In each of Gibreel’s dreams the question was asked, “What kind of idea are you?” And each time, the answer was this: “I was tempted, but am renewed; am uncompromising; absolute; pure” (514). Gibreel’s inner struggle results in his destruction as he focuses on the divine and finds himself unable to deal with compromise and impurity of cultural displacement, resulting in a fatal internal exile. The psychic stress proves too much for him. As a result, he attempts the metamorphosis of London into a tropical city, seeking to change London to suit his own identity. The spirit of Rekha, a former lover who killed herself when he left, haunts Gibreel, taunting his belief that he is the archangel. Finally, she offers him a deal. “If he would only say he loved her... If he would only say it, and, once a week, when she came to lie with him, show his
love: Then I will terminate the insanities of the city, with which I am persecuting you; nor will you be possessed, any longer, by this crazy notion of changing, redeeming the city like something left in a pawnshop” (344). But Gibreel insists on carrying out his mission, and finally shoots himself, having reached the lowest point of his dementia. Gibreel represents the attempt to maintain a purity of identity, an individual who, despite migration, remains uncorrupted by foreign cultural influence. The narrator comments, “Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances; and in spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses;—has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous—that is, joined to and arising from his past” (441).

Saladin, on the other hand, is “a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention” (441). His father sent him to an English school at a young age, and he flew the immeasurable distance “from Indianness to Englishness,” changing his name from Salahuddin Chamchawalla to Saladin Chamcha (41). The young Indian became determined to become a secular man who didn’t need a god and “to become the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a goodandproperEnglishman” (43). But the narrator observes that his mutation began long before Saladin left his home in Bombay; it began when he first began dreaming of reinventing himself as English. After receiving a cruel letter condemning his remarriage, his father Changez wrote stunningly prescient response to his Anglophile son: “A man untrue to himself becomes a two-legged lie, and such beasts are Shaitan’s best work” (48). Thus, the roots of Saladin’s mutation run deep and some responsibility for his demonization seems to lie on the land he has left and on himself as the narrator describes the disguises that the migrant assumes as “our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of
security our secret selves” (49). He seems to succeed in his efforts, marrying an English woman of good social standing and establishing a lucrative career as an actor—the man of a thousand voices.

However, something goes badly awry for Saladin. After returning to India for a short stint in a theater production, he conducts a brief affair with Indian actress Zeeny Vakil, who attempts to reclaim him. She reminds him that his career as an actor in England in _The Aliens Show_ requires him to be buried in prosthetic make-up because his “face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs” (62). Upon his return to England, Saladin crash-lands with Gibreel, transforms into a satanic-looking Goatman, and after being abandoned by Gibreel and abused by the British police, finds himself placed into a ward for mutants, where a manticore who was once a male model from Bombay informs him that other migrants have undergone similar changes: “There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes” (173). These mutations clearly correspond with stereotypes of their sub-Saharan locations and seem to be a literalization of the English projection on these members of former colonies.

The migrants in the ward are victims of the process Edward Said describes in _Orientalism_. Said argues that the West acquires knowledge of the East through a lens that distorts, creating through this “Other” an image outside of history—placid and eternal. He writes, “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1). Defining this production of knowledge as Orientalism, Said concerns himself “not with a correspondence between
Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient . . . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a ‘real’ Orient” (5). Indeed, the manticore in the ward for mutated foreigners goes on to explain their situation to the distressed demi-goat, “They describe us . . . That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (174).

However, Saladin’s subsequent escape from the mutant hospital demonstrates an agency of the “Other” that may be lacking in Said’s analysis; England may describe him but this description is not sufficient to explain the changes that have come over him. As the occupants of the Shaandaar Café, where Saladin has ended up after being turned away from his own home, observe the bedraggled beast standing in their kitchen, Jumpy Joshy observes, “Ideologically . . . I refuse to accept the position of victim. Certainly, he has been victimized, but we know that all abuse of power is in part the responsibility of the abused; our passiveness colludes with, permits such crimes” (261). Muhammed Sufyan, the kindly, learned owner of the café, attempts to comfort Chamcha by classically terming the mutation in the form of the Ovid - Lucretius debate, and Chamcha remarks, “Either I accept Lucretius and conclude that some demonic and irreversible mutation is taking place in my inmost depths, or I go with Ovid and concede that everything now emerging is no more than a manifestation of what was already there” (286).

But the goatish mutant’s bewilderment over his condition continues. “Had he not pursued his own idea of good, sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness?” (265) Mishal Sufyan, the café owner’s daughter, provides him with the most useful advice concerning his devilish state, telling him, “It’s an image white society has rejected for so
long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own” (296). Finally, Saladin submits—“I am, he accepted, that I am” (298). After a terrifying fit of rage against the traitor Gibreel, who abandoned him to his tormenters following their landing, he finds himself back to normal, and lying amidst the wreckage of his anger is “no iconic Thing of horns and hellsbreath, but Mr. Saladin Chamcha himself, apparently restored to his old shape, mother-naked but of entirely human aspect and proportions, humanized—is there any option but to conclude?—by the fearsome concentration of his hate” (304).

Saladin’s initial embrace of English culture seems overly ingratiating and results in his external exile and demonization, which ultimately allows him to escape the “confining myth of authenticity” (52). His submission to the identity forced upon him empowers him because it entails an acceptance of the constructed nature of his identity. His willingness to experience external exile results in his discovered ability to recreate himself and his homeland. Saladin survives by translating into something different and acknowledging his position between the two worlds (Sanga 117). The parallels between Saladin’s experience and Rushdie’s own life suggest the semi-autobiographical nature of the character. Rushdie embraces the concept of hybridity because it provides a means of resistance but also enables creativity through “new and unexpected combinations.”

Michael Gorra observes, “Rushdie’s sport with language and identity depends on a world in which those cultural consequences—migrancy, mimicry—have themselves become creative forces” (7). Indeed, Rushdie sees himself as having the power to construct his own identity in the interstices between nationalities and languages, and the notion of hybridity he renders in The Satanic Verses suggests to Sanga that “it is impossible to read
Rushdie as though he were mainly, exclusively, a product of either a Western or Eastern tradition. It is imperative to read Rushdie as ‘something else besides’” (82).

A closer examination of narrative voice of The Satanic Verses brings an intriguing dimension to Rushdie’s identity as “something else besides.” The two migrants in his novel fall from a plane called Bostan, one of the Muslim heavens. As they pick themselves up off the beach like Milton’s crew of fallen angels, the narrator remarks, “Higher Powers had taken an interest.” He immediately clarifies that “I am, of course, speaking of myself” and proceeds to identify himself further when his arrogance compels him to comment on their fall from the sky: “You think they fell a long way? In the matter of tumbles, I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-. From clouds to ashes, down the chimney you might say, from heavenlight to hellfire” (137). The smoke clears from the rubble of the opening explosion to reveal the unexpected narrative voice behind the tale: the Devil himself. Satan, a gifted raconteur by all accounts, tells the story of Gibreel and Saladin to revise the myth of his own fall from Heaven, suggesting that his dissent was merely exercising the freedom to doubt. In his story, the good angel and the bad angel fall.

The satanic narrator’s scarcely veiled antagonism toward God continues throughout the novel. He suggests the divine injustice towards women: “From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. He moves in mysterious ways: men say. Small wonder, then, that women have turned to me” (97). The mocking continues when Gibreel Farishta has a vision of God sitting on his bed—“a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him the most was that the apparition was
balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected” (329). He identifies himself as “Ooparvala... the Fellow Upstairs” and admonishes the delusional migrant concerning his mission: “Did We pluck you from the skies so that you could boff and spat with some (no doubt remarkable) flatfoot blonde? There’s work to be done” (330). This is a Deity “Who reigned by terror, insisting upon the unqualified submission of even Its closest associates, packing off all dissidents to Its blazing Siberias, the gulag-infernos of Hell” (343). Satan goes on to suggest the degree to which his own identity and character has been invented: “It isn’t until the Book of Chronicles, merely fourth century B C, that the word shaitan is used to mean a being, and not only an attribute of God” (334).

Rushdie critics disagree as to the importance of reading the novel as a story by Satan. James Harrison argues, “there is no case to be made for Satan as the consistent narrator throughout the novel” (114). Clark sees consideration of the satanic narrator as critical for interpretation: “While the Verses contains the harshest, crudest, most blasphemous and most insulting of attacks, the severity of these attacks is in keeping with the notion of a satanic narrator, for such a narrator is the sworn enemy of God and Islam” (166). Clark claims that while Saladin’s demonization reveals the mistreatment of immigrants in Britain, the satanic narrator uses the association of the culturally demonized Other (“the Muslim”) and the otherworldly Other (the Devil) for his own selfish purposes, playing immigrant politics for all that it is worth to him; “the novel’s postcolonial politics and its cosmic politics are worlds apart” (147).

However, Clark’s argument disregards an important facet of Satan’s identity in Rushdie’s estimation—Satan himself is a migrant—and reading The Satanic Verses
primarily in terms of Rushdie’s concern for the hybridized identity of the migrant
necessitates a look at his choice of an infernal storyteller. The flyleaf of the novel
contains a quote from Daniel Defoe’s *The History of the Devil*:

> Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is... without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.”

Rushdie portrays the fallen angel as the ultimate migrant—tossed from heaven, labeled evil, roaming to and fro across the earth—who better to narrate his novel? The satanic narrator comments on the similarity of his situation with the migrant Chamcha’s, suggesting the arbitrary nature of the labels of “evil” and “good”: “And might we then not... say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity—call this ‘evil’—and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall? —While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man” (441).

By constructing his own hybrid identity, Rushdie adopts the same strategy as his protagonist Saladin Chamcha by speaking as the Devil himself. Assuming this narrative guise, Rushdie thus opens up for himself the possibilities of both the literary Satan and the traditional religious Satan, possibilities of both resistance towards a totalitarian authority and the opportunity to subscript “evil” as a symbol of the kind of originality and newness facilitated by hybridity. Alleluia Cone avidly reads William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a text that does much to illuminate Rushdie’s purpose in *The Satanic Verses*. 
Blake’s purpose seems to be to identify much of the good that lies in the traditionally “evil.” Evil, to Blake, possesses a freedom, a willingness to submit to creative desire, and a refusal to submit to the constraints of oppressive morality.

The Devil of *Marriage* observes:

> The history of this is written in Paradise Lost. & the Governor of Reason is call’d Messiah.  
> And the original Archangel or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is call’d the Devel or Satan and his children are call’d Sin & Death  
> But in the Book of Job Milton’s Messiah is call’d Satan.  
> For this history has been adopted by both parties  
> It indeed appear’d to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devils account is, that the Messiah fell. & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss (104)

Blakes’s Devil makes clear the possibility of reversing the labels of good and evil depending upon who tells the story. Using Satan as his narrator, Rushdie may escape the totalizing impulse to define his identity and tells the story of a migrant from the perspective of someone who has escaped all boundary and definition.

Rushdie’s hesitancy to stoke the inferno of protest that followed publication led him to downplay the moments when Satan narrates the novel. This reluctance is understandable after seeing images of protesters carrying “burning cardboard Rushdies with horns, and their eyes poked out” (Clark 141). Thus, the identity of the narrator may have been yet another interpretive casualty as “critics have focused on the worldly politics surrounding the Rushdie Affair rather than on the otherworldly politics in the text itself” (Clark 129). Clearly, the issues raised by the attack on the book cannot be the only issues considered, and the distance of time may allow a rereading of *The Satanic Verses* in terms of migration and the determination of postcolonial identity. Or rather, Rushdie might argue, the indetermination of identity—as he wishes to demonstrate that the
migrant’s identity is not fixed. Yet questions might persist. Is the issue of blasphemy an important one to consider? Why this apparent attack on Islam? Attacking the fixity of identity opens up a number of possibilities for the writer. Experiencing his own transformation of identity, Rushdie chooses to incorporate Western discourses. Not committed to any one ideology, Rushdie sees himself enabled to interrogate any position, including the Islamic tradition. The subsequent accusations of “satanic forethought” may be much more accurate and complimentary than one might expect.
Bibliography


