

**The Satanic Verses. By: Ross, Robert L., Magill's Literary Annual, Jun1990  
Literary Reference Center**

**Salman Rushdie**

**Born:** June 19, 1947; Bombay (now Mumbai), India

**Quick Reference**

**First published:** 1988, in Great Britain (first pb. in US, 1989)

**Publisher:** Viking (New York). 547 pp. \$19.95

**Type of work:** Novel

**Time of work:** The twentieth century and the distant past

**Locale:** England, India, and imaginary historical settings

The **Satanic Verses** interchanges past with present, reality with the fantastic, to unravel myriad lives and events in a grand exploration of modern humankind's spiritual plight

**Principal characters:**

*Gibreel Farishta*, an Indian film star

*Saladin Chamcha*, an Anglophile Indian who does voices for British broadcasting Studios

*Mahound*, the prophet of Jahilia

*Alleluia Cone*, a British mountain climber

*Aysha*, a holy woman dressed in butterflies

**Essay**

While *The Satanic Verses* received only the customary mix of enthusiastic and tepid reviews after its British publication in 1988, the American issue in early 1989 created an international cause celebre. Some rumbles, it is true, had been heard earlier, when the book was banned in various Islamic countries, but in February of 1989 Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini of Iran sentenced Salman Rushdie to death for blasphemy and urged faithful Muslims to execute him. This announcement and its aftermath dominated news accounts the world over. Thus a novel, which few had read, and its author, whose name not many would have recognized earlier, set astir a controversy often more characterized by political and religious implications than literary ones. Muslims at home and abroad staged demonstrations that too often turned into riots and brought about deaths. Copies of the book were burned, American and British publishers and bookstores intimidated, diplomatic relations shaken. Rushdie went into hiding. Major world writers and others, appalled by such a threat, staged readings of the novel, wrote endless articles, and formed counter demonstrations. All the while demand for *The Satanic Verses* soared.

Although public interest in the affair gradually diminished, the eventual fate of the book — and its author — may not be settled for some time to come. The yet-to-be-commuted sentence of death will certainly continue to haunt Rushdie, who was at the height of his literary career when *The Satanic Verses* appeared. Moreover, such furor cannot but obfuscate critical judgment on the book's artistic qualities, for will it be possible ever to divorce the fiction from the reality that now colors it? As well, the non-Islamic reader should remain sensitive to how the novelistic handling of the Prophet and the Koran must have affected devout Muslims when they read the book — or even those who merely heard about the offending passages, or perhaps read them out of context. Schooled in freedom of expression and benumbed by literary Christ figures along with irreverent allusions to Christian theology, those outside Islamic belief find it difficult to comprehend so much power being invested in the word.

These extrinsic considerations notwithstanding, *The Satanic Verses*, when viewed as it was intended, as a work of fiction, is an impressive achievement: complex in its plot and original in its characterization, fantastic in the telling, rich in texture and style, and essentially religious in its treatment of spiritual desolation. Rushdie's novel was chosen by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the Best Books of 1989. Critics have observed correctly that *The Satanic Verses* is not easy to read, and would never on its

own have gained popular success. This is not to say that the work's intricate design and elaborate execution of that plan fail, but it does demand much from the reader.

Conceived in absurdity, the action gets under way when the two major characters, Gibreel and Saladin, fall from an exploding airplane that had been hijacked earlier. After cavorting through the heavens, they land in a remote part of England. Once safe on the ground, Gibreel, a noted screen star from Bombay, discovers that a halo has formed above his head. At this point, he starts to assume an air of holiness and to think of himself as a latter-day archangel Gabriel, charged to save humankind from its sinful folly. In contrast, his companion Saladin gradually turns into a hairy, hoofed, and horned monster. An Indian immigrant long resident in England, Saladin specializes in behind-the-scenes narration for London broadcasting studios. Neither a man with his own identity — one an actor who had made his name playing Hindu holy figures, the other an unseen imitator of foreign voices — the two survivors engage in a series of adventures, some on a seemingly realistic level, others merging into fantasy and dream states. Their past lives also unfold, including their mutual experience aboard the hijacked jet. At times their paths intersect as they move back and forth between India and England. Throughout they encounter a wide spectrum of characters — Britons, Indians, immigrants in London — who represent all conditions of modern men and women, even while they emerge as clearly defined characters in their own right.

Within this intricately constructed tale of contemporary life, Gibreel dreams stories set in ancient times, some of which seem to suggest aspects of Islamic theology and history. It is these passages that, justifiably or not, many Muslim readers consider blasphemous. For one thing, Mahound, a businessman turned prophet, plays an active role in Gibreel's fitful sleep; and this dream character bears an uncanny and perverse resemblance to the Prophet Mohammed. The fictional treatment of the Prophet's twelve wives has also displeased some. Further, the novel takes its title from one of Gibreel's dreams about the writing of the Koran, when a scribe named Salman inserts spurious items into the Prophet's dictation; his unnoticed additions become "the **Satanic verses**" within a book considered the absolute word of God.

Yet, when the novel is approached as work of the imagination, its characters appear neither blasphemous nor real. Instead, in their absurdity, they serve as reluctant pilgrims, constantly in motion. They fly from India to England, then back again; and they wander about London or Bombay aimlessly; they flee to refuges that fail them; or, as in the case of Alleluia Cone, they climb mountains. The narrative, then, scatters in all directions, moves forward, turns back on itself, circles, dissolves, retraces its steps, so that the form the text takes is inseparable from that which it signifies: the chaos and dispossession that mark modern life.

Rushdie has framed his multiple quest for meaning within garlands of flamboyant language that create a luxuriant texture and heighten both setting and person. Although from the first line to the last, this texture dominates, one scene that illustrates it dramatically occurs near the end of the novel, when Gibreel, dreaming that he is the Archangel, descends on London like an Old Testament prophet. Streams of fire emerge from the mouth of the golden trumpet he carries, as he proclaims, "This is the judgment of God in his wrath." He walks through low-cost high-rise housing, "built on stilts under which

there is the howling of a perpetual wind, and the eddying of debris: derelict kitchen units, deflated bicycle tires, shards of broken doors, dolls' legs,... fast-food packets, rolling cans, shattered job prospects, abandoned hopes, lost illusions, expended angers, accumulated bitterness, vomited fear, and a rusting bath.

Gibreel wanders on through the garish streets, until he enters a burning restaurant and rescues an old enemy. The narrator then interrupts to ask: "What does this mean?"

Well might the reader pose the same question from time to time. In an article, "My Book Speaks for Itself," Rushdie explained that *The Satanic Verses* is "about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay." All of this sounds rather literal, and leads to the conclusion that the novel

encompasses much more. Yet in one respect Rushdie has provided a list of the metaphors on which he has draped his extraordinary search for some understanding of modern humankind's spiritual plight. After all, migration is quite real to Rushdie, who was born in Bombay of Muslim parents at the very moment of the 1947 Partition when Pakistan, intended as the home for Muslims, was carved out of India, which was to remain a Hindu country. Living for a while in Pakistan, then in England, where he eventually became a citizen, Rushdie wrote an allegorical account of Partition and its aftermath in his first successful novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), for which he received the prestigious British literary award, the Booker Prize. His next novel, *Shame* (1983), recorded Pakistan's early history. Neither could be called historical, for they took the actual events, turned them inside out, then addressed universal questions, the same ones that pervade *The Satanic Verses*. For here Rushdie has simply continued his series of inverted postcolonial histories, this time focusing on the former subjects of Empire who have come Home: that is to say, to England. In order to do so, however, they must undergo a metamorphosis, symbolized in particular by Saladin, who has become more self-consciously British than the average Briton. Always their selves are divided, neither Asian nor British. They are as much at home and afloat in London, the one-time seat of the Empire, as they are in Bombay — the "Gateway to India," as the British-built arch dominating the city's shoreline proclaims. This theme of divided selves has been developed variously by other Asian writers, such as Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who in *Three Continents* (1987) expanded the scene to include the United States, and Anita Desai whose *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) reverses the story by tracing the life of a Jewish refugee who migrated to India. Rushdie shares this preoccupation as well with the Caribbean-born V. S. Naipaul, who, in his novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), records yet another version of the journey so many have made from one place to another.

*The Satanic Verses* does indeed cover "migration, metamorphosis, divided selves,... London and Bombay"; and it serves these matters effectively. At the same time, though, the work reaches toward other extremes — "love, death," for example, as Rushdie explains. Above all, though, it addresses the greatest dichotomy: good and evil. That purpose becomes abundantly evident on the book's first page when Gibreel and Saladin descend from the heavens like falling angels, one to develop a halo, the other to acquire horns and hooves. The stage so clearly set, these two characters on their endless journeys, and those they encounter en route, search for their salvation in ways yet untried. Systems of religious belief have traditionally provided a framework in which to understand the mystery of good and evil, but in Rushdie's fictional world such explanations fail the migrating, transformed, divided selves who alone must answer the question, "What does it mean?" Certainly, two other major world religions, Hinduism and Christianity, could be said to fare as poorly under Rushdie's satire as does Islam. But to attack established theology is not at all the intent of the work. Rather, it sets out to unmask hypocrisy, to question blind adherence to tradition, to condemn religious tyranny born of ignorance.

Finally, *The Satanic Verses* might simply be described as a novel conceived and executed on an immense scale that defies all fictional conventions, but one which in so doing cannily creates its own. The narrator intervenes to explain the workings of his art and to question what he has set in motion, but he does not grow tiresome. The conception of the myriad characters borders on absurdity, yet never crosses into ridiculousness. The language is verbose and overwrought, ornate and laden with puns, but all of that creates a rich resonance. Set in two opposing worlds — the Asian and the Western — it draws from the sensibilities of both. Just when the story verges on tedium, it turns to soar with narrative power. The novel is both funny and sad, obvious and obscure, both humane and bitterly satirical in its record of human foibles. Granted, to some it might seem blasphemous. For others, though, *The Satanic Verses* emerges as a testament to humankind's enduring quest.

Essay by: Robert L. Ross

## Bibliography

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Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Penguin, 1991. Several essays deal specifically with *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwā*; many others, no less relevant, deal with various postcolonial topics.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Although it includes no extended discussion of Rushdie and his novel, Said's book is required reading for anyone hoping to understand *The Satanic Verses* in the postcolonial context.

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