

The New York Times

'The Satanic Verses': What Rushdie Wrote

By [Michiko Kakutani](#)

Feb. 23, 1989

Born in Bombay to a Muslim family (which later moved to Karachi, Pakistan), Salman Rushdie has spent the last two decades living in England, and in all his fiction, he has used his multi-cultural perspective - what he calls his "stereoscopic vision" - to look at the subcontinent both from within and without.

Although the novelist has written of the responsibility of writers to deal with public, as opposed to private, issues, his new book "The Satanic Verses" (Viking Penguin), which has prompted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to call on Muslims to kill him, remains the most autobiographical of Mr. Rushdie's novels and the least overtly political.

"Midnight's Children," which won England's prestigious Booker Prize and brought Mr. Rushdie to the forefront of a new generation of British writers, stands as a dark parable of Indian history since independence: the decline of the book's hero - from a brilliant childhood into adult cynicism and despair - became a metaphor for the country's own fate, its high hopes of democracy crumbling in the the tumultuous period of emergency rule declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. After the book's publication in 1981, Mrs. Gandhi threatened to sue for libel over a passage that implied she bore responsibility for her husband's death.

"Shame," published in 1983, focused even more closely on political issues, using Mohammad Zia ul-Haq's brutal rise to power as the President of Pakistan as a springboard for creating a phantasmagorical portrait of a country that was "not quite Pakistan." Peopled with a cast of petty, self-righteous fools, "Shame" offered a portrait of a country teetering precariously on the edge of absurdity like one of the fictional countries in Evelyn Waugh's black comedies. Although the book received some positive reviews in Pakistan, that country later banned it.

"The Satanic Verses," in contrast, concerns itself less with political events than with the consequences of cultural exile and the more personal matters of

identity and metamorphosis. Although there are chapters set in Bombay, much of the novel takes place in London, Mr. Rushdie's current home. Like the author's earlier books, it is written in roiling, street-smart prose, but much of the anger that animated those other volumes (particularly "Shame") has dissipated here, replaced by a lyricism that nearly passes for nostalgia.

In fact, the central (and most persuasively written) sections of "The Satanic Verses" deal with what appears to be a thinly disguised autobiographical material - a man named Saladin Chamcha, who has moved to England and become an Anglophile, returns home to Bombay to visit his aging father, and is forced to come to terms with his own past, his anomalous condition as a spiritual and cultural exile.

Counterpointing Saladin's story is the story of Gibreel Farishta, one of India's biggest movie stars, who, like Saladin, has miraculously survived a 29,002-foot fall from an airplane. Whereas Saladin's quest for identity takes him to India and back, and is told in fairly straightforward terms, the journey of Gibreel, who has begun to suffer from the delusion that he is really the Archangel Gabriel, is a more inward one, taking him into the dreamworld of madness and paranoia. The sections chronicling his adventures are, quite appropriately, described in the fantastical, surreal terms of magic realism. It is passages from Gibreel's dream sequences that have so outraged Muslim fundamentalists. Their objections revolve around these points:

- * The name Mahound. One of the characters in Gibreel's dreams is a businessman turned prophet named Mahound - a figure whom Muslim critics regard as a thinly and perversely disguised representation of the Prophet Mohammed. The name Mahound is the name used in certain medieval Christian plays to indicate a satanic figure.

- * The Satanic Verses. The title of Mr. Rushdie's book refers to an incident in Mohammed's life, recorded by early Arab historians and discredited by later experts on the Koran. In the incident Mohammed accepts three pagan goddesses as a means of furthering his own cause, and subsequently repudiates this act as having been inspired by the Devil. These actions are re-enacted by the fictional Mahound in what critics charge is an attempt to revive a blasphemous story.

- * The word of God. To believing Muslims, the Koran is accepted as the word of God, dictated by the Archangel Gabriel through the Prophet Mohammed and set down, immaculately, by the Prophet's scribes. In contrast, the fictional Mahound is victimized, in one dream, by an untrustworthy scribe named Salman (Mr.

Rushdie's own name) who changes words and meanings as a kind of test of the prophet's omniscience.

* The wives of the Prophet. Muslims regard the wives of the Prophet Mohammed as the "mothers of all believers," and have violently objected to what they see as Mr. Rushdie's characterization of Mahound's wives as prostitutes. What in fact happens in Gibreel's dream is that the whores of a local brothel "had each assumed the identity of one of Mahound's wives," as a sort of business gimmick.

Irreverent as these episodes may be, there seems to be little actual malice on the part of Mr. Rushdie (who is no longer a practicing Muslim) toward Islam or religion in general. In the first place, the portrait that emerges of Mahound is that of a very human figure, afflicted by the usual human problems - a portrait not unlike that of Jesus in Martin Scorsese's recent film version of "The Last Temptation of Christ." In the second place, that portrait comes to the reader through the intermediary figure of Gibreel, a character suffering a crisis of faith and later diagnosed as being mentally ill.

Mahound, to use one of Mr. Rushdie's favorite expressions, both "is and is not" Mohammed, just as the character Raza Hyder "is and is not" Mohammad Zia ul-Haq in "Shame," just as the character Saladin Chamcha "is and is not" Mr. Rushdie. That is one of the liberties of fiction.

Saladin, for instance, obviously shares certain characteristics with his creator: both were born in Bombay, both are humiliated as schoolboys in England, both marry British women (Mr. Rushdie's first wife was British; his second wife is the American novelist Marianne Wiggins), both struggle to come to terms with their two homelands. On the other hand, Mr. Rushdie is not a radio celebrity like Saladin, does not survive a 29,002-foot fall from a plane, and contrary to what his critics believe, he has not sprouted horns and a tail (as Saladin does in the book).

Saladin's temporary transformation into a devil is meant by Mr. Rushdie to indicate not only the constant possibility of metamorphosis - by changing names, addresses, hairdos - but also the consequences of such transformations. Indeed Saladin's physical change signifies, in some sense, the horror with which he is now regarded by others: his family and former neighbors in Bombay look upon him as a traitor, someone who has abandoned his home for the phony enticements of England; his English acquaintances see him as some sort of pushy arriviste, a foreigner who will never fit in.