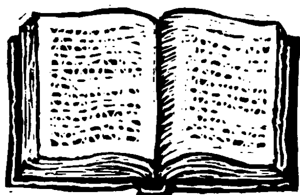
The Satanic Verses

Salman Rushdie

1988



Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* rapidly became one of the most widely known and controversial books in the world when it was published in 1988. Reviled by much of the international Muslim community, the novel was banned in India and protested across the world for its portrayal of certain sensitive topics such as the wives of the chief Islamic prophet Muhammad and the infallibility of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. After the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini issued a "fatwa," or Islamic judicial decree, that Rushdie and those involved in the publication of the book be killed, the novel made headline news across the globe and inspired a diplomatic crisis between countries, including Britain and Iran.

Although *The Satanic Verses* does address the religious beliefs and practices of Islam, this is only one aspect of a complex and highly allusive novel that produces a broad and ambitious commentary about the philosophical and religious problem of good and evil. In fact, Rushdie's novel is steeped in commentary about British and South Asian politics and culture; it takes on a diverse variety of themes involving cultural and racial identities (particularly Asian and African immigrant identities), and it is concerned with literary aesthetics and the nature of truth. All of these ideas are incorporated into an eventful storyline involving Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, two characters with complex British/Indian identities caught in an epic battle that takes place between London and Bombay in the 1980s. Both of the main characters

begin to take on supernatural qualities and visit alternate worlds, such as that of Gibreel's extended dreams about the Islamic prophet Muhammad. *The Satanic Verses* has been widely misunderstood and defamed, but it has also fascinated its readers, opened up an international debate about censorship and the function of literature, and confirmed Rushdie's status as one of the most important contemporary writers in the English language.

Author Biography

Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 to a prosperous family in Bombay, India. Although his background was Muslim, Rushdie was not brought up as a believer. He was sent away when he was thirteen to a private education in England, where he was harassed by his peers, and Rushdie's family joined him in Kensington, London, between 1962 and 1964 before moving to Pakistan. Rushdie attended King's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1968 with a master's degree in history. After living briefly in Pakistan, Rushdie moved back to England and worked in advertising, publishing, and television.

Rushdie wrote one novel that was rejected and abandoned two others before publishing his first novel, *Grimus* (1975). This debut was unsuccessful, and Rushdie began to work for the Camden Committee for Community Relations assisting Bangladeshi immigrants. *Midnight's Children*, his second novel, was published in 1981 and won Britain's prestigious Booker Prize, launching Rushdie to fame in Britain and South Asia. While this novel takes India and Indo-British relations as its main subject, *Shame* (1983) focuses on Pakistan. During the 1980s, Rushdie also wrote a travelogue about Nicaragua and pursued his interest in film, producing two documentaries.

The infamous series of events that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 began when, immediately after its publication, Muslims across the world began to protest. The novel was banned in India, copies of it were burned publicly, and a number of demonstrators were killed or injured when protests turned violent in India and Pakistan. In February of 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who was the Muslim religious and political leader of Iran, issued a fatwa that the author and all those involved with the publication of the book were sentenced to death. Rushdie went into hiding, not to emerge until 1995, while three people involved with the book were attacked, including the Japanese translator, who was killed. Since then, Rushdie has continued to publish short stories and novels including *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). He splits his time between London, New York, and India, where he was granted a visa to return in 1999 after years of exile.

Salman Rushdie AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission

Plot Summary

The Angel Gibreel

The Satanic Verses begins with a description of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha falling from a plane into the English Channel and surviving. Gibreel is flying to London to find his lover, Alleluia Cone, while Saladin is coming home from an acting gig in Bombay. Before blowing up the plane, terrorists hijack their jumbo jet and hold them captive for one hundred and ten days, during which time Gibreel fights against the sleep that brings him vivid religious dreams.

Mahound

Chapter 2 dramatizes Gibreel's dream about the experience of the chief Islamic prophet Muhammad,

whom the narrator calls Mahound, in the city of Jahilia. It refers to Muhammad's period of persecution in Mecca and the episode in which several "satanic verses" were alleged to have been told to Muhammad and later expunged from the Qur'an. After several confrontations with the Grandee of Jahilia, his wife, and the poet Baal, Mahound flees the city.

Ellowen Deeowen

An old Englishwoman named Rosa Diamond finds Gibreel and Saladin washed up on the seashore and nurses them back to health. Saladin has begun to take on the features of the devil while Gibreel appears to have a halo around his head. Saladin calls home, but quickly hangs up after a man answers, and then the police come to arrest him and beat him brutally. A physiotherapist named Hyacinth nurses Saladin back to health and then escapes with him; Saladin returns home to find his wife in bed with his friend, Jumpy Joshi. Meanwhile, Gibreel escapes from Rosa Diamond, who had been immersing him in the secret love story of her past. Gibreel wanders through London until he finds Allie Cone.

Ayesha

Chapter 4 is another of Gibreel's dream visions, beginning with the Imam of Desh, who is an exile in London until he forces Gibreel to accompany him to witness the revolution in his home country. This episode refers to the 1979 Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Iran. Gibreel then dreams of Mirza Saeed Akhtar's passion for Ayesha, who claims to be a prophet, and informs Mirza Saeed that his wife Mishal has cancer. Ayesha convinces the entire village to go on a pilgrimage by foot to Mecca, announcing that God will part the Arabian Sea for them.

A City Visible but Unseen

Jumpy takes Saladin—who is becoming more and more like the conventional image of the devil—to the Shaandaar Bed & Breakfast, where Saladin discovers that he has lost his job, that his wife has become pregnant by Jumpy, and that Gibreel is going to make his dreams into movies. Enraged, Saladin becomes larger and is taken to the Hot Wax nightclub, where he loses his supernatural qualities and swears revenge on Gibreel. Gibreel, meanwhile, lives passionately with Allie but becomes consumed by jealousy and leaves her apartment to wander London believing that he is an archangel. He fails in his quest to announce the message of God and finds his way back to Allie's doorstep.

Return to Jahilia

The next section of Gibreel's dream narrative—which many Muslims consider offensive and blasphemous—describe Mahound's conquest of Jahilia. Salman the Persian complains to Baal of the problems and absurdities of Mahound's sacred verses, particularly their treatment of women. Mahound spares the lives of all of his former enemies in Jahilia, except Baal, who hides in a brothel and marries its twelve prostitutes that have taken the names of Mahound's wives in order to attract clients. Baal is eventually found and executed, but Hind, who pretended to convert to Islam, has been practicing black magic and manages to summon the devil Al-Lat to kill Mahound.

The Angel Azraeel

Saladin goes home and informs Pamela that he will live in the house for the time being, despite her continued affair with Jumpy. Jumpy is deferential to Saladin and invites him to partake in their protests against the incarceration of Uhuru Simba for the series of "Granny Ripper Murders" that have shaken London. Saladin then meets Gibreel again at a party hosted by S. S. Sisodia and begins to take his revenge by arousing Gibreel's mad jealousy. Soon, Saladin drives Gibreel to smash Allie's precious possessions and leave her, which Allie will not forgive. Gibreel comes to believe that he is the angel of destruction, Azraeel, while riots involving Asians and Blacks break out after Uhuru Simba is killed in prison and revealed not to have been the murderer. Jumpy and Pamela die in a fire related to the riots, and Saladin attempts to save the Sufyan family from a fire in the Shaandaar Café but he collapses and is saved instead by Gibreel.

The Parting of the Arabian Sea

In the hospital with Saladin, Gibreel dreams the conclusion of the narrative involving the pilgrimage of Ayesha and the villagers of Titlipur. Mirza Saeed follows the pilgrims in his station wagon, urging them to turn back, but they follow Ayesha despite a number of calamities and walk into the sea. Some say they walked directly into heaven, but the episode is based on the real events of 1983 in which thirty-eight Muslim pilgrims drowned in the Arabian Sea believing that the waters would open for them. Mirza Saeed returns home, where he starves to death.

A Wonderful Lamp

Eighteen months after the fires, Saladin flies home because his father is dying of cancer, and

they are reconciled. Saladin inherits his father's fortune and takes up with Reeny Vakil. Meanwhile, Gibreel has begun an unsuccessful comeback tour, making movies of his dreams; he is haunted by his jealousy and Allie's refusal to be reconciled with him. After killing Sisodia and throwing Allie from Everest Vilas, Gibreel shows up in Saladin's father's home, takes a revolver out of Chamcha's magic lamp, and shoots himself.

Characters

Mirza Saeed Akhtar

A zamindar, or land-owner, Mirza Saeed is the descendent of an ancient family who desperately attempts to convince his beloved wife and the other villagers to turn back from her pilgrimage with Ayesha. He feels great lust as well as hate for Ayesha.

Mishal Qureishi Akhtar

Mirza Saeed's wife, Mishal is terminally ill with cancer and convinced that Ayesha is a holy prophet.

Ayesha

Ayesha is the name of four characters. The first mentioned is the empress whom the Imam forces Gibreel to help him destroy in Gibreel's dream. The second is the butterfly-eating would-be prophet from another of Gibreel's dreams. This Ayesha is characterized by her great beauty and the complete and uncompromising certainty of her visions from the angel Gibreel, and she leads her entire town of pilgrims over hundreds of miles and into the Arabian Sea. The third Ayesha is Mahound's young and beautiful wife, who (Salman the Persian implies) was unfaithful to Mahound, and the fourth is the prostitute (and Baal's favorite wife) who takes the name in order to attract customers.

Baal

Baal is the greatest satirist of Jahilia. "A sharp narrow youth" during chapter 2, he writes jeering verses about Mahound at Abu Simbel's command. In chapter 6, however, at fifty years old, Baal experiences "a thickening of the tongue as well as the body" and, after hiding in a brothel and marrying twelve prostitutes who pose as Mahound's wives, he is discovered and executed. His name is associated with a variety of pagan gods in the Hebrew Bible.

Billy Battuta

A "whiz-kid tycoon" who Saladin describes as a "Playboy Pakistani" and a "con-man" who exploits women, Billy invests in re-launching Gibreel's career and gets into trouble with the police in the United States and Britain.

Bilal

Bilal is an "enormous black" slave whom Mahound frees and makes his disciple. Bilal (or Bilal X) is also the name of the American singer and convert to Islam (a parody of the folk star and convert Cat Stevens) who is close to the Imam of Gibreel's dream.

Pimple Billimoria

"The latest chilli-and-spices bombshell," Pimple is Gibreel's co-star before he vanishes from Bombay and during his unsuccessful comeback.

Pamela Lovelace Chamcha

Saladin's wife, Pamela falls out of love with him when he leaves for India, and she takes Jumpy Joshi as a lover when she believes that Saladin has died. Saladin describes her as "frail as porcelain, graceful as gazelles." She has an aristocratic English voice, but she is not actually a stereotypical upper-class English woman at all, having been abandoned by her parents when they committed suicide. She works in community activism and dies along with Jumpy, whose baby she is carrying, in a fire in the Brickhall Community Relations Council building.

Saladin Chamcha

One of the two main characters of Rushdie's novel, Saladin is defined throughout much of the novel by his desire to become entirely English and his association with evil. Called Salahuddin Chamchawala when he was born, Saladin dreams of escaping from his father and their Bombay home throughout his childhood, and he associates all that he dislikes about India with an incident in which an old man forces Saladin to masturbate him. He goes to England to study, resolves to become completely English largely out of resentment towards his father, becomes an actor with an amazing capability for vocal impersonations, and assimilates completely (or so he thinks) into British culture.

Saladin begins to experience an identity crisis, however, during his extramarital affair with Reeny Vakil, and this is one of the explanations behind his estrangement from his English identity and his transformation into the devil. He begins associating

with the oppressed groups of Asian and African immigrants to England who are living in London during a time of racial strife. Despite all of his bitterness and anger, Saladin rarely does anything truly evil or demonic, and he grows to have a much more mature understanding of his bifurcated Indian and British identity.

Saladin's relationship with Gibreel is quite complex, despite the fact that it is often referred to as a fight between evil and good. Saladin resents Gibreel because of his effortless luck and because Gibreel abandoned Saladin to the police after their fall from the plane. Eventually, Saladin takes revenge on Gibreel by placing a series of phone calls in which he pretends to be Allie Cone's lovers. Saladin's abbreviated last name, Chamcha, means "spoon" in Hindi, which is why Gibreel calls him "Spoono."

Changez Chamchawala

Saladin's father, Changez is a brilliant and mischievous man who also has a tyrannical and domineering side. Changez's relationship with his son is extremely important to Saladin's development, and it disturbs Saladin deeply that Changez remarries another woman named Nasreen less than a year after his first wife's death, then takes his former maid as a kind of concubine who dresses up as his first wife. Saladin is estranged from his father for much of his adult life, but they are reconciled as Changez is dying of cancer.

Nasreen Chamchawala

"The slightest, most fragile of women" who dresses with "excessive verve," Nasreen is Saladin's mother and Changez's first wife.

Alicja Cone

Alicja is Allie's spirited mother, who frowns upon her relationship with Gibreel and moves to California to marry a professor.

Allie Cone

Allie, short for Alleluia, is a "climber of mountains, vanquisher of Everest, blonde yahudan [Jew], ice queen," and lover of Gibreel. She feels silenced after climbing Everest, as though everything else in her life will be downhill, and she is plagued by painful flat-footedness that will make it impossible to be a mountain climber any longer. Although she loves Gibreel and takes care of him, she cannot stand his extreme jealousy and eventually leaves him. Eventually, Gibreel goes insane and murders her, pushing her to her death from Everest Vilas in Bombay.

Elena Cone

Allie's sister, Elena, is a model and a drug addict who drowns in her bathtub at twenty-one.

Otto Cone

Allie's father is a Polish émigré to England and a survivor of a Nazi death camp. He is a captivating and somewhat quirky art historian who attempts to assimilate entirely into English culture.

Martín de la Cruz

The Argentine Martín is Rosa Diamond's would-be lover.

Henry Diamond

Known as "Don Enrique of Los Alamos" in Argentina, Henry is Rosa's husband.

Rosa Diamond

Rosa is the old woman who finds Gibreel and Saladin after their fall into the English Channel. She sees visions of English history and draws Gibreel into the secret story of her past in Argentina.

Sarpanch Muhammad Din

Sarpanch is the pilgrim of Titlipur who takes Mirza Saeed's side in the station wagon after his wife dies early in the voyage.

Eugene Dumsday

Dumsday is the anti-Darwin creationist who sits next to Saladin on the *Bostan*.

Gibreel Farishta

Born "Ismail Najmuddin" in British Poona, Gibreel moves to Bombay when he is thirteen to work with his father as a food carrier. Babaseheb Mhatre takes Gibreel in after his parents die and arranges for him to work in the movies. Eventually becoming a star in theological movies, Gibreel begins to sleep with many different women, including Rekha Merchant, and rises to enormous fame. He is nearly killed by a bout of seemingly inexplicable internal bleeding, during which he loses his religious faith. After meeting and falling in love with Allie Cone while eating a great deal of pork at a famous Bombay hotel, Gibreel flies to London to find her.

One of Gibreel's definitive characteristics is that he gets away with everything and is entirely effortless in his approach to life, but this is contradicted by his severe episodes of supernatural visions and insanity in the course of the novel. He

dislikes England and English culture and has a vicious jealous streak that eventually drives him to insanity and murder. Since Gibreel leaves Bombay within a week of his fortieth birthday, the new life he attempts to start with Allie Cone can be seen as a mid-life crisis of sorts. Gibreel is associated with the Biblical archangel Gabriel and seems to represent the forces of good for much of the novel, but this changes at certain key points, which reveals that good and evil are not clear-cut categories.

Salman Farsi

Salman the Persian is Mahound's disciple until he becomes disillusioned with the prophet and falsely transcribes some of the verses of the Qur'an. He flees from Mahound, but the prophet finds him in Jahilia and allows him to travel to Persia.

Bhupen Gandhi

Bhupen is a sensitive poet and journalist who, along with his friends George Miranda and Reeny Vakil, is an example of a Bombay intellectual.

Girls of the Curtain

The twelve prostitutes of the Curtain brothel take the names of Mahound's wives and marry Baal the poet.

Hamza

Mahound's uncle, Hamza is a renowned warrior who fights for Mahound. Hind butchers him and eats his heart.

Hind

Hind is the "ferocious, beautiful" wife of Abu Simbel of Jahilia. She remains everlastingly young and powerful, devouring men literally as well as sexually. She survives Mahound's conquest of Jahilia.

Imam

The Imam, or Muslim religious leader, from Gibreel's dream narrative is an exile who despises London but is forced to live there until he returns in triumph to a revolution in his homeland. His character is based on the Iranian fundamentalist leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who sentenced Rushdie to death.

Hanif Johnson

A "smart lawyer and a local boy made good" who is generally disliked, Hanif maintains an office above the Shaandaar Café. When she learns that he is involved with Mishal, Hind furiously kicks him.

Jumpy Joshi

Jumpy is Saladin's friend who feels extremely guilty about his ongoing affair with Saladin's wife. Although his real name is Jamshed, he is known as Jumpy because of his "enormous capacity for nervous agitation," his thinning hair, and his unique giggle. He is a martial arts instructor.

Kasturba

Saladin's caretaker when he was young, Kasturba begins to act and dress as Changez Chamchawala's late wife Nasreen at some point after Changez's remarriage.

Khalid

Water-carrier of Jahilia and disciple of Mahound, Khalid becomes a general in Mahound's armies.

Inspector Stephen Kinch

Inspector Kinch is a corrupt police officer involved in the death of Uhuru Simba.

Madam of the Curtain

A nameless madam who runs the brothel in Jahilia.

Mahound

Mahound is a long-disused European term for Mahomet or Muhammad, the founder of Islam and the final, most important prophet of God in the Islamic faith. Said to be a merchant who was born in Mecca, Muhammad claimed to have been visited by the Archangel Gabriel and told to memorize the verses that became the Islamic Qur'an. In 622, he was forced to flee from Mecca to Medina, both cities in Northern Arabia, but eventually his armies conquered Mecca and the other pagan tribes of Arabia.

Mahound appears in chapters 2 and 6 of Rushdie's novel, which are versions of the religious history of Mecca, known in the book as Jahilia, which is an Islamic term for the ignorance of God's message. The novel implies (very controversially) that Mahound manufactures the messages of Gibreel to suit his temperament and desires, and that Mahound was a jealous man who disliked women.

Mimi Mamoulian

Saladin's Jewish costar on British television and radio, Mimi has a wide range of impersonations. She becomes involved with Billy Battuta despite Saladin's warning that he will exploit her, and she spends some time in jail for participating in one of his con-artist schemes.

John Maslama

Owner of the Hot Wax nightclub, Mr. Maslama meets Gibreel on the train to London and believes that Gibreel is the archangel of God.

Rekha Merchant

Gibreel's most serious lover in Bombay, Rekha appears to him after her suicide as a vision on a flying rug. Gibreel continually returns to her because, unlike his other lovers, she both abuses him and consoles him, which Gibreel cannot resist. She is married to a man summed up by the narrator as "a mouse with money and a good squash wrist," and she has three children whom she throws to their deaths, along with herself, as a result of Gibreel's departure to London. Gibreel finally makes her apparition disappear by telling her that there is no God but God.

Babasaheb Mhatre

Grand Secretary of the Bombay Tiffin Carriers' Association, the Babasaheb takes the orphaned Gibreel into his home and arranges for him to be in the movies.

George Miranda

A fat, "young Marxist film-maker" with a waxed mustache, George is Reeny's friend. He hates the "disembodied, invisible" power of America and knows all of the Bombay film gossip.

Nasreen II

Changez's second wife has the same name as his first, as well as the same "birdlike" body type.

Ooparvala

Ooparvala (God), who may also be Neechayvala (Satan), appears to Gibreel and tells him to get back to work as an angel.

Osman

A Hindu convert to Islam, Osman earns his living as a clown and is in love with Ayesha.

Sherpa Pemba

Pemba is Allie's friend and fellow-climber. They climbed Everest together and reached the peak without oxygen tanks.

Hyacinth Phillips

Hyacinth is Saladin's physiotherapist in the hospital. She escapes with him and the other monsters but then changes shape inside a church and attacks him along with a number of similar creatures.

Pinkwalla

Pinkwalla is the D. J. at the Hot Wax nightclub.

Mr. Qureishi

Mishal Akhtar's father, Mr. Qureishi is a rich banker who finds his daughter and wife on their pilgrimage and tells them to abandon it.

Mrs. Qureishi

Mishal's mother, Mrs. Qureishi undertakes the pilgrimage, but eventually comes to Mirza Saeed's side and attempts to dissuade her daughter from continuing.

Dr. Uhuru Simba

Formerly Sylvester Roberts, Uhuru is the black activist leader who is falsely accused of committing the serial "Granny Ripper Murders." He is murdered in jail, presumably by the police.

Karim Abu Simbel

Abu Simbel is the Grandee of Jahilia until he surrenders his city to Mahound. A tall man in white robes whose "gait contains the lilt, the deadly elegance of power," he forces Mahound to flee the city. The crisis in Jahilia strips Abu Simbel of his grandiloquence and, in chapter 6, he has grown into a "soft and pursy old age."

S. S. Sisodia

Sisodia is the rich and enigmatic Indian film producer who speaks with a stutter.

Aurora del Sol

Aurora is Martín de la Cruz's jealous fiancé.

Sri Srinivas

Srinivas is the Brahmin toy-maker who accompanies Ayesha and Mirza Saeed on the pilgrimage.

Anahita Sufyan

Anahita is Mishal Sufyan's slightly jealous younger sister.

Hind Sufyan

Sufyan's bitter wife, Hind despises England and blames her husband for all of her problems. She is the cook and money-maker at the Shaandaar Café and Bed & Breakfast.

Mishal Sufyan

Mishal is the Sufyans' attractive teenage daughter who falls out with her mother and

marries Hanif Johnson. She is the best student in Jumpy's martial arts class.

Muhammad Sufyan

The mild and kind-tempered owner of the Shaandaar Café, Sufyan is devastated when he discovers that his wife has been overcharging the immigrants he thought he was helping.

Tavleen

Tavleen is the chief hijacker of the *Bostan*. She speaks with a Canadian accent and blows up the plane.

Zeeny Vakil

Zeeny is the exciting and attractive dark-skinned Indian woman involved with Saladin. They met when they were teenagers, when Zeeny was a "rash, bad girl," and she retains a streak of craziness in her adult life. She is a doctor who works in a hospital and with the homeless as well as an art critic and Bombay socialite, and she has made it her project to return Saladin to his Indian roots.

Hal Valance

Hal is Saladin's bigoted, rude, and greedy producer who cuts him out of *The Aliens Show* because he believes the market for ethnic actors is shrinking.

Vallabh

Vallabh is Changez Chamchawala's old and faithful servant.

Maurice Wilson

The ghost who haunts Allie, Maurice Wilson is the yogi (practitioner of yoga) who died on Mount Everest while attempting a solo ascent.

Themes

Good and Evil

The Satanic Verses touches on a great variety of political, cultural, abstract, and theoretical themes. Many of its most central ideas relate to philosophical and religious notions of good and evil. The narrator tends to view the plot as an epic battle between Gibreel, the angel of good, and Saladin, the devil of evil. Rushdie reinforces this framework by giving these characters their supernatural qualities.

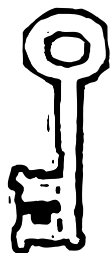
Good and evil in the epic battle between Gibreel and Saladin often refer to two main areas: national/ethnic identity and religious faith. Gibreel's status as an angel is closely related to his crisis of faith, and his transformation begins shortly after he develops the conviction that God does not exist. Meanwhile, Saladin's metamorphosis into the devil is inextricable from his quest to assimilate entirely into British culture and his association with oppressed Asian and African immigrants in England. Like the other magically deformed creatures who escape from the hospital, Saladin assumes his devilish shape because English racism has transformed him with its "power of description." Why exactly Gibreel embodies good, while Saladin embodies evil, is never made entirely or explicitly clear, and as the reader rapidly becomes aware, notions of good and evil are hopelessly jumbled by the end of the first chapter.

Countless other situations also take the form of a fight, or confrontation, between good and evil ideas, labeled as such for a variety of reasons including religious faith, political persuasions, racial identities, and positions of power. In Gibreel's dream world (where prophets battle non-believers, pagans and poets), in the volatile political context of 1980s London (where immigrants are demonized, oppressed, and harassed), and in the lives of the many supporting characters (in which, for example, lovers such as Allie and Pamela are variously idealized and degraded), there is often an interplay and battle between notions of good and evil, or of the demonic and the angelic. In all of these situations, the novel strongly suggests that good and evil are rather confusing and shifting categories. At various points, Rushdie seems to be implying that good and evil are nothing more than man-made notions defined and based on what is most convenient for the group or person in the position to judge.

Racial and Cultural Identity

Rushdie's exploration of race, culture, history, ethnicity, and nationality takes many forms. One of the ways in which this commentary is most apparent is in the identity crises of several of the novel's main characters. Before the plane crash, Saladin is initially defined by his desire to assimilate entirely into British culture. Gibreel, on the other hand, seems to feel entirely comfortable and complete in his Indian identity and persona, while disliking and insulting British culture and identity. Both characters change markedly in the course of the novel as they find that their identities are split between two worlds and cultures. Gibreel's ultimate madness and death can be attributed in large part to his

Topics For Further Study



- Research the events following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Then, discuss some of the things the episode reveals about the various communities involved (such as fundamentalist Islamic groups, the Western and Indian governments, the news media, and the international community of authors) and the attitudes of each of these groups towards literature.
- Examine the many magical and fantastical elements of Rushdie's novel. Why do Gibreel and Saladin assume supernatural qualities? How does the magic in the novel relate to its main themes? Choose one magical motif in particular, such as Gibreel's angelic qualities or the appearance of God/Satan in the novel, and discuss how this motif is important to the meaning of the work as a whole.
- *The Satanic Verses* contains numerous allusions to political and cultural events and situations in England. In what ways is Rushdie a political novelist? How does he approach political themes, and what angle does he take? How does he go about evoking the cultural atmosphere of London, and what is his perspective? Examine his treatment of the condition of immigrants to the United Kingdom, and discuss the main points he is trying to make about English culture and politics.
- Research why sections of the novel were offensive to Muslims, namely the chapters "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia." What aspects of these chapters were particularly offensive? Why are they considered blasphemous? Discuss the function of these chapters within the meaning of the novel and why you think Rushdie included them.

inability to reconcile his love for Allie (characterized by paleness, whiteness, and Englishness) with his Indian race, nationality, history, and culture.

Rushdie is particularly concerned with the situation of immigrants to Great Britain, and many of the major characters go through a difficult process of acceptance and assimilation into English society. In fact, the plot of the novel can be seen as a metaphor for the British immigration experience, as though each immigrant, particularly those that are Indian, must endure a journey like that of Gibreel and Saladin. Rushdie considers how the experience of voice- and personality-shifting immigrants like Saladin is different from that of somewhat more uncompromising and unchanging immigrants like Gibreel.

Both types of immigrants find themselves confronting a brutal and oppressive system of authority in Britain. Racism is rampant among white English characters, particularly the police, who are extremely violent and unjust towards Asians and Africans. Rushdie, therefore, comments not just on abstract and philosophical questions about identity; he considers in depth the actual situation of groups of people trying to negotiate their place in a difficult and racist society. He also offers a glimpse of the ways in which identity is also complex and difficult to negotiate amongst Bombay intellectuals such as Reeny and her friends, who find that foreign cultures strongly impact their beliefs and their understandings of themselves.

Islam

The aspects of the novel that some consider inflammatory and controversial are all related to its allusions to, and commentary about, the religion of Islam. Rushdie implies that the Qur'an, like many human achievements, was formed as a result of human history and human fallibility. He also refers to elements of Muslim history, such as Muhammad's multiple wives, in a manner that criticizes the conventional treatment of women in Muslim society, and can be construed as satirical of the prophet. Rushdie's treatment of Islam is an important theme that is not as simple as a condemnation or satire, however. He makes lengthy allusions to Islamic beliefs and traditions not simply to convey his opinions about the negative, hypocritical, or absurd

aspects about the religion, but to explore, for example, his commentary on good and evil in another context.

Style

Magic Realism

The literary device of "magic realism," or the use of supernatural elements within an otherwise realistic narrative, is one of the most important stylistic aspects of *The Satanic Verses*. Gibreel's transformation into an angel, and Saladin's into a goat-man/devil, are examples of this device, as are other impossible or magical events such as Rekha's appearance on a flying carpet and Gibreel's trumpet of fire.

Magic realism, which is popular among Latin American postmodern writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, is useful in several main ways. First, it allows the author great flexibility in elaborating on the meaning of the story; by imbuing Gibreel and Saladin with magical characteristics, for example, Rushdie is able to emphasize much more directly and physically how and why they are connected to ideas of good and evil. Also, magic realism is a useful authorial technique for challenging the reader's assumptions and encouraging him/her to think about the themes of the work in a new and different way. Finally, the use of supernatural occurrences can make a work appear to take the form of an epic tale, since classic and religious epics often include supernatural events and deities. Because it challenges its readers' understandings of conventional reality, and because it seems to read like a classic or religious text, *The Satanic Verses* is able to more convincingly address ambitious themes such as human truth, religion, and history.

Narrative Voice

The majority of *The Satanic Verses* is written from an omniscient, third-person narrative perspective, which means that the narrator describes the events of the novel from an all-knowing, external standpoint. In chapter 7, over four hundred pages into the novel, the narrator makes a first, mysterious appearance in the first person. Asking the reader not to ask him/her to "clear things up," the narrator says that he/she previously appeared to Gibreel, meaning that the narrator is Ooparvala (God), Neechayvala (the devil), or both. This mysterious and interesting detail (and joke) implies that God has control over the narrative of the novel, and it relates to Rushdie's commentary on religion, and good and evil.

Historical Context

Britain in the 1980s

Rushdie was living in London when he wrote *The Satanic Verses*, and 1980s London is also the main historical context of the novel. Throughout the 1980s, the conservative Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of England. Known for her policies of reducing government spending on everything except defense, as well as privatizing government-controlled industries, Thatcher was ideologically akin to the American President Ronald Reagan.

The early 1980s in England were marked by rising unemployment, but Thatcher's government remained popular and won the 1983 election largely because of Britain's involvement in the Falklands War. Argentina, which had long claimed ownership over the British territorial islands on its shores, sent forces to the island in 1982, and Thatcher responded by sending a British naval task force that defeated the Argentines.

After the 1983 election, Thatcher presided uncompromisingly over a series of domestic disturbances beginning with the Miner's Strike of 1984–85. Because the government announced that it was closing twenty large mines, and because unions were concerned about Thatcher's actions to reduce their power, the unsuccessful strike began and went on for nearly a year amidst police violence and intimidation. Meanwhile, in the fall of 1985, a series of confrontations between white police officers and predominantly black youths began in London and Birmingham. Two possible causes of these violent confrontations were the difficult economic circumstances, and the conservatism and intolerance of the British government.

India in the 1980s

The party of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru (the first prime minister of independent India), was elected back into power in 1980. Gandhi had a series of key meetings with foreign leaders, while dealing with several insurgencies in India. She was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in 1984 because of her previous decision to storm a sacred Sikh temple in Punjab that was being held by insurgents. Also in 1984, the infamous industrial disaster occurred in Bhopal, India, when the Union Carbide pesticide

Compare & Contrast

- **1980s:** Margaret Thatcher, known for her inflexible, conservative beliefs, is prime minister of Britain.

  Today: Tony Blair, the leader of the Labor Party who pioneered the "New Labor" movement, embracing a degree of privatization, has been the British prime minister since 1997.

- **1980s:** Militant Islamic fundamentalism is gathering force in the Arab world. The United States government is providing arms and training to Osama bin Laden and his group of Muslim fighters in the Afghan War against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

  Today: Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Western countries have adopted new attitudes towards foreign policy, partly to attempt to address Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organizations.

- **1980s:** Jim Henson's Muppets, which satirize politicians and celebrities, are trendy and popular in the Western entertainment world. Bombay's "Bollywood" film scene has an enormous number of devoted viewers in India.

  Today: Animated satires like *The Simpsons* are one of the most popular forms of television entertainment in Britain and the United States. Although Western entertainment is more accessible in India than it was twenty years ago, Bollywood continues to be extremely popular.

- **1980s:** Salman Rushdie goes into hiding after the Iranian fatwa condemns him to death.

  Today: Publicly "pardoned" by the Iranian government, Rushdie lives openly and attends many public events, although he does continue to employ bodyguards.

plant located near the city leaked toxic gas that killed thousands of people and injured hundreds of thousands.

The Satanic Verses

Rushdie's novel is brimming with allusions to historical and contemporary events, philosophies, and people, but perhaps the most important extended reference in the novel is to several verses that Satan allegedly tricked Muhammad into including in the Qur'an, and which Muhammed later expunged from the Islamic holy text. The main source for the controversial story, which is rejected by nearly all major Muslim scholars, is the biography of Muhammad by the Arabian historian Ibn Ishaq, written 120–130 years after the prophet's death. Now available only in a heavily revised version, the biography claims that Muhammad included verses of revelation that accepted the divinity of three pagan goddesses of Mecca. Gratified, Meccans ceased their persecution of the prophet until the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and instructed him that the verses were profane. Muhammad took back his words, claiming they were inspired by Satan, and instructed his scribes (Muhammad is said to have been unable to read or write) to remove the verses from the Qur'an. The incident is so sensitive amongst Muslims because the belief that the Qur'an is an infallible transcription of God's word is at the heart of the religion.

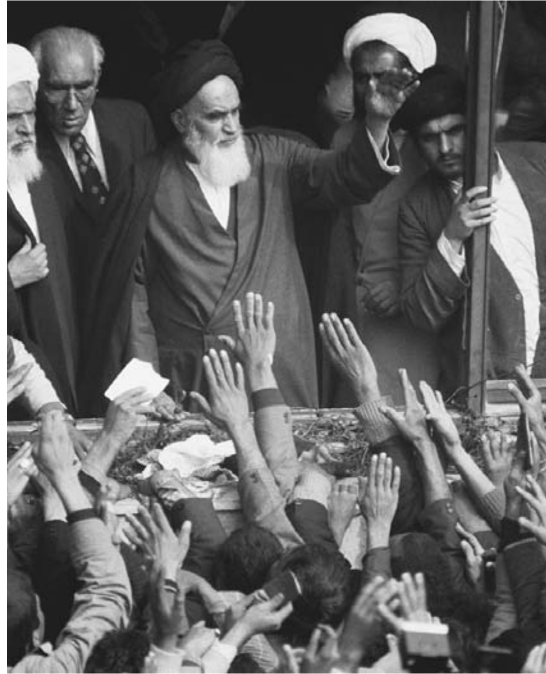
Critical Overview

An enormous amount has been written about Rushdie's extremely controversial novel, although only a segment of the reaction to *The Satanic Verses* and its effects around the world involves any literary analysis of the work. Writings about the novel can be roughly separated into several main categories, the first being its prominent place in the news media. Newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* carried the story of the controversy on the front page and quoted Khomeini's original

fatwa (in "Khomeini Says Author of '*Satanic Verses*' Should Be Killed," by Charles P. Wallace and Dan Fisher): "I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of '*The Satanic Verses*,' a book which is against Islam, the prophet and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are hereby sentenced to death."

Rushdie's novel has been widely denounced and condemned by Muslims who consider it blasphemous. The most influential of these condemnations was that of Khomeini, but numerous other Muslim scholars and leaders condemned the novel and its author. In their 1989 anthology *The Rushdie File*, Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland collect the most important writings and speeches by both sides of the debate about *The Satanic Verses*. Another category of writings about the novel is that of the historians and cultural theorists that have taken Rushdie's novel as their subject, using the events surrounding its publication to explore relations between Islam and the West, and to explore as well postcolonial politics and intercultural attitudes.

The final category of writings about *The Satanic Verses* involves critical analysis of the literary content of the novel, although this style of writing was initially overshadowed by the furor following the book's publication. In the fall of 1988, the novel received the Whitbread Prize for the best novel in England that year, and some critics lauded the book's literary merits. In his 1988 review for *London Review of Books*, Patrick Parrinder writes that the book is "damnably entertaining, and fiendishly ingenious." American newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times* printed mixed reviews, however, and some critics criticized Rushdie for his indirectness and incomprehensibility. However, *The Satanic Verses* is generally considered a key novel in Rushdie's oeuvre, and many literary critics have written at length about its theological, philosophical, political, and cultural meanings.



Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, greets followers in Tehran in February 1979 © Bettmann/Corbis

Criticism

Scott Trudell

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses Rushdie's commentary on Islam in The Satanic Verses.

The fatwa ordering Muslims around the world to murder Rushdie and his collaborators has irrevocably affected how Western readers approach the novel. Because of the dangerous and sensitive political context, many Western critics have downplayed the work's direct engagement with the Islamic religion so as not to seem to be giving credence to the Islamic fundamentalist outcry against it. Rushdie himself, in a series of understandable attempts to save his own life, claimed to the press that his novel should not be seen as insulting Islam. At one point, he even went so far as to embrace the central tenets of the religion, although he later rescinded this position.

The fact is that the novel's commentary on Islam is at the center of its thematic agenda. *The Satanic Verses* is, first and foremost, about how humans develop and practice notions of good and evil, and, specifically, how these notions are determined by religion. Islam is the religion that Rushdie uses to explore these universal themes and, in the process, he makes a number of specific and satirical criticisms about common Muslim practices, including the typical treatment of Muslim women, the connection between Islamic fundamentalism and violence, and the persecution of writers in the name of Islam. Tracing all of these topical themes back to their historical and ideological origins, Rushdie

To Rushdie, therefore, the moral system of Islam is nothing more than an extremely effective method by which individuals and groups gain absolute power and authority without the need to justify themselves rationally."

provides a substantial criticism of the tenets and contemporary practices of the religion.

This commentary begins explicitly, as "The Angel Gibreel" and Saladin fall from the heavens "To be born again," a clear and common metaphor for spiritual rebirth. Rushdie's references to religion then remain explicit and evident throughout the novel, as Gibreel transforms physically into an angel and experiences extended dreams about Muslim prophets, while Saladin becomes a goat man imbued with the features of the devil. Their epic battle, which eventually comes in the form of Saladin haunting Gibreel with the "satanic verses" of prank phone calls that make him, like the prophet Mahound, fiercely jealous, is portrayed in terms of a fight between good and evil.

What good and evil actually entail, and whether Saladin and Gibreel can be said to conform to these notions has become indistinguishably complex by the time of final confrontations. Gibreel is depressed, schizophrenic, plagued by doubt, and when he does believe he is the angel of God his actions are often not just insane but destructive, as when he blows fire on London through his magic trumpet. Saladin, meanwhile, is revealed to be not so much an evil monster as a sympathetic victim of an identity crisis whose career, wife, and respectability are suddenly taken from him. His only act that can be considered "evil" is his revenge on Gibreel, and the terrible results of the prank phone calls are mainly a result of Gibreel's own consuming jealousy.

In fact, nowhere in the novel is the meaning of good and evil entirely clear, and the sacred is very often closely associated with or mistaken for the profane. Gibreel becomes the angel of God immediately after he has lost his faith and stuffed himself with pork, Ayesha the prophet stones a baby and then leads her followers to a watery death, Mahound's wives are doubled in the brothel of Jahilia, and holy Imam of Desh, a parody of the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, is a bitter and "monstrous" figure fueled by hate and shown swallowing his people whole. Rushdie establishes with examples such as these that holy is by no means good and profane is by no means evil. The chapters about Mahound suggest explicitly that the Qur'an is by no means the infallible word of God and that good and evil are, in fact, entirely human constructions.

A skeptic who dismisses the idea that the sacred and religious are morally good, Rushdie suggests that the chief prophet of Islam is much like a poet, which is perhaps why Mahound feels so threatened by Baal. *The Satanic Verses* suggests that the monotheistic, absolutist text of Islam is a fiction of verses just like that of Baal's. Its only essential difference is paraphrased early in the novel by the Islamic terrorist Tavleen: "History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?" In other words, the difference between the cause of art and literature and cause of the Islamic faith is not that one was inspired by God via the Angel Gabriel. Rather, the Qur'an is different from the words of a shape-shifting, multi-voiced and flexible poet only in that it claims to rigidly pin down exactly what is good and evil, for all time.

Indeed, the narratives from Gibreel's dream cycle establish that religious "good" and "evil" are simply categories that Mahound, Ayesha, and the Imam of Desh define based on what is most expedient for their personal desires. Since Gibreel has no answers from God, who appears as a combination God/Satan figure to clarify that there is no distinction between Al-la and Al-lat, it is clear that these devout figures have produced their certainties for themselves. Mahound (like Ayesha and the Imam of Desh) manufactures his timeless transcription of the will of God entirely from his own head, and he does so in order to impose his own ideas of authority and uncompromising power upon the world.

It is because of this absolutism that Islam, to Rushdie, produces so many evils. Inflexible ideology is responsible for most of the evils in the novel, from the destructive religious impulses of Mahound, Ayesha, and the Imam, to the brutal and

inflexible immigration policies of Margaret "the Iron Lady" Thatcher's Britain. The inability of the British police to understand or accept diversity, as well as the harshly bigoted ideology of Britons like Hal Valance, is the true cause of the violence and mayhem in London, as well as the fact that immigrants are transformed into monsters by the "power of description."

Rushdie's most fluent and specific condemnation of absolutism, however, remains in the context of Islam. One of the most important explications of the author's attitude towards the religion comes during Salman Farsi's conversations with Baal in which he condemns Mahound and the Qur'an. Salman (it is no coincidence that he shares his name with Rushdie) begins by ridiculing the many extremely specific and businesslike aspects of the Qur'an that make him suspect that Mahound is simply conjuring up the verses himself. He then traces the fact that the Qur'an gives men the right to have multiple wives back to Mahound's desire to convert the widows of Jahilia, and the common Islamic practice for men to dominate women, to Mahound's bitterness at the women of Yahtrib (Medina).

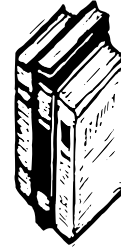
This section is not merely a criticism of certain specific Islamic traditions; it is an attack at the entire premise of the moral authority of a religious text such as the Qur'an. Rushdie's implicit argument is that uncompromising, faith-based morality is extremely dangerous because it does not need to answer to any rational critique and is easily crafted to suit one all-powerful authority. This criticism could apply, by extension, to religions such as Christianity and Judaism, but the analogy is less perfect because the belief that the holy text is a direct transcription of God's will is uniquely important to Islam.

To Rushdie, therefore, the moral system of Islam is nothing more than an extremely effective method by which individuals and groups gain absolute power and authority without the need to justify themselves rationally. Poets, scribes, and shape-shifting actors like Baal, Salman Farsi, and Saladin are contemptible to Islam, and therefore demonized, because they are constantly quibbling, satirizing, and questioning this moral tyranny. They are flexible and adaptable, and their ideas are similar to the "Satanic Verses" that Mahound originally included in the Qur'an because they make space for a variety of authority figures and power systems. Absolutism, both in politics and in morality, is the antithesis of their value system.

Similarly, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is in direct confrontation with the moral foundation of the Islamic religion, and is so offensive to it, because it questions, satirizes, and ridicules Islam's absolutist moral code. In a way, the extreme and fanatical reaction to the novel on the part of many Muslims including the Ayatollah Khomeini, an extremely powerful and influential religious leader with great authority, proves that a strong current of absolutism continues in many interpretations of the Islamic tradition. Indeed, Khomeini and the other Muslim fundamentalists who denounced the novel and demanded Rushdie's death, proved not just that their moral systems are tyrannical and absolutist, but that an author, whether or not he/she claims to be a prophet of God, has the power to shake the world with a pen.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *The Satanic Verses*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

What Do I Read Next?



- *Midnight's Children* (1981) is Rushdie's compelling novel about Indian history and identity. Focusing on the story of Saleem Sinai, who was born at the moment of Indian independence, the work includes elements of magic realism and alludes to classic texts, including the Christian Bible and *Arabian Nights*.
- Nicholas Mosley's *Hopeful Monsters* (1990), winner of the Whitbread Prize in 1991, is the story of two European intellectuals and their journey around the world as they become involved in the scientific, political, and religious controversies of the era.
- Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (1992) is a collection of seventy-five articles ranging from political to religious to artistic subjects, and it includes two of Rushdie's key articles in response to the circumstances following his publication of *The Satanic Verses*.
- Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is the classic colonial British novel about the orphaned Kim O'Hara and his experience growing up in India.

Jacqueline Bardolph

In the following essay excerpt, Bardolph explores how The Satanic Verses *"in its depiction of the characters as they grapple with language—conception, speech, writing—emobodies a form of courage."*

To name the unnamable, point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep." This passage from *The Satanic Verses* has been quoted as a defence of the right and duty of the artist. But the context takes it away from this romantic and irresponsible attitude. It goes on: "And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict, then they will nourish him." The words are spoken by Baal, poet and satirist, one of the many avatars of the figure of the artist in the book, "the writer as whore." This can be used as a preliminary warning before any study of this polyphonic novel: not one sentence out of the multiplicity of voices or statements can be used in isolation, extracted from the whole. "Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true." Like the preceding statement this is both true and false within the text, being the vision of Jumpi Joshi, a little-known poet and martial arts instructor who may suffer from another type of delusion: the writer as *guerrillero,* writing from "the barrel of a pen."

Yet, given the novel itself and the unforeseen consequences of its publication, as it came to the attention of people who in the normal course of things would never have been its readers, this proud pronouncement will help to give an outline of one of the possible approaches to this major book.

"The ability to conceive a thought, to speak it," says Joshi, who is a poet; I would add a third element—"to write it." Like Rushdie's previous novels, *The Satanic Verses* has among its major topics language and artistic creation, in a way that connects modern metafictional themes with the condition of the exile and immigrant (Rushdie, who has three countries, like his hero Omar Khayyam's three mothers, has given *Midnight's Children* to India, *Shame* to Pakistan, and this third book in the trilogy to the Britain of the immigrant). Among the many avatars of the writer or artist in *The Satanic Verses*—in fact, it can be claimed that most of the male characters are so many facets of his vision, like the myriad facets of a fly's eyes—a coherent team takes prominent place: the central figure is the prophet, the one who "proffers," the voice in the desert, or his profane negative, Mahound. Before the voice must come inspiration: this is Gibreel, the angel Gabriel, creating visions of an uncertain nature—are they, for instance, the truth about the one God, or satanically inspired visions about three unholy goddesses? And modestly, at the end of the production-line, sits Salman the Persian, the "myopic scrivener," an essential cog in the wheel transferring the voice to the Book, not wholly responsible for its content, maybe even guilty of transforming a sacred vision into a "Book of Rules" (when and how to eat, wash, marry, defecate . . .).

I shall explore briefly how the book, in its depiction of the characters as they grapple with language—conception, speech, writing—embodies a form of courage.

The most obvious one is also central: the ability to speak. Particularly in societies, past or present, with a strong oral culture, the act of utterance has always had something sacred about it, and is potentially fraught with danger—to which can be added linguistic uncertainty. Like most writers from the Commonwealth who write outside an implicit language-norm, Rushdie is aware of the richness and perils of this *métis* situation. In *Midnight's Children,* he could represent the head-on collision of different cultures in the two language-marches which clash in Bombay and start a language-war. Other writers, in Africa for instance, have tried in various ways to come to terms with the representation and expression of linguistic plurality when dealing with well-defined cultures. *The Satanic Verses* chooses to speak from the point of view of the immigrant in Britain, or anywhere, where it is no longer possible to set up clear-cut identities in opposition. "This approach enables Rushdie to enter into and tease out with great clarity and vividness the structure and inner dynamics of the immigrant's everyday life, including racism, self-alienation, the joys and tortures of harbouring several selves, and the fantasized reality in which he is forced to live." Rushdie has now joined other writers who grope for expression as they give voice in a single work to a whole range of varieties of English: one thinks of Selvon, of Desani's *H. Hatterr,* or of Wendt's narrative personae, all with an attentive ear to a wide range of spoken idioms, none of which claims to be a norm.

The Satanic Verses, like a radio play, provides a varied collection of modern British usages, each with its distinctive flavour and rhythm. Brought up in a tradition of oral storytelling, Rushdie recalls the pleasure of mimicry, born of variety, but also shows a new language taking shape. For the novel is not a collection of documents centred on a central "RP" voice: the whole narrative shares this

chaotic multiplicity, more so than *Midnight's Children* or *Shame,* where, after all, other languages were represented through the medium of English. Here is the true challenge of the immigrant: he has no mother-tongue left, "'An Indian translated into English-medium. When I attempt Hindustani these days, people look polite.'" He will have to make do with the unstable forms born of multicultural contact, and make them work for him. The dialogue and the narrative are extremely varied in scope: suburban Indian English, Bombay's mixture of Colonial and Americanese, London West Indian or African, new-generation Asian English, mid-Atlantic show-biz jargon—they all coexist in the pages and merge with the narrative voice.

The primary risk in being so close to specific dialectal variations in their own time and space is the loss of universal relevance. Babylondon is alive in these pages, for those of us who have heard at least some of these varieties; but what of other readers, elsewhere, in years to come? What about translation? This irritating factor is one way of stating the predicament of the exile. It is embodied in Saladin, one of the two major characters, a radio actor with chameleon voices, "the Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice." He is the image of the artist as impersonator, or liar, a mere trickster, taken over by his text.

But artist and migrant are one in their plight: they have so many voices that they have lost their own. Where is the central identity connected with the physical memory of the first cry, breathing, the mother tongue? Saladin in mid-flight between India and England can feel his vocal chords readjusting to a new accent, a new rhythm. If language is identity, the simple shaping of the mouth and throat around a consonant can make of you an alien, a potential traitor, as Nuruddin Farah has shown in *Maps* in the case of Misra. *Grimus,* Rushdie's first novel, was already expressing the circular torture represented by this protean gift, this "polyglot frenzy":

A man rehearsing voices on a cliff top: high whining voices, low gravelly voices, subtle insinuating voices, raucous strident voices, voices honeyed with pain, voices glinting with laughter, the voices of the birds and of the fishes. He asked the man what he was doing (as he sailed by). The man called back—and each word was the word of a different being:—I am looking for a suitable voice to speak in. As he called, he leaned forward, lost his balance and fell. The cry was in a single voice; but the rocks on the shore cut it and shredded it for him again.

The Satanic Verses, like a radio play, provides a varied collection of modern British usages, each with its distinctive flavour and rhythm."

Is pain the only possible unifying factor? The comfort of nostalgia or return is not available to the exile, who can no longer idealize the tolerant pluralism of the Bombay of his youth: it cannot be retrieved from the past before Independence or Partition. The babble of voices of the seven hundred children of midnight is at first an exhilarating sound, their very diversity a promise. As the child hero grows, "the miracles inside his head," when the Midnight's Children Conference took place in his brain through telepathy, turn into a nightmare. After the paranoid over-confidence of the child, Saleem finds it impossible to control the discordant voices. Multiplicity in that novel is at first a source of wonder but turns at the end into a threat, the menace of annihilation. "only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons." It demands courage to go on speaking in a polyphonic manner, while looking for the one voice: the suffering involved is well represented in *Grimus,* with its reference to the mystical Sufi quest for the One, based on 'Attâr's *Conference of the Birds.*

Maybe the voice which fears fragmentation, the biblical curse of division, as it strives to speak for Babylondon can trace its trouble to the source. The voice of the prophet singles him out and makes him an obvious target; but is he really the originary utterer of the message? Isn't he merely the messenger, who exposes himself by clamouring what God's go-between, the angel Gabriel, has whispered in his ear or shown to him in a dream? Gibreel Farishta, an Indian film-actor who can no longer impersonate Hindu deities on Bombay screens, is afraid to sleep because in his dreams he is Gabriel and as such participates in three long stories which are the major subplots of the novel, the best-known one being connected with the dictation of Satanic verses to Mahound. The three parables explore the same question: is inspiration good or evil—to be trusted, dismissed, or examined in the sceptical

light of reason? Are the protagonists of the three stories—Ayesha the prophetess, Mahound, Desh the Imam—receiving a divine message or projecting their own dreams and desires in the reading of the dreams? And what if Gabriel himself is delivering messages after he has lost his faith?

All of the elements which revolve around this central question represent another way in which language is courage: the courage to conceive certain thoughts, the courage of the imagination. Daniel Sibony, a psychoanalyst writing about the Rushdie affair, claims for the artist the right to fantasize, "le droit au fantasme." It is a right which has its own dangers, even before public utterance and writing. The artist who explores such areas on the border of the unconscious runs risks. If he must feel free, he is bound to transgress even against his own norms merely by conceiving certain topics and giving them shape. Rushdie is once more handling dangerous material: in previous books he dealt with the brother-sister bond and the dark mother; here he explores the various figures of the mother as whore, the connection with Islam, sex, death, and the sacred. The awesome links are forged in an intrepid manner—which has hurt many, as it has hurt him. A fantasy, given free rein, knows no respect or reverence. What is most sacred can become burlesque; mundane characters can be inflated to mythic proportions. God can be equated with the photo on the back cover (*Verses* 318). In such a family romance, the affectionate and querulous invective of the son against his father can be voiced to Abraham in plain English "[Ibraham,] the bastard. . . ."

The novel has the courage to keep to the logic of the oneiric vision, bringing to light raw materials which have the coherence of dreams, in which characters merge into one another, in a chain of metamorphosis to which the key is not always provided. The punning language of the unconscious establishes a connection between Allah, the dark goddess Al-Lat, and the blond Allelluiah Cone or Allie, who is close to Ayesha (prophetess, or wife, of the Prophet; or empress; or chief whore). And Allah/Al-Lat connects with the problem of evil—Atallah, Othello, the mystery of "motiveless malignity." There is a risk in exposing in words a vision so highly charged with explosive material, without being sure whether they are god-sent revelations or inane trifles. The reader can identify with the puzzlement of "the dreamer who knows he dreams," and yet is deeply disturbed by the emotional impact of such mental images. When can one be sure the cosmic vision is not just a narcissistic projection? Or even the projection of other people's dreams and desires, which the angel-poet, sponge-like, has absorbed? (It is here we find the relevance of the introductory fable about Rosa Diamond.)

Having gone "au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau," the artist can discover very dark visions. They may refuse to fit nicely with the rational political views of the writer—as, for instance, in the scene in the Hot Wax Night Club, when Maggie Torture is burnt in effigy and melts to a puddle: the images of racial or class hatred clash with the sane proposals for racial harmony in explicit statements. *The Satanic Verses* lends great significance to a dark figure which recurs from book to book—obtrusive, ambivalent, difficult to account for: in *Grimus,* the madam of the brothel called "The House of the Rising Son" is a dark threatening woman called Liv; in *Midnight's Children,* Kali the black goddess of fertility and death vies with the Widow, the castrating mother of India; in *The Satanic Verses,* one has the pagan goddess Al-Lat, cruel and alluring, who keeps reasserting herself to Mahound in spite of his will to believe in the one God. Is the dark vision satanically inspired or part of an important truth?

This is where the book connects up with ancient moral and theological debates. But the problem remains the same for prophet and poet: dreams are dangerous stuff. Are they good and loaded with meaning, or self-indulgent and private? The novel states that there are two kinds of ideas. Saladin, the rational, worldly aspect of the artist and exile, has "soft ideas" of the kind that compromise, accept the contours of the world, and live through "selected discontinuities." Gibreel, the erratic self-centered actor given to inspiration, has "hard ideas" which come in two kinds: the dangerous, rigid ones that do harm to society—see how the Imam Desh has followed him—or, less often, the "hard idea" that will act as a lever to move the world. How is one to know which vision, which god-sent words, have this power? The prophetic nature of the visions which have thus surfaced in the mind is far from certain. But the prophet has no chance in his wrestling with the angel, as witness the oft-cited parable of the conscious mind struggling with the creative force.

Dangerous thoughts have been conceived, then voiced aloud, as Jumpi Joshi's statement acknowledges. Now comes the third phase, when "language is courage" applies to the process of writing itself, when Salman the Persian, "the scum," sits modestly like a slow-witted, unreliable scribe with diminished responsibility.

For Rushdie does not create poetry, or plays, or short fiction, but uses the Western genre of the novel. He has not chosen the relative freedom allowed to the *Arabian Nights* or to allusive traditional poetry, nor, at the other extreme, the comfortable "objectivity" of the chronicler or journalist. He works in a contemporary format, linked in the West to a certain function, a certain aesthetic code, and he attempts to shape it to his needs, which extend beyond the scope of most modern novels.

Source: Jacqueline Bardolph, "Language Is Courage: *The Satanic Verses*," in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, edited by M. D. Fletcher, Rodopi, 1994, pp. 209–20.

First, however, the novel makes very real the charismatic sexual power of the male to illustrate the force of heterosexual desire and the consequent psychological and physical dangers to women."

Janet Mason Ellerby

In the following essay, Ellerby explores the "mutability and immutability of the female subject" in The Satanic Verses.

As a Western reader, *The Satanic Verses* matters to me not because of its irreverence for the prophet Muhammed, but because of what it tells me and shows me about what it means to be female in this final decade of the twentieth century. The novel warns me of the dangers of "the achievement of femininity" and of the mutability of the female subject when she "falls in love" or becomes the desiring subject as well as the object of male desire.

First, however, the novel makes very real the charismatic sexual power of the male to illustrate the force of heterosexual desire and the consequent psychological and physical dangers to women. Gibreel Farishta is the beloved of Allie and Rekha Merchant, but he has had a promiscuous sexual history before meeting them. He thought of women as vessels that he would fill temporarily and then move on. It was their nature, he believed, to understand him and to forgive him. Because he is irresistibly attractive to women, they have spoiled him with their generosity. Their willingness to forgive him, says the narrator, was that which corrupted him, for he lived without knowing that he was doing anything wrong at all.

Gibreel's corrupt belief in his innocence is significant, for it is generous women who have allowed him to believe that he can simply move solipsistically through the bodies of desiring women without regard for their well-being. His blindness allows him callously to announce to Rekha Merchant that he has fallen in love with Allelulia Cone without even a glimmer of understanding of the desperate pain his rejection will cause her. Yet this inability of the man to empathize with a woman has been caused, says the narrator, by women. Because women have allowed Gibreel to treat them irresponsibly, he can abruptly leave Rekha, weeping, face-down on the floor of her apartment without realizing the mortal danger his rejection places her in. She takes her two daughters and one son to the roof of her high rise and falls. There are no survivors—only rumors that Gibreel is to blame. Her suicide note reads, "Many years ago . . . I married out of cowardice. Now finally, I'm doing something brave." Nevertheless, her ghost tells Gibreel: "It was you who left me, her voice reminded his ear, seeming to nibble at the lobe. It was you, O moon of my delight, who hid behind a cloud. And I in darkness, blinded, lost, for love."

Before her death, Rekha sees her suicide (and the murder of her children) as an act of bravery. Desire has led her to take action, to become the agent of change. As the desiring subject, she is mutable; her desire for Gibreel has reversed her basic instincts from wishing to protect her children from harm and to live, to wishing for death. However, after her death, she understands that, in fact, she was lost in darkness, blinded by desire. She knows that to forgive Gibreel his insensitivity was wrong; now she desires revenge. She places a curse on him:

> Now that I am dead I have forgotten how to forgive. I curse you, my Gibreel, may your life be hell. Hell, because that's where you sent me, damn you, where you came from, devil, where you're going, sucker, enjoy the bloody dip.

In fact, Rekha's curse is amazingly effective. Gibreel falls in love with Allie, but it is not a love that brings him the understanding and sensitivity that he lacked. He knows that she could bring to him "the best thing . . . the deepest thing, the has-to-be-it," but he cannot find it within himself to

trust her her, perhaps because he himself moved without concern for the objects of this desire—from woman to woman—for so long. Instead of finding peace and renewal with Allie, he is tormented by obsessive jealousy. he raves at her as he gives in to recreating her past as a series of lovers. He imagines them waiting for her still. Thus it is very simple for Saladin Chamcha, Rushdie's version Iago, to set the trap—to create the satanic verses—for as a mediocre actor and a cuckolded husband, he wants to avenge himself on Gibreel out of envy for Gibreel's successes (as an actor, as a well-loved citizen of India, and as the man with whom women fall in love). Allie has no idea that Saladin finds her desirable, nor does she sense his envy. But because he cannot hope to possess Allie, she comes to represent the entirety of his loss, and he sets out to destroy both her and Gibreel. Allie and Gibreel, each in a vulnerable position of desire for one another, easily become pawns of his manipulations. Disguising his voice, Saladin calls Gibreel on the phone over and over again and delivers verses that reveal his knowledge of Allie as a lover (details Gibreel himself has confided in Saladin). These are the satanic verses of the novel's title, which return again and again to torment Gibreel. Saladin can mimic voices both deep or squeaky, slow or quick, sad or cheerful, aggressive or timid. He slowly releases them to invade Gibreel's already precarious world, weakening his defenses between what is real and what is not. Gibreel is irresistibly drawn into Saladin's manipulative web of deceit:

> Little by little their [the verses'] obscene, invented women began to coat the real woman like a viscous, green film, and in spite of his protestations to the contrary he started slipping away from her; and then it was time for the return of the little satanic verses that made him mad:
>
> *Roses are red, violets are blue,*
> *Sugar never tasted sweet as you.*

The voices change Gibreel's concept of Allie, and she becomes both the desirable and detestable. Jealousy, however, is triumphant; Gibreel comes to treat her cruelly and without remorse.

And Allie—how has she allowed herself to become this pawn of men? Is she to be blamed for being too forgiving? Is she to be held responsible for the debacle of her love affair because of her generosity? Before Gibreel, Allie had been a powerful woman, having successfully climbed Mount Everest. Upon tenaciously reaching the seemingly insurmountable summit of ice and rock, she had experienced a miraculous transcedence. Afterwards, she chose to remain alone in the world, turning away from her sexuality that it might not absorb her. Gibreel is the first man she has slept with in five years. Before him, she had resisted the Freudian quest for femininity. She knew that were she to participate in this heterosexual love narrative, she could lose her autonomy and its accompanying power of self-direction. But Gibreel diminishes even her transcendence of Everest: she becomes subsumed by him and consumed by her sexual desire. During their first weeks together, they spend almost all their time in bed, making love six or seven times a day, their hunger for one another inexhaustible. "You opened me up." Allie told him. Her comment is important. It appears that Gibreel has motioned her toward the fulfillment of her sexuality, and this fulfillment becomes more important to her than any of her other accomplishments, past and future.

Allie has changed. She, herself, is surprised by her new, accommodating personality. Because Gabreel is so sulky when she asks him to do his share of the household chores, she finds herself not only doing these tasks herself but also taking on the responsibility of cajoling him back to good humor. He is, of course, being driven mad by Saladin's satanic verses and by his own psychotic belief in himself as the archangel who has come to save if not the entire world, at least London. He begins a cycle of leaving her, and when he does she falls to the floor weeping, much as Rekha Merchant did the day Gibreel left her for the last time. Allie cannot believe that she is playing this part, "like . . . a character in a story of a kind in which she could never have imagined she belonged." But she does now belong to the master narrative of the heterosexual romance, in which male desire still dominates, and she becomes fiercely "written" by that narrative to the point of becoming its victim.

Because Gibreel is mad, Allie takes it upon herself to care for him with the same tenacity with which she climbed Everest. She begins to think of saving him as she had thought of conquering the mountain, determined to help him back to sanity and not to allow her devotion to him to subside. She is conflating the two narratives of love and individual conquest that have nothing in common and this only works to increase her own fragility and jeopardy, and losses that telling feeling of being caught in the wrong kind of love story. Instead she has become the one who will heal him so that they might resume their great love; hence, she becomes bound to him as healer, redeemer, and lover.

Nevertheless, she does begin to see the hopelessness of his position (of her and by his madness),

his irrationality, and his out-of-control suspiciousness. She even sees intellectually that her more "real" life is being suspended or buried at Gibreel's expense. She begins to ask questions, to think agin about her needs and her right to also set terms for their relationship. But she is also firmly ensnared in the Freudian master narrative—now even her biology is controlling her conduct. Though she wants to leave him, she can't because now not only does she want him, she also wants his child. Finally, when she discovers that Gibreel is having her follower, she is able to make the break. The notes she leaves him is telling: "This is killing me." Although this is often a cliché of exaggeration, I think we should take Allie's declaration seriously. The change brought by her sexual entanglement with Gibreel is, in fact, killing off the autonomous, healthy, ambitious Allie. As object of his desire, she has taken on a submissive subject position that is in conflict with her other "selves" and, in fact, requires that she act against them.

On her departure, Gibreel leaves her apartment in another fit of jealous rage at having the object of his desire taken from him. Yet Allie helplessly takes the responsibility for his rage, saying, "I feel in some obscure way to blame . . . it's my fault." Thus the master narrative remains intact despite her temporary departure, which is followed soon after by her return. Her quest is now not that *her* life work out, but that *theirs* does. I would argue that it is, in fact, not even *their* for which she takes responsibility, but Gibreel's exclusively. His greatest need is to maintain the narrative that has made her exclusively the object of his desire, and she will maintain it as long as she can. Gibreel complains to Saladin that it is her beauty that is driving him mad because he has witnessed how men, slobbering and groping, are drawn to her no matter what. He feels that he has every right to be her protector from male lust.

Speaking of women, de Lauretis says, "And so her story, like any other story, is a question of his desire." Allie has arrived at the end of her quest by effacing herself because of her desire for Gibreel. She is not really a private person, as Gibreel insists; but she is the private property of Gibreel. She confirms her capitulation when she confesses to Saladin that she no longer hopes that her life could count as important, as taking first place. Her life has now become their life; she can no longer think of herself in the first person "I."

Still the satanic verses continue over the phone, goading Gibreel, infuriating him, making more and more precarious his tenuous hold on sanity until he flees Allie again, but not before demolishing her apartment. And Allie responds, repeating Rekha Merchant's curse: "Die slowly! Burn in hell!" However, Allie meets Gibreel again. We are told nothing of this meeting; we do not know why she goes with Gibreel to his apartment, why she follows him to the top of his apartment, Everest. We have only the newspaper account: she falls to her death as did Rekha Merchant before her. Our only other account is the mad Gibreel's:

> . . . she changed in front of my eyes I called
> her names whore . . .
> [b——] cool as ice
> stood and waited. . . .
> Rekha was there. . . .
> It was Rekha's idea take her upstairs summit of
> Everest once you've been there the only way is
>   down
> I pointed my finger at her we went up
> I didn't push her
> Rekha pushed her
> I wouldn't have pushed her. . . .
> I loved that girl.

Allies death remains obscured by the cloudy memories of a madman intent on committing suicide. Such narrative irony is a fit emblem for Allie's final and complete surrender of all of her realized and potential subject positions to Gibreel's control.

Still, according to Rushdie, the novel ends happily. Saladin, the perpetrator of the satanic verses that drive Gibreel mad and lead Allie ultimately to her death, is reborn on his return to India and reclaims his true Indian name, Salahuddin, and his more authentic identity. Despite all the wrong he has done, it is he who has the good fortune of getting another chance for which, the narrator remarks, there is no accounting. So there is a change in the master narrative. Rushdie's Iago is redeemed, or rather, he gets another chance. But there is a reason for his good fortune and Allie's bad fortune. The Narrative has swerved in order to save Salahuddin, but not to extricate Allie from the entanglements of the most imperialistic of all narratives—that story that leads a woman to identify herself no longer as a self-directed, self-critical agent, but instead as receptive to the thoughts and volitions of a man's dominating impulsiveness.

For Freud, Allie achieves her femininity as she succumbs to the subject position of the feminine in the heterosexual dyad—the object of male desire. Again this narrative prevails over all others. Because Gibreel is lost to madness and suicide, so must Allie, who the narrator insists is entirely blameless and unjustly injured, be enigmatically sacrificed. On the margin of the dyad is Salahuddin, who tried to

drive a man to complete paranoia, knowing that the way to do so would be to exploit Allie and choosing her because he had no way of gratifying his own voyeuristic desire for her. Salahuddin also took the subject position of the male who desired Allie as object, and was, like Gibreel, able to claim agency and act upon the vulnerable pair. Thus both Gibreel and Salahuddin can act as agents when they make Allie the object of their desire; however, Allie is disempowered and left finally at the mercy of their manipulations.

As an initial reader of *The Satanic Verses,* I refused Rushdie's ending and created my own out of my narrative desires. But this was not a tenable position. On confronting again the concreteness of the text, I have had to revise my first reading. I cannot bring Allelulia Cone back to any sort of textual life. However, through a more self-conscious reading, I can write beyond the ending by critiquing the master narrative that leads women to give up their agency and power when they adopt the position of woman within the heterosexual romantic dyad. As a postmodern feminist critic, I can persistently engage in dialogues with already written narratives in ways that can increase our self-consciousness. Only by interrogating the constitution of femininity can women take more forceful positions within dyads of reciprocal desire in which they will be subjects and agents rather than objects to be acted upon.

Source: Janet Mason Ellerby, "Narrative Imperialism in *The Satanic Verses*," in *Multicultural Literatures through Feminist/Poststructuralist Lenses*, edited by Barbara Frey Waxman, University of Tennessee Press, 1993, pp. 173–89.

Simona Sawhney

In the following essay excerpt, Sawhney explores the theme of metamorphosis, particularly how it relates to migrancy, in The Satanic Verses.

Inhabitations

> But if you are in doubt as to what We sent down to Our slave, then produce a Sura the like thereof, and summon witnesses of yours other than, God, if you are truthful. —*The Bounteous Koran* 6

> The composition of the Qur'an is not a miracle. Human beings are capable of the same, and of better. —Nazzam the Mu'tazilite, qtd. in Adonis 41

We remember that Gibreel's sequential dreams about the life of Muhammad/Mahound begin after he recovers from a long illness and that the recovery itself begins exactly at the moment when he confronts his own loss of faith. The illness has been for him a period of constant prayer and pleading—the plea for recovery slowly changing to the more desperate plea for an interlocutor. From questioning the nature of God ("Are you vengeance or are you love"), he now begins to question the very existence of God: "Ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be." It is at that terrible moment of isolation, when he realizes "that there was nobody there at all," that his illness gives way to recovery. The narrator calls this a "day of metamorphosis," and thus records this as one among the several scenes of metamorpnosis that occur in a text that, on one level, is constituted as a conversation between Ovid and Lucretius.

Metamorphosis thus becomes a guiding trope of the novel: a metaphor that responds at once to the lives of migrants, the transformations of tales, and even to the sly slippage between desire and intention, the hidden and the acknowledged, that becomes crucial to Mahound's story. The connection between migrancy and metamorphosis is fairly obvious. It surfaces in the novel's distinction between exile and migrant: the exile guards against change, stubbornly holding on to the dream of return, "frozen in time"; the migrant becomes invaded, transformed, metamorphosed. Thus on a thematic level, the drama of metamorphosis is enacted in the stories of various migrants whose lives (and bodies) are transfigured in postcolonial cities, while on a formal plane, this drama is played out in the mutations of literary traditions and genres that produce the gargantuan and wildly allusive body of the cosmopolitan text.

After Saladin's ordeal at the hands of the British police, when he finds himself suddenly transformed into a bestial creature, the change is explained in terms of a loss of identity that has left him vulnerable to the power of description vested in his captors, the police, and more generally, in the entire state apparatus. The text suggests that Saladin's transformation is partly the result of his having succumbed to that power of description, and also that he was particularly vulnerable to it because he had already lost a refuge or home that a more stable sense of identity would have provided. Saladin himself ruminates on a version of this explanation when he reflects on the two theses on metamorphosis that his friend Sufyan recounts to him: Lucretius's idea that change necessarily entails a kind of death—the death of the old self—and Ovid's belief that souls themselves remain constant even as they "adopt in their migrations ever-varying forms." Saladin chooses Lucretius over Ovid: "A being going through life can become so other to himself as to *be another,* discrete, severed from history." His transformation thus becomes a sign of both a prior

and a future homelessness: now that he has become an other, he has been splintered from history itself. The novel does not quite endorse his reading of his own situation, for by the end of the book, not only has Saladin regained his human appearance but he has also returned to a life and a land that he thought he had entirely forsaken.

In some ways, Gibreel's metamorphosis appears to be more violent, especially in terms of its final consequences. Perhaps the violence of the change—from believer to skeptic—registers more deeply with Gibreel because he is someone who wishes to remain the person he always was: "continuous—that is, joined to and arising from his past . . . at bottom an untranslated man," as the narrator says much later. Despite his avowed renunciation of faith, he finds that he cannot dissociate himself quite so easily from the passion that has hitherto sustained his life and now manifests itself in the extravagance of his dreams. Through the final implicit victory of Saladin, the novel suggests that Gibreel's greatest error might well lie in his overriding desire for continuity and authenticity.

The thematic resemblances among all the different dream narratives are quite apparent. They are all narratives of departure and return, of lost homelands, and most obviously, of struggles with faith; and their connection to Gibreel's waking life is easily established. Gibreel's own appearance in the dreams as a confused and helpless Angel Gabriel, a nonknower or nonbeliever who finds himself forced to be a messenger of faith, is also clearly related to the roles he plays in theological movies, or more accurately to the roles he will play after his crisis of faith. What is perhaps more interesting is the way in which this crisis manifests itself in the dreams: a crisis of will that presents itself most strongly as a crisis of utterance. For it is his absolute inability to fathom the mystery of his own utterances in the dreams that causes him the greatest discomfort of all. The problem is not merely that he is perceived as a messenger of divine utterance, but that in some inexplicable way, he *becomes* such a messenger—he is, in fact, able to say exactly what his listeners wish to hear, although he does not know whence such speech appears:

> All around him, he thinks, as he half-dreams, half-wakes, are people hearing voices, being seduced by words. But not his: never his original material.—Then whose? Who is whispering in their ears, enabling them to move mountains, halt clocks, diagnose disease?

Gibreel, of course, is not the only one plagued by the confusion of voices: in what has now become the most notorious section of *The Satanic Verses,* it is Mahound who acknowledges an error of recognition and naming. Having first accepted as divine revelation the dictates of a voice that sanctions the worship of the old goddesses of Jahilia within the practice of Islam, Mahound later decides that the message he received came in fact from the devil and orders that it be expunged from the record of revelation. Rushdie's narration of the "satanic verses" incident becomes perhaps the text's most powerful strategy for questioning the authority and transmission of revealed words. The episode itself has been described by several Muslim historians and biographers, of whom the best known are the ninth-century historians Al-Tabari and Ibn Sa'd. Whether or not these accounts are true, they nevertheless suggest that an anxiety regarding the phenomenon of revelation was evident quite early in the history of Islam.

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Ibn Sa'd relates that at a time when Muhammad strongly desired to establish better relations with his countrymen, he was once at the Ka'ba, reciting from the Koran.

> When he came to the passage: "Do you behold Allat and Al 'Uzza, and also Manat, the third idol?"—which now concludes: "What? shall ye have male progeny and Allah female? This were indeed an unfair partition!"—Satan suggested two lines to him: "These are the exalted females, and truly their intercession may be expected." (Andrae 19)

Muhammad then prostrated himself and prayed, and the whole tribe of Quraish followed him. Later that evening, when the prophet was meditating at home, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, and Muhammad recited the sura to the angel. "Have I taught you these two lines?" asked Gabriel (Andrae

19). Muhammad then realized his error and remarked that he had attributed to Allah words that He had not revealed.

The story has evoked responses of several kinds. Tor Andrae claims that "the whole narrative is historically and psychologically contradictory" (19), but maintains that there is some element of accuracy in it: in one instance, Muhammad did in fact attempt a compromise between monotheism and pagan idolatry in order to reach an understanding with his people. Providing ample justification for the resentment of later Muslim historians against orientalist biographers, he then declares that "parallels to such opportunism are by no means lacking in Mohammad's later conduct."

Montgomery Watt is more sympathetic in his treatment of the incident. He argues that even the cult of the goddesses might be considered a "vague monotheism" insofar as the enlightened Arabs regarded the deities as manifestations of a single divine power. Thus the word *goddess* here suggests a sacred power associated with certain places, rather than a more elaborately anthropomorphized deity. The Semitic religion, Watt says, "has a less personal conception of the divine" than, for instance, Greek paganism. Thus, Muhammad and his followers might not have regarded the worship of the goddesses as being necessarily a violation of the monotheistic principle.

Orientalist scholars have always shown a particularly strong interest in the story, often retelling it in ways that have angered Muslim historians. Many of the latter maintain that it is a fabrication, propagated by those who wished to attack the very basis of Islam: the idea of monotheism or *tawhid.* This is the view of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, one of the most respected biographers of the prophet, who writes:

> the forgers must have been extremely bold to have attempted their forgery in the most essential principle of Islam as a whole: namely, in the principle of *tawhid* . . . in which [the prophet] never accepted any compromise.

Rafiq Zakaria has also dealt at length with the incident in his book *Mohammad and the Quran,* partly in order to expose the various prejudices that have always accompanied the narration of the incident and partly as a polemic against Rushdie. Zakaria charges that Rushdie "opened old wounds" by his "lurid picturization of this incident." Like Haykal, Zakaria reads the story as a negation of the central message of the Koran and a slur on Muhammad's mission. He comments on various readings of the incident and finally presents as conclusive the assessment of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98), perhaps the most eminent Muslim intellectual of undivided India, and the work of Maulana Abul'ala Maudidi, the founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami, "the foremost [Muslim] fundamentalist organization in South Asia" (Zakaria 16). Maudidi's version of the incident is particularly interesting in that it shifts the burden of error from the prophet to the listening congregation. While the prophet was reciting the sum "Al Najm," Maudidi says, the listeners were so elated by his eloquence and by the mention of the three goddesses that they did not hear what he actually said. They thought the goddesses were being praised when in fact their authority was being dismissed. Later, when the Quraish realized their mistake, they invented the story of satanic intervention as an expression of their displeasure with Muhammad. Thus it remains a story of mis-hearing and misjudgment, but in this version it is the pagan Arabs who allow their desire to obscure or redirect the course of revelation.

However, Zakaria's main argument has more extensive implications. It rests largely on a blanket repudiation of the traditions on which early Arab writers based their work. Various authorities are quoted to demonstrate that the works of the eighth-century writer Ibn Ishaq and the ninth-century writers Tabari, Waqidi, and Ibn Sa'd have little basis in historical accuracy and instead rely largely on gossip and myth. According to Zakaria, not only are these writers themselves irresponsible and romantic in their approach to the material, but also the very tradition on which they base their work is suspect, for their accounts contradict each other in several instances and "none of them has produced any reliable evidence" for their work. Zakaria agrees with Maudidi's conclusion that perhaps with the best of intentions, they failed to see the "incongruity and contradictory nature" of this tradition.

Zakaria and other modern commentators judge the work of the early chroniclers, like that of Rushdie perhaps, by the standards of accuracy and inaccuracy, the demands for evidence and rational cogency, that are properly characteristic of the desire for a scientific, empirical history, even though in this case it is the history of a miracle or a faith that is under scrutiny. I am certainly in no position to read or analyze the original work of the early writers, but it does seem that in judging this work from the perspective of empirical historians, the modern commentators are making what one might call a generic error, where a history that has not yet emerged as distinct from legend or poetry is now

judged by the alien standards of history as a social science. It might be instructive for us to note that for scholars like Zakaria, as for the Sikh terrorist Tavleen in the novel, it becomes a relatively easy matter to assimilate a certain version of history within the project of revelation: in the name of such a history, it is finally literature that must be silenced. What first appears, then, as a complaint directed against orientalist writers turns out to be an expression of discomfort with all work that cannot be relegated to the margins of Islamic historiography. Those who have charged Rushdie with joining ranks with imperialists, as well as those who have hailed him as a champion of Western values of freedom and democracy, would do well to remember that in fact, Rushdie has predecessors in the Arab tradition itself, and that the battle between gossip and truth, or literature and history, need not be waged at the boundary between East and West.

In Rushdie's text, the interest in the episode of the satanic verses shifts to some degree. Certainly the incident is still concerned with the tension between monotheism and polytheism, which acquires a specific resonance for Indian Islam, crowded by a pantheon of Hindu deities. But Rushdie focuses more explicitly on what has been a source of anxiety for the tradition as well as for modern Muslim scholars: the incident's skillful subversion of the very phenomenon of revelation. In *The Satanic Verses,* the episode's significance derives from Mahound's tacit acknowledgment of a failure of recognition—a failure that is mirrored in Gibreel's failure, later in the novel, to recognize the voice of Saladin in the telephonic verses that prove to be his undoing. The verses that Mahound proposes as true revelation to replace the earlier, heretical words seem to settle the question of monotheism quite definitively—even as they make use of a familiar misogynist detour—but they offer little help in laying to rest the anxiety about recognizing (and naming) the sources of belief. In Rushdie's text, the new verses read:

> Shall He have daughters and you sons? That would be a fine division!
>
> These are but names you have *dreamed of,* you and your fathers. Allah vests no authority in them. (emphasis added)

It is evident that Rushdie's translation consciously calls attention to the ambiguous status of dreaming, which can signify at once an idle fantasy and a profound vision. Most other English translations of the sura "Al Najm" of the Koran, to which Rushdie's text refers, do not use the word *dream* at all. Nevertheless, one may read the sura itself as betraying an anxiety about revelation, at least in its overriding concern with establishing its own authority. The sura in the text of the Koran reads:

> By the star when it sinks down, your companion [Muhammad] neither strays nor is allured; neither does he speak out of whim. It is naught but a revelation inspired, taught him by one vigorous in power [Gabriel], prudent and in true nature, while poised on the uppermost horizon. Then he drew near and lower, until he was at two bow lengths distant or nearer. Then he revealed to His servant what He revealed. The heart did not falsify what he saw. Do you dispute over what he saw? . . . Indeed he saw his Lord's greatest signs. Have you seen al Lat and al 'Uzza, and Manat the third, besides? Have you [begotten] males and has He [begotten] females? That is indeed an unjust partition. They are nothing but names you yourselves and your fathers named them. God has sent no authority concerning them. They [the Pagans] but follow surmise and what the souls desire, when indeed there came to them guidance from their Lord. (*The Bounteous Koran* 700–01)

At least in light of what we already know about the sura, it is hard not to read the first few lines as responding to voiced or unvoiced allegations about the source of revelation. The text appears to be particularly concerned to establish the purity of the prophet's declarations. It states that they stem neither from whim nor desire—the desire, for instance, to either placate or defy the idolaters—but that they only record what was revealed to the prophet by the archangel.

For Rushdie's story, however, the archangel is not a transparent authority but only a figure of deference. Who really speaks, the novel asks, when the archangel speaks? Thus in the novel, the focus shifts to Gabriel; and in his dreams of doubt and despair, Gibreel Farishta, whose name literally means Gabriel Angel, appears to himself as an archangel forsaken by his faith. In these dreams Gibreel becomes the guarantor of revelation, except that the archangel himself does not know whose messages he transmits or how he transmits then. When Mahound decides that the earlier revelation about the goddesses was but a trick of the devil, Gibreel the messenger is more mystified than anyone:

> Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me.* From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked.

Gibreel's mouth, as we know, gets "worked" by Mahound's will, as it does in other dreams by the imam's or Ayesha's will, so that Gibreel remains,

in every scene, an actor reciting words that he neither chooses nor even understands.

How then are we to read such a version of the story of the satanic verses? As an allegory that dramatizes the relationship between politics and religion, the legislator and the angel of God, such that the legislator actually becomes a ventriloquist who turns the gods into his puppets, as in Hobbes's account of the early lawgivers? As a psychological reading of the mystery of revelation, which demonstrates that what is imagined as revelation is but the desire of the prophet? Or to go even further, as a suggestion that the sacrosanct voice of the heart—whether it be named instinct, desire, or revelation—is nothing but a ruse of power, its instrument and slave? The text itself corroborates all these readings, and possibly others as well. We may, indeed, keep in mind that since the story of the satanic verses, like several other episodes in the novel, is narrated as a dream, we should perhaps also allow our approach to be guided by the peculiar logic of the dream world. We could at least say that like a dream, the story is overdetermined, that the elements in the story are determined by several contexts, and that each of these contexts might be represented in the story by various elements.

Thus we find, condensed in Gibreel's dreams, images of the Bombay film world, the legends of Islamic hagiography, the backdrop of an India struggling to define itself as a socialist, secular state, and the dreamer's own struggles with his loss of faith. On a more overtly linguistic level, the dreams are also connected to the dreamer's names: the name he was given, Ismail Najmuddin (Star of the Faith), which perhaps guides his later preoccupation with the sura "Al Najm" (the Star) of the Koran; and the stage name he adopts, Gibreel Farishta (Gabriel Angel), in memory of his mother, who thought of him as her very own angel, "her personal angel, she called me, *farishta,* because apparently I was too damn sweet." We might also note here the ways in which the names of other characters circulate through the various episodes of the book—Hind, Bilal, Ayesha—appellations that proliferate like metaphors. As the plot moves from one landscape to another, from the real world to the dream world, we encounter familiar figures, names, references: memories both preserved and strangely transformed. Gibreel's dreams thus become the dreams of the novel itself, the text's own dreaming of its manifold contexts.

We might find here a way of understanding why the source of revelation, or indeed of utterance itself, becomes such a persistent enigma in Rushdie's treatment of the satanic verses episode. If the text continually draws attention to its own inability to name the source of utterance, and if it explicitly focuses on the possibility of error whenever such an attempt at naming is made, then by this very gesture it points toward that which perhaps defines it as a text—that is, as a literary rather than a revealed text. In spite of a momentary error, Mahound can later definitively assert that his words bear the authority of divine law, but a story like that of the satanic verses can only circulate by veiling its sources: its power derives precisely from its lack of authorization. It has a history but no recognizable origin: as gossip, fable, indictment, or parable, it becomes the shadow play that mimics and mocks the drama of revelation. It inhabits the story of revelation, one might say, in a way that is just as disruptive or as uncanny as the way in which the novel inhabits the epic, or the secular inhabits the sacred. The text's preferred model for such inhabitation is the experience of the dream, perhaps because dreams represent to us at once the most intimate and the most alienating relationship we can have with ourselves.

Source: Simona Sawhney, "Satanic Choices: Poetry and Prophecy in Rushdie's Novel," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Fall 1990, pp. 253–77.

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Further Reading

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Cavanaugh's article discusses the theological context of Rushdie's novel and its commentary about how violence is related to prophecy.

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The chapter on Salman Rushdie in Erickson's scholarly work discusses *The Satanic Verses* in terms of its depiction of Islam's relationship with the West.

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Pipes provides a study of the circumstances surrounding the publication of Rushdie's novel, including an analysis of Rushdie's intentions and reactions to the fatwa.

Rushdie, Salman, "In Good Faith," in *Newsweek*, Vol. 115, No. 7, February 12, 1990, pp. 52–56.

Rushdie's important article about *The Satanic Verses* defends his novel, argues why it should not be offensive to Muslims, and asks for the right to free expression.

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Seminick's analytical approach to *The Satanic Verses* offers a useful deconstruction of the novel's themes.