

Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses

Monthly discussion groups

Parts 5 and 6

1. As we have come to expect in a Rushdie novel, characters continue to proliferate in Parts 5 and 6.
 - As you are reading, can you define the relationship between each of the following characters and Gibreel and/or Chamcha?
 - Muhammad Sufyan + Hind, Mishal, and Anahita
 - Hanif Johnson
 - Mimi Mamoulian
 - Billy Battuta
 - Hal Valance
 - Sisodia
 - Otto Cone + Alicja and Elena
 - Hyacinth and Orphia Phillips
 - Dr. Uhuru Simba
 - Which minor characters in London have connections with both Gibreel and Chamcha, without knowing about the two actors' relationship to each other? What significance do you find in these apparently coincidental connections?
2. The title of part 5, "A City Visible but Unseen" suggests that the novel will reveal aspects of London (the "Elloven Deeowen" of Chamcha's childhood fantasies) that usually go unnoticed. What are we shown in this part of the novel about the London to which Chamcha and Gibreel have immigrated?
 - What do the descriptions of the Shaandaar Café and rooming house reveal about multi-cultural London? What do we learn about London from the view of the street from Chamcha's attic window (pp. 292-93)?
 - What aspects of modern London life does the description of the Hot Wax Club reveal?
 - What do Sisodia's tirade about "The Trouble With The English" (pp. 353-54) and Gibreel's plan "to tropicalize" London" (pp. 365-66) reveal about the view many south Asian immigrants have of London in particular and the English in general?
3. When Chamcha tries to warn his former voice actor partner Mimi Mamoulian that Billy Battuta is a scam artist, Mimi replies, "I am an intelligent female . . . conversant with postmodernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a 'flattened' world. When I become the voice of a bottle of bubble bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly, understanding what I'm doing and why. Viz., I am earning cash" (p. 270).
 - Has English urban culture, as represented in this novel, become "pastiche"—the mere imitation of earlier forms and practices, all jumbled together? Is it "flattened": without depth of thought or morality or meaning? Are the characters in this novel living in "an amoral, survivalist, get-away-with-it-world" (p. 271), as Chamcha fears?
 - Besides Billy Battuta, who are the other scammers in part 5? Who's scamming whom?

- What resonances can you find between these scammers and the “Satanic” temptation of Mahound, the businessman?
 - At the other end of the spectrum from the scammers are the pure, whose answer to the question “What kind of an idea are you?” (p. 345) allows for no compromise. Does the novel valorize either pole in this spectrum? Is a middle position possible?
 - Is this novel itself a “pastiche” stylistically? Is it morally, philosophically, or theologically “flattened”?
4. How are we to understand the novel’s representation of multiple quests for transcendent experience? Are they delusional?
- What does Everest mean to Allie?
 - Is Allie’s sister’s addiction to drugs a quest for transcendence?
 - Does sex for Allie and Pamela become a transcendent experience? Why does Allie’s sister disdain sex?
5. Since his adolescence, Chamcha has tried to be a “good” Englishman, but he is transformed into a goatish, horned devil. Gibreel is a womanizing, spoiled movie star, who has blasphemed against his faith, but he gains a halo. And God looks like “a myopic scrivener” (p. 329). Questions about good/evil, angels/devils, and God recur throughout this novel.
- Why has London become a locus of a growing revaluation of the devil as hero (pp. 294-96)?
 - Why does Chamcha lose his devilish appearance when he experiences intense hatred for Gibreel on the night of the “meltdown” at the Hot Wax Club?
 - How are we to understand Rekha Merchant’s questioning of the belief that God is wholly good when she reminds Gibreel that “Jahweh, quoted by Deutero-Isaiah . . . , remarks: ‘I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things’” (p. 334)? Likewise, how are we to understand Gibreel’s struggle to define his own relation to “the adversary” (Satan in Hebrew): “It occurred to him now that he was forever joined to the adversary, their arms locked around one another’s bodies, mouth to mouth, head to tail, as when they fell to earth . . . No! . . . Iblis/Shaitan standing for the darkness, Gibreel for the light. – Out, out with these sentimentalities: *joining, locking together, love*. Seek and destroy: that was all” (pp. 364)?
 - How are we to understand the appearance of God to Gibreel when he breaks up with Allie (pp. 328-30)?
 - What are the “archangelic functions” that Gibreel possesses? Are they a force for good or evil (p. 340)?
6. As The Satanic Verses wrestles with questions of theology, it also addresses fundamental problems of philosophy: What is real? What is true?
- How are we to understand the “reality” of Gibreel’s, Chamcha’s, and Allie’s dreams, as well as the dreams of many anonymous Londoners (p. 294-95)?
 - What does the plan to create a new kind of “theological” film based on Gibreel’s dreams suggest about the relation between dream/hallucination, fiction/film, and belief?
 - Jumpy describes the “real language problem” of the poet (from Greek *poiein* ‘create’) as “*how to bend it shape it, how to let it be our freedom, how to repossess its poisoned*

wells, how to master the river of words of time of blood . . . Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true” (p. 290). Can the creator of fictions in language make them true?

7. Much of Gibreel’s dream of “The Return to Jahilia” takes place in The Curtain, a whore house that Mahound allows to remain open while easing the transition of new converts to Submission.
 - How does this den of iniquity become a “profane mirror” (p. 397) of Mahound’s own household?
 - Why do the men of Jahilia seek out whores who take on the identities of the wives of the Prophet?
 - Why do the whores, who used to mock the poet Baal, decide to take him as their “husband,” and then encourage him to take charge like the patriarchal Prophet?
 - When Salman disdains Mahound’s proliferating rules for women, why does Baal defend the Prophet whom he once mocked?

8. The central characters in this section are both writers: Salman, the Persian scribe who records Mahound’s recitations of the angel Gibreel’s messages, and Baal, the satirical poet once hired by Abu Simbel to mock Mahound who has now grown old and lost his poetic edge.
 - Why does Salman become disillusioned with Mahound and his angelic messages? How do Salman’s actions call into question the founding revelations of Islam?
 - Perhaps not coincidentally, Salman the scribe bears the name of his creator Salman Rushdie. Does the scribe voice Rushdie’s views—about Submission and the treatment of women, about the provenance of the Quran, about the role of the writer? What are we to make of his claim, after having been reduced to writing for hire in the marketplace, that “People write to tell lies . . . So a professional liar makes an excellent living” (p. 398).
 - What are we to make of the fact that Baal, who seemed to have lost his poetic powers, goes to the prison gates of the twelve jailed whores and publicly recites love poetry that moves his listeners to tears?
 - Why does Baal, who had been so terrified that Mahound would punish him for his satires that he hid among The Curtain’s eunuchs, now reveal his identity and proudly proclaim, “I recognize no jurisdiction except that of my Muse; or, to be exact, my dozen Muses” (p. 404)?
 - When Baal confesses at his trial the whole story of his life in The Curtain, why does the crowd erupt into laughter, much to Baal’s dismay? What does this laughter suggest about the power of the writer in the face of power?
 - Is either Salman or Baal a heroic figure? What does the following exchange between the soon-to-be-beheaded Baal and Mahound suggest about the role of the writer in the land of Submission:
 - “[Baal] shouted over his shoulder: ‘Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can’t forgive.’ Mahound replied, ‘Writers and whores. I see no difference here’” (pp. 405).

