

Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses

One meeting group

Parts 1 and 2

1. Just as in Midnight's Children, Rushdie peoples The Satanic Verses with a sprawling cast of characters. As an aid to reading, you might try to identify how each of the following characters relates to the protagonists of Parts 1 and 2—Gibreel, Saladin, and Mahound:
Gibreel Farishta + Rekha Merchant and Alleluia Cone
Saladin Chamcha + Pamela Lovelace and Zeeny Vakil
Changez Chamchawala
Mahound [a derogatory name for Muhammad, found in medieval romances, believed to be a demon that Muslims worshipped]
Bilal, Khalid, Salman
Hamza
Abu Simbel
Baal
Hind
2. The reader is introduced to Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha as two actors of Indian origin on a flight that explodes over the English Channel. Both men have already experienced multiple transformations in their lives and are soon to be completely transmuted by their fall out of the sky.
 - What transformations/reincarnations has each experienced? How has each adapted to these transmutations? For example,
 - How has being an immigrant in England affected the identity of Saladin?
 - How has being the star of wildly popular “theological” movies affected the identity of Gibreel?
 - How has the profession of actor impacted the identities of Gibreel and Saladin? Are their off-stage/off-mike identities stable or fluid? What does Chamcha mean when he thinks, “After all, ‘les acteurs ne sont pas des gens’” [Actors are not people] (quoting the French movie Children of Paradise, p. 35).
 - Does the novel suggest that there exists an authentic Indian identity, or are inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent always already hybrid, as Chamcha’s Indian lover Zeeny Vakil describes
“the eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition [In the paintings of the legends of Hamza, the warrior] you could see the Persian miniature fusing with Kannada and Keralan painting styles, you could see Hindu and Muslim philosophy forming their characteristically late-Mughal synthesis” (p. 71).
Does the novel suggest that there is a significant difference between a hybrid identity and a fluid identity?
 - Early in the novel the omniscient narrator opines,
“A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of

abominations most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves” (p. 49).

What relationship does the novel seem to be drawing between fluidity of identity, acting, being an immigrant, and definitions of evil (see the epigraph quotation from Daniel Defoe’s The History of the Devil)?

3. As Gibreel and Saladin fall,

“Chamcha, prim, rigid, and still upside-down, saw Gibreel Farishta in his purple bush-shirt come swimming towards him . . . and would have shouted, ‘Keep away, get away from me,’ . . . [but] instead of uttering words of rejection he opened his arms and Farishta swam into them until they were embracing head-to-tail . . . ” (pp. 6-7).

This introduction to the two main characters foregrounds their differences, but nevertheless unites them as twins, “tumbling end over end, performing their geminate [Latin: *geminus* = twin] cartwheels” (p. 7).

- How do Gibreel’s and Saladin’s personalities and life experiences differ?
- Despite these differences, what unites them?

4. From the beginning, Gibreel sees things that others don’t see, Saladin is plagued by prophetic dreams, and the narrator relates impossibilities as if they were facts.

- Why does Gibreel try so hard to resist sleep? Do his visions and hallucinations characterize him as a religious visionary or as a schizophrenic?
- Why would prophetic dreams irrupt into the consciousness of the modern rationalist, Saladin?
- In general, how is the reader to understand the fantastic elements of the novel? Are they rationalized? Are they irruptions of superstition into the modern, scientific world? Are they symbolic embodiments of the novel’s themes? Other possibilities?

5. Surprisingly for the kind of ironic, skeptical, mocking narrator that we’ve come to expect from Midnight’s Children, the narrator of The Satanic Verses speaks, apparently without irony, of love. While telling of Gibreel’s self-education, the narrator reveals that

“He filled himself up with God knows what, but he could not deny, in the small hours of his insomniac nights, that he was full of something that had never been used, that he did not know how to begin to use, that is, love” (p. 24).

Moreover, while telling of Saladin’s courtship of Pamela Lovelace, the narrator states categorically,

“A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he’s managed it . . . Not only the need to be believed in, but to believe in another. You’ve got it: Love” (pp. 49-50).

- What role does love play in the novel? Does the novel draw a distinction between true and illusory love?
- Is love ironized or imagined as real and present?

6. As in Midnight’s Children Rushdie often imbues objects (the perforated sheet, pickles, the brass spittoon, etc.) with meanings that resonate throughout the protagonists’ life. What

significances do the following carry in the life of Saladin: the wallet he found as a child, the roast chicken he bought in London, the lamp in his father's study that looks like Aladdin's, and the walnut tree?

7. In Gibreel's dream vision, which constitutes Part 2, Rushdie reimagines the founding of Islam with important departures from the orthodox version, as simplified below:

“The Satanic Verses are words of ‘satanic suggestion’ which the Islamic prophet Muhammad is alleged to have mistaken for divine revelation. The words praise the three pagan Meccan goddesses: al-Lāt, al-'Uzzá, and Manāt and can be read in early prophetic biographies of Muhammad Religious authorities embraced the story for the first two centuries of the Islamic era. However, beginning in the 13th century, Islamic scholars . . . started to reject it as being inconsistent with Muhammad's ‘perfection’ . . . which meant that Muhammad was infallible and could not be fooled by Satan.” (Wikipedia)

- Why did Islamic clerics find Rushdie's reimagining of the story so offensive that they banned the novel and even invoked a *fatwa* calling for the assassination of Rushdie, his publishers, and translators?
- In his vision, Gibreel feels himself to be, at different times, (a) the audience of a movie, (b) the angel who speaks the revelations, and (c) the Prophet who both listens to and generates the angel's revelations. How does this version of the foundational story of Islam question the authority of the revelations that, once dictated and recorded, became the Quran?

8. Gibreel is tormented by his dream visions and longs to be released:

“Let there be an end to revelations . . . cause of all the trouble in the human race, movies, too, if I was God I'd cut the imagination right out of people and then maybe poor bastards like me could get a good night's rest” (p. 124).

- In this novel, does Rushdie represent the imagination as fundamentally dangerous, or as delusional, or as a mode for approaching the truth or . . . ?
- Baal, the satirical poet for hire, claims that
“A poet's work . . . [is] To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.” Then the narrator adds, “And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict, then they will nourish him” (p. 100).

Does Baal here articulate the role Rushdie has taken for himself as a writer? Or in the novel is Baal merely a sophist (“a person who reasons with clever but fallacious arguments”), not a true poet (“a maker”—from Greek *poētēs*; *poiein* = to create).

Parts 3 and 4

1. As we have come to expect, characters continue to proliferate in Parts 3 and 4. As you are reading, can you define the relationship between each of the following characters and Gibreel and/or Chamcha:

Alleluia Cone (Allie)

Pamela Lovelace

Rosa Diamond + Don Enrique
Martín de la Cruz + Aurora del Sol
Officers Stein, Bruno, and Novak
Hyacinth Phillips
Jumpy Joshi
Muhammad Sufyan
John Maslama
The Imam
Ayesha (the empress and the peasant)
Mirza Saeed
Mishal
Osman

2. Part 3 is entitled “Elloven Deeowen,” the nonsense phrase Chamcha, as a child in Bombay, used to chant while playing “grand-mother’s footsteps.” The narrator decodes the phrase as “the six letters of his dream city . . . London” (p. 37).
 - Before his fall from the hijacked plane and his resulting transformation, Chamcha seems to have realized his fantasy. He lives in London, he has succeeded in his profession, and he married a lovely wife. But what cracks have already begun to open in his adopted identity? Why did he marry Pamela Lovelace? Why did she marry him? What dissatisfactions plague his work life?
 - After his fall from the hijacked plane, how does the England that Chamcha experiences differ from his childhood fantasy of Elloven Deeowen?
 - How is Chamcha redefined by those who see his transformed self? What new identity has he acquired?
 - The story of Rosa Diamond, who rescues Chamcha and Gibreel after they land on the beach, may seem extraneous to the central plot. How might her delusions about the landing of William the Conqueror and her memories of Argentina expand the novel’s representation of England in the post-colonial era?
3. How does Gibreel’s fall from the hijacked plane transform him?
 - What accounts for the difference between Chamcha’s and Gibreel’s transformations?
 - What is Gibreel seeking in his escape from India to London? How do the Londons that Chamcha and Gibreel imagine differ?
 - Does Gibreel’s quest for Allie resemble Allie’s quest for Everest? Is either quest ultimately spiritual?
4. How are we to understand Rushdie’s use of magical realism in the narration of Chamcha’s and Gibreel’s lives after their fall?
 - Why does Chamcha sprout horns, take on the body of a satyr, and defecate in the police van?
 - Why do the police, the immigration officers, and John Maslama, who sits beside Gibreel on the train, see an aura around Gibreel’s head?
 - What are we to make of the angelic vision Allie sees at the summit of Everest?
 - Pamela Lovelace’s uncle’s manor house was once owned by Matthew Hopkins, the famous seventeenth-century “Witchfinder-General” (p. 188). How does this small detail

expand Rushdie's exploration of the infernal and the transcendent in the histories of the Indian Subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula?

5. Parts 3 and 4 expand the novel's treatment of love, desire, sexual expression, and transcendent experience.
 - In which relationship(s) does individual sexual pleasure seem to be the goal?
 - In which relationship(s) does sexual intimacy seem to flow from love for the other as separate from the self?
 - Do any relationships seem to open a window to the transcendent?
 - Why is sexual betrayal so devastating to Rekka Merchant and Saladin Chamcha?
6. Gibreel lost his faith after his prayers during his extended illness went unanswered. In his subsequent dreams, how does he imagine religion? Do these dreams present a nuanced critique of Islam, or are they corrosive satire?
 - Which was more likely to have engendered the ire of the Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie: his irreverent treatment of the story of the founding of Islam in Part 2 or Gibreel's dream of "the Imam" in Part 4?
 - Why is Gibreel dreaming about Mahound, a Medieval visionary in the Arabian Peninsula; a contemporary Imam in exile in a Western metropolis; and a girl in modern India who wants to lead a pilgrimage to Mecca? What role(s) does Gibreel play in these dreams?
7. In Gibreel's dream about "the Imam," the enemy is Ayesha, the empress of Desh. In the dream about Mirza Saeed and his wife Mishal, Ayesha is a peasant girl who becomes a prophetess and leads a pilgrimage.
 - How do "the Imam" and the peasant Ayesha differ as religious leaders of a devoted following? Does either resemble Mahound?
 - What does each want to achieve? How does each enact love?
 - Why does Al-Lat, one of the three Meccan goddesses mentioned in "the Satanic verses," burst out of the empress Ayesha's shell at the end of Gibreel's dream about "the Imam"?
 - What issues about gender and religion do all three of Gibreel's dreams raise?
8. What thematic relationships can you find that connect the narration of the lives of Gibreel and Chamcha to the interpolated stories of Mahound, "the Imam," and the peasant Ayesha?

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 "Ellowen 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).

Parts 7-9

1. In the climax to the stories of Chamcha and Gibreel, evil takes the form of jealousy and lust. Why and how do jealousy and lust come to dominate the lives of these two immigrants?
- Do the different struggles of Chamcha and Gibreel to form coherent (if hybrid and/or fluid) identities make them susceptible to these forms of evil? (See the epigraph quotation from Daniel Defoe's The History of the Devil.)
 - What is the basis of Gibreel's and Allie's sexual relationship? Why is it so vulnerable?
 - Chamcha once insisted to Pamela, who considers Shakespeare a racist, that "Othello, 'just one play', was worth the total output of any other dramatist in any other language" (p. 412).
 - If he so admires this tragedy, why does Chamcha take the role of its villain, Iago, who sets out to poison Othello's mind with jealousy?
 - How do Chamcha's motivations mirror Iago's?
 - Is Gibreel an innocent Othello? Does he, in some way, deserve Chamcha's "hate"?

- Chamcha uses sing-song verses like jingles or children’s rhymes, to drive Gibreel to madness. Which verses are more “Satanic”—Chamcha’s suggestive jingles (pp. 459-61) or the original “Satanic verses” of the Quran (p. 117)?
2. The Satanic Verses presents the reader with multiple perspectives on London during the Thatcher years. In the climactic chapter, “The Angel Azrael,” what has “Ellowen Deeowen” become?
- What has become of British culture as represented in the scene at Billy Battuta’s party on the movie sound stage of a musical adaptation of Dicken’s Our Mutual Friend? Has the great British cultural tradition been reduced to pastiche? Has London become a kind of Disney World simulacrum?
 - What is the reader to make of occurrences like these:
 - the discovery of a witches’ coven in the police force
 - a wave of murders by “the Granny Ripper”
 - a rally where speakers preach resistance against police brutality, but also gloss over the history of sexual aggression perpetrated by their hero Uhuru Simba (whose real name is Sylvester Roberts), all the while appropriating symbols of the struggles against segregation in the American South and apartheid in South Africa (p. 429)
 - the eruption of apocalyptic violence amid “derelict kitchen units, deflated bicycle tyres, shards of broken doors, dolls’ legs, vegetable refuse extracted from plastic disposal bags by hungry cats and dogs, fast food packets, rolling cans, shattered job prospects, abandoned hopes, lost illusions, expended angers, accumulated bitterness, vomited fear, and a rusting bath” (pp. 476-77)?
3. The narration in “The Angel Azrael” is complex.
- Who exactly is the narrator?
 - A transcendent, but enigmatic being like an absent, but all-seeing god (pp. 423, 473, 480)?
 - A writer, like the one Jumpy describes, who makes an inverted Faustian contract with the Devil, ruining his life to gain “(only if he’s lucky) maybe not eternity, but posterity, at least” (p. 474)?
 - As the story hurtles toward its climax at the Shaandaar Café fire, how does the perspective of the narration shift?
 - From whose perspective does the reader learn about Gibreel’s taking the trumpet of Azrael (pp. 462-63)?
 - From what perspective does the reader view the events of the night of rioting and fire (pp. 470-72)?
 - From whose perspective does the reader learn of Pamela’s and Jumpy’s deaths (pp. 479-81)?
 - Why do you think Rushdie enters his own novel as “I” and includes so many perspective shifts in this climactic chapter?
4. How is Gibreel’s dream of Ayesha and the village pilgrimage to Mecca connected thematically to other aspects of the novel?
- To Gibreel’s dream of the Imam’s return to defeat the Empress Ayesha?

- To Gibreel's dream of the bargain Mahound is offered to increase his followers?
 - To Gibreel's experiences
 - of love and lust
 - of religious faith and its loss
 - of miracles that promise a new life
 - of his struggle to answer the question "What kind of idea are you?"
 - Why does a film star dream about charismatic religious leaders?
5. Does The Satanic Verses imagine a world in which redemption is possible?
- What motivates Chamcha to rush into the burning Shaandaar Café? What motivates Gibreel to rescue Chamcha from the flames?
 - What happens to Chamcha's "hate" for Gibreel and Gibreel's pursuit of Chamcha as "the enemy" (a translation of *Satan*)?
 - How does returning to India to see his dying father change Chamcha/Saladin/Salahuddin?
 - Why does being in the presence of death effect this change?
 - Both Rosa Diamond and Salahuddin come to believe that ghosts are "unfinished business." What ghosts must Salahuddin confront on his return to India? How do "the walnut tree" and "the magic lamp" represent aspects of his "unfinished business"?
 - What does the reunion with Zeeny Vakil offer Salahuddin? Can he accept it?
6. Does the novel's ending mete out rewards and punishments that allow the reader to feel that justice has been served?
- Are the good rewarded and the evil punished? Who are the good and who, evil?
 - How is the reader left to imagine Salahuddin's experience of a new life (as a rich heir who has, at long last, returned home and fallen in love) after hearing Gibreel's confession and witnessing his suicide?
 - How does the reader judge Gibreel's murder of Sisodia and Allie?
 - Is Gibreel an innocent (angelic?) victim? Is Salahuddin a Satanic villain?