

Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses

Every seven weeks discussion groups

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," which some commentators believe were dictated, then rejected as part 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 Azraeel” 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 Azraeel (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 own 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 his 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, a paranoid schizophrenic, an innocent (even angelic?) victim?
- Is Salahuddin a Satanic villain?