

Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses

Every other month group, parts 5-9

Parts 5-6

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).

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 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 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?