CHAPTER-V

THE SATANIC VERSES: IMAGING IDENTITIES
CHAPTER: V

The Satanic Verses: Imaging Identities

Doubt is the human condition, but what of the angelic?
Halfway between Allahgod and homosap, did they ever
doubt? They did: challenging God’s will one day they
hid muttering beneath the Throne, daring to ask
forbidden things: antiques. ...Human beings are
tougher nuts, can doubt anything, even the evidence
of their own eyes. Of behind their-own eyes ... angels,
you don’t have much in the way of a will. To will is to
disagree; not to submit; to dissent.

(The Satanic Verses 92-93)

At the end of Midnight’s Children, its narrator Saleem Sinai is seen
“pickling the past,” getting ready to “unleash” the real truth about the past of his
“amnesiac nation” (549), while throughout Shame, the narrator-author has been
trying to fabricate the truth, of “forming a palimpsest on the past” (91). Just
because Rushdie employs the novel as the instrument of demystification, it is
no guarantee that he is free from the doubts, duplicities and evasions for which
he attacks the politicians. Such doubts and duplicities have the effect of creating an atmosphere of unreality and make-belief. In fact, they are contributing to the breakdown of any judgment that tends to lead the reader towards any certainty. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie seems to be working, almost from the first page, to subvert its narrative authority and, to introduce doubts about the identity of the narrator as well as reliability of the narrative. The novel projects the problematic of blurred vision, of being torn between alternative worlds of identities.

A lot of debates have evolved, especially after the widespread controversy in *The Satanic Verses* affair, around the themes of definition and self-definition, doubt and description. The perceived threat of losing one’s identity is clearly part of the arguments of the affair. There is an increasing tendency to perceive the other as enslaving, blind, one-sided, and oneself as the true, right-minded, in a way which often seems naïve or even callous. The fears are old, too, going back to the birth of Islam, and they escalate in the accusations of conspiracies: whether it is an Islamic fundamentalist plot of the East or a Zionist conspiracy of the West. But Zeeny Vakil, a character in the novel, puts a strong argument against such a tendency: “Why should there be a good, right way of being a wrong? ...Actually, we’re all bad Indians. Some are worse than others” (52). Thus the controversial novel, in fact, appears a work of radical dissent and questioning and reimaging, but not wholly—as the author tries to explain in the essay “In Good Faith”—full of “filth and insult and abuse.”

With its perceived closeness to the Islamic tradition and the Quran, *The Satanic Verses* has posed serious interpretative problems to Muslims as well as to other readers. The most painful aspect for all is perhaps the fight over identities in an increasingly migrant and mélange culture. Besides, when there are definitions of self-clash as parodied in the novel, there is every possibility of
conflicts. In case of the novel the conversation has gone wrong very deeply, reinforcing the intercultural conflicts, marking the ruptures of communities. Akbar Ahmed in his *Postmodernism and Islam* has made a critical study of the varying Muslim positions where he sees that the problem of identity is not only with the individual but it is also a communal matter. He fears the lack of hope of any dialogue: "In this atmosphere, even to hint at dispassionate analysis of the situation was to risk being labeled disloyal to the cause, a traitor of the community". However, leaving apart the bitter part of the controversy, it is often possible to see the work as a narrative in search of order amidst chaos, doubts and disbeliefs. Nasim Ansari also expresses this view in an article on blasphemy; he writes: "Rushdie’s fiction raises interesting issues of belief and skepticism that are provocative but not really blasphemous, unless one starts from the premise that the very shadow of a doubt on holiness is blasphemous".

A migrant in real life and a fantastic fabulist in fiction, Rushdie portrays the central experiences of his life in his novels as symbolic of the human condition. His experience as a migrant—first an unwilling one from Bombay to Karachi, and then rather a liberated one from Karachi to London—keeps pushing through despite the fact that the personal elements are heavily disguised through the blending of the mythic and fantastic into the real world. Despite several painful references to partition of the Indian subcontinent, the largest single human exodus the world has ever known, migration has never been the central issue in *Midnight’s Children*. However, in *Shame*, the pain of forced transition finds its peculiar explication:

I, too, know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will). And I have
a theory that the resentments we mohajirs engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men ancienly dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown. (85)

His rhetoric of simultaneous lamentation and celebration, reflecting on the theme of self-actualization continues in the same novel, of course, in a tone of light-heartedness:

What is the best thing about migrant people? I think it is their hopefulness....And what's the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage...We have come unstuck from more than the land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time.(86-87)

These passages act as a precursor for the opening of *The Satanic Verses*, where Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, two Indian immigrants in England, encounter a very nagging question, “Who am I? Who else is there?” (4), and they both explore their ways of imaginatively reimagining the plural and partial nature of identity.

But the novel remains a dislocated text in its material, reception, and in its generic space. Its narrative refers to multiple historical and textual materials and combines them in different, dislocated, and new contexts. So, it is a ‘novel’ at least in that sense, in being new. It reflects the electric, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition sketched in *The Satanic Verses*: “The Mughals had brought artists from every part of India to work on the paintings; individual identity
was submerged to create a many headed, many brushed Over artist who, literally, was Indian painting" (70).

When the text subscribes to such a hybrid tradition, it is perhaps no wonder to find even further diversity and disruption in its reception. The dislocation means that readers have found *The Satanic Verses* very different things, standing for various ideological positions, and that readers insist the others are wrong in their perception. It is in this insistence that the novel becomes dislocated, not that it would otherwise be located correctly, but having no one specific location. When it comes to its generic space, displacement has given rise to a new mode of reimagining; Rushdie envisages this mode of distancing in a phrase—"slight angle to reality"— in *Shame.*

*The Satanic Verses*, like the earlier novels, is both breathless and breathtaking as it jostles with history, time, language and culture. Here Rushdie has recreated an imaginative world that accommodates wildly divergent materials— the fantastic worlds of Bombay, London and Jahilia, the city of sand, and the Indian village of Titlipur. His underlying theme is migration, especially as the Asians face it in London, and more generally as it affects the human spirit. Rushdie's own life provides the metaphor for the modern Indian migrants, destined to carry the whole baggage of the ancient modern subcontinent into a hostile London, where one perforce life in a permanent seize among the bigoted tribe. "This is the first time", Rushdie confides in an interview to Bryan, "that I have managed to write a book from the whole of myself. It is written from my entire sense of being in the world."

Primarily from this point of view, *The Satanic Verses* appears to be portraying a migrant's eye-view of the world; it is written from the very migrant experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis. The novel attempts
radical reformulation of language, form and ideas through the celebration of
hybridity, impurity, intermingling, questioning in a bitter parodic style that raises
much heat and dust about his work. Moreover, while portraying the conflicts
between the material and spiritual worlds, the novel tries to mirror the conflict
within the author's own self. The novel contains serious doubts, uncertainties,
and even shocks that are not definitely up to the liking of the devout.

The novel could not have possibly introduced these themes in better
way—history and contemporaneity interlinking together to form layers of
meaning and metaphor—than the bang of explosion of an Air India jumbo
jetliner that the hijackers blow up over the English Channel. The bizarre event
is based on a historical fact of the blowing up of Kaniska, the Boeing 747, by
Sikh militants off the Ireland coast in 1985. The plane is named 'Bostan', which
is both a Farsi word for garden and the title of the great didactic poem by the
thirteenth-century Persian poet Saeli, proclaiming the virtues of justice,
benevolence, self-restraint, gratitude, penitence and so on. Furthermore, the
name 'Bostan' prompts the reader to think that the fabled Oriental garden has,
of late, turned upside-down to suggest a shameful image of violence and
disintegration. Such details are not insignificant in Rushdie's work, where each
act of naming is dense with implications.

Falling from the plane, and floating with the gift of anti-gravity, the sole
survivors—Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha—sing: "To be born again,
first you have to die" (3). The song, as one finds, is deeply related to the title as
well as to the novel's recurrent theme—the theme of transmogrification,
emphasizing that there is no re-birth without death. Its extension includes there
is no idea which can claim to be whole and pure without first having undergone
the temptation of doubt and profanity. There is no genuine faith, love or salvation

—148—
without the agony of suffering induced by the lure of the 'satanic verses'. Here Rushdie hints at humankind's contradictory yearning for individual freedom and salvation, for independent quest for truth and loyal commitment to a community.

The surreal, mythical fall of Saladin and Gibreel at the beginning of the novel is paralleled by their tragic, personal fall at the end of the novel. The inner conflicts of these two characters and their potential for greatness have been revealed to the reader by the narrator with such force that the reader has a decisive insight through empathy into the inevitability of human failure and suffering. The failure is commonly associated with the spiritual death of the character—the death is brought on by the individual's admission of total moral failure and the resolution to start afresh.

Washed up on the wintry English coast, rescued by an aged widow Rosa Diamond, who is imaginatively reliving her early married life on the Argentine pampas, the two survivors feel themselves to be "born again" (3) in some sense yet to unfold. The novel goes back and forth to narrate the story of these two painfully divided selves: in case of Saladin Chamcha, the division seems to be secular and societal; he is torn between Bombay and London, between East and West. In case of Gibreel Farishta, the division is spiritual, a rift in his soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his inability to do so. Thus the novel is mainly about their quest for wholeness.

The narrative moves with Gibreel and Saladin, from their past lives in Bombay to London, and back to Bombay again. Saladin Chamcha is a star of the dubbing trade on British radio and television; he is an actor of a thousand and one voices, none of them his own. The reader at various points is reminded of his virtuosity of living simultaneously in several selves: "Once, in a radio play for thirty-seven voices, he interpreted every single part under a variety of
The heroic association of his name with Saladin, the great champion of medieval Islam who defeats the Crusaders and restores Sunni Islam to Egypt, however, is symbolic of a resurrection. In fact, his transformation is more in the realm of social and physical possibility. His background closely parallels Rushdie's own—Bombay youth, English education, living "without a god of any type," and determined to become "the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a good and proper Englishman" (43). Thus floating upward from history and memory, Saladin recreates him in a deliberate act of will, becoming "unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abomination....Or consider him sociopolitical: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false description to counter the falsehoods invented about us" (49). This note recurs throughout the novel, acting as a kind of touchstone for the transformations that take place in the pages.

He was born in Bombay as Salahuddin Chamchawala and, like his author, is estranged with his father and settles down in London. He tries in London to identify him completely with a "good and proper Englishman" (43) — English accent, English manners, English dance, dress, food, and anything and everything about England. His marriage to Pamela has been part of this desire. But Pamela is rebelling against English stuffiness and championing immigrant causes; she understands that Saladin is not in love with her but with "that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit" (180). Thus theirs is definitely "a marriage of crossed purpose, each of them rushing towards the very thing from which the other was in fight" (180). After his air disaster and rescue, Saladin is taken away by the British police to a detention center where he is beaten and laughed at. But in the hour of real need his friend Gibreel abandons him to be so dehumanized by the immigrant officials that he develops
pseudonyms and nobody ever worked it out” (60). The heroic association of his name with Saladin, the great champion of mediaeval Islam who defeats the Crusaders and restores Sunni Islam to Egypt, however, is symbolic of a resurrection. In fact, his transformation is more in the realm of social and physical possibility. His background closely parallels Rushdie’s own—Bombay youth, English education, living “without a god of any type,” and determined to become “the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a goodandproper Englishman” (43). Thus floating upward from history and memory, Saladin recreates him in a deliberate act of will, becoming “unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abomination....Or consider him sociopolitical: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false description to counter the falsehoods invented about us” (49). This note recurs throughout the novel, acting as a kind of touchstone for the transformations that take place in the pages.

He was born in Bombay as Salahuddin Chamchawala and, like his author, is estranged with his father and settles down in London. He tries in London to identify him completely with a “goodandproper Englishman” (43) — English accent, English manners, English dance, dress, food, and anything and everything about England. His marriage to Pamela has been part of this desire. But Pamela is rebelling against English stuffiness and championing immigrant causes; she understands that Saladin is not in love with her but with “that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit” (180). Thus theirs is definitely “a marriage of crossed purpose, each of them rushing towards the very thing from which the other was in fight” (180). After his air disaster and rescue, Saladin is taken away by the British police to a detention center where he is beaten and laughed at. But in the hour of real need his friend Gibreel abandons him to be so dehumanized by the immigrant officials that he develops
a pair of horns and reduces into a goat. The other monstrous beings detained in the center tell him that they are all Indian immigrants like him, but are demonized and their identity has been determined by the attitude of the colonizers: “They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (168). However, when these unassimilated migrants come to his rescue, Saladin’s attitude towards them appears no better than that of the colonial masters; he hounds on them: “You’re not my people. I’ve spent half my life trying to get away from you” (253). He loves to see him as a “creature of selected discontinuities” while the rest of the lot “wish to remain, to large degree, continuous— that is, joined to and arising from the past” (427).

Saladin’s segregation from his cultural roots and the subsequent degeneration of values is amplified in the novel when he asks his father Changez to cut down the walnut tree that had planted on his birth, sell it and send him the cash. However, Cangez’s hope of a possible entente and regeneration is non-ceasing like the soul of India; he writes back: “I have your soul kept safe, my son, here in this walnut tree. The devil has only your body. When you are free of him, return and claim your immortal spirit. It flourishes in the garden” (48). That The Satanic Verses is all about morality—the damnation of self-seeking pride, uprootedness and about the romantic salvation— is to be found in the communal faith, commitment and resoluteness of the humble. Those who have closed themselves off actually punish themselves in the hell of their isolation. On the other hand, those who open themselves up to love and community are on a self-challenging pilgrimage to heaven. This has been a roving metaphor, emanating layers of meaning, throughout the novel.

In fact, there is a deeper spiritual problem implied in Saladin’s separation from his father which emigration completes. Rushdie links the separation from the biological father and the loss of faith in him with the loss of belief in the
invisible God. He also charges his father with the denial of history and the stepping of time, the same charges that he levels at the mentors of fundamentalism. To his father he says, “I accuse him of inventing Time” (41). That is, by sending his son to England after India has achieved independence and escaped that influence of the Raj, his father forces him to return to the womb that nurtured that world. But in any case, Chamcha’s epiphany comes as a decisive insight into the soul-destroying phoniness of his whole life, which has been misspent destroying his Indian heritage. In trying to become more English than the English, Chamcha, in fact, has become an uprooted cosmopolitan mimic without a true identity or the authenticity of soul that comes from being true to the original self.

But his soul of course betrays him at times; his invented self drops all its pretensions. Emerging from his dream, when a stewardess in a plane en route to Bombay asks his choice of drinks, Saladin finds his traitor speech unaccountably metamorphosed into the Bombay lilt he has so diligently unmade: “So, okay, bibi, give one whiskysoda only” (34). His reunion with his dying father, moreover, is the moment when his farce is transformed into a tragic admission of alienation from himself and from others. His friend Zeeny Vakil has pointed out to his pretentious alienation elsewhere:

You know what you are, I’ll tell you. A deserter is what, more English than, your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don’t think it’s so perfect, it slips, baba, like a false moustache. (53)

In fact, Zeeny Vakil inspires the proud, self-seeking Saladin moments of introspection to repent over his toadying to England and the denial of his own true self in scorning the people and the customs of India. She inspires him to
join in a human chain that stretches across Bombay in a peaceful demonstration of people's communal love and concern. The human chain is ignored by the capitalist mass media of India as unworthy of reporting. But the standoffish Saladin finds in this demonstration—a community with a different faith and a very different ideology from Mohammed and Islam—a community faith that is nevertheless meant to provide a structural parallel in the novel. Moreover, it provides a parallel with the community of the Moslem foot-pilgrims that the likewise standoffish Mirza is finally permitted to join at the moment of his death through the mystic intercession of Ayesha.

The moral question remains really significant here: does Saladin deserve salvation and transcendence at the end of his life? Certainly he expects to be murdered by Gibreel for having driven him back to insanity with his obscene, satanic jingles and he does not find this "death-sentence unjust" (546). But first through the forgiving kindness of Gibreel and then through the enduring love of his dying father, Saladin gets another chance in life. Finally he is loved and encouraged to join in the community of intellectuals through his friend Zeenny Vakil. He survives and not only survives but makes himself whole by returning to his roots; more importantly he learns to deal with the great verities of love and death. These moments of love and forgiveness at the conclusion are the moral climaxes of the novel.

The parodic-mythological dimensions that Rushdie assigns to his major characters go long way in dramatizing the vacillation of uprooted individuals between vanity and self-indulgence on the one hand and self-destructive doubt and guilt on the other. If Saladin represents contemporary metropolitan Indians who find themselves trapped in the slavish imitation of their colonial masters, Gibreel's torments have come to him in the form of dreams that are not altogether sceptical. He abandons his movie-making community in Bombay and
blasphemes against Islam by stuffing his face with pork. He suffers such delusions of grandeur in his uprootedness in England that he feels exalted in announcing the Day of Judgment by blowing on a trumpet he has bought from a pawnshop. He is ridiculed and threatened with an insane asylum precisely because he has lost touch with his community. His cultural uprootedness and moral degradation drive his Indian mistress Rekha Merchant to commit suicide and, he subsequently destroys himself in an obsessive passion for a beautiful English mountain climber Alleluia Cone.

Gibreel's adventures appear to be more interior. As an actor he has lived through hell several times for having denied Allah, of dying and being reborn in a mythical fall, of deluding himself that he has been reincarnated as the Archangel Gibreel. By recognizing that he is afflicted with schizophrenia dementia, that he is ravaged by uncontrollable fits of Othello-type jealousy, Gibreel can find no release from the sickness of his life except in suicide. In suicide he atones for having driven Rekha to commit suicide at the beginning of the novel, and for having repeated this crime at the end of the novel by pushing his loyal lover Alleluia to her death. The erotic passion of Rekha, Gibreel and Alleluia could of course be analyzed as farce, but even if so, it is farce that culminates in tragedy. The tragedy is not contained in the physical deaths, but in Gibreel's confession that he is incurably insane and that he is haunted by Rekha's spirit. Rushdie has been able to adapt his style to express from the insides of Gibreel's horror at his outwardly divided self as well as at his unbearable remorse. His bizarre dreams about the 'satanic verses' are really agonizingly painful to him; they are inflicted on him like nocturnal retribution or punishment for his terrible loss of faith. His suicide brings him release from the torments of insanity and guilt, but it is a release without transcendence.
The novel consists of a merging of opposites. The migrant, imprisoned under the beam of public contempt, has nevertheless a larger, more complex view of his place in history, which is paradoxically liberating. The mutations through which Chamcha and Farishta pass are inherently unstable. Chamcha descends to goatishness and emerges from it, but essentially lives within history, making up faces to fit prevailing circumstances. Farishta becomes angelic and suffers unwillingly from delusions of God-like powers through which he traverses as well as fashions history. To give him the archangel's name, it appears, is to give him a secular equivalent of angelic half-divinity, for when he loses his faith, he is destined to be doomed. His satanic contamination seems primarily because of his abandoning the clarity of vision that Islam suggests through the teaching of the Prophet. He can neither return to the love of God, nor succeed in replacing it by earthly love. Thus unable to bear his doubts, delusions and torments, he commits suicide that appears to be the only choice left for him.

The underlying question here is actually faced by all migrants, who by definition are seekers for the truth, about themselves, about life. The contemporary social significance of the migrant in London gains increasing importance in the novel through two lines of development—the exploration of the relationship between Good and Evil, and the search for a sense of personal worth—each of which becomes implicated in the dramatization of the mythological foundation of Islam. The problem for accounting for the existence of Evil lies buried, so Rushdie seems to suggest, in the mystery of the human heart. The story of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, both masters of the art of disguise and consequently out of touch with their individual reality, shows evil arising from a core of dissociated feeling. For example, each betrays the other and each has the opportunity to save the other. Chamcha uses his disguised voice to fuel the jealousy between Farishta and his wife Alleluia Cone in response to his grudge against the former's inaction during his humiliation by
the immigration officers. However, neither, in the end, is absolved from evil, as 
the novelist says: “Let’s rather say an even harder thing that evil may not be as 
far beneath the surface as we like to say it is—that, in fact, we fall towards it 
naturally” (427).

But the ironies continue still further. Farishta, who has a feeling that he 
is finished with England-induced ambiguities, now assumes the powers of the 
djinns and decides to rescue his old-chum Saladin by causing the smoke to 
divide like the waters of the Arabian Sea, providing Chamcha a pathway to 
salvation. Chamcha, who resents Farishta’s terrible silence while the immigration 
oficers were dragging him off, however, remains ever powerless even to write 
his own narrative. But the two remain an ambiguous pair—perhaps, from the 
spiritual point of view, best considered as the two halves of one whole. He 
refers to them as “Gabreelsaladin Farishtachamcha”, condemned to this endless 
but also ending “angelicdevilish fall” (5), underlining the complex unity of life in 
which all the elements mutate to produce both Beauty and Beast, indeed, every 
quality and its opposite.

As per his scheme, Rushdie creates Jahilia, a symbolic city, based on 
the historical Mecca, which is offered implicitly as both contrast and parallel 
with modern London:

The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand, its structures 
formed of the desert whence it rises...the whole of 
miracle worked by its citizens, who have learned the 
trick of transforming the fine white dune-sand of the 
forsaken parts—the very stuff of inconstancy—the 
quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-
of-form—and have turned it, by alchemy, into the fabric
of their newly invented permanence. These people are a mere three or four generations removed from their nomadic past, when they were as rootless as dunes, or rather rooted in the knowledge that the journeying itself was home. Whereas the migrant can do without the journey altogether; it's no more than a necessary evil; the point is to arrive. (93-94)

The comparison between Jahilia and London is that both are effectively entrepots; the contrast is that one has managed to transform the stuff of impermanence into permanence whereas the other, London, is debased where “Djinns, houris, demons populate the city on this night of phantasmagoria and lust” (117).

Furthermore, Rushdie's fictional version of the foundation of Islam seems to be designed to give a historical dimension to his enquiry, foregrounding the awkward question of responsibility to his source. He pursues the ambiguity at the heart of Gabriel's revelation to Mahound, seeking to uncover the key to differentiating the good from evil in one's own soul. Islam, to Gibreel, appears to offer clarity that at any rate is what he wants to believe. Hence Gibreel's challenge to England, which offers only “ambiguities,...Biblical-satanic confusions” (353).

If one sets aside the dramatic reconstruction of Mohammad's personal life, it appears that Rushdie has drawn the main elements from theological controversy from some versions of the Quran. For example, Mohammad's concession to heathenism, the recognition of the exalted virgins—Al-Lat, Al-Uzza and Manat—contributes to considerable confusions in many quarters. Rushdie, moreover, pushes the issue back to the dream of Gibreel Farishta, by

— 157 —
creating an archangel who knows “one small detail just one tiny thing that’s 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, universe and reverse, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked” (123).

The historical repudiation of the verses had led Mohammad to migrate from Mecca to Medina. This migration is equally important to Rushdie, for in addition to being part of history, it chimes in with his underlying theme of migration and loss of identity in alien societies. Everybody, on one’s journey to death and self-discovery, in fact, is a migrant. The novel charts the perils of the journey, testing the stances taken by sceptics and believers of various kinds. Meaning is layered on meanings, image on image, structure on structure, linking past with present, suggesting an imponderable and shared destiny. No doubt the point is of right kind of choice, but the absence of precise rules of choosing or living does place a heavier responsibility on each individual.

Rushdie provides this possibility of an ultimate choice— the need for coming out of the sterile circles of narcissistic pride and finding a new community with the recognition that this new community of the faithful can only be attained through trials by ordeal and surmounting the impasse of intellectual doubts— through the historical portrayal of the Prophet’s life. The structure of The Satanic Verses invites the reader to compare Mohammed’s successful fight against temptation in the seventh-century with Gibreel’s and Saladin’s succumbing to temptation in the twentieth-century. Mohammed’s steadfast faith and the dedication to his community is contrasted with the spurious, shoddily pseudo-religion which Gibreel offers his community through his cheap theological films. It is also contrasted with Saladin’s arrogant denial of his cultural past back in Bombay by self-imposed exile in London. Rushdie uses this comparison and
contrast in order to provide an anatomy of some of the great problems of mankind in modern times—cynicism, materialism and loss of faith, tragic uprootedness of the cosmopolitan artist, spiritual homelessness of the metropolitan migrant and so on. It is no wonder, therefore, to find the self-disciplined strength of Mahound contrasted in the narrative structure with the self-indulgent weakness of Saladin and Gibreel. One has to understand that the greatness of Mohammed’s concept of God and religion has been contrasted with the farcical, surreal fantasies, and febrile delusions of Gibreel and Saladin with a view to providing some sense of order or meaning to the otherwise chaotic nature and ways of life.

Rushdie bases his psychobiography of Mohammed in his attempt as an artist to bring Mohammed’s largely unknown inner life to expression, on two controversial incidents which he views as vital turning points in the Prophet’s life. Both incidents are shaped and expressed in terms of the antitheses that determine the structure of The Satanic Verses. These antitheses are political intrigue versus spiritual purity, the fickleness and venality of the unconverted masses versus the unwavering vision of a great leader and, the mockery of materialists and doubters and the submission of the faithful.

The two incidents are the so-called ‘satanic verses’ in Mahound’s early years and his alleged twelve wives in his late years. It has been alleged that both incidents have been deliberately chosen by Rushdie to slander the origins of the Islamic religion. However, from the textual analysis it appears on the whole that Mahound is not negatively depicted in The Satanic Verses. There is of course some ironic humour in the depiction of Mahound’s surreal nocturnal wrestles with Archangel Gibreel in the quest for a divine revelation, but this humour is the inevitable result of a rationalist writing about a religious miracle. The humour springs from the incongruous mingling of sacred myth with rational psychology.

— 159 —
The plot of *The Satanic Verses* reveals that Grandee of Jahilia, Abu Simbel, blackmials cowardly Baal to belittle Mahound’s proclamation of Allah and monotheism. Baal chooses to ridicule the Messenger’s religious movement as a ludicrous “revolution of water carriers, immigrants and slaves”. (101) Baal writes the facile satire of a propagandist: “Messenger, do please lend a careful ear. Your monophilia, your one one one, ain’t for Jahilia. Return to sender” (106). But Baal’s mockery is of no real significance. He is too spiteful and petty to comprehend a positive vision and he represents only the licentious whoredom of Jahilia. Mahound struggles against far more powerful foes and conquers a much more insidious temptation. The Grandee of Jahilia offers to deliver to him the religious allegiance of every soul in the city if he will compromise his monotheistic idea and publicly recognize the ancient trio of goddesses— Al-Lat and Al-Uzza and Manat— as also worthy of worship. Mahound wrestles in agony all night on deserted Mount Cone seeking truth from a being whom he wrongly identifies as the Archangel Gabriel. He returns to Jahilia the next day in order to announce his political compromise in the contentious ‘satanic verses’: “They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed” (114-15).

Mahound is so determined that his proclamation of monotheistic Allah should emerge from obscurity and ignominy that he fails to realize until later that he has been lured into compromising the purity of his revolutionary idea.

One feels the despair and yet also the fierce determination of Mahound to wipe out this false step as he trudges through the desert in order to wrestle on the mountain with Archangel Gabriel in pursuit of a renewed revelation from God. When he perceives the political and theological enormity of his error, he retracts these verses as the work of ‘Shaitan’/Satan and returns to the purity of his idea of monotheism. Readers are really enthralled by the courage shown by Mahound when he returns to Jahilia and delivers a public abrogation of the ‘satanic verses’ (124). At this moment, even for unbelievers, Mahound becomes
a true hero. This is the stuff of inspiring fiction, inspiring regardless of whether or not the incidents are historically verifiable.

From the point of view of creating Mahound as a great hero with a slight, human flaw, *The Satanic Verses* is splendid writing. If Rushdie had eulogized his fictional simulacrum of Mohammed as a plaster saint, this would hardly have been of interest to any but the most devout Moslem. This scene is electrifying precisely because one realizes that the puritanical but otherworldly Mahound has made the mistake of compromising his faith for a short-term political advantage. He has been successfully tempted. It appears at first as though Mahound’s political compromise has been overwhelmingly successful when the Grandee and Hind, and then the entire population of Jahilia, make their obeisance to Allah.

Rushdie has chosen to focus on the 'satanic verses' not in order to jeer at the human, all too human imperfections of Mahound, but in order to illuminate the crucial moment when a great idea is either watered down and lost or does take its place on the stage of world history. This dramatic insistence on the purity of an idea or vision is given further structural significance in the novel when it is recreated as a leitmotif in the story of Ayesha the mysterious butterfly saint in twentieth-century India. To the question that provides the theological foundation of this novel—"What kind of idea are you at the moment of triumph?" (500)—saintly Ayesha replies with authority: “I was tempted, but am renewed; am uncompromising; absolute; pure” (501).

It is the way of most revolutionary ideas, Rushdie seems to imply, that their propounders compromise when challenged and that their ideas sink into the maelstrom of human chaos. Of the idealists, who do not compromise on statusquo, many have been butchered by the juggernaut of power. Only prophets
remain like the polestar to have an enduring influence on human civilization. Rushdie suggests in his novel that the Prophet Mohammed does yield briefly to the political temptation to compromise in his early days in Jahilia. Nevertheless, he withdraws swiftly from this compromise in order to maintain the purity of his revolutionary monotheism and this purity gave rise to the book of Recitation and the religion of Islam.

The other question, which Rushdie asks in order to evaluate the revolutionary idea or vision, is revealed through the significant answer given to the question “What kind of idea are you at the moment of triumph?” What he means to signify is whether the Prophet is vengeful and vindictive when he finally assumes power in Jahilia or he is really generous and forgiving. Upon his return to Jahilia, Mahound proves himself to be stern and authoritative, but also forgiving to his enemies. His compassion spreads to the Grandee, to his treacherous wife Hind, and to the general population who have hounded and ridiculed him into exile a decade earlier. The thrust of this section of the novel is therefore not to denigrate the religion of Islam but rather to reaffirm, from an unorthodox, unbeliever’s point of view, the greatness of Mohammed and his revolutionary idea or vision.

The depiction of Mahound’s achievements in The Satanic Verses becomes clearer if one compares and contrasts Mahound with other character-foils provided in this novel. Rushdie lampoons himself and his profession as poet in the devious figures of Salman the Persian and Baal the satiric poet who are portrayed as weak, treacherous and susceptible. Their weakness is perceived to stem partly from their status as outcasts, from their inability to draw spiritual strength from solidarity with the faith and customs of community and homeland. Salman is an uprooted cosmopolitan in exile and Baal is so
narcissistically in love with the cleverness of his verses that he has no concept of his own pitifulness.

As such the allegation of Rushdie accusing Mahound of lechery seems untenable. On the contrary, it is the satirist Baal and the brothel madam of Jahilia who try to undermine the authority of Mahound by dressing up twelve whores as facsimiles of Mahound's twelve wives. But Mahound protects the dignity of his Islamic revolution by having the whores stoned to death and Baal beheaded. Mahound thus subordinates sexual desire and erotic love to his religious mission. Gibreel, on the other hand, is shown as guilty of self-indulgent promiscuity and, subsequently he descends into a hell of sexual jealousy. Saladin, likewise, misuses sex and marriage as a way of escaping from his Indian identity and, for gaining entry to British society. It is only when Saladin is rejected by his British wife Pamela and by the British people during the London race riots that he slowly begins to realize that he must return to his family in Bombay in order to rediscover himself in a community of his own people. There is a similar structural contrast between Mahound and other lesser character of the novel in the matter of sex. Mahound eschews the lechery of Hind and enters into his twelve marriages as a way of forgoing a statesmanlike confederation of the clans of Jahilia and Yathrib. By contrast, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha become hopelessly enmeshed in the intrigues of their lust, their dishonesty and their jealousy in other sections of the novel.

It is also noticeable in these character contrasts that it is not Mahound who loses touch with the traditions of his homeland or the needs and directions of his people. It is Gibreel and Saladin. Gibreel commits childish and compulsive blasphemies against religious lore and Saladin intellectually denies the religion of his childhood in order to help make himself more British than the British. Their uprootedness is the source of their shallowness, their lack of commitment.
and their pusillanimity. Mahound on the other hand retains his roots in the
traditions of his society even as he is transforming that society with his
revolutionary idea. Mahound draws his inner strength and his sense of purpose
partly from his inner vision and partly because he combines this revolutionary
vision with his otherwise conservative and diplomatic leadership of his
community.

Furthermore, in his character portrayal, Rushdie deliberately plays down
the political, commercial, diplomatic, military and legal dimensions of
Mohammed's career. In fact, his novel has nothing to do with a historically
objective assessment of Mohammed's statesmen-like and worldly-wise
leadership of the squabbling Arabic clans. Instead the author has chosen to
construct what he must have known would be a provocative psychobiography.
He has not hesitated to take liberties with history, partly in order to create dramatic
fiction and partly in order to emphasize the human aspect of Mohammed's
struggle for a revelation from the divine spirit. For example, he has fused the
two main historical opponents of Mohammed in Mecca, namely Abu Jahl and
Abu Sufyan, into one figure, the Grandee of Jahilia, Abu Simbel.

More importantly, Rushdie has decided to emphasize the spirituality of
Mohammed by making a parallel between him and Jesus Christ. He calls
Mahound's religious movement a revolution of the poor, a "revolution of water-
carriers, immigrants and slaves"(101) and, to lend credence to this interpretation,
he invents the figures of Khalid the water-carrier, Salman the Persian immigrant,
Bilal the slave and Baal the satirist as Mahound's disciples.

Mahound's arch foe, Shaitan/Satan on the other hand, suffers the eternal
damnation of uprootedness, of not belonging. Rushdie expresses this
interpretation of Satan's suffering in the epigraph to The Satanic Verses:
Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for although he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is... without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.

One appreciates the reason why Rushdie has chosen this epigraph for his novel. Clearly this particular characterization of Satan as homeless and without community has to be reflected in the themes of *The Satanic Verses*. In contrast to Satan, Mahound the prophet and Ayesha the saint retain their roots in their community at the same time, as they are demanding a sacred revolution of its purpose. They have a fixed place to which they belong, namely Jahilia/Mecca as the spiritual center of Islam.

Rushdie represents all of these characters negatively, and all of them are contrasted with the triumphant life of Mahound. There also seems little doubt that Rushdie is giving ironic, part projections of his own suffering in self-imposed exile when he depicts the sufferings of Saladin and Gibreel in England. This is why those parts of the novel set in twentieth-century England are satiric and grotesque, whereas the deeply moving, spiritual climax and conclusion of the novel are set in India. Rushdie is projecting a wish fulfillment for himself in this climax and conclusion, namely his desire to escape from self-imposed exile, from the very lack of belonging to a community, with which he characterizes the punishment of Satan.

The leitmotif of the 'satanic verses' re-occurs in two other passages in this novel in quite separate contexts. The main character of the novel, Saladin...
Chamcha, concocts "little, satanic verses" (445) in order to take an obscene revenge on his fellow Anglo-Indian actor, Gibreel Farishta. Gibreel is suffering through bouts of insanity, believing he to be the Archangel Gabriel and also sick with the crazy jealousy of an Othello for his mistress Alleluia. Saladin makes anonymous phone calls of him, whispering obscene jingles:

When she's down at Waterloo
She don't wear no yes she do
When she's up at Leicester Square
She don't wear no underwear (445)

Undoubtedly, this trivial jingle is satanic in its context because it represents the betrayal of friendship and a fiendish determination by Saladin to exploit Gibreel's mental sickness and thus destroy both his love and his sanity. Saladin has become the voice of the Devil, just as Baal had before him. In the spiritual mythology that determines the narrative structure of *The Satanic Verses*, it is highly significant that at the end of the novel Gibreel rewards Saladin's evil with kindness. He saves Saladin from certain death in the fiery furnace of London's race riots. Saladin is not punished—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—but, instead, is saved by Gibreel's mercy and forgiveness.

There is a similar structural pattern on the third and final occasion when the 'satanic verses' reappear in the novel. The atheist and village leader, Mirza Saeed, speaks the verses. He has been following a dedicated group of faithful Muslim foot-pilgrims in his Mercedes Benz. The pilgrims are inspired and follow a cloud of butterflies by day; their leader—a beautiful teenage girl called Ayesha—is literally clothed in butterflies (489), and feeds upon them for her sustenance. The name Ayesha may be a coincidence here, evoking the name
of the youngest and favorite wife of the Prophet. But the mythical parallels with Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt and into the Promised Land are clear. Moreover, Ayesha is called “Bibiji the name of the long ago saint” (482) and refers to herself as “a messenger” (483) in a mythical echo of Mohammed as the Messenger of Allah.

As part of his tempting of these pilgrims, Mirza undermines the faith in their odyssey by telling them tales, which implicitly parallel Ayesha with the evil enchantress Circe who bewitches the pilgrims and turns them into pigs. He also implicitly identifies Ayesha with the vengeful Pied Piper of Hamelin “who lured a town’s children into a mountain-crack” (484) whereupon they were never seen again. His verses become satanic in the new context of the smearing and slander of Ayesha as a contemporary Pied Piper who is destroying the lives of a whole village by luring them on this senseless pilgrimage:

Hamelin town’s in Brunswick
Near famous Hanover City.
The River Weser, deep and wide,
Washes the walls on the southern side... (484)

These are the verses with which Mirza begins his satanic propaganda, tempting the villagers to give up the painful madness and to return to their deserted village. To this implied slander artfully disguised as entertainment for the pilgrims, Ayesha responds in anguish: “Those who listen to the Devil's verses, spoken in the Devil’s tongue ... will go to the Devil in the end” (484).

Later in the novel Ayesha provides a magnificent spiritual climax when she leads her faithful band of pilgrims to Mecca though the Arabian Sea. Her epiphany is told in the fairy-tale of a mystic faith. She is meant to stand in incongruous contrast to the postmodernist mood of the novel—that is, to
parodistic pastiche of the religious myths, to materialism and to spiritual shallowness. Her ultimate miracle in defying death by walking with her fellow pilgrims across the Arabian Sea to Mecca is told from a narrative perspective in which bemusement is outweighed by wistful yearning for the impossible made real in fiction.

In a glorious coda to this supernatural tale of Ayesha—a coda which is nothing if not mystical—Mirza Saeed the atheist is forgiven and accorded salvation at the hour of his death by fire. He dreams his beloved Ayesha stepping "miraculously out of his wife's body". (506-7). The rationalism and materialism of Mirza, which have made him proud and have closed him off from the community of the humble, are converted at the moment of death into a liberating romantic cure by Ayesha. His erotic passion is miraculously transformed into creative love in a scene that has mythical overtones. The lines with which this miracle is expressed in *The Satanic Verses* are a model for the powerful expression of a spiritual epiphany without melodrama:

He was a fortress with clanging gates. – He was drowning. – She was drowning, too. He saw the water fill her mouth, heard it begin to gurgle into her lungs. Then something within him refused that, made a different choice, and at the instant that his heart broke, he opened. His body split apart from his adam's-apple to his groin, so that she could reach deep within him, and now she was open, they all were, and at the moment of their opening the waters parted, and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea. (507)
Mirza Saeed's epiphany, as one tends to believe, is of a traditional, tragic kind. He dreams as a non-believing landowner, who has seen his wife and his entire subjects drown in the Arabian Sea at the behest of Ayesha who assures the waters would open up to give the pilgrims a passage to Mecca. However, in the depths of his despair he is suddenly granted the vision of perfect love and his adulterous yearning for Ayesha is mystically fused with a spiritual love. He experiences the truth of the miracle at the moment of his death, when he opens up his heart to God, and sees the waters really open up. This is a dream that dramatizes the struggle between faith and doubt. But his opening-up is an act of love and faith, and as Rushdie presents, it is an equivalent of the love of Jesus or Mohammed for the revelation of the living God. (150).

Thus, it appears that in The Satanic Verses Rushdie has attempted to capture the authentic moods of different social cultures. Firstly, there is England— imperial, racial, conservative and vainglorious—whose cultural incompatibility Saladin bemoans after his torture at the detention camp: “This isn’t England” (158)—not the England of his colonial concept but the alien land where immigrants are dehumanized. Secondly there is the power-struggle of Mahound as he strives to transform seventh-century Jahilia from venal, idolatrous and lecherous trading centre to the stern Puritanism of monotheistic Islam.

Thirdly, the culture of the migrants— their homelessness as well as inbetweenness— and, their search for wholeness, have been projected through the fractured selves of majority of the characters. Neither Saladin, nor Gibreel, nor Salman the Farsi nor even Baal the satirist has a fixed abode or a community to which they belong. As artists or intellectuals they are uprooted from their community and they suffer in the pride of their isolation. Saladin’s metamorphosis as Satan with horns and tail is a symbolic expression of his being lost and damned as a homeless vagabond.
The novel ultimately suggests that the world despite its bizarre and incompatible nature somehow conveys to the collective consciousness what its natural limits are. One might be tormented by the problem of fractured identity, intrigued and baffled by the nature of good and evil. Teased by the line dividing reality from illusion, one may imagine monstrous worlds, but one is never in real danger of losing hope. One may be alienated from the world, but not completely lost. The book is large enough to contain, implicitly, its own self-criticism and its own advice to the author. The words of advice come near the end of the novel through Zeeny Vakil:

If you're serious about shaking off your foreignness, Salad baba, then don't fall into some kind of rootless limbo instead. Okay? We're all here. We're right in front of you. You should really try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time. Try and embrace this city, as it is, not some childhood memory that makes you both nostalgic and sick. Draw it close. The actually existing place. Make its faults your own. Become its creature; belong. (541)

But there is of course a mischievous inclination in Rushdie to tease and to mock at the same time as he is declaring his admiration. It is Rushdie's wide-ranging power of assimilation and imaginative boldness, his fashionable literary gestures - Joycean wordplay, magic realism that make his work so tantalizingly different from that of other well-known Indian novelists. His stylistic innovations often lead the reader right into the middle of many controversies. One such controversy is regarding the very title of the novel. The Muslim leaders protest against the content and the title of the novel saying *The Satanic Verses* as a derogatory comment on the Quran's status as divine revelation The story about
interpolation is itself interpolated within the title, hence, both instances of the expression are interpreted to refer to and frame the same thing. The title is entitled to leave, to mark an opening to the story and, it also encloses. Derrida says that the text bears its title and bears upon it. The title is indeed powerful; the play of the title has been productive in providing imperatives of argument. The title "satanic verses" is not only entitled to secure the boundaries of the text, but it is at the same time a promise, or a threat, of the 'outside', which lurks in and out through this opening.

The Muslim protest against Rushdie's depiction of the Prophet's wives is another area of controversy: the whores of a brothel take the names of the wives of the Prophet in order to arouse their customers. But through the textual analysis one finds that the real wives are living perfectly chastely in their harem. One finds the images that crystallize the opposition between the sacred and the profane throughout the novel. The harem and the brothel provide such an antithetical imagery: in the harem the women are kept pure, no chance of any intruder or voyeur leaking into their privacy; but the brothel exposes the women to strange males. Likewise, the presence of the Prophet, the receiver of the sacred text in the harem is contrasted with the presence of Baal, the creator of the profane text in the brothel. Thus the two strange worlds—pure and profane, chaste and coarse—are juxtaposed to explore morality in tension and to reclaim an integrated identity.

However, the ironic scheme continues to flourish in the novel to embrace other related issues and enlighten the reader on the author's voice of concerns and scepticism. One may not miss Rushdie's satiric attitude against Mahound's attitude to women when he disapproves of the three sister-goddesses: "Shall He have daughters while you have sons? That would be an unjust division"(124). The author undoubtedly points his reservations in the article "In Good Faith": "I
thought it was at least worth pointing out that one of the reasons for rejecting these goddesses was that they were female. The rejection has implications that are worth thinking about. I suggest that such highlighting is a proper function of literature” (399-400). Moreover, it gives Rushdie’s critical attitude against the way original Islamic rules belittle woman’s rights. The Islamic Law of inheritance allows a widow only an eighth share and gives to sons twice as much as it does to daughters; while the Islamic law of evidence makes a woman’s testimony worth only half that of a man. (400)

But one of the main reasons why many people have been puzzled over the debate is the insecurity on authority, the representation of the authentic voice of one’s conviction in public. The debate undoubtedly suffers from biased publicity by Muslims and Westerners alike. Some Muslim leaders insist that the ‘authentic Muslim point of view’ and ‘genuine Muslim anger’ have been ‘misdirected to issues of freedom of speech and censorship’. What is at issue is who represents Muslims and who speaks in their name on a range of questions. The issue of freedom of expression, which is interpreted and defined in a great variety of ways during the debate, lies on the opposite end of the line of argument. In a similar representative manner it is put forward as the genuine core of liberal and secular West’s self-identity, though not without grudges from different directions.

Rushdie’s combativeness has always been there from the beginning. He announces his terms in Imaginary Homelands thus:

The real risk for any artist are taken ...in pushing the works to the limits of what is possible, in the attempt to increase the sum of what it is possible to think. Books become good when they go to this edge and risk falling
over it—when they endanger the artist 'what he has, or has not, artistically dare

Derrida criticizes the ambiguity of this critical f
Rushdie shares with the West, considering es' censorship. For an intercultural issue, however, the acute. Rather than reading the text as mere fictior account what Bhabha defines in Lawton's words:

The key importance of the Rushdie affair for professional students like myself is that it demonstrates, once and for all, the inadequacy of the model of reading we have maintained for too long: the individual reader, the supposedly 'private' reader, reading the individual text. A study of blasphemy is therefore relevant to finding a better model, one that engages with communities, something rival collectivities, and diverse cultural and cross-cultural positioning.

There can be no unanimity with regard to the critical functionality of The Satanic Verses. However, it is undenying that whether life really was ever quite as pure or unadulterated as one thinks, the phenomenon of migration has helped Rushdie and his 'borne-across' characters gain an awareness of the doubleness, the essentially mysterious nature of human experience. Comforting as it might be to imagine that there is a place somewhere where one would feel perfectly at home, perfectly at one with oneself, the truth probably is that there is never such a place. A still greater truth the reader gains from The Satanic Verses is that the appreciation of particular things, particular places and particular people—or what Zeeny Vakil argues for making "an adult acquaintance with this place, this time" (541)—will go long way to appreciate the 'silent surplus of reality' which, as Iain Chambers puts it, "remains beyond the frame, apparently dumb."

—173—
NOTES AND REFERENCES


