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CONSTRUCTING POSTCOLONIAL MIGRANT IDENTITIES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE SATANIC VERSES*

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Abstract: This essay looks at how the identity of the modern postcolonial migrant is articulated across the coordinates of the postcolonial nation, the imperial center and cultural and personal consciousness. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the condition of the migrant self, its representations and misrepresentations as thematized by Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses. It seems that Rushdie proposes a demonic state of the migrant as a man fallen from grace, someone who has willingly severed his ties with the "paradise" of unbroken and unquestioned national identity and has entered a state of "rootlessness", of not belonging. Therefore, it might be argued that the novel resolves to kill the essence of the pure, "untranslated" self only to reassert it as hybridity and mongrelization. A postmodern novelist like Rushdie is bound to reject as mere fiction the integrity of both the communitarian and the migrant subject. In his view, the self is necessarily fragmented - a construct of bits of ideals, perceptions, desires and beliefs, cultures, histories, and traditions, in one word, a hybrid. Moreover, the novel shows that the migrant, in the very process of moving, of crossing over, redefines the old traditional territorial boundaries, maps and divisions, especially the cultural ones. Therefore, both the location of culture (in Homi Bhabha's terms) and the location of the migrant identity are now to be found in the interstitial and the global.

Keywords: migrant, identity, hybridity, postcoloniality, metropolis

1. Flying, Fall, Death, and Rebirth. The Element of Air.

The discussion of the migrant trope in *The Satanic Verses* is articulated along two lines: 1) the discussion of the nature and constituency of the migrant self, based on the two prototype characters Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta and 2) the extrapolation of the first discussion into the social and political reality of the immigrants in Britain, in the 1980s.

The novel bears an epigraph from Daniel Defoe's *The Political History of the Devil as Well Ancient as Modern* which announces some of the key themes to be developed in the novel:

Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though 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. (*The Satanic Verses* 1)

On the one hand, there is the traditional Miltonian motif of the fall from Heaven and on the other hand there is the idea of the devil as a migrant, as a wonderer through the air. If one connects the epigraph to the beginning of the novel in which

Saladin and Chamcha are shown in the very act of falling from the sky, more precisely from the high-jacked airplane which had just been blown up over London by Sikh terrorists, then the mood and the direction in which the novel will move become at once clear. From the very beginning we are informed, by Gibreel's song, that the migrant self is constituted in the act of dying and being reborn and that the element of death and rebirth is that of air.

Before discussing the constituency of the migrant self, the choice of space needs to be examined. Rushdie chooses air because it is symbolical of the migrant's "transcendental homelessness" (Lukacs 61) and because he believes air to be one of "the defining locations" of the twentieth/twenty-first centuries:

that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic,—because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible. (*The Satanic Verses* 5)

It is quite apparent that air is the site and enabler of the globalization process, a site of confusions (see the jet lag of the people who fly long distances) and illusions of metamorphoses just because in the air "anything becomes possible". Therefore, it is possible for Gibreel and Saladin to survive both the airplane explosion and their subsequent fall and successful *landing* at Hastings. Moreover *air* acquires several main implications in the novel: 1) it makes people and things happen, materialize but also dematerialize (see the airplane explosion or Gibreel's disappearance off the Bollywood scene "into thin air"); 2) it means *void*, emptiness as in the expressions "into/out of thin air" "into/out of the blue" or Gibreel's realization that when he was calling upon Allah to save him from his illness he was "talking to thin air, that there was nobody there at all" (*The Satanic Verses* 30); 3) it means the very essence of the human being, that is material and immaterial at the same time, physical and spiritual, existent and non-existent, Gibreel's note upon his leaving Bollywood being quite revelatory in this sense: "*We are creatures of air, Our roots in dreams And clouds, reborn In flight*" (*The Satanic Verses* 13). As it can be easily noticed there is a reversal of traditional tropes in the novel. While *ground* is traditionally seen to be the *home* of people, governed by the attraction of gravity, and death is seen as burial and mixture with the regenerative earth, as in the saying "*ashes to ashes*", in Rushdie's novel the *home* of the migrant people is seen to be the element of air, this being the site of their death and rebirth at the same time. The concept of home for the migrant has become thus symbolically ephemeral and immaterial, without strict boundaries offering both the freedom to wander and the curse of rootlessness and instability.

Therefore, in the immateriality of air, life is seen as *travel, movement, crossing, flying* through the air while death acquires Miltonian values of the fall. There are in fact numerous occurrences of *movement* in the novel. First of all we have the motif of flying by airplane as the most common means of long distance traveling in the

global world. Saladin flies to and from India on several occasions, one of them being the spectacular and life transforming Bostan 420 flight from India to Britain. A subtle effect of irony is achieved when the name of the flight and its explosive end are associated with the meaning of Bostan which was in fact one of the two gardens in the Islamic Paradise. Saladin did fall from Paradise after all. Flying in *The Satanic Verses* does not occur only by means of aviation technology but also by the sheer power of the mind. Gibreel dreams of flying on several occasions among which as the bearer of the revolutionary Imam on his way back to Iran or as the Archangel Gibreel on mission to tropicalize and straighten out the apocalyptic metropolis of London. Moreover, machinery (a winch-operated chariot) as that on the set of the Bollywood production meant to bring Gibreel back on the cinema scene, is used to mimic flying with the devastating effects of enhancing Gibreel's delusional state. Flying is both real and modern and unreal and magical. Rekha Merchant's traveling on the flying carpet in a magic touch added to the realism of modern technology means that flying as a concept of movement through life, in time and space is both concrete and real and symbolical and spiritual, both a state of the body and a state of mind.

In this *airy* context dying occurs either as a fall or as an ascent to one's death. Allie the mountain climber chooses to go to the top of the mountains to find true meaning. However, she insists on doing so without the supply of oxygen and against her flatfoot condition which sends knives in her legs and makes her walk like the *Little Mermaid*, another character who sought to changer her condition and find meaning *above* her native habitus. However, sadly and ironically enough, Allie, the valiant mountain climber, is denied permanent access to the rarefied truths and meanings on top of the mountains because she finally finds her death falling off an Everest, not the one that she dreamt of but the Everest Villas, the highest building in Bombay. Other deaths by fall include the death of Rekha Merchant, Gibreel's first lover, who chooses to deal with the loss of Gibreel's love by *taking off*, together with her three children, from the very same Everest Villas that saw Allie's death. In fact, falling to death, in most cases, is a consequence of taking one's own life. Suicides just like Rekha's include Allie's father (jumping down an elevator shaft) and Pamela Lovelace Chamcha's (Saladin's wife) parents who committed suicide after going bankrupt by jumping off a building in London.

Another facet of the fall is that of falling out of faith or rationality into *thin air*. This happens both to Gibreel and Allie. As she explains it to Gibreel:

information got abolished sometime in the twentieth century, can't say just when; stands to reason, that's part of the information that got abolsh, *abolished*. Since then we've been living in a fairy-story. Got me? Everything happens by magic. Us fairies haven't a fucking notion what's going on. So how do we know if it's right or wrong? We don't even know what it *is*. So what I thought was, you can either break your heart trying to work it all out, or you can go sit on a mountain, because *that's where all the truth went, believe it or not, it just upped and ran away* from these cities where even the stuff under our feet is all

made up, a lie, and it hid up there in the thin thin air... (*The Satanic Verses* 323–324)

Gibreel falls into insanity the minute he stops believing in Allah. More than just the loss of faith it is actually an acute sensation of the postmodern foundation-less world in which there are no certainties to rest your foot on but only vertigo and insecurity. Rushdie characterizes the postmodern age as:

This rejection of totalized explanations is the modern condition. [. . .] The elevation of the quest for the Grail over the Grail itself, the acceptance that *all that is solid has melted into air*¹, that reality and morality are not givens but imperfect human constructs, is the point from which fiction begins. This is what J. F. Lyotard called, in 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne*. (*Imaginary Homelands* 422)

The space of air is the site of movement, death but also rebirth. Airplanes are described by Rushdie as facilitating the rebirth of the migrant traveller. The imagery of airplanes connotes pregnancy and the process of giving birth. Thus airplanes are “a seed-pod giving up its spores, an egg yielding its mystery”, “a flying womb” “a metallic phallus” while the passengers are “spermatozoa waiting to be spilt” (*The Satanic Verses* 41). The very airplane which explodes over London had a one hundred and eleven day “period of gestation” (of being in the highjackers’ hands) during which the passengers were awaiting their rebirth. After the airplane is actually exploded by the terrorists, Gibreel and Saladin follow the same birth imagery by falling “like bundles dropped by some carelessly open-beaked stork”, Saladin descending “head first, in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal” (*The Satanic Verses* 5). Another interesting idea is that the characters enter the world through “a cloud-walled tunnel”, a birth canal that is also “the hole that went to Wonderland”, connecting Allie’s idea that the earth beneath our feet has been “made-up” and is a “fairy-land” where “everything happens by magic”. By falling into our world Saladin and Gibreel fall onto the Wonderland of lost meaning and faith. Rushdie even claims that Saladin and Gibreel’s rebirth is actually a re-enactment of the beginning of the world out of the immense nothingness: “out of thin air: a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time” (*The Satanic Verses* 4).

2. Migrant Metamorphoses

Rebirth in *The Satanic Verses* acquires universal values which are also trans-cultural and trans-religious:

phoenix-from-ashes, the resurrection of Christ, the transmigration, at the instant of death of the soul of the Dalai Lama into the body of a newborn child [. . .] the avatars of Vishnu, the metamorphoses of Jupiter, who had imitated Vishnu by adopting the form of a bull; and so on [. . .]. (*The Satanic Verses* 85–86)

¹ Rushdie actually cites the catchphrase “all that is solid has melted into air” from Marshall Berman’s book bearing the title *All that is Solid Melts into Air*.

More than just being intertextual cultural allusions, these images bring up the essence of the rebirth phenomenon which is *metamorphosis*. In their death, migrants lose their old selves, sever their ties with the past and emerge transformed. What they leave behind is:

the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*. (*The Satanic Verses* 4–5)

or in Gillian Gane’s words “a litany of loss, disruption, and discontinuity” (23).

In the case of the two protagonists of the novel, they metamorphose into two fundamental, organizing and defining ideas for the human consciousness: evil and good, Satan and Angel. Does Rushdie want to make us believe that they are two facets of the same coin, the *self* and the *Shadow*? Well, this is only the beginning of an argumentation discussed and enlarged below. It does however open with the binary of good and evil:

Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different *types* of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-names and performances; and in spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses;—has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous*—that is, joined to and arising from his past;—that he chose neither near-fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that, in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be;—so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as “true”. . . whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, “false”? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity—call this “evil”—and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall?—While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered “good” by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom, an untranslated man. (*The Satanic Verses* 441–442)

What we have here is the moral opposition between *the continuous* and *the discontinuous* but not from Rushdie’s point of view. He only imitates the essentialist discourse of *nativists* who condemn such departures and ruptures from one’s identity and past as evil or “cultural heresy”² Only then does he truly intervene and assert his position:

² Sara, Suleri. *The Rhetoric of English India*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 192

But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?—Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, “pure,”—an utterly fantastic notion!—*cannot, must not, suffice. No!* Let’s rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is.—That, in fact, we fall towards it *naturally*, that is, *not against our natures*. (*The Satanic Verses* 442)

These binary oppositions are in fact used to point out how the migrant identity is constructed, that is by internalization, synecdoche, embodiment and representation. There are two directions to follow: more clearly, one of the two protagonists, continues his old self by exacerbating it into a greater category. This is the case of Gibreel, who basked in his mother’s stories about him being her angel (i.e. Farishta) and later on identified himself with the religious characters he played therefore, metamorphosing into the Archangel. Moreover, the divine nature of Gibreel’s new persona is also fed by the world of Bollywood who raised him on a pedestal of superstardom and in the act of adulation prompted his divine paranoia. Gibreel is the archetype of the continuous self who wishes to remain unchanged by his passage in the world. He believes his self to be unitary, unbroken by migration, a true representative of his culture of folk stories and Bollywood mythology only to be exaggerated into something more, larger than life, divine. The divine nature of Gibreel’s newly found form is actually a result of that part of the ex-colonial world which views its status and mission as the force of reclaiming and preserving a utopic “compact”, truly Indian identity. This attitude is satirized by Rushdie who wishes to show that such a narrative of unity and national identity is fallacious at its very core. Gibreel is no more a “true” man than Saladin the devil. Gibreel’s values as images of the whole (through stories, songs, movies, clothes, language, etc.) and his claims to be the representative of a politically, ideologically and culturally organic community are shattered into irrelevance by the very fact that he is a composite product of that community’s own assumptions (stories, narratives) about itself. He is a character in the *great* India movie about itself as he is a character (that of the Archangel) in humanity’s other great narrative: religion. Even Rushdie admits that he created Gibreel from bits and pieces of Indian real life actors:

the character of Gibreel himself is a mixture of two or three types of Indian movie star. There was in the forties a Muslim actor, a very big star at the time, who did somehow get away with playing major Hindu divinities and because he was so popular it was not a problem. And it was interesting to me that megastardom allowed you to cross those otherwise quite fraught religious frontiers. So there was a bit of that in Gibreel. And then there was an element of the big South Indian movie stars, a bit of Rama Rao. And finally there was a large bit of the biggest movie star in India for the last fifteen or twenty years, Amitabh Bachchan. (Brians 8)

Thus, Gibreel's identity construction is based on *synecdoche* (as a part he is symbolic of the whole), *internalization* (he assumes the identity others attribute to him), *representation* (he is himself a constructed image, a representation of other individuals, mortal or divine and performs the task of representation by the mimetic, re-mythologizing gesture of acting). The fact that it is Gibreel who dies in the end, at his own hand, and due to his own paranoia shows how dangerous this type of delusional identity construction can be, in Rushdie's views. The second archetypal metamorphosis is that of Saladin. As already seen, he is the devil in the eyes of the two parties involved in the post-colonial phenomenon.

On the one hand he is the Chamcha, (spoon in Urdu) the *spoono*, the sycophant, the servant, the stock-character of traditional Third World Literature, the traitor who wanted to become "more English than the English" and sever all possible ties with his past, embodied by his father, his language and his sense of home in Bombay. In the eyes of his own people, he is the devil who betrayed India for the colonial Britain. In a sense, in his mad desire to be English and in possession of all things English, including his wife, Saladin is another facet of the utopic project of a unitary self, completely re-constructed according to his own intimate desires and aspirations.

Saladin symbolically dies and is re-born more than once in the novel. He dies once when he leaves India to go to school in England, he dies when he falls from the exploded airplane and loses his own-constructed English self, metamorphosing into the devil, he dies when he realizes that the community he so wished to embrace and be assimilated into rejects and negates him with no mercy and he is re-born when he shifts back into his old human shape after being saved from death in the Shaandaar Café fire by Gibreel.

Saladin is also the devil in the eyes of the English white community, embodying all their darkest fears of the *brown* immigrant. Rushdie ironically makes Saladin have erotic dreams of having intercourse with the Queen of Britain in a *conquering* act of violation of all prejudices and differences. Moreover, Saladin is the devil in his Iago-like role of driving Gibreel mad with jealousy.

By playing the role of both the traitor stock character and the evil immigrant in the whites' prejudiced minds, Saladin sees his demonic identity constructed along the lines of *embodiment* (he physically changes into the devil) and *attribution* (by the very fact that he is an immigrant, he is attributed all the demonic features associated with his kind). It is important to understand that from the very beginning, Saladin fails in his project to be English because his condition as a migrant does not allow him such a "pure" stance. The very racism and discrimination present in Britain in the 1980s forbids him to become the *citizen* he wishes to be. Yes, he does possess a British citizenship, an English wife and a house but when things go wrong his citizenship is trampled on by the police (ironically figures of immigrants themselves, Irish, Scottish, etc.) who abuse him before knowing he is a citizen and then abuse him even harder when they learn he *is* a citizen; his honor is trampled on by his English wife (with whom he was unable to conceive children, which is indicative of him failing to assimilate to the extent he desired) who is quick to abandon him as dead and jump into bed with yet another second generation immigrant Jumpy Joshi

(with whom she does manage to procreate), his contractual rights are trampled on by his English employer, the advertising manager Hal Valance, who refuses to take him back despite of valid work arrangements; in short Saladin finds himself in a void of rejection and annihilation. For Britain, just as for his wife, he ceased to exist the minute the airplane exploded.

It was however necessary for Saladin's delusional idyllic English self to die in order for him to re-emerge, disillusioned in his aspirations but stronger and more aware of his real condition. It was as if a veil had been lifted off his eyes because the abuses he suffered after *the fall* were not the first he had suffered but rather the most violent and transforming. Earlier abuses were subtler and easier to live with. To begin with, apparently the migrant in Britain was hardly ever allowed to attach a face to his voice, that is to become *present* and *visible*. Saladin had been working as a voice-over actor in commercials and children's TV serials. He was the Man of a Thousand Voices who could imitate everybody and everything but could not speak in his own voice. Moreover, the characters he played were part of the TV series relevantly entitled *The Alien Show* which was imitating civil society by means of deformed, grotesque representations. Saladin was apparently not that bothered that Hal Valance motivated his choice of not allowing him *a face* on TV by the fact that Saladin was a person of "*tinted persuasion*" (*The Satanic Verses* 267).

It took the fall for Saladin to wake up and realize his condition of hybrid, mutant and embrace it as such: "He would enter into his new self; he would be what he had become: loud, stenchy, hideous, outsize, grotesque, inhuman, powerful" (*The Satanic Verses* 298). Saladin understands that

the change in him was irreversible. A new, dark world had opened up for him (or: within him) when he fell from the sky; no matter how assiduously he attempted to re-create his old existence, this was, he now saw, a fact that could not be unmade. (*The Satanic Verses* 433)

Unlike Gibreel, Saladin is the one who does exercise agency in constructing his own identity. To begin with, he makes the conscious choice to stop being Indian and become English. The process, because of the effort and training involved, stresses the very idea of *construction*. In fact, later on, from the very beginning of his metamorphosis into the devil he realizes that:

He was in a void, and if he were to survive he would have to construct everything from scratch, would have to invent the ground beneath his feet before he could take a step. (*The Satanic Verses* 136)

One of his actions is to consciously and voluntarily take vengeance on Gibreel for abandoning him after the fall by driving him madly jealous. Rushdie actually discusses here how a man decides to step across the line demarcating right from wrong and how he decides to be absolutely unforgiving and resolute in his revenge. In this way Saladin manages to inhabit the devilish persona he discovers to have become.

3. Mutations and Hybridizations. The Tensions of Representation

To continue with, Gibreel and Saladin's mutations are not the only ones in the novel. In fact, metamorphoses occur in a number of contexts throughout *The Satanic Verses*: for instance, a mountain is "land's attempt to metamorphose into sky; it is grounded flight, the earth mutated—nearly—into air"; overcome by his archangelic delusions, Gibreel wishes to effect the "metamorphosis of London into a tropical city" (*The Satanic Verses* 365); an architect who converts deconsecrated churches into dwellings specializes in "metamorphoses of the sacred into the profane" (*The Satanic Verses* 448). However, these are more instances of the transformation that the present global postmodern world goes through in every aspect of its existence. The following instances of mutations deal with a more violent aspect of cultural translation and representation. More precisely they deal with instances of racism and discrimination through representation in *The Satanic Verses*.

At the sanatorium attached to the Detention Center for illegal immigrants, where Saladin wakes up after the encounter with the police, he discovers other mutants like himself:

beings he could never have imagined, men and women who were also partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion, built partly of brick or stone; there were men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with necks as long as any giraffe. (*The Satanic Verses* 176)

It is now that Saladin becomes aware of the means by which discrimination and mutations take place. It is by *description* as intimated to him by one of the hybrid monsters in captivity: "They describe us. [. . .] They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (*The Satanic Verses* 174).

Rushdie has been known to be a virulent critic of the Thatcher regime and its politics of exclusion and discrimination against all immigrants, Indians in particular. *The Satanic Verses* abounds in powerful episodes of police brutality such as that of Saladin being beaten up in the police van or Dr Simba suspiciously breaking his neck by falling off his bed while in police custody, discrimination in the world of advertising embodied by the deeply racist manager Hal Valance drawn from Rushdie's early years as an advertising and television copywriter, apocalyptic anti-immigrant discourses such as that of Enoch Powell ironically mimicked by Rushdie, violent clashes between the racist white youth and the Indian immigrants living at the periphery of London and the local news' one-sided portrayal of the conflicts, Rushdie's direct and crude representation of the British PM Thatcher as "Maggie the Bitch" and the symbolic burning of her wax effigy in the immigrant-run disco in London as part of a ritualistic manifestation of protest of the *browns*.

Besides depicting straightforward, in-your-face acts of racism in the novel, Rushdie employs another highly effective technique to criticise the blatant discrimination present in the 80s UK. He resorts to a counter-descriptive technique of turning his immigrant characters into the very devilish image the white British

have of them. Thus, Saladin, transformed into the embodiment of Satan with all the commonly recognized evil attributes such as horns, hooves and large grotesque genitalia, comes to ironically symbolize all that the whites fear in the immigrants. This representation becomes a mark that the immigrants proudly and defiantly flaunt to assert their identity. Here, Saladin is explained why his devilish image has become so popular and emblematic that even children happily wear florescent plastic horns in the street: “people can identify with you. It’s an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it,... occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own” (*The Satanic Verses* 287) The very same technique is used for subverting the Christian world’s vilified image of the Prophet Mohammed. Therefore, the Christian, offensive term *Mahound* is used not to attack the Muslims and their religion, but on the contrary, to reveal Western prejudices and fallacies about Islam:

To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil’s synonym: *Mahound*. (*The Satanic Verses* 93, emphasis mine)

Rushdie’s novel performs several acts on the social level. First, it exposes the metropolitan centre’s racist politics in the post-colonial age and second, it insists that the centre can no longer be seen as a purist, closed, exclusive bastion of Englishness / Britishness because, due to the end of colonialism, it has been penetrated and transformed or *tainted* (as he puts it) by the colonial *margins* pushing back on it. The novel makes the West reassess its own image of itself by disrupting the romantic views of Britain still held by most Englishmen. Rushdie derides the British as “deluded about themselves and their society. They still for most part think it the fairest, most just, most decent society ever created” (“The Indian Writer in England” 81). The point is that by basking in such idealistic and unrealistic national narratives of identity, the centre tries to preserve the idea of Britishness as a homogenous unity of history, tradition and fixed social, ethnic and sexual roles. Rushdie comes and shifts the focus from the metropolitan centre to the immigrant community now actually within the centre, thus making the latter a site from which a critique of the former’s idea of Britishness is launched. In 1982 Rushdie was writing:

I want to suggest that racism is not a side-issue in contemporary Britain; that it’s not a peripheral minority affair. I believe that Britain is undergoing a critical phase of its post-colonial period, and this crisis is not simply economic or political. It’s *a crisis of the whole culture, of the society’s entire sense of itself*. (*Imaginary Homelands* 129)

However, Rushdie does not fall in the trap of taking one side of the parties involved without critically looking at the other. Rushdie’s own immigrants do not escape his unforgiving critical gaze either. Therefore, Rushdie simultaneously performs a critique of two forms of essentialist nativism, the British and migrant

Indian. As for the latter, the migrants are not sympathetically presented as the technologically-challenged but good-hearted stock figures of earlier Third World Literature traditionalist writers but as souls, profoundly affected and transformed by uprooting and relocation. They are the ones who cannot be the same anymore, whose old selves died and new hybrid ones have emerged. They have been *tainted* too. Take the Shaandaar Café owners Muhammad and Hind Sufyan, living in the migrant Brickhall neighbourhood in South London, those who accommodate Saladin during his physical *satanic* period. He is a Bangladesh teacher, conversant in Western classical philosophy and literature who, when in Britain, loses his traditional bread-winner role in favour of his wife Hind. The traditional sexual roles upheld by the immigrants are shaken by the interaction with the centre. Hind, the wife, thus becomes the actual manager of the family business. She is the one who exploits the upper stories of the Café as a rooming-house for the homeless immigrants charging the local council exorbitant rents for this “temporary accommodation”. Rushdie calls these homeless immigrants “temporary beings”, “faceless persons, unable to scream”, who ironically are even more exploited by their own kind than by the racist British.

Apparently, in Rushdie’s view, not only the British but also the migrant Indians are *deluded* about their own *pure* condition. Articulating one’s identity as different from *The Other’s* is no longer possible. The binary opposition constructed on established cultural epistemologies such as traditional/modern, good/evil, central/marginal, sovereign/subject fails, or, in the author’s own words, “cannot, must not suffice” (*The Satanic Verses* 442). In the context of the centre and margins, of movement and migration, the construction of the self is now formed through *interaction, interference, inter-reference* and a sort of “leaking into each other” (*Imaginary Homelands* 394):

I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now *partly of the West*. (*Imaginary Homelands* 15, emphasis mine)

Basically, Rushdie counters the essentialist migrant’s ideal of the “untranslated” (*The Satanic Verses* 442) man, proposing instead one that is inescapably a construct of bits and pieces of an older self transformed by interaction with the new realities of his relocated life. In the postcolonial, postmodern world, pure forms of religious, social and cultural expression will forever be a utopian and toxic aspiration. Hybridity is the new post-colonial condition of the migrant:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. *It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure... It is a love-song to our mongrel selves*. (*Imaginary Homelands* 394, emphasis mine)

Therefore, after Saladin's fall and demonic metamorphosis and the awful dawning on him about his permanently changed condition (a hyphenated soul: Indian-Not-so-Indian-English-Not-so-English) he still manages to find hope in yet another type of symbolic mutant that he sees on TV, a "chimeran graft" between two trees, a laburnum and a broom, a plant that is shown to grow "vigorously out of a piece of English earth." The tree hybrid is meaningful because it reminds Saladin of another tree that he had severed in the past, the walnut tree in his father's garden, the guardian of his soul. Moreover, the hybrid is important because along Saladin's own line of thought "if such a tree were possible, then so was he; he too, could cohere, send down roots, survive" (*The Satanic Verses* 420).

Hope for the future appears to smile especially for the second-generation migrants such as the Sufyan sisters who survive the fire at the family Café in which the parents Hind and Muhammad die. Mishal, the rebellious martial arts lover, the sexually liberated daughter of the despotic Hind becomes pregnant with another second generation immigrant, Hanif, the lawyer. Unlike Pamela who was also pregnant and who dies in the fire, failing to conceive and secure her legacy, Mishal optimistically looks into a future removed from the enclosed narrative of the old traditional self and outside the tyranny of a teleological end. It looks as if in order for the future to happen the past in its traditional sense needs to die. The *pure* forms, the "parents" such as Hind or Allie's father (a Jewish survivor of the Nazi concentration camps who cannot adapt to his new *tainted* life in Britain and thus takes his own life) must disappear so that their descendants can freely move on. However, the death of the past does not mean that it dissipates as a reference point. If we look at Allie's mother, she gleefully returned to her Jewish traditions, clothes and food when liberated from the *tyranny* of the *father*. The past only needs to stop controlling the present by freezing it into certainties and the laws of the absolutes. When it does so, it is immediately revived into new forms and stories.

4. The Metropolis - An Imagined Territory

To be a Bombayite (and afterwards a Londoner) was to fall in love with the metropolis. The city as reality and as a metaphor is at the heart of all my work. (Imaginary Homelands 404)

The twentieth century technological advancements such as that of avionics have caused the planet to *shrink*. Since the physical distances between originally distant and different locations have been shortened, the possibility of freely moving among cultures has grown substantially. According to Rushdie, the distance between Bombay and London is:

Five and a half thousand as the crow. Or: from Indianness to Englishness, an immeasurable distance. Or, not very far at all, because they rose from one great city, fell to another. The distance between cities is always small; a villager travelling a hundred miles to town traverses emptier, darker, more terrifying space. (*The Satanic Verses* 41)

The Satanic Verses alternates between two main tropes, two great global cities: Bombay and London. What is interesting about them is how Rushdie describes them as composite constructs and representations that mirror and accommodate their equally composite and constructed inhabitants.

The post-colonial phenomenon of migration has enabled the traditionally clearly located and delimited periphery to move inside the metropolitan centre and change its *pure* status. The hybridization of the migrant self is thus reflected in the hybrid state of the locus it inhabits. London, *Babylondon*, “the gate of God”, “Ellowen Deeowen” is no longer the empire’s center and its main symbol of colonizing power but rather a construct, an *imagined* city. In fact it is important to mention the fact that besides the very realistic depictions of the immigrant neighborhood in Brickhall South London, the rest of the references Rushdie makes to the city are exactly that: references, representations, ideas that the characters have about London. For instance, Gibreel conceives of London as a tourist attraction and therefore perceives it in the fictional, textual terms of “The Geographer’s London: the whole dog-eared metropolis, A-Z Guide to London” (*The Satanic Verses* 160).

Moreover, the *colonized*’s naïve and adulating conception of the colonizing center, his representation of it as the pinnacle of civilization, is satirized by Gibreel being anxious to descend in “Proper London”. The constructed, fictional nature of London as a symbol in people’s minds is supported by the fact that in most of his interactions with London Gibreel maintained his actor stance and thus moved in a space which was an imitation of the *real* city, made up of props on a movie set. Take for example the party that the upper-brow London society offers for Gibreel in honor of his up-coming movie. The party is held on a movie set miniature reproduction of London with cardboard palaces and a cardboard London Bridge. This is the site of the confrontation scene between Gibreel and Saladin after the former’s betrayal of his friend. Their confrontation is made to appear less real and substantial by the very lack of substantiality of the background. London can only use its metonymic parts to project its image. The imperial past comes back only in cardboard reproductions. This is the London of people’s minds, not a real place. It is fiction. Saladin is the most delusional *subject* of the British Empire and its capital. He carries around an ideal of a “picture post-card” England, composed of the Royal Family, cricket and the Houses of Parliament. Moreover, when Gibreel descends in his archangelic rage over London this acquires biblical meanings of an apocalypse city: “The city’s streets coiled around him, writhing like serpents”. In his attempt to transform London according to his image, Gibreel *tropicalizes* it, transforms its former ice-cold, pristine character into another vivid, breathing site of reverse colonization. London is actually *Babylondon*, the city of Babel, of the confusion of languages, the conglomerate, the mixture of cultures, identities and representations.

Bombay is the mirror image of London: “five and a half hours of time zones; turn your watch upside down in Bombay and you see the time in London” (*The Satanic Verses* 41). Bombay is a globalized metropolis of luxurious skyscrapers such as the deadly Everest Vilas, of old, decaying neighborhoods such the Scandal Point of Saladin’s childhood and most importantly the home city of an entire industry of

fiction and representation: Bollywood. To Saladin, the city is a “dream of childhood”, a state of mind that comes back in Proustian manner through bits and pieces of the memory of an old dead self: toothpaste ads and old car brands. It is a city as fantastic and fictional as London, a “Wonderland, Peristan, Never-Never” the land of Oz. Bombay is a city emerged out of stories, the personal stories of its inhabitants, projections of a desired “continuous” identity, but in the end *an imagined* city.

Saskia Sassen speaks of the global city as “a strategic site for disempowered actors” (Sassen xxi), an idea evident in Rushdie’s entitling one of his chapters, where he discusses the condition of the low class immigrants at the periphery of London, “A City Visible but Unseen”. Brickhall is a city within London, visible in its physical presence on the map but unseen because its inhabitants are “temporary, faceless human beings”. As Rushdie explains: “There you have the experience of a lot of people, millions of people now in Britain, invisible to the rest, and I wanted to try and make it visible.” (Reder 105) This is the city that needs to be seen as such, real and living within the fantastic fairy-tale like city of London.

By means of the alternation of real and fantastical elements in the novel and the foregrounding of the fantastical in order to underline the power of those “backgrounded”, Rushdie accomplishes a critique from within the system and points to two main effects of the phenomenon of globalization: i.e. the blurring, the overlapping and fictionalizing of the borders between the large economic and cultural blocks on the present world scene and the very real and poignant condition of the “disenfranchised” migrants caught in between.

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