

POSTMODERN STRATEGIES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE SATANIC VERSES*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism is a complicated concept that has influenced several disciplines such as politics, sociology, economics and even cybernetics. It is in fact a social and cultural force having a bearing on every dimension of life. Postmodernism means different to different people and it continues to elude and baffle the readers. Similarly, postmodern fiction is difficult to understand due to the incorporation of complex postmodern strategies within its ambit. Rushdie's fictional oeuvre is situated in a postmodern context and hence demands a different kind of reading. The need to write this appear stems from predominantly two reasons; one, due to the misunderstanding the text created due to Rushdie's playful attitude towards religion, which I believe can be removed if a text is re-read taking into consideration the irreverent tone adopted by postmodernists and secondly to decipher the meaning of a postmodern text in a way that it needs to be done.

*Salman Rushdie subverts the conventional forms of story-telling and magic realism or fantasy are used as subversive strategies. Character is elusive in postmodern fiction and lacks depth. Rushdie's protagonists possess this trait and have fragmented identities. Pastiche is another postmodern device to combine, paste together multiple elements. It is a unique narrative and can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic or information drenched aspects of postmodern society. Rushdie deploys these strategies; hence the paper seeks to explore *The Satanic Verses* from a postmodern perspective.*

Keywords: *Postmodern, subversive, meta-narrative, narrative unreliability, multiphrenic, hybridity, fantasy, simulacra.*

Postmodernism needs a challenging mind that comprehends it wholly and embraces a different kind of reading that it requires. Postmodernism questions the nature of reality and postmodern texts resort to subversive strategies to communicate a subversive meaning. Fantasy is subversive in nature since it seeks an alternative reality. The significant components of fantasy are "disorientation in time, dislocation in space, distortion of actuality"[Parameswaram 1988:56]. Rushdie's fiction depicts timelessness and fantasy is a narrative strategy employed to denote it. Thus, fantasy defies time and space and stations itself between the real and the marvelous. Joanne Russ points out that "Fantasy violates the real, contravenes it, denies it, and insists on this denial throughout" [Jackson 1981:22]. Rushdie's narrative strategies seek to resolve the pulls between the world of desire in fantasy and its inevitable denial in reality.

Postmodernism affirms that individuals are not a self at all. Identity metamorphoses perpetually and is defined externally by the various relations an individual has with others. Individuals do not have fixed identities distinct from their surroundings. Postmodern self is fragmented, unstable which Rushdie has depicted through his characters. They can be labeled as transcultural individuals as they are plural as well as partial.

Postmodernism opposes centralized and totalized discourses. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is "an incredulity towards meta-narratives"[Lyotard 1984:24], which indicates that it vouches for mini-narratives in contravention to universality, truth or stability. The postmodern novels bear many unreliable narrative voices where meanings jostle to establish their superiority. These novels transgress the established norms, experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporality and blurs the distinction between serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic. The various modes and genres coalesce to generate a work that appears to be in sync with the postmodern situation.

Rushdie resists totalized, metaphysical and essentialist doctrines and deconstructs modern discourses as nation, identity and religion and other cultural and historical constructs. He proposes an alternative space to a binary system and prioritizes a postmodern space to include both the binaries of east/west, secular/religious, real/fantasy, to install hybridity. Rushdie intends to portray the state of confusion and alienation that is symptomatic of postmodern societies and individuals. Rushdie's fiction is encyclopedic where convergence of different styles and narrative voices emerge. His texts require different interpretation and the need to disentangle the web of knowledge embedded into these texts. It is in this context that an attempt has been made to analyze Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* from a postmodern perspective.

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* evinces dislocation of time and space which is an element of fantasy. The narrative moves from contemporary England to fictionalized Mecca of the seventh century to a contemporary Indian village. In the narrative, Gibreel and Chamcha oscillate from Bombay to London, and back to Bombay again. Gibreel undertakes an imaginary journey to a city of sand called Jahilia where a very decent businessman-turned-prophet Mahound assumes significance.

Narrative unreliability is evident in the novel as the narrator says:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and potency, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope.(SV, 10)

But he is doubtful even of his own identity: "Who am I? / Who else is there?" (SV,4) The narrator interrupts the narration in the beginning. The narrative flow is frequently interrupted by the narrator's questions and explanations. The narrative voice also provides a detailed explanation of his own identity:

I'm saying nothing. Don't ask me to clear things up one way or the other; the time of revelations is long gone. The rules of creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll. Where's the pleasure if you're always intervening to give hints, change the rules, fix the fights? Well, I've been pretty self-controlled upto this point and I don't plan to spoil things now. Don't think I haven't wanted to butt in; I have, plenty of times. (SV, 408-409)

The narrator denies his control over things he has started, which also suggests that the author do not possess control over the meaning of the text after it has been written.

The subject of narration in postmodern literature is not expected to lend meaning and credence to the text as Hutcheon says:

The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to [be] a coherent meaning generation entity. Narrations in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate [.....] or resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience. [Hutcheon 1998:11]

The semi – omniscient narrator in *The Satanic Verses* doubts even his own abilities and repeatedly questions his own personality.

The narrative deliberately confuses the supernatural and the real by switching constantly between the characters' imaginations and their normal activities as actors. For instance, in the second chapter, the readers are imported in 8th century Mecca during the early days of Mecca. Actually, it is a contemporary set of a popular religious film directed by Gibreel. Two such stories emerge in the chapters of the novel ; one dealing with 'Jahilia', featuring the Prophet 'Mahound' and the other story discussing the march of the group of some faithful Muslims in India to the shores of Arabian sea, with waters receding so that pilgrims can walk unhindered to Mecca.

The title of the novel itself refers to an incident which lies on the border between fiction and fact. The opening chapter of the novel reveals the paradoxical nature of fiction's notion of "true" discourse: "Once upon a time - it was and it was not so, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did*-maybe, then, or maybe not".(35) The narrative then seems obviously to be an imaginative construct. The novel begins with the absurd, almost non-existent reality of rebirth of two actors falling to earth without parachute or wings from the sky. The other improbabilities follow or fantastic occurrences take place in the novel. Gibreel acquires a halo and Saladdin Chamcha goat hooves and horns. A dead lover visits Gibreel on a magic carpet and then Gibreel tropicalizes London's climate. The British authorities transform immigrants into a water-buffalo, slippery snakes and a manticore. These authorities lend the devised story about how Chamcha became unconscious some credence by embedding the fact that he was really sick before. Many magical embellishments also occur: the pilgrims follow a cloud of butterflies by day; their leaders are literally clothed in butterflies, and feeds upon them for their sustenance. Pamela's hair becomes snow-white in a state of shock when she sees Saladdin in his altered condition. Her dog too undergoes the similar change. Ayesha's hair too becomes snow-white when she meets the Archeangel. Allie and Pemba ascend Everest without Oxygen without suffering eye or brain damage.

The "realist" chapters in the novel are interspersed with the chapters in which Gibreel experiences dreams and nightmares. Gibreel's dreams and nightmares form the warp and woof of the novel. Gibreel's participation in these authentic occurrences suggests that history itself is a collective dream about the past. His dream of Mahound parallels the incidents from the life of Prophet Muhammad. Likewise, the story of Ayesha bears resemblance to the episode that took place in Karachi in 1983 when Naseem Fatima led thirty eight Shia followers into the sea expecting it to make way for them. Another narrative thread in Gibreel's dream chapters is the description of the Imam's return from exile to Iran after the downfall of the Shah in 1979. One of the dreams

is about an epileptic woman, a seer, who leads a pilgrimage to Mecca, with the promise of the Arabian Sea parting for the pilgrims. One of the most controversial episodes occurs in Gibreel's story "Return to Jahilia", where the women of a brothel called 'the curtain' decide to impersonate the wives of the prophet. The entire episode occurs in Gibreel's dreams, which is a cinematic fantasy. Prior to his return to Jahilia, Gibreel signed a contract for a series of films to be based on his dreams. As a cinematic fantasy based on a dream, the episode however reflects the state of contemporary cinema.

Gibreel finds himself trapped between a real world where the miraculous occurs and a world of dreams where miraculous seems almost authenticated historical truth. The real world and the world of dreams overlap so profusely that it further complicates the narrative strand. The mysterious capital Ellowen Deeowen is an imaginative territory as well as geographical reality, an area on which the fantasies of the migrant are projected and the brutal reality they had to face when they descend on earth.

Saladin encounters a woman at the hospital who confirms the notion that immigrants breed rapidly and intend to rule the country:

Still the woman's birth-agony refused to end, and at intervals ranging from fifteen to thirty minutes for what seemed like an endless time she continued to add new babies to the already improbable numbers marching, like conquering armies, from her womb. (166)

The fantastic image of the conquering armies marching out of her womb conveys the reality, the harsh idea that immigrants breed profusely, promulgated by the British.

Mythology is blended into the narrative structure of *The Satanic Verses*. The novel's opening lines: 'to be born first you have to die'(3) points to the Hindu belief of reincarnation. 'Jahannum' (254), 'Gehenna', 'Muspelheim' refers to the Muslim, Jewish and Norse Hell respectively. Ayesha shown as defying death by walking with her fellow-pilgrims across the Arabian Sea to Mecca, is a miraculous event indeed. The mythical parallel with the event where Moses led the Jews out of Egypt and into the Promised Land is quite obvious.

[II]

In the beginning of *The Satanic Verses*, as the two main characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha fall from the heavens, they hold on to each other and float safely down into the English channel. Their names are intertwined and their fall is referred to as "angelicdevilish". (SV,5) Their fall in fact points to the "mutation of the selves and identities of their former forms". [Kuortti 1998:138] Their identity changes and so are the concepts of good and evil, God and the Devil. Gibreel and Saladin become united during the Fall, "Gibreel-Saladin Farishtachamcha". (5)

Saladin epitomizes the position of a migrant and accepts the hybridity of his identity. His dream city is "ellowen deeowen" (37), but he has been betrayed by his dream city. Saladin Chamcha is a star of the dubbing business on British radio and television, a man of a thousand and one voices, none of them his own. He is an ardent Anglophile who bears poetic license and is about to be transformed by forces beyond his control. His personality is a 'half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices'. (9) He monopolises the market for advertising voice-overs with Mimi Mamoulian. His personality appears like a palimpsest to his Indian lover, Zeeny Vakil; his Indianness effaced and Anglophilia reinscribed.

Saladdin has tried to become more English than the English and thus has become a nobody, an uprooted, cosmopolitan without a true identity. He marries an English woman, Pamela Lovelace and even changes his name to Saladin Chamcha to adapt to the English environment. He finds himself trapped between the English and Indian culture. His inner Indian self is reflected in the variety of English he speaks when he visited India to meet his father. However, he struggles to maintain his Indian self as he has become extremely habituated to his English self. On his return flight to England, 'his voice had begun of its own accord to revert to its reliable, English self'(73), which shows that his individuality again undergoes a change; the change in place effects a change in personality.

Saladin tried desperately to change his identity from that of an Indian to an Englishman, changing even his face and "a voice to go with that face" (33). But this new identity seems to falter on his visit to India as he exclaims, "I'm not myself" (34). He slowly develops horns, hoofs, excessive body hair and a tail. He is transformed into a goatish like creature; he has now become the "other", completely different from human categories such as the white, middle - class, male policemen and so on. In the end, Saladin does not reject his Indian identity and incorporates both English and Indian elements of his identity. Blair Mahoney points out that: "Whereas before he hid a void beneath his multiple masks because he abjured those Indian parts of his identity, he now has

identity written over identity, the new selves overlaying the old and creating rich, new hybrid identities". [Ed. Mittapalli, Kuortti (Vol. I), 2003 : 192]

Gibreel Farishta specialized in playing Hindu Gods, though he himself is a Muslim. He is a mixture of different actors in one personality. It appears that "Gibreel Farishta is torn between his two mutually exclusive natures: the angelic and the human" [Litcrit 27. 4, 1992 :38]. Gibreel's exposure to the Hindu environment probably led to his loss in his own faith. His eating pork depicts his loss of faith which fractures his self: 'the retribution began a punishment of dreams'.(32) The immigration further disintegrates his self which ultimately developed into "paranoid schizophrenia" [Goonetilleke 1998 : 85].

Gibreel's predicament of identifying his different selves assumes importance in the novel. First, the distinction between the angel and the Prophet:

[N] ow Gibreel [...] feels a confusion, *who am I*, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangel is actually *inside the Prophet*, [...] I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper's navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies *listening*, entranced. (110)

This distinction is accompanied by the division between the actor and the angel:

He had begun to characterize his 'possessed', 'angel' self as another person in the Beckettian formula, Not I .He. His very own Mr. Hyde. (340)

Gibreel's identity as a film star also seems to be temporary illusion, as figured in the decaying images on street hoardings. He disintegrates after disappearing from the set of his latest film.

Gibreel and Saladin are "twined around each other" and "their qualities prove interchangeable"[Haritham 11, 1999: 70]. Gibreel is unable to distinguish between dream and reality and hence suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, while Saladin's demonic self is construed by his friend Jumpy Joshi as 'psychological breakdown, loss of sense of self '. (253) Both Saladin and Gibreel are actors quite capable of mimicry; they are "cultural chameleons"[Cundy1996:69].

Salahuddin, Gibreel, Salman the Persian and Baal do not possess a fixed home or a community; they are uprooted from their community. Salahuddin lives in self-imposed exile in England as he despises his community in India. His transformation as Satan with horns and tail signifies his state of being lost and rendered as a homeless vagabond. Gibreel abandons his movie – making community in Bombay and transgress the Islamic principles by stuffing his face with pork. He suffers uprootedness in England so much that he feels obliged to announce the Day of Judgment by blowing on a trumpet. He is ridiculed and threatened, considered insane since he has lost touch with his community. This strong feeling of uprootedness compels him to drive his Indian mistress, Rekha Merchant to infanticide and suicide, and later on destroy himself in his love for Alleluia, an English woman. Salman, the Persian, an immigrant from Persia is skeptical of the faith he profess. Muhammad Sufyan, a teacher, was a learned scholar, capable of quoting from Rig-Veda, Quran as well as the Revelations of St. John the Divine. He was aware of multiple culture; he was a 'multiphrenic' person, a true 'cosmopolitan' self in the real sense.

The narrator argues that it would be impossible to think of a self "as being (ideally) homogenous, non-hybrid, 'pure' ".(427) The heterogeneous identities which the different characters acquire is seen when they change their names. Their intention is to find new identity through new names. Jamshed turns into Jumpy, Alleluia Cone's husband Otto had anglicized her sister's name Yelyena into Ellaynah and reduced Alleluia to Allie and Cohen to Cone. The prostitutes of the curtains also changed their names to those of Prophet's wives.

Narrative in the *Satanic Verses* is presented at times as dreams. Rushdie uses playful attitude towards religion and the Protagonist and other characters bear fragmented identities. These are all postmodern strategies deployed by Rushdie which makes *The Satanic Verses* a truly postmodern novel.

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