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# Questioning the Representation in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines Rushdie's The Satanic Verses that shocked the world with the portrayal of the themes after its publication in 1988. This novel led to the loss of over twenty lives. It made its author go into hiding from the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa of 1989, where he remained under government protection ever since. The novel played a significant role in redefining the West's image of itself. The Iranian President Khamene'i justified his fatwa against Rushdie by similarly accusing him and "the world devourers" (the West) of publishing The Satanic Verses as a calculated move aimed at rooting out religion and religiousness, and above all, Islam and its clergy. The novel boldly explores religious identity, cultural hybridity, and the rivalry that ensues between tradition and modernity. The text depicts religious figures and themes that are aligned with Islam, the result of which is an issuance a Fatwa and several attempts on his life.*

*The article analyzes the novel used by the ruler of Iran as a deliberate literary attempt to eradicate religion and religiousness, and more specifically, Islam and its clergy, in order to defend his fatwa against Rushdie. The objective of the paper is to demonstrate the conflict between tradition and modernity, religious identity, and cultural hybridity. The exploration of the study suggests that the novel portrays religious figures and themes that are consistent with Islam, which led to the issuance of a Fatwa and multiple attempts on his life. In his writings, Rushdie makes use of linguistic markers and literary devices to help define, mold, and differentiate his characters. Besides, it also helps to give a thorough and nearly immediate grasp of a character's past.*

**Keywords:** Portrayal, Religion, Discourse, Resistance, Postmodern Condition

## Introduction

This article examines The Satanic Verses to explore the causes of the controversy as seen in the aftermath of the publication. Rushdie's ideological position is far more nuanced and problematic. His book encourages "doubts, uncertainties.". "It opposes the conclusion of discussion, disagreement, and opposition" (*Imaginary Homelands* 396). Rushdie is unmistakably establishing himself as a writer in a postmodern world where nothing can be said with certainty by defending his right to continually defend all issues, to put off closure indefinitely, and to oppose certainties of all kinds, whether they come from the East or the West. Rushdie has asserted, "I am a modern, and modernist, urban man," "accepting uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing" (404-05). The position of the

postmodern condition is this rejection of all grand narratives. Rushdie's personal background adds even more complexity to this contradiction.

After graduating from King's College in London with a degree in history, he decided to remain in England, having been raised as a Muslim in a Hindu nation and sent to an English public school at the age of 14. He self-exiled from his home country, but the racism he encountered in his new one repeatedly turned him away. Before the fatwa was issued, Rushdie was among the most sarcastic opponents of the racist politics of the Thatcher administration. After being taken into the custody of the British security services, he was left in the conflicted position of an adopted citizen who owed his life to a government that was also enacting anti-immigrant laws out of concern that the country would be overrun by foreigners. Despite being marginalized racially, Rushdie is more central to the dominant culture when viewed through the lens of class and wealth.

Rushdie's hybridity as a migrant has become a desirable, albeit uncomfortable, way of living. His satirical subversion of the metropolitan political certainties and the center's power dynamics as an outsider is postcolonialist. In an attempt to resolve these inner conflicts, Rushdie uses the oxymoron trope, which he uses to celebrate the singular affirmation of plurality and the certainty of uncertainty. Each camp has unavoidably criticized him for allegedly supporting the other. Marxists, particularly Aijaz Ahmad, have been continually criticizing him for his distinctly postmodern outlook. Rushdie's fictional world is "occupied so entirely by Power that there is no space left for either resistance or its representation," according to Ahmad, who attacks Rushdie on this point (127). Ahmad believes Rushdie lacks the necessary political conviction against imperialism. Because he is on both sides of the postcolonial debate, Rushdie declines to take a lenient stance that allows him to identify the desire to grab the truth for them and use it to justify imposing it on both believers and non-believers in both dominant and emergent cultures through *the Satanic Verses*.

## Literature Review

*The Satanic Verses* has received tremendous reactions and scholarly feedback since its publication. Different critics have had different reactions to the book's characters and plot, with some readers taking extreme measures, such as trying to kill the author. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calling for Salman Rushdie's death has been one of the most important responses to its publication. Rushdie was charged with blasphemy through the novel, and this decree was broadcast on Tehran Radio (Stepney 2013). This retaliation came about because it was thought that the novel was blasphemous to the Prophet Muhammad and Islam.

The demands of the Islamic communities for its censorship were heard in a number of nations, which subsequently complied. These courses of action were then to blame for the ensuing cultural and social repercussions, where disagreements and discussions about the right to free speech and expression were pitted against consideration for religious feelings. The controversy persisted over time because Rushdie was the target of multiple

assassination attempts. There was another attempt on Hitoshi Igarashi's life in 2022, around the same time that the first attempt occurred (Kabir 13). Rushdie's security was impacted by the 1989 book's publication since he was required to live under police protection.

By highlighting the contradictions and irrationality in society, Rushdie employs wordplay to challenge the status quo. Throughout the book, he employs puns to provocatively question social norms and power structures, paying particular attention to social constructs and beliefs (Dynel105). As he delves into other themes in the book, Rushdie skillfully accomplishes this and keeps the reader interested because there are times when a sentence can have two meanings. To add layers of symbolism and meaning to his works, he, for instance, heavily references the Quran and biblical texts and examines religious texts in his novel.

Rushdie chose to question society, politics, and religion by employing satire and irony as literary devices to critique the status quo. The use of irony and satire forces readers to consider the world critically and exposes the hypocrisy present in basic facets of society (Katuwal 20). Rushdie is able to use irony and satire, despite their possibly disparate origins, to address topics that would otherwise be prohibited. By mocking religion, culture, and political oppression, Rushdie uses satire to attack a number of targets. As an illustration of how irrationality appears to be the foundation of most religious fundamentalism, he challenges the religious extremists by exaggerating their beliefs and how illogical they appear from an outside viewpoint. Despite having a lot of criticism, no scholar has studied the novel by interrogating the depiction of the novel so far. This study investigates into the representation of the controversy and its other layouts.

## Discussion

The paper discusses discourse that is governed by a unique set of limiting rules, according to Foucault. Rushdie has used fictional discourse in *The Satanic Verses* be so threatening to the discourses of nationalism and fundamentalist religion. Is it because fiction asserts that it incorporates these other discursive formations into its own discourse, thereby revealing the will to power that underlies their will to truth? Foucault identifies the will to truth as the most significant of the three systems of exclusion that govern discourse.

Foucault asserts that the other two systems—the prohibition of words and the distinction between foolishness and reason—have tended to be absorbed. Every discursive formation conceals its desire for power behind its determination to construct the truth of things and asserts the status of "true" discourse for itself. This is true in the case of a theocratic state like Iran, where the Shi'ite branch of Islam is used as justification for a war against even fellow Sunni Muslims in a neighboring state like Iraq. By referring to it as a jihad or holy war, which is by definition a conflict fought against unbelievers, such a state uses the rhetoric of "true" religion to justify its blatantly political and nationalist goals. Mrs. Thatcher similarly invoked the "truth" of the Falkland Islanders' right to self-determination to support her wish to maintain political authority in the city center.

Rushdie essentially asserts that in fictional discourse, freedom triumphs over institutional control in an imaginative form of truth. He contends that fiction can assert that it is the "true" or authentic representation of human experience while ignoring the everyday facts and appealing to the imagination. In *Imaginary Homelands*, he makes the case that "politicians and writers are inherently antagonistic. Each group fights for the same territory and tries to shape the world to fit their vision. And one way to reject the official, political version of events is through the novel" (14). Rushdie's use of metaphor in this passage is instructive. Even though he is supposedly debating assertions of veracity, his use of words like "rivals," "fight," and "territory" is rooted in the realm of power. Rushdie's use of the paradoxical nature of fiction's concept of "true" discourse compels his readers to recognize it: "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 foundation of all fictional discourse is that "maybe.". It is up to the reader to determine how likely the imaginative construct is.

An impossible rebirth at the start of *The Satanic Verses* defies any sense of factual reality with two actors—as the two main protagonists is tellingly characterized—falling to earth from a height of 29,000 feet without parachutes or wings. There are more improbabilities. Gibreel gets the horns and hooves of a Chamcha goat and a halo. Gibreel is visited on a magic carpet by a deceased lover. London's climate is tropicalized by Gibreel.

Rushdie quickly responds, "They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (168), in response to Chamcha's question about how "they" manage to transform the immigrants into such strange creatures. Nonetheless, Rushdie implies that he possesses a superior descriptive power that should allow him to subdue the racist immigration authorities' descriptive discourse. Similar to the author, these authorities add the fact that Chamcha was actually ill before becoming unconscious to their fictional account of how he got there, primarily as a result of the beating they inflicted on him, to make their "story" "more convincing" (169). Rushdie mocks their storytelling style by beginning with a fictional character, like the manticore, and then providing a metaphorical explanation for the shapes they seem to take on, rather than actual facts.

There are realist chapters interspersed with chapters where Gibreel experiences unwanted nightmares or dreams. In his bizarre dream world, Gibreel paradoxically finds himself watching or taking part in a sequence of historically verified events, implying that history is a collective dreaming about the past. His dream of Mahound, the demonic term used by Christian crusaders to demonize Muhammad, includes many incidents from Muhammad's life. Ayesha's story freely draws from a well-known incident that occurred in Karachi in 1983, when Naseem Fatima led thirty-eight Shi'a followers into the sea, which they believed would split them. Gibreel's dream chapters also contain a narrative thread about the Imam's return from exile, which is similar to Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979.

Gibreel is caught between a "real" world where miracles occur and a dream world where they are brought back to a previously imagined but largely verifiable historical past. By

depicting the barrier between the waking and dreaming worlds gradually disintegrating, Rushdie further muddies the already hazy distinction between material and imaginative reality as Gibreel slowly descends into a state of schizophrenia. The boundaries between the two worlds are unclear to both Gibreel and the reader.

Confusion can either be liberating or destructive as a result. Rushdie acknowledges that "the imagination can deceive, denigrate, mock, caricature, and hurt just as well as it can elucidate, amplify, and reveal" (Imaginary Homelands 143). However, when Rushdie asserts inconsistently that "the opposition of imagination to reality.," he exposes his own bias. reminds us that having dreams gives us power and that we are not powerless. The will to power that underlies fiction's will to (imaginative) truth is once more visible here. "Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstituted," Rushdie adds (Imaginary Homelands 122). His definition of "reality," however, seems to refer to "our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be," a world "in which things inevitably get worse" (122). "The power." is present in the artist's dream worlds. In opposition to this grim reality" (122).

Rushdie claims that their (postmodern) plurality illuminates a world darkened by the ideological and religious unitary truths. However, according to Foucault, the discourse of fiction is just as incapable of "recognizing the will to truth which pervades it" as is all true discourse (*Archaeology/Discourse* 219). Its will to establish its superior status is as blinding as the discursive formations of Islam and nationalism that it subordinates to its goals. Discourse is inherently tainted by its ambition to dominate, just like knowledge.

The power of constraint exerted by fictional discourse on the totalizing discourses it opposes is exercised through their incorporation into its own discourse, which supposedly challenges all declared truths. In Rushdie's subversive account of the Qur'anic origins, Mahound uses a type of telepathy to spell out what he (Mahound) needs from Gibreel, while Muslims believe that the archangel Gabriel dictated God's verses to Muhammad. Put another way, Rushdie substitutes the psychologized exchange between the needy Prophet and his purportedly angelic mouthpiece—an internal projection—for the unwritten word of God. Since Gibreel is in charge of uttering the Satanic verses and their angelic rebuttal while under Mahound's influence, the fictional discourse puts him in a position to cast doubt on Mahound's assertion that the first set of verses originated with Satan.

Yar, it's not fun to be God's postman. However, God is not depicted in this image. Whose postal worker have I been? (112). The absolutes of the Islamic faith are humanized and relativized thanks to Rushdie's use of a lighthearted, witty tone and fictional discursive form. Just using "postman" instead of "messenger" diminishes the sublime to the commonplace. Rushdie frequently takes advantage of the polysemantic nature of language to draw our attention to the number of possible interpretations that existed at the time and that the Islamic discourse gave preference to for its own purposes. As Allie argues, "why speak if you can't manage perfect thoughts, perfect sentences" (296), perfection means complete silence. The writer of fiction is aware that entering the world of language involves

the compromises and ambiguities that come with imperfection, a reality that the believers in scripture deny. Most certainties—particularly the comforting absolutes upheld by religion—fall apart in Rushdie's dystopian world. The only constant certainty that Rushdie twisted in the book is uncertainty.

In his own discourse, Rushdie conducts what Foucault refers to as a genealogy of Islamic discourse. An examination of this type of discourse entails determining its norms, how it developed, and the circumstances surrounding its emergence, expansion, and variation (*Archaeology/Discourse* 231-32). In fact, the main focus of this book is this fascination with what Foucault refers to as genealogy: "How does newness come into the world? How is it bom? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?" (8) Mahound's argument is based on the conviction that there is only one God.

Rushdie forces this monotheistic belief on the polytheists of Jahilia, who built their city out of the shifting desert sands themselves. The survival of their numerous dry sand structures is threatened by Mahound's insistence on ritual washing, which also serves as a paradigm for the ideological differences between them. In their belief in gods with overlapping powers and domains, Jahilian polytheists are more tolerant of linguistic discontinuity than Mahound, who is a member of what Foucault refers to as the "'critical' group" that imposes "forms of exclusion, limitation, and appropriation" on the linguistic universe that threatens (*Archaeology/Discourse* 231). A unitary belief system was imposed on a society that resembled India, where "the human population outnumbers the divine by less than three to one" (16). This is reflected in Mahound's victory. In this passage, Rushdie blends a Western postmodern support for the polysemantic nature of language with a postcolonial appreciation of Indian culture.

Rushdie's fictional historicization of the history of Islam also reveals that Mahound, like Muhammad, was a prosperous businessman before using the new religion to solidify his secular power in a manner akin to that of a businessman. Mahound moves from the will to power to the will to truth which soon enough reveals the underlying will to power that resurfaces as the religious metamorphosizes into the political. Mahound is also compared to Ibrahim, who deserted his wife in the desert at God's command. "From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable" (95) is the narrator's observation. Such an aside subtly contradicts the discourse of religion with another discourse. However, it also lends narrative support to the opposing viewpoint, undermining the purported postmodern position of universal skepticism.

The context implies that feminism is the main discourse that is invoked.

A lot of attention is paid to Mahound's practice of limiting his followers to four wives while allowing himself twelve. In a section of the book that particularly enraged Muslims, Rushdie creates a brothel in which Mahound is paralleled by the poet Baal (who is symbolic of literary discourse), and the twelve prostitutes he marries are named after the Prophet's twelve wives. Similar to how sacred and secular verbal creativity are presented as nearly identical in a fictional setting, so too are sacred (that is, divinely approved) and secular

sexualities. Foucault's external rules of exclusion are gradually dropped until the discourse melds with fiction, becoming merely another creative textual construct. By situating it in a discursive context, Rushdie is able to undermine a unitary discourse in this instance more successfully.

*The Satanic Verses* succeeds in incorporating religious truth into its multifaceted discourse, demonstrating the superiority of plural fictional discourse over the unitary discourse of Islam.". Sara Suleri has pointed out that "the desacrilizing [sic] of religion" in The Satanic Verses "can simultaneously constitute a resacrilizing of history" (190). Her observation is sharp. The novel, however, places the playful and alluring powers of the artistic imagination above even history.

In Rushdie's fiction, the imagination extends far beyond the posing of questions, despite his claims to the contrary. He often says one thing while doing another. Answers are inexpensive. "Questions are hard to find," he declared when he came out of hiding in September 1995 to discuss his most recent book, The Moor's Last Sigh (Montalbano 7). However, in the new book, he expresses his regret for "the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One" (Wood 3) in a way that goes beyond simple inquiries once more. Why the insistence on binary polarity? What is wrong, for instance, with the One and the Many? Is this not the more genuine postmodern alternative to the exclusivity of the One?

Salman’s subversive discourse, in which the Quran’s divine status is undermined by the natural slippage of language, is unavoidably given precedence by Rushdie's playful use of his own name for this character. Is this intentional on Rushdie's part—an effort to acknowledge and escape his own logocentrism—or is he once again endorsing the superior status of literary discourse in his narrative? The heteroglossic dispute between languages, which Rushdie and Bakhtin both believe to be the unique domain of fictional discourse, is frequently dramatized. According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia is "another's speech in another's language dot.". A particular kind of talk with two voices" (324). Rushdie contrasts a poet's skill with the thundering’s of a prophet and a politician on two different occasions. In a poem titled "Reclaim the metaphor," immigrant Jumpy Joshi uses Enoch Powell's racist speech about rivers of blood as the title and subject matter. In this poem, the river of blood of the slain is changed into the river of blood of humanity in all its forms. Turn it into something useful for us (186). In the second case, Mahound, who opposes all poets and poetry, and Baal, the satirical poet, engage in a language war. Baal contrasts Mahound's Recitation with his poetic parodies.

## Conclusion

The paper has explored diverse religious and cultural issues that have enforced the author to represent Islam and its scriptural versions in a controversial manner. It has specified some aspects of the conflicts between believers and non-believers. Rushdie has been able to depict the complexities surrounding identity, culture, and storytelling. It can be concluded that the use of linguistic markers has been used to shape character identity and narrative perspective

in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The novel challenges and redefines our understanding of how language, culture, and identity intertwine. Rushdie also adds multiple layers of detail to his works by manipulating the narrative's perspectives and multiple viewpoints in a way that treads the line between fantasy and reality. The truth-value of *the Satanic Verses* is identical to those of the discourses it seeks to discredit. His usage of magic realism has been taken negatively by others. What may seem like a form of freedom in one realm, specifically literature, is perceived as a barren retreat in another, namely liberal politics. Angry Muslims are reminded by those within the literary community that this is simply fiction. Interpreting a novel as an act of blasphemy reflects a misunderstanding of the essence of fictional discourse.

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