

Cross-Cultural Influences in The Satanic Verses

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Abstract

The novel The Satanic Verses focuses on the cross-cultural influences and delves into the complexities of cultural hybridity by exploring the collision and blending of diverse traditions, identities, and belief systems. The narrative follows the intertwined lives of two Indian expatriates, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, who survive a terrorist attack on their flight from Bombay to London. Following the miraculous survival, the characters experience a series of surreal and fantastical transformations, blurring the lines between reality and myth. Rushdie's novel is renowned for its exploration of cultural syncretism, where elements of Eastern and Western cultures converge and coalesce. The characters navigate between different cultural landscapes, grappling with questions of identity, belonging, and the clash of civilizations. The narrative traverses various historical and geographical contexts, including India, Britain, and the Islamic world, highlighting the interconnectedness and fluidity of cultural boundaries. Central to the novel is the concept of hybridity, where characters embody multiple cultural identities and negotiate the complexities of their hybrid existence. Through vivid imagery, intricate storytelling, and linguistic experimentation, Rushdie depicts the rich tapestry of cultural influences shaping the characters' lives and experiences. The novel challenges essentialist notions of cultural purity and celebrates the dynamic interplay between diverse cultural traditions. Furthermore, the text explores the impact of colonialism, migration, and globalization on cultural formations, illustrating how power dynamics shape cultural exchanges and encounters. Rushdie critiques the hegemony of dominant cultural narratives and emphasizes the importance of embracing pluralism and diversity in contemporary societies. Overall, "The Satanic Verses" serves as a provocative and illuminating exploration of cross-cultural influences, offering profound insights into the complexities of cultural identity, hybridity, and the ever-evolving nature of human experience in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Hybridity, Postcolonialism, Identity, Disapora

1. Introduction:

Salman Rushdie's novel, "The Satanic Verses," stands as a literary masterpiece that transcends borders, languages, and cultures. Published in 1988, this novel sparked

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intense controversy and ignited debates around the world, delving into themes ranging from religion and identity to migration and globalization. At its core, "The Satanic Verses" is a testament to the intricate interplay of cultures, ideologies, and belief systems that define our modern world. This research article seeks to unravel the intricate web of cross-cultural influences embedded within Rushdie's seminal work. By examining the novel through a multicultural lens, the paper aims to shed light on how various cultural elements converge and clash within its pages, shaping both the narrative and its reception across different societies. "The Satanic Verses" draws inspiration from diverse sources, including Islamic history, mythology, and literature, as well as Western literary traditions and popular culture. Rushdie skillfully weaves these disparate threads together, creating a narrative tapestry that reflects the complexity of contemporary multicultural societies. Through characters like Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, who straddle multiple cultural identities, Rushdie explores the fluidity and hybridity of identity in an increasingly globalized world. Moreover, the novel's exploration of religious themes, particularly its reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition, invites critical examination of the intersection between culture and spirituality. Rushdie's bold reimagining of sacred texts and figures challenges traditional boundaries and prompts readers to confront the fluidity of religious belief and interpretation. Furthermore, "The Satanic Verses" serves as a mirror to the cultural and political tensions of the late 20th century, reflecting the anxieties and aspirations of postcolonial societies grappling with the legacies of imperialism and globalization. Rushdie's engagement with issues of migration, exile, and diaspora underscores the interconnectedness of cultures and the ways in which displacement shapes individual and collective identities. In this research article, we will delve deeper into these themes, analysing Rushdie's narrative techniques, character development, and thematic explorations to unravel the intricate tapestry of cross-cultural influences in "The Satanic Verses." Through this examination, we hope to contribute to a richer understanding of the novel's significance as a literary work that transcends cultural boundaries and continues to provoke thought and debate in diverse contexts.

2. Methodology

By employing a comprehensive research methodology that combines textual analysis, literary theory, reception studies, and socio-historical contextualization, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the cross-cultural influences in Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses." Through this interdisciplinary approach, the research seeks to shed light on the complexities of cultural representation and intercultural dialogue in contemporary literature.

3. Review of Literature

Various critics have interpreted Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* from different perspectives. Daniel Pipes explores Ayatollah Khomeini's forceful stance on Rushdie in his essay titled "Two Decades of the Rushdie Rules: How an edict that once outraged

the world became the new normal." Khomeini holds Rushdie responsible for the publication of *The Satanic Verses* asserting that the book defames Islam, the Prophet, and the Quran. Consequently, he issues a fatwa calling for the immediate assassination of the author and anyone involved in publishing the book, urging devout Muslims to swiftly locate and execute them to prevent further disrespect towards Muslim beliefs. Khomeini suggests that those who die in this act can attain martyrdom. Furthermore, he encourages those lacking the courage to carry out the slaughter themselves to inform others to take action. In addition to Khomeini's fatwa, Hugh Trevor-Roper, a respected historian, expresses a vehement reaction to the novel's publication, foreseeing the possibility of violence against the author. Trevor-Roper remarks:

I wonder how Salman Rushdie is faring these days under the benevolent protection of British law and British police, about whom he has been so rude. Not too comfortably I hope... I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit and literature would not suffer. (21)

Former United States President Jimmy Carter addresses this issue in "The New York Times", stating that "Rushdie's book is an insult," and emphasizing that Rushdie, being a Muslim familiar with Muslim customs and beliefs, should have anticipated the potential consequences better. Carter contends that Rushdie, possessing knowledge of Muslim beliefs, should have anticipated a strong negative reaction from the Islamic world.

Novelist John le Carré in his essay "Russians Warm to le Carré" expressed a similar sentiment, condemning the Iranian Government's death sentence imposed on Salman Rushdie. Le Carré stressed that disrespecting major religions should not go unpunished. Another notable critic of Rushdie, the art critic John Berger, offered a different perspective. In February 1989, in "The Guardian," Berger expressed skepticism about the feasibility of controlling the violence. He proposed that Rushdie might contemplate requesting his publishers worldwide to cease producing new editions of *The Satanic Verses*. Berger believed this step was necessary not only to safeguard Rushdie's own life but also to protect innocent individuals uninvolved in the book's creation or readership. He suggested that if Rushdie took this action, Islamic leaders and statesmen globally might be more inclined to denounce the Ayatollah's practice of issuing terrorist death warrants. Without such intervention, Berger feared that a unique Holy War of the twentieth century, characterized by terrifying righteousness on both sides, might erupt sporadically in locations such as airports, shopping streets, suburbs, and city centers, posing a threat to public safety.

"The New York Times" published an article titled "Iranians Protest over Banned Book," which highlighted the response of Britain's foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, to Rushdie's death sentence. He expressed serious concern about Khomeini's declaration

during an interview with the BBC, describing it as a matter of "very grave concern." He mentioned that the British government was carefully assessing the situation, underscoring the challenge of establishing a constructive relationship with a revolutionary regime that strongly adheres to its own interpretation of innocent lives. In his essay titled "Britain Protests Khomeini's 'Death Sentence' Against Author Rushdie," He further stated, "Nobody has the right to incite people to violence on British soil or against British citizens. Ayatollah Khomeini's statement is totally unacceptable."

"The New York Times" also ran a story titled "Britain puts ties with Iran on hold," which conveyed the British government's stance regarding Rushdie's novel. The government cautioned that normalizing relations with Iran would be impossible until the Iranian Government fully adhered to international standards of behavior. "The Washington Post" quoted Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech in an article titled "Iran Tells Britain to Condemn Book," focusing on her opinion about Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*. Thatcher emphasized that freedom of speech in Britain is governed solely by the country's laws and would always remain so. She stressed the importance of this freedom to British values, asserting that no external influence could alter it.

4. Analysis and Interpretation

As the main issue of *The Satanic Verses* is the position of immigrants and foreigners in general within mainstream British society, it is mostly set in London. The characters were either born or found their new home there and consider it their home and more or less like it. Even though London is their home and they should feel safe there, it is not always so. One of the reasons for some of the difficulties they encounter there is the part of the city they live in. The characters are brought face to face with the cultural mixing and prejudices of their own and from time to time also with demonstrations of racism as the white residents are not always happy to welcome black newcomers into their neighbourhood.

In Rushdie's novel, the image and description of London is somehow more intense. Both characters are on their way from Bombay to London, the place they want to live in and boost their Englishness. Therefore, in their eyes London is the promised place, the ideal of their new lives. "He was fed up of textile factories and local trains and all the confusion and superabundance of the place, and longed for that dream – Vilayet of poise and moderation that had come to obsess him by night and day" (Rushdie 37). They focus all their wishes and dreams on London in the hope that that is the place where they can live happily and differently. The image of London as the imagined Promised Land does not last long and then comes disillusionment and meeting the reality and realizing that none of the places they know is any better.

In the novel, the main heroes strive to make London the city of their dreams and they sacrifice their freedom for it. As they abandoned their roots for it, they lay claims to a place within this city, they want to own it and dominate it from the position of immigrants. “Of material things, he had given his love to this city, London, preferring it to the city of his birth or to any other . . . dreaming of being the one to possess it and so, in a sense, become it” (Rushdie 398). It is an effort to dominate, in this case, London and in a sense take their revenge. At the background of London we follow the stories of different characters and their families. In *The Satanic Verses* the struggle between good and evil (or between these two characters) is in fact the main storyline and continues until the end of the novel.

The text also deals with the good-evil dichotomy. At the very beginning, the characters’ fates are decided and while entering Britain they become the metamorphoses of an angel and a devil. Here the division is caused by the superior power which is obviously the author himself. In a sense, he does not factor in their natures; he just does what he wants because he is the uppermost authority within the text. Again we have two opposing forces who are confronted with each other as well as with themselves. Only at the end do they swap their roles and become themselves. Interestingly enough, the “becoming themselves” takes place in Bombay where they meet each other as well as their roots. In conclusion, their identities become clearer for them once again, however wrong or right they are.

Most probably the children themselves are not aware of the “subversive” force of their individual registers but the author definitely is. Nevertheless, they use these registers and dialects when they want to single themselves out (at least for a while) from the major society. For Zadie Smith, language is one of the main devices to deal with the issue of postcolonialism and particularly with the problems of several generations of immigrants. On the other hand, Salman Rushdie does not usually employ various “englishes” or registers. However, he also plays with language and with words. Sometimes, he inserts words from other languages (Indian mostly) to point out the divergences between people who live in the West and those living in the East. Moreover, we can also trace some examples of “destabilizing” (Mercer’s words) the English language but ridiculing its words by literal translations or transferring the meaning without translation.

The main character in *The Satanic Verses* is called Saladin which is an Indian name, but while speaking in English with his friend she calls him Salad. The interpretation of this example can be double-edged or multivalent as she can be ridiculing together his English, his effort not to be Indian any more but at the same time not being proper English either. In the case of Rushdie it is better to talk about idiolects rather than dialects or registers. Each of his characters has a specific way of expression and it is not always only a matter of their nationality or origin. In his case it serves a slightly different purpose than in Smith’s novel. Rushdie is a representative of a form of postmodern magic realism and therefore “to write naturalistically would be an expression of Western superiority” (Seminck 33). Of course this is not applicable only to the use of language but also to his whole literary

style. Still, the point is the same – to present another (not common) perspectives and forms and demonstrate that the Western perspective is not the only way. The main characters in the novel marry or have a relationship with a person that is not from the same country of origin and moreover is English. Gibreel and Saladin in *The Satanic Verses* find their women partners in England (however, Gibreel’s girlfriend Allie is a daughter of Polish immigrants). This can be seen as another example of hybridity (or multiculturalism in this case) or even of colonialism in reverse where the immigrants conquer the country by marrying and having children with the native inhabitants.

All these characters and their families are at least partly immigrants; however, they belong to different types of immigrants. Their feeling of superiority can be also explained by the fact that the other immigrants have a different skin colour which is a difference obvious at first sight. Also the immigrants from Caribbean and the immigrants from India partially share the same history due to diasporisation through slavery. The feeling of superiority among immigrants is present also in Rushdie’s novel. Saladin Chamcha considers himself a better English citizen than the other Indian immigrants and does not want to have anything to do with them. Even though he considers himself English, he is not English enough for the English people and at the same time to little Indian for the Indian people. This duality within the characters themselves is an important and recurring theme in the novel.

If we look back at the adult characters in the novel in detail, they are quite dissimilar in their attitudes towards their immigrants’ status and other aspects connected with it. In *The Satanic Verses* we have Anahita and Mishal Sufyan. All these children were born in Britain and they feel English though also they have some problems with the inclusion into the society. Yet, their parents’ country usually means nothing to them. This is true mainly in the case of Sufyan girls who even call their country of origin “Bungleditch” (Rushdie 259) and to spite their mother they wear typical western clothes and in general indulge in the western culture. Saladin and Gibreel in *The Satanic Verses* return (for real) to Bombay to recover their forgotten roots once again. The same holds true for Rushdie, who was born in India and only later moved to England but regularly returned to India and Pakistan. He then projects in his novel his own experience of displacement (in the character of Saladin Chamcha in particular).

Gibreel and Saladin from *The Satanic Verses* have intentionally forgotten their roots and tried to completely gain the English identity. ““Damn you, India,” Saladin Chamcha cursed silently, sinking back into his seat. “To hell with you, I escaped your clutches long ago, you won’t get your hooks into me again, you cannot drag me back” ” (Rushdie 35). Saladin has a very clear idea what he wants to get but he is not aware of the consequences and thus ends up arrested as an illegal immigrant although he has been living in England for many years. In a sense, he is punished for abandoning his roots and origin. In Gibreel’s case (as he is the embodiment of an angel) his roots are more connected with religion and by losing his faith he is abandoning his origin only to re-gain it back in the end: “. . .

when Gibreel regained his strength, it became clear that he has changed, and to a startling degree, because he lost his faith . . . and he loaded his plate with . . . pork sausages from Wiltshire and the cured York hams and the rashers of bacon . . . with the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism (Rushdie 29). It seems that the more Saladin and Gibreel strive to get rid of their roots and become English (or being unintentionally deprived of them – Gibreel) the more they are perceived as foreigners. Because of that they take on all the English stereotypes, “Chamcha cultivated his voice and manners to be ultra-English” (Cody). He even hates other English people for not being English enough. However, his effort is useless as soon as he is found by the police and considered an illegal immigrant. Here Rushdie employs magic realistic aspects as he let Saladin transform into a sycophant and sends him to a hospital full of similar human-animal monsters who are all immigrants. Their horrible appearance is caused by the English people who out of xenophobia and racism have the power to project their images of foreigners into their actual appearance: “They describe us,” the other whispered solemnly. “That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (Rushdie 168). Rushdie refers here to the Orientalist discourse; a notion introduced by Edward Said in which the East or Orient is a construction created by western scholars. They describe it and it thus comes into existence. Only when Saladin learns to hate his immigrant’s status he is changed back into his human appearance. He is once again aware of his real origins and roots and understands that he can never be a real Englishman; there will always be a gap between him and English people.

Rushdie questions some of the postcolonial ideas about the necessity to put the immigrants or people from the former colonies at the same level with people living in the centre of the former Empire. He points out that such an effort is useless and the equality can never be reached and the only thing we can do with it is to learn how to live with it. It is not as easy as that and there are still many immigrants who cannot reconcile themselves with this new reality. They look for different ways of escapism such as alcohol, drugs and memories. Nevertheless, by living in England all the immigrants are inevitably becoming part of the culture and society to a certain extent. They adopt their cultural customs and life style from the dominant culture. Hybridity is not only present in the places of former British colonial power but also in its centre. However, in this case, the mainstream culture has much more greater impact on the minor culture than vice versa. The minorities are gradually forgetting their own culture and are more and more getting used to the mainstream one. “Audience surveys show.” He breathed, “that ethnics don’t want to watch ethnic shows. They don’t want’em, Chamcha. They want fucking *Dynasty*, like everyone else” ” (Rushdie 265). To become the part of the mainstream culture easily they conform to their standards in almost every aspect of their lives.

The most visible instances of cultural intersection or mixing of cultures are marriages and relationships of the main characters. Foreigners get married to English citizens and

thus are directly faced with hybridity. However, there are not many striking differences between them as far as their cultures are concerned because those who are immigrants want to become part of their culture therefore get included into it; they do not want to insist on their own traditions as far as they are in conflict with the mainstream culture. There is a mixing up, there is hybridity but all this is happening for different reasons on both sides. For some people, the reason is a fashion wave, to experience something new and to break out from the monotony. That is why they choose exotic names, love eating in Shaandar cafe. For the immigrants, the reason is the exact opposite, they want to be included in the monotony, and they want to be part of the crowd as they are otherwise apparently different. Their roles are changing, their cultures are mingling and the differences are becoming less and less distinguishable. The changing of roles and exchange of culture is happening, yet people are still as if not aware of it. What matters most is the fact that they are foreigners, however hard they try not to be.

The cross-cultural influences can also be seen within the characters themselves, they are confused between two worlds, the one they came from and the one they came into. This confusion or chaos in the souls of the immigrants is a prominent element in the novel. The characters are Indian and English at the same time and only because they want to be more English than Indian they paradoxically end up Indian reconciled with their lost roots once again. Prejudices and ignorance are narrowly connected to racism and therefore appear also in the novel. Rushdie points out these issues and thus depicts the society as not able to accept divergence yet.

The novel unveils similar attitude towards minorities and a kind of still-colonial perspective on them. Some of the English people of the dominant society have very distorted ideas about the lives of immigrants. They still try to assert their dominance by presenting their civilisation as more advanced and the feeling of superiority. “Africa, Asia, Caribbean: now those are places with real problems. Those are places where people might have grievances worth respecting. Things aren’t so bad here, not by a long chalk; no slaughters here, no torture, no military coups. People should value what they’ve got before they lose it. Ours always was a peaceful land, he says. Our industrious island race” (Rushdie 455). These are the words of a police inspector investigating the London riots. Such an attitude was nothing surprising in the 1970s and 1980s where there were numerous many race riots and the police precautions were very racist. Though the era of colonialism is over we can still trace its manifestations within the society as presented in the novel.

Another phenomenon “colonialism in reverse” (qtd. in Bhabha 60). This is a term based on what has happened after the big waves of immigrants from the former colonies came into England. Now they were in a sense colonizing the major society and its culture and language. The characters, particularly Gibreel, want to take their revenge on the country that oppressed their own culture and thus Gibreel sends a heat wave down on London. ““City, . . . I am going to tropicalize you,” Gibreel enumerated the benefits

of the proposed metamorphosis of London into a tropical city: increased moral definition, institution of national siesta, development of vivid and expansive patterns of behaviour among the populace, higher-quality popular music” (355). By tropicalizing England, he has colonized it; he brought new culture and customs to the country and aimed to change the peoples’ behaviour and habits without asking their permission. He wanted to be the one who controls their lives by transforming everything they were used to into his own image.

A resemblance can be seen to what the colonizers did to the colonized countries and their inhabitants. As the colonized people in the past tried to sometimes resist or rebel against the colonial rule also in London the sudden change of climate changes peoples’ behaviour and their start rioting in the streets and the disturbances are to be seen everywhere around the city. Not only Gibreel has the power of reverse colonialism, we can follow its aspects also in the character of Saladin who has a dream of having and sexual relationship with the Queen. “. . . he found himself dreaming of the Queen, of making tender love to the Monarch. She was the body of Britain, the avatar of the State, and he had chosen her, joined with her; she was his beloved, the moon of his delight” (169). As far as colonialism in reverse is concerned, Saladin and Gibreel differ in its appreciation. In Gibreel’s case it is more of a revenge on the country that destroyed his personality by turning him into an angel. Saladin always wanted to become a part of the country and its society, he loved Britain but at the same time he wanted to own it, he wanted it to be his country and he wanted to do with it whatever he desired. What these two have in common is the fact that both their efforts fail in the end and they return to the country of their origin. Another, and more explicit example of revengeful behaviour is the entertainment provided by the Club Hot Wax owned by an Albino Indian, “An Indian who has never seen India, East-Indiaman from the West Indies, white black man” (292).

Salman Rushdie also contributed to the debate on postcolonial theory in his novel. He quotes Frantz Fanon’s ideas to support his own fiction. He has chosen probably the most important figure who wrote “the most influential and perhaps the most important book of post-colonial literature: *The Wretched of the Earth*. In it he argues for the importance of “national culture” to an anti-imperialist struggle” (146). Rushdie is not engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle as he is writing about countries that already gained their independence; he uses these words to justify Gibreel’s revengeful acting. “He would show them – yes! – his *power*. – These powerless English! – Did they not think their history would return to haunt them? – “The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor” ((Rushdie 353). Here we can see the onset of Gibreel’s vengeance when he turns from the oppressed to the persecutor by sending a heat wave on London (as was already mentioned). Rushdie also makes a remark about another problematic issue of postcolonialism which is the concept of binary oppositions or binarism.

As was said before, the colonial theory was based on binary oppositions and postcolonialism wants to dissolve this division between West – East, good – evil, civilised

– uncivilised, etc. Again Rushdie puts this into Gibreel’s mouth who is the avenging angel; the one who will establish the coequality. “No more of these England-induced ambiguities, these Biblical-Satanic confusions! – Clarity, clarity, at all costs clarity!” (Rushdie 353). Gibreel is also one of the victims of this binarism, he became the angel (as opposed to Saladin – devil). However, this transformation was caused by the English, he had no choice, and it was imposed on him. It has always been the West who invented these opposites and the East take on the duty to eliminate them.

The crucial theme in the novel is then the immigrants’ position within a new society and learning how to live in it and at the same time try to maintain their roots. Both authors present this all life long struggle and at the same time point out changes and in a sense improvement connected with the second or third generation of immigrants in Britain in relation to their parents. The core of the novel is the pervasiveness of hybridity in the centre of the former British Empire. Rushdie shows that the postcolonial effort to put all people at the same level within one society (however multicultural the society claims to be) is practically impossible. Though Rushdie represents a different generation, the novel takes place almost at the same period at the background of the same political situation and thus his characters are faced with similar problems.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel presents the divergencies as well as similarities and overlaps of two different cultures existing in one country and the problems and questionable issues connected with it. It confirms the idea of hybridity or multiculturalism which is the main idea of the whole postcolonial theory, in both its negative and positive sense.

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