

# Two falls and a Submission: Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988)

Talk about books, 9 Feb 2023 — Art Kavanagh

I was lucky enough to have read *The Satanic Verses* before the Ayatollah Khomeini declared it blasphemous and called for the murder of its author. I had, in other words, an opportunity to make up my mind about the book without taking into account, or indeed being aware of, the views of an aged theocrat with no sense of the boundaries of his own jurisdiction as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's an opportunity that, rereading the novel this past week, I've shamefacedly come to see that I squandered.

Salman Rushdie's fourth novel was published in hardback in the autumn of 1988. I wasn't in the habit of reading new hardbacks within months of their publication, though I'd like to have been, if hardbacks hadn't been so relatively expensive. I was able to read this one because my upstairs neighbour was given the book as a Christmas present. When I enthused about *Midnight's Children*, he offered to lend me the new book before he had even read it himself. I took him up on the offer.

After the heady rush of reading *Midnight's Children*, I had found Rushdie's third novel, *Shame*

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(1983) a disappointment. If the earlier book was, as I had taken it to be, an outraged indictment of the failure to achieve the possibilities unleashed by Indian independence, *Shame* had seemed to me to be a rather more desultory attempt to do much the same thing for Pakistan. (I'll elaborate in a future post.) I was hoping that *The Satanic Verses* would turn out to be closer in tone, spirit and tenor to the earlier book than to the more recent one. It turned out to be something else again, quite different from either, and I didn't really know what to make of it.

I ought to have read it again within a short period, thought about it a bit more, chewed over the several parts that puzzled me. The Ayatollah's intervention deflected my attention. In those days, it was normal practice for a paperback edition to be released a year after the hardback. This paperback was delayed because of the real danger to people involved in publishing it. There were several attacks on publishers and translators. It wasn't until 1992 that an ad hoc collective calling itself The Consortium brought out a paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*. I bought a copy of this edition but to the best of my recollection never read it. The pages seemed to be the same size as the hardback edition and at more than 500 pages the volume did not seem robust enough to stand up to rough treatment.

So, as far as I remember, the rereading that I finished last night has been only my second ever reading of *The Satanic Verses*, 34 years after the first. This realization came as a bit of a shock to me, given that I've read *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* several times each. I happen to know that I reread *Midnight's Children* in 1992 or early 1993, so I'm a bit puzzled that I didn't go back to *The Satanic Verses* at around the same time. I'm sure that the format of the paperback wasn't the only thing that stopped me, but neither was it wholly without effect.

*The Satanic Verses* contains (or seems to be attempting to contain) various themes yoked together in ways that I can't (yet) claim to understand, but which don't quite seem to contradict each other. Perhaps the most obvious theme is that of migration. The two central characters, both of whom are known by different names than those they were originally given, enter the United Kingdom in an irregular, not to say miraculous manner, tumbling almost 30,000 feet from an exploding airplane. In the fall, they embrace, switch places, seem to exchange parts of their personalities. The unidentified narrator – "who has the best tunes?" (p. 10) – apparently omniscient but by no means disinterested, though occasionally professing his unwillingness to intervene, likens their fall to a rebirth.

Saladin Chamcha (originally Salahuddin Chamchawala) is taken into custody by police and

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immigration officials who, by virtue of their “power of description” (p. 168), are able to transform him into a foul-smelling, horned and cloven-hooved animal, figuratively (or actually) a devil. Such behaviour would, of course, be outrageous when directed at any human being but Saladin feels – and it’s actually quite difficult not to sympathize – that it’s particularly unfair in his case because he has long been settled in the UK where he has a successful career as a voice actor and children’s cartoon character. Saladin finds that his anger tends to reverse the dehumanizing process, but ultimately it’s hatred in tandem with that anger that returns him to his accustomed form (p. 294).

The object of his hate is the man who was reborn with him, Gibreel Farishta (originally Ismail Najmuddin) who, preoccupied with his own problems, didn’t intervene when the police and immigration authorities came to take Saladin away. Rationally, one might expect Saladin’s hatred (like his anger) to be directed at the authorities but perhaps hatred is never rational.

Gibreel’s refusal to get involved when Saladin is arrested is echoed later in his own dreams, in which the poet Baal, who used to write satires making fun of the new monotheistic religion when it was weak, finds that when it returns in strength he has to take refuge in a brothel, pretending to be a eunuch. When the brothel is being shut down, one of his supposed “wives”, on the

point of being arrested, pleads with him to “help us, if you are a man” (p. 389); he doesn’t respond.

Like Saladin, Gibreel is an actor, but while Saladin has succeeded by concealing his identity behind a cartoon alien – an alien, that is, supposedly from another planet, not merely another continent – or various products that are being advertised, Gibreel (whose adopted name is that of an archangel) has relied on his looks, starring in a number of Bollywood films as a variety of deities, angels and spirits from several different religions. Late in the story, when the two main characters have returned to Bombay and Gibreel’s attempts to revive his career have been failing, another poet – this one, Bhupen, not part of a dream – says:

“I always saw Gibreel as a positive force ... An actor from a minority playing roles from many religions, and being accepted. If he has fallen out of favour, it’s a bad sign. (p. 540)

Shortly after this, Gibreel shoots himself dead, having first killed the woman, Alleluia Cone, or “Allie”, the pursuit of whom had brought him to London in the first place, by (reportedly) pushing her off a tall building from which his former lover, Rekha Merchant, had previously jumped with her children. By then, Gibreel has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and paranoia,

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apparently with good reason. Yet, earlier, in London, he has been convinced that the diagnosis was wrong:

The doctors had been wrong, he now perceived, to treat him for schizophrenia; the splintering was not in him, but in the universe. (p. 351)

Saladin's way of revenging himself on Gibreel is to stoke the other man's jealousy. The play *Othello* is a recurring motif in the novel. Saladin, before he married his eventually estranged and ultimately murdered (apparently by witchcraft-practising police) wife, Pamela, had told her:

... that *Othello*, "just that one play", was worth the total output of any other dramatist in any other language, and though he was conscious of hyperbole, he didn't think the exaggeration very great. (p. 398)

When Saladin's animosity towards Gibreel is revived, and the latter in his medicated state inadvertently reveals the strength of his jealousy, Saladin understands that he can best damage his enemy by taking on the role of Iago: "*I follow him to serve my turn upon him*" (p. 428). Gibreel has been too talkative, too revealing and above all too trusting and Saladin is able to use his confidences to excite Gibreel's suspicions that Allie has been promiscuously unfaithful and to persuade her that her lover has been widely

disseminating her intimate secrets. Anonymous phone calls, made using Saladin's formidable voice acting skills, ensure this.

Up to this point, Saladin has seemed, despite his portrayal as a devilish figure, to be the good guy. Or maybe not exactly a good guy, but certainly a better-than-average guy. His desire for acceptance into English society, his adoption of a vaguely insulting name, his intention to sever any links with his own background: none of these seem to hurt anybody other than himself. But the narrative voice – can we trust it? – implies that Saladin has actually become evil:

What Saladin Chamcha understood that day was that he had been living in a state of phony peace, 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. He seemed to see a road before him, forking to left and right. Closing his eyes, settling back against the taxicab upholstery, he chose the left-hand path. (pp. 418-9)

As the confrontation between Saladin and Gibreel comes nearer, the narrator makes sure that we can't miss the parallels with Shakespeare's play:

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What follows is tragedy – Or, at least the echo of tragedy, the full-blooded original being unavailable to modern men and women, so it's said. – A burlesque for our degraded, imitative times, in which clowns re-enact what was first done by heroes and by kings. – Well, then, so be it. The question that's asked here remains as large as ever it was: which is, the nature of evil. how it's born, why it grows, how it takes unilateral possession of a many-sided human soul. Or, let's say: the enigma of Iago. (p. 424)

To characterize Iago's malignity as "motiveless" is not in the least to say that it is inexplicable. Allie, Saladin and Gibreel may not have the heroic (or tragic) qualities of Shakespeare's characters but "they will, at least, be costumed in such explanations as my understanding will allow" (p. 425).

Gibreel is equally convinced that Saladin has turned evil, once he realizes that it must have been Chamcha who undermined his relationship with Allie:

And now, at last, Gibreel Farishta recognizes for the first time that the adversary has not simply adopted Chamcha's features as a disguise, – nor is this any case of paranormal possession, of body-snatching by an invader up from Hell; that, in short, the evil is not external to Saladin, but springs from some recess of his own true nature,



that it has been spreading through his selfhood  
like a cancer, erasing what was good in him,  
wiping out his spirit ... (p. 463)

And yet, when Saladin suffers a heart attack and two  
broken arms, trapped beneath a beam in the burning  
Shaandaar Café, Gibreel carries him out, saving his life.  
At the end of the novel, Salahuddin Chamchawala,  
having resumed his original name and his residence in  
Bombay, feels that

... in spite of all his wrong-doing, weakness,  
guilt – in spite of his humanity – he was getting  
another chance. (p. 547)

Gibreel and Allie are dead, as are Pamela Chamcha and  
Jumpy Joshi, the Sufyan parents and Salahuddin's own  
father. Why is it that Salahuddin is getting another  
chance and none of them is? Perhaps because he  
needs it more? Or maybe there isn't a reason, it's just  
happenstance.

The novel's title refers to an episode, the historical  
accuracy of which is disputed, in which the prophet  
Mohammed is said to have removed a short passage  
from the Qur'an, saying he had been deceived by the  
devil into including it. In Gibreel's dream within the  
novel, this is presented as a failed attempt at an  
accommodation between Islam (there referred to as  
Submission) and the older polytheistic beliefs, and as a

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defeat (or long-term setback) for the female deities, in particular Al-Lat.

In general females, whether human or divine – there don't seem to be any female angels at all – get a raw deal in this story. Allie (whose name echoes that of Al-Lat) has been treated particularly egregiously:

In the matter of forgiveness, Salahuddin reflected, nobody had thought to consult the entirely innocent and gravely injured Alleluia, *once again, we made her life peripheral to our own. No wonder she's still hopping mad.* (p. 538)

("Hopping" must be particularly painful for Allie, who has fallen arches, a condition which did not stop her from climbing Everest, completing the final ascent without oxygen.)

Another set of verses, ones that have a better claim than the ones allegedly excised by the Prophet to be considered evil or diabolical, play a pivotal part in the story. They're the verses that Saladin recites over the phone, using some of his "Thousand Voices", which inflame Gibreel's paranoid jealousy and drive him and Allie apart (pp. 444-6). When Salahuddin assumes that Gibreel is about to kill him, he thinks

... about how he was going to die for his verses, but could not find it in himself to call the death sentence unjust. (p. 546)

I'm conscious that I'm leaving out a lot that I'd have liked to say about this novel. No doubt I'll return to it in the future, though probably not in a Talk about books post. I've previously written here about Midnight's Children and Fury, and I intend to fill in the gap by writing about the adult novels (that is, not including *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*) that Rushdie published in between. This present post was going to be about *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* together, followed by one post each for *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground beneath Her Feet* later this year.

While rereading *The Satanic Verses* in the past week I concluded that I was going to have the devil's own job fitting what I wanted to say about it into a single post, so I dropped the idea of writing about it and *Shame* in the same post. But, because *The Satanic Verses* would be fresher in my mind, I decided to write about it first, breaking the chronological order, and to keep *Shame* for later.

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