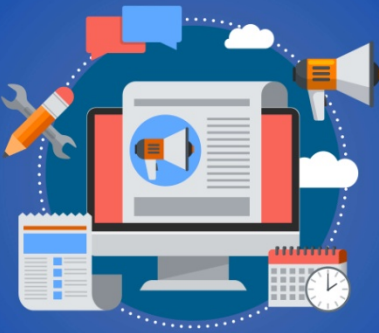


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Dismantling the Boundary between History and Fiction in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie's highly controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* stands against every notion of orthodoxy and absolutism and views any human artifact like religious book can no more stick towards its authority, so as historical fact. So he provides an alternative version of Qur'anic historical fact in the novel by making the readers conscious about "whose truth [is] get[ting] told" (Hutcheon 123). By giving entry to a fictional and unreliable character Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, Rushdie brings every narrative text into critical stand point. The anonymous narrator presents protagonist Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha to intermix the fact and fiction in such a way that it orients readers to orient even religious sacred book Qur'an under suspicion.

Keywords: fictional history, grand narrative, Satanic Verses, historiographic metafiction.

Rushdie's character Gibreel dreams on an epic scale and his theological dreams provide the script of his own movies along with Rushdie's pretext for paradoxically rewriting the history of Muhammad's founding of Islamic world and satirizes the contemporary politicians of Islamic nationalism. In the novel, protagonist dares to draw the history of Islamic religious book in a parallel relation to the fictional history of Muhammad and through his abnormal dream like experience. The strict and absolute story of origin of Islamic creed and his prophet Muhammad are smashed with lose and unreliable story of Gibreel's own role of god messenger. Both leading characters have been narrated from the eyes of an unknown narrator; about their experiences and event in very magical realistic tone in order to portray the disturbed migrant mentality which itself is shocking and unreliable. Novel's narrator seems to be omnipresent and omnipotent which can be coincided with Allah, Islamic god but anonymous in its presentation hints his intention of challenging the existences of god in any

religious treatise thus, put every human artifact as narrative contraction and deserves to be written again. As Rushdie says “Human being understand themselves and shapes their futures by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable; not by bowing the knee, whether to god or a man” (*Imaginary Homelands* 394).

Gibreel and Chammcha, in the beginning part the novel, are trapped in a hijacked plane during a flight from India to Britain. The plane explodes over the English Channel, but they are magically saved. In a miraculous transformation, Farishta takes on the personality of the archangel Gibreel and Chamcha that of a devil. In realistic level, Farishta's transformation can be read as the symptoms of the protagonists who are developing ‘Dissociative identity disorder’. Writer uses the magical realistic technique in order to present the unpreventable reality of the event. Unknown narrator, in this context, narrates:

Just before dawn one winter's morning, New year's Day or thereabout, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of clear sky. (1)

Rushdie uses this technique to parallel the way religious text presents its grand narrative so that authority and superiority of god could maintain up to the level of unchangeable and unchallengeable. On the other hand, this technique also paves the way to doubt on the authenticity of narrator and leaves the readers to describe the event in their own version because the version the narrator narrates is not always reliable as argued by Alexander to challenge the “received versions of history” (16). Hence, the author provides the loopholes to turn the readers' attention over the authenticity and factual accuracy of events provided by other. To interrogate “every centric totality” and to have “deliberate contrast with hierarchial notion of history” is the main thrust of historiographic metafiction as Hutcheon writes in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (118, 43).

Rushdie's novel problematises the very historical fact of Muhammad's life and the Qur'anic verse. He allows his character Gibreel Farishta to enter into the prime time of Islamic origin and mixes it with different alternative consequences. As Gibreel lost in his dream and found out himself as archangel, a messenger of god happens to encounter the incident where Mahound seems to be engaging in politicizing the religious root and convert

pre-existing polytheism system into monotheism in order to furnish his own desire to rule. The novel through its interpretation process and rhetorical strategies for reading and rewriting history argued “about who should have power over grand narrative, the story of Islam, and that power must belong to every one. . . who do not have power over story that dominates their live, power to retell it ” (*Homelands* 432). Gabriele’s unwanted dream or nightmare leads him paradoxically in his surreal world of fantasy, “whose point of view is sometimes that of the camera and at other moments, spectator” or participant in a series of historically authentic occurrence of the life of Muhammad (108).

This dream becomes troubling dream for Gabriele since that dream makes him unwillingly doubt over Muhammad and Qur’anic history. His ‘blasphemous dream’ creates “. . . a rift in the soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so” (98). Narrator describes Gabriele’s doubt:

The human condition, but what of the angelic? Halfway between alloahgod and homosap, did they ever doubt? They did: challenging god’s will one day they hid muttering beneath the Throne, daring to ask forbidden things: antiquation. Is it right that. Could it not be argued. Freedom, the old antiques. (92)

Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses* can be seen as a “parody of Mohammed’s life” (144). Since its publication, it has been witnessed in relation to the *fatwa* imposed by Ayatollah Khomeini on Salman Rushdie for insulting Islam, because his book emphasizes its functionality by using magical realism and can thus be exonerated from political control is dangerous. In one hand, it has been read both as a blasphemous, obscene travesty of Islamic history and scripture and as a biting satire on a contemporary England that demonizes Muslim immigrants and mercilessly punish any dissent from its secular- capitalist world-view. But on the other hand, this book is a postmodernist writing for its use of ironic and self-periodic mode, which resists any attempts to locale any authorial point of view, to frame its author with any political intention, any religious belief or disbelief. Likewise, western politician choose to represent this conflict as a battle between democratic freedom of speech and autocratic censorship or even terrorism. But Rushdie insists that he has “never seen this controversy as a struggle between west freedom and eastern unfreedom,” rather he asserts his novel is only about “doubt and uncertainties. It dissents from the end of debate of dispute, of dissent” (*Homelands* 389, 396). Though, this novel is regarded as fictional discourse as he himself asserts “the novel does not seek to establish a privileged language but it insists upon

the freedom to portray and analysis the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges” (420).

As both protagonists happened to survive, they experienced same consequence differently. Soon after landing on the Dover Coast, Saladin Chamcha is arrested by trio of Britain immigrant officers who subject him to the obscene resist taunts and vicious hungry, reserved for the dark-skinned Asian immigrant. These two protagonists interpreted their salvation differently and also expressed very different reception. Saladin “finds himself transformed into the goatish, horned and hoofy demon, in a bizarre sanatorium full of other monstrous (402). He is demonizing by the host culture’s fear and contempt of otherness, he “grows horns, a tail and monstrous phallus” but Gibreel transforms physically into “an angel and experiences extended dreams about Muslim prophet” (76, 98). While, Saladin is taken away by police and Gibreel gets protection from eighty-year old woman Rosa diamond. Rushdie, in this context, wants to show that two characters are twinned in the plot as interchangeable opposites who define their differences by exchanging the role and signifiers of good and evil, angel and devil. By presenting the ordinary event in magical admixture, Rushdie tries to hint how human develop and practice the notion of good and evil especially how these notion are determined by religion.

Unlike history, literature plays the role to find new angle at which to enter reality; is paved the way for reinterpretation of every human artifact and antiquity rather than regarding factual events in a text according to selected frame of references. Rushdie’s preferences of genealogical line in place of archeological description in the novel added energy and vivacity to his text in such a way that his protagonist doubts over religion and creates his own history of Qur’ran. Gibreel enters into the history of Islam and reformulates it by assuming himself as messenger of god in his own dream. This process has its ground on Hayden Whitian argument, “there is something in a historical masterpiece that can not be negated, and this nonnegotiable is its form which is its fiction” (401). In other words, historical writing is always in the form of narration that depends on “non-negotiable item” (White 12).

Rushdie exploits different narrative strategies in order to reflect the unauthenticated claim made by human artifact. Unknown narrator focalized every event experienced by Gibreel seems to be radically unreliable to the reader. The focalization of Gibreel turns into defocalization when the narrator provides first hints of Gibreel’s abnormal behavior. When he heard the voice of Rehka Merchand, a former girlfriend of his, Chamcha did not find any

thing happened. Gibreel experiences hallucinations and exposes his experiences as fallible. He says:

‘You don’t see her?’ gibreel shouted. ‘you don’t see her gooddamn Bokhara rug?’
No, no Gibbo, her voice whispered in his ear, don’t expect him to confirm.
I am strictly for your eyes only, may be u r going crazy. . . (7)

This novel, from the very outset, exploits the narrative technique to break the absolute claim of history in relation to religious treaties. Narrator of the novel repeatedly describes the same event of the miraculous save in the plane crash. These events provide alternative way to evaluate the coincidence and magical rescue to the readers on the one hand, but on the other hand he attacks it with the idea of ‘reincarnation’ as religious book always hyperbolically describes in order to exercise the ruthless meaning in origin.

When the narrative structure of the novel coincides with its thematic analysis, it shows writer’s idea of unattainable of any authorial reliability. Rushdie seems to compare absolutism of religious verses to unreliable mode of fiction. In order to point out the unreliable and inauthentic voice of any religious treatise, Rushdie introduces anonymous narrator. Gibreel Farishta is leading focalized action of narrator who himself has no certain idea over him. Thus, narrator can maintain no authority or belief in terms of focalization. Narrator narrates Farishta:

A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he’s managed it. Playing god again, you could say. Or you could come down a few notches, and think of Tinkerbell fairies don’t exist if child don’t clap their hands. Or you might simply say: it’s just like being a man. (49)

By means of various narrative techniques, novel mixes private fictional dreams vision of religious history with Islamic sacred book in parallel way. Rushdie shows the unavoidable link between historical event and the individual admixture of his imagination in history. He makes Gibreel to “reconstruct the boundary wall between dreams and reality, and [be] on the road to recovery” (340). Gibreel interferes each and every moment of Muhammad’s life and origin of Qur’anic verses through his use of dream, memory and imagination. In the novel, Gibreel, assuming himself an archangel, a messenger of god converts the unknowingly with his semi dream imagination. Though he is not intended to challenge the god’s message but his unrestraint dream turns the Qur’anic verses into satanic

verses. By plunging into the schizophrenic world of dream, Gibreel seems to “revolt not only against [religion] tyrant, but against history” (210). This unwilling schizophrenic dream of Gibrell makes “history, the intoxicated, the creation, the possession of the devil” (210). Rushdie, with the power of imagination mixes historical fact with literary fiction, thus subverts the traditional form of history. The dream-like distorted form of narration about the dream of Gibreel not only distorts the official version of but also brings every historical fact into doubt.

The first person demonic narrator of the novel presents Gibreel in a dram like sequences as he says “every time I go to sleep the dream starts up from where it stopped same dram in same place” (83). By going back and forth of this fictional dream, protagonist not only finds himself play the role of messengers but also subverts the chronological narration of official history about Muhammad’s life and origin. This narrative technique not only deconstructs the Islamic creed but also provides different perspective through which readers can evaluate the possible construction of power possessed by the religious person. The book can be read as an allegorical concern, its call for new interpretation of Islam. Rushdie illustrates it by identifying the main character Gibrell and Saladin as the equivalent of the angel Gibreel and Satan. He also reinforces the religious allegory by placing himself in the text in the guise of Salman, the Persian who notes down the new scripture. In the novel, Salman the Persian, a professional scribe, initially a disciple of the prophet Mahound, whose role is to take dictation of the prophet’s revelation of holy writ and law transmitted in god’s word by the archangel Gibreel. Salman soon notices the political motifs behind the prophet’s revelation and he begins to lose faith in their authenticity when he says “your God certainly jumps to it when you need him to fix things up for you” (368). To test his suspicions, he introduces deliberate corruption into the verses which is unnoticed by the prophet. His contaminated scripture with fiction are eventually detached then he turns his talent to another kind of ‘profit’. The abrupt shift of the events from chapter to chapter makes the plot complicated. The mixture of narrated events and Gibreel’s dream confuse the readers to separate the dream and reality clearly. The second chapter of the novel is whole about the Gibreel’s dream; a story of Muhammad; more or less closely base on the tradition surrounding Muhammad and the founding of Islam in seventh century. Gibreel’s vision of semi-dream and his angelic figure alter when he begins to interfere the history.

Mahound, coincides with Islamic founder Muhammad, who surveying the city of Jahilia,” In this city, the businessman-turned-prophet, Mahound, is founding one of the world’s great religions” (95). The fictional mark up of Gibreel’s dream corresponds historically to the early days of Muhammad’s preaching in Mecca, when he had not widely been accepted. Hind, wife of Abu Simble protests against Mahound. Narrator says:

There can be no compromise with Mahound, she shouts, he is not to be trusted, the people must repudiate. Abu Simble and prepared to fight besides them and for the freedom of Jahilia’ will. You merely lie down before the false prophet . . . (371).

The imaginative admixture of Gibreel story shows the moral system of Islam is nothing more than the extremely effective method through which individual and group can gain absolute power and authority without need to justify themselves rationally. In this story, poet, scribes, and shape-shifting actor Baal, Salman Farsi and Chamcha are contemptible to Islam, and therefore demonize because they are constantly quibbling, satirizing and questioning the morel tyranny.

When Abu Simbel, a ruler of Jahilia recognizes Mahound as a threat to his power, he offers a deal to Mahound if his Allah will accept “upon Lat, Uzza and Manat, the third the other” (114)? After the first verse, Mahound decided to compromise and return to Jahilia to announce new verses as “they are the exalted birds and their intercession” (114). One can draw the implication that religion was “the triumph of the businessman in the tent of unbelievers” (115), founded by rationalizing good and evil and its founder were both a sincere mystic and power hunger entrepreneur. Gibreel, an actor who specializes in impersonating ditties, who unknowingly lose himself on his dream world that challenges the unchanged history or Islamic world. In revising process of history, Gibreel finds himself against moral codes and he finds his unrestraint imagination is the cause for his habit of doubt over the religion. In his monologue, he says:

. . . if I was God I’d cut the imagination right out to people and then maybe poor bastard like me could get a good night’s rest. Fighting against sleep, he forces his eyes to say open, unlinking, until the visual purple fades. . . he diminishes me to his own size and pulls me in toward his, his gravitation fields is unbelievable. (122)

Novel depicts Mahound as a business person who maintains his power by making “this world into which [Mahound] has brought his message: one one one amid such

multiplicity . . . a dangerous world” (103). Mahound compromises with Abu Simble for Polytheist but as he found his power in hand he changed religion in same monotheist system. His politics of religion lies under his power of absolutism. Other characters seem to challenge the absolutism with their power of language. Both Baal and Salman scribes to alter the received test demonstrating the impossibility of monologism and the inevitability of dialogism. Revolutionary character Baal questions to Abu Simbel “why do I fear Mahound? for that: one one one, his terrifying” (102). Likewise, Salman’s desire to test the authenticity of Mahoud’s pronouncement makes him as if he is the alter ego of writer in the novel. When Mahound did not notice even substantive changes he made in divine revelation. He understands the importance of re-writing and inevitable fallible nature of human being. Salman says:

I’d say Oops, O God, bit of a slip, how could I, and correct myself. But it didn’t happen; and now I was writing the revelation and nobody was noticing and I didn’t have the courage to own up. I was sacred silly, I can tell you. Also: I was sadder than I have ever been. So I had to go on doing it. Maybe he’d just missed out once, I thought, anybody can make mistake. So the next time I change a bigger thing. (368)

After Salman discloses Mahound’s politics of religion, he becomes enemy to new religion. Mahound achieved his power to be the one and only prophet of one God Al-lah. Mahound with his power defeat his protestant. Hind submits herself as follower of Mahound and says “there is no god but Al-lah, and Mahound is her prophet” (374). Salman fasely blames Baal as Mahound true enemy so that he could save himself form the death punishment. Baal remains unchanged in his revolution and stand against Mahound’s play of power politics in the name of religion. Baal says:

Gibreel had recited verses giving him full divine support. God’s own permission to fuck as many women as he liked. So there: what could poor Ayesha say against the verses of God? You know what she did say? This: “Your God certainly jumps to it when you need him to fix things up for you.” Well! if it hadn’t been Ayesha, who knows what he’d have done but none of the other would have dared in the first place. (386)

In the chapter, narrator through Gibreel’s dream vision puts the veil off of religious discourse.

Rushdie projects the power of hegemonic religious discourse which is the foundation of suppression, murder and exclusion. So he celebrates the fiction work of Baal as his fictional work though the rigid fundamentalist religious verses regard it as satanic verses. In against of hollow religious verses, Baal presents his poetic verse which does not exploit other and never stick around will to rule. Narrator says:

. . . every evening after that, the strange fellow would reappear and recite a new poem, and each set of verses sounded lovelier than last. It was perhaps this surfeit of loveliness which prevented anybody from noticing, until the twelfth evening, when he completed his twelfth and final set of verses, each of which were dedicated to different women. (391)

Baal poetic activities hindered Mahound's religious foundation. In contrast of holy profound language, Baal uses 'simplest language, concealing noting' (391). But his revolutionary road leads him to be beheaded. He rebels till last hour of his death. Before punished, he says "whore and writer, Mahound, we are the people you can't forgive" (392). As soon as Baal died narrator says "Gibreel dreams the death of Mahound" (393).

Narrator narrates Gibreel's dream of ancient Islamic world in such a way that it invites the readers to participate in the debate of historical authenticity. Writer allows different characters to engage in the heteroglossic platform and provides alternative angle to speculate over suppressed group. Those who had been demonizing as blasphemous in religious treatise are turn into a heroic figure in the fictional world of Gibreel's dream. By replacing polyglossic discourse of fiction in place of monologic discourses of Islam, Rushdie uses some tools of language to discourse their orthodoxy which is exploited by religious and historical narration. The novel shows prophet Mahound's death due to fatal illness, writer uses understatement technique. Narrator says:

Since no prophet may die before he has been shown Paradise, and afterwards asked to choose between this world and the next:

so that as he lay with his head in his beloved Ayesha's lap, he closes his eyes, and life seemed to depart from him; but after a time he returned: and he says unto Ayesha, 'I have been offered and make my choice, and I have chosen the kingdom of God.' (393)

Rushdie's technique enforces a thematic equilibrium between any discourses of human artifact. Instead of fabricating the event and glorifying it with magical power as religious narrative describes the death of their prophet in very supernatural mode. Rushdie mocks at those grand narrative stories to maintain its power and privilege. Rushdie shows the power of literature that resists every singular version of narrative

Language plays and advocates the readers to participate on the 'perpetual revolution' as dynamic representation to drive the history forward. As Tim Wood says "retelling history raise a social obligation[. . .] out of this obligation steams wonder at the past, a sense that the hidden past can produce awe" (344). Rushdie's character Gibreel comes out from the religious obligation and dig the past out to produce awe.

The novel portrays the postmodernist hybrid multicultural situation where single truth fails to preserve its status-quo. Both leading characters Farishta and Chamcha desperately lose their identity in foreign land and compel to return home. Chamcha in the foreign land adopts the quality of mimicry as adjustment device in a diasporic situation but could not stick around and finally realizes the essence of root. But in the case of Gibreel, he could stick neither to his root nor adjust himself to the hybrid condition. Gibreel, as a reluctant dream visitor indicates the human quality of imagination and dreaming who is obliged by religious rigidity and turn into a demonic figure. His dream world makes him understand the historical and religious world is not away from the fictional world but those religious and historical fundamentalists create the deadly situation of individual to exercise his own imagination. Rushdie says, "When Salman the Persian, Gibreel's dream figment, culminates against the dream religion's aim of providing rule of every damn thing, he is not only tormenting the dreamer but asking reader to think about the validity of religion's rule" (*Homelands* 400)

Rushdie uses fictional genre of literature to reveal is by no means the infallible word of god and that good and evil are, in fact, entirely human construction. Literature has no authorial individuality which endorses a singular, unified language and discourse of truth rather it has multi-voiced, multi-system that "is, of all that arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds. . ." (*Homelands* 420). In confrontation of religious text, literature is trespassing or it does not observe any rules of taboo, exclusion and prohibition, exercised by existing discourse. Novel exploits a position of discursive detachment to step in

and out of established regimes of truth and disturb the boundaries between holy and profane, truth and falsity, reality and fantasy.

To reveal the fallible aspects of human artifact that hides its loopholes in order to get power of truth is possible only through Rushdie's postmodern historiographic metafiction as narrative tool. As Hutcheon, Rushdie states that fiction is "one way of denying the official, politician version of truth" (14). The notion of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction has great impact on the novel as it claims the impossibility of representing the exact history. In Rushdie's words "literature is in fact the business of finding new angle at which to enter reality" (*Homelands* 15).

Therefore, *The Satanic Verses* is a satire on those human artifacts which sought to establish its own regimes of truth, those artifacts inevitably have a potential of intermixing fact with fiction and provides new angle for studying the existing history.

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