

Homesickness, Failed Transnationality, the Conservatism of Belonging, and Salman Rushdie

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Abstract

The Satanic Verses as a text that dramatizes the failure of a transnational belongingness and the conservatism of place and belonging; it is a celebration of migrancy and cosmopolitan identity. Focusing on the tensions between the homeland and the migrant self, this paper intends to highlight a depiction of homesickness in the novel's major migrant characters to show how they fail to negotiate an idea of a new cosmopolitan space that not only accommodates the migrant on equal terms with the city host, but also one that insists on the possibility of a community of different peoples living and working together harmoniously. The question of how the novel fares in the context of transnational globalism and the immigrant's claim to citizenship rights and fair treatment is also considered.

Keywords: Homesickness; Transnationality, Conservatism

Although *The Satanic Verses* refuses to be read merely as a text that speaks for any particular tradition or cultural space, its engagement with homesickness – observed in its principal protagonists: Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta – exposes Rushdie's narrative as an adventure towards a search for home or a realization of it in love. The novel's multiple plots derive basically from the consciousness (or unconsciousness in some cases) of the two male protagonists of the text whose journeys to Britain are used to explore the migrant experience as well as the tensions between the migrant self and the *homeland*. Rushdie

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depicts Chamcha and Gibreel as representing two different images of the Indian immigrant in Britain: evil and angelic respectively. Understandably, Gibreel is angelic given in part that he has already attained a level of fame in the homeland and also because he represents a sort of *Oriental* charm. Chamcha, on the other hand, is filled with self-loathing and occupies an obscure space that fixes him in the eyes of the *Empire* as evil. What, however, unites these two characters is their homesickness for India (or their being held by it), depicted in their haunted consciousness. Both men are haunted by their pasts and the desire to return home, even when they keep repressing these desires. The intrigue of their stories is woven around their apparent denial of this desire to return to India, especially as both of them chase after the Englishness that they eventually realize they can never acquire.

Oftentimes, depiction of homesickness in many post-colonial narratives that portray the exilic and migrant experiences of immigrants (from the supposed Orient) in the West have been explained away as nostalgia in many a critical essay, blurring the apparent difference between the two psychological states. While nostalgia exposes a desire for a past and thus fixes that past in a state of unchanging ideal, homesickness is basically preoccupied with a longing for home – a space. In other words, nostalgia deals more with time, especially a past time that is associated with wholeness and ideal, while homesickness deals with space. An instance of this blurring of the two terms as meaning the same thing is clearly expressed in Mridula Chakraborty's essay, "Nostalgic Narratives and the Otherness Industry," wherein the critic makes no clear demarcation between homesickness and nostalgia. The longing for *home* is hailed as nostalgia thus:

These nostalgic narratives, for me, are the diasporic expressions of Third World intellectuals trying to come to terms with life in Anglo-North America, often through retelling of a particularized socio-cultural collectivity, creating thereby not only a memory, but a home in memory. Memory becomes the gunny sack in which the intellectual and emotional baggage of the refugee, the immigrant, and the asylum seeker crosses the waters. (128)

While Chakraborty's view on "nostalgic narratives" helps us to make a link between homesickness and nostalgia in memory, it collapses the two as meaning the same thing, apparently failing to distinguish between a memory of (remembrance of things past) and a desire for place. The concept of nostalgia will not necessarily help us understand Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* since it presupposes a longing for a past time that is idyllic, harmonious and whole. Homesickness, however, captures the hauntedness of space in a dislocated self. In the homesickness syndrome, the memory is not a remembrance of past experiences or of an alluring past, but more of a desire (however repressed) to occupy a present space. The Negritude poems of Leopold Sedar Senghor, for instance, are expressive of the nostalgic feeling, even in their celebration of migrancy. Amazingly, homesickness as a concept has not really

been popular in the exploration of the migrant/exilic hero in the critical engagements with postcolonial narratives. In this paper, homesickness is defined as the conscious or subconscious longing for *the home*, resulting often in “adjustment disorder” (vanTilburg *et al.* 901) due to a dislocation from a social, cultural, or psychological space.

In *The Satanic Verses*, the characterization of Chamcha and Gibreel has largely been seen as Rushdie’s revisionism (with immigrant identity and experience) of the primacy of a Western self and place (Brians). The migrants populate England, *contaminating* it with their exoticness and diversities. London is not the property of the English alone, but also of the immigrants: Asians, Africans, Americans, and the peoples of the Caribbean. This type of reading draws attention to Paul Gilroy’s reminder of the hybrid and transnational character of identities in Europe and America, a concept he explores in his book, *The Black Atlantic*. It is quite clear that Rushdie revises much of the Western myths about the center-periphery construct that is used to “describe” the immigrant from the *periphery* to the *center* as a non-self (a monster) until they begin to see themselves as monsters. Chamcha’s metamorphosis like Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*— into a beast is a clear exemplification of how the *Empire* constructs the image of the immigrant. This linking of Chamcha to a Kafkaesque working class condition is quite clear in the novel, even though neither Chamchan or Gibreel belong to the working class in their homelands—India. Their choice of exile is largely self-induced, as against the notion of a forced exile due to an uncomfortable and unsafe home front. Rushdie’s choice of the petit-bourgeois exposes his elitist focus as many critics have also observed. Nevertheless, the tension between Chamcha and his father, similar to that between Samsa and his father, makes this link quite apparent. In addition, however, Rushdie refuses to permit the *Empire* the sole power of such description.

Chamcha is shown to also have a hand in his metamorphosis. His self-loathing and hatred for his Indianness also contribute to his transmutation. Jumpy Joshi aptly expresses this view when he offers his own ideological understanding of Chamcha’s monstrous state:

What has happened here? A: Wrongful arrest, intimidation, violence. Two: Illegal detention, unknown medical experimentation in hospital... And thirdly,... psychological breakdown, loss of sense of self, inability to cope. We’ve seen it all before... I refuse to accept the position of victim. Certainly, he has been victimized, but we know that all abuse of power is in part the responsibility of the abused; our passiveness colludes with, permits such crimes. (260-61)

Chamcha’s and Gibreel’s homesickness is made more apparent in their desire for home, manifested in their striving to inhabit the same spaces with their partners: Chamcha seeks to reunite with his wife Pamela and Gibreel with Allie. Their

rejection by these women intensifies their traumatic experience in the West, a metaphorical reflection of their inability to feel at home. Chamcha, for one, is first rejected by his wife due to his disfigurement and thrown out of the house. After he is transformed— *humanized*, he faces the awkward situation of living in the same house with his wife and her lover, Jumpy Joshi. He is helplessly homesick, but keeps repressing this feeling because home, in the image of Zeeny and his father Changez, seems to haunt and taunt him. Refusing to accept defeat as if in competition with himself, Chamcha rejects everything Indian, including the Indian community in London which tries to appropriate him as belonging to them. During his disfigurement, Mishal's father, Sufyan, tells him, "Best place for you is here...Where else would you go to heal your disfigurements and recover your normal health? Where else but here, with us, among your own people, your own kind?" (261). But to himself, Chamcha says afterwards, "I'm not your kind ... You're not my people. I've spent half my life trying to get away from you" (262). Although in practice he remains with the diaspora community until his restoration to a *human being*, he never accepts this community or its claim on him.

Even when it is apparent to him that London harbors a tragic conclusion for the immigrant who lives in self-denial, Chamcha refuses to accept defeat: he refuses to concede to the implausibility of forcing his way from the periphery to the center, the impossibility of being *at home* in London. His insistence on the possibility of transplanting himself from India to London is expressed in his musing during a television program, *Gardeners' World*:

There it palpably was, achimera\kai-mere\with roots, firmly planted in and growing vigorously out of a piece of English earth: a tree, he thought, capable of taking the metaphoric place of the one his father had chopped down in a distant garden in another, incompatible world. If such a tree were possible, then so was he; he, too, could cohere, send down roots, survive. Amid all the televisual images of hybrid tragedies – the uselessness of mermen, the failures of plastic surgery, the Esperanto- like vacuity of much modern art, the Coca-Colonization of the planet—he was given this gift. It was enough. He switched off the set. (420)

Like Gibreel, India haunts Chamcha until he receives the telegram informing him of his father's terminal illness. That is when "he discovered to his surprise that after a lifetime of tangled relationships with his father, after long years of crossed wires and 'irrevocable Sunderings', he was once again capable of an uncomplicated reaction" (525). Even when he is unable to remember any happy moment he has had with his father, it is gladdening for him to discover "that even the unforgivable crime of being one's father could be forgiven, after all, in the end" (527). He reverts his Western accented name back to its Indian status quo. He reunites with Zeeny and even joins in the political rally.

This final reunification with *home* and all its foibles and attractions reveals an

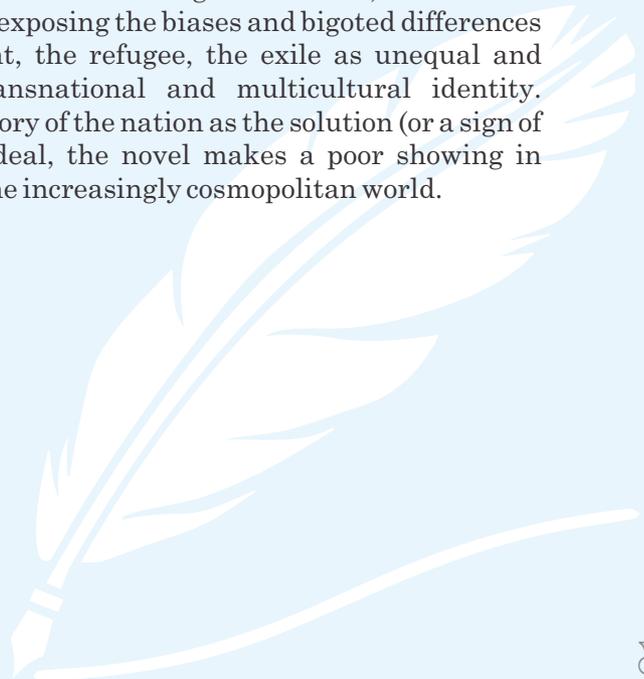
apparent conservatism in the novel. In Rushdie's portrayal, the India to which Chamcha returns is in a sort of historical stasis that he walks back in to as if to pause the past. Nothing has changed *really much*, except that Changez is dying of cancer. It seems that only Chamcha has changed, coming to such epiphanic moments that provides him with fresher understandings of life, particularly while watching Changez die. Even Zeeny and her friends are still doing the same things. Zeeny's re-entry into his life (or his re-entry into her life) is said to complete "the process of renewal, of regeneration, that had been the most surprising and paradoxical product of his father's terminal illness. His old English life, its bizarreries, its evil, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant, like his truncated stage-name" (548-49). It is also apparent by implication that Zeeny has paused her sexual life, perhaps in her wait for his return, given her shyness in inviting him *home* "as if she were removing a veil after long concealment" (549).

Chamcha's resolution to "think of myself, from now on, as living perpetually in the first instant of the future" (549) is in line with Pnina Werbner's statement that the "ultimate message [of *The Satanic Verses*] is one of faith in man as the source of rational creativity" (S57). In other words, the novel should be seen more as a modernist rather than a postmodernist narrative, since postmodernism "is constituted by absolute uncertainty, a loss of the last remaining cornerstone of modernist faith in progress, a realization of the irrational consequences of rationality itself" (Werbner S57). The expression of postmodernist temperament in the novel is Gibreel. But woeful Gibreel's death and the seeming resurgence of energy in Chamcha sends Rushdie's message quite firmly and aptly: hope (or at least a semblance of it) in the rational self. Chamcha's rootedness and place of belonging, metaphorized in the walnut-tree which, even after it is cut from the base, maintains its root in the homestead, exposes further the conservatism that insists that *home* is rooted somewhere in a cultural space that haunts and pulls the prodigal migrant back to itself. The search for happiness is often always traceable to the cultural root and so, the cause of unhappiness is the severance from it.

Unlike Saladin Chamcha, Gibreel Farishta is a privileged migrant. Even after his angelic transfiguration in London, he is considered an outsider. The turn in his life as he escapes to London is quite instructive. In India, he is a demigod, a posturing that incenses Chamcha to heightened hatred of everything Gibreel represents, including a part of Chamcha himself. In London, Gibreel finds himself utterly useless, even reproductively sterile. His inability to reignite his sexual charms and to have women frolicking around him turns him into a passionately dotting partner, ultimately culminating in his suspicion of everything Allie does. Like Chamcha, he is on a self-imposed exile, haunted by both his Indian past and present. While Chamcha perhaps in search of fame and an apparent hatred for India migrates to London, Gibreel flees India to escape fame and find love—Alleluia Cone. It turns out, however, that London does not recognize his angelic form, which is basically construed in the same light as monstrous though with lighter consequences, unlike

Chamcha's monstrosity. Gibreel challenges traditions, dreaming revisionist and blasphemous dreams as he struggles to make sense of his existence. The notion of homesickness is more complicated in his characterization, particularly because he does not really have a *home* in the traditional sense of the word, even in India. Coming from an ethnic minority, having lost his parents at a tender age, and having been raised by a generous foster family, Gibreel seems to be the perfect character to challenge repressive customs and traditions. All his haunted surrealist dreams are a systematic questioning of established religious and cultural codes. His faithlessness—a postmodernist expression of displeasure at best—leads him to near insanity and eventually to murder and suicide. Could Rushdie have used Gibreel's death to signal the hopelessness in postmodernist faithlessness? There is no home for Gibreel, not in India, not in London. In a sense, it is easy to conclude that all the attractions as well as flaws in Gibreel emblemize the flaws of postmodernist thinking.

Gibreel's death in the end and Chamcha's resolution to start anew in India shows the novel as privileging an Indian national allegory, reversing the narrative build-up of what appeared to be a transnational aesthetic attempt to write the marginalized *subaltern* immigrant, the exile, the refugee into the global sphere on equal terms with the West. Gibreel's and Chamcha's epic adventures to the West are depicted as failed escapades into the heart of whiteness (Europe). Perhaps, Rushdie may have used this narrative to express the notion that before any claims of place in the global arena should be made, a claim of place in the local has to be established first. The only problem with this notion, though, is how the global and the local are defined. Ultimately, from the point of view of human rights criticism, *The Satanic Verses* is significant in underscoring and exposing the biases and bigoted differences that insist on describing the immigrant, the refugee, the exile as unequal and *monsters*, even in the face of a transnational and multicultural identity. Nonetheless, for regressing into the allegory of the nation as the solution (or a sign of grander hope) to failed cosmopolitan ideal, the novel makes a poor showing in charting a clear transnational vision of the increasingly cosmopolitan world.



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