

Angels, Devils and the In-Between: The Making of Hybrid Identity in *The Satanic Verses*

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Abstract: This article examines Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as a multifaceted representation of the migrant experience of displacement and the formation of hybrid identity. While cultural hybridity is often celebrated as a means of challenging colonial authority, this analysis underscores the complexity of sustaining hybridity for the diasporic subject. It demonstrates how the novel dramatizes the negotiation between national and diasporic identity, particularly in relation to the narratives of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. Furthermore, the magical realist metamorphoses of Gibreel into an angel and Saladin into a devil accentuate the tension between the ideal and the real, revealing the instability of coherent identity in the context of displacement.

Keywords: *hybridity, mimicry, displacement, magical realism, Salman Rushdie*

الملائكة والشياطين وما بينهما: تكوين الهوية الهجينة في رواية «آيات شيطانية»

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مستخلص البحث: تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية سلمان رشدي آيات شيطانية بوصفها تمثيلاً معقداً لتجربة المهاجر وما يصاحبها من اغتراب وتشكل الهوية الهجينة. فعلى الرغم من الاحتفاء المتكرر بالهجنة الثقافية بوصفها وسيلة لتحدي السلطة الاستعمارية، تؤكد هذه الدراسة على اشكالية استدامة الهجنة لدى الفرد المهاجر. حيث تبين كيف تجسد الرواية عملية التفاوض بين الهوية الوطنية والهوية الشتاتية، ولا سيما في سرديتي جبريل فرشته وصلاح الدين شمشة. كما تُبرز المقالة التحولات السحرية الواقعية لجبريل إلى ملاك وصلاح الدين إلى شيطان حدة التوتر بين الرؤى المثالية والواقعية للشخصية، وتكشف هشاشة الهوية المتماسكة في سياق الاغتراب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهجرة، الهجنة الثقافية، الواقعية السحرية، سلمان رشدي.



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1. Introduction:

Since its first publication in 1988, *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie has occupied a prominent position in postcolonial literature, particularly for its exploration of diasporic cultural dynamics. The novel offers fertile ground to examine how hybrid identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested within a diasporic context. Cultural hybridity is one of the key concepts debated, championed, and challenged in postcolonial studies. Hybridity has emerged as a critical framework to conceptualize the instability of identity in the domain of transnational cultural interaction, illuminating the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in cultural/historical power relations. At its simplest, the concept can be understood as the fusion of two cultures as their representatives confront and interact.

This article examines the representation of hybrid identity in *The Satanic Verses* by addressing the following questions: How does Rushdie depict the formation and fragmentation of hybrid identity through the characters of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta? And how do displacement, mimicry, and binary thinking complicate cultural fusion within the diasporic experience? It aims to demonstrate that *The Satanic Verses* exposes the limitations of hybridity as a stable or sustainable mode of identity formation.

2. Methodology

Hybrid identity, in its postcolonial diasporic context, can be defined as the construction of a new identity that incorporates several aspects of one's native culture and the adopted culture. Scholars have discussed hybridity extensively, but have not reached a consensus on a singular definition. On the one hand, Homi Bhabha is among the first to embrace it as a form of resistance to colonial power and authority. He argues that hybridity deprives the dominant culture of its claimed authenticity and purity. Bhabha (2004) states, "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (p.159). While hybridity can be helpful as a critical concept to destabilize the structures that uphold cultural superiority and colonial domination, it has been criticized for its limitations. Parry (2004) denounces hybridity. She argues that by employing this notion,

"postcolonialism effectively became a reconciliatory rather than a critical, anti-colonialist category" (p.4). In other words, the discourse of hybridity abandons the violent history of colonialism and detaches itself from that political domain, dealing only with its cultural conditions. Acheraïou (2011) also questions the postcolonial perception of hybridity by highlighting its conceptual inadequacy. He draws particular attention to the troubling relationship between hybridity and binary thinking. Acheraïou (2011) states that hybridity "as postcolonial discourse is far from collapsing binarism as it proclaims" (p.108).

While the theory of hybridity continues to provoke debate among postcolonial critics, Rushdie clearly invests in its transformative potential. He declares that the novel embraces various modes of hybridity:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs (...). *The Satanic Verses* is for change by fusion, change by conjoining (...). It is a love song to our mongrel selves. (Rushdie, 1992, p.394)

Moving from this statement, and contrary to Rushdie's claim, I argue that *The Satanic Verses* problematizes the construction of hybrid identity as represented in Saladin and Gibreel. Through close textual analysis, the study examines the transformation of their identities following their unconventional arrival in England. The article first discusses how displacement disrupts Saladin and Gibreel's identities. It then considers issues that challenge the construction of a hybrid identity: the instability of hybridity, the issue of mimicry, and hybridity's attachment to binary opposition. It should be noted that *The Satanic Verses* is rich in successful paradigms of cultural hybridity aside from Saladin and Gibreel, but these aspects are beyond the scope of this research.

3. Analysis and Discussion:

The frame narrative of *The Satanic Verses* tells the story of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, who miraculously survived the fall from an exploded plane—flying from India to Britain—over the English Channel. After their landing in

England, both characters undergo supernatural transformation. Gibreel, a famous Bollywood actor known for theological roles, assumes the personality of the Archangel Gabriel. In contrast, Saladin, a voice actor living in England, physically transforms into a devil-like creature with horns and goat-like legs. Both characters embody fractured identities caught between cultures; Saladin, in particular, represents the migrant's experience of displacement and discrimination after being arrested and abused by British authorities. In the end, Gibreel becomes schizophrenic and commits suicide, while Saladin returns to India and reconciles with his father. Their journey highlights the migrant experience of faith, identity, and displacement.

The first and foremost challenge to constructing a migrant identity is the displacement from one's own culture to another. *The Satanic Verses* shows how displacement disrupts the formation of a migrant's identity, and therefore, could subvert a successful construction of hybridity. It appears that the migrant is trapped in what Bhabha (2004) calls a "liminal space." This is a vital concept for the construction of hybridity since it is "in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction (...) this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity" (p.5).

While Bhabha (2004) envisions the liminal space as a site of possibility, Rushdie's (1998) narrative foregrounds its tensions and contradictions, particularly in relation to the magical metamorphoses of Saladin and Gibreel. *The Satanic Verses* begins with the tale of the two characters floating in a liminal space; they are neither in India nor in England, but in "air-space," as the narrator states:

Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic, because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible. (p.5)

The "air-space"—an essential place for the migration movement in the postmodern era—is described as a profoundly liminal zone. The discontinuity and metamorphic qualities of air-space are emphasized, which reflect Bhabha's argument that the liminal zone interrupts a coherent formation of identity and creates an intermediary zone in which meanings are renegotiated. It is the space in-between cultures where a new form of hybridity is inaugurated: "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, and conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?" (Rushdie, 1998, p.8). As the narrator stated, a migrant's entrance to the new world is a process that is marked not only by connection and hybridization but also by challenge and difficulty. In *The Satanic Verses*, this space conveys contested meanings in relation to the condition of the migrant subject. On the one hand, the plane crash in the novel "symbolically implies that the passage between continents and cultures is inclusive and unsuccessful" (Alghamdi, 2011, p.53). This suggests that any effort to construct a hybrid identity must be a failed one. Nevertheless, because of the incorporation of magical elements, Saladin and Gibreel survive this incident through their metamorphoses into satanic and angelic figures, respectively. The narrative implies that the migrant subject cannot invariably withstand the pressure of displacement and that identity negotiation is only possible through extraordinary means.

On the other hand, Saladin and Gibreel's passage downwards through the air "illustrates the active processes of change that take place in the migrant as he moves between cultures" (Cundy, 1996, p.68). Since air is an unstable element, it is significant in its correspondence with the metamorphoses of the two characters. Saladin, in particular, is "becoming metamorphic, hybrid" (Rushdie, 1998, p.7). In this sense, the movement from one culture to another directly entails an internal transformation of the migrant's individual identity; insubstantiality and movement equate with change in the construction of a hybrid identity. Therefore, this liminal space can be considered a "birth canal" (Rushdie, 1998, p.5) where the two are reborn with new identities and metamorphosed into an angel and a devil. Gibreel and Saladin have different reactions to this moment; the former is excited to be reborn: "Born again, Spoono, you and me. Happy birthday, mister, happy

birthday to you,” while Saladin, “as befitted a newborn babe, burst into foolish tears” (p.10). Their different responses reveal how displacement opens a dual possibility of renewal and fracture. Also, the model of transfer from one culture to another may not be sufficient to explain the process of the hybridization of identity.

Another issue arising from the construction of a hybrid identity in this novel is the difficulty of maintaining it in a stable and balanced form. This imbalance occurs because migrants either reject the new culture and preserve their native culture or, conversely, fully embrace the adopted culture and discard their own. The latter model is called mimicry in postcolonial studies, a term I shall return to later. Alghamdi (2011) observes that “it is not always possible to move beyond this initial disorientation and towards an improved or more evolved hybrid identity” (p.51). This disorientation, primarily caused by displacement and by being trapped in the liminal space, can lead to instability.

In *The Satanic Verses*, a hybrid identity is constructed, yet it proves unsuccessful due to the difficulty of maintaining its stability and balance. In her article “Reading *the Satanic Verses*,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1989) observes that “in spite of all its plurality, [this novel] has rather an aggressive central theme: the post-colonial divided between two identities: migrant and national” (p.79). Rushdie represents the ambivalent condition of migration through his depiction of Saladin and Gibreel’s characters. Saladin endeavors to embrace Englishness; he is therefore the more fluid and fragmented character. Gibreel, on the other hand, seems more static because he maintains his national identity and thus is steadier than Saladin, but as we will see, these two conditions will change later in the novel. Accordingly, it can be observed that both characters are unable to embrace a stable form of hybridity because, in each case, there is a strong attachment to either Englishness or Indianness.

In addition, while Saladin and Gibreel’s characters seem unlike, they are closely related, thus can be read as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, Rushdie (1998) illustrates that these characters can be viewed as two types of the migrant’s self:

Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different types of self? Gibreel

has wished to remain (...) continues (...) so we may describe [him] as ‘true’(...) whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention; his preferred revolt against history being what makes him (...) ‘false’? Do we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity - call this ‘evil’ - and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall? - While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man (p.427) [emphasis original].

This passage is particularly significant because it provides crucial insights into the divergent identities of the two characters. The association of Saladin with Satan and Gibreel with the Archangel reveals the individual and social perceptions of migrants’ identities, in that Saladin’s fluid identity is linked to the figure of Satan, while Gibreel’s fixity is connected to the angelic image. As Kuortti (2007) suggests, “Gibreel represents the fixed view of identity and consequently regards himself as the purveyor of truth; Saladin vouches for a fluid identity and, as a result, is treated as the embodiment of evil” (p.129). This assumption is accentuated in the novel when Saladin, even though he is a British citizen, is excluded by everyone, especially the English, and the only people who receive him are the Sufyan family, who are migrants just like him. Despite being an illegal immigrant, Gibreel fares better than Saladin, communicating easily with people in society and enjoying more freedom.

If we consider both characters to be “two fundamentally different types of self,” as the narrator suggests, this supports the idea that the migrant subject exists in an ambivalent state between old and new identities. It also indicates that one cannot always succeed in constructing a balanced, stable hybrid identity. There will always be one part that overcomes the other, and Rushdie draws attention to this perplexing situation. According to Dayal (1997), “Rushdie stages a tension between the ideal of the subject as ‘angelic’ plenitude versus the reality of the subject as ‘satanically incomplete’” (p.89). In other words, and as Rushdie’s extract suggests, the migrant is in a state of frailty and bewilderment because there is a constant quest to construct a

hybrid identity; yet this quest is met with an internal conflict between being the ideal “angelic” versus the real “satanic” subject.

Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, there is a further criticism of Gibreel and Saladin’s paradigms. Rushdie demonstrates that because Gibreel preserves his national identity, not only is he unable to live a normal and healthy life, and thus becomes schizophrenic, but he also dies as a result of this rigidity. Saladin, too, is unable to fulfill his intended Englishness and returns to India and to his own people, whom he had constantly rejected in the past. While hybridity is celebrated, it is complex and elusive, not always plausible, and, in many cases, it puts its subject in an ambivalent situation in which he can be neither one nor the other, trapped in the liminal space.

Mimicry can also be viewed as a failed attempt to create a hybrid identity. Similar to hybridity, mimicry has become an increasingly popular concept in postcolonial studies to describe the “ambivalent relationship between the coloniser and the colonised” (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 124). In this context, it is defined as the effort to imitate Englishness whilst simultaneously striving to distance oneself from Indianness.

Although mimicry can be viewed negatively, Bhabha (2004) adopts a distinct standpoint on the subject. He both criticizes and celebrates it as a form of subversion of the colonial power. He argues that mimicry proves that Englishness is merely a performative role, that anyone can perform it, and that this means the English themselves are playing that role too. While mimicry and hybridity are closely linked because they both represent the migrant’s ambivalence when constructing a new identity, they differ in that, when compared to hybridity, “mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha, 2004, p.122). Hence, mimicry can be both subversive to the colonial power and also destructive to the colonized subject. Kortenaar (2016) argues that, in *The Satanic Verses*, “mimicry of the coloniser is never subversive” (138). In this novel, mimicry marks the failure of the colonizer to construct a hybrid identity. Thus, my focus here will be on the negative aspect of mimicry.

Mimicry may be conceived as a failure to negotiate hybridity because not only does it

overthrow the essential incorporation of national and migrant identities, privileging one over the other, but it also reinforces the superiority of one culture over the other. Bhabha (2004) asserts that the “desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry is the final irony of partial representation” (p.126). Mimicry entails significant ramifications in that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 2004, p.122). The migrant subject can never fully assimilate into the identity of the colonizer, even when mimicry is rigorously pursued.

In *The Satanic Verses*, mimicry is depicted in several ways. Cundy (1996) argues that Saladin and Gibreel display some mimicry because of their professions: “They are actors, both adept at mimicry of one kind or another” (p.69). This is accurate because Saladin, through his role as a voice-over, is “that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices” (Rushdie, 1998, p.9) and “the Man of Thousand Voices and a Voice” (p.467). Gibreel, too, is an actor who plays the roles of different theological figures. Both characters have also changed their names to sound more English and better suit their professions: Ismail Najmuddin to Gibreel Farishta, and Salahuddin Chamchawala to Saladin Chamcha. However, if we consider only the roles they play in mimicry, this will offer a somewhat narrow understanding of the concept, focusing only on the surface.

Saladin demonstrates, in numerous ways, that he is a mimic man. Many scholars interpret his embrace of Englishness as a form of mimicry (Godiwala, 2007; Kortenaar, 2016). Godiwala (2007) states that the colonized subject practices mimicry because he harbors an internal belief that his culture is inferior to that of the colonizer (p.61). Mimicry involves the risk of perpetuating the racist ideology against the colonised culture. According to Asad (1990), “to be an ‘authentic’ English gentleman is to live out a racist ideology, to engage in discourses of ‘generative essence,’ a discourse in which ‘Indians’ have a different place” (p.255). On several occasions, Saladin explicitly expresses his dislike of his origins and feels ashamed of his people. For example, when he is on the plane after a brief visit to India, he declares, “Damn you, India (...) to hell with you, I escaped your clutches long ago, you won’t get your hooks into me again, you can’t drag me back”

(Rushdie, 1998, p.35). He also reveals how much he aspires to be fully English, admiring England and considering it “a great civilization” (p.39). He possesses a “determination to become (...) a good proper Englishman (...) he would be English, even if his classmates giggled at his voice and excluded him from their streets” (p.43).

When Saladin lands in England after the plane crashes, his life is turned upside down, but his obsession with Englishness remains unchanged. When sheltered by the migrant family, Sufyan asks him, “Where else would you go (...) where else but here, with us, among your own people, your own kind?” (Rushdie, 1998, p.253). Saladin, however, holds a different view, and his response conveys an unchanged denial of his origin: “I’m not your kind (...) you’re not my people. I’ve spent my life trying to get away from you” (p.253). He struggles to comprehend that England treats him as a stranger, as an Other: “It hadn’t been Chamcha’s way; not his, nor that of the England he had idolized and come to conquer” (p.270). It can therefore be perceived that mimicry not only subverts the construction of a hybrid identity but also re-inscribes in it the racist ideology that the colonized culture is superior, and certainly Rushdie is critical of this conception.

Another threat to hybridity lies in its basis on binary opposition. Hybridity is commonly assumed to transcend the binary of colonizer/colonized by incorporating some elements of the two polarities in one. Bhabha (2004) identifies hybridity as “the transformational value of change [that] lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One (...) nor the Other (...) but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both” (p.41) [emphasis original]. Since hybridity is regarded as a means of subverting this binary, it can be perceived as a challenge to the dominance and power of the colonizer. As Bhabha (2004) states, “Hybridity (...) resists any binary opposition of racial and cultural groups (...) as homogeneous polarized political consciousness” (p.296).

Nevertheless, the relationship between subordinate and dominant cultures is complex and, to a degree, is affected by the representation of the former as the Other. Young (2005) explains that “postcolonial criticism has constructed two antithetical groups, the coloniser and the colonised, self and Other, with the second only knowable

through a necessary false representation” (pp.4-5). Like Young’s (2005) assertion, I understand it as the process of colonial discourse to construct the colonized subject as Other. However, Spivak (1985) provides different meanings of Otherings; sometimes the colonizer appears as Other and at other times the colonized is the one perceived as Other. The focus of this section is on the latter meaning, which is the perception of the colonized-i.e., the migrant -as Other.

Accordingly, hybridity, in a way, maintains, if not reproduces, the racial ideology it claims to disrupt, and this is established through the designation of the migrant as the Other. According to Acheraïou (2011), hybridity is “self-contradictory, especially regarding its relation to binarism. As most postcolonial scholars contend, the theory of hybridity is primarily intended to resist hegemonic powers and binary thinking. In practice, however, things are less simple and conclusive” (p.153). Instead of being a challenge to racist hierarchies, hybridity “legitimizes the very system of domination and inequality that it is meant to break down” (Acheraïou, 2011, p.157). In this sense, power is still in the hands of the colonizer.

In *The Satanic Verses*, the power struggle is strongly represented when Saladin is detained by the immigration officers. The colonizer/colonized is not the only binary in that scene, but other subsequent binaries demonstrate the superiority of Englishness over Indianness. When the officers arrest Saladin, he informs them, “My name is Salahuddin Chamchawala, professional name Saladin Chamcha (...) I am a member of Actors” (Rushdie, 1998, p.163). By asserting his full Indian name first, Saladin is emphasizing his attachment to his Indian identity. He is exhibiting a form of hybridity, but his hybridity is met with sarcasm when they respond, “Who’re you trying to kid? (...) look at yourself (...) what kind of name is that for an Englishman?” (p.163). Citing Saladin’s different race and un-English name, the officers immediately deprive him of his Englishness. This demonstrates that, at times, hybridity is inherently unable to surpass the binary system.

Moreover, the perception of the colonized subject as Other pushes towards ascribing inferior stereotypes to him. Rushdie presents multiple examples of binaries that determine the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, like human/

animal and civilized/primitive. As part of Saladin's metamorphosis, he begins to look and act in a goat-like way, and the officers begin to observe him that way: "animal (...) you're all the same. Can't expect animals to observe civilised standards" (Rushdie, 1998, p.159). The dehumanization of Saladin and the other prisoners underlines colonial logic in the way the English officers perceive themselves as superior, while Saladin and the others are perceived as animals and uncivilized people. Rushdie provides another example where the discourse of colonial power defines the migrant subject as Other. When the police beat Saladin, he is sent to a hospital, where he comes across other migrants. Like Saladin, they are metamorphosed into half-humans and half-beasts; thus, they represent "the image of the ultimate Other" (Kuoritti, 2007, p.130). The manticore tells Saladin, "They describe us (...) They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (Rushdie, 1998, p.168). They have deformed looks because the dominant discourse in their experience sees them thus: negative stereotypes, perceived as Others by a colonial mentality. This is why the manticore warns Saladin that they need to escape "before they turn [them] into anything worse" (p.168). This points to the perpetual attempt by colonizers to describe migrants as Others. Despite the claim that hybridity rejects or transcends the binary opposition, the representation of Saladin and Gibreel seems to subvert this assertion. Instead, their portrayal shows, as with many a binary oppositional theoretical model, that it ends up reinforcing the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized.

4. Conclusion

Both Saladin and Gibreel have failed to reflect a successful form of hybridity. The reasons for this failure vary from the lack of balance between national and migrant identity to the strong attachment of hybridity to binary opposition. Part of this imbalance stems from being a mimic, which is considered a way to escape one's native identity and, in Saladin's case, to embrace Englishness. Therefore, this novel offers a rather pessimistic view of the migrant's attempt to construct a hybrid identity.

Despite the widespread celebration of hybridity among postcolonial critics, the migrant's identity remains highly complex and tinged with ambivalence. The persistent perception of the subject as the Other consistently challenges the notion of hybridity, which is intended to undermine the binary between the colonizer and the colonized. Rushdie, through these two characters, not only questions essentialist claims that one race is superior to others but also demonstrates how efforts to escape a culturally constructed hierarchy can result in further complications, ambivalence about one's values and identity, and the persistence of binary barriers.

Despite Rushdie's claim that *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, when we critically examine Saladin and Gibreel, we find that it is not the case for these two characters. Although both have gone through difficult experiences in England, these experiences lead to dramatic changes towards the end of the novel, with Gibreel's death and Saladin's return to India. In a way, the novel posits the impracticality for the migrant to survive his displacement, which ultimately results in either becoming schizophrenic and dying or returning to one's own country, sadder and wiser. Such a reading invites broader reflection on the limitations of hybridity as a theoretical framework within postcolonial studies. Future research might extend this inquiry through examining alternative modes of belonging to understand the ways in which postcolonial subjects negotiate displacement.

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