

"It was so it was not so:" The Clash of Language in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

By Terri Beth Miller

In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M.M. Bakhtin characterizes the novel thus: "It is precisely this that defines the utterly distinctive orientation of discourse in the novel—an orientation that is contested, contestable, and contesting—for this discourse cannot forget or ignore...the heteroglossia that surrounds it" (qtd. Kalliney 72). Salman Rushdie's masterpiece, *The Satanic Verses*, seems to exemplify what Bakhtin had in mind when he created his theory of the novel. In it, multiple discourses are problematized, their effects on the consciousness of the individuals by whom they are used and against whom they are leveled metaphorized, most explicitly, by the physical and psychical transformations endured by the novel's two protagonists. *The Satanic Verses* examines the repercussions of linguistic appropriation for the individual and the society in which he or she lives. Above all, it is a novel about discursive authority, about what may be said, how, and by whom. As each character's discourse competes against other, antagonistic discourses, Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia is actualized and, in the carnivalesque atmosphere that ensues, it is impossible to differentiate man from animal, angel from demon, God from Shaitan. What emerges from this cacophony of cultural discourses—theological, nationalistic, sociological—is a theory of humanity, and of language, that embodies no singular attribute, neither purity nor evil, neither God nor Satan, neither truth nor lie, but rather contains all such attributes, all of the time. This essay explores the clash of social and ideological languages in Rushdie's novel and situates this contest within the scope of a larger artistic project of social and psychological (r)evolution through the liberation of language from the constraints of totalitarian discursive regimes.

Rushdie begins his program of interrogating dominant discursive regimes by embedding within his text the principle of uncertainty. His narrative is conditioned by the caveat of the ancient fairy-story: "it was so, it was not so." The ambiguity and inherent contradictoriness of this formative mechanism of the text calls into being a narratorial paradigm in which truth and fact are not necessarily interdependent or mutually

referential. Moreover, this insertion of paradox within the text signifies a Bakhtinian appreciation of the multivalent and amorphous nature of language. In an interview with W.L. Webb, Rushdie describes his method in writing the Gibreel scenes in *Verses*. He states:

I found myself writing down connected stories about various historical and imaginary manifestations of the archangel down the ages and connected all together by the idea of this Indian movie star called Gibreel, who comes to think of himself as a reincarnation of the archangel. And as the reader, I suppose, you're asked to accept the possibility that he might be telling the truth.

(qtd. Reder 90)

This problematizing of the nature of truth, of allowing for its possibility within a text that adds to, reshapes, or nullifies traditionally sacrosanct (and therefore immutable and indisputable) discourses, appears to lie at the heart of Rushdie's literary project. It is a project that informs the work of most imaginative writers, according to Ian MacKenzie in his elaboration upon Richard Rorty's view of pragmatism. MacKenzie describes the work of the "ironist," a category into which he places Rushdie, particularly as the author of *The Satanic Verses*, as an attempt not only at social but also at self recreation. He writes that the ironist's method is to "redescribe or recreate...using a metaphorical vocabulary of their own choosing....If they think that the descriptions and narratives furnished by their own culture are inadequate, they will enlarge their acquaintance, generally by reading books, with other times and places" (285). Rushdie "enlarges his acquaintance" not merely through his prodigious knowledge of world cultures but also through his exploration of the imagination in language. This program destabilizes notions of fixed meaning even as it provides alternative access to a realm of "truth," itself an inherently unfixed and ineffable construct.

The situating of these interconnected "it was so it was not so" stories primarily within the figure of an Indian film star serves multiple purposes within Rushdie's artistic program. First, it problematizes the nature of received doctrines in the modern world, illustrating the commodification of social discourse, its form and function determined most often not by an adherence to a perceived absolute truth, but contingent upon very real, very secular external forces. The nature of the divine, as the Farshita episodes

exemplify, often is determined by two decidedly unholy means: the interest of money and the will to power.

The second function, however, is less pernicious and pertains to issues already discussed. Farshita's multiple sacred roles refute notions of a singular truth. His incredible success in adopting the persona of deities from various traditions suggests the polyphonic, polymorphic nature of truth and identity in which Rushdie himself so strongly believes. The coexistence of numerous, seemingly mutually contradictory versions of the nature of the truth metaphorizes Rushdie's own vision of truth as all-encompassing, myriad, harmonious, and interdependent, even as it distrusts and vehemently opposes any doctrine which would valorize one of these stories—one of these film roles—and condemn the rest. Rushdie describes his text thus:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world...*The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. (394)

Another critical component of the attempt to control language is in the process of naming. In *Verses*, names recur, are abandoned or embraced. They act as figures of social condemnation and as emblems of celestial predestination. Names play an integral role throughout the Rushdie oeuvre in situating a character, psychically and symbolically, within the textual universe. In *The Satanic Verses*, each of the novel's protagonists undergo name changes. Gibreel Farshita, the sometime Indie film star and would-be angel of God, is born Ismail Najmuddin, the impoverished but beloved son of a lunch peddler. *Ismail*, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the illegitimate son of the patriarch Abraham, from whom the religions descend. When Abraham conceives a child, Isaac, with his wife, Sara, the illegitimate child and his mother are exiled from Abraham's home, banished to the deserts of Arabia. It is through the line of Isaac that Judaism and Christianity trace their lineage. Islam, however, tracks its roots back to Abraham's first son, Ismail, the rejected child. Conversely, however, the name *Najmuddin* derives from the Punjabi for "star of the faith." Thus, Farshita's original name bestows a mixed legacy, one of hope

amid the acknowledgment of loss, one of terrestrial suffering endured with the expectation of celestial transcendence.

It is significant, then, that from Ismail Najmuddin the text's protagonist should become Gibreel Farshita, literally meaning "The Angel Gabriel." Farshita, "angel," is a nickname given Gibreel by his mother for the seeming purity of the child in his youth. The name, however, will take on ironic overtones in the years of Farshita's young adulthood, when shameless bouts of philandering lead not only to numerous broken homes but also to the suicide of a young mother following her murder of her children. In Rushdie's textual universe nothing is ever as simple as it may at first seem, and from such seemingly whimsical origins, a mother's indulgent love for her son, comes a preview of a far darker theme within the text: that of the power of description to transform the described. The angelic label affixed to him in love becomes a simultaneously centering and decentering, stabilizing and destabilizing, force throughout his life. Long before the new name is officially adopted, this seraphic characterization of Farshita's mother would insinuate itself into his self-concept, subtly altering him, until at last his identity is no longer his own. The further cementing of Farshita's angelic identity occurs when he begins to gain success in the film industry. His adoption of the Angel of the Revelation's name stems from his incredible aptitude at portraying sacred figures from a variety of theological traditions. As will be elaborated upon later in this paper, the program of naming in Farshita's example illustrates a dynamic of wish fulfillment, as the titles thrust upon an individual compel metamorphoses of identity, shaping the object's consciousness to fit the demands of the naming subject. Perhaps even more critical to the purposes of this text, pliancy seems to go out of the character of Farshita with the abandonment of his original hybrid name. In its stead comes a title of such unyielding purity that the human being who must embody it cannot withstand the weight of its signification. He chooses suicide over the task of living up to his name.

Another critical aspect of naming occurs in the figure of the novel's second protagonist, Saladin Chamcha. In this instance, it is not a case of a title being imposed from without, but rather an identity being adopted from within. Saladin is an abbreviation of Salahuddin, which the protagonist drops upon leaving Bombay. Similarly, Chamcha derives from Chamchawala. While Farshita's rechristening exemplifies foremost the

transformative effects of labels, Saladin's voluntary renaming enacts an opposite relationship, illustrating the extent to which the individual will may metamorphose even so seemingly fixed an object as the personal name.

Saladin's specific choices in his new name appear highly symbolically motivated; the first name, undoubtedly, manifests an intention of which its bearer is aware. Saladin was the name of the great conqueror of Asia. Similarly, Saladin Chamcha dreams of conquering his beloved London through the appropriation of all things (he perceives to be) British, from customs to accents, from sensibilities to prejudices. Conversely, however, the abbreviation of his last name suggests an ironic play on words by the author.

Chamcha, in Urdu means Spoon. It was also used, however, to describe a colonized sycophant, one who shamelessly acquiesced to the colonial powers in return for special favors. Though Chamcha, assuredly, is aware of the meaning of his abbreviated name (Farshita nicknames him "Spoono"), he seems oblivious to the irony inherent in it. As M. Keith Booker in the notes to his "Beauty and the Beast" argues, the cooperation of such "chamchas," of would-be Westernized natives, in colonized India made possible the success of the colonial enterprise, even as these so-called "yes-men" were internalizing the discourse of colonization which authorized their subjugation (996). Thus, once again, we see in Chamcha a reciprocal relationship between name and identity, as titles simultaneously shape and are shaped by the individuals to whom they are affixed.

Place names also figure critically within Rushdie's textual cosmos. The thematic of doubling, of the mirror's (warped) reflection, functions not only in Rushdie's *dramatis personae*, but also in the locales his characters inhabit. Mount Everest occupies a pivotal role in this text, as does its diminished double, Everest Villas, the apartment complex from the roof of which Rekha Merchant, despondent over her abandonment by Farshita, flings her children before leaping to her own death. From this same roof, Farshita, believing himself to be the exterminating angel, Azrael, will push his lover, the conqueror of Mt. Everest, Alleluia Cone. Also of critical importance, Cone is the name of the mountain to which Mahound in this text goes to receive Gibreel's revelations.

The doubling of place names serves multiple purposes in this text. First, it exemplifies the shrunken and specular aspects of the tactile world in which the characters live. Like the miniaturization of London for the filming of Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*

which engenders Farshita's and Chamcha's climactic reunion, the textual universe is frequently perceived by its characters as a degraded and comical echo of a bygone and glorious era. Rushdie describes what will follow from this meeting of Farshita and Chamcha, during which Chamcha learns the secret of Farshita's obsessive jealousy, a secret which he will use to destroy not only Farshita but also, unwittingly, Allie Cone. Rushdie writes:

What follows is tragedy.—Or at the 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 once first done by heroes and by kings. (439)

Fools now crawl where gods once tread; the sublime feats of yesterday give way to a farcical shadow of what once was. It is a post-lapsarian world, indeed, in which the characters of *Verses* live. The haunting sense of absurdity in this text suggests a postmodern discourse at odds with the behaviors and espoused ideologies of many of the characters. There is a sense in which figures such as Chamcha and Farshita experience a profound clash between conscious belief and unconscious doubt, Farshita in the faith he has always cherished, though rarely adheres to, Chamcha in the Anglophilic which he believes will transmute him into the “proper” English gentlemen. The surrealism of the world in which the characters live stems from the clashing of personal and social discourses against the reality of cultural (and individual) systems that give the lie to any claim of unimpeachable, disinterested truth.

The doubling of “Cone” exemplifies this diminished, dubious status to reality as well. Whereas Mt. Cone in the Mahound sections of the text is to be the site of revelation, a revelation which, according to the traditional Islamic purview, is the unmediated and therefore absolute Word of God, Alleluia Cone, Farshita's lover in the present-day world of the text, is a woman of flesh and blood. She provides no parallel access to a universal truth. Rather, she is both savior and executioner of Farshita. It is to Alleluia Cone that Farshita flees from the demons of his mental illness. It is she who assiduously endeavors to restore his sanity. It is she with whom Farshita shares an almost other-worldly sexual communion, the two describing their congress as an electric spiritual union of two souls

into one (Allie says of Farshita: “He just seems to, to *know*. To know *me*” (448)). On the other hand, however, Alleluia is also the target of Farshita’s obsessive jealousy, a jealousy that leads ultimately to Alleluia’s murder and to the suicide of Farshita, who believes his madness to be inexorable this time.

Alleluia Cone herself is a dark figure, besieged by ghosts and obsessions. Specifically, the desire to climb Everest alone haunts Cone, as does the ghost of the man who endeavored to do so, Maurice Wilson, which Cone first sees on the mountainside. According to Farshita, this figure will also be at Cone’s side—visible even to the man who imminently will murder her—in the moments before her death. Because of her obsession to climb Everest solo, she endures excruciating physical training, running flights of stairs barefoot to strengthen her fallen arches. Her physical condition is such that she risks the threat of a wheelchair and must resort at moments to the use of a cane. Yet her obsession stems from the same place as Farshita’s, and also, in a manner of speaking, from the same place as Mahound’s when he seeks revelation. On Everest, Alleluia Cone experiences communion with the transcendent. Language systems break down, morality is suspended, individual identity is abrogated. There is only the mountain and Alleluia’s free-floating, unsignified consciousness inhabiting it. Rushdie writes:

Why I (Alleluia) really went up there? Don’t laugh; to escape from good and evil...This’s what I learned in the revolution...This thing: information got abolished sometime in the twentieth century...Since then we’ve been living in a fairy-story...So how do we know if it’s right or wrong? We don’t even know what it *is*. So what I thought was, you can either break your heart trying to work it all out, or you can go sit on a mountain, because that’s where all the truth went, believe it or not, it just upped and ran away from these cities where even the stuff under our feet is all made up, a lie, and it hid up there in the thin thin air where the liars don’t dare come after it in case their brains explode.

(324-325 emphasis original)

Alleluia’s inebriated exposition on the spiritual experience of mountain-climbing, like most everything in Rushdie’s corpus, is laden with signification. In the symbolic economy of the text, mountains herald instances of or opportunities for extreme change. They signal revelation, or emotional and/or spiritual sublimity (or conversely, depravity).

Similarly, icebergs and water manifest complementary symbolic functions. Water,

as in the Jahilia scenes, represents both need and vulnerability. To the residents of the sand city, water is an imminent but necessary threat. For the Jahilian followers of the burgeoning Islamic faith, however, the emphasis on cleanliness and the daily ablutions serves to differentiate them from the pagan Jahilians. Thus, water assumes another signification: as a menace to the established discursive order, it is also an emblem of change. Furthermore, icebergs, as Rushdie describes them, are water aspiring to be land (313). Alleluia herself is frequently described as the ice queen, and, as she walks alongside the Thames, she hallucinates, believing to see three fog-shrouded icebergs floating down the river.

In this complex system of metaphor, it seems apparent that Alleluia's obsession with Everest, an obsession for which she is willing to break her body, just as Farshita's obsession readies him to fracture his mind, is an obsession with sublimation. The water (signifying ideological change) which aspires to be land or mountain (representing the surmounting of ideology to be in the presence of truth), can be seen to echo Alleluia's own desires in her dream for solo ascent. Just as her name, Alleluia, hearkens back to numerous theological traditions, in which it signifies both joy and praise, Alleluia the character conjures the mystical, transcendent experience without referring to any particular theological discourse. It is a brand of belief, almost Sufistic in its character, which Rushdie himself finds appealing. In an interview with the *Indian Post*, Rushdie says of his novel:

I suppose it is also about the attempt of somebody like myself, who is basically a person without a formal religion, to make some kind of accommodation with the renewed force of religion in the world; what it means; what the religious experience is. It is clear that there is such a thing as transcendence, that mystical events are not entirely spurious, that people see visions and they are not always lying. The question is what is the nature of that experience, assuming that one does not immediately look to the miraculous for an explanation, but, at the same time does not dismiss it as a fraud. That middle ground about the nature of transcendence is, or might be, also what the novel is about. (Reder, 84)

As he goes on to explain, his skepticism is not with the reality of transcendence, nor with existence of truth, but rather with the ideological discourse which would endeavor to shape the ultimately ineffable into dictatorial language (Reder 117-118). Farshita and

Cone symbolically suggest the sacred and secular manifestations of the human desire for belief in transcendence. Their communion is inviolable for as long as it remains physical and inarticulate. It is Chamcha's misappropriation of the language of their love that ultimately destroys their union.

Among the most controversial of the doubling episodes pertains to the names of the prophet's wives. In *The Satanic Verses*, Farshita dreams a multitude of interconnected stories, each told serially, resuming in an orderly fashion at the precise moment at which it had ended with Farshita's previous awakening. One of these serial dreams occurs in the time of Mahound himself. In one episode of the dream, the satirist/poet Baal, fleeing the revenge of the triumphantly returned Mohammed, takes refuge in the city's most illustrious brothel, "The Curtain." There, disguised as one of the establishment's eunuch bodyguards, he is sheltered for a number of years.

In this dream, the Grandee Abu Simbel surrenders the city of Jahilia peacefully to the former exile, Mohammad. But the people of Jahilia, former devotees of a polytheistic religion and partakers of the sensual and hedonistic pleasures of the market town, soon find Mohammad's theocratic rule too severe. Patrons at The Curtain begin to request that the prostitutes adopt the names of the wives of the prophet while performing their services. The fantasy becomes so entrenched, so popular with clients as well as courtesans, that soon the women abandon their names entirely for the names of the wives. Along with this change, there quickly follows an alteration of personality, as each rapidly transforms into the persona of her namesake. Original names are quickly forgotten, and when the women ask Baal to marry them, another specular image is born. The Curtain becomes the (ostensibly) degraded mirror image of the home of Mohammed.

The implications of this text for the program of scriptural absolutism will be explored later. What remains salient at this moment however is the degree to which this scene further emphasizes the metamorphic power of naming. With the adoption of these surrogate names comes a surrogate identity, and personal and collective dynamics are transformed. Petty jealousies arise; character traits purported to belong to the originals overwhelm the subjectivities of their mirror images; even Baal's affective responses seem to echo those of the man in whose role he stands: it is "Ayesha," reportedly Mohammed's own favorite wife, whom Baal grows to love the best.

As has been noted, this text exhibits a grave concern for the nature of the role its characters have to play. It is skeptical of any notion of discursive exceptionality; that is of any one tradition claiming ownership to the absolute and enduring truth. It is highly cognizant of the very human status of its players, with all of the attendant contradictions, cruelties, and shortcomings of humanity. The days of God-like men, for all of Farshita's delusions, and of divinity dwelling among humans, have long since vanished, if indeed they ever existed at all outside of the minds of the believers and those who would exploit that belief to their advantage (a possibility very seriously entertained in this text). Thus the doubling as it occurs in The Curtain episodes reflects this problematic of the lapsed universe. The Curtain scenes also, of course, open themselves to a strong feminist reading: Rushdie seeming to equate the position of women, within fundamentalist Islam, (which uses as a model for living the examples of the prophet's own life, just as the residents at The Curtain have also done) as within all oppressively patriarchal systems, to that of prostitutes.

What is also critically important for the purposes of this paper, however, is what Rushdie's program of multiple selves, places, and realms has to say about language. The theme of doubling in this text seems to imply an attempt on behalf of the author to dramatize the amorphous and contradictory nature of language. Bakhtin notes in *The Dialogic Imagination* that every signifier is loaded with a complex web of meanings, and that each word not only strums along a vast, interconnected network of semantic and ideological associations, but also activates a host of contradictory utterances, which is dialogism in its truest sense (276).

It seems particularly useful, then, to consider the instances of doubling in this text as a manifestation of a metaphorical dialogue, as the author's attempt to grapple with entrenched discourses. The Curtain episodes may be seen as a new reading of, and a counter-argument to, the received doctrine. Similarly, the figure of Alleluia Cone may be intended to provide a new interpretative slant on Mohammed's journeys to the mountaintop. It is not my belief that Rushdie employs such inflammatory techniques simply to be irreverent, simply to tear down the existing ideologies with which he may not agree. I suggest, rather, that in employing episodes such as these, Rushdie seeks to provide a new voice, an alternate reading. It may be that the mirror image Rushdie provides is not

in fact a degraded one at all, but rather a more accurate reflection because it is deprived of the glamour of divinity that prohibits too close a scrutiny.

Perhaps the most important aspect of place-naming occurs in the figure of London itself. The characters in *Verses* subject London to a constellation of titles: Alphaville, Babylondon, and, by Chamcha alone, “Proper” London. England itself is called Vilayet, which is also a term derived from the Arabic *wilaya*, meaning both “province” and “to administer”¹ and is used in addition to describe one of the chief administrative locales of the Ottoman Empire. Like most of the language used in Rushdie, the term Vilayet in this instance seems to carry multiple meanings. On the one hand, it may reinscribe England’s position as the former colonial power and present-day post-colonial powerhouse (second to the United States and now, perhaps, to the financial Goliaths of the east).

An additional reading of the term Vilayet, however, may concern the Saladin paradigm at play here. Vilayet describes an eastern empire, not a western one. This is combined with the echoes of the conquering Arab, Saladin, whose battles against European crusaders in the Middle Ages wrested the Holy Land from western control. Saladin Chamcha’s admitted desire is for the similar conquest of the land he loves. A problematic that is highly figured in this text is the degree to which the host nation is changed when immigrants land upon (and in Chamcha’s instance, the meaning is literal) its shores, and how that nation responds to such change. As Harveen Mann points out, a reverse colonization appears to be at work here. Londoners of Anglo-European descent express fear and even rage over the influx of the “foreigners,” as is evinced in the violence occurring in the streets, particularly near the Shaandaar Café to which Chamcha is taken to recover following his transmogrification. Yet perhaps the most disconcerting example of the racism saturating the British landscape occurs when a genteel-looking, elderly woman hands Gibreel a pamphlet concerning the exportation of African migrants from England. Otto Cone, Alleluia’s father, himself an immigrant who endeavors to fully assimilate into his newly adopted homeland, only to later isolate himself in his home when he finds complete assimilation impossible, delivers a critical clue to Rushdie’s own idea of the urban melting pot when he tells his daughter:

¹ See Definition 1 for "Vilayet." in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed. 2000.

The modern city...is the locus classicus of incompatible realities. Lives that have no business mingling with one another sit side by side upon the omnibus. One universe, on a zebra crossing, is caught for an instant, blinking like a rabbit, in the headlamps of a motor-vehicle in which an entirely alien and contradictory continuum is to be found. And as long as that's all, the pass in the night, jostling on Tube stations, raising their hats in some hotel corridor, it's not so bad. But if they meet! It's uranium and plutonium, each makes the other decompose, boom. (325)

In this modern city, in which rising populations increasingly throw these “incompatible realities” together, it is impossible to maintain the isolation that Otto Cone embraces. As the text’s street violence illustrates, the explosions are all but inevitable.

The inevitable transformation of the host country by immigration figures into another crucial aspect of naming. In this text, London is frequently dubbed Ellowen Deeowen, based upon an Indian children’s game of the same name. The name is a sort of onomatopoeia of the accented spelling of the place name. What is significant here is the inclusion of the accented pronunciation in the place name. Accentuation assumes critical importance in this text, as will be shown, but its imbrication in the name London, itself such a loaded signifier, a metonym by which British society is conjured, conveys a new level of thematic significance. The accented spelling of London, which soon comes to replace the place name itself, symbolically enacts the sociolinguistic transformation of the host locale by the varying ideological and discursive patterns it will absorb. No matter how earnestly the new-comer endeavors to assimilate, and it must be conceded that no immigrant could endeavor to assimilate more assiduously than Chamcha, the new homeland is always already altered by the migrant’s coming. Harveen Mann writes:

Not only are the new immigrants displaced in their British surroundings, but the (white) Britons themselves at times appear to be outsiders in their own country, in an ironic echo of the deracination of indigenous populations under colonial rule. What was once a Calvinist church gives way to a synagogue before being replaced by the Jamme Masjid. (295)

In this amorphous and constantly changing London, then, it is not only white

Britons who appear displaced. Chamcha, the immigrant who wants nothing more than to belong, speaks an antiquated, “museum” discourse, according to his British wife. Thus, as will be elaborated upon later in this text, his discourse is doubly othered: first, by the ineradicable accent which is the ultimate linguistic marker of difference, and second by the embracing of a dead discursive paradigm, the paradigm of the British Empire. Rushdie writes:

He had been striving...to be worthy of the challenge represented by the phrase *Civis Britannicus sum*. Empire was no more, but still he knew ‘all that was good and living within him’ to have been ‘made, shaped and quickened’ by his encounter with this islet of sensibility, surrounded by the cool sense of the sea. Of all material things, he had given his love to this city, London, preferring it to the city of his birth or to any other; had been creeping up on it stealthily....dreaming of being the one to possess it and so, in a sense, *become* it....London, its conglomerate nature mirroring his own, its reticence also his...its hospitality—yes!—in spite of immigration laws and his own recent experience. (412 emphasis original)

As the last lines imply, Chamcha’s internalized rhetoric is so deeply entrenched it blinds him even to the realities of his own body. In the clash between the truth of the senses and the collective voice of an antiquated discourse, Chamcha chooses to believe the discourse. His subjectivity, then, is subsumed by the pernicious force of political rhetoric.

Perhaps the most significant instant of renaming occurs in the figure of Mohammed/Mahound. In Islam, the name of the prophet is revered. Its invocation elicits an immediate reaction in the faithful: a required prayer for the continued blessedness and honor of the figure. Mohammad’s second appellation, Mahound, however, carries multiple significations. In the medieval period, Western theological plays recast the figure of Mohammad as Mahound, a decidedly diabolical figure (Booker 986). The representation of Mohammad as Mahound hearkens back to earlier Apocryphal teachings of a Mahound as an avatar or attribute of Satan. In Rushdie’s text, however, there is an intimation that Mohammad himself adopted the name Mahound (although this is never explicitly stated within the text, just as it is never clear what entity is in fact addressing the prophet by this name). The text suggests, nevertheless, that Mohammad chooses to assume this title as a means of depriving the name of its deleterious effects. By adopting the name with which

his enemies endeavor to hurt him, Mahound deprives his detractors of their own weapons. Rushdie writes:

His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given but he won't answer to that here; nor, though he's well aware of what they call him, to his nickname in Jahilia down below—he-who-goes-up-and-down-old-Coney. Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound. (95)

In the circular chronology of the text, defense mechanisms of the present inform those of the past. As the above passage, with its mingling of modern political events and ancient theological teachings, shows, language never flows in a linear progression but rather endlessly redoubles upon itself, illuminating opaque discourses, dismantling absolutist rhetoric. It is an endlessly self-reflexive machine. And, Rushdie suggests, the instant one ceases to interrogate, add to, or alter existing discourses through new language, through an endless renaming, that discourse either dies or becomes reified. If dead, it makes fools of those, like Chamcha, who perforce or by will inhere in it. But when reified, it becomes totalitarian, a scourge and impediment to all who would think new thoughts in new words.

The problematizing of the structures of English discourse pertains to the issues illustrated by Rushdie's emphasis on the power of names and labels to transform individuals. The power of description is an eminently strong force. What is suggested in the scene of Farshita's nicknaming by his mother is painfully and movingly dramatized in Part Three of the novel, *Ellowen Deeowen*, in which Chamcha finds himself metamorphosed into a goat-like figure. After enduring psychological torture (he is stripped naked and forced to eat his excrement off the floor) and physical brutality at the hands of the police, he finds himself confined against his will in a government-run medical facility. One night, he and his fellow patients escape their prison, but as he flees he sees for the first time what he could not see while in the hospital (because curtains are used to isolate

the residents, their only knowledge of one another comes in speech). In patches of moonlight, the disembodied voices with which he had become familiar are made corporeal. Among the entities he sees fleeing with him into the dark English night are “men and women who were partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion, built partly of brick or stone” (176). Rushdie writes: “[t]hey describe us,’ the other (a manticore, the symbol of the fantastic and dangerous “other”) whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (174).

The Satanic Verses indubitably is an attempt to counter the discourses which have served to dehumanize and objectify the marginalized within the society. However, Rushdie argues that the discourses remain lamentably unequal. Once again, in an interview with W.L. Webb, Rushdie states:

The point is that if you come from the black communities in this country, the power of other people to describe you is much greater than your power to describe back. And so, one can’t see it as a fair struggle at the moment, because we are described, and we are described into corners, and then we have to describe our way out of corners, if we can. And it seems to me that that’s one of the things I was trying to do. I was trying to contest the descriptions. (100)

Significantly, however, though Rushdie suggests that there remains a great deal of work to be done before all discourses enjoy equal respect and authority, he does seem to embrace an almost utopian vision of the power of language to chip away at the oppressive discourse. By re-appropriating the power of description, the marginalized individual slowly rediscovers the voice through which to rename, and re-describe, himself.

The methods Mohammad employs in depriving his enemies of the capacity to insult him by willfully adopting the injurious name will be echoed on the streets of 1980's London in the text. At the time of Chamcha's transformation, London begins to dream of the fearsome goat-like creature. To the marginalized communities, this figure is messianic, the avatar of their revenge and defiance. To the empowered sectors of the society, he is the embodiment of their conscious and unconscious fears of the other. Significantly, then, when minority youths begin to wear devil and goat horns and other paraphernalia, it inaugurates the community's first collective effort at defiance, as it endeavors to

corporealize the reprehension in which their society holds them. The names that the dominant classes (predominantly white, though Chamcha himself has participated in such naming) have given them are re-appropriated and transformed into a guise through which the insidious and repulsive face of racism can be materialized. It is a forced confrontation, a banishment of hypocrisy and the obfuscatory evasions of political language. It is word made flesh.

This re-appropriation of language textualizes an important component of Rushdie's own artistic project. Often ridiculed for his use of the English language, Rushdie situates himself within a paradigm of postcolonial writers endeavoring to deconstruct the linguistic oppression leveled against so-called marginalized others by turning against the purveyors of the dominant, repressive discourse the language which is the very instrument of their conquest. While Rushdie's refusal to utilize his native Urdu has been perceived by some as a betrayal, the language of Rushdie's corpus is far from the "Master's English" that his opponents criticize him for embracing. Indeed, the English of Rushdie's own creation is, in the words of Harveen Mann, an indigenized form of English (282), a hybrid, nonstandard construct meant to problematize the rigid linguistic structures of the hierarchy. In *Verses*, Rushdie puts what seems to be the thesis for his own artistic program into the thoughts of the Shaandaar Cafe's struggling poet, Jumpy Joshi, as he is confronted by Hanif Johnson, an IndoEuropean attorney and social activist, and "master of the social languages." Joshi thinks:

The real language problem: how to bend it shape it, how to let it be our freedom, how to reposess its poisoned wells, how to master the river of words of time of blood: about all that you haven't got a clue. How hard that struggle, how inevitable the defeat. Nobody's going to elect me to anything. No power-base, no constituency: just the battle with the words...Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true. (290 emphasis original)

In an interesting shift in technique, the voice of Rushdie's implied author seems to make itself heard more clearly here than at most any other point in Rushdie's extensive body of fiction. The use of italics in the text presumably signals the mental discourse of Joshi. These ruminations are commented upon by the implied author, who, in the final line quoted above, makes one of the most overtly personal statements on language and the

writer's craft in the corpus.

Perhaps the most significant element in Rushdie's program of interrogating the parameters of language occurs in the figure of Gibreel, and by this I mean both the actor, Farshita, and the angel who ostensibly wishes to embody him. What is most important for the purposes of this paper is the manner in which the revelations of Gibreel/Farshita are elicited. Islamic teachings hold that the sacred text, the Qur'an, is the infallible word of God transmitted through the angel Gibreel to Mohammad. In this version of the revelation story, however, Gibreel is shown to be merely a puppet, an instrument through which human desires, not sacred truths, are relayed. The relationship between Gibreel and Mahound in this text is parasitic rather than symbiotic, the latter wresting divine sanction from the unwilling and impotent mouth of the angel. Mahound literally appropriates Gibreel's voice. Rushdie writes:

I am the dragging in the gut. I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper's navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farshita, while my other self, Mahound, lies, *listening*, entranced, I am bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other. We flow in both directions along the umbilical cord...The dragging again, straining with all his might at something, forcing something, and Gibreel begins to feel that strength that force, here it is *at my own jaw*, working it, opening shutting; and the power, starting within Mahound, reaching up to *my own vocal cords* and the voice comes. (113-114 emphasis original)

Similarly, Gibreel Farshita seems to embody an awesome force of terrestrial wish fulfillment. Rosa Diamond, echoing Odysseus' capture by the witch Circe, holds Farshita prisoner in her home by sheer force of will. Farshita escapes only through the elderly Diamond's natural death. The intensity of her desires as she lay dying literally at moments renders Farshita immobile. Too weak even to lift his hand from a chair, Farshita, through the force of hallucination or dreams reenacts with Rosa the heady days of her Argentinean youth. In addition to the reenactment of real, lived history, however, the "lives" Rosa compels Farshita to manifest for her include alternative and contradictory realities, the "it was so it was not so" paradigm upon which this text is based. Another example of the appropriation of the will occurs in the figure of the Trinidadian ticket booth operator at the local theater. Confronted by the incredible force of Farshita's presence, Orphia Phillips finds herself relating the precise details of her

failed romance with the lift operator. These revelations, however, are consciously solicited neither by Farshita nor by Orphia but are born of Orphia's unconscious compulsion to speak her pain by transferring both her will and accountability for her speech act onto the figure of Farshita.

The Gibreel/Farshita sections are emblematic of a theory of foreignness espoused by Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves*. Basing her approach on E. Jentsch's semiotic reading of Freudian notions of the uncanny, Kristeva writes:

The symbol ceases to be a symbol and takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes. In other words, the sign is not experienced as arbitrary but assumes a real importance. As a consequence, the material reality that the sign was commonly supposed to point to crumbles away to the benefit of the imagination...We are here confronted with the 'omnipotence of thought' which, in order to constitute itself invalidates the arbitrariness of signs and the autonomy of reality as well and places them both under the sway of fantasies expressing infantile desires or fears. (186)

In his incredible aptitude for recognizing and fulfilling, typically against his will, the desires of others, I suggest that Gibreel/Farshita functions similarly to the empty signifiers described by Kristeva. Magic and animism in Kristeva's analysis give way to magical men, both angelic and animalistic. Gibreel/Farshita, by virtue of their ostensibly unknown and unknowable foreignness, are signs without signifiers, and thus comes their "uncanny" ability to abrogate material reality, the natural laws, in order to manifest the desires of those to whom they are the ineffable, specular other.

Such a compulsion of stories, such loss of control over the voice, figures heavily in Rushdie's critique of perceived absolute truths. Islam is not the singular target of Rushdie's skepticism, however. Rather, Rushdie in this text problematizes all doctrines which would portray themselves as indisputable and self-evident. From the American capitalist businessman with the overtly racist tactics, Hal Valance, to the exiled Imam for whom deviation from his perceived modes of truth signifies certain and justified death, the avatars of absolutism are among the most dangerous figures within the text. This is a book in which ambiguity prevails, and, where totalitarian regimes of truth are found within it, so are there likely to be found violence, hatred, exploitation, and death.

Absolutism of another form occurs in the figure of Chamcha. His absolutism is not only cultural, espousing the unmitigated superiority of the British society over his own native Indian one, it is also secular/moral. Farshita's refusal to speak a word in defense of his friend leads ultimately to Chamcha's arrest and his subsequent transmutation into animal form. It is this failure to intervene with a single word, to corroborate Chamcha's story of his (and Farshita's) remarkable survival of the aircraft explosion, that is highly problematic. On one hand, it may be viewed as the imposed silence of the post-colonial subject by the authority of the metropolitan elite (although the superior hierarchical status of the policemen is dubious at best: two of them carry the accents of Scotland and Wales and as such are themselves in a sense colonial). Indeed, Farshita's silence seems to relate much more to the wish fulfillment of the elites than to any animosity toward Chamcha—without doubt the policemen are eager to arrest the trespassing immigrant; also without doubt Rosa Diamond relishes the opportunity to be rid of the menacing figure of Chamcha in order to have the seraphic loveliness of Farshita entirely to herself.

Whatever the ultimate cause, Farshita's act of betrayal triggers Chamcha's absolutist moral code (the same moral code which bids Chamcha abandon his father when he discovers the triangular relationship he has created between his new wife and Chamcha's ayah) and leads in turn to perhaps the most reprehensible act in the text. Having discovered Farshita's psychological fragility, and the obsessive nature of his relationship with Alleluia Cone, Chamcha undertakes a program of his own “satanic verses.” The illustrious voice actor, the man with “a thousand voices and a voice,” systematically destroys Farshita's mental well-being. Using the limitless and graphic details provided by Farshita of his sexual life with Allie, Chamcha begins to make a series of pornographic telephone calls, each employing one of his thousand and one voices. “The verses,” as they are called, take more than their desired effect. Not only is Farshita's sanity irretrievably lost, but the murder/suicide described earlier becomes the inevitable result.

The appropriation of the voice is further problematized in the person of Chamcha as well. Indeed, in many respects Chamcha may be viewed as the supreme example of what Homi Bhabha calls “mimic men,” that is, marginalized individuals who endeavor,

as has been discussed earlier in this paper, to reflect back upon the dominant authority its idealized image. This mimicry, however, constitutes a repetition with a difference. In this case, however, unlike the case of the mimic men, whose difference ultimately may be transmuted into a source of power, Chamcha's difference is wholly involuntary in the first stages of the book. He finds shame in his dissimilarity to the British world he loves. Nevertheless, his dissimilarity is irrefutable. Zeeny Vikail, Chamcha's lover, notes the slippage of his accent. Indian speech forms perpetually threaten the "purity" of Chamcha's English, a threat that grows decidedly more difficult to evade as Chamcha travels east. In Chamcha's purview, the encroaching accent represents a humiliating marker of his inexorable Indianness. He has internalized the doctrines of the former empire, doctrines which necessarily espoused the inferiority of the colonized races in order to solidify the colonial enterprise (Fanon 210-212).

Chamcha embodies the spirit elucidated in Bhabha's text: that of the culturally engineered (by (post)colonial discourse) man, a man English in education and sensibility, but Indian in body and temperament (which according to this doctrine means that he is ascribed to the inferior class and never questions the legitimacy of his inferior status). Mimic men, in Bhabha's hypothesis, are born within this climate of concerted social engineering and, superficially, they carry out its tenets. But in their role as specular image, they become dangerous for the truths they reveal in the act of mimicry and for the inevitable destabilization that their performances engender (86-92). There is, after all, no wholly accurate mimicry. All parody carries with it its own individual difference.

Chamcha's variation of the mimic man, at least before his "redemption" through reconciliation with the father and the homeland that occurs at the text's conclusion, carries with it no such hope for social change. There is no intent to mimic in Chamcha. His desire is not to parody, nor even to approximate, but to *become*. But the discourses against which he is made to clash in his desperate attempts to assume this new (and entirely unattainable) subjectivity warp him until, at last, ungirded as he is with an insulating personal discourse with which to protect himself, he is unmanned, made bestial by the social languages he wishes to participate in but cannot.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie problematizes the nature of social

discourses. He traces their effects upon the individuals who use them, as well as those who would be used by them. Above all, with limitless courage and dazzling ingenuity, he challenges those discursive regimes which claim absolute and unquestionable access to a singular truth. In another, stirring example of doubling and renaming, Salman the Persian is shown rewriting the sacred texts of Islam. Under the threat of death, the authorities demand that the scribe repent of the crime of “set[ting] your words against the Words of God” (387). Salman Rushdie offers no such repentance. Instead, he continues unapologetically to push against the boundaries of language, to set his words against the Words of Theocracy, of Nation, of Law and Culture. Through his writing, Rushdie continues his search for a linguistic, imaginative, and social freedom that ever exceeds the confining and confounding grasp of ideological discourse.

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