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The Satanic Verses: A Carnival of Hybrid Identities

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Abstract – Cultural and postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha is credited with making "hybridity" a buzzword in literature and other cultural discourses for referring to the consolidation of assorted, often contrasting elements into a congruous whole. The alterations in the contributing factors, that defy the initial polarity, and are resultant of atypical aggregation, bring forth innovation, abundance and diversification, whether such a conflux take place in art language, literature or culture. On account of its novelty and cross-cultural interdependence, the notion of hybridity constitutes major characteristics of postcolonial theory and practice. Bhabha is the key architect of the term "Third Space" as well which refers to the crevice that develops between clashing cultures and which gives rise to new cultural identities. This in-between space captures the consequences of alienation, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, displacement, hybridity and transnationalism. Migrants, who are exposed to different cultures commonly, foster a third space or hybrid sensibility. The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie celebrates the ideas like hybridity and third space. For example, when Saladin and Gibreel fall from the aeroplane (a metaphor for third space, the in-between arena), their personalities begin to transform because along with them the exploding plane casts out "broken memories, lost loves and mother tongues". The Satanic Verses is an exposition of the adequacy with which hybridity sums up the complexities of identity in the globalized existence. It accentuates the concurrence of cultures and advocates for the ascendancy of mongrelisation. The novel disarrays the dominance of certitude by recommending that it is detrimental to dislodge hybridity due to the delusion of purity. This paper is an attempt to display how The Satanic Verses resists the chimera of credibility and antagonizes any supplication for homogeneity.

Keywords — Hybridity, Bhabha, postcolonial, third-space, diaspora, identity, The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie.

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Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is perhaps known in lesser degree for its artistry than for the audacity with which it treats the deeply embedded Islamic credo. A gross and common misreckoning related to this work is deliberating it exclusively in the light of its guiding text—The Quran. In point of fact, Rushdie's novel appose variegated cultural assets, both oriental and occidental, to create an intertext that presses into service aesthetic products ranging from *Dastan-E-Amir-Hamza*to Darwin; Omar Khayyam to Orwell; and Mahabharata to Madonna. The application of intertextuality and non-adherence to classification of these texts as strictly contemporary or classical; eminent or inferior; oriental or accidental and sacred or profane is indicative of the irreverence that Rushdie opts in the novel. The author's insouciance towards religious assumptions is indeed fictionalization of scathing criticism of religious and metaphysical discourses that are inward looking and self perpetuating. It is a criticism of insubstantial and unifying claims about cosmos, nature and existence maintained rather by force than logic:

In olden times, the earth was stationary, and the sun and the sky used to revolve around it. Poets used to say: By night and day the seven heav'ns revolve! And then a person by the name of Galileo came along and began to make the earth revolve around the sun. The priests were very angry that someone had put them in such a spin. By giving due punishment to Galileo, they put a stop to these sorts of movements, but even so they could not stop the world from rotating, and it still goes on moving in the same old way.(Ibn-e-Insha,28-29)

An iconoclastic treatment of stock religious subject by Rushdie drew the ire of fundamentalists and resulted in issue of fatwaagainst him and his subsequent exile. Curiously, the novel about deprival and migration led to the migration of the author. The motif of migration is contextualized in the novel through a ground-breaking episode of the theological history of the world—Birth of Islam.

Around 600 CE an Arabic merchant Muhammad claimed visitation from angel of God. The angel

declared him to be the chosen one, preaching to humanity, the ideas that were dear to God. What the angel recited before Muhammad, became the holy text of Islam—The Quran. Muhammad imparted the newly received knowledge to his followers who consistently swelled in number. During this time Mecca, the hometown of Muhammad emerged as the centre of this new faith, Islam. After the death of Muhammad in 632 CE his followers felt an urge to take their new faith to different parts of the world. This led to invasion of lands like Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and Africa unto Spain. By the end of European dark ages Islam was established as one of the largest religions of the world.

Tension between the propagators of new faith and the inhabitants of invaded communities is implicit in the birth and journey of Islam. When Rushdie deals with newfound religion, he is not interested in the conflict emerging out of the antithetic religious practices of the natives and invaders. He is talking about Indian Islam which has"always known the importance of secularism" (Rushdie, *Step Across the Line* 232). Rushdie, by excogitating a fantasy about the principal propagator of new religion, Prophet Muhammad; and the guiding book, The Quran,conceives of a hybrid religion. An Indian flavour is given to Islam where stern monotheism accommodates aboriginal Gods, Goddesses and seers.This is a kind of practice not uncommon in "hybrid Sufi groups founded and led by immigrant Muslims who were born and raised in Muslim societies" (Hermasen, 28). A similarly reconciling agent that Rushdie deals with is the cosmopolitan city of Bombay:

And Bombay, of course, represents Rushdie's 'third principle' a space that attempts to include both sides of the east/west, secular/religious, real/fantasy, colonizer/colonized binary in ever new combinations that foreground hybridity over clarity and open-endedness over closer. (Hassumani, 88)

And what is true about Bombay is even more so about composite Indian culture which has meandered through a long passage of history, depicting elements from umpteen cultural antecedents ranging from Harappa to Harsha; Magadha to Mughals; and Bharata to British. India thus becomes a space for fusing plurality into singularity. The central idea of *TheSatanic Verses* is introduction of novelty into the world, and harmonic order accommodating multiplicity is presented in a narrative that leverages sources like European classics, Persian *Quissa* and *Dastan*, *Vrihatkatha*of Sanskrit and Bollywood, which is another tool for creating cultural hybridity: "Writing that 'the illusion itself is a reality,'and thereby acknowledging the hypnotic grip of magic emitted by cinema, Rushdie... acknowledges the power of the medium as a component of a hybrid post-colonial Indian culture" (Litvak, 69).The composite nature of discourse in the novel is emphasized when characters like Mimi Mamoulian designates the world as pastiche while the author explicitly zigzags multiple voices:

Gibreel . . . has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous – that is, joined to and arising from his past . . . whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention; his preferred revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'? [Where Chamcha is therefore perceived as 'evil'] 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. — But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy? — Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, 'pure', – an utterly fantastic notion! – cannot, must not, suffice. (427)

Any clear cut distinction between the good/bad, continuous/discontinuous binary is both impossible and problematic. It is then safer to conceive of thesetwo characters in the light of hybrid subjectivity.They are a remodelled version in conflict with the original scheme of their own creation.

One of the central characteristics of any former colony is dissolution of pristine cultural identity. It is replaced by a hybrid space that constitutes the elements of both the aboriginal as well as new cultural identity. The study of hybrid then serves to discern unique cultural complications of the postcolonial societies. The key architect of the term 'hybrid', Homi K. Bhabha denies the possibility of any unadulterated or intact cultural identity. He recognizes every identity as a blend, as a hybrid. To project his idea, Bhabha draws the analogy of stairwell:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interactions, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between the upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from setting into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hybridity. (Bhabha, 5)

Bhabha identifies Salman Rushdie as a hybridizing novelist who blends the cultural identity of Europe with that of the subcontinent. His *The Satanic Verses* creates a space for contest between the liberal and conservative cultural representatives of Britain as well as between overall British liberal identity and postcolonial nations. Bhabha sees the kaleidoscopic narratives and numerous episodes linked with each of the narratives as an evidence of hybridity:

What the book uniquely reveals is a life lived precariously on the culturaland political margins of modern society. Where once we could believe inthe comforts and continuities of tradition, today we must face theresponsibilities of cultural translation. In the attempt to mediate betweendifferent cultures, languages, and societies, there is always the threat ofmistranslation, confusion, and fear. (Bhabha, *ATL*12)

Bhabha employs the term 'hybridity' in relation to the identity of a subject in the postcolonial sphere. It is antithetical to any circumscribing nomenclature such as pure, absolute, or even categorically colonial or postcolonial. It is a borderless sphere that keeps on adjusting the limits in accordance to the need of exchanging and imbibing the attributes of what lies outside that space. Since the position of an individual in terms of his/her identity is opaque, the distinction between colonial master or native subject is seldom very sharp and often hybridized. This is contrary to assumption of "Polarities devised by a dominant centre" (Ashcroft etal. 178).

The idea of hybridity, that turns down the binaries like self/other was originally shaped by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Although initially Edward Said draws heavily upon the idea of occidental self and oriental others as opposite and conflicting identities; he eventually dismisses such a ratiocination for not producing "admirable ends" (Said, 45). He holds culture as "hybrid and heterogeneous" and dedicates himself to "the rethinking of what had for centuries been believed to be an unbridgeable chasm separating east from the west" and to confront the impression that "difference implies hostility, a frozen reified set of opposed essences, and a whole adversarial knowledge built out of these things" (Said, 352).*The Satanic Verses* gives a constructive touch to this already established notion of synthesis between diverse and dissimilar elements and celebrates the compound, hybrid existence:

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. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world… *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 394)

On the two central characters of the novel Gibreel and Saladin, angelic and satanic identities have been bestowed respectively. However, regardless of the new endowment in a new locale, England, both of them fail in keeping the new, separate from their old identity. Their mutable identities keep on fusing into one another. In the opening chapter titled, "The Angel Gibreel" the identities of Saladin Chamcha and GibreelFarishta become hybridized and Chamcha feels that he has transformed into Gibreel:

Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon them, gigantic flowers with human breasts dangling from fleshy stalks, winged cats, centaurs, and Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long, patrician neck. (6)

Identifying angelic or satanic attributes as distinct identities becomes a troubled task right from the first chapter of *The Satanic Verses*. As the novel progresses, two types of national identities are challenged—Indian and English. The notion of Hybridity cancels out the assumed epistemological pre-eminence of occidental culture over abated alternative cultures. It serves as an introspective and interrogative catalyst for the postcolonial self that exposes the epistemological assault of dominant over submissive culture.

The attributes of English cultural identity are cryptically encoded in *The Satanic Verses.* When Whisky Sisodia stammers, "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means", he performs a very important function of the author (343). His stammer ingrains in the readers the troubled relation of the English with history. The prolonged pronunciation of "Engenglish" indicates the Meta nature or larger than life self realization of English identity. But this self importance brings along a departure of English identity from the historical relation between a nation state and the spirit of Englishness. For Bhabha the assertion of Sisodia is a review of the need to redraw the national boundary.

Rosa Diamond, "The creature of cracks and absences she knew herself to be", provides herself with plausibility through her perception of Battle of Hastings; and in doing so embodies English identity (130). Her dream of the landing of the armada of William the conqueror has a clear reference to the making of English identity. The accomplishment that William achieved was not limited to military success; he is also credited as the harbinger of that historical event which shaped the modern notion of England as a state. After this terminal incursion on the English soil, the intruders became an inseparable part of the English way of life. The idea that underlies this assimilation and consolidation is the contribution of extraneous elements as chief patrons who granted such a unity.

With the changing landscape in England the equation of cultural identification among the outsiders and insiders has also changed. The coastline near the house of Rosa has altered much since Norman Conquest. The primordial Norman castle previously towering over the seafront has now shifted inwards. Such a shift is illustrative of the integration of Norman culture into English.

The idea of homogeneity is defied not only at the level of population configuration of a nation but also at the level of perception. The notion of purely egalitarian England harboured by Saladin receives a major setback. While he had renounced his Indian Identity for English citizenship, a wife and a mansion, what he really receives is maltreatment at the hands of coastguards. This treatment and this nation are certainly not congruous with the land of liberty, equality and emancipation that Saladin had perceived of. The notion of democratic nation stands further removed from reality when Saladin meets Asians, African and other non-Europeans. These hapless people are doomed to beastly existence because of the English prejudice. Again, the authenticity of perception stands impeached when Saladin preserves similar kind of prejudice as his English oppressors. The black nurse Hyacinth had facilitated the liberation of indwellers from the hospital. But as soon as Saladin is salvaged, he thinks of Hyacinth as a threat and notices her ugliness. Hyacinth too thinks of Saladin as a grisly beast. The enduring existence of Saladin in the demonic form is due to his own perception of Indian identity as something denigrating.

The phenomena associated with Indian identity are in a state of constant flux in the novel. Saladin Chamcha is consistently at odds with his Indian identity. He has eschewed his Indian identity to embrace English identity. His irked father vilify him as Satan's work and blasphemer, "A man untrue to himself becomes a two legged lie, and such beasts are Shaitan's best work,..... a man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the creator's role, according to one way of seeing things: he's unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abomination"; while for Mimi Saladin is a hollow man (48). The author does not offer relinquishing one's indigenous identity and proclaiming a foreign identity as a measure to settle the issue of identity crisis in a hybrid world.

Therefore, following the native traditions has been stressed upon as much as esteeming comprehensive plural customs from other parts of the world. Hind Sufyan prepares for her husband numerous cuisines peculiar to the subcontinent so much so that it begins to "resemble the wide rolling landmass [of the subcontinent itself]" (246). This is her way of acknowledging and appreciating the unconventional and pluralistic outlook of her husband. While Muhammad advices her, "restraint is also part of our tradition" (246). Muhammad, exterminated from his homeland for holding affinity towards communism, is a reluctant exile in England. Although his identity has become hybridized, he esteems his core traditional values. Such a disposition is reflected in Gibreel's recitation, "O my shoes are Japanese,...these trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that" (5). Muhammad's daughter Mishal later on follows the ethnic ethics of her father. Although her attire and appearance is closer to continental culture, her assistance is available to the Indian (sub continental) society much like her father.

As the novel concludes Saladin returns to India and reconciles with his father. He participates in a movement for national integration. This movement for integration is not occasioned by jingoistic fervour but to address the underlying issue of eliminating ethnological and sectarian discriminations against fellow Indians, "How to accuse others of being prejudiced when our own hands are so dirty" (518).

By celebrating the notion of hybridity *The Satanic Verses* also foregrounds the values like liberty, emancipation, tolerance, and introspection etc. which are common to both the source tradition as well as the resultant hybrid one. The novel thus becomes a site of constant struggle between different identities, polarities, notions and conformations. The charm of the novel is sustained by an unbroken enigma as to which attribute of the individual identity will emerge as the most captivating one in this carnival of hybrid identities.

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