



The Post-Colonial Concept of Hybridity and Cultural Identity in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*

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ABSTRACT

The *Satanic Verses* is considered the most controversial and stirring novel ever written by Rushdie. It captured the fundamental aspects of the lives of migrants in foreign countries, especially in Western nations like England. Rushdie illustrates that "If the *Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world"¹.

Keywords:

The *Satanic Verses* is considered the most controversial and stirring novel ever written by Rushdie. It captured the fundamental aspects of the lives of migrants in foreign countries, especially in Western nations like England. Rushdie illustrates that "If the *Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world"². Certainly, *Satanic Verses* highlights many issues, but the most primary issue is the great struggle that Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants encounter in the

new world "England" to attain a better life. The book starts with two Indian characters Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha and how these two characters develop split cultural identities as a result of being in another country (England). Salman Rushdie, in his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, addresses the issues of hybridity and cultural identity using a narrative tool on post-colonial diaspora subjects. He describes the challenges individuals face in the diaspora, such as cultural disorientation, and identity formation and crisis. In an attempt to make a remedy, Rushdie emphasizes cultural hybridity as the best option to address the challenges.

At the beginning of the novel, Rushdie seeks to understand how newness is introduced in the world. As he expresses in *Satanic Verses*, "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions,

¹. Rushdie, Salman. "In Good Faith."

Newsweek 115, no.7 (February 12, 1990): 52.

². Rushdie, Salman. "In Good Faith."

Newsweek 115, no.7 (February 12, 1990): 52.

translations, conjoining is it made?"³ The element is critical in laying the foundation for the reader to understand the foundations of cultural mixing and hybridity. The newness experienced in the world is as a result of conjoining, translations, and fusions of different elements. For instance, the fusion of two cultures is identified as a critical strategy that would address some of the significant problems related to the cultural identity of subjects in the diaspora. Rushdie experiences cultural identity as he is an Indian who traveled and settled in England. He admits of the ambiguity in the national and cultural connections which affect his identity as a migrant. The different lifestyles of the East and the West form the basis of his explanations of hybridization and cultural identity through other characters. Based on two Indian characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, Rushdie aims at describing cultural identity through the migrant's view of the world. His work focuses on the belief that mixing two identities and cultures is vital as opposed to limiting the identification of people to a single idea or place. The research will focus on post-colonial concepts of hybridity, cultural identity, and the English language, as addressed by Rushdie in his novel *Satanic Verses*.

As the novel begins, it introduces the central protagonists Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha as they miraculously survive from a plane hijacking and 'fall' into the English nation (England). The scene of the "fall" associated with their rebirth. "'To be born again,' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, the first one needs to fly'"⁴. The theme of "fall" as a prelude to rebirth- for instance, the rebirth for both of those two actors- is opportunities of renewal of their life as immigrants who desire to explore the new life and forget their past. The scene is critical in describing the central protagonists

and understanding their immigration history to inform the cultural identity and hybridization challenges they experience. From the onset of the novel, it is evident that the characters are critical to the aspect of the hybridization of culture. As Rushdie describes in the book, "O, my shoes are Japanese, Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the up-rushing host-nation, These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that"⁵. The symbolism is aimed at defining the impact of hybridization in ensuring an individual is entirely full, especially when they are in the diaspora. Gibreel describes the attires as being from various national and cultural backgrounds. It is an aspect that Rushdie focuses on to show the beauty of the hybridization of culture. Gibreel's song describes how good one looks in the attire that is not entirely from his native culture. Similarly, individuals that live in the diaspora experience an introduction to new cultures. As Sunil Bhatia states, "postcolonial studies have emphasized this mixing and moving, a continuous and ongoing process through which many non-western/European immigrants reconstitute and negotiate their identity"⁶. The practices are beyond the normal cultural practices from an individual's native culture. One of the best strategies that could be effective in reducing challenges associated with cultural identity is to develop measures of hybridization. Rushdie aims at showing how important the elements of the hybridity of different aspects would have a positive impact. The use of Gibreel's attire song is a perfect example of how hybridization would work effectively for individuals in the diaspora.

Rushdie describes the difficulties the characters encounter in navigating the

⁵. Rushdie, 5.

⁶. Sunil Bhatia, "Acculturation, Dialogical Voices and the Construction of the Diasporic Self." *Theory & Psychology* 12, no. 1 (February 2002): 56.

³. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*: (New York, N.Y.: Viking Penguin Inc, 1989), 8.

⁴. Rushdie, 1.

memories of life in native India and their adult life in England. Chamcha views India as reproachable while England is restraint and has dignity. England is a superior nation to him as he initially finds his life frustrating and embarrassing. It is an attempt to be part of the society that he does his best to fit in the England culture. The cultural identity challenge that the character experiences is disadvantageous to his satisfaction as an individual as well as it adversely impacts his Indian culture. One of the actions he takes to show his need to fit in is marrying an upper-class British beauty. According to Chamcha, Pamela Lovelace represents the happy England, which he describes as "stinking of Yorkshire pudding"⁷ The main reason for marrying him is to have an experience of the superiority of England⁸. He believes that marrying a person from the country will play a critical role in making him a part of the country. Moreover, he hoped to find the best life in England as he states in *Satanic verses* about England, "Culture, city, wife; and a fourth and final love ... the love of a dream"⁹ Saladin's heart desired to go to London, become British, find a wife, and have a child. Moreover, he wanted to be a real British citizen by changing his name, his appearance, and his thoughts. He assumes a career as a voice-over artist, aimed at subsuming his Indian identity. He is effective in training his tongue not to have the Bombay accent, but he is not satisfied. He is aware that he can never fit into British society and pretend to be like the natives. The incomplete and unsuccessful transition is traumatic since he makes the best efforts to ensure he fits in society. The cultural identity crisis he faces is evident to post-colonialism as many colonies

⁷. Rushdie,180.

⁸. Sarah Ilott, "Introduction: Remapping Boundaries—Postcolonial Britain and Literary/Cinematic Genres." *New Postcolonial British Genres*. (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015): 8.

⁹. Rushdie, 250.

aimed at acting and behaving like the colonial masters since they were viewed as superior. It is an element that had a negative impact on the cultural identity of the people.

Gibreel experiences a cultural identity crisis when he is adopted in a powerful family that shapes his future career. He is a lead actor in Bollywood films and plays roles related to Hindu gods. "It was part of the magic of his great persona that he succeeded in crossing religious boundaries without giving offense"¹⁰. He lives a famous life as people know him from the films and he attains the status of the characters he portrays in the films. The life of a celebrity and public life has an impact on his identity. For instance, he eats pork, which is forbidden in his culture. "-he was gobbling down the vast amount of forbidden pork in a Bombay restaurant as a sign of his apostasy, had seems to signal the beginning of a new life for him"¹¹ He rebels against his Muslim heritage, which makes him reject his career and life as well as his love for the Indian girl, Rehka. He later begins a relationship with Alleluia Cone a British girl, who convinces him to make a journey to England. Based on the turn of events, it is clear that Gibreel experiences a cultural identity crisis. Fame makes him go against the Muslim culture of restricting eating pork¹². It is an aspect that has an impact on determining his identity as an individual. He experiences a series of epic nightmares in a form that frightens him with startling realism. Rushdie uses the character to show how individuals tend to lose their cultural identity and the effects it has on their well-being. In the case of Gibreel, he experiences nightmares that show him the reality of rejecting his culture. The journey to England is aimed at trying to find a culture that would resonate with his actions. However, the series of dreams act as an indication that despite moving from India, his native culture is

¹⁰. Rushdie,16.

¹¹ . Rushdie, 85.

¹². Rushdie, 86.

always part of him and defines who he is. This unwillingness to accept the culture affects him and he develops schizophrenia which eventually leads him at the end to commit suicide.

The post-colonial period is characterized by immense xenophobic and racist ideologies that are advanced by the stereotype individuals have about other cultures. Gibreel and Chamcha experience hate and xenophobic attacks in England as a result of the narrow view on nationalism. The country only recognizes Anglo-Saxons as the only British nationals and the immigrants a threat to the country's nationalism. It is an aspect that has a negative effect on the way immigrants relate to Britons in the country. As Vijay Misra states, "The migrant living here and elsewhere would find it difficult to fit into, say, Margaret Thatcher's imperious definition of a Briton during the Falklands War"¹³. Margaret Thatcher's England was characterized by the exclusivist and ethnocentric concept of national identity. The main focus of Thatcher was to ensure there is hegemony in British society and have an assault in the local democracy. The imagined communities were mostly the diaspora that was the victims of oppressive and discriminatory situations. The post-colonial British society was characterized by the view of superiority and, as a result, saw other cultures as inferior. Individuals that immigrated to England were not accorded the same status as the nationals. As Citrin and Sides point out "A social identity originates in the act of self-categorization as a group member; the individual answers the "who am I?" question by naming a subset of people"¹⁴.

¹³. Vijay Misra, "Post-Colonial Different: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie". *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (1995): 23.

¹⁴. Jack Citrin, and John Sides, "More than nationals: How identity choice matters in the new Europe." *Transnational identities: Becoming European in the EU*, (2004): 165.

The differences in the national identity were as a result of an increase in the oppressive and discrimination elements that were experienced during the colonial period. The British government still had the mentality that the people were subjected to colonial rule, which had a negative impact on the identities of the immigrants. Since most of the immigrants wanted to be part of England's national identity, they found themselves in a crisis on whether to deny their identity. It is based on such an aspect that Chamcha is focused on engaging in a career that would make him blend into the British culture easily. Such is an indication of the cultural identity crisis of the immigrants that was caused by the oppressive tendencies during the colonial period. The superiority complex is evident in British society, and it affects the manner immigrants perceive their native culture.

The furthering of the diaspora challenges in fitting in the society is evident through the institutions in a country. The post-colonial period was characterized by the belief that the colonizers were superior human beings, and their culture was an epitome of civilization as opposed to those from other countries. It is an aspect that had a negative impact on the cultural identity of the individuals that were from other countries living in Britain. In most cases, individuals tried to be part of society by acquiring a nationality and learning the basic and complex cultural identities that will make them part of society. However, institutions were against the blending of other cultures into British society. For instance, Chamcha is a victim of police brutality because he is different from the Britain nationals. He is racially abused by the police after the government mistakenly identifies him as an illegal immigrant. "you've got to believe me, I'm a British, he was saying, with right of abode, too, but when he couldn't produce a passport or any other identifying document they began to weep with mirth, the tears streaming down even the blank faces of the plainclothesmen from the immigration

service"¹⁵ The description of the position of Chamcha as he is beaten up by the police is an indication of the challenges of foreigners when being confronted by the government institutions. Rushdie states, "he crouched down in his little world trying to make himself smaller than smaller in the hope that he might eventually disappear altogether, and so regain his freedom"¹⁶. The immigration officers view his actions as common for a foreigner. The officer tells Chamcha, "you're all the same. Can't expect animals to observe civilized standards"¹⁷. The sentiments are discriminatory and are an indication of the way foreigners are viewed in British society. Shailja Sharma states, "Despite Chamcha having a British nationality, he is viewed as the same as other immigrants"¹⁸. He could experience cultural identity since on one hand, he is a native Indian, and on the other, he has British nationality. Being described as others, yet, he is a citizen, is a depiction of racial discrimination that individuals from other cultures in the diaspora are likely to face, and it can impact their cultural identity.

Besides, Rushdie intentionally selects his traditional magic realism to criticize the racial status of an immigrant in England. The fact that Rushdie argues against the Commonwealth of immigrants' law was issued in 1981 by Margaret Thatcher and was subject to controlling immigrants, especially people who were not holding British passports. He depicts the experiences of a newcomer in England and how living conditions have affected them. Rushdie's application of magic realism techniques explores this subject at

length in the novel as the plot unfolds. Rushdie alleged Britain was a racist country through his portrayal of unfair immigration laws. Several conservative immigration laws were passed around the time of the publication of the first edition of the *Satanic Verses*. Moreover, the number of refugees not being accepted by the British government and the hostility towards immigrants from the residents of London increased significantly at the same time¹⁹. There were many hate and racial differences concerning immigrants in London at that time. These incidences explain the experiences of Saladin and Gibreel in London in Rushdie's novel. Indeed, Saladin as an immigrant wanted to be treated no more than a British person with more respect and more humanity, since he was a positive person seeking a new life in England. He thought his embrace of the life of England would bring equality, but later the treatment that he received from the government turned him into a symbol of immigrant frustration.

Furthermore, hybridity is experienced in society when there is the construction of new identities that are not the same as those of the natives. Rushdie is keen to identify ways in which the society in the post-colonial era led to a significant change in cultural identities²⁰. The dominance of the White culture is one of the main reasons that led to the different constructed identities of the colored immigrant communities. As Chamcha experiences in his thoughts, there are many people in the diaspora that have constructed new identities. As he states he sees "glimpses beings he could have never imagined, men and women who are partially plants, or giant insects, or even on occasions, built partly of bricks and stones,

¹⁵ . Rushdie, 140.

¹⁶. Rushdie,162.

¹⁷. Rushdie,159.

¹⁸. Shailja Sharma, "Salman Rushdie: The Ambivalence of migrancy. (Critical Essay)." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 47, no. 4 (December 22, 2001): 599.

¹⁹. Cristina Emanuela Dascalu, *Imaginary homelands of writers in exile: Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and VS Naipaul*. (Cambria Press, 2007): 34.

²⁰. Jannik Eikenaar, *The Im (Proper) Name of Salman Rushdie: Hybridity, Migrancy, and the Rushdie Persona*. (University of British Columbia, 2015): 135.

there are men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with a neck as long as any giraffe"²¹. The individuals he describes are from the immigrant community, and they were subjected to various identity formation. It is an aspect that depicts the crisis they face in the construction of their cultural identity that is affected by the new surroundings. Being in another country has a negative impact on the way their identity is constructed, and it influences the way they view themselves. They are forced to create new identities, which is a hybrid of their native culture and that of the superior society²². The main reason for the use of such an approach is to ensure the immigrants fit in society, and as a result, they are subjected to less discrimination from society. It is also a way of ensuring they blend in the civilization that colonial powers were believed to be ahead of the cultures of the colonies. The same aspects were evident in the post-colonial period.

Furthermore, one of the common challenges that the individuals living in the diaspora face is the creation of identity by the dominant society. Rushdie uses the characters to describe how diasporic communities lose their identity as a result of the creation of new identities by the British. The major inequality experienced in the community is that the British give the immigrants the identities they fancy. In a conversation that Chamcha had with immigrants in his imagination, he seeks to understand the formation of identities. "But how do they do it?" Chamcha wanted to know. "They describe us," the other whispered solemnly. "That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct"²³. Since identity is created by

the dominant culture, the immigrants become what they do not wish to be. It is one of the main causes of an identity crisis, and it impacts the outlook of individuals on their identity²⁴. In some cases, the immigrant cultures are stereotypes significantly, which has a negative impact on the manner they view their native culture. It is critical to note that most people in the diaspora face similar conditions. The dominant culture defines who they are and state how they are supposed to react to various situations in the society. It is an aspect that has a negative impact on the way the dominant culture and the immigrants relate. In the post-colonial era, it is evident that there is some form of colonialism of culture²⁵. The immigrants are subjected to the way other people view them, which is not a good indication of freedom. It shows that countries such as Britain believe they should have control over individuals living as diasporas.

The characters in the novel are affected significantly by cultural disorientation, which is a major cause of a crisis. The diaspora subjects are forced to mimic the culture of the dominant culture. It is a critical show of how hybridity works in determining the cultural identity of the immigrants. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin states that hybridity occurs, "in the post-colonial societies because of the conscious moments related to cultural suppression" they further reiterated that, "such suppressions occur as a result of the colonial powers invading and consolidating the political and economic control in which they force the indigenous to assimilate to the new patterns"

²¹. Rushdie,171.

²². Leslie Nierste, From *Cultural Purism to Cultural Pluralism: Salman Rushdie and the hybrid*. Diss. (Appalachian State University, 2010): 20.

²³. Rushdie,168.

²⁴. Janice Ho, "The Satanic Verses and the Politics of Extremity." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 44. No. 2. (Duke University Press, 2011): 39.

²⁵. Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*. (University of Michigan Press, 2007): 21.

²⁶. The clash of cultures is evident and has a major impact on the way immigrants are viewed in the dominant society. The main reason for mimicking the dominant culture is to have a superior social position. In most cases, it makes the subjects to have a reproachful attitude towards the Indian culture. Chamcha nearly hates everything that is Indian due to the way he is forced to engage in the culture of the Englishmen. His main aim is to be fully incorporated in English society, which would mean he would abandon some of his native cultural practices. Hybridity is experienced in the use of the language of the native society. As Michiel Verspaandonk defines hybridity, "Hybridity is a prevalent concept in contemporary post-colonial discourse and is mostly concerned with the place of the post-colonial migrant in the West but can also refer to the encounter between two or multiple cultures in (formerly) colonized areas"²⁷. The use of the English language is one of the ways he seeks to be assimilated into the culture of Britons. He ensures he speaks like the English people, which is a strategy that is aimed at ensuring he is accepted in the culture. In the post-colonial society, the dominating cultures have influenced immigrants to leave their language and learn that of their society. It is a characteristic that has proved the extent of cultural erosion that individuals in the diaspora face in their daily lives. As Gora states to Chamcha as, "an Indian-born professional mimic, a man of a thousand voices, who in private life has remade himself as an Englishman- accent, bowler hat, member of the Garrick club"²⁸. The extent Chamcha is

concerned about living like an Englishman is clear that the dominant culture requires the immigrant to mimic their culture. It is a strategy that aims at showing the post-colonialism; the colonial powers have a significant influence and are superior to other societies.

Rushdie creates Gibreel as a hybrid character to indicate the possibility of an individual to assume various roles that are not linked to their culture. He is a Muslim in largely Hindu society. Therefore, he is assimilated into the Hindu culture, which makes him act in the roles of Hindu gods. It is clear that being part of the Hindu society has had an impact on his religion. Since he feels part of the Hindu community, he eats pork, which is against the religious beliefs of Islam. The change in practice has a negative effect on the manner he relates to his beliefs. As Rushdie states, "Ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be. But he felt nothing, nothing, nothing, and then one day, he found that he no longer needed there to be anything to feel...And to prove to himself the non-existence of God, he now stood in the dining hall of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face"²⁹. Gibreel begins the existence as a hybrid individual when he plays roles that cross the rigid cultural and religious boundaries. It is an aspect that helps him have a better understanding of the roles he plays³⁰. Moreover, cultural hybridity is evident in the life of Chamcha. When he is rejected by the host culture after trying hard to be assimilated, he realizes the need to embrace his culture. It is after the realization that he can recognize his real self and as a result start living a happy life. He finds refuge in the people he had rejected. Gibreel and Chamcha are effective characters that clearly indicate the call for hybridity in the novel.

²⁶. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. (London; Routledge, 1995), 137.

²⁷. Michiel Verspaandonk, *A Dialogue Between Cultures-The The Depiction of the Orient and the Oriental in Two Works by Salman Rushdie*. MS thesis. (2010): 16.

²⁸. Rushdie, 87.

²⁹. Rushdie, 30.

³⁰. Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. ed. *The Salman Rushdie Controversy in Interreligious Perspectives*. (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990): 5.

In conclusion, the novel *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie effectively describe the post-colonial concept of hybridity and cultural identity. The concept of hybridity focuses on integrating different cultures and values to attain a better version that can accommodate all cultural diversities and differences whereas Cultural identity is crucial in understanding and unifying people from different and unique cultural differences. In *satanic verses*, Rushdie highlights all these concepts through his two characters, Gibreel and Chamcha. Gibreel begins by singing a song that describes an attire from different cultures. Rushdie uses symbolism as a way of describing the beauty of the hybridity of cultures. It describes that individual can move to another country and adapt to the cultural aspects but at the same time not lose their native identity. Rushdie believes that combining different elements of cultures is a remedy to the cultural identity crisis that individuals face when they are in the diaspora. The characters are faced with a dilemma of cultural disorientation in the diaspora. The dominant society determines the cultural identity formations they are supposed to assume. Chamcha is a representation of an individual that focuses on fitting in the English culture. He tries to fit through his career and relationship but in the end, he feels he is not part of the culture. Moreover, they are forced to mimic the culture of the dominant society, which has a negative impact on their native identity. They use the English language in all communication and also, they try to behave like the natives. Such aspects make them have a hard time in determining their actual identity since they are more focused on being like the English natives. Rushdie emphasizes cultural hybridity as the solution to creating a new outlook on cultural identity. It is evident that following the culture of the dominant society and denouncing one's native culture does not help in making one accepted in the culture. Consequently, individuals living in the diaspora should maintain their native culture and mimic some of the practices from the dominant society for survival.

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