

SATANIC VERSIONS

*Salman Rushdie has played fast and loose with history and popular culture as much as religion, with Thatcher's England and life in post-colonial Bombay as much as any middle-Eastern state. John Leonard reads *The Satanic Verses*.*

Headlines kept getting in the way of this article. In Pakistan, reactionary nuts are using Salman Rushdie - and the dead bodies of some true believers - to destabilise Benazir Bhutto's government. In Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, with Rocks in his Dome, has put out a \$5.2 million contract on the novelist.

In South Africa and Saudi Arabia, *The Satanic Verses* is banned. For a couple of minutes, let's try to see the book through the bonfires of its burning.

As much as Islam, Salman Rushdie blasphemes Thatcherism. He's unkind, too, to V.S. Naipaul. "Pitting levity against gravity," altogether impious. *The Satanic Verses* is one of those go-for-broke "metafictions" - a grand narrative and a Monty Python send-up of history, religion and popular culture; Hindu cyclic and Moslem dualistic; post-colonial identity crisis and modernist pastiche; Bombay bombast and stiff-upper-liposuction; babu baby-talk and ad agency neologism; cinema gossip, elephant masks, pop jingles, lousy puns, kinky sex and *Schadenfreude*; a sort of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* in Doris Lessing's *The Fair-Gated City* - from which the sly-boots Author-God tip-and-twinkletoes away with a cannibal grin. "Who am I?" he asks us. "Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?"

As we shall see, he's disingenuous.

And already, like the Mojtabais and Mukherjees, I've made the novel sound as daunting as the kipper that the poor displaced protagonist Chamcha has to face, so many miles from home, at his first appalling public-schoolboy breakfast: "England was a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones, and nobody would ever tell him how to eat it." How, indeed?

Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta were both born in Bombay; they are equally inauthentic. Chamcha leaves the "vulgarity" of Bombay for the "poise and moderation" of England, where he eats kippers, marries the blond and well-bred Pamela, co-hosts a popular children's TV program called *The Aliens Show* and turns himself into the Man of a Thousand Voice-Overs: "If you wanted to know how your ketchup bottle should talk in its television commercial, if you were unsure as to the ideal voice for your packet of garlic-flavoured crisps, he was your very man. He made carpets speak in warehouse advertisements, he did celebrity impersonations, baked beans, frozen peas. On the radio he could convince an audience that he was Russian, Chinese, Sicilian, the President of the United States." From Pamela he wants a child, but can't have one. He is a mimic man.

Gibreel stays home to star on the big Indian screen, and in various Bombay bedrooms. When he isn't pretending to be Hanuman the monkey king "in

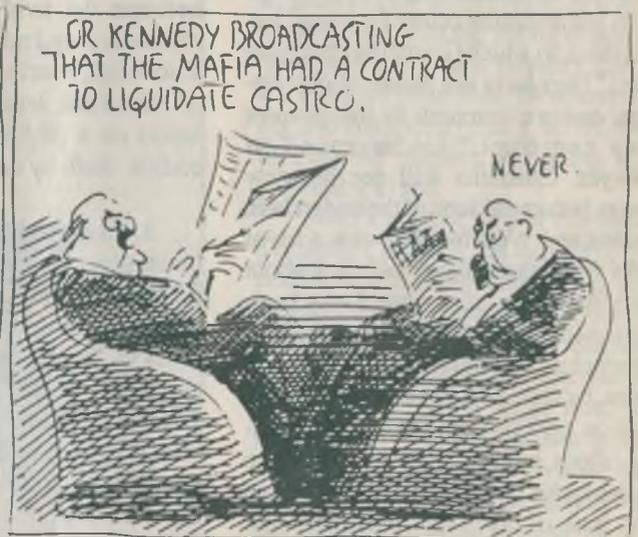
a sequence of adventure movies that owed more to a certain cheap television series emanating from Hong Kong than it did to the Ramayana," he incarnates "with absolute conviction, the countless deities of the subcontinent in the popular genre move is known as 'theologicals'... Blueskinned as Krishna he danced, flute in hand, among the beauteous gopis and their udder-heavy cows; with upturned palms, serene, he meditated upon humanity's suffering beneath a studio-rickety bodhi-tree." Recovering from a mysterious Christ-like haemorrhage, he will fall in love with the Everest-climbing ice queen Alleluia Cone, and lose his faith.

Instead of kippers, Gibreel eats "the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism". He is an impostor.

Now, then: Chamcha and Gibreel, the mimic man and the impostor, are on their way from Bombay to "Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville" - better known as "Proper London, capital of Vilayet" - when their jumbo jet, the Bostan, is skyjacked by Sikh terrorists and blown up in mid-air, at 29,002 feet. This unlikely pair of pretenders, in a parable of the migration of peoples and souls, drop from a "Himalayan height" down "the hole that went to Wonderland", through "a succession of cloudforms, ceaselessly metamorphosing, gods into bulls, women into spiders, men into wolves. Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon

The Rushdie Affair

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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.

Are they "just two brown men, falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves"? Or are they fallen angels "halfway between Allahgod and homosap ... daring to ask forbidden things: antiquations"?

Chamcha and Gibreel land in a swamp in Sussex presided over by a crazy woman. And Chamcha has turned into a goat. He may also be the devil, Shaitan. But what he looks like to white England - with his horns, hooves and tail - is Everywog. As a manticore explains to him on the night of his escape from the detention centre for illegal immigrants, to which Gibreel has betrayed him, "They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct." Underground in Vilayet, Chamcha will see his new image become an icon of the underclass. Asians and West Indians, with a lot of help from the police, will riot about race. Although, after some funny business with waxworks in a nightclub, Chamcha will metamorphose once more, by rage, into Shakespeare's Iago, he won't really learn anything interesting about himself until he returns to Bombay for the death of his father and the bed of an old girlfriend, the opinionated Zeeny Vakil.

This is overmuch symbolic baggage for any one character to carry around, but it's nothing compared to the burdens of Gibreel. Gibreel acquires a halo. He may be the Archangel Gabriel, through whom God posted messages to the Prophet. On the other hand, he behaves more like Azrael, the exterminating "agent of God's wrath", come to burn down Proper London. On the third hand, having played so many gods in the low-budget "theologicals", maybe he's just crazy. He has terrible dreams: "The universe of his nightmares had begun to leak into his waking life, and if he was not careful he would never manage to begin again, to be reborn with her, through her, Alleluia, who had seen the roof of the world." These bad dreams are what got

Rushdie into deep Shiite:

1. In the ancient sand-city of Jahilia, a Mohammed-like businessman/prophet named Mahound seems to be making up his messages from God - or Gabriel, or Shaitan - to suit his political convenience in a hairshirt-pulling fight with the local matriarchal deities Uzza, Manat and Al-Lat. Even these "satanic verses" are fiddled with, whimsically, by his scribe. Meanwhile, in the local brothel, the girls take the names of Mahound's many wives, to spice up their profane business.

2. In the semi-modern Titlipur, in the shade of a banyan tree so immense that "the growth of tree into village and village into tree had become so intricate that it was impossible to differentiate between the two", the beautiful, orphaned and epileptic Ayesha also hears voices and, wearing nothing but a cloud of butterflies, leads the credulous villagers on a pilgrimage to Mecca that ends in death by drowning.

3. In a modern imperial city, an Imam plots the overthrow of a Middle Eastern state run by a Westernised and secular-minded empress, whom he accuses of "sexual relations with lizards" and whom he confuses with a mother-goddess: "History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies - progress, science, rights - against which the Imam has set his face. History is a deviation from the Path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Al-Lah finished his revelation to Mahound." And: "Burn the books and trust the Book; shred the papers and hear the Word." And, after the revolution: "Now every clock in the capital city of Desh begins to chime, and goes on unceasingly, beyond twelve, beyond twentyfour, beyond one thousand and one, announcing the end of Time, the hour that is beyond measuring, the hour of the exile's return, of the victory of water over wine, of the commencement of the Untime of the Imam."

Well, "Mahound" was a term of contempt used by the Crusaders and is

always a satanic figure. The Jahilia brothel, a "tent of Black Stone called The Curtain", sounds a lot like Ka'aba, regarded by the faithful as the only consecrated spot on earth. And the scribe who fiddles in the desert with the text of the Koran is "a bum from Persia" whose name - surprise, surprise! - is Salman. And while the story of Ayesha, her butterflies and her lemming-like Exodus to Jonestown may derive from the Sufis and their moths, Ayesha was also the historical Mohammed's favourite wife. And she turns up yet again in the Imam dream, as the name of the despised Empress. The Imam, of course, is Khomeini, never notorious for his sense of humour.

Rushdie may say now whatever he wants to about "the fictional dream(s) of a fictional character, an Indian movie star, and one who is losing his mind at that". He can say that his book "isn't actually about Islam"; it's about, instead, "migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death". To Madhu Jain in the *India Today* of September 15: "Actually, one of my major themes is religion and fanaticism. I have talked about (Islam, which) I know the most about." To Shrabani Basu in the September 18 edition of *Sunday*: "It is a serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person ... Besides, Mohammed is a very interesting figure. He's the only prophet who exists even remotely inside history."

I'm not saying that for this impudence Rushdie deserves Khomeini's eleventh-century sort of criticism by assassination. I am saying he has played fast and loose. ("Writers and whores", observes his own Mahound: "I see no difference here.") Having said that, let me add I'm sorry that so much attention's been paid to less than a third of the novel and so little to the rest of it, which has brilliant things to say about the hatred of women in history; the triumph of the machinery of images - in movies, television and advertising - over ancient myth, classical literature and political science; the displacement and deracination of the modern in intelligence in a world of permanent migration and mindless hybridising; the loss of self and death of love in a time without decency or roots; wog-bashing in the racist theocracy of the Mad



Rushdie on the hot seat.

Thatcher.

Talk about your Imams. Listen to this, from one of the New Men, an ad exec:

Maggie the Bitch ... She's radical all right. What she wants - what she actually thinks she can fucking *achieve* - is literally to invent a whole goddam new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really *want* and who know that, with her, they can bloody well *get*. Nobody's ever tried to replace a whole fucking *class* before, and the amazing thing is she might just do it if they don't get her first. The old class. The dead men ... And it's not just the businessmen. The intellectuals, too. Out with the whole faggoty crew. In with the hungry guys with the wrong education. New professors, new painters, the lot. It's a bloody revolution. Newness coming into this country that's stuffed full of fucking old *corpses*. It's going to be something to see.

Who's left out of this revolution? Certainly Chamcha. He may have married Pamela because of her voice, "composed of tweeds, headscarves, summer pudding, hockey-sticks, thatched houses, saddle-soap, house parties, nuns, family pews, large dogs and philistinism"; because, as she says, "I was bloody Britannia. Warm beer, mince pies, commonsense and me." But, having fallen from the sky and found his brown face, Chamcha's welcome only in Asian ghettos like Brickhall High Street, in cafes like the Shaandaar, among the pista barfi and jalebis, the challoo chai and vegetable samosas. "What's a pachy?" asks Alleluia Cone, herself the daughter of death-camp survivors. A news vendor tells her: "A brown Jew".

Also left out will be Mimi Mamoulian, Chamcha's partner in mimicry and impersonation: "I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with post-modernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a 'flattened' world. When I become the voice of a bottle of bubble bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly, understanding what I'm doing and why." Owing to "upheavals of Armenian-Jewish

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history', Mimi has an "excessive need for rooting". She owns "a Norfolk vicarage, a farmhouse in Normandy, a Tuscan bell-tower, a sea-coast in Bohemia. There will be, nevertheless, no place for Mimi to hide.

Nor for Alleluia: her father kills himself, like Primo Levi: "Why does a survivor of the camps live forty years and then complete the job the monsters didn't get done? Does great evil eventually triumph, no matter how strenuously it is resisted? Does it leave a sliver of ice in the blood, working its way through until it hits the heart? Or, worse: can a man's death be incompatible with his life?" Alleluia has read "that as part of their natural processes of combustion, the stars in the skies crushed carbon into diamonds. The idea of the stars raining diamonds into the void: that sounded like a miracle". It is toward this miracle that she climbs, as high up as her lover, Gibreel, falls, and she can't hide there, either.

What's going on? History is out of control, and metamorphosis, too. We've left home once too often. Instead of rising out of the ashes like a phoenix or resurrecting like a Christ, we are reborn, devolved, in to parody, bloody farce, false consciousness, bad faith. Like Gibreel, our nightmares leak. Like Chamcha, we are on the run. What we see on the streets of Jahilia the night Mahmoud prevails are "men and women in the guise of eagles, jackals, horses, gryphons, salamanders, warthogs, rocs."

Or in London the night the goat-Chamcha escapes from Immigration: "men and women who were also partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion, built partly of brick or stone; there were men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with necks as long as any giraffe. The monsters ran quickly, silently, to the edge of the ... compound, where the manticore and other sharp-toothed mutants were waiting by the large holes they had bitten into the fabric of the containing fence."

Talk about alienation! After all of Rushdie's cultural anthropology and depth psychology, comparative religion and apocalyptic politics, World Lit-looting and show-biz pratfall - his razzle-dazzle with the likes of Lucretius, Ovid, Shakespeare, Joyce, Beckett, Eliot, Nabokov; Bentham and Gramsci,

Dickens and Naipaul, William Blake and Omar Khayyam, Henry James and Frantz Fanon, *Ubu Roi* and *The Wizard of Oz*, *Dr. Strangelove* and Jerry della Femina - we end up, all of us, hungry for meaning, demanding to be made new, condemned instead, like Chamcha, to *The Aliens Show*.

We've come all this way in as much of a mess as *The Satanic Verses* itself, and I haven't told you anything about the sex and violence, or what you probably want to know about Pamela and Alleluia and Chamcha's father and Gibreel's producer, not to mention Dr.

Rushdie lost control of his novel

Uhuru Simba and Jumpy Joshi and the Granny Ripper and the race riot and the *Othello* sub-plot and the female Sikh terrorist and the satirical poet Baal. Nor do I intend to. Somewhere along the line, maybe in "the secret chamber of the clavichords", Rushdie lost control of his novel the way I've lost control of this article. *The Satanic Verses* lacks the ravaging power, the great gulp of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. It bites off the heads of its characters instead of digesting their essences. It has far too much on its troubled mind to make a symphonic noise out of so many discords. Nevertheless, of course, in its huge, dishevelment, its *Leaves of Grass* lurchings and scourges, whistles and vapours, belly laughs and belly-flops, it is infinitely more interesting than those hundreds of neat little novels we have to read between Rushdies.

Is there a way out of his cycles that devolve into lesser selves, meaner societies and deathward-spinning metaphysical systems? One suggestion, though I'm not sure how seriously it's intended, shows up in a book by Zeeny Vakil, Chamcha's Bombay art critic girlfriend (and the most interesting and least-developed character in the novel): *The Only Good Indian* lambastes "the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes

seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?" It's Zeeny who tells Chamcha to get real: "We're right in front of you. You should try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time. Try and embrace this city, as it is, not some childhood memory that makes you both nostalgic and sick."

But this seems far too straightforward for metafiction. I'm not positive but I think Rushdie is proposing something more botanical. When, in Gibreel's dream of Mecca and drowning, the Titlipur villagers leave their mothering banyan tree, they perish. Then there is, for Chamcha, "the tree of his own life", the walnut tree his father plan ted "with his own hands on the day of the coming of the son". Chamcha explains this tree to Zeeny: "Your birth-tree is a financial investment of a sort. When a child comes of age, the grown walnut is comparable to a matured insurance policy; it's a valuable tree, it can be sold, to pay for weddings, or a start in life. The adult chops down his childhood to help his grown-up self. The unsentimentality is appealing, don't you think?" As usual, Chamcha's missed the point. For his father, that tree was where his son's soul lived while the boy himself was far away, pursuing his unrequited love affair with England. Many pages later, Chamcha will watch a television program on gardening, and witness what's called a "chimeran graft", in which two trees - mulberry? laburnum? broom? - are bred into one:

a chimera with roots, firmly planted in and growing vigorously out of a piece of English earth: a tree, he thought, capable of taking the metaphoric place of the one his father had chopped down in a distant garden in another, incompatible world. If such a tree were possible, then so was he: he, too, could cohere, send down roots, survive. Amid all the televisual images of hybrid tragedies - the uselessness of mermen, the failures of plastic surgery, the esperanto-like vacuity of much modern art, the Coca-Colonisation of the planet - he was given this one gift. spera-Esperanto-like vacuity of much modern art, the Coca-Colonisation of the planet - he was given this one gift.

For this, they want to kill him.

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