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History and Myth in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

Daniela Carstea[1]

Abstract:

Two of the most conspicuous and also widely discussed directions in reading Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* are the historical and the mythical components. Some critics maintain that *The Satanic Verses* is, allegedly, a revisioning of the foundation myth of Islam. Rushdie himself, in a commentary on the novel, acknowledged that it is based on extensive historical research. Here we may bring the discussion onto a more theoretical ground and consider the status of the fictional text. What is the position of the referents as regards fiction? The strongly sustained assumption is that the fictional worlds, created by fictional worlds, do not have referents, nothing can really be interpreted in a literal way. So, *The Satanic Verses* is only partly historical. The direction upon which I shall dwell is the mythical one. And here, *The Satanic Verses* could be read as "a masterful evocation of a male midlife crisis", imbued with archetypal patterns, in magical realist terms.

Keywords: magical realism; metamorphosis; hybridity; postmodern; Salman Rushdie.

Two of the most conspicuous and also widely discussed directions in reading Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* are the historical and the mythical components. Some critics maintain that *The Satanic Verses* is, allegedly, a revisioning of the foundation myth of Islam. Rushdie himself, in a commentary on the novel, acknowledged that it is based on extensive historical research and yet: "Jahilia is and is not Mecca. Likewise, the religion of Submission is and is not Islam. Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical." (Rushdie, 2001: 8) In other words, we can't really follow the way of reading that is common in the *roman-à-clef*.

Margareta Petersson mentions, however, that Muslims prefer to put the novel into a Western tradition of hostility to Islam, where Rushdie is said to have opened the heart of Islam from within and invited the whole world to laugh. And here we may bring the discussion on to a more theoretical ground and consider the status of the fictional text. What is the position of the referents as regards fiction? The strongly sustained assumption is that the fictional worlds, created by fictional worlds, do not have referents, nothing can really be interpreted in a literal way. So, *The Satanic Verses* is only partly historical.

The other direction, upon which I shall dwell lengthily, is the mythical one. And here, *The Satanic Verses* could be read as "a masterful evocation of a male midlife crisis", imbued with archetypal patterns, in magical realist terms. (Petersson, 2016: 17)

Structurally, the novel is made up of three stories. The story of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta constitutes the outer narrative. It also contains two recurring embedded narratives embedded narratives – which formally are subordinated to the outer narrative, since they are Gibreel's dreams. In the *first dream* sequence, placed in seventeenth century Jahilia the prophet Mahound, the poet Baal and the scribe Salman the Persian appear. Gibreel dreams in the second inserted story about the contemporary village girl Ayesha, who persuades the people in her village to walk to the sea, which will open, she promises, so that they will reach Mecca dry-shod. Now, in order to explain Rushdie's novel, contexts such as the mythical and the alchemical one will prove very helpful, because they reveal an overarching, universal dimension in Rushdie's novel.

And for a yet improved framework of analysis, which will contribute to a refined comprehension of the novel, I advance the hypothesis that *The Satanic Verses* is an instantiation of magical realist fiction. According to Faris' definition of magical realism, this "narrative mode" combines "realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed." (*Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction*, 2015: 29)

[1] Lecturer PhD, English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages and literatures, University of Bucharest, Romania; daniela.carstea@lls.unibuc.ro; +40723564365.

The fact that the text contains an "irreducible element" of magic, which exists symbiotically with realism, is, otherwise, one of the primary characteristics of magical realist fiction. Alongside the one mentioned, another trait finds ample exemplification in Rushdie's novel, namely the presence of metamorphoses, which embody in the realm of organisms "a collision of two different worlds, of two different ontological modes" even. (Smale, 2004: 36)

In other words, we are witnessing a "manifestation of the collapse between words and the world." Language can work magic with metaphors, which gain materiality when inner states are projected outward, but the entity thus created resists referentiality, which is only natural.

Such fictional referents resistant to referentiality will populate in extenso the mytho-poetic world of *The Satanic Verses*. And since interpreting a literary text implies trying to discern the writer's own instructions through his choice of narrative units, I will try to dismantle, for analysis and isolate the most conspicuous themes, which seem to be: that of the flight and magical descent through the air, which bears strong likings to, for instance, Alice's fall into Wonderland, or the fall in *Finnegan's Wake*, or Icarus' fall into the Aegean Sea and which may expose a symbol of the Eternal Youth's (in Jungian terminology, *Puer Aeternus*) fortunate fall into life; and the second one, that of the metamorphosis: Saladin Chamcha's metamorphosis into a devil, complete with hooves and horns, underpinned by the Jungian archetype of the *shadow*.

In order to render familiar the archetype of the *Puer Aeternus*, we would have to say that, for the man with a "high flying", *puer* personality, freedom comes to an abrupt end through a fall into "life" proper, crude and cruel, which may turn out to be, at the fictional level, a fortunate fall or a tragic crash. In our case, Gibreel (=Gabriel) Farishta (= Angel), a Bombay film star tumbles from the sky, singing a song: "to be born again, first you have to die" (Rushdie, 2008: 3), accompanied by Saladin Chamcha, a resettled native of Bombay who passionately identifies with English culture, has married Pamela, an English aristocrat, and works in London as a radio actor. Both of them are survivors of the terrorist explosion that destroyed the plane named Bostan – one of the gardens of paradise in Islam – which could be read as a foreshadowing of the Jungian archetype of the adult struggle with the paradise of childhood. The two are plunging "like bundles dropped by the careless open-beaked stork" and we have here the theme of the fall as a precursor of rebirth: rebirth at midlife, given that Gibreel is "within a week of his fortieth birthday" and Chamcha is of the same age. (Rushdie, 2008: 4, 11)

Gibreel Farishta amply proves to be a "high flyer": he has an unnerving desire to get as high as possible, from the earth, from ordinary life. A desire nurtured even to a higher degree by his female counterpart, Alleluia Cone, a female mountaineer who has conquered the Everest, in spite of her handicap: she was born with fallen arches. They might be read as the "physical sign of her metaphorical status as a fallen *puella*" (Faris, 2015: 274). And we could dwell even further on this level of metaphorical causes and surmise that she might have been handicapped by Gibreel's jealous love. Gilbert and Gubar, in their study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, maintain that women in fiction, deprived of their freedom, concretely acquire aching feet. (1998: 25) Eventually, Gibreel kills both her and her presumed lover in a bout of jealousy, only to kill himself, shortly afterwards. And we could speculate here another mythical reference, the death by fire(arm) of a modern Icarus: "the dangers of attempting to fly: what flaming falls, what macabre hells were reserved for such Icarus types" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1998: 307)

Gibreel seems to fit perfectly into the *puer* pattern. He ticks the large majority of the characteristics of the *puer*, one of which is the saviour or Messiah complex. And here the argument rests on Gibreel's insane misconception that he has actually come to be his namesake, the archangel Gibreel. And eventually dream becomes reality: Gibreel Farishta believes that he has turned into the archangel Gabriel in order to save the city of London from apocalyptic destruction. This delusion is deemed as a kind of a hubris, a "fatal flaw" (Rushdie, 2008: 315), given that one of the reasons for his suicide is his dread that his delusion, "paranoid schizophrenia", as it is called in the novel will never cease to plague him. The disease introduces a further link: the division theme. In Gibreel's encounter with Mahound, the latter thinks there are two of them, but Gibreel knows all the time that he is playing both parts. Also, Baal, the poet from Mahound's world feels himself divided: "It is as if I see myself standing beside myself. And I can make him, the standing one, speak; then I get up and write down his verses" (Rushdie, 2008: 385). Yet, Gibreel saves the life of Saladin Chamcha, by pulling him from a burning building. So, he is at least Saladin's angel.

Don Juanism is another trait of the *puer* that can be said to find a parallel in Gibreel. As a Bombay film star, Gibreel "had so many sexual partners that it was not uncommon for him to forget their names even before they left his room" (Rushdie, 2008: 25). And like a prototypical *puer*, he has a rich fantasy life: his reveries regarding the foundational myth of Islam account for upwards of half of the novel. For the recovering *puer*, a great therapeutic value is placed on work., according to theoreticians of archetypes and according to Jean Starobinski, who reaches the same conclusion in his book on melancholy.

And here we could mention Gibreel's reluctance to settle down to a task. The precise moment he stopped working in the movie studios of Bombay marks the beginning of his identification with the archangel. At this stage, we might attempt to overlap political commentaries onto the psychological ones. Gibreel's hallucinatory self-delusion could be tackled with, along Fanon's proposed line of argument, as "the native as an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor." (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1994: 62) And Gibreel has such an apocalyptic dream of persecutory power: "He would show them – yes! His power. – These powerless English! – Did they not think their history would return to haunt them?…Then away with all fogs. He would make this land anew. He was the archangel, Gibreel" (Rushdie, 2008: 353).

Saladin Chamcha might also be construed as the *puer* at midlife. Like Gibreel, he is himself an actor, and acting could symbolise the *puer*'s distance from life. This distance is perhaps best rendered in the novel through the metaphor of the glass skin: Saladin dreams of "a bizarre stranger, a man with a glass skin who…begged Saladin to release him from the prison of his skin." (Rushdie, 2008: 33-4) We might say, with Steven Walker, that he is imprisoned in his "postcolonial Anglophilia," so he needs to "regain contact with native culture, to free his Indian self from the English persona in which he has enclosed himself." (*Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles*, 2005: 216) So, at the end of the day, the man with the glass skin is actually him.

> Saladin was not dead, but weeping. The tears of shock freezing his face. And all his body cased in a fine skin of ice, smooth as glass, like a bad dream come true. In the miasmic semi-consciousness induced by his low body temperature he was possessed by the nightmare-fear of cracking, of seeing his blood bubbling up from the ice-breaks, of his flesh coming away with the shards. (Rushdie, 2008:131)

The cased body echoes, imagistically, the *puer*'s separation from life, and in this context the figure of the breaking of the ice can be interpreted as a symbol that forebodes Saladin's psychic renewal.

The novel even records, on two occasions, the archetypal image of the *Puer Aeternus*: Saladin has a repetitive dream about "a small boy of about five", "his imagined son" (Rushdie, 2008: 400), whom he was teaching to ride a bicycle in a city park; the proof that Saladin's dream has not just a personal, but an added collective and archetypal reference is the fact that his friend Jumpy Joshi, who has become Saladin's wife Pamela's lover after Saladin's disappearance has exactly the same dream (411). But the archetypal pattern of the *puer*, as I was saying at the beginning of the discussion, predicts and demands the evanescence of the boy in the aftermath of the midlife crisis. He is as evanescent as the dream which contains it, or, as Shakespeare would have put it: he is the "stuff dreams are made of": ephemeral.

In the novel, the fall from Bostan, a paradise that actually changes into a hell shows that the midlife fall into life can lead directly to a metamorphosis, Saladin's metamorphosis into a goatish, horned and cleft-footed devil, which finds an echo in Kafka's homologous hero in *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa.

From a Jungian perspective, Saladin's devil metamorphosis would represent symbolically a stage at which his shadow side can no longer be ignored, as I will attempt to prove henceforth. In Jungian terms, Saladin Chamcha's diabolical metamorphosis will doubtless be constructed as symbolic of his becoming aware of his shadow, meaning the repressed side of his personhood. And the encounter with the shadow, with one's personal devil, becomes a needed step on the path to self-knowledge and individuation.

Rushdie himself uses the word "shadow" at two significant junctures in the novel, although there is no indication that he intended them to be taken in the Jungian acceptation: "Watch out, Chamcha, look out for your shadow. That black fellow creeping up behind" and "his old self…a dead self, a shadow" (Rushdie, 2008: 58). Both quotations refer to Chamcha's shunned Indian identity, the identity he has rebuffed in order to become a proper Englishman, but which haunts him and follows him like a shadow.

Before embarking upon making surmises as to the "meaning" of this metamorphosis, I shall stop for an interpretation of the magical realist metamorphosis, in a dialogue between Chamcha, metamorphosed into a partially goat-like figure, and a former male model, now changed into a manticore of sorts, in the hospital ward where Chamcha is recovering from racially motivated police beating:

> The point is some of us aren't going to stand it. We're going to bust out of here before they turn us into anything worse…" "But how do they do it?" Chamcha wanted to know. "They describe us. That's all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct. (Rushdie, 2008: 168)

There is a clear statement here of the Immigrant as the Other, described and defined in terms of animalistic racist stereotypes and who undergoes, as a consequence of it, and according to what is clearly a magical realist procedure, an actual metamorphosis into phantasmagorical figures. A further reference to the immigrants apprehended as threat is also to be found in the image of a woman who incessantly gives birth to children: "marching, like conquering armies, from her womb" (Rushdie, 2008:166).

We could say that on the *societal* level, Chamcha's metamorphosis has a *positive* power: it enhances the character's self-awareness; it puts on display the badness of the immigrant Other revendicated as the power to withstand racist violence. On the *personal* level, nevertheless, it changes sign and becomes negative. Saladin's behaviour toward Gibreel, driven mad by his voice actor' talent of making phone calls pretending to be Allie's presumed lovers is purely devilish. An explanation, provided, this time in Freudian terms, would conceive of it as acting out of oedipal rage against the father, the bullying Changez, by tormenting Gibreel. So, Saladin "plays Iago to his Othello". And, furthering the argument, this "acting out" acts in a therapeutic and liberating way: Saladin vents "enough of his oedipal hatred of his father to enable him to reconcile" with Changez before he dies. (Rubinson, 2004: 90, 92)

Eventually, Saladin is brought back to his old human shape. And the de-metamorphosis, which, in this view, is organically connected to the theme of rebirth is presented as the result of decreased emotional repression, especially of hatred, rage and anger, because Saladin has become his hate literally, bodily. For instance, "during Chamcha's brief but violent outburst against Gibreel, the horns…diminished." Yet, under renewed pressure of repressed rage he grows "to a height of over eight feet, and from his nostrils there emerged smoke of two different colours, his tail was swishing angrily, his eyes were a pale but luminous red" (Rushdie, 2008: 290, 291). Whereof we infer the humanising effect of integrating the shadow into his conscious personality.

The reconciliation with his father will lead, furthermore, to a coming to terms with his once despised and rebuffed Indian self: he begins to call himself by his unanglicized, original name, Salahuddin Chamchawala, and starts "to find the sound of his full, unanglicized name pleasing for the first time in twenty years" (Rushdie, 2008: 524).

The metaphors of plants are important pawns in the configuration of the theme of rebirth. For instance, the walnut tree, planted on the day of Saladin's birth, with the strong belief that the child's soul was living in the tree is cut down by Changez, at Saladin's request: "The adult chops down his childhood to help his grown-up self" (Rushdie, 2008: 65). This metaphor is supplemented and counteracted, at the same time, by the metaphor of the chimera tree, a cross-fertilised tree, able to take root in the earth and thus survive (Saladin had seen it, accidentally, on a TV programme). The chimera, Saladin thinks, would be capable of taking the metaphorical place the walnut tree once had: "If such a tree were possible, then so was he; he, too, could cohere, send down roots, survive" (Rushdie, 2008: 406).

So, death forebodes new life. The process, which started with the *puer*'s fall, ends with Saladin's growing into a new phase of life. He returns to Zeeny, his Bombay lover, a fact which could be assimilated to a return to his cultural roots. Zeeny's remark: "now you can stop acting" triggers Saladin's feeling that a new life had started for him: "yes, this looked like the start of a new phase, in which the world would be solid and real" (Rushdie, 2008: 534). In other words, "magical metamorphoses cease after having fulfilled their psychic goals of integration and growth" (Faris, 2015: 159).

The other very helpful context for the comprehension of *The Satanic Verses* is given by the alchemical pattern, with such sub-themes as: transmutation, change and transformation, migration. Transmutation is a key word with alchemy, the art of transmutation, the attempt to get substances to transmute into each other. Saladin recalls the alchemical process: he is *mutated* firstly from the Salahuddin of childhood into Saladin and thereafter *transmuted* into a Vilayeti, a Briton (Rushdie, 2008: 37, 44). Even his way of expressing himself follows the transformation: vowels and vocabulary "transmogrify". (Rushdie, 2008: 34) This happens on the plane when, after waking from the dream with the skin-glass stranger, he feels and acts like a disempowered Englishman, for reasons explored above. The equipoise is upset and the Indian in him surfaces in the way he pronounces, or rather mispronounces English words. Also, alchemy embodies the union of opposites. *Prima materia*, again a key concept contains all opposites and polarities. Both Saladin and Gibreel represent the basic substance: they fall joined, in a Joycean way, we might say, from the exploding plane: "Gibreelsaladin farichtachamcha", their "angeldevilish" fall composed of good and evil, angel and devil.

Implicit in the transmutation theme are also *change and transformation. A* basis for the idea of transformation was the conception that all things consist of different combinations of the same four elements, earth, water, fire and air, a conception originating in Greek pre-Socratic thinking, of a monistic character. These four elements acquire an emphasised structural role in *The Satanic Verses*. As will be seen, they appear closely connected to the theme of death and rebirth, which is, otherwise, the metaphorical overlayer of the most important phases in the alchemical process. So, Gibreel and Saladin "die" and are reborn in *air* in the first chapter. The seventh chapter dwells lengthily on the destruction with death and rebirth through *fire*: the Shandar Café is burnt to the ground in the context of some anti-racial protests; Saladin attempts to save the owners who had sheltered him while he was a hideous devil-like monster, but he is trapped by a falling pole and is saved by Gibreel. Ayesha's and Mirza Saeed's deaths take place in *water* (though the end of their story is not unambiguous).

Ayesha urges Saeed to open his soul, then the sea will open as well. Possibly a rebirth occurs in the symbolic Red Sea. And, finally, Saladin's hopeful rebirth awaits him at the end in *earth*, where the chimera, transplanted to British earth, is mentioned: "Let the bulldozers come", concatenating the theme with that of regeneration.

Migration is, also a basic experience for many characters in Rushdie's novel, migration which is itself a wholly *revolutionary* process. It leads cultures to mix and change and humans to be transformed. When referring to this (im)migrating process and the (cultural) identity emerging from it, Stuart Hall coins and uses a meaningful hybrid word: "cut'n'mix" (Hall, 2002: 10). Both societies and humans die and are reborn again. So, purity and hybridity become charged conceptions in this context, in a "less dichotomic fashion". (Guran 114) Rushdie gives many examples of impure, hybrid culture, one being the figure of the devil. The theme of hybridity could be, of course, also comprehensible without reference to alchemy.

Rekha Merchant, who is Gibreel's former mistress, outlines the history of the devil. The Prophet Amos asks if God created it and Yahweh remarks, according to Deutero-Isaiah: "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil" (Rushdie, 2008: 323). So, God is here presented as the only power, an idea inherently triggering associations with Leibniz's devised theodicy, where he deals with the predicament of human mind, at a loss when trying to comprehend the possibility of evil if God, one of whose attributes is Goodness, exists.

In Gibreel's first dream about Mahound, he recounts the story of Lucifer's fall from heaven. The very existence of a fall means that the devil is not univocally evil, but partook in the good as well, back in the day. (Rubinson, 2004: 35-7) Consequently, it illustrates the hybrid theme, featuring the devil as simultaneously good and evil. Gibreel and Saladin fall angelic-devilishly connected from the plane. Gibreel was called Shaitan as a child and has a Mephistophelian lock of hair and a satanic breath. During the fall, nevertheless, he acquires a halo, "streaming from a point at the back of his head." Saladin, with his innocent cherubic face, takes over the satanic breath and develops horns, hooves and tail. Once again, evil and good are presented as closely intertwined. Consequently, the ambivalence in the character of the devil is stressed, thus becoming the foremost representative of the hybrid character.

The epigraph placed at the beginning of the novel foregrounds another distinctive feature of Satan's condition: the wandering, the impossibility for him to find a dwelling place: "Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste of air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is...without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon" (Defoe, 2005: 89). In other words, the devil would be the first migrant, and, by extension, a representation of all the migrants present in the novel.

Hybridity is well illustrated in the novel on various levels. Rushdie utilizes it to "renavigate" (Gal 42) the non-existence of purity, by giving some examples of: Mirza Saeed's house has a staircase from England, carpets from Shiraz, columns with Corinthian capitals and Venetian chandeliers; Saladin's father's house is a hybrid construct: it is approached through a gate which is a copy of Septimus Severus' Roman triumphal arch, it is built in Persian style and there are glass ballerinas from Dresden on display in the interior chambers.

The novel itself is postmodern, hybrid. Brian McHale compares the reading of a postmodern work with "zapping", i.e. channel-hopping. Zapping in *The Satanic Verses* is a mise-en-abyme of sorts, a reduced scale-model of the textual poetics of *The Satanic Verses* as a whole: "its juxtaposition and orchestration of disparate worlds, into ontological plurality" (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 2013: 25).

In the final proceedings of the analysis, some reader-response remarks. One of the passages in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was particularly eye-catching: "one could live in the world and also not live in it: to carry a brimful pitcher of water through a holiday crowd without spilling a drop, on pain of death, so that when he returned, he was unable to describe the day's festivities, having been like a blind man, seeing only the jug on his head" (Rushdie, 2008: 42). A parallel can instantly be drawn with a smaller passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*: "it was the face of a man whose ears had been covered by some god so that no other sounds be within him, but his own" (2003: 36). They might be regarded as a faithful expression of the tribulations of any migrant banned from his/her at-homeness.

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