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HYBRID MOMENTS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE SATANIC VERSES*

Hugo Ríos

"Hybrids open up the door"
Misfits

How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? (*Satanic Verses* 8) With these words, Rushdie initiates the discussion of the hybrid in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. In terms of cultural identity there is nothing absolutely new in the world: newness then, enters the world as a process of combination or in Rushdie's words as "a bit of this and a bit of that" meet and mingle; Melange, hotpotch" (*Imaginary Homelands* 394).

In his essay "In Good Faith," published in his collection *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie states that *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" (*Imaginary Homelands* 398). This is Rushdie's definition of hybrid; one he embraces in his novels. Although the theme is present throughout his work, only *The Satanic Verses* can be read as a master manual in which Rushdie inscribes his theories about the role of the hybrid in postcolonial societies.

The narrative structure of the novel is based on a series of events narrated in various forms thus forming a web of reference: dreams and film-like scenes that dissolve any straight forward attempt to read the novel. The main characters are Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha but by no means does the narrative focus exclusively on these two characters. The text effectively distributes the narrative voice and elements among several secondary characters that usurp the main story line and provide different reading and interpretations of the events. In more than one way these characters, in the best Borgesian fashion, work as mirror images of each other. Saladin and

Gibreel are also one character, the migrant, and as we will see later on, they are faces of the hybrid. Rushdie avoids the traditional good and evil dichotomy with his two characters; instead they are roles, phases of a whole being. The theme of the migrant caught between east and west is an extremely important topic in Rushdie's fiction and in *The Satanic Verses* plays a decisive role in shaping out the intricacies of the plot. Once again the figure of the author contaminates the text because Rushdie also happens to be in the same place as his characters: he is also a stranger in a strange land and perhaps the prototype for his fictional creatures.

Most of the problems that Saladin and Gibreel encounter are the result of the postcolonial condition of the immigrant. In this particular case, London is the goal, the Promised Land for these two Indian immigrants. A goal in this context should not be interpreted as a finishing line but rather as another beginning, a new and more challenging point of departure.

The novel begins with Saladin and Gibreel falling out of the sky, after the airliner that was carrying them over London airspace explodes. Layers of the fantastic cover a realist landscape in order to literalize the roughness of the descent into a foreign land, an alien landing. Another reading of the incident would see it as a more straightforward fantastic strategy employed as a metaphor of the postcolonial condition. The characters are not presented to the reader; they are rather thrown into the fictional world of the novel. This hyperbolic nature of the postcolonial is what Rawdon Wilson identifies as "the abrupt entrance of the postcolonial subjects into the imperial center" (221). The tense situation on the plane, the explosion and the fall are only metaphors of the immigration/ transmigration from one self to another and the xenophobic barriers that deny access to the real self.

Even though Rushdie's characters fall together, their difference is clearly established during the fall and also, by the different paths they choose, they are unmistakably defined. One of these paths of difference is the figure of the enigmatic Rosa Diamond, the eighty-year old woman who finds Gibreel and protects him while Saladin is taken away by the police. This old lady lives on her distant memories, visited every night by the ghost of the Battle of Hastings. The unnamed narrator mentions that she lived in Argentina with her husband, Henry Diamond, until they had to flee the country to avoid scandal. Rosa could very well be a crossroads, the encounter between past and present, between different cultures but for Gibreel she represents the mystique, the seduction of the foreigner by the imperial center.

Rosa's stories represent the fact that life-saving stories are not the exclusive property of the periphery but that the center can also use them to maintain their hegemony in place. Rosa uproots Gibreel, leading him astray from his path/story and pasting him in her own story and disrupting his identity. By taking him out of context, Rosa disseminates his social being while creating a condition of acceptance towards the new self and rejection towards his own. Gibreel does not contaminate Rosa's stories with his foreignness because her stories, set in an exotic locale, have established the role that he is set out to play. Only when Rosa dies is he free to recover his path. As a victim of Orientalism there are only limited roles for him to play and the narrator comments this situation as follows: "...in an ancient land like England there was no room for new stories...", suggesting a closed canon. His personality is struggling between what he is (immigrant) and what he represents (Hindu Deity) and the exotic roles Rosa had for him. Any attempt of Gibreel to reconstruct his self is now contaminated by his encounter with the Canon.

After his exhausting encounter with history and tradition (Rosa) Gibreel suffers a series of metamorphoses that reflect his inner turmoil and conflicts. Back in his homeland, Gibreel was a famous actor. He starred in several "theologicals." A theological is a film based on the life of Hindu deities. When the identity crisis starts, the diving line between his own self and the characters he plays become blurred.

Gibreel's sorry state is the result of his inability to transcend the gap between cultures and inhabit this space as a hybrid. Since he is not attached to any culture, he keeps bouncing between rejections, disassociated and uprooted. Surrounded by light beings, perhaps equally uprooted, equally at odds with their identity like Rekha Merchant and Alleluia Cone, he ends up committing suicide, putting an end to his struggle, finding his country in death: "...Gibreel put the barrel of the gun into his mouth; and pulled the trigger; he was free" (*Satanic Verses* 546).

Saladdin Chamcha's story is the exact opposite of Gibreel's. When he lands in England he is not so lucky as his partner-in-flight. Immigration agents pick him up as soon as he lands and he suffers endless interrogation and beatings. Like Gibreel, the instability (in this case caused by violence and rejection) triggers metamorphic states where Saladin's true self is denied and transformed. The narrator introduces these chances by employing a common magic realist technique: familiarization of the uncanny. This technique is a reversal of the strategies explained by the Russian formalists. Victor Shlovksy, in "Art as Technique," states that common objects can be defamiliarized.

Defamiliarization is “the technique to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Richter 741). As Chamcha is questioned by the police he grows horns, a huge penis, and a traditional devil-like tail. He also emanates an acrid sulfur-like smell also associated with infernal beings. In this diabolical transformation, Rushdie saturates the text with innumerable allusions and parodies. For instance, the figure of the devil is an extremely important reference, since the devil is an outsider in monotheist religions and many characters identify with the devil as part of the xenophobic myths employed to destabilize the postcolonial condition of the immigrant.

Chamcha’s metamorphosis and the echo of his name immediately bring to mind Kafka’s Samsa. According to Paul Brians, the name Saladdin Chamcha is an oxymoron because Saladin is a traditional heroic name and to create contrast this sublime name is paired with spoonseller (8).

The way in which the narrator represents the attitude that his captors take against Chamcha in a way reflects the position of a foreigner when he is initially confronted by the ruling class. “...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” (*Satanic Verses* 162). In the eyes of the immigration officer, this transformation is not fantastic. It is a simple case of a foreigner showing his true self. Even though Chamcha has British nationality, he is considered a foreigner by the officers: “You’re all the same. Can’t expect animals to observe civilized standards” (*Satanic Verses* 159). Interestingly, at the beginning of the novel, Chamcha detests his roots. He is a privileged immigrant with a recognized position and prestige; he rejects his roots to the extent of shortening his name from Chamchawalla to a more acceptable (or western) Chamcha. Or as Michael Gorra states: “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” (87). This is why, when he is kept captive, he claims that he is not a “fishin-boat sneaker in.” Later on, even when he is enjoying the hospitality of the Shaandaar café he angrily retorts, “I’m not your kind, you’re not my people. I’ve spent half my life trying to get away from people like you” (*Satanic Verses* 290). Chamcha is not pleased when he is linked to the Indian community living in England but when pressed by the police to reveal his true name he is confronted with a terrible reality that destroys his idea of his English self: “What kind of name is that for an Englishman” (*Satanic Verses* 163). In this particular case

a wrong name creates a series of events that change forever the life of the characters.

Another character-defining instance in the novel occurs in the hospital scene. This scene is of a great importance since it shows how an imperial center treats its colonial subjects. Chamcha is sleeping in the hospital when he is suddenly awakened by someone. This mysterious being is a manticore: half man, half tiger. During his conversation with the manticore, Saladin discovers that the hospital is full of fantastic hybrid beasts, such as chimeras and satyrs. According to the manticore these mutations are the responsibility of "someone." Certainly they are the result of contact between a foreigner and the powerful renaming machine of the Empire. Chamcha is interested in knowing about the process employed in the transformations. The manticore is quick in providing an answer: "They describe us ... they have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (*Satanic Verses* 168). This statement captures the power of stereotype over a subjugated mind. The one that controls the describing discourse and language controls the subject. Later on, when Chamcha escapes from the hospital authorities, he receives shelter from a Hindu restaurant, The Shaandaar. It is fascinating to see how Chamcha, a proud Englishman in his own eyes, has to escape from his fellow citizens and can only find refuge with the people he rejects. Even there his metamorphosis continues. He keeps on growing, so much that his figure transcends the world of physical reality and starts invading the world of dreams. This is essentially how "newness enters the world." The hybrid, consciously or unconsciously, starts absorbing characteristics from the surrounding cultures, growing to such extent that no single culture can contain the cultural cross-references that inhabit this new being. This rupture not only habitates the hybrid but also enables him/her to inhabit the time/space zone that is created, akin to what Homi Bhabha called the "third space" (36).

One of the most challenging moments for the establishment of Chamcha's new identity occurs when he finds out about the success of Gibreel in England. A powerful hatred consumes him. He finds an outlet for releasing his anger in the destruction of the wax figures in the Hot Wax Club, a local discotheque. These effigies of English political leaders are burnt anyway by the Indian Pinkwalla during disco nights. As Frantz Fanon asserted in *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence is sometimes an effective method used to release the frustrations of the colonized mind but the type of violence presented in Rushdie's text does not exactly fit the form of Chamcha's hatred is repressed and only released against wax figures, not only against the political effigies mentioned before but surprisingly against the figures

of important immigrant leaders. The result of this melting is one solid mass, formed out of the remains of the different set of bodies. Once again, this incident is an apt metaphor of the hybrid condition. After the Hot Wax episode, the bestial transformation stops and Saladin returns to his human form. But a different metamorphosis now ensues. He starts reevaluating his cultural contexts. He relinquishes his rejection of his cultural background and his love of the imperial center. He reaches ground zero. Or as the narrator explains: “he would have to construct everything from scratch, would have to invent the ground beneath his feet, before he could take a step” (*Satanic Verses* 132). This is the station of the hybrid. This new cultural being builds an innovative time/space continuum because after the transformation he or she can no longer inhabit a traditional discourse. He or she sets out to rebuild his self and along the way, write a new history quite removed from the previous models of history. Now that he knows who he is, Chamcha can make peace with his past and face his future. In order to lay to rest the ghost of his previous history, Chamcha must make peace with his dying father. He decides to return “home” although the whole way he questions where home is supposed to be. “What strange meanings words were taking on. Only a few days ago that back home had rung false” (*Satanic Verses* 514). He also finds the sounds that his words were supposed to have and that he meticulously hid away while living in England. Among the words that savors again the sound of his original unabridged name leaves him a confusing and yet satisfying sensation: “began to find the sound of his full, un-englished name pleasing.” Later on he meets an old friend, Zeeny, who delivers the coup de grâce to his reconstructing bid:

If you are serious about shaking your foreignness....then don't fall into some kind of rootless limbo instead...you should really try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time...try and embrace this city...the actual existing place. Make its faults your own. Become its creature. (541)

The hybrid state is not a “rootless limbo” and the hybrid does not lack roots. It is the other way around. The hybrid selects his roots. In order to do so, he or she must make peace with his origins and select what he or she wants to use as materials for his/her new being. Chamchas’s final turn around is the exact opposite of Gibreel who, even when he flirted with his angelic powers, could not find enough elements to construct a solid suicide-proof personality.

Two men fall from the London sky. One of them flirts with history and confuses his path along the endless forest of symbols, acting out in order to achieve acceptance. The other one rejects his roots

but through a series of painful experiences is able to come through as a different version of his old self. Both represent stations of the hybrid, because both choose similar ways to try to adapt but they are caught in the machine and in the end only one of them is able to see the light.

Chamchawalla's last thoughts define the closure of *The Satanic Verses*: "if the old refuse to die, the new could not be born" (547). This statement right at the end of the novel connects with the first "To be born again...first you have to die" (3). Saladin died and was reborn in Salahuddin, hybrid citizen, craftsman of the space/time zone, the interstice of the hybrids.

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