THE (UN) READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE’S *THE SATANIC VERSES*

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“…but the chief end I propose to myself in all my labours is to vex the
world rather than divert it.” (Jonathan Swift, Letter to Pope, September 29,
1725)

Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* has haunted and perplexed readers and
critics since its publication in 1988. *The Satanic Verses* models itself on the two-fold
working of memory and imagination and skillfully interweaves the combined machinery
of dreaming and waking. A distinction of both worlds—dream and reality—offers strange
workings of the author’s (or more specifically, of the characters’) capacity to conjure
beasts, humans and bodily metamorphoses. Events thus populate the world of *The
Satanic Verses* in the manner of a *dream-like-waking* or a *waking-like-dream*. This
intricate mixture of dream and reality is also complicated by the difficulty of the efforts
to translate dream-language into reality or reality into dream-language. Both attempts
face the difficulty of translating one language game (“reality”) into another (“dream”). In
line with my epigraph above, I wager that the chief aim of the “untranslatability” of the
different language games in *The Satanic Verses* is to “vex” the world rather than divert it.
Diversions take the reader into an escapist, fantasy world; Rushdie’s “vexing” endeavor
on the other hand unsettles the reader and forces him/her to reflect deeply on it. I explore
the implications of Rushdie’s “vexing” endeavor in this essay.

As a text, *The Satanic Verses* (henceforth SV) can be read simultaneously or
exclusively as a postcolonial or a postmodern novel. Moreover, the “text” of SV cannot
be dissociated from its “real” life subtexts—the infamous Rushdie Affair, the relentless
critique of the sacred in the text and the dilemmas of postcolonial identity. Any reading
of SV necessitates an engagement with its numerous subtexts that “bleed” into each other in irreducible ways. These subtexts are unavoidable for any reader—they frame a horizon of reading even before one has actually read the text (or if the text is read at all, as a lot of critiques often stem from hearsay). All these factors make SV the most unread novel of contemporary times. Taking this question of literal and metaphorical “unreadability” as an opening premise, I suggest that any attempt at understanding the text of SV succumbs to the inherent difficulty/deficiency of language to convey a fixed set of meanings (as an attempt to translate), and hence productively generates more texts, making the very act of reading a simultaneous act of “unreading.” The literal and metaphorical acts of “unreading” thus bleed into each other—just like Gibreel’s dreams bleed into reality. This vexes the reader: the controversies associated with the novel run on parallel tracks with a reading of the text. The text itself remains elusive, never ending, open-ended and productive of more meanings. Signifiers in SV do not exactly correspond to the (so-called) signifieds, because any attempt to translate such a relation is limited by the semantic aporias that necessitates the emergence of other texts. I take this to be Jacques Derrida’s point, too, when he says:

> In the limits to which it is possible, or at least appears possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation: a

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1 Unreading corresponds to the deliberate act of readers to choose not to read SV because of the blasphemous annotations associated with it. More sophisticated and metaphorical act of unreading corresponds to language’s deficiency to convey fixed meanings in the text that fails to make sense of “the text” but generates other (unavoidable) subtexts in every single act of reading SV.
regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. (Derrida, Positions 20)

Derrida’s notion of translation explores the arbitrary relation of signifier to signified and the ambivalent space that lies in-between these two elements. The relation between the two is never pure—signifier and signified always have an arbitrary relation, and this arbitrariness usually results in a complete ‘transformation’ rather than translation of one language into another.

In line with Derrida’s point about translation-as-transformation, this paper is structured in three sections that explores the issue of the ‘unreadability’ and related “untranslatability” of one language game into another. The first section focuses on the notion of mutations and metamorphoses in the plot (real) and sub-plots (dream) of SV both of which echo, as well as, overshadow one another in the attempt to translate the other. Second, I deal with the religious subtext and the charge of blasphemy (a point which is analogous to the issue of “original” and “translation”). Finally I explore Rushdie’s idea of polyglot “Indianness” which is tied to the exploration of the hybrid nature of South Asian migrants in Britain. All of the three sections explore the arbitrary relationship of signifiers with the signifieds that result in a transformation (instead of translation) of one text (language game) into another.

I. ‘Mutabilities,’ and ‘Untranslatability’

Rushdie’s penchant for exploring the aporias of translation is evident throughout his oeuvre. For instance, in his first novel, *Grimus*, Flapping Eagle, encounters a man who is “rehearsing voices… high whining voices, low gravelly voices, subtle insinuating voice” who “calls back – and each word was the word of different being.” Flapping Eagle
also claims that he is “looking for a subtle voice to speak in” (*Grimus* 35-36). If the look for a ‘subtle voice’ was the beginning of the exploration of postcolonial dilemmas about untranslatability then Rushdie’s later novels—*Midnight’s Children, Shame* and *SV*—promote a much more sophisticated political-intellectual struggle to decolonize the immigrants from the colonizer’s language. *Shame* is a good case in point. This text shows the inadequacy of Standard English in the domain of the translation of foreign words and cultures. English, the narrator says, is a “peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts and the accumulated detritus of its owners’ unrepented past.” Hybridizing the English denotation of “shame” by conjoining it with its multiple Urdu connotations—“embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts” (*Shame* 34, 35)—Rushdie opens up a polysemic field which deconstructs fixed, purist notions of meaning and states of being. I wager that this attempt to indigenize English is an endeavor to empower the immigrant. For Rushdie, translation becomes a metaphor for migration and exile. For him words take on different meanings and migration is “by no means the only form of [geographic] migration” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). Rushdie traces the derivation of “metaphor” and “migration” from the same root. Migration comes from Latin migrate, *to change one’s place of living*, and is similar to the Greek ameibein, *to change*. Rushdie explains that:

…with its roots in the Greek words for bearing across, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants—borne across for translated humans—are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross
frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant people. (Imaginary Homelands 278-79)

Metaphor—as translated images which invoke “full” presence only to defer its imaginary plentitude—becomes a strong tool for the postcolonial writer to transport and translate his culture-specific material into a foreign culture and tongue as well as remake (or specifically deconstruct) English into its existing divergent cultural realities. The postcolonial writer, thus, crosses all sorts of frontiers: linguistic, cultural, and more so, the frontiers of time, by juxtaposing explorations of the past with imaginations of alternative presents and futures. In reply to the earlier question in the novel of “how newness comes into the world,” Rushdie says that SV, specifically, proposes an amalgamation of plurals such that the text is “not just about… mixture; [but] it is that mixture itself” (Appignanesi & Maitland 166). Rushdie believes that transformations based on “the mixture of several traditions, the agglutination of fragments, the hybrid patchwork,” is an unavoidable necessity of our time. He underlines this necessity in the personalities of Gibreel Farishta, the “untranslated,” unbending, monomaniacal man dying because of his “bitterness,” and Saladin Chamcha, the “translated,” changing, growing man surviving because of his “flexibility” and readiness to “come into newness” (Mann 283). Rushdie himself describes this issue in depth in his essay, “In Good Faith,”

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that existing in the liminal space of the “in-between” will inevitably weaken “their” own ‘origins’ or ‘pure’ cultures. I am of the opposite opinion. 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, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (*Imaginary Homelands* 394)

The migrant gives different meaning not only to his own reality but also causes reformation of his societies; this is how “newness comes into the world.” His transmogrified ‘new’ world not only celebrates the presence of all immigrants but also gives a particular ability to the immigrant to identify and understand different cultures—a quality that SV implies that the “rooted” British (language and culture) lacks.

Rushdie invades, populates and colors the dull British city with immigrant figures that not only bring flavor to its tastelessness, but also—as mentioned earlier—“brings newness.” His immigrant group is itself colored by a variety of peoples from within—from all cultural, linguistic and religious groups—the South Asian postcolonial diaspora with their own distinct idiosyncrasies. In the novel S. S Sisodia elaborates on the plentitude of South Asians and the uniqueness of all groups from one another gathered at Earl’s Court.

‘All sorts are here,’ … you could tell the Pakistanis because they dressed up to the gills, the Indians because they dressed down, and the Bangladeshis because they dressed badly, “all that pupurple and gogo gold *gota* that they like.” (361)
The diversity of the South Asian postcolonial immigrants also amount to its linguistic diversity—with all the complexities of different dialects, idioms and language usages. In his commentary on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” Jacques Derrida suggests that “[the story of Babel communicates] among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility” (171). Rushdie, in *Shame*, seems to align his artistic practice with Derrida’s view of the necessity and at the same time impossibility of translation—“to unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words” (111). The author’s idea of translation is not just a translation of words but of a translated subjectivity as well: it implies that it is not only the writing that is translated but that Rushdie has translated himself into English. He thinks of it as a positive phenomenon in which the postcolonial person is “borne across” constantly shaping up and opening new avenues. This process involves a complete reworking of the subject and his writing in the process of translation. In SV, Rushdie claims to bring about a resolution of different peoples and tongues by making allusions to and quoting from other works in a variety of languages and cultures. Rushdie says in *Shame*:

> I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to jump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change. (*Shame* 91-92)

To bring about a reconciliation of different groups—from (and within) East and West, and Old and New—SV astounds the reader and replaces the binary equation of pure/original with the simultaneous menace and promise of hybridity. Farishta’s
insistence, “to be born again, first you have to die,” (15) repudiates the nostalgia for origins. He celebrates hybridity in person through the repetition of the same song, “O my shoes are Japanese…. These trousers English, if you please. On my head red Russian hat: my heart’s Indian for all that”2 (5). If Midnight’s Children can be considered an enactment of Rushdie’s Indian self, Shame as his Pakistani heritage, SV can be “writing for the first time from the whole of [his] self. The English part, the Indian part” (Marzorati). SV also exemplifies hybridity and plurality in the makeover of Saladin who is an illustrative figure of the postcolonial migrant. The migrant’s identity is manifested by concepts of ethnic and racial impurity, mixture, and miscellany, because the migrant, in order to survive, must translate himself into something different, and recognize, inescapably the fact that he lives between two or more worlds. Saladin, out of need, reimagines himself in the new world and desires a purist identity free of the taint of his natal country because his migration reveals complicated issues of identity and home. We see in the novel that he takes on a new identity in order to assimilate into English culture. In the episode of his goatish metamorphosis, we see that the phenomenon of migration has translated his entire being, and consequently he is faced with enduring humiliation.

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2 Rushdie generously alludes to Hindi Cinema in SV, like he does in this song. Original opening lyrics in SV that are translated into English from Hindi are:
Mera Joota hai Japani
Yeh Patloon Inglistani
Sar pe lal topi Rusi
Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani
Shailendra wrote the lyrics for this song that first appeared in the 1955 Hindi movie Shree 420 picturized on the popular Bollywood star Raj Kapoor. He was also the producer and director of the movie. The song is basically patriotic in color that sings of globalization in the newly established nation of India. Rushdie incorporates this song in SV through the Angelic Gibreel Farishta who resurrects the idea of the (re) birth of Indian nation after the formal end (death) of British colonization in India in 1947.
and racism that exists in Britain—something that finally impels him to come back home to reconcile with his roots. Rushdie elaborates this movement in *Imaginary Homelands*:

A migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviors and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (277-78)

However, Saladin’s metamorphosis can also be identified with his interpellation by the colonial discourse of the English. In the episode of his arrest and consequent admission into the hospital—where he sees so many others who had metamorphoses similar to his—he is not merely physically victimized, but psychologically as well: the colonizers’ discourse immediately metamorphosed him into a beast. This modality of vision is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s “ideological becoming”—he starts to see himself in the mirror the English gave him, and in the fashion in which they see him. On the other hand, Gibreel Farishta muddles with a much more sophisticated idea—instead of metamorphosis he contends for a complete re-birth: a birth after death, for which one has to die. Earlier in the novel we see him as an actor who performs different manifestations of Hindu gods and attains the status of a deity himself. Twice half-dead—once in the hospital, another on the plane—counts for one full death, and with some unseen supernatural power he is brought back to life, as he explains to Saladin; “Me, I only half-
expired, but I did it on two occasions, hospital and plane, so it adds up, it counts.” After a half-and-half death, he says; “Spoono my friend, here I stand before you in Proper London, Vilayat, regenerated, a new man with a new life” (32). But he thinks of it not as death, but rebirth—that too in bits and pieces. The notion of rebirth is tied to Rushdie’s description of the two types of mutabilities, or translated selves. In SV, Sufyan (of Shaandar Café) presents two different views of Lucretius and Ovid on mutation:

‘Question of mutability of the essence of the self,’ … is “Whether by its changing goes out of its frontiers,”—that is, bursts its banks—or, maybe, breaks out of its limitations, - so to speak, disregards its own rules, but that is to free, I am thinking … “that thing”, at any rate, Lucretius holds, “by doing so brings immediate death to its old self.” However,… poet Ovid, in the Metamorphoses, takes diametrically opposed view. He avers thus: “As yielding wax… is stamped with new designs And changes shape and seems not still the same, Yet is indeed the same, even so our souls,”… Our spirits! Our immortal essence! —“Are still the same forever, but adopts In their migration ever-varying forms.” (285)

Whereas for Saladin it “[was] always Ovid over Lucretius” (285), at the other end: “Farishta chose Lucretius over Ovid. The inconstant soul, the mutability of everything, das Ich, every last speck. A being going through life can become so other to himself as to be another, discrete, severed from history… Newness: [Farishta] had sought a different kind, but this was what he got… I am, … that I am. Submission” (297-98). Farishta’s was a different sort of submission, a submission that Dr. Faustus achieves in front of the Devil when he sells his soul for twenty-four-years of joy and pleasure in
return of forbidden knowledge. Saladin, on the other hand, makes peace with his roots and “accept(s) that certain compromises, closures, are required if [he is] to continue” (306). During his literal and metaphorical reconciliation with his father, he accepts his transformed new self—newness through hybridity. Farishta gets a new self of (a non-hybrid) Azrael in Lucretius’ sense by completely cutting off from his former being—newness through death and rebirth. Saladin survives at the end while Gibreel could not come to terms with himself (and blows his brains out).

Srinivas Aravamudan views Saladin-Gibreel mutability in an Ariel-Caliban binary—the former parts of the binary being positive (malleable), whereas the latter as negative (stubborn). Saladin’s initial dream of a through and through English—and his disgust with native identity—later on changes and he comes to the realization of his own self. The inhuman treatment at the hands of English tolls him back to his own reality. Gibreel, however, transforms into Othello when Saladin plays upon his inassimilable nature that is prone to jealousy. Saladin plays Iago and exploits (the gullible) Gibreel with his skills of imitating a variety of voices. The latter starts doubting Alleluia Cone’s fidelity and actually believes in her involvement with S. S Sisodia. He transforms into a dark and stubborn Othello who kills both of them and then commits suicide in front of Saladin.

It is indeed predictable that of the two types of colonial subjects it should be the Ariel rather than the Caliban who survives; Ariel-Chamcha can go “native,” after completely internalizing colonial paternalism; Gibreel-Caliban would always remain monstrously inassimilable, whether in the periphery or the metropole. (Aravamudan 15)
Gibreel, himself, is an incorporation of human, angelic, godly and prophetic selves in SV. In him, we see so many faces of different personas. In the City of Jahilia he appears as the Archangel Gibreel, who then changes and also takes on the person of the messenger (Mahound). He appears as Angel Gibreel to another self-proclaimed (like himself) prophetess, Ayesha, and to the Imam in exile. But the narrator explains that “with Mahound, there is always a struggle; with Imam, slavery; but with this girl [Ayesha], there is nothing” (240). He is here, there and everywhere. Unlike Saladin, Gibreel Farishta enters the metanarrative world of SV (ironically) singing of and announcing hybridity. Despite the fact that he is a hybrid figure of human, angelic, and godly traces, he (the archetypal Caliban) fails to hold his different forms together and wages death on himself and others. His loss of faith in himself, in others and in God is earlier described in the novel when God himself, as we see in the novel, is presented in a hybrid vein. This questions a fundamentalist’s (Calibanist) inability to accept God in different heterogamous forms—Omnipresent and Omnipotent: Ooperwala (The Fellow Upstairs) and Neechaywala (the Guy from the Underneath). In reply to Gibreel’s doubts The Ooper-Nechay-Wala visits him at Alleluia Cone’s house and speaks in a self-explanatory speech describing its own being:

‘Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as Oopar and Neechay, or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here… ‘The point is, there will be no more dilly-dallying. You wanted clear signs of Our existence? We sent you Revelations to fill your dreams: in which not only Our nature, but your also, was clarified. But you fought against it, struggling against the
very sleep in which We were awakening you. Your fear of the truth has finally obliged Us to expose Ourself, at some personal inconvenience, in this woman’s residence at an advanced hour of the night. It is time, now, to shape up. (330)

In contrast to Gibreel’s persona, Mahound (the messenger) is considered perfect, pure and above all reproach. The narrative destabilizes the fundamentalist belief of him being a perfect human being, an unapproachable divine figure; rather, he is depicted as a humanized, hybrid character. After the satanic verses incident Mahound confesses to having been deceived by Satan, and abruptly denounces the verses inspired by the devil. The incident arouses doubts in the hearts of believers. Salman the Persian starts to harbor a disbelief in the authenticity of the divine book and starts amending the revealed verses.

Pnina Werbner juxtaposes the main narrative with the sub-narrative of the satanic verses: “the two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse…by making them echoes [and shadowing] of one another” (Werbner 139). The English victimized Saladin in the main plot with the weapon of stereotyping. In the dream plot, Salman the Persian falls prey to the medieval depiction of the figure of the Prophet: the Crusaders attributed demonized names with the Prophet. Rushdie brings those names into play to “vex” his reader and to echo the exploration of stereotyping in the main plot. Werbner also believes that “Rushdie makes the names work for him. They disguise identities, demonize and divinize inversely. They are external impositions…. Mahound is not the anti-Christ monster medieval Crusaders made him out to be” (Werbner 141). The Crusaders depicted the Prophet’s figure with different names—Muhammad, Mahound, Mahomet and
MoeHammered, and Salman the Persian, too, imagines him the way the medieval Crusaders have presented him:

His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given, but he won’t answer to that here; nor, though he’s well aware of what they call him, to his nickname in Jahilia down below—he-who-goes-up-and-down-old-Coney. Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil’s synonym: Mahound. (95)

Our fictional prophet undergoes a transformation through translation of meanings and dreams; rather a metamorphosis, a rebirth through death—of which Gibreel is so fond. After his fictional rebirth, we encounter a prophet, not the Islamic figure of Muhammad who was born and raised in the old city of Mecca, but of our fictional L-O-N-D-O-N type of Visible But Unseen City of Jahilia. Farishta alternately impersonates as archangel and as messenger for the people of Proper London to metamorphose the city and its people: “the city he had come to save, Proper London, capital of Vilayat…. He would redeem th(e) city: Geographers’ London, all the way from A to Z” (332). But the self-proclaimed angel-prophet takes a different kind of entrance, as a Satanic fall from the

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3 Different variants of the name Muhammad (referring to the Islamic prophet-messenger) have been simultaneously used in SV. Mahound/Mahommet/MoeHammered: variants used with anti-Muslim sentiments by Western Christian belief in the medieval literature. They were used with pejorative and satanic connotations that Muhound/Mahommet/MoeHammered was false god or demon worshipped by Muslims.
sky—for the downward motion is the only way forward in the dream-fiction—to hit the God-Forsaken city, and, during his fall, chants, “Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won’t know what hit them. Meteor or lightning or vengeance of God” (4). Hence, both the (real and dream) worlds echo and overshadow one another transforming one into the other in terms of mutations and transformations of their respective protagonists.

II. Religious Subtext and Blasphemy

The largest part in SV comes from the Islamic tradition, which narrates Prophet Muhammad’s life and the divine revelations that he received from God. Those revelations are compiled in the form of the Holy Book, the Qur’an, which Muslims consider as the Truth. The novel fictionally refashions certain parts of the Qur’an by imaginatively “polluting” the divine revelations. The most important translations of the pure and impure that Rushdie performs are: the refashioning of the life of the prophet, and introducing an element of skepticism through the episode of the verses, which are believed to be a incorporation, and ii) changing the traditional episodes with scandalous, sexual and profane characteristics. In doing so, Rushdie commits blasphemy.

Rushdie reinvents the story of the satanic verses in his transformative approach. Probing the origin of Islam, he tries to subvert the system by questioning and differentiating between the word of God and that of Shaitan. Rushdie plays upon the idea of restructuring the Qur’an in the episode where Salman the Persian deliberately tries to change (parts of) of the revelations. As a result, his faith metamorphoses into skepticism as regards the authenticity of the word of God. He thinks that if the satanic verses can be a satanic temptation, all the revelations can also be doubted on the same premise. Thus he
starts inserting some of his own words into the revealed words “as he sat at the Prophet’s feet, writing down rules rules rules, he began, surreptitiously, to change things…actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the word of God with [his] own profane language” (380). Rushdie plays upon this entire concept of ‘restructuring’ in the satanic subplot by employing the tropology of pollution and purity.

Similarly Rushdie commits blasphemy when he tries to change the traditional episodes with scandalous, sexual and profane representations. Rushdie plays upon the same trick of using similar names for the women in the whorehouse as those of Prophet’s wives when Farishta dreams of the whorehouse (Veil) in the Jahilian City. The notorious Baal also takes refuge in Veil for the fear of his life. In reaction to the rules and forbidding of the new religion, all the Women in Veil pretend to have married Baal in a pejorative mimicry of Women in the Harem. Rushdie’s technique of using the same names (signifiers) for the women (signifieds) in different realities disintegrates their differentiation and they start leaking into one another. Baal on the other hand mimics the role of the Prophet when he starts pretending to be the husband of the women in Veil. But as a false prophet, his mimicry seriously fails as he is revealed to be a weak person. Unlike the Prophet, he is a person with no honor who does not protect his women despite their repeated pleas during their arrest.

Both of the above episodes in SV function as a religious subtext that charged Rushdie with blasphemy. The linguistic incoherency results in the imperfect “translation” of the “original.” Language games complicate Rushdie’s metaphors of sacred and profane
and fall prey to invisible presence reminiscent of Derrida’s *différence*—where significations are suspended, differed and deferred in space and time. Rushdie’s strategy is to break away from traditional tropes by defying the past in order to reimagine them in the contemporary arena of politics and multiculturalism. He translates the “untranslatable,” in a Derridean vein to the Western world to rethink some of the fundamentalist and inconsistent things in the traditional belief system structuring the Qur’an. The process of translation of the ancient and sacred to the Western audience in a modern secular approach emits a confrontation of the two that has resulted in blasphemy—a case of “inappropriate” translation.

Additionally, as Homi Bhabha says, by reviewing the Qur’an Rushdie commits blasphemy in translating traditional Islamic tropes into an imaginative novel. As Bhabha says in *Location of the Culture*, “Blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation” (226). Thus the subject matter of one tradition is overwhelmed and alienated when one story ‘echoes’ and ‘overshadows’ the other. This moment of alienation from essence opens up a space between the sacred and profane. Rushdie emphasizes that, Mahound himself expressed doubts and suspicions. Thus Rushdie took the whole idea of prophet, God and angel out

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4 It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority…. Not only is no kingdom of *différence*, but *différence* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. …Since [Freudian] trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocated itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site erasure belongs to its structure. And not only the erasure which must always be able to overtake it, but also the erasure which constitutes it from the outset as a trace, which situates as is the change of site, and makes it disappear in its appearance, makes it emerge from itself in its production. (*Différence* 20)
of the boundaries of Islamic logocentrism and placed it on the scale of uncertainty and doubt.

“\textquote{It was the Devil,\textquote{}} he says aloud to the empty air, making it true by giving it voice. ‘The last time, it was Shaitan.’ This is what he has \textit{heard} in his \textit{listening}, that he has been tricked, that the Devil came to him in the guise of the archangel, so that the verses he memorized, the ones he recited in the poetry tent, were not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly, but satanic. He returns to the city as quickly as he can, to expunge the foul verses that reek of brimstone and sulphur, to strike them from the record forever, so that they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and unwrite their society. (125-26)

The metaphors of migration, hybridity and sacred—directly related to the purity-pollution binary—acquire subversive meanings that constantly produce other subtext(s) (such as blasphemy) because of the presence of the element of a \textquote{trace} that constantly shapes and reshapes an authorized system of language. The idea of a meaningful present depends on this trace, which is an effect of writing. Derrida also stresses that the idea of trace is inseparable from the concept of \textit{diff\textacute{e}rance}. The concept of this unstable relationship of signifier and signified is mapped on to the Freudian idea of the trace as \textquote{an effort of life to protect itself by deferring} the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve” (\textit{Diff\textacute{e}rance} 16). The \textquote{reserve} protects the language from subversion but Rushdie’s \textquote{translation} questions and subverts this reserve that, as a result, unleashes \textquote{the dangerous investments} making the text blasphemous. Hence, under normal
circumstances, language use is our conscious attempt to give meaning to the sign by repressing all other unwanted meanings in communication. SV also explores this problematic phenomenon by asking the fundamental question, “if the dabba had the wrong markings and so went to incorrect recipient, was the dabbawalla to blame?” (342). The answer Rushdie seems to give is, “no,” but in the effort of translating the “original”, the unconscious and heterogeneous significations attached with the signifiers come into play. The original is overshadowed by the translation and the “dabbawala” has to bear the blame for the wrong delivery.

No matter what Rushdie’s chief design in SV might have been, the differences have only been deepened after the novel’s publication confirming Derrida’s view in “Des Tours” of the “inadequation of one tongue to another” (165). Rushdie himself offered various contrastive interpretations of his novel that gave different meanings to his public and private life. In his interviews in 1988 he comments on the novel by mentioning his major themes in the novel to be religion and fanaticism: “I have talked about the Islamic religion because that is what I know the most about… [and his novel as a] serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person” (The Rushdie File 31, 33). But Khomeini’s fatwa suddenly changed the reality after years of seclusion and police watch. Rushdie defends himself against the blasphemy charge, and concludes that “to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories” (Imaginary Homelands 409). Critics such as Homi Bhabha argue that the novel is an effort to “mediate between different cultures, languages and societies, [where] there is always the threat of mistranslation, confusion and fear” (The Rushdie File 114). The text of SV does not settle the strange functioning of “untranslatability” of one
language game to the other. Although Rushdie may argue that in fiction nothing is as it appears, it’s the reader who interprets the text and may not necessarily agree with the authorial intentions. Rushdie also argues that the real themes and intentions of the book were to investigate the relative (and not absolutist) value of sacred and profane, purity and hybridity, and the love of God and one’s fellow humans. However, the novel, on the one hand, is condemned as blasphemous in opposition to Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur’an, and on the other hand an anti-racist and anti-imperialist book that nobody in Britain would have wanted to publish. Therein lies the irony of incommensurability—what is intended as a simultaneous deconstruction of two discourses becomes sharply differentiated from each other. The twain does not meet.

Rushdie’s dream of translation is marred (or preferably, overshadowed) by the way he structures his novel in a continuous narrative of dreaming and waking that start seeping into one another: “an agitation born of this further evidence that the world of dreams [is] leaking into that of the waking hours, that the seals dividing the two [are] breaking, and at any moment the two firmaments could be joined, - that is to say, the end of all things [is] near” (314-15). As much baffling as for Farishta, the reader is also “vexed” by a continuous web of dreams within a dream, which is to say, translation on a translation [or in Derrida’s words, “writing on writing, and also of a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points” (Différance 3)]. Because of the incommensurability of the language games, different trajectories converge at the same point of blasphemous subtext that has surrounded both the novel and the writer.
III. Rushdie’s Audience and the Idea of “Indianness”

Among all different subtexts and (mis)translation of the postcolonial and postmodern text, the greater irony is the “condemnation by those South Asian migrants in Britain whose voice [the author] claims to be and whose language he professes to speak” (The Book Burning 19). But the apparent critique of South Asians in SV is embedded in the loss of a common language that the South Asians in the novel seem to speak. This is reminiscent of the story of the Parsi woman in the novel who falls in love with a Turk in Germany. The only relatedness and a common link between them is the German language that they speak. The woman arrives in London and loses her interest and fluency in German language while the man becomes fluent in it. In her reply to his passionate letters she uses a flat and immature language that becomes a basis for the death of their relationship—“an inequality of language” (83). The same inequality of language leads to a problematic relationship of the writer and his novel with his audience—an unequal translation of the East to the Westernized reader. But the relationship of the writer and his audience is also problematic and varying, as in Rushdie’s own words.

I have never had a reader in mind. I have ideas, people, events, shapes, and I write “for” those things, and hope that the completed work will be of interest to others. But which others? In case of Midnight’s Children I certainly felt that if its subcontinental reader rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West. So I would say that I write “for” people who feel part of the things I write “about,” but also for everyone else whom I can reach. (Imaginary Homelands 19-20)
The notion of “Indianness” (whom the author claims the book is for) is in itself compartmentally hybrid. To be an “Indian” is not a uniform and unitary condition here, instead it represents a problematic diversity. It is this diversity of hybridity that focuses on the notion of what is meant to be Indian. Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands*: “My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity…. To my mind the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once” (32). The practice of more than twenty major languages and other minor dialects in India is itself a source of plurality as the narrator remarks in *Midnight’s Children* that “there are many versions of India as Indians” (323), and they speak more than one language. But the linguistic difference is not the only cause for this plurality. We can think about the religious diversity that affects and pluralizes the notion of Indianness—Hindus and Muslims as two major and distinct religious groups (among other numerous ones). Thus “Indianness” is presented as a very complicated idea that relates to and is dependent on the plurality and heterogeneity of hybridity.

In the subcontinental postcolonial context of the novel, Rushdie calls for a subcontinental and migrant reader by saying, “This is, for me the saddest irony of all; that … I should see my book burned, largely unread, by the people it’s about, people who might find some pleasure and much recognition in its pages” (The Book Burning 26). But the writer’s desire for an Indian audience becomes debatable when one reads through the multilingual practices in the novel that are constantly resistant, anti-racist, anti-imperialistic and postmodern like that of James Joyce’s. The language of the novel is equally vexing the Oriental and Occidental audiences: the postcolonial Indians find it
puzzling with all its postmodern references, whereas the Occidental audience is baffled by the abundance of Eastern cultural, religious and social references with all their complications, privy only to an Indian audience—an unequal translation to both audiences. This reflects Bhabha’s definition of postcoloniality in his essay, “Postcolonial Criticism.” He describes postcoloniality by describing its cross continental and its translational nature which might also be linked with post-World War II migration of the Third World people to the ex-colonizer’s country and settling in their culture. The postcolonials settled in the new culture and started affecting (changing) it as if it were a revenge of the formerly colonized peoples. Up against the grand colonial and imperialistic cultural narrative, the migrant started redefining the host culture. The time for “assimilating minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed,” Bhabha adds, which is why the “the very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from postcolonial perspective,” just like the issues of race, gender and sexual orientations have been redefined in the West in 1970s and 1980s (Postcolonial Criticism 461). It is this redefinition of postcolonial “selves” and cultures that Rushdie has thematized in SV within a translational/translated and migratory narrative. This context becomes apparent when the postcolonial’s “imaginary homeland”—London—starts getting affected (redefined) after the downward flight of “two real, full-grown, living men… from a height” (3). Farishta’s insistence to change the city from A to Z in order to heal “broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home” (5), is an attempt to imprint the presence of invisible migrants in the metropolis. Hence, the postcolonial
writer writes in an English tongue which is completely colonized by Hindi and Urdu, so much so that the English characters feel baffled and alienated not only from their own language but from their own culture as well. Mikhail Bakhtin’s point about heteroglossia is relevant here:

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this personal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, on other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (Bakhtin 293-94)

Rushdie makes the language of SV his own by populating it with all the migrant-Indian characters, speaking in the Hindi/Urdu version of English with a host of Bombayite expressions, and of Hindi cinema and songs that are only intelligible to the Indian-English migrant. Srinivas Aravamudan also has the same take on the Indianness in SV when he says that it “is profoundly Indian in the sensibility it exports…the principle character Saladin Chamcha, says, “the earth is full of Indians, you know that, we get everywhere, we become tinkers in Australia and our heads end up in Idi Amin’s fridge.” Furthering this notion Aravamudan also notes “[that] it seems logical, perhaps, that India was also the first in a series of countries to ban the novel.” However, to be an Indian does not represent a coherent national identity; rather, India is a nation of nations with various
linguistic and religious sensibilities. The reaction to the novel was, hence, different by the Muslims and a different “onslaught on the novel in India was led by Syed Shahabuddin, an opposition fundamentalist Muslim Member of the Parliament” (Aravamudan 8).

Indian characters don’t merely populate the novel but also import a through and through Indian sensibility. The Indian characters may have populated the world of SV but controversies arise when the idea of a pure national identity is challenged by the presence of a variety (of religious and linguistic) groups within the Indian audience. The Indian legal system is framed in accordance with its plenitude of Indian subjects and citizenship—comprised of all (linguistic and religious) groups that we witness in the novel. Shahabuddin challenges Rushdie on the grounds of Indian Penal Code in an open address in a national newspaper: “Whoever with deliberate and malicious intention outrages the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India, by words either spoken or written or… otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class shall be punished with imprisonment… or with fine… or with both” (qtd in Aravamudan 8). Thus Rushdie’s multifarious Indian audience divides in different camps with different reactions on the issue of the deciding the fate of SV.

As is evident, the novel does not make the same appeal to its multifarious South Asian audience. As much as Farishta’s song calls forth for hybridity, it also desires a hybridization of the language by directly translating Hindi/Urdu into English as in the song of “Japanese shoes, Russian hats” and “subcontinental hearts” (6) and bringing newness to the world “by fusions, translations, conjoinings…[but] in a language [no one] know[s]… to a tune [none] had [ever] heard” (8). Compared to his earlier works, in SV, Rushdie fully affirms the themes of migration and translation that closely chimes with
Bhabha’s belief of postcolonial translational cultural redefinition. Rushdie’s *Grimus* dealt with the themes of rootlessness and multiple roots. *Midnight’s Children* dealt with the same kind of uprootedness and immigration caused by the partition of India into two countries—a postcolonial migration (after the formal end of British colonisation) that resulted in class struggles, linguistic differences, schisms, political squabbling and wars. Migration is also an overriding theme in *Shame* that describes a translated Pakistani society ambivalently positioning (and repositioning) itself into its new (Pakistani, Bangladeshi) reality. SV, however, ignores these internal fragmentations and focuses more on the issues and problems of South Asian peoples in the country of the former colonizer with all its pressures, stereotyping and racism.

SV becomes an equal identity quest for its readers: the postcolonials—that is not a uniform national identity—and the English in London. With an attempt to redefine the English language and culture, the novel attempts to push the British characters to recognize the fact of hybridity and impels them to relocate themselves in the newly metamorphosed (reborn) city. For the English, it is an exploration of their culture that has been seriously affected by racism. The deep-rooted racism in Britain is reflected in the unacceptability of a completely Anglicized person of Chamcha even though he was “promptly identified … as a British Citizen first class… [that] had not improved his situation, but had placed him, if anything, in greater danger than before” (SV 169). Chamcha was not the only person who had suffered from an inhuman treatment—the entire South Asian diaspora was depicted as a “culturally othered” species. The novel muddles these notions by presenting the real face of the English society. Jaina C. Sanga
has the same take on the large-scale cultural alienation of the immigrants living in Britain. She says:

By depicting the way in which Chamcha is treated by the British immigration officers, who beat and insult him, Rushdie is clearly making a statement about British racism toward Asians. It is not only Chamcha who has experienced this inhuman treatment (ironic given his desire for “pure” Englishness). At the sanitarium where Chamcha is taken by the British officers, other migrants have suffered similar mutations, supposedly to their animal states by the British, so that one creature remarks: They [the British] describe us. That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct. (Sanga 37)

To sum it all up, Rushdie’s multi-dimensional and multi-directional narrative portrays that migration is a phenomenon that is both negative and positive. SV reckons the advantages of the metamorphosis of the city of London into a tropical city that includes “religious fervor, political ferment, renewal of interest in the intelligentsia… new social values: friends to commence dropping in on one another without making appointments, closure to old folks’ homes, emphasis on the extended family; the use of water as well as paper in English toilets; the joy of running fully dressed through the first rains of the monsoon” (365-66), that is all part of the (hybridized) transformation plan to make a good present and better future. The dream of rethinking and creating a Proper London is evident in the later part of the novel when Antoinette Roberts resurrects her son’s—Dr. Simba’s—words:
“Make no mistakes… we are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed; African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Crepriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children. We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to top. We shall be the hewers of the dead wood and the gardeners of the new. It is our turn now.” (428-29)

Rushdie examines the various interpretations of migrations in the novel that affirms the importance of migration and translation. This notion also covers his portrayal of Islam and its texts as well. Rushdie’s Mahound is also forced to migrate to Yathrib where he receives his revelations and becomes the representative of the new faith of the migrants. Rushdie considers that Islam itself is a hybrid culture and therefore can variously be translated and interpreted. Islam, in his view, wears different garbs in different countries, cultures and sects. In this light the religion is (unconsciously) evolving and reimagining itself in different times, lands and circumstances—like the dream of the migrant—to avoid being static. To doubt, for Rushdie, is to create/recreate or reimagine, which can be seen in his interpretation and translations of different religious and historical texts in SV. Unfortunately, his translation of the Islamic narrative was interpreted as blasphemous and made him a writer on the run.

The relentless critique of all narratives bewilders the non-European readers, while its “mongrelization” of English confuses the Western reader. But the value of SV, I
suggest, lies in juxtaposing these “untranslatable” language games paradoxically with each other. Rushdie manages to deconstruct the desire for fixed presence in both. Rushdie vexes his readers as he does his characters by putting them amidst host of conflicting realities. The reader is put in the midst of the chaotic world of dreams and reality, purity and hybridity. At the end of the day most readers make the same mistake, reminiscent of the character of Farishta who fails to recognize the Ovidian new self and chooses a metamorphosed diabolic identity for whom “Mr Gibreel Farishta transform(s) into a simulacrum of an angel as surely as he [is] the Devil’s mirror-self” (303). The author doesn’t expect his reader (crowded by all subtexts of the novel) to commit the same mistakes his characters do—by waging death over cities, like Azreal does on L-O-N-D-O-N5. Farishta loses his faculties and becomes diabolic, devilish, profane and blasphemous. It is evident, though, that Rushdie distances himself from Farishta when he presents an Ovidian hybrid instead, as in the character of Saladin, as a solution to conflicting identities. A whole new subtext remains untranslated when SV is taken for nothing but a blasphemy. The narratives are subverted, and the untranslatability of one linguistic reality comes into play that starts “vexing” most of the readers.

The gripping intertextuality and multilingualism in the novel, and the use of complex metaphors of migration and hybridity have all succumbed to the inherent

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5 This transformation is also resonant of Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver who is shipwrecked on different (imaginary) islands in his series of journeys—to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and Houyhnhmsland. Like Farishta (in his dreams), Gulliver too, is exposed to different (imaginative) realities in his one-after-the-other visits to different islands. He fails to take a-bit-of-this and a-bit-of-that from every exposure but everywhere confines his identity with his hosts. Gulliver’s view changes the reality of humans (into yahoos), and considers horses to be the epitome of reason and humans as “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of earth” (Swift 120). Gulliver becomes a misanthrope but with that the reader commits the mistake of identifying Swift as a misanthrope, too.
difficulty of language and (consequent) translations that have produced the inevitable subtexts surrounding the novel and the writer. For the most part, though, the novel remains unread because of the linguistic complexity to convey fixed meanings (a notion that the novel defies); however, it also remains unread because of the (blasphemous perceptions) deliberate intention of choosing not to read it, resulting in banning it in most of the Muslim countries. Thus, SV positions itself as a postcolonial and postmodern novel that continues to “vex” its readers.
Works Cited


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