THE SATANIC VERSES AND THE OCCIDENTALISM OF SALMAN RUSHDIE

by

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This paper is an inquiry into the critical tenability of the positioning of Salman Rushdie as brown sahib and the coincident reading of *The Satanic Verses* as an Orientalist attack on Islam. The paper opens with an exposition of Rushdie's thematic preoccupation with the identity of the Westernized Indian and of how ideas from his earlier writing are developed into a reappraisal and repositioning of this identity in the novel. Rushdie's presentation of these themes and his depiction of London and its British Indian community, demonstrates that he does not identify with the colonial culture and that the positioning of him as brown sahib is untenable. The reading of the novel as Orientalist is dependent on the identification of Rushdie with the West. Having established that the positioning of Rushdie as brown sahib is invalid, the paper proceeds to dismantle the reading of the novel as Orientalist which takes such a positioning as its basic premise. Having dismantled the framework of Orientalism within which the novel is understood, the paper then demonstrates how such a positioning of Rushdie and the discrediting of *The Satanic Verses* as an Orientalist attack on Islam can be understood as a rhetorical device constructed to subvert Rushdie's authority and to obscure the actual critique of Islam that is offered in the novel.
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Islam cannot be threatened by the discoveries of astronomy, such as the observation of new galaxies, because its vision is of a cosmos in movement. Threats to its authority do not come from outside, but from within human beings. It is imagination and the irreducible sovereignty of the individual which engender disequilibrium and tension. A Galileo challenging the authority of Islam must be not a scientist but an essayist or novelist, a Salman Rushdie, and exploration of the psyche will surely be the arena of all future sedition.

---Fatima Mernissi

Even the sun
Illuminates only what can receive its light.

---Adonis

A man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest.

---Paul Simon
INTRODUCTION

What is noteworthy about the dialectic of the principal discourse concerning Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* is that while areopagitica after areopagitica has been written defending the novel under the banner of freedom of expression, the framework drawn up for the understanding of the novel by those who read it as an Orientalist attack on Islam has remained largely unchallenged. This contextualization of the novel and the parameters within which the novel has come to be understood have received little critical attention—and thus the reading of *The Satanic Verses* as Orientalist and the coincident positioning of Rushdie as "brown sahib" has, by virtue of rhetoric and repetition, gained widespread acceptance.

*Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies is perhaps the most complete attempt to contextualize the novel as an Orientalist attack on Islam. This book positions Rushdie as a writer for whom cultures are packed in an hierarchical order: every culture is walking the incline of history, slightly out of breath, trying to reach up to become like the culture of modernity, the zenith of Western civilization. (87)

Rushdie is positioned by their discourse as a brown sahib—and *The Satanic Verses* is read as the product of Rushdie's internalization of Orientalist prejudices in his attempt to identify with the colonial culture:

In his desperate attempt to obliterate his indigenous identity and submerge it into the European self, the brown sahib seeks to present his original culture and civilization as a pre-modern extension of the culture and civilization of the mother country [...] The literary endeavours of the brown sahib are the product of this grand Western project. His brown colour
ensures the eagerness of many Europeans to listen to
his authentic voice and thus have their own prejudices
confirmed. (86)

This positioning of Rushdie is the framework through which Sardar and
Wyn Davies read The Satanic Verses, which they contend "reads like a
re-run of a cul de sac of history, Orientalism" (5).

In Be Careful With Muhammad! Shabbir Akhtar of the Bradford
Council of Mosques attempts to outline the intellectual position of his
organization and others that were united in their opposition to the
publication of the novel. Akhtar also ties the novel to the historic
Western animus against Islam and contends that "The parody of Muhammad
and the Muslim tradition in The Satanic Verses has clear echoes of the
worst brand of Orientalist sentiment" (8). While Akhtar wavers between
reading the two chapters of the novel that principally raise his ire as
parody or as Rushdie's revisionist account of the early history of
Islam, his argument against the novel--that it is an Orientalist attack
on Islam--remains constant. In a lecture delivered at Cornell
University on March 1st 1989, Ali Mazrui mused: "is Salman Rushdie
simply continuing his basic contempt for his own roots?" (85) That
Rushdie possesses this basic contempt for his own roots is assumed by
Mazrui in his lecture. Mazrui accuses Rushdie of cultural treason for
having written a novel that is disrespectful of Islam for the
"titillation of his Western readers" (86). This positioning of Rushdie
as brown sahib or cultural traitor and the reading of the novel as an
Orientalist attack on Islam is so widespread it has given rise to a
collection of essays and articles--The Kiss of Judas: Affairs of a Brown
Sahib--that not only propagate this understanding but take it as the
basic premise for their response to the novel.

This positioning of Rushdie provides the framework for the reading
of the novel as Orientalist, and the reading of the novel as Orientalist
reinforces the positioning of Rushdie, each concept validating the
other. In this paper I hope to dismantle the framework of Orientalism within which the novel has been understood, and to call into question the positioning of Rushdie as brown sahib. More than merely showing that the accusation of Orientalism that is made against Rushdie is critically untenable, this paper intends to demonstrate how such a positioning of Rushdie can be understood as a rhetorical device constructed to subvert Rushdie's authority and to obscure the actual critique of Islam that is offered in the novel.
INDIAN IDENTITY IN RUSHDIE'S WRITING

The identity of the Westernized Indian is a recurring theme in Rushdie's writing. In "Imaginary Homelands," an essay he wrote in 1982, Rushdie explores the identity of and conflicts faced by Indian writers based in the West, and by extension, himself:

The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinged spectacles. (I am of course, once more, talking about myself.) I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated [...] and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. (15)

But Rushdie saw more to migration than merely loss and displacement—for him this translation could be a magnificent experience and could create new plural hybrid identities:

The word "translation" comes, etymologically, from the Latin for "bearing across". Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained. (17)

This question of the identity of the Westernized Indian was explored by Rushdie in Midnight's Children through the character of Dr. Aadam Aziz, the narrator Saleem Sinai's grandfather. The novel begins with the story of Dr. Aziz who returned from five years of studying medicine at Heidelberg to see the valley of his birth through different, travelled eyes: "Instead of the beauty of the tiny valley circled by giant teeth, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon" (5). Not only did Dr. Aziz see the valley differently, but he felt that the valley also saw him differently: "as though the old place resented
his educated, stethoscoped return" (5). The story of Dr. Aziz's return from Heidelberg, and how he is forced from the valley by the displeasure of Tai the shikara, who has branded him an outsider, is Rushdie's introduction to the question of the identity of the Westernized Indian. The story captures the tension within Dr. Aziz himself, as well as the tension between him and those who considered him somehow less Indian due to his Western education. Given the colonial relationship between the British and the Indians, the sentiments on both sides were perhaps unsurprising.

Rushdie touches on the question of the identity of the Westernized Indian only tangentially in Midnight's Children, yet the novel's constant return to the theme of Indian national identity provides many clues to the direction of Rushdie's thinking on this subject—which he would develop more fully in The Satanic Verses. Rushdie's idea of Indian identity is plural, eclectic and hybrid—and he sees India as a nation filled with endless potential and possibility. The confused parentage of Saleem Sinai (who is handcuffed to India's history) mirrors Rushdie's ideas about the confused and hybrid nature of Indian identity. The midnight's children themselves are a metaphor for the plurality, the multiplicity, the superabundance, and most importantly, the potential of India. It is the endless possibility and potential that is the product of this plural eclectic hybridity that defines India for Rushdie.

In his third novel, Shame, Rushdie once again touched on the relationship of the Westernized Indian to the subcontinent. In Shame, Rushdie is writing a story set in a looking-glass Pakistan—a nation that he has come to know in slices—and he reconciles himself to the fact that "however I choose to write about over-there, I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors" (69). Rushdie anticipates his own positioning and the accusations that will be made against his legitimacy to represent the subcontinent:
Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? (28)

But once again, the identity of the Westernized Indian, and his or her credentials, remains a tangential and unresolved issue.

In a documentary made in 1987, entitled the Riddle of Midnight, Rushdie explored the nature of Indian identity as he understood it, and examined where India had come to in the forty years since independence:

I come from Bombay and a Muslim family, too. 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, heterogenous, many things at once. (Imaginary Homelands, 32)

This question of Indian identity is one that recurs in Rushdie's writing. It is only in The Satanic Verses that he expounds a full and comprehensive philosophy of Indian identity and in doing so presents us with new ways of understanding and appreciating the position and perspective of the Westernized Indian.
INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE SATANIC VERSES

It is in *The Satanic Verses* that Rushdie puts forth his most comprehensive vision of the Westernized Indian and of how he/she is best understood. Rushdie is himself a Westernized Indian, and it is clear from his earlier writing that the questions of identity faced by Westernized Indians are central to his thinking:

To be an Indian writer in this society is to face, every day, problems of definition. What does it mean to be Indian outside India? How can culture be preserved without being ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world? (*Imaginary Homelands*, 17-18)

The mere fact that Rushdie is Westernized and that he writes about the subcontinent from this perspective is a complicated issue for him. In "Imaginary Homelands" he suggests that his dual perspective as both an insider and an outsider to Indian society (as well as British) might provide him with interesting and illuminating angles on the construction of truth and reality, and he argues persuasively for the benefits of translation. Nevertheless, his perspective on the subcontinent is not an uncomplicated or unproblematic one for him, and this is an issue that he feels the necessity to face within all his writing on the subcontinent. In *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* this tension is alluded to tangentially, but not resolved. In *The Satanic Verses*, however, this issue of the identity of the Westernized Indian takes centre stage, and is one of the principal themes of the novel.
In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie argues that Indian identity is essentially plural and hybrid, a hotch-potch of many many different cultures, some indigenous and some alien. He argues that Indian culture and identity is a melange of, among others, Aryan, Persian and Mughal influences. This understanding of Indian identity is an elaboration of his contention in *Midnight's Children* and the documentary the *Riddle of Midnight*, and appears as a principal theme in *The Satanic Verses*. It is through this elaboration of his theory of Indian identity, that Rushdie is able to offer some kind of resolution to the crisis of identity faced by the Westernized Indian, which has loomed in the background of his previous writing on the subcontinent.

In the novel, we are first introduced to Rushdie's conception of Indian identity via Zeenat Vakil's book of art criticism:

> [her book was] on the confining myth of authenticity, that folklorist straightjacket which she had sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest? [...] She had called it *The Only Good Indian*. "Meaning, is a dead," she told Chamcha when she gave him a copy. "Why should there be a good, right way of being a wog? That's Hindu fundamentalism. Actually, we're all bad Indians. Some worse than others." (52)

The philosophy put forth by Zeenat's book echoes Rushdie's own writing on the subject. She explores the nature of Indian art, and through this exploration comes to the conclusion that Indian art reflects Indian cultural identity, in that it is hugely eclectic and multifaceted and that it has been born out of centuries of cross-pollination. This is not a particularly difficult conclusion to agree with, especially when one considers that India itself is more of a continent than a country
(three countries these days to be precise, and that's not even including Sri Lanka, Bhutan or Nepal). In the first place, as Rushdie has in fact pointed out in *Midnight's Children*, Indian identity varies from region to region—for instance a Gujurati notion of Indian identity might be very different from a Bengali or a Punjabi notion, and might have very little in common with Tamil notions of Indian identity. Not only is India very heterogenous on the inside, as a country she has been shaped by many different outside influences, beginning with the Aryan civilization which originated in central Asia (or central Europe depending on which historians you read) but was certainly not a culture indigenous to the subcontinent. Neither Mughal, British nor Persian culture was indigenous to the subcontinent, but each had a profound effect on the growth and development of what is now generally accepted as Indian culture. The logical conclusion to the argument that Westernized Indians are somehow less "Indian" than other Indians would be to suggest that Muslim culture as it exists among Urdu speakers in Northern India and Pakistan and dating back to the time of the Mughals, is not truly Indian—which Zeenat Vakil points out is precisely the creed of Hindu fundamentalism. Muslims are no less Indian than Hindus, regardless of the fact that they trace their heritage, culture and religion to roots outside of India—of course, there are some who would claim that precisely for this reason Muslims are less Indian than Hindus, but this is, fortunately, a minority point of view.

We see this concept of Indian identity recurring throughout the novel. The *Hamza-nama* in the house of Changez Chamchawala brings us back to this positing of Indian identity:

The pictures also provided eloquent proof of Zeeny Vakil's thesis about the eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition. The Mughals had brought artists from every part of India to work on the paintings; individual identity was submerged to create a many-headed, many-brushed Overartist who, literally, was Indian painting. One hand would draw
the mosaic floors, a second the figures, a third would paint the Chinese-looking cloudy skies [...] In the Hamza-nama you could see the Persian miniature fusing with Kannada and Keralan philosophy forming their characteristically late-Mughal synthesis. (70)

This theme of the eclectic nature of Indian identity is even alluded to in the philosophy propounded by Muhammad Sufyan, the ex-schoolteacher from Dhaka, who runs the thriving Shaandaar Cafe:

[he] could quote effortlessly from Rig-Veda as well as Quran-Sharif, from the military accounts of Julius Caesar as well as the Revelations of St. John the Divine [...] secularist Sufyan swallowed the multiple cultures of the subcontinent--"and let us not pretend that Western culture is not present; after these centuries, how could it not also be part of our heritage?" (246)

Here Rushdie shows how his positing of the eclectic and hybridized nature of Indian identity is tied to his repositioning and reappraisal of the identity of the Westernized Indian.

Rushdie rejects the polar opposition between the West and the East--between England and India--that is based on the history of colonial opposition between the two cultures. Rushdie is no apologist for the British Raj--quite the opposite--but he insists that Western culture, specifically English culture, is now an integral part of Indian culture and identity. The positioning of the Westernized Indian as somehow less Indian by virtue of his/her Westernization posits a binary opposition between England and India, which ultimately leads to a privileging of the two hundred years of British rule out of all proportion with their true influence on the subcontinent. If Indian identity is eclectic and hybridized, hotch-potch to use Rushdie's own terminology, a bit of this and a bit of that, constantly refashioning itself, determinedly pluralistic and never singular, then why should Westernization be viewed as anything more than one of the influences
that might go towards fashioning a person's Indian identity? A Westernized Indian is no less a true Indian than an Urdu speaker from Lucknow steeped in Mughal traditions, or a tribal from Arunachal on the Chinese border, where the influences of Chinese culture and heritage are greatly in evidence. The notion of someone being somehow less Indian due to his/her cultural influences, language, beliefs or values, is dependent on the positing of a singular notion of Indian identity, which is precisely what Rushdie argues does not exist.

This is Rushdie's resolution to the crisis of identity that has plagued his earlier writing on India. In *The Satanic Verses* he has elaborated his concept of Indian identity, and using his elaboration as a base has suggested a dazzling repositioning and reunderstanding of the identity of the Westernized Indian:

Chamcha decided to grin and then fight back. "Zeeny," he said, "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. Columbus was right, maybe; the world's made up of Indies, East, West, North. Damn it, you should be proud of us, our enterprise, the way we push against frontiers. Only thing is, we're not Indian like you. You better get used to us. What was the name of that book you wrote?"

Although Chamcha himself is perhaps not the best ambassador for this point of view, having as Zeenat points out, spent his entire life denying his Indian identity and attempting to turn white, the argument is Rushdie's. One of the things that he finds most attractive about India as a country is her capacity for regeneration, the myriad possibilities that result from her hybridized nature, the enormous potential for newness and originality in this constant recycling and renewal—and he finds that the Westernized Indian might therefore be understood to be quintessentially Indian. He does not see the Westernized Indian as an imitation of the colonial identity, but as
something new and exciting—a prime example of the regeneration of Indian identity out of disparate ones. The Westernized Indian need not be considered a mere imitation Westerner (although in the case of Saladin Chamcha such a designation might be quite appropriate). Rather than look at the Western influence on Indian culture through the prism of colonialism—Rushdie suggests that how Indians have taken aspects of Western culture and adapted them to Indian culture reflects the take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest development of the national identity. Nowadays, Indians play cricket and put milk in their tea without the slightest trace of self-consciousness. These activities might have been introduced to the subcontinent by the British—but they are no longer foreign. The various languages of the subcontinent too have been influenced by the English language. In many parts of the subcontinent, one refers to one's supervisor or boss as the incharge. In a court of law, the defendant is referred to as the undertrial. Indians have taken aspects of Western culture and language, and adapted them in the formation of Indian culture and languages. There is no cause to view this adaptation as anything other than Indian. Rushdie is attempting to demonstrate how an Indian can be Westernized without being a brown sahib who identifies with the colonial culture.
BRITISH INDIANS

*The Satanic Verses* is, in many ways, a celebration of British Indian identity, and by extension, the identity of the Westernized Indian. Rushdie's ideas about how Westernization can create a new and vibrant strain of Indian identity are reflected in his depiction of the Indian community of Brickhall. *The Satanic Verses* is a repositioning and reappraisal of British Indian culture along the lines drawn up by Rushdie in his definition of Indian identity. It demonstrates that British Indian culture is neither imitation mainstream British culture, nor a diluted or tainted (and therefore lesser) form of Indian culture—but something new and exciting that has grown out of the cross-pollination of both. The British Indian identity that Rushdie depicts within the pages of his novel is an illustration of what he takes to be the limitless potential and possibility that defines Indian identity.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie writes with great sympathy about the trials of those Indians for whom migration to England has meant nothing but loss and alienation. He manages to convey the sense of pain and disjuncture felt by those members of the Indian community in Brickhall for whom England has been less of a promised land than a hostile and unfamiliar Babylon:

> Everything she valued had been upset by the change; had in this process of translation been lost. Her language: obliged, now, to emit these alien sounds that made her tongue feel tired, was she not entitled to moan? Where now was the city she knew? Where the village of her youth and the green waterways of home? The customs around which she had built her life were lost, too, or at least were hard to find. Nobody in this Vilayet had time for the slow courtesies of life back home, or for the many observances of faith [...] and worst of all, the poison of this devil-island had infected her baby girls, who were growing up refusing
to speak their mother-tongue, even though they understood every word, they did it just to hurt.

(249-250)

But while the novel chronicles the discontent of the transplanted Indian, it is also at the same time a celebration of the new identity that must be forged out of such seemingly inauspicious surroundings. Hind Sufyan might bemoan the fact that her daughters are not growing up the way that they would have done had the family remained in Bangladesh—but it is important to perceive what she does not—that they are growing up not as imitation Englishwomen but as British Indians, and that their own personal identity and self-definition is intertwined with their identification as such. They may not be Indian (or specifically, in this case, Bangladeshi) in any way that their mother can identify—but there exists a crucial distinction between them and the majority culture.

*The Satanic Verses* makes this distinction clear. The novel provides us with a vivid depiction of British Indian life and culture and makes us aware of the crucial factor that being Indian plays in the formulation of such an identity:

Mishal had developed the habit of talking about the street as if it were a mythological battleground, and she, on high at Chamcha's attic window, the recording angel, and the exterminator too. From her Chamcha learned the fables of the new Kurus and Pandavas, the white racists and black self-help or vigilante posses starring in this modern *Mahabharata*, or, more accurately, *Mahavilayet*. Up there, under the railway bridge, the National Front used to do battle with the fearless radicals of the Socialist Workers Party [...] Down that alley was where the Brickhall Three were done over by the police and then fitted up, verbauled, framed; up that side-street he'd find the scene of the murder of the Jamaican, Ulysses E. Lee, and in that public house the stain on the carpet marking where Jatinder Singh Mehta breathed his last [...] These days the posses roamed the nocturnal Street, ready for
aggravation. "It's our turf," said Mishal Sufyan of that street without a blade of grass in sight. "Let 'em come and get it if they can." (283-284)

The Satanic Verses is a strong statement of British Indian identity. Rushdie, in his depiction of their concerns, their realities, and their mythologies, demonstrates the Indian component of such an identity, or, in other words, the essentially Indian nature of such an identity. Mishal's declarations are representative of Rushdie's vision of British Indian youth, seemingly deracinated, but in truth fiercely loyal to their own identity, to their own determination of self which is a celebration of their otherness--of their Indianness--of their non-whiteness. Mishal is a demonstration of how British Indian youth have carved out an identity for themselves that is anything but a denial of their race and roots--an identity, in fact, that is deeply connected to their race and their roots. There is more than one way of being an Indian--this is one of the central themes of The Satanic Verses which recurs again and again in the text--and characters such as Mishal Sufyan or Hanif Johnson or the DJ Pinkwalla or even Jumpy Joshi hammer home this point of Rushdie's. They are the perfect example of what he is talking about--a new breed of Indian--just as Indian identity has constantly renewed and refashioned itself, and is doing so, and has been doing so constantly and endlessly, so these British Indians are an example of that capacity for renewal and regeneration. This depiction of British Indian life and identity and culture makes Rushdie's point that new frameworks need to be drawn up understand this identity--and that to merely dismiss it as an imitation of Western identity would be a crude simplification which would not capture the essential Indianness of such an identity.
Rushdie has been accused of being a brown sahib—an Indian who identifies with the colonial culture. The accusation made against him by countless critics (some of whom I have mentioned by name earlier) is that he is nothing more than the Anglicized Indian imagined by Macaulay in his Minute on Indian Education:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect. (Sardar and Wyn Davies, 77)

Leaving aside the fact that this accusation against Rushdie is dependant on the acceptance of Macaulay's belief that there exist such things as English morals and intellect (as opposed, presumably, to Indian ones)—we perceive that Rushdie is being accused of internalizing, and in The Satanic Verses reproducing, the prejudices of the colonial culture with regard to his own. In other words, Rushdie has been accused of parroting the colonialist party line with regard to the superiority of Western civilization and culture over that of the East:

Because Rushdie is a brown sahib his Western readers assume he gives them artistic truth superior to the Western preoccupation with the Orient. It takes knowledge of the context, the diversity of the Orient, the wealth and meaning of its tradition and history, to assess its real worth. When examined thus Rushdie emerges as little more than the distorted imagination writ large [...] The logic of the brown sahib requires destruction; its tools are constant rejection, abnegation and denigration of indigenous tradition, as a positive means of achieving the end they accept as good. The objective is the remaking of the non-West in the image of the West. (Sardar and Wyn Davies, 141 & 271)

These are serious accusations to make against a post-colonial writer. I
hope to establish that a close contextual reading of *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates that to accuse Rushdie of propagating the remaking of the non-West in the image of the West is ludicrous. Such a positioning of Rushdie pre-supposes his belief in the superiority of the West to the East—a belief that the text of *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates is patently untenable.

*The Satanic Verses* is at least as strongly critical of the West, and in particular, of England, the imperial centre, as it is of religious absolutism. In the novel, Rushdie elaborates on many of the concerns that he had raised with regard to England as an essayist and social critic throughout the nineteen eighties. Essays such as "The New Empire Within Britain," "An Unimportant Fire," and "Outside the Whale," which are reproduced in *Imaginary Homelands*, introduce the themes that Rushdie would develop in *The Satanic Verses*. In these essays, Rushdie takes English culture to pieces for what he refers to as its neo-colonial, neo-imperialist values. He argues that British racism has created a new empire within Britain, and that this racism is in fact little more than a renewal of British colonial attitudes towards the races they had colonized for centuries. Rushdie also expresses concern about the racism that dominates the British police and immigration authorities, and suggests that these attitudes not only reflect the attitude of mainstream England towards people of other races but are, in fact, officially sanctioned. And lastly, his essays are strong denunciations of the greed, inequality and injustice that in his judgment pervades life in Britain. These themes are all to be found at the heart of *The Satanic Verses*, and the novel can be understood as a scathing attack on all that is corrupt and wrong with British civilization and culture.

Rushdie introduces his theme of officially sanctioned racism in the opening pages of the novel. His first reference is nothing more than an aside:
Also—for there had been more than a few migrants aboard, yes, quite a quantity of wives who had been grilled by reasonable, doing-their-job officials about the length of and distinguishing moles upon their husbands' genitalia, a sufficiency of children upon whose legitimacy the British government had cast its ever-reasonable doubts. (4)

From the very opening, we perceive that the novel is to be an attack on British racism. Rushdie introduces this theme by alluding, almost in passing, to the appalling treatment meted out by immigration authorities to migrants travelling to be reunited with their families. The casual, almost off-hand, and certainly ironic tone in which he mentions these incidents reinforces his point that such occurrences are nothing unusual, and suggests the pervasiveness of racist attitudes. The brutality of the immigration authorities is elaborated in his depiction of the treatment of Saladin Chamcha at their hands. After he is arrested for illegal entry into country (in itself an irony—the plane he was in is blown up by a terrorist bomb) he is brutalized by the immigration police, who physically abuse him and force him to eat his own excrement. Rushdie's chilling depiction of such treatment signals to the reader that the book is anything but a glorification of English culture and civilization.

The novel is a strong condemnation of the British police, and as such, can be understood as an accusation of officially sanctioned racism. The picture Rushdie draws of the metropolitan (London) police force is one of a body of authority that is guilty of systematic harassment of the non-white population. This is a police force that arrests the activist Dr. Uhuru Simba for the serial killings and mutilations that have terrorized the community of Brickhall, fully intending to frame him and do whatever it takes to convict him. It is suggested that the framing of non-white individuals at the hands of the authorities is commonplace, and when Simba dies in police custody under
highly suspicious circumstances it is again suggested that this is nothing out of the ordinary. This is a police force that is riddled with witches' covens (categorized by Pamela Chamcha as working-class free-masonry) who murder Pamela Chamcha and Jumpy Joshi to ensure their silence in this regard. This is a police force that instigates riots and routinely provides defence for racist white youth terrorizing the non-white community. Rushdie's harsh depiction of the British police can be read as a wider condemnation of officially sanctioned racism that reflects the racism pervading British society.

Rushdie goes further than this in his attempt to highlight British racism in his novel. *The Satanic Verses* depicts an England that is divided along largely racial lines. His primary criticism of racism can be found in his depiction of the Indian community and the trials and tribulations that they are faced with both at the hands of a racist society and at the hands of an uncaring, unsympathetic and often hostile police force. This is a society where skinheads terrorize the patrons of Indian eating establishments, spitting on their food and looking for aggravation—and of course when it comes it is the Indians who are taken to jail, not the skinheads. This is a society where city councils house newly arrived immigrants in unsafe and unsanitary conditions—where they can, and sometimes do, burn to death as a result of official negligence. Rushdie succeeds in portraying a non-white community which feels that it is under siege—and it is this portrayal that is perhaps the most definitive condemnation of racism. It is not just that they are victims of injustice and inequality—it is the open and outright hostility and persecution that large sections of the non-white population of England are forced to deal with every day of their lives that is one of the principal themes of *The Satanic Verses*.

Rushdie not only finds fault with British society for its treatment of minority communities—he ties this in with his condemnation of the greed and injustice that he feels is endemic to the society.
Rushdie's depiction of characters such as Hal Valance and Billy Battuta represents his vision of the greed and corruption that lies at the heart of English society. The England to be found within the pages of *The Satanic Verses* is a harsh and cruel country—a country that has lost its way; and Rushdie's point is that this is no accident, no coincidence, but that England is now merely feeling the effects of the essentially flawed values and beliefs upon which the nation's identity is based.

Rushdie portrays England as a fundamentally flawed culture and civilization—by no means a civilization to revere and emulate. The novel does not suggest that India should seek to remake itself in the image of the colonizer—which is the accusation made by critics such as Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies—in fact the novel suggests exactly the opposite. At the beginning of the novel Saladin Chamcha believes British civilization and culture to be the pre-eminent ones in the world—but Zeenat Vakil (as well as Pamela Chamcha) is quick to contest this belief:

"I was so proud of Bhupen tonight," Zeenat said, getting into bed. "In how many countries could you go into some bar and start up a debate like that? The passion, the seriousness, the respect. You keep your civilization, Toadji; I like this one plenty fine."

(58)

And, of course, the story of Saladin Chamcha is nothing if not the story of his being made aware of the error of his earlier beliefs, and his progression towards Zeenat's point of view. The novel concludes with Saladin having found his way back to Bombay, turning his back on his earlier beliefs, and embracing those of Zeenat Vakil. His return to Zeenat Vakil itself is representative of his choosing India over England. In *East, West*—a collection of short stories—Rushdie writes that he refuses to choose between East and West—however, *The Satanic Verses* makes it clear what his choice would be, were one forced upon him—and that his primary identification is with the East.
THE BROWN SAHIB

In *The Satanic Verses*, the story of Saladin Chamcha is Rushdie's rejection of the brown sahib mentality that he is accused of celebrating and propagating. If anything, the narrative points out the futility and folly of such a mentality and can be read as a cautionary tale of the psychological toll taken by such a philosophy on the person and mind of those who buy into it. Rushdie's treatment of the brown sahib is more or less even-handed and charitable. He even applauds the heroism and grandness of Chamcha's vision in taking on the task of the creator—that is the task of recreating or remaking himself—but the novel ultimately demonstrates that his remaking of himself is less a refashioning along bold new lines than a straightforward rejection of his Indian identity and unquestioning acceptance of British values and modes of thought. Chamcha's philosophy is shown to be narrow-minded and unimaginative, his personality little more than a mask—a smudgy imitation of his idealized vision of the colonial identity—and his life consequently empty, hollow, and unfulfilling.

The story of Saladin Chamcha's rehabilitation and his return to the name and identity of Salahuddin Chamchawala is Rushdie's reflection of the limitations of the brown sahib philosophy. The novel begins with Salahuddin Chamchawala having successfully remade himself into the brown sahib Saladin Chamcha. He is a successful actor—the man of a thousand voices and a voice—living with his English wife Pamela in their five-storey mansion in Notting Hill. He believed in his idealized vision of the dream England of poise and moderation—and lived to be worthy of the challenge represented by the phrase *Civis Britannicus sum*. Looked at from another point of view, however, Chamcha is almost a caricature—his values and beliefs, and even his appearance are no more than mimicry of that of a
"goodandproper" Englishman—he even makes his living through mimicry—putting on masks and speaking in voices that are not his own.

In his refashioning of himself into Saladin Chamcha he has denied everything of his Indian self, and he returns to Bombay to see if he can make peace with his Indian roots and identity. Chamcha's return to Bombay after an absence of fifteen years is not all that he expected it to be. He finds that he is unable to come to terms with either his roots or his own Indian identity. He finds that his attempts to reclaim India for himself are more problematic, and that his psychological difficulties in coming to terms with his roots are more fundamental, than he had imagined: "He had begun to hear, in India's babel, an ominous warning: don't come back again. When you have stepped through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds" (58). It is Zeenat Vakil who points out the hollowness of Chamcha's life of make believe as a brown sahib, and makes his reclamation her project:

You know what you are, I'll tell you. A deserter is what, more English than, your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don't think its so perfect, it slips, baba, like a false moustache. (53)

Zeenat points out that his life in England is not as perfect as he would like to imagine, and that his refusal to come to terms with his Indian identity has only succeeded in obscuring the truth of his situation:

Such a fool, you, the big star whose face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs, who has to travel to wogland with some two-bit company, playing the babu part on top of it, just to get into a play. They kick you around and still you stay, you love them, bloody slave mentality, I swear. (61)

Zeenat insists that he is in denial about the truth of his life in England. She senses the emptiness of his existence and argues that the only way for him to become whole again is through coming to terms with
India and the Indian identity that he had so long ago left behind. Her protestations and his experiences while back in India crack through Chamcha's shell—but he is so apprehensive of what he might find beneath his English exterior that he resolves once again to bury his Indian identity, rather than to come to terms with it and incorporate it into the new identity that he has fashioned for himself. He takes the catastrophic attempt at reconciliation with his father as symbolic of the futility of attempted reclamation of his Indian self, and returns to India determined to have nothing further to do with his Indian identity:

Damn you India, Saladin Chamcha cursed silently, sinking back into his seat. To hell with you, I escaped your clutches long ago, you won't get your hooks into me again, you cannot drag me back. (35)

It is when he is at this stage of consciousness that Chamcha falls from the exploding plane and begins to metamorphose into a devil. It is at this moment that the true metamorphosis that he undergoes begins to take place:

But at the time he had no doubt; what had taken him over was the will to live, unadulterated, irresistible, pure, and the first thing it did was to inform him that it wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices. (9)

Due to his metamorphosis into a devil, Chamcha is demonized by the immigration police, and forced to come to terms with his otherness, and to thus identify with the Indian community in England from which he had previously kept aloof. After his fall from the plane, Chamcha feels that he has woken into the most fearsome of nightmares and often returns to the thought that he has fallen out of the sky and into some realm that was not England, but rather a grotesque and surreal looking-glass version of the England that he had come to identify with so closely. Rushdie suggests that this feeling of having woken into the most
fearsome of nightmares helps to awaken Chamcha from his dream vision of England, and that his persecution and demonization bring him into closer understanding of his identity as an Indian in England.

Chamcha is forced by his metamorphosis to seek physical refuge among the Indian (here Bangladeshi to be precise) community in the bed and breakfast above the Shaandaar Cafe run by Muhammad and Hind Sufyan. The first night of his incarceration at the Shaandaar Cafe, he feels only alienation among the Indian community.

"Best place for you is here," [Muhammad Sufyan] said, speaking as if to a simpleton or small child. "Where else would you go to heal your disfigurement and recover your normal health? Where else but here, with us, among your own people, your own kind?"

Only when Saladin Chamcha was alone in the attic room at the very end of his strength did he answer Sufyan's rhetorical question. "I'm not your kind," he said distinctly into the night. "You're not my people. I've spent half my life trying to get away from you."

(253)

But Chamcha's incarceration at the cafe and his metamorphosis into a devil result in the beginnings of his identification with the Indian community which is the first step in his reclamation of self. Chamcha's demonization forces him into an awareness of the unreality of his own vision of England, and as he lives with and learns about the experiences of the Indian community in England--their realities and their mythologies--he begins to feel a connection to the community and to come to terms with his Indian identity. Chamcha's deliverance comes from his eventual acceptance of that which he is: "I am, he accepted, that I am. Submission" (289).

This acceptance of his Indian identity is the first step in Chamcha's rehabilitation, and paves the way for the resolution of his crises. Now that he can come to accept his Indian identity, he is able to come to terms with his father, his past, and Zeenat Vakil herself:
His old English life, its bizarreries, its evils, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant, like his truncated stage-name. "About time," Zeeny approved when he told her of his return to Salahuddin. "Now you can stop acting at last." Yes, this looked like the start of a new phase, in which the world would be solid and real. (534)

The novel concludes in resolution for Chamcha—he is reconciled with his father, reconciled to his Indian identity demonstrated by his return to the name Salahuddin Chamchawala, and reunited with Zeenat Vakil: "It seemed that in spite of all his wrong-doing, weakness guilt—in spite of his humanity—he was getting another chance" (547)—and this new chance that he gets at life is fashioned out of his reclamation of his Indian self.

The narrative of Saladin Chamcha is a condemnation of the brown sahib mentality. Saladin Chamcha is a brown sahib who through his metamorphosis into a devil comes to appreciate his Indian identity and finally finds his way back to wholeness. The narrative suggests that for a brown sahib to become complete—to make peace with himself—he must first come to terms with his identity as an Indian. This is the real metamorphosis that Saladin Chamcha undergoes through the narrative—the metamorphosis from brown sahib to Salahuddin Chamchawala. His metamorphosis into a devil merely facilitated this deeper change within his psyche. It is only in the reclamation of his Indian identity that Chamcha could truly metamorphose and become complete.
While there exist elements of autobiography in the story of Saladin Chamcha, Rushdie goes to great lengths to distance himself from the character of Chamcha. The most obvious indication of this distance is in his naming of the character. In Urdu chamcha literally means "spoon" but idiomatically means "ass-kisser", and in so naming him, Rushdie indicates his own attitude towards the brown sahib. While Chamcha is not drawn unsympathetically, he is more or less a caricature of a brown sahib, and it is clear that Rushdie is having fun with the creation of this character. Chamcha's profession can even be seen ironically—it is as though Rushdie is suggesting that being an actor, or more specifically, a voice-over artist who can only appear on TV after he is covered in latex and computer simulation, is an ironic comment on Chamcha's status in England and the quality of his life there.

Of course, Rushdie himself was involved in theatre in his younger days, and there is an autobiographic feel to Jumpy Joshi's explanation of the lure of the theatre for Chamcha:

Chamcha's room struck the sleepless intruder as contrived, and therefore sad: the caricature of an actor's room full of signed photographs of colleagues, handbills, framed programmes, production stills, citations, awards, volumes of movie-star memoirs, a room bought off the peg, by the yard, an imitation of life, a mask's mask [...] and everywhere, on the wall, in the movie posters, in the glow of the lamp borne by bronze Eros, in the mirror shaped like a heart, oozing up through the blood red carpet, dripping from the ceiling, Saladin's need for love. In the theatre everybody gets kissed and everybody is darling. The actor's life offers, on a daily basis, the simulacrum of love; a mask can be satisfied, or at least consoled, by the echo of what it seeks. (174)

And there are other incidents in Chamcha's life—such as his sitting at the table for ninety minutes at boarding school attempting to eat a kipper without knowing how—that Rushdie admits are echoes of his own
experience. Chamcha’s determination to conquer England—even down to his relationship with his wife: "Part of it? I was bloody Britannia. Warm beer, mince pies, common sense and me" (175)—seem to have autobiographical models (see Weatherby, 91-107). There are times in the novel, when the character of Saladin Chamcha seems to be drawn from Rushdie’s own experience, and certainly Rushdie’s own life is one of the principal sources for Chamcha.

While it is natural that there should be some autobiographical aspects to the characterization of Saladin Chamcha, the dissimilarities between him and Rushdie are far more profound. In the novel, we learn of how the young Salahuddin found himself growing increasingly impatient with the dust and the vulgarity of Bombay and longed for that dream England of poise and moderation. Chamcha’s feelings for Bombay here are diametrically opposed to those of Rushdie—who in Midnight’s Children demonstrated his great affection for the dust and vulgarity and superabundance of the subcontinent as a whole, and of Bombay in particular. Unlike Chamcha, Rushdie had to be bullied back to England by his father to attend university.

The principal difference between Rushdie and Chamcha, as would be apparent to anyone who was even passingly familiar with Rushdie’s non-fictional work, is political, and concerns their attitude towards England. While Chamcha believes in the England of poise and moderation, and is a staunch admirer of England’s culture and heritage and glorious colonial history, Rushdie has spent two decades attacking what he terms neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism in English attitudes. Rushdie’s essay "Outside the Whale" is a powerful criticism of the revival and glorification of England’s colonial history that took place in the mid nineteen eighties. This criticism is renewed in his essay "A New Empire Within Britain" in which Rushdie connects the jingoism and patriotism of the Falklands War with this revival of Britain’s colonial past. In this essay, Rushdie condemns the Falklands War and connects the support for
it to the racism that he believes is endemic to the nation. The political slant of these essays is in direct contrast to Chamcha's patriotic conservative convictions—and it would be a great mistake to assume that Rushdie shares any of Chamcha's beliefs about the glory and greatness of British civilization. Rushdie concludes his anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist tirade in "A New Empire Within Britain" with the comment:

And so it is interesting to remember that when Mahatma Gandhi, the father of an earlier freedom movement, came to England and was asked what he thought of English civilization, he replied: "I think it would be a good idea". (Imaginary Homelands, 138)

Lastly, of course, Chamcha's attitude towards England is tied to his conservative political beliefs. Rushdie has been a bitter denouncer of Thatcherism and British conservatism throughout the nineteen eighties, and it is clear that he shares none of Chamcha's political views—such as Chamcha's views on the Falklands War. If anything, Rushdie's own political views are best represented by those of Jumpy Joshi and Pamela Chamcha—the politics of leftist city councils in London's inner boroughs, the politics of anti-racist activists condemning the police in town halls, the politics of class traitors and champagne socialists—about which Saladin Chamcha is so scathing, and which Rushdie portrays self-deprecatingly in The Satanic Verses, half tongue-in-cheek, admiring their resolution and moral vigour, but all too aware of their, and by extension his own, failings.

The story of Saladin Chamcha is often read as largely autobiographical, and the consequences for the contextualization of the entire novel that stem from this misreading are immense. In their reading of the novel in Distorted Imagination, Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies take the connection to be so evident that they continually make use of the locution Chamcha/Rushdie as in:

The point is the nature of the change that
Chamcha/Rushdie can envisage, the kinds of options he conceives as possible for those remade and remaking people. (181)

The authors of this study then proceed to take Rushdie to task for the point of view that Chamcha voices. Their reading of the novel identifies Rushdie with the character of Chamcha, and argues from that basic premise—the result being a quite astonishing (mis)understanding of the novel. This misreading is a necessary first step to the positioning of Rushdie himself as brown sahib which provides the framework for the reading of the entire novel as Orientalist. It is important, therefore, to point out the distance between the author and his character—and to demonstrate that the philosophy or ideology of the novel as a whole does not support such an understanding. The identification of Salman Rushdie with the character of Saladin Chamcha and the subsequent positioning of Rushdie as brown sahib is critically untenable, and should be read for what it is—an intellectually dishonest attempt to discredit Rushdie and subvert the authority of his text. In this paper I hope to establish that the reading of The Satanic Verses as an Orientalist attack on Islam which is dependent upon this positioning of Rushdie can similarly be understood as an intellectually dishonest rhetorical strategy with no critical tenability.
What is Salman Rushdie being accused of when he is accused of Orientalism? The parameters of Orientalist thought were laid out and very precisely defined by Edward Said in his classic study Orientalism—and I believe that for the purposes of this paper it is necessary to now return to Said's understanding of the concept. In the introduction and first chapter of his study, Said attempts to outline the defining characteristics of Orientalist thinking:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted this basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. (2)

Said's introduction makes it clear that all Orientalist thinking proceeds from the positing of a basic distinction between the East and the West:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made the culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: The idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (7)

Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West [...] What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or
written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and a moral fact. (20-21)

Within this basic distinction that is posited between East and West, Orientalist thought takes as its basic premise the superiority of the Occident (and all that is identified with the West) to the Orient (and all that is identified with the East). What makes Orientalist thinking Orientalist, as far as it is identified and defined by Said, is that it operates from the premise of European superiority. But there is more to Said's definition than Western ethnocentrism--Said understands Orientalist writing an act of self-definition in negation to the Oriental "other". The writer indicates his/her distance from the Oriental "them" as an act of identification with the Occidental "us".

The question of identity is critical to the accusation of being an Orientalist that has been made against Rushdie. For Rushdie to be an Orientalist he must also be a brown sahib or cultural traitor. The accusation presupposes a dual positioning of Rushdie. At a very basic level the accusation suggests that Rushdie has internalized the Orientalist prejudice against the East and that The Satanic Verses is an expression of this prejudice. I hope that my close reading of the novel has succeeded in establishing the untenability of this supposition. The novel does not proceed from the basic premise of the superiority of Western culture and civilization to that of the East--nor does it suggest Western civilization as the model for the advancement and modernization of the East. The ideology of the novel is in direct opposition to the beliefs that form the basis of Orientalist thinking. Secondly, the accusation of Orientalism suggests that Rushdie has internalized Orientalist prejudices to the point of identifying himself with the West--and that the novel is a statement of this self-definition. I hope that this supposition, too, has been successfully dismantled by my close reading of the novel thus far.
At this point, it is imperative to draw a distinction between the negative representations of Islam that are the product of a Eurocentric perspective and can therefore be classified as Orientalist—and negative representations of Islam which cannot merely be dismissed as the product of Eurocentric prejudice. This is a distinction that is often not drawn—and the epithet of Orientalism is commonly applied as short-hand for any negative representation of Islam that originates in the West or is perceived to be aimed at a Western audience. This understanding is based on a confusion of the academic (pre-Saidian) definition of Orientalism as work that describes the Orient and makes the Orient speak for a Western audience—and Said's definition which refers to work that not only describes the Orient for a Western audience but also takes the superiority of the West to the East as its basic premise.

Said's argument is not with Western representation of the East per se—but with Western representations that operate from a Eurocentric and ethnocentric perspective. Under Said's definition a scholar such as Maxime Rodinson, the author of an acclaimed if controversial biography of Muhammad, is not an Orientalist, and Said even makes it a point to give scholars such as Rodinson a kind of dispensation from the general accusation of Orientalism:

On the other hand, scholars and critics who are trained in the traditional Orientalist disciplines are perfectly capable of freeing themselves from the old ideological straitjacket. Jacques Berque's and Maxime Rodinson's training ranks with the most rigorous available, but what invigorates their investigations even of traditional problems is their methodological self-consciousness [...] what one finds in their work is always, first of all, a direct sensitivity to the material before them, and then a continual self-examination of their methodology and practice, a constant attempt to keep their work responsive to the material and not to a doctrinal preconception. (326-327)
Said is extremely precise in his definition of Orientalism and it is evident that he did not perceive the concept as some catch-all term of condemnation for European representations of the East. According to the academic (pre-Saidian) definition of Orientalism, Rodinson is an Orientalist in that he describes the East for a Western audience—this however can hardly be held as grounds for condemnation. The confusion arises when a critic elides Said's definition of Orientalism with the academic (pre-Saidian) definition and concludes that Rodinson's secularist appraisal and representation of Islam is Orientalist in the negative (Saidian) understanding of the term.

This is precisely the confusion of terminology that I wish to avoid in this paper. Too many of the criticisms of Rushdie as Orientalist are based precisely on this confusion. The argument is that Rushdie has represented Islam negatively for a Western audience—and is thus guilty of Orientalism. I hope that I have demonstrated that because such an argument is premised upon a mistaken definition of the term Orientalism—it is untenable and need not be refuted further.

Critics who read *The Satanic Verses* as an Orientalist attack on Islam focus their argument on the dream sequences in which Gibreel Farishta witnesses and is a participant in the birth of a religion, Submission, that, to quote Rushdie, "both is and is not Islam" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 409). The contention of these critics is summarized succinctly by Shabbir Akhtar:

The two chapters "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia", containing Gibreel's coherent dreams, are in effect Rushdie's attempt to rewrite chronologically the history of early Islam. Taken together, along with some subsidiary material in other chapters, these sections of the book proffer an alternative biography of Muhammad, his wives and his companions. (4)

The dialectic of this argument identifies Rushdie with the West, and therefore reads the novel within the context of the history of Western
animus against Islam, and the history of Western scholarship and literature that Orientalizes Islam. There exists in the West a vast corpus of scholarship and literature that distorts and misrepresents Islam, and it is within this context that The Satanic Verses is read as the latest in a long line of Orientalist attacks on Islam. Edward Said makes precisely this point in an essay discussing the contextualization of the novel:

Above all, however, there rises the question that people from the Islamic world ask: Why must a Muslim who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, now represent us so roughly, so expertly and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriâte our traditions, reality, history, religion, language, and origin? Why, in other words, must a member of our culture join the legions of Orientalists in Orientalizing Islam so radically and so unfairly. (Appignanesi and Maitland, 176)

I should mention at this point that here Said is merely articulating the position of those who are opposed to the novel—and it would be a mistake to infer that he agrees with this understanding of the novel. Two quotes, one taken from the essay "Against the Orthodoxies" in For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defence of Free Speech, and one from an interview with W.J. Weatherby, indicate Said's own position on the novel more accurately:

Were it the loathesome curse against Islam that it is portrayed as being readers could set it aside and ignore it. It is attractive, engaging, funny: it offers not a dour unsmiling sermon, but a riotous carnival, and is much more humane than a counterdoctrine or new dogma. (For Rushdie, 260)

I am one of the people who believe that Satanic Verses for all its irreverence and spoofing of the Islam world has been done with a certain amount of affection, not at all vituperative but done with tongue in cheek, knowingness and inwardness, It suggests he was in no way trying to get rid of the
world he's lived with all his life and continues to do so. The novel is an astonishingly brilliant piece of work. It's not one of those things easily reduced to just a Western insult to Islam. (Weatherby, 183)

I hope that I have demonstrated that to read *The Satanic Verses* as Orientalist necessitates the glossing-over of the ideology that informs the Saladin Chamcha narrative. However, having dismantled the framework of Orientalism within which the novel has been understood, I would like to now turn my attention towards the Gibreel Farishta narrative, and construct a new and more tenable framework for understanding and responding to it.
Rushdie first explored the psychology of the individual who feels the need to believe in God and religion but is unable to do so in the character of Dr. Aadam Aziz in Midnight's Children. The novel opens with Dr. Aziz's abrupt loss of faith, and Rushdie touches on the conflict caused within him by this loss of faith—but Dr. Aziz is not a principal player in Midnight's Children, and while the conflict that rages within him is touched on by Rushdie it remains a tangential issue that is not explored in any great detail:

One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray [...] Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright, he found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had solidified, too; and at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history [...] [he] was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole. (3-6)

In The Satanic Verses Rushdie explores the concept of this God-shaped hole in full. The story of Gibreel Farishta is the story of the psychology of a man who is strung out between his immense need to believe in God and his inability to do so. The God-shaped hole that is a tangential issue in Midnight's Children is one of the primary themes of The Satanic Verses and the story of Gibreel Farishta is most persuasively read as Rushdie's continued exploration into this concept of the God-shaped hole.
GIBREEL FARISHTA

In *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta is a movie star—and in his essay "In Good Faith" Rushdie explains the choice of this name (Gibreel being the Arabic version of the name Gabriel, and *farishta* being Arabic for angel):

Gibreel is a movie star, and movie stars hang above us in the darkness, larger than life, halfway to the divine. To give Gibreel an angel's name was to give him a secular equivalent of angelic half-divinity. When he loses his faith, however, his name becomes the source of all his torments. (*Imaginary Homelands*, 397)

Gibreel is born Ismail Najmuddin in the city of Pune, and we learn of his childhood as one of the fabled lunch-runners or dabbawallas of Bombay (where his family moved when he was still an infant). Rushdie tells us of Ismail Najmuddin's fascination with the supernatural—and his account of Ismail's youth foreshadows the blasphemous dreams that he would fall prey to later on in life.

He grew up believing in God, angels, demons, afreets, djinns, as matter-of-factly as if they were bullock-carts or lamp-posts, and it struck him as a failure in his own sight that he had never seen a ghost. He would dream of discovering a magic optometrist from whom he would purchase a pair of green-tinged spectacles which would correct his regrettable myopia, and after that he would be able to see through the dense, blinding air to the fabulous world beneath.

From his mother Naima Najmuddin he heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if inaccuracies had crept into her versions he wasn't interested in knowing what they were [...] sometimes though he caught himself in the act of forming blasphemous thoughts [...] his somnolent fancy began to compare his own condition with that of the Prophet [...] [and] he began to worry about the impurity in his make-up that could create such terrible visions. (21-22)
When Ismail becomes a movie actor--and adopts the name Gibreel Farishta--he spends the first four years of his career in a succession of minor knockabout comic roles. Rushdie is careful to further foreshadow his blasphemous dreams:

To get his mind off the subject of love and desire, he studied, becoming an omnivorous autodidact, devouring the metamorphic myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter, the boy who became a flower, the spider-woman, Circe, everything; and the theosophy of Annie Besant, and the unified field theory, and the incident of the Satanic verses in the early career of the Prophet, and the politics of Muhammad's harem after his return to Mecca in triumph; and the surrealism of newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed, and children were born with no faces, and young boys dreamed in impossible detail of earlier incarnations, for instance in a golden fortress filled with precious stones. (4)

Rushdie is extraordinarily careful in foreshadowing the content of Gibreel's future nightmares and to demonstrate that everything he dreams of has a basis in his sub-conscious.

Gibreel's big break comes with the arrival of the theological movies--films based (extremely!) roughly on theological mythology. Every god in the pantheon got his or her chance to be showcased, and when a production "based on the story of [the elephant-headed god] Ganesh [was scheduled] none of the leading box-office names of the time were willing to spend an entire movie concealed inside an elephant's head" (24) and so Gibreel is given his first starring role. It is from this first lucky break that Gibreel's career as a superstar--and as a superstar who played the role of god after god--is born:

For over a decade and a half he had represented, to hundreds of millions of believers in that country in which, to this day, the human population outnumbers the divine by less than three to one, the most acceptable, the most instantly recognizable, face of
the Supreme [...] you'll agree that for such an actor (for any actor, maybe, even for Chamcha, but most of all for him) to have a bee in his bonnet about avatars, like much-metamorphosed Vishnu, was not so very surprising. (16-17)

It is when he is at the height of his fame that Gibreel is struck with a mystery illness that takes him to death's door. It is this illness which causes Gibreel to lose his faith—and Rushdie gives us an account of how this loss of faith comes about:

During his illness he had spent every minute of consciousness calling upon God, every second of every minute. Ya Allah whose servant is bleeding do not abandon me now after watching over me so long. Ya Allah show me some sign, some small mark of your favour, that I may find in myself the strength to cure my ills. O God most beneficent most merciful, be with me in this my time of need, my most grievous need. Then it occurred to him that he was being punished, and for a time that made it possible to suffer the pain, but after a time he got angry. Enough, God, his unspoken words demanded, why must I die when I have not killed, are you vengeance or are you love? The anger with God carried him through another day, but then it faded, and in its place there came a terrible emptiness, an isolation, as he realized he was talking to thin air, that there was nobody there at all, and he felt more foolish than ever in his life, and he began to plead into the emptiness, ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be. But he felt nothing, nothing nothing, and then one day he found that he no longer needed there to be anything to feel. On the day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began. (30)

After his recovery, Gibreel rushes to the Taj hotel to partake of the forbidden flesh of the swine, the unclean quadruped, to prove to himself the nonexistence of God. But it is after he eats the pigs that the retribution begins—a nocturnal retribution—a punishment of dreams.

Rushdie is careful to provide us not only with the background for
the content of Gibreel's blasphemous dreams—but also with the context within which the dreams are to be understood. The dreams are a punishment—a subconscious retribution for Gibreel's loss of faith. The dreams are a representation of the battle that is being fought within Gibreel's subconscious between faith and doubt, between belief and unbelief. Gibreel is desperate to regain his lost faith—but he is haunted by these dreams of faith-shaking scepticism and blasphemy. Rushdie's depiction of Gibreel's dreamscape makes it clear that this is a realm of make-believe—a looking-glass world of the grotesque—where Gibreel's doubts play themselves out on the movie screen of his imagination:

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 [...] Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck [...] our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound [...] The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand, its structures formed of the desert whence it rises [...] Water is the enemy in Jahilia. Carried in earthen pots, it must never be spilled (the penal code deals fiercely with offenders), for where it drops the city erodes alarmingly. Holes appear in the roads, houses tilt and sway. (93)
THE DREAM SEQUENCES

Gibreel dreams that he is the archangel Gibreel—the angel of the recitation. In the dreams that are recounted in the chapters "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia," Gibreel dreams that he is witness to, and participant in, the birth of Islam. It must be remembered that these are nightmares. Gibreel is desperate to regain his faith—but he is haunted by this faith-shaking nightmare representation of Islam—the nocturnal retribution for his loss of faith. In this nightmare version of Islam, the source of the revelation is not he, the angel Gibreel, but the Prophet himself.

Gibreel dreams that Mahound is offered a deal by the Grandee of Jahilia, Abu Simbel:

"It's a small matter," he begins again. "A grain of sand. Abu Simbel asks Allah to grant him one little favour [...] If our great God could find it in his heart to concede—he used that word, concede—that three, only three of the three hundred and sixty idols in the house are worthy of worship [...] He asks for Allah's approval of Lat, Uzza, and Manat. In return, he gives his guarantee that we will be tolerated, even officially recognized; as a mark of which, I am to be elected to the council of Jahilia. That's the offer. (105)

Mahound ascends the mountain to see what the angel of the recitation has to say about this concession. But the angel of the recitation is Gibreel, the dreamer, and he is filled with panic:

he, the dreamer, feels his heart leaping in alarm, who, me? I'm supposed to know the answer here? I'm sitting here watching this picture and now this actor points his finger out at me, who ever heard the like, who asks the bloody audience of a theological to solve the bloody plot?--but the dream shifts, its always changing form, he, Gibreel, is no longer a mere spectator but the central player, the star [...] Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to
choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I'm just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help. Help. (108-109)

As it turns out, Gibreel need not have been so panicked—the revelation when it comes does not come from him—but from within Mahound. The verses that are revealed to Mahound indicate that the Grandee's offer has been accepted and that Lat, Manat, and Uzza are recognized by Allah. But the story does not end here—Hind, the wife of the Grandee, suggests to Mahound that it was a mistake to make this concession—and he once again climbs the mountain to consult Gibreel. New verses are revealed to Mahound in place of the old ones:

"It was the devil," 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 heard in his 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 for ever and ever, so that they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and rewrite their story. (123)

The first dream ends with Khalid the water-carrier telling Mahound:

"Messenger, I doubted you. But you were wiser than we knew. First we said, Mahound will never compromise, and you compromised. Then we said, Mahound has betrayed us, but you were bringing us a deeper truth. You bought us the Devil himself, so that we could witness the workings of the Evil One, and his overthrow by the Right. You have enriched our faith. I am sorry for what I thought."

Mahound moves away from the sunlight falling through the window, "Yes." Bitterness, cynicism. "It was a wonderful thing I did. Deeper truth. Bringing
This blasphemous faith-shaking dream is Gibreel's worst nightmare. He is desperate to regain his faith, yet in his dreams, at once a retribution for his loss of faith and a representation of his loss of faith, he is haunted by these blasphemous visions. His dreams suggest to him that Muhammād is something of a charlatan and that the religion of Islam is based not on the word of God—but on Muhammad's perception of the word of God—if not on outright duplicity and deceit. These are the dreams of a man with a God-shaped hole within him, these are the dreams of a man knocked into that middle place Rushdie refers to in *Midnight's Children*, these are the dreams of a man who wishes to believe in God but is unable to do so. Gibreel's loss of faith fills him with a sense of having been born again—of having crossed some new threshold. But at the same time he is filled with a sense of guilt and emptiness and betrayal—betrayal of himself and betrayal of the God in whom he cannot completely disbelieve—and the dreams are the result of these conflicting and complicated emotions.

Gibreel’s nightmare is continued in the chapter "Return to Jahilia." He is still desperate to recapture his faith, but his doubts and uncertainties are ever more vivid—now it is his sanity as well as his faith that seems to be slipping away from him. Gibreel's doubt and uncertainty is even more extreme than before, and as a result this nightmare is even more painful and shocking and disturbing than the first one. According to the account of Salman the Persian, Mahound is a charlatan who manipulates the recitation to suit his own political and personal desires, and, even worse, with its newfound authority his religion has grown into a stifling and repressive code:

> The faithful lived by lawlessness, but in those years Mahound—or should one say that archangel Gibreel?—should one say Al-lah—became obsessed by law. Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules rules rules

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until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation—the recitation—told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep, and which sexual positions had received divine sanction. (363-364)

This terrifying and faith-shaking dream piles blasphemy upon blasphemy and sacrilege upon sacrilege. It is a commingling of the sacred and the profane—the pure and the impure—the dream is a representation of the advanced dissolution of Gibreel's certainties. It is a representation of the painful exorcism of his faith from his consciousness.

The novel opens with Gibreel falling from an aeroplane and living. "To be born again first you have to die"—and at times Gibreel feels as though this miracle is a validation of the new path that he has chosen to tread—but he is beset with doubts and uncertainties. He cannot shake the feeling that the miracle is a sign from the God whom he has denied at least thrice—and this idea racks Gibreel with guilt. To make matters worse, the line dividing the world of his dreams and the world of reality is growing ever more indistinct. The nightmare of Islam that is recounted in the chapter "Mahound" seemed to validate his new nonbelief in God—but since his fall from the aeroplane, the idea that he might indeed be the avatar of the archangel Gibreel has crossed over from his sleeping to waking world as well. At times he notices a halo streaming out from a point from behind his head—and he fears that this cannot be be discounted as any mere hallucination, because it is witnessed by others as well, such as Rosa Diamond and John Maslama.

On the other hand—as the apparition of Rekha Merchant, following him around on her bokhara rug, is quick to remind him—this could all be a sign that he is losing his mind—and again the madness towards which
he feels himself slipping could be divine retribution for his loss of faith—or it could be something else entirely:

Mr. Gibreel Farishta on the railway train to London was once again seized as who would not be by the fear that God had decided to punish him for his loss of faith by driving him insane [...] The terror of losing his mind to a paradox, of being unmade by what he no longer believed existed, of turning in his madness into the avatar of a chimerical archangel, was so big in him that it was impossible to look at it for long; yet how else was he to account for the miracles, metamorphoses and apparitions of recent days? "It's a straight choice," he trembled silently, "It's A, I'm off my head, or B, baba, somebody went and changed the rules." (189)

These conflicting emotions all stem from Gibreel's initial loss of faith, and can be understood as Rushdie's representation of that middle place—the emotionally turbulent ground covered in the journey from faith to doubt--from belief to unbelief.

Gibreel's second dream is one in which he (in the shape of the archangel of course) visits the Imam—a religious leader who lives in exile in a Kensington apartment block, from where he plans his revolution against Ayesha the Empress and his triumphant return to a land that is identified only as Desh (which means country in many subcontinental languages—as in Bangladesh):

Exile is a soulless country. In exile, the furniture is ugly, expensive, all bought at the same time in the same store and in too much of a hurry [...] In exile the shower goes scalding hot whenever anybody turns on a kitchen tap [...] In exile no food is ever cooked; the dark spectacled bodyguards go out for take-away. in exile all attempts to put down roots look like treason: they are admissions of defeat. (208)

In this dream the Imam flies on Gibreel's back to witness the revolution that is taking place in Desh. Gibreel witnesses scenes of frightful carnage as the people march towards the gates of the Empress' palace.
only to be mown down by her household guards hundreds at a time:

"You see how they love me," says the disembodied voice. "No tyranny on earth can withstand the power of the slow, walking love."

"This isn't love," Gibreel, weeping, replies. "It's hate. She has driven them into your arms." The explanation sounds thin, superficial.

"They love me," the Imam's voice says, "because I am water. I am fertility and she is decay. They love me for my habit of smashing clocks. Human beings who turn away from God lose love, and certainty, and also the sense of His boundless time, that encompasses past, present and future; the timeless time that has no need to move." (214)

Here Gibreel is reminded of what he has turned away from and what he has given up in his forsaking of God. This dream tells him that his present confusion and lack of certainty is retribution for his loss of faith.

But at the conclusion of this dream when the Empress is defeated:

Gibreel, looking away from her in horror, sees the Imam grown monstrous, lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates: as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole. (215)

This dream is once again a representation of the middle place that Gibreel has been knocked into--between faith and doubt. It portrays faith as horrific—as a power that dominates and consumes innocent lives--but at the same time Gibreel is warned that to turn away from God means the loss of love and the loss of certainty. The dream is a representation of the confusion that Gibreel feels, unable to believe in God, but at the same time unable to replace that belief in God with anything else--it is a representation of the God-shaped hole.
If Gibreel's dream of the Imam warns him that to turn away from God is to be left with nothing--the Ayesha serial dreams intensify this emotion. These dreams, however, are more benign than the others, and seem to beckon him back to the realm of belief:

[The dream] suggests that the deity whom he, Gibreel, has unsuccessfully tried to kill can be a God of love, as well as one of vengeance, power, duty, rules and hate; and it is, too, a nostalgic sort of tale, of a lost homeland; it feels like a return to the past.

This is precisely what these dreams are--a return to the past. In these dreams Gibreel returns to the beliefs that he had cherished and which had nourished him in his days as a true believer. It is for this reason that the dreams return him to India--the return suggesting a connection between the spirituality of the subcontinent and the comforting certainty of belief.

In these dream sequences Gibreel appears as the archangel to a young woman named Ayesha. After he appears to her she is transformed:

Ayesha the orphan was nineteen years old when she began her walk back to Titlipur along the rutted potato track, but by the time she turned up in her village some forty-eight hours later she had attained a kind of agelessness, because her hair had turned as white as snow while her skin had regained the luminous perfection of a new-born child's, and although she was completely naked the butterflies had settled upon her body in such thick swarms that she seemed to be wearing a dress of the most delicate material in the universe. (225)

Ayesha is informed that Mishal Akhtar, the wife of the zamindar is suffering from cancer--but she also is informed that this is a test of faith and that God will save Mishal from the sickness:

"It is the angel's will that all of us, every man, woman and child in the village, begin at once to prepare for a pilgrimage. We are commanded to walk
from this place to Mecca Sharif, to kiss the Black Stone in the Ka'aba at the centre of the Haram Sharif, the sacred Mosque. There we must surely go [...] We will walk two hundred miles, and when we reach the shores of the sea, we will put our feet in the foam, and the waters will open for us. The waves shall be parted, and we shall walk across the ocean floor to Mecca." (235-236)

In these dreams God is a God of love and mercy and redemption. It is a dream that suggests to Gibreel the magnificence and sublimity of faith and spirituality—and the hollowness and emptiness of a life without faith and without certainty.

In these dreams Mirza Saeed Akhtar is the unbeliever—and the dreams are a rejection of his creed of scepticism and imported Western atheism. His refusal to accept the beliefs of the faithful is depicted as the product of his closed-mindedness and his ill-will and his overweening pride:

Good words, Mishal laughed bitterly. Saeed, good choice of words. You know I can't live but you talk of suicide. Saeed, a thing is happening here, and you with your imported European atheism don't know what it is. Or maybe you would if you looked beneath your English suitings and tried to locate your heart. (238)

Mirza Saeed follows the pilgrimage in his olive-green Mercedes-Benz station wagon—determined to stop what he sees as an enterprise of superstition and irrationality. His attachment to his beloved Mercedes-Benz station wagon indicates that his refusal to accept the existence of God is connected to his worship of the material world—and that to turn away from God is to turn away from the spirituality that redeems this existence. In the Ayesha dreams it is the life of the unbeliever which is shown to be a life of self-delusion and denial—and ultimately a life of emptiness:

From all sides, out of little tinkers' gullies, the villagers of Titlipur were returning to the place of
their dispersal. They were all coated from neck to ankles in golden butterflies, and long lines of the little creatures went before them, like ropes drawing them to safety out of a well [...] "I don't believe it," said Mirza Saeed. But it was true. Every single member of the pilgrimage had been tracked down by the butterflies and bought back to the main road. And stranger claims were later made: that when the creatures had settled on a broken ankle the injury had healed, or that an open wound had closed as if by magic. Many marchers said they had awoken from unconsciousness to find the butterflies fluttering about their lips. Some even believed that they had been dead, drowned, and that the butterflies had bought them back to life. "Don't be stupid," Mirza Saeed cried. "The storm saved you: it washed away your enemies, so its not surprising few of you are hurt. Let's be scientific, please."
"Use your eyes, Saeed," Mishal told him, indicating the presence before them of over a hundred men, women and children enveloped in glowing butterflies. "What does your science say about this?" (494-495)

The pilgrimage ends with the pilgrims entering the Arabian Sea--never to be seen again--not a single gasping head or thrashing arm--no drowned or drowning bodies were ever washed up on shore:

Human beings in danger of drowning struggle against the water. It is against human nature simply to walk forwards meekly until the sea swallows you up. But Ayesha, Mishal Akhtar and the villagers of Titlipur subsided below sea-level; and were never seen again. (503)

Those who had left the pilgrimage to join Mirza Saeed in the station wagon of scepticism are pulled from the water drowning and blue in the face. All except Mirza Saeed witnessed the miracle of the waters parting--like hair being combed--and watched the pilgrims walk away from them along the ocean floor. Mirza Saeed returns to Titlipur, where it seems as though centuries have elapsed instead of months, a broken man,
and waits for death to claim him.

It is only at the moment of his death that Mirza Saeed is finally able to abandon his lifelong creed of scepticism and embrace the faith that he had so long denied—and it as that moment that the miracle occurs for him too:

Then something within him refused that, made a different choice, and at the instant that his heart broke, he opened. His body split apart from his adam's-apple to his groin, so that she [Ayesha] could reach deep within him, and now she was open, they all were, and at the moment of their opening the waters parted, and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea. (507)

The Ayesha dreams represent to Gibreel the richness and reward of religious faith and the emptiness of a life of unbelief. These dreams represent to him what he is turning away from in turning away from faith.
The reading of the novel as an attack on Islam is based on the dream sequences in which Gibreel is witness to, and participant in, the birth of the religion, Submission, that to use Rushdie's locution, "both is and is not Islam" (Imaginary Homelands, 409). The context within which these dreams are to be understood is made quite clear by Rushdie. Submission is not intended to be a direct representation of Islam, and therefore accusations that the dream sequences represent Rushdie's revisionist account of the life of Muhammad and the early history of Islam are clearly not tenable. However, while Rushdie does not say anything directly about Islam in these dream sequences--it would be disingenuous to suppose that he does not suggest plenty (the distinction is important). It can perhaps be argued that Rushdie is presenting his own ideas about Islam, but that he encodes them within dream sequences in order to distance himself from, and thus absolve himself of, responsibility for the ideas that are presented.

What, then, could these dream sequences be legitimately construed as suggesting? The principal suggestion put forth by Rushdie that has so offended many of his critics is that the Qur'an is not the word of God, but the Prophet Muhammad's perception of the word of God. In an interview with Sunday magazine of India, Rushdie is quoted as saying:

I don't believe that Muhammad had a revelation but then I don't doubt his sincerity either. Muhammad didn't make up the angel. He had that genuine mystical experience. But if you don't believe in the whole truth and you don't disbelieve him either--then what's going on? What is the nature of the mystical experience? Given that we accept it happens and we don't believe in God and archangels. That's what I tried to write about. (Appignanesi and Maitland, 41)

Rushdie uses the incident of the satanic verses to put forth his ideas.
about the nature of revelation. This incident is recorded by the historian al-Tabari (d.923) but has been rejected by the Islamic orthodoxy as unreliable. Rushdie not only resurrects the incident but suggests a quite credible contextualization of the incident, and uses it as the corner-stone of his suggestion that Muhammad's revelation might have been self-induced and influenced by his desires. Rushdie then goes on to suggest that the Qur'an is filled with trivial and petty "rules about every damn thing" (363). The questions that *The Satanic Verses* raises about the content of the Qur'an--how it often seems to read like the word of a seventh century Arab businessman rather than the word of God--are nothing new. I think, for instance, of Ali Dashti's response to Sura CXI which curses Abu Lahab, an enemy of the Prophet: "The retort as such is not out of proportion. On the other hand, it ill becomes the Sustainer of the Universe to curse an ignorant Arab and call his wife a firewood carrier" (149). Rushdie's satire of the life of Muhammad is irreverent and disrespectful, and he makes some extremely irreverent suggestions as to not only the origin of the Qur'anic teaching but also its content, and as such, the novel is undoubtedly offensive and upsetting to many Muslims. However, the accusation that the novel is a vicious attack "[aimed] at the jugular vein of Islam" (Sardar and Wyn Davies, 151) requires some qualification before it can be accepted as critically tenable. It cannot be denied that the Jahilia dream sequences suggest a critique and even a criticism of Islam--however it is necessary to reconcile any criticism of Islam suggested by Rushdie with the compelling depiction of the beauty and sublimity of the faith that is presented in the Ayesha dream sequences. If *The Satanic Verses* is in part a questioning of Islamic faith, one must acknowledge that it is also in part a celebration of the faith and a questioning of the merits of a life lived without faith. Close textual and contextual analysis of all of the dream sequences reveals that to read the novel as a straightforwardly anti-Islamic tract is untenable. Rushdie is far
more even-handed and charitable in his critique of the faith than his critics give him credit for. Sara Suleri, however, is one critic perceptive enough to point out this ambiguity towards Islam that underlies the text:

The desire to desecrate must here be dissociated from the more simplistic question of whether or not Rushdie has been "offensive to Islam"; instead, the text perversely demands to be read as a gesture of wrenching loyalty, suggesting that blasphemy can be expressed only within the compass of belief. Given such a paradox, Rushdie performs a curious act of faith: he chooses disloyalty in order to dramatize his continuing obsession with the metaphors that Islam makes available to a post-colonial sensibility. (223)

Malise Ruthven's compelling reading of the novel in *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* provides a bridge between Suleri's understanding and that of those who read the novel as a polemical attack on Islam:

It may be argued that in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie is a novelist and not a propagandist. His novel is to Islam what *Portrait of the Artist* is to Roman Catholicism: a form of spiritual autobiography, an exorcism of the repressive, punishing faith in which he was bought up. (160)

Ruthven's reading of the novel takes into account the ambiguity towards Islam that is noted by Suleri and is so apparent in the Ayesha dream sequences. The novel parodies the life of the Prophet with a ribald irreverence and courageous iconoclasm that is undoubtedly painful and offensive to many believing Muslims--yet, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that an expression of one's doubt or even outright disbelief in the form of a cathartic satire and desacralization is not the same thing as "a calculated attempt to vilify and slander [sic] Muhammad" (Akhtar, 6) with the intention of "inflict[ing] the most pain on his target [believing Muslims]" (Sardar and Wyn Davies, 151). It is
taking nothing away from the status of *The Satanic Verses* as "one of the greatest lessons in heresy the world has ever seen" (to borrow Louis Althusser's phrase on the philosophy of Spinoza) to contend, as this paper does, that the novel is a playful, and not a polemical attack, on Islam. To read *The Satanic Verses*, however, as an attempt to vilify and defame the Prophet, and to savage the teachings of the Qur'an, constitutes a misunderstanding of both the tone and angle of Rushdie's critique, and, most importantly, overlooks the fact that the principal criticism of Islam is offered in the form and not the content of Rushdie's argument.
CONCLUSION

Salman Rushdie's "heresy" is that in *The Satanic Verses* he has said the unsayable. He has over-stepped the prohibitions that have been constructed by the Islamic orthodoxy as it exists today. Rushdie has satirized and thus desacralized the Prophet Muhammad; he has desacralized the wives of the Prophet, whom Muslims consider "the mothers of the faithful"; he has desacralized such sacred icons(!) as the Ka'aba; and he has mocked and ridiculed the teachings of the Qur'an (if only by suggestion). In the Islamic world there exists a taboo against any one of these acts. Rushdie has transgressed these taboos and said the unsayable. This is the principal criticism of Islam that is offered in *The Satanic Verses*. By saying the unsayable, Rushdie is attacking the concept of the unsayable that has become enshrined in Islamic thought. This is the angle of his attack. It is for this reason that accusations that he has satirized the Prophet and resurrected the historically unreliable incident of the satanic verses, or mocked and ridiculed the teachings of the Qur'an by calling it "rules about every damn thing" are beside the point. Rushdie's principal criticism is not in his suggestions--it is in the form of the suggestions. The medium of his criticism (satire and desacralization) is the message. Rushdie is guilty of blasphemy (by suggestion), he is guilty of satirizing the Prophet, and he is guilty of desacralizing much that is sacred and precious to Muslims, but the question that *The Satanic Verses* asks is: why is this so wrong?

Rushdie is asking the question: why, in 1988, can one not satirize the Prophet? One of the responses to Rushdie misses his point entirely with its title *Be Careful With Muhammad!* The question that Rushdie asks is: why should one be careful with Muhammad? Why is he off-limits to an imaginative writer? Muhammad is, after all, only a Prophet, and Rushdie's satire of him can be read, in part, as his
questioning of the extremely un-Islamic veneration and devotion afforded Muhammad by his followers. Muhammad has been all but deified by the Islamic orthodoxy—and Rushdie’s playful satire is an attempt to call into question this deification, rather than an attempt to vilify and defame him. Why can we not treat the Qur’an with scepticism and even irreverence? Why, above all, does there exist in Islamic thinking this concept of the unsayable? The best way to transgress the taboo of the unsayable is to say it—and this is precisely what Rushdie has done. Rushdie is a rationalist and reformist Muslim thinker. He does not write from within the religion of Islam—but he does write from within the cultural tradition of Islam. *The Satanic Verses* is not the work of an outsider to the tradition of Islam—it is the work of a non-believing Muslim. The cultural tradition of Islam has produced countless rationalist reformers and free-thinking heretics—and this is the correct context within which to view *The Satanic Verses*. This is precisely the point made by Sadiq Jalal al-Azm who understands Rushdie as a "Muslim dissident" (256). In his essay "The Importance of Being Earnest About Salman Rushdie," al-Azm produces an impressive list of recent reformist and heretical Islamic thinkers and writers: "Ali Abd ar-Raziq, Taha Husain, Naguib Mahfouz, Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah, Abd Allah an-Najjar, Abd Allah al-Qusaymi, Nadim Bitar, Ibrahim Khlas, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Abd Allah al-Alayli, Sulaiman Bashir, [and] Hammad Salih al-Udi", commenting that "the list can be expanded almost at will" (278).

In his essay "Being God’s Postman is No Fun, Yaar" Srinivas Aravamudan problematizes Rushdie’s satirizing of Islam:

Defending satire of a longstanding historical and cultural "other" of the West, such as Islam, can very easily, if the satire is appropriated by the West as a decontextualized "critique" serve the apotropaic function of insulting and frightening the adversary,
ultimately doing the ideological work of cultural imperialism. Such a defence illegitimately asserts the superiority of a Western viewing-position over that which is attacked. (189)

Aravamudan seems unaware of the possibility that satire can be part of an internal critique of Islam. As such, one can quite easily defend satire without "assert[ing] the superiority of the Western viewing-position." Undoubtedly, Aravamudan would be equally unable to defend *The Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn on the grounds that it could be appropriated to illegitimately assert the Western viewing-position over that of the Soviet communist authorities (another longstanding historical and cultural "other" of the West). The problem with critics such as Aravamudan is that while they have undoubtedly read their *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam* attentively, and are acutely conscious of the historical Western animus against Islam (from which they wish to distance themselves at the cost of elevating the orthodox Islamic viewing-position above all others) they do not have enough familiarity with Islam and Islamic politics to realize that identical arguments have been used by orthodox Islam to silence and shackle Islam's rationalist tradition for over a millenium. Certainly Islam has been a longstanding historical and cultural "other" of the West. We have all (I am sure) read our *Orientalism*, but what Said fails to mention in his classic study is that the same is true in reverse; that the West is also a longstanding historical and cultural "other" of Islam, and that the implications of what should perhaps be called "Occidentalism" are at least as dangerous, at least for the Islamic world, as those of Orientalism. This is precisely the point made by Fatima Mernissi in *Islam and Democracy*:

*Gharb*, the Arabic word for the West, is also the place of darkness and the incomprehensible, always frightening. *Gharb* is the territory of the strange, the foreign (*gharib*). Everything that we don't understand is frightening. "Foreignness" in Arabic has
a strong spatial connotation, for gharb is the place where the sun sets and where the darkness awaits. It is in the West that the night snaps up the sun and swallows it; then all terrors are possible. It is there that gharaba (strangeness) has taken up its abode. (13)

Mernissi then continues to explore how this "ancestral fear of the West" (15) that exists within the Islamic world (and which was naturally intensified due to the history of colonialism and decolonization) has been manipulated by the Islamic orthodoxy to discredit rationalist and reformist thinking in Islam by "decking it out in the chador of foreignness" (15).

Mernissi traces the roots of the rationalist and humanist tradition which exists within Islamic thought "[that] raised the two issues that we are today told are imports from the West, issues that Islam has never resolved: that of ta'a [obedience] and that of individual freedom" (21). It must be remembered that the rationalist tradition includes both reformist and heretical thinking because the emphasis is on ra'y (the freedom of personal opinion), and because often the difference between the two is little more than a matter of opinion. It therefore includes the Sufi tradition, including heretics such as the Sufi mystic, Hallaj, who was burned alive in Baghdad in the 11th century for his declaration "ana al-hagg" (I am truth incarnate). Mernissi traces this tradition in Islamic thought back to the Mu'tazila (Rationalist) school of thought which arose in the first century of Islam (seventh century A.D.):

The Mu'tazila were systematically combated by the holders of power, who condemned them as falasifa (philosophers) who were "polluting" Islam with the humanistic patrimony of ancient Greece. From the first centuries of Islam the Mu'tazila were castigated as being in the service of foreigners and the propagators of enemy ideas. As such they were repudiated as mulhidun (atheists) who were perverting the faith.
This condemnation of the Mu'tazila on the pretext that they were importing foreign ideas, has persisted throughout the centuries and continues still today. (26)

For a century, the Abbasid dynasty adopted the Mu'tazila philosophy of openness (approximately speaking, the ninth and early tenth century A.D.) before the dynasty fell into what Mernissi calls "palace intrigues" and the Mu'tazila philosophy of openness was discredited: "The result was that the opening to reason, personal opinion, and the cult of private initiative were condemned as "foreign" enterprise. The falasifa were hunted down and the freethinkers condemned as infidels and heretics" (36-37). Knowledge of this history is necessary for anyone seeking to make sense of the condemnation of The Satanic Verses as an Orientalist attack on Islam:

With complete impunity, the Muslim leaders would battle the Muslim intellectuals who tried to explain and spread the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Like the Mu'tazila of the past, these intellectuals were harassed, condemned, and denounced as blasphemers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bans on their writings and imprisonment followed, despite the declarations of independance—but with one difference. The Mu'tazila were the traitors who imported Greek ideas; the modern intellectuals are called servants of the West. Twentieth century humanism, celebrated elsewhere as the triumph of creativity and the flowering of the individual, is forbidden to us on the pretext that it is foreign. Obscurantism is proposed as the ideal of the future, and one to defend. (40-41)

In The Satanic Verses Rushdie has attempted to call into question the concept of the unsayable. The novel is a courageous attempt (and only one of many) to bring Enlightenment thought to Islam. Orthodox Islamic thought has been resistant to rationalist and reformist thinking ever since the philosophy of the Mu'tazila was discredited in the middle of the tenth century. And any attempt to rationalize, modernize,
secularize, feminize, or in any way reform Islamic thinking since then has been denounced by, in Mernissi's words, "decking it out in the chador of foreignness" (15). The concept of Orientalism and the historic Western animus against Islam has been transformed into a new and potent arrow in the quiver of orthodox Islam in its fight against reform. Any critique of the religion that comes from the West can be dismissed as a manifestation of Orientalist prejudice, and dissent from within the culture can be discredited by identifying the dissident with the West and Western modes of thinking. I hope that I have demonstrated that neither the identification of Rushdie with the West (the positioning of Rushdie as brown sahib) nor the reading of the novel as Orientalist is critically tenable. The positioning of Rushdie as brown sahib and the dismissal of *The Satanic Verses* as an Orientalist attack on Islam can thus be seen as an effective rhetorical strategy on the part of orthodox thinkers and writers to discredit Rushdie and obscure his actual critique of Islam. This rhetorical strategy has a long and infamous history in Islamic thought—and has proved on this occasion (as it has in the past) to be deadly effective.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


