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Zachary (Zakk) Bluford
Oberlin College

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Recommended Citation

Bluford, Zachary (Zakk), "Gibreel's Inadvertent Consersations: "extending his internal repertory"" (2014).
Friends of the Libraries Excellence in Research Awards. 14.
https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/fof_research_awards/14

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Gibreel's Inadvertent Conversations: "extending his internal repertory"

Any reader of the fiction or non-fiction of Salman Rushdie will inevitably encounter the author's belief that identity is manifold and slippery to the point of never being fully grasped by the subject who inhabits it. Whether on the scale of individuals or nations, Rushdie sees inevitable tragedy where self-conscious entities attempt to define themselves in monolithic ways. As a South-Asian diasporic writer, it is natural that throughout his oeuvre Rushdie most consistently focuses this critique on the colonial subject and on various forms of nationalism which have arisen in postcolonial India. Fawzia Afzal-Kahn sees *The Satanic Verses* as a special case in Rushdie's career, in which the author's critique of colonialism intersects with a related but distinct critique of religion:

It is only in *The Satanic Verses*...however, that Rushdie draws explicit parallels between religion and colonialism as hegemonic strategies of containment. Whereas the latter has tried to contain people within racial and geographical boundaries and definitions, religion has tried to delimit and contain man's intellectual territory. Both kinds of containment are reprehensible to Rushdie, and the only way out he sees is through destruction and "blasphemy."¹

Although I agree that in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie advocates for a sort of blasphemy, I do not think that he goes as far as assigning equal levels of hegemonic status to "religion" and "colonialism"; colonialism necessitates hegemony in a way that religion does not, despite the long historical record of domination by religious communities. Rushdie is concerned with critiquing the hegemonic aspects of religion which have driven him and other secular people away from its practice while also recognizing and dramatizing the experiences of transcendence it has provided human beings for thousands of years. Most of all, he is interested in religious experience which is blasphemous against hegemonic structures, whether of religion, colonialism, or modernity.

¹ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, "Salman Rushdie: The Debunking of Myth," in *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel: Genre and Ideology in R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandava, and Salman Rushdie*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 172-173.

Rushdie's grievances with particular forms of religion go back to the identity problem that I posed above as one of the fundamental themes of his work. An optimistic reading of *the Satanic Verses* reveals an ultimately constructive blasphemy which critically reimagines the meaning and trajectory of transcendence in human life, rather than rejecting religious transcendence as an empty and destructive illusion: "the point of view that emerges is not anti-Islam but anticlosure, opposed, in principle, to any dualistic, fixed way of looking at things. Framed in such a way, Rushdie's impulse toward blasphemy becomes really an impulse toward regeneration: renewal born of a destruction of old, fixed ways of seeing and understanding."² Rushdie displays this regenerative aspect of blasphemy in the experience of an "angel," Gibreel Farishta, who aims his destructive powers towards his own religious background. For Gibreel, each significant change in his life is accompanied by retribution against his old way of life and against anyone else who still practices it. Discovery of self must always be balanced by a rejection of false self, and Gibreel mistakenly assumes that this rejection can be totally successful. In this essay I will consider Gibreel's dream sequences as projections of a *conversation* about religion and the self—a conversation he has banished from his waking life in order to maintain for himself and for the public an apparently fixed identity. The views of religion which Gibreel involuntarily considers from dream to dream are represented by characters within them, the narrative structures of the dreams, and moments of reflection in which he makes comments about the dreams and his complicated role within them. In other words, dreams are the place where aspects of Gibreel's complex identity reject their own rejection, fulfilling a necessary "nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams."³ The dreams about Mahound and the Imam each allegorize hegemonic forms of religion and of the self, while

² Joel Kuortti, "The Satanic Verses: 'To be born again, first you have to die,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 168-169.

³ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Random House, 2008), 32.

the nostalgic and ambiguous dream of Ayesha proposes blasphemous forms of religious life and identity. I will argue that Gibreel is able to embrace the latter worldview only within the dream, and that the course of his life and death afterward mark a “fear of the self his dream creates,” an incompatibility between the structure of his waking life and the aesthetic triumph he achieves in his dreams.⁴

Gibreel’s Angelic Self and Satanic Dreams

Before I elaborate the features and implications of Gibreel’s dreams, it will be helpful to expound his understanding of the self and its relation to his angelic persona. The view of the self which Gibreel clings to for most of the novel’s main narrative seems to have solidified through his rise to fame. As a movie star, Gibreel has to accept that his public persona is relatively autonomous, only indirectly under his control. Furthermore, this persona is deeply connected to the religious figures he acts out in his films: “For over a decade and a half he had represented, to hundreds of millions of believers...the most acceptable, and instantly recognizable, face of the Supreme. For many of his fans, the boundary separating the performer and his roles had long ago ceased to exist.”⁵ Because Gibreel plays the part of such a diverse set of divine figures, it is only through his *face*—“[the] most profane of faces, the most sensual of faces”—that he can maintain a stable sense of self.⁶ With such a publically defined persona, Gibreel attains a sort of negative agency by covering up aspects of his personal experience which contradict his public image: Gibreel “learned the arts of dissimulation, because a man who plays gods must be above reproach.”⁷ His center of self is the thoroughly defined surface which remains “instantly recognizable” despite the dramatic shifts in its surroundings. It remains static through

⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 25.

retribution—the forgetting, forgiving, or otherwise rejecting of elements which destabilize its form.

Though Gibreel’s rejection of faith may be blasphemous towards a particular set of beliefs, I want to argue that his *presentation* of that rejection is rooted in his continuous and public sense of self, which he makes sure not to transgress. As with his face, any *change* in Gibreel’s lifestyle must be “instantly recognizable,” by an unforgettable watershed such as his pork binge: “to prove to himself the non-existence of God, he now stood in the dining-hall of the city’s most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face.”⁸ Despite the apparently humongous shift in his conception of reality, Gibreel maintains continuity of self by infusing this shift into a narrative of self-realization: “On that day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began.”⁹ By associating his belief with sickness and his unbelief with recovery, Gibreel reserves for himself—as the main character in a centered narrative—the responsibility of tracking the development of his own way of living. His public statement *ostensibly* directs attention away from himself in favor of the metaphysical claim he is making. Allie Cone’s amused commentary, however, suggests the extent to which the dramatic context in which he makes that statement points it back at himself: “‘Don’t you get it?’ he shouted after her, spewing sausage fragments from the corners of his mouth. ‘No thunderbolt. That’s the point... ‘You’re alive,’ she told him. ‘You got your life back. *That’s* the point.’”¹⁰

Gibreel enacts a cult of the star, in which real elements in his life—such as personal connections and religious practice—are “sacrificed” in order to preserve the continuity of his own image. He comes to fear sleep not only because his dreams are unpleasant, but because their form and content reenact these banished, blasphemous elements, forcing him to inhabit

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

perspectives which disrupt the image which he tries so hard to solidify: “Gibreel when he submits to the inevitable, when he slides heavy-lidded towards visions of his angeling, passes his loving mother who has a different name for him, Shaitan, she calls him...”¹¹ Gibreel’s involuntary exploration of his past is itself blasphemy, relative to his concept of self which enacts revenge on its past as it moves past it. Thus, the very constitution of dreams necessitates that there be a “Shaitan” underlying “visions of his angeling”—“devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel.”¹² At first, this Shaitan simply appears as a *religious* Shaitan, who blasphemes against “what one might call the apparatus of institutional religion: the link between God and His messenger, the integrity of the prophet, the absolute uniqueness of divine speech.”¹³ In the following sections, I’ll suggest that in each dream Gibreel identifies a confrontation between antagonistic entities in religious experience, only to ultimately identify with all sides and with the confrontation itself. The theological content in all cases becomes allegorical of a particular element of Gibreel’s identity formation.

Mahound: Myth and its Unraveling

In the chapters “Mahound” and “Return to Jahilia,” Gibreel dreams religion as a mythological battle between an old civilization and an idea which will bring about a new civilization. Descriptions of Jahilia’s legendary origins and the parallel climbing of Mount Coney by Mahound and Ibrahim suggests that Mahound is performing a new iteration of an eternally recurring tale.¹⁴ Jahilia itself carries a mythic significance, and as a city its lineage goes back to the first man, Adam, and even the beginning of the world: “They say in Jahilia that this valley is the navel of the earth; that the planet, when it was being made, went spinning around

¹¹ Ibid., 91.

¹² Ibid., 93, 95.

¹³ Simona Sawhney, “Satanic Choices: Poetry and Prophecy in Rushdie’s Novel,” *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly And Critical Journal* 45, no.3 (Fall 1999): 254.

¹⁴ Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 96-97.

this point.”¹⁵ By the time we come to Jahilia, however, it has fallen into a state of decadence. The House of Black Stone—“the first House”—remains in the center of the city and yet is surrounded by “the city’s many seers who, in return for pilgrim money, are chirping, cooing, hissing, possessed variously by djinnis of birds, beasts, snakes.”¹⁶ The city’s primordial past has been fetishized and commercialized, to the point where it no longer preserves a spiritual heritage but instead is constantly producing new profitable forms of worship: “The deities, to entice the travelers, come – like the pilgrims – from far and wide. The idols, too, are delegates to a kind of international fair.”¹⁷ Abu Simbel, current ruler of Jahilia, fears Mahound because Mahound’s monotheism threatens to expose some flaw in the fluidity and multiplicity that characterizes his rule and his regime: “Why do I fear Mahound? For that: one one one, his terrifying singularity. Whereas I am always divided...”¹⁸

Baal the poet and Salman the scribe provide critical lenses through which readers can avoid “picking sides” and see the problematic nature of any religion which bases its authority on victory in a political and/or economic struggle. Baal is first noted for his courage to speak honestly in front of Abu Simbel, stating his satirizing mission and his alleged political independence to the ruler: “‘A poet’s work... To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.’ ... ‘It isn’t right for the artist to become the servant of the state.’”¹⁹ Of course, this is the very scene in which Abu Simbel forces Baal into writing attacks on Mahound and his followers; however, even as the poet is coopted by power, his words provide a critical interpretive machinery for the reader (and

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

¹⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

dreamer), who are able to read both Mahound and Abu Simbel as attempting to put the world to sleep in some way, despite their apparently antagonistic forms of authority.

While Abu Simbel's coercion of Baal is an overt manipulation of power in the ruler's self-interest, Salman's narrative in "Return to Jahilia" shows how Mahound's "obsession" with law takes on a similarly restrictive and self-preserving character: "Salman began to notice how useful and well timed the angel's revelations tended to be, so that when the faithful were disputing Mahound's views on any subject... the angel would turn up with an answer, and he always supported Mahound."²⁰ When both these writers—the poet and the scribe—implicate the rulers they work for and even their own complicity in the political scheming of those rulers, it becomes hard to tell how much "religion" even lies within this dispute. What is certainly there is *writing*; talented writers are coerced by these rulers to give their political activity positive aesthetic or theological connotations.

Using this suspicion of writing, we can begin to move from Gibreel's dreams as a religious critique to a critique of Gibreel's understanding of self. Gibreel acknowledges even within the dream that he is seeing multiple aspects of his own personality rather than fulfilling an isolated role within the story. He is Mahound *and* Gibreel, as is implied when Mahound says, "Often, when Gibreel comes, it's as if he knows what's in my heart. It feels to me, most times, as if he comes from within my heart: from within my deepest places, from my soul."²¹ I do not read this, as Peter Morey does, as a sign of Rushdie proposing a Romantic view of revelation, in which all religious experience is a product of the human imagination.²² Rather, Mahound's

²⁰ Ibid., 376-377.

²¹ Ibid., 108.

²² Peter Morey, "Rushdie and the English tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38: "The scene is constructed on the notion of the prophet-as-poet, the intuitive seer who is able to process, distill and articulate powerful emotions, thereby performing the central empiricist task of bridging the gap between external impressions and the poet's immortalizing

perception that Gibreel lives “within” his heart is a flag to the reader (and the dreamer) that what Mahound calls transcendence is merely a projection of one part of himself, separated from and perceived by a more centered part of himself. Once again, it is the way Mahound speaks—writes—his relationship with Gibreel infuses it both with its power and its potential for critique. Is Mahound’s projection onto Gibreel a sign that he is exploring the depths of the human soul, or merely a convenient self-delusion which helps him pursue his self-interest?

I am convinced that Gibreel’s explicit discomfort with this dream is rooted in the similarity between the struggle he witnesses and that which underlies his own processes of identity formation. As Salman points out, Mahound’s revelation is really “*recitation*”—the rhetorically impressive codification of self-centered desires which makes the fulfillment of those desires a holy mission. Just as Mahound’s visits to the angel Gibreel become mere rituals in which he satisfies a desire by projecting it into Gibreel’s words, the real-life Gibreel uses sex with women to solidify his own self-image: “[women] were the vessels into which he could pour himself, and when he moved on, they would understand that it was his nature, and forgive... And it was true that nobody blamed him for leaving...their forgiveness made possible the deepest and sweetest corruption of all, namely the idea that he was doing nothing wrong.”²³ The Mahound dream allows readers to imagine that this act of “forgiving” on the part of the women is not something they *choose*, but rather something which they painfully submit to as they realize that Gibreel views it as a necessary condition of their sexual encounter. In the dream-role of the angel, the agency of Gibreel himself becomes one of these “forgotten” elements in the construction of Mahound’s power. Of course, Mahound relies on reference to Gibreel for his political power, but we see that Gibreel’s role is far more passive than Mahound makes it out to

apparatus. The origin of the divine vision is, thus, beside the point. ... The true home of the ‘divine’ lies in the human imagination, something that is reiterated by the many references to Blake and his visions in the text.”

²³ Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 25-26.

be: “As if [Mahound’s] learning me, searching me, as if I’m the one undergoing the test.”²⁴ As all of the destabilizing elements of this story—Baal, Salman, and Gibreel’s internal monologue—get swallowed by the agency of powerful figures—Abu Simbel, Mahound, Hind—the mythological tone which carries the story becomes implicated as mere formal recitation, a captivating illusion which conceals an ultimately conservative vision of historical change. Drawing on legends and the potent imagery of recurrence is only part of a code which justifies an image of history as violent competition between narrowly defined representations of self. The Mahound story provides Gibreel with a compelling mirror of his own day-to-day drive for self-interest, and it is this deep connection which creates “Gibreel’s fear, the fear of the self his dream creates, makes him struggle against Mahound’s arrival.”²⁵

The Imam: exile and enslavement

In the Imam dream—the first three sections of the chapter “Ayesha”—we see a form of religious life in which self-interest is irrelevant; what really matters here is “eternal vigilance”—unconditional commitment to a central idea of perfection.²⁶ In this very short section we are not immersed in a literary genre as much as in the logic of the Imam’s conception of exile: “Exile is a dream of glorious return. Exile is a vision of revolution... It is an endless paradox: looking forward by always looking back.”²⁷ Everything about the Imam’s surroundings is discussed and judged in the context of its distance from the glorious return he envisions. The real conditions of the world are rejected wherever they deviate from the idea: “The curtains, thick golden velvet, are kept shut all day, because otherwise the evil thing might creep into the apartment:

²⁴ Ibid., 125.

²⁵ Ibid., 111.

²⁶ Ibid., 214.

²⁷ Ibid., 212.

foreignness, Abroad, the alien nation.”²⁸ It is this sense in which the Imam controls “something stranger” than history.²⁹ For all particular aspects of the world are dissolved into their relation to the pure—everything that happens in the present requires one to look back, and so is blasphemy and must be destroyed. When the dream concludes, there is a sense in which nothing has happened, despite the death of Al-Lat and the announcement of “the hour that is beyond measuring, the hour of the exile’s return, of the victory of water over wine.”³⁰ For all of these things have been announced by the Imam from the beginning of the dream, and the fantastical description of the victory leaves us no reason to believe that it has been achieved anywhere except in his own mind. We do not see the movement of history but rather the endlessly imagined statement of a logic being realized, an idea endlessly proclaimed by its slave rather than realized by its prophet and disciples.

If the angel Gibreel’s agency is challenged and overcome by Mahound in “Mahound” and “Return to Jahilia,” in the Imam story Gibreel imagines agency only to see it taken from him: “Gibreel understands that the Imam, fighting by proxy as usual, will sacrifice him... that he is a suicide soldier in the service of the cleric’s cause. I am weak, he thinks...The Imam’s strength moves Gibreel, places thunderbolts in his hands.”³¹ Once again, Gibreel’s aversion to the contents of this dream lies in its reflection of aspects of his life which are generally excluded from his persona. Gibreel’s life story consists of many moments in which he was left with absolutely no choice but to do what he did. Choices were made for him with no consideration of his desire by other people such as his parents, his adopted guardians, or by some other unidentifiable force. His ascent to stardom, for instance, is largely dependent upon his inborn and

²⁸ Ibid., 213.

²⁹ Ibid., 216.

³⁰ Ibid., 222.

³¹ Ibid., 221.

inadvertent ability to please: “from the beginning, it seemed, [Gibreel] could fulfill people’s most secret desires without having any idea of how he did it.”³² His audition with D.W. Rama is set up despite Gibreel never having expressed interest in a film career.³³ At the time, Gibreel interprets this and other important moments in his life as signs of a guardian angel: “When Babasaheb Mhatre took him into his home it confirmed to the young man that he was not alone in the world, that something was taking care of him.”³⁴ Regardless of any later revision of this explanation, the fact is that much of Gibreel’s life was spent moving forward without any sense of control whatsoever. What he may later have reimagined as talent or instinctive self-determination was once the inevitable pull of destiny, a sensation which is mirrored in Gibreel’s inevitable falls into dreaming slumber.³⁵

The force of destiny takes on a particularly interesting role in the description of Gibreel’s wheelchair-team. The “complex coding system” which Gibreel imposes on the wheelchair-team is itself derived from a system to which Gibreel was forced to comply as a lunch-runner—of course, this job is also something into which he “followed” his father.³⁶ However, as a movie-star, he transmits the imperatives of this system upon his employees, who ultimately submit their own well-being to that of Gibreel as they attempt to make excuses for his absence and are fired one-by-one, despite having no responsibility for his absence.³⁷ In his dream, by inhabiting the mind of the angel Gibreel as well as the Imam, Gibreel inhabits two links in the chain of slavery which leads back to the logic of exilic existence. This logic takes the place of agency, to such an extent that both characters are actually passive.

³² Ibid., 19.

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 93.

³⁶ Ibid., 11, 18.

³⁷ Ibid., 12.

The Imam dream is the twisted double of the Mahound dream; while the Mahound dream problematizes a life of self-interest by revealing the self-delusions inherent in it, the Imam dream reveals the way that those self-delusions strike back as something external which controls us—they return from exile with the force that has grown in them since they’ve been “gone.” When Gibreel attempts to uphold a sense of the self which is based on rejection of disruptive elements, he enters into a logic of vengeance, of “eternal vigilance.”³⁸ His rejection of particular elements of his multiplicitous self necessitates their return in the form of “nocturnal retribution.”³⁹ His attempt at self-definition is an enslavement to a vision of destruction which is the only possible way to actually try to realize the bounds he sets up. Whether or not he is able to embrace the rejected elements, they will enact revenge upon him simply because he will be haunted by visions of their destruction, and their deep connection to his life will force that destruction to remain imagined and never fully realized—he is enslaved to an image of perpetual apocalypse.

Ayesha: “nothing”

In my analysis of the Mahound story and the Imam story, I’ve suggested that Gibreel’s dreams are rooted in his critical interpretation of particular forms of religious life, and that the discomfort of the dreams rests in the applicability of those criticisms to his own conception of self. In both cases, the most explicit mark of that discomfort is the internal monologue of the angel Gibreel as he interacts with Mahound and the Imam. In the Ayesha story, however, we do not witness a single moment where the angel speaks to the prophetess—these moments are only recounted by Ayesha after and heard by the dreaming Gabriel as he dreams.⁴⁰ Thus, relative to the other dreams, there is no “evidence” of revelation at all, and Gibreel hesitates even more than before to accept responsibility for the commands she reports: “She was ... receiving a message

³⁸ Ibid., 214.

³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 232, 496, 513.

from somewhere that she called Gibreel.”⁴¹ There is neither struggle for agency nor negation of agency through enslavement—rather, it is unclear whether Gibreel has acted or attempted to act at all.

Furthermore, unlike in the other dreams, it is quite difficult to figure out the motivations of the characters, most of all of Ayesha. There is no clear political motive like there is for Mahound, nor a clear idea towards which someone like the Imam strives. Ayesha’s perspective is only vaguely represented in the way she behaves, the commands she delivers, and the elusive “explanations” she gives for them: “Everything will be required of us, and everything will be given to us also.”⁴² The villagers are forced to confront the same obscurity. And yet, they all follow her. Though I cannot speak for all readers, I think the story is told in such a way as to bring the reader along as well. I find myself forgiving characters *constantly*, to an extent which I would never consider for the characters who populate the other dreams. Gibreel the dreamer “follows,” too:

Things have reached the point at which some of his night-sagas seem more bearable than others, and after the apocalypse of the Imam he feels almost pleased when the next narrative begins, extending his internal repertory, because at least it suggests that the deity whom he, Gibreel, has tried unsuccessfully to kill can be a God of love, as well as one of vengeance, power, duty, rules and hate.⁴³

Making sense of this narrative’s meaning requires us to interrogate both what prevents Gibreel from understanding it, and how this lack of understanding creates an environment of forgiveness and community which is absent in the other dreams.

One persistent and difficult theme in the story is that of unnoticed presence. The dream-narrator recounts a legend of Titlipur’s distant past, namely the story of the holy woman Bibiji and her attendant butterfly spirits, who once brought prosperity and miracles to the village. We

⁴¹ Ibid., 233.

⁴² Ibid., 232.

⁴³ Ibid., 222.

learn that the butterflies returned after one hundred and one years of being gone, “but when the expected wonders failed to materialize the locals sank back, little by little, into the insufficiency of the day-to-day...The human inhabitants of Titlipur, and its butterfly hordes, moved amongst one another with a kind of mutual disdain.”⁴⁴ In other words, the stuff of miracles and the people who witness miracles are all present, but the connection between them has somehow been severed. This being the case, it is hard to say what “religion” *is* here. If the material of religion simply becomes part of the furniture, as it appears to have become in Titlipur, how can meaning ever be resurrected and returned to devotional practices? The closest thing we get to an answer is that there *is* meaning in faith, and that Ayesha returns that meaning to the consciousness of the village.

While we are never told why Ayesha appears, her appearance and prophetic mission can be said to provide a meaningful antidote for the village’s sense of unimportance in a modern, globalized world: “Ayesha was the vindication of the long-soured hope engendered by the butterflies’ return, and the evidence that great things were still possible in this life, even for the weakest and poorest in the land.”⁴⁵ It is unsurprising in this dream of the subaltern’s spiritual redemption that Gibreel—a hugely successful movie star—is nowhere given a space to critique the form of devotion he witnesses; for he lives at a height of the modern social structure that is literally unimaginable from the perspective of Titlipur’s humble inhabitants, and vice versa. Because he is not given a voice within the narrative itself, the only moments of reflection which we get are Gibreel expressing his confusion: “All around him, he thinks as he half-dreams, half-wakes, are people hearing voices, being seduced by words. But not his; never his original

⁴⁴ Ibid., 223-224.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 241.

material. – Then whose? ... He can't work it out."⁴⁶ His structural separation from this leaves him detached in a way that was, for some reason, not the case in the Mahound and Imam narratives. And yet, since it is a dream it must reflect some aspect of himself. The dream is described as “a nostalgic sort of tale, of a lost homeland,” suggesting the allure that Gibreel feels towards the mixture of familiarity and incomprehension.⁴⁷ There is some element present in himself which creates the characters and shape of the narrative, and yet he can *only* see them projected, without any intuitive understanding of the process of projection.

This absolute distance mixed with his feeling of being “almost pleased” suggest that what we are dealing with here is desire. The most persistent critique in the Ayesha story comes from the zamindar Mirza Saeed, notable for his lust for Ayesha and for his connection to the modern political organization of India. Mirza's previously harmonious relationship with his surroundings is totally disrupted by Ayesha's appearance: “He found that he was at once sickened by his own impure deigns and also elated by the feelings that were coursing within him, fresh feelings whose newness excited him greatly.”⁴⁸ Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Ayesha's appearance and the pilgrimage is the extent to which it feels *new* to him, rather than *old*; his direct insults—“loonies, simpletons...bitch”—as well as his references to modern science, technology, and objective knowledge are insecure assertions of his hierarchical view of the world, into which the phenomena he witnesses simply do not fit.⁴⁹ It is precisely due to his modern sensibility that this incompatibility is intolerable to him, and his ongoing frustration and temporary exclusion from the final miracle are signs that full participation would require a sacrifice of aspirations to full understanding.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 244-245.

Other “moderns”—police, “journalists, local politicians... businessmen... foreign tourists, nostalgic Gandhians”—are similarly baffled by the pilgrimage: “these visitors were amazed, and retreated with confounded expectations, that is to say with a hole in their pictures of the world that they could not paper over.”⁵⁰ The modern worldview is based in a desire for totality; thus, as certain areas of modern society and knowledge do appear to expand infinitely, the desire inherent in modernity ends up being focused towards aspects which slip from its control and so question its worth as a form of social organization. As Sara Suleri claims: “To the skeptics of both the village and the subcontinent, such literalism [the literalism with which Ayesha justifies the pilgrimage] translates into blasphemy itself, converting religious desire into a most dangerous transgression of social stability.”⁵¹ Mirza’s ability to see some but not all aspects of the miracle suggests that through the pilgrimage he made steps towards a religious worldview, and yet was unable to fully transcend his modern viewpoint.⁵² When he returns home and witnesses the inexplicable decay that has occurred in Titlipur, he finally manages to open himself by letting go of his own aspirations to understanding or correctness: “...he decided there was no point bothering to find food. For what? Much better to rock in this chair, and not think, not think, not think.”⁵³ Considering that he is starving to death, the vision which closes the story could easily be interpreted as Mirza going crazy. However, it also appears that the death of the pilgrims and the testimony of the other survivors has forced him to acknowledge the limits of his point of view, and to seek what lies beyond them through inaction. The final absence of Gibreel’s voice suggests that within the dream he has done something similar, and has become fully immersed in Mirza’s experience.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 489, 502.

⁵¹ Sara Suleri, “Salman Rushdie: Embodiments of Blasphemy, Censorships of Shame,” in *The Rhetoric of English India*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 203.

⁵² Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 519.

⁵³ Ibid., 520.

Conclusion—the final retribution

In a reflection which is especially convenient for the purposes of this essay, Gibreel distinguishes between his angelic experiences in the three dreams: “With Mahound, there is always a struggle; with the Imam, slavery; but with this girl, there is nothing.”⁵⁴ As I’ve already suggested, the Ayesha dream must be rooted in some combination of Gibreel’s previous experiences. And yet, whatever is represented here, he clearly does not know how to *talk* about it, other than with the word “nothing.” While the unnoticed presence of the butterflies is transcended by the appearance of Ayesha, it is left ambiguous whether Gibreel is ever able to think of what happened in this dream as more than “nothing”—or to *value* it for its nothingness. For Gibreel appears not to incorporate the form of the dream into his waking life. When he stars in a film called *The Parting of the Arabian Sea*, he plays the angel Gibreel in a fashion which blatantly contradicts his muted perspective during the dream: “...Gibreel’s own portrayal of the archangel had struck many critics as narcissistic and megalomaniac.”⁵⁵ The film’s failure at the box office suggests that the dream’s affective power was lost in translation to real life. It appears that Gibreel’s dreams and hallucinations have, more than anything, caused him to try to go back to the way things were before—falling into the dangers outlined in the Mahound and Imam dream, he has once again attempted to enact revenge on blasphemous elements, including the perspective he encountered in the Ayesha dream.

Gibreel’s suicide, more than anything, leaves the reader wondering where the Ayesha dream came from and what effect it had. He may be unfaithful in his film adaptation, and yet if the dreams have taught us anything it is that different parts of Gibreel are alienated from each other, and to some extent he is able to inhabit one part and enact judgment on another. Suleri

⁵⁴ Ibid., 240.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 528.

claims that “The Ayesha episode attempts to transcribe the dubiousness of miracle into a framework of secular history, thereby providing postcolonial narrative with a highly novel language of reconciliation and forgiveness.”⁵⁶ Perhaps Gibreel commits suicide because he *has* forgiven all of those beings and ways of living he once rejected, including aspects of his own self. Through the nostalgic language of his dream he has come to instinctively value a truly blasphemous—and truly blessed—way of life, and yet is unable to incorporate it into his thoroughly modern way of life. He is simply unable to live through this dissonance. As Afzal-Khan claims, “in the end we become the roles we play, we become as contained and boxed in as the frameworks that engulf us, if we accept the conventions of definitions. Gibreel ends up destroying himself because finally he cannot live according to the definition of himself as an angel.”⁵⁷ The only being he has not forgiven is the self that committed so many acts of violent retribution. Just before he kills himself, he reminds Saladin of a time when he said ““that if I thought the sickness would never leave me, that it would always return, I would not be able to bear up to it.””⁵⁸ He has come to realize that his sickness continued despite his ongoing process of “cleansing”. Gibreel’s death sets him “free” because in a final act of delimiting—he sets the temporal bounds of his own life—he destroys the possibility of further delimiting; he commits retribution on the idea of retribution.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Suleri, “Embodiments of Blasphemy,” 205.

⁵⁷ Afzal-Khan, “The Debunking of Myth,” 172.

⁵⁸ Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*, 560.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 561.

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I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment.