

# Cruel Optimism in the Satanic Verses by Salmon Rushdie

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**Annotation:** The Satanic Verses by Salmon Rushdie is a fictional novel that incorporates the use of magical realism to a large extent (Albertazzi 28). The story depicted in the book was inspired by the life of the Islamic Prophet, Mohammed in part. Several Quran teachings are also portrayed. For instance, the title of the book is derived from three pagan goddesses whose story is told in the Quran. The narration of the story is also crafted in line with contemporary events concerning immigration. This paper looks into the controversies surrounding the novel.

**Keywords:** Satanic Verses, Quran, Salmon Rushdie

The Satanic Verses by Salmon Rushdie is a fictional novel that incorporates the use of magical realism to a large extent (Albertazzi 28). The story depicted in the book was inspired by the life of the Islamic Prophet, Mohammed in part. Several Quran teachings are also portrayed. For instance, the title of the book is derived from three pagan goddesses whose story is told in the Quran. The narration of the story is also crafted in line with contemporary events concerning immigration. This paper looks into the controversies surrounding the novel. More so, the paper will analyze the theme of immigration which has been ignored in favor of the aspect of religion which is quite dominant in the novel. Rushdie also theorizes the arguments associated with cruel optimism. He achieves this through educating the reader on the trauma that immigrants face.

Laurent Berlant defines cruel optimism as “the state which occurs when something you desire is actually an obstacle for your flourishing.” (Berlant 1). This may be in relation to many things that a person experiences in their life including love, the fantasy of a good life or politics. At the heart of the concept of cruel optimism lies the idea of a good life. In this regard, people cling on to the hope of having good relationships, political influence, stable institutions and influence on the market. They, however, disregard the costs that those fantasies carry along with them. These costs are usually very clear and obvious, yet people seem to be oblivious of them. This section addresses the issue of cruel optimism in relation to some important themes portrayed in Rushdie’s book.

Due to its use of magical realism, The Satanic Verses attracted numerous debates from the Muslim society (Mufti 278). Many considered it blasphemous to the religion and an abuse of the freedom of speech. This view led to several protests against the book. Subsequently, the book was banned from India and several copies burned in Britain. Several demonstrations advocated for the death of Rushdie. He was also sentenced to death in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini, a leader of Iran. After that, he was exposed to several attempted assassinations which he escaped due to the protection awarded to him by the British government. Other people associated with the book, however, did not get away with it. For instance, the author of the book’s Japanese translation was stabbed to death in 1991. Another translator was stabbed but survived death in 1991 (Mufti 278).

These controversies were sparked by several aspects portrayed in the book beginning with the title itself. The phrase ‘satanic verses’ are used in reference to a couple of verses derived from the Quran (Jussawalla 54). These verses were spoken to Prophet Mohammed by three pagan women. However, they were subsequently withdrawn because they were believed to have been from the devil and intended to deceive the prophet. Quoting them ‘Satanic Verses’ was seen to be an implication that the Quran was partly the work of the devil (Jussawalla 59).

Other controversies included the author’s choice of name for the character portrayed as Prophet Mohammed. He was named Mahound which was considered derogatory (Jussawalla 60). Other controversial titles include; Angel Gibreel, Saladin, Jahilia, and Ayesha (Jussawalla 64). Other critics suggest that Rushdie asserts that, “the Quran is the unvarnished word of God; that is what makes them Muslims” (Buchan 27). This is considered insulting to the religion.

The depiction of Abraham in the novel also stirred some dispute. Here, he had been described as a bastard because he sent Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Muslims were equally not happy with the characterization of Salman the Persian in the novel. In the book, he was one of the record-keepers of the prophet (Berlant 665). The characterization stirred some controversy because according to Islamic history, this character was a controversial figure. He had abandoned the faith because Mohammed did not appreciate some changes he had made to the Quran. Some remarks made by characters in the book also sounded blasphemous against the Islamic faith. In this regard, one of the characters made a joke complaining that Islamic law had rules about everything. (Rushdie 65).

The *Satanic Verses* explores the theme of immigration. Rushdie himself asserts “the book is not about Islam, but about immigration, metamorphoses, divided selves, London...” (Sharma 97). This story is premised on two protagonists who are Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta. They were both Muslims and Indian. However, they moved to London as immigrants. Their experiences in this capacity are impactful to their lives to a large extent. For instance, upon their entrance into the United Kingdom, the police suspect that Saladin was an illegal immigrant. Consequently, he faces several abusive acts from them depicted through the statement " For poor Saladin, fresh from his beating in the police van..." ( Rushdie 173). During this period, the UK had in place several conservative policies that restricted full acceptance of immigrants. Accordingly, they would not be perceived the same way a non-immigrant would be. On the other hand, the story also depicts the positive effects of immigration. This is shown by the relationship between Allie Cone and Farishta (Rushdie 450). Gibreel is a Bollywood actor who fell in love with a British mountaineer. He was born into an impoverished family, and the situation forced him to seek employment at a young age as a delivery boy. In fact, Farishta is motivated to move to London to pursue this love interest. It depicts the effects of the intermingling of people of different cultures. “It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure” (Rushdie 2).

In order to further the issue of migration problems in *Satanic Verses*, it is also important to consider the political setting at the time the book was authored. The consideration is rare because the book incorporates the use of magical realism in the narration of the story. The first edition of *The Satanic Verses* was published in 1988. It was during this period that Margaret Thatcher was in office as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. She was known for her conservative nature and her push towards the adoption of several conformist policies. Some of these policies dealt with the issue of immigration (Dascalu 34). The Prime Minister claimed that British people did not want loose immigration laws because they were afraid that the country would eventually be flooded with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Subsequently, several conservative laws relating to immigration had been passed by the time the book was authored. In 1981, the British Nationality Act was enacted by the British Congress. This law provided that only its citizens had the right to live in the UK (Dascalu 34).

Consequently, the rates of immigration into the UK declined during this period. The number of refugees accepted into the country also decreased significantly which attracted hostility towards the immigrants from the residents of London. There were several cases of hate crimes inspired by racial differences in London at the time.

Immigration in the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie can be related to cruel optimism in several aspects. First, Saladin’s dream of moving to London preoccupied his mind for a large part of his childhood. At some point, “this was an obstacle to his flourishing” (Berlant 1). He moved to the city with the hope of having a rosy life of a British man. In his “fantasy of a good life” (Berlant 1) he failed to factor in the discrimination that he would encounter in the process. Saladin had however always wanted to move to London. He understood that, "was destined for a cool Vilayet full of crisp promises of Pounds sterling at which the magic blindfold had hit" (Rushdie 39). The said abusive acts did not bar him from his dream. This is an attribute of cruel optimism (Berlant 2). Secondly, Farishta’s pursuance of his love interest set him to “move out of himself and into the world in order to bring himself closer to satisfying something that he could not generate in his own” (Berlant 1).

The concept of cruel optimism is explained in reference to the experiences of Saladin and Gibreel in London. First, when a woman sees Saladin and Gibreel crawling out of the water, she calls the police to report them as illegal immigrants (Dascalu 38). On the way, the cops harass Saladin by beating him ruthlessly. Despite him informing the officers that he was a citizen of the country they were reluctant to

believe him. Although he had lived in Britain since he was a child and had since gained citizenship, these policemen do not take their time to listen to him. The author writes that “nor was it long before he understood that the call to the Police National Computer, which had promptly identified him as a British Citizen first class, had not improved his situation...” (Rushdie 172). They escort him to their facilities without necessarily considering that he could indeed be a citizen for the United Kingdom. Eventually, he is released from police custody and put under treatment. Here, he meets a psychotherapist who understands Saladin’s transformation because he had gone through an almost similar change himself since they both experienced bias from the white people in London. “All attachments are optimistic” (Berlant 23). Saladin hoped to find the best life in London. This object of desire gave him the heart to endure all hardships that the city had to offer. He developed an attachment to the city due to the sheer fantasy of an ideal British life. Even though his presence compromised his wellbeing and dignity, he was unable to point out its problematic characteristics. This is a characteristic of cruel optimism (Berlant 23).

Similarly, although the police do not treat Gibreel as harsh as they treated Saladin, he still faces racial discrimination. The discrimination happened when he met the racist pamphleteer. This pamphleteer was circulating materials with anti-immigration content. There are also a few cases of cultural segregation that Gibreel experiences. The events may include occurrences like where Alleluia’s mother comments about her relationship with Gibreel as she views Gibreel as “An out-to-lunch! A ninety-pennies-in-the-pound...” (Rushdie 358). Likewise, the Sufyan segregate themselves from other people. They are seen to interact and associate only with people from South East Asia while keeping remaining tight-lipped for fear of their businesses being taken away from them “for the people in the know remained tight-lipped, the Sufyan because they feared the loss of business.” (Rushdie 299).

Generally, this book depicts the experience of a newcomer in England and how this may have affected his or her view of the city. Rushdie explores this subject at length as the plot unfolds. He shows the fruits to be reaped when the seeds of racism are planted are usually those of violence. He also highlights the plight of the youths who feel excluded in a country where all they desire to make a life for themselves. Those who were citizens of the United Kingdom but were not white faced the same predicament. Their citizenship was disregarded because of their race. Such situations were common in London because London had a large population of immigrants in the country. Immigrants move into the country with the hope of a new life and better opportunities than their countries of origin. They develop an optimistic attachment to the country they are to move in to. However, this may compromise their well-being in the long run. Such attachments are very cruel because when a subject has a particular thing that they have desired in their life, they may not be able to endure its loss even in the circumstances that that object is disastrous to their dignity and wellbeing; a position that is emphasized in the cruel optimism (Berlant 24).

The author intended this novel to be viewed as a novel encouraging liberation (Cooley 80). Upon understanding the plight of an immigrant in London, it ought to have opened up the eyes of British citizens and its government. Instead of isolation, they should aspire to assimilate the immigrants from South East Asia because the immigrants like the white citizens of the country deserve to be treated humanely. Equal treatment is based on the rationale that a society is more effective and efficient as a united front as opposed to when it the members of the community are divided. Similarly, myths formed against a particular people should be shunned if they are not parallel to the reality on the ground. Blindly, immigrants such as Saladin may shut their eyes to the tragedies, they may face on the basis of race because of their inherent desire to live in a foreign country. This cruel optimism should not be taken advantage of. Instead, such governments should make use of it for maximum productivity of the nation.

This view explains the immigrant status of an individual in London at that time. It depicts the type of experiences that immigrants would be subjected to because of their racial orientation. Immigrants would experience hostility not only legally through the laws enacted but also socially through the treatment they received from law enforcers and the general public. In this regard, immigration is a serious issue which was depicted in Rushdie’s book. He sought to open the eyes of his readers to the experiences of an immigrant into a western country from the east. Accordingly, this book is not merely about religion, but also about migration. Migration is a subject that has been conveniently overlooked by critics as they review the book.

The concept of hybridism is seen from the beginning of Rushdie’s book, *The Satanic Verses* (Berlant 669). It begins when the two protagonists, initially from India, find themselves in London after the plane

exploded. We are told, "The Jambo Jet Boston, flight AI-420, blew apart without any warning" (Rushdie 2). The two are in an environment that is different from the Indian environment which they are used to as they were born and bred in India. They had adapted to the cultural conditions in the east and their migration to the London forced them to face a very different cultural climate. These cultures then merge to form a new one, and the characters develop a new identity.

As the two protagonists are introduced to the reader at the beginning of the book, they are said to have been "falling from the sky by a stork" (Rushdie 8). The statement mentioned above is a metaphorical representation of the re-birth of the two characters. It marks the onset of hybridism. It appears as if Farishta had already accepted his hybridism whereas Saladin was still in denial. Farishta was singing a hybrid song which declared the countries of origin of his attire "O my shoes Japanese. These trousers English, if you please. On My head red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that" (Rushdie 5).

On the other hand, Saladin was not ready to embrace hybridity. Since he arrived in London, he had tried to extinguish all traces of the Indian culture that Saladin had developed when he lived there. He is seen chasing English women and avoiding Indian ones (Rushdie 23). He was strongly enchanted by his relationship with Pamela Lovelace, an English woman because it made him feel closer to the white race and cultural background "He monopolized her all evening and she never stopped smiling and she left with another man" (Rushdie 52). It gave him a sense of reassurance that his existence was English and not Indian. In the book, he expresses that the white breasts that he was holding, coupled with white civilization made him feel worthy. Eventually, Pamela herself realizes that Saladin was only with her because she was white. Saladin's desperation for Pamela is depicted when the author writes "He needed her so badly, to reassure himself of his own existence..." (Rushdie 54).

Similarly, Saladin dreams that he has sexual experiences with the Queen of England "...he found himself dreaming of the Queen, of making tender love to the Monarch." (Rushdie 179). The queen, being the most significant figure in the United Kingdom, represents its body. These dreams, therefore, symbolize his intentions to connect with Britain at a deep and more substantial level. Saladin also tried to incorporate his voice-actor job into his real life. The attempt caused Saladin to imitate English voices in real life. However, as they fell from the plane, his inner self told him that it did not want to be associated with his English personality. He was wearing an English bowler hat as he fell while singing the lyrics of the song 'Rule Britannia.' Though he had not sufficiently acknowledged his hybridism, it still appeared in his subconscious because it was a culture is a concept that one cannot wholly resist (Mazrui 100).

To further explain the effect of hybridity on Chamcha, I will advance the argument by pointing out how much he wanted to be British. In this regard, he changed his name from the original one that sounded too Indian to one that looked like a western name. Chamcha's birth name was Salahuddin Chamchawala which he later converted to Saladin Chamcha (Sardar35). However, he eventually realized that his strive to become entirely British and abandon his culture was a mockery of the Indian culture from which he originally came from. As he was on the plane from Bombay to London, he realizes that he has not been himself. He had to embrace both cultures and their effects on his persona. The realization dawned upon him when he visited India and had his English voice break down. It reminded him that the persona he had adopted was not his real personality. The change of heart and mind was demonstrated when he rejected a white woman who offered herself to him. He also reconciles with Gibreel. "He believes that the events of the Brickhall fire, when Gibreel saved his life, had in some way cleansed them both" (Rushdie 565).

Similarly, he uses his original Indian name when he gets back to India. He discovered several pieces of himself that he had been abandoning over the years but had remained in existence, nonetheless. He realized that he was neither Indian nor British, but an amalgamation of both, a hybrid. This acceptance and reconciliation with himself enable him to survive whereas Gibreel commits suicide by blowing his brains. On the other hand, Gibreel views London from a very different perspective from that of Saladin. As they fall from the sky, he looks like he embraces hybridity. He was transformed into an angel. However, once life begins, he is unable to cope with what London had to offer. Unlike Saladin who admires everything British, he only sees the negative aspects of the city. Gibreel is not able to reconcile the life he had in India with his new life in London which makes a life for him as an immigrant hard and he is unable to embrace his hybrid identity. He compares London to India and does everything in his capacity to change London into being what India was to him. He wanted to transform every aspect of England including its physical environment

to be like that of India with new birds and trees. This unwillingness to accept the new culture and embrace hybridism marked the beginning of his downfall. Subsequently, he develops schizophrenia which eventually leads him to commit suicide.

Cruel optimism incorporates a combination of habit and living in the moment. A subject considered the current moment that he is living in to be the crisis time. "Everyone lives in the present intensely, from within a sense of time, this time, is a crisis time" (Berlant 57). They are absorbed into the activities happening at the moment that they may ignore the underlying crisis that may be affecting their well-being. Similarly, focusing on a particular claim of life leads to the development of habits in an individual "Habit is the idiom of the claim of life" (Berlant 57).

In relation to the characters in *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin initially appeared to be living in the moment. He also developed a habit of chasing the life of an Englishman. In the process, he failed to acknowledge the impacts of denying his Indian identity. He had for a long time dreamt of adopting an Englishman lifestyle such that when he got it that engulfed all of his attention. He tried by all means to engulf any traces of his Indian identity. In this regard, he developed habits that geared him towards that direction. Such habits included chasing British women only. On the other hand, he failed to realize that not embracing hybridity was detrimental to him. It denied him of his overall happiness. Ultimately, when he embraced it, he was able to achieve happiness.

Gibreel, on the other hand, was not as lucky as Saladin in the long run. His aspects of cruel optimism accompanied him to his death. With his close connection to his Indian identity, he developed habits that propagated him towards a dream of a world that looks completely like India. His brain could only be satisfied by such a world. In the process, he failed to identify that this would eventually lead to his doom. He would not achieve happiness unless he embraced his hybridity.

In regard to Gabriel's fate in reference to Berlant's book, he might have been undergoing the process of 'slow death' through his life. Here, slow death is defined as "physical wearing out of a population as a result of deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (Berlant 95). In order to establish sovereignty over life, one has to work with all his aspects of manifestation of power. By denying them one experiences slow death because those aspects control an individual.

## Conclusion

To Sum, all these characters face disastrous events which alter their lives dramatically. Though they do not die as is typically the case in reincarnations, they undergo a personal revelation that changes their lives drastically. Generally, this book explores matters of identity in characters. The author is able to incorporate transformation as a mode of depicting drastic change. *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie received harsh criticism for allegedly misappropriating religious concepts; individuals' belonging to the Islam religion felt like the author was being blasphemous through his representation of Mohammed who is deemed as the most significant prophet in Islam.

However, several other vital themes were overlooked by these critics. Some of these themes include migration, cultural identity, and hybridism. The author was able to explore the treatment of immigrants into London extensively. Through the characters depicted in the novel, the author was able to portray the racial segregation that was dominant in the city. Aspects such as migration give rise to hybridism a concept that the author has been able to explore through the incorporation of both Indian and Britain culture when talking about the characters in the novel. As such, it is fair to conclude that the novel goes beyond the limitations imposed by the critics of Rushdie. Readers with an open mind have the chance to actually learn from the different themes in the novel as the novel talks of aspects like cultural identity. These aspects are dominant in the current society as individuals are constantly migrating from their place of origin in search of better opportunities. As such, Rushdie's portrayal of the treatment that immigrants received and the manner in which the immigrants perceived the treatment can be used as an eye opener to educate the society we live in on the need to be kind to immigrants. These themes can be related to cruel optimism as asserted by Lauren Berlant in her book as explained above as Lauren explains concepts like slow death which are evident in the novel.

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