

The Fragmentation of Identity in Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses'

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Abstract:

This paper explores the theme of identity fragmentation in Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses', examining how the novel portrays the complexities and challenges of identity formation in a postcolonial, diasporic context. Through a critical analysis of the protagonist, Saladin Chamcha. The novel's use of magical realism, this research reveals how Rushdie's work critiques essentialized notions of identity and culture, and highlights the tensions between different identity categories, such as nationality, culture, and religion. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which postcolonial, diasporic experiences shape identity, and the ways in which literature can reflect and challenge dominant narratives of identity and culture.

Keywords: Identity Fragmentation, Post Colonialism, Diaspora, Magical Realism.

Salman Rushdie is acclaimed and debated writer in modern literature. His works are characterized by their vibrant prose, exploration of identity and migration, and fearless engagement with political, religious, and historical themes. Rushdie is widely regarded as a pioneer of postcolonial literature and magical realism, and his career has left an indelible mark on global literary traditions. Rushdie is renowned for employing magical realism that effortlessly weaves the extraordinary into the everyday. This style allows him to explore profound themes such as migration, identity, and history while making the ordinary extraordinary. His characters often grapple with the tensions of hybridity and the fragmentation of identity in a postcolonial context. Rushdie incorporates elements from mythology, religion, and literary texts, reinterpreting and subverting them in a modern context. His works frequently reference Islamic mythology, Hindu epics, and Western literary traditions. Rushdie often employs nonlinear storytelling, weaving together multiple timelines, perspectives, and subplots. This technique allows him to explore the complexity of history and identity.

In Literature, English novels often delve into the cultural disruptions caused by colonialism, highlighting the loss, resistance, and adaptation of indigenous identities. Cultural identity is often explored through characters, settings, and narratives that reflect the complexities of belonging, alienation, and hybridity. Writers use literature as a medium to examine how cultural identity is shaped, challenged, and preserved in diverse social and historical contexts. A person's sense of belonging to a specific culture, which includes shared traditions, beliefs, language, rituals, and historical events, is referred to as their cultural identity.

Salman Rushdie, an Indian author, wrote the magic realism epic novel **The Satanic Verses**. In 1988, the Satanic Verses was first published. The book was shortlisted for the 1988 Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Novel of the Year award the same year. However, its literary merit was often overshadowed

by the controversy it sparked. While many countries banned *The Satanic Verses*, Iran's ban was the most notorious. Rushdie's satirical portrayal of Islam led many Muslims to regard the work as blasphemous, prompting Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to issue a fatwa against him.

The novel's central characters are two Indian Muslims living in England. Gibreel Farishta, a famous actor romantically involved with English mountaineer Alleluia Cone, is recovering from a mental health crisis. Saladin Chamcha, another actor, has grown estranged from his father. While the two are flying from Bombay to London, their plane is hijacked by Sikh militants. During a struggle, a bomb is accidentally detonated, destroying the aircraft over the English Channel. The sole survivors, Gibreel and Saladin, fall into the Atlantic Ocean. As they descend, Gibreel experiences vivid visions and transforms into the angel Gabriel, while Saladin becomes the devil, sprouting horns and cloven hooves. The first major subplot—one of the most controversial elements of the novel—retells the origins of Islam through a fictionalized lens. In the polytheistic city of Jahilia, a prophet-like figure named Mahound seeks to establish a monotheistic faith. Initially, a divine vision allows the worship of three goddesses, but Mahound later retracts this, claiming the revelation came from the devil.

Twenty-five years later, Jahilia converts to his religion, but some followers lose their faith. Back in the present, Saladin is arrested as an undocumented immigrant and bitterly resents Gibreel for not helping him. After escaping from the hospital, he discovers his wife's infidelity and loses his job. His misfortunes continue until his anger toward Gibreel subsides, restoring him to human form. Meanwhile, Gibreel reconciles with Alleluia but is urged by an angel to leave her and preach in London. His story takes a tragic turn when he is struck by a car belonging to an Indian film producer. Saladin eventually returns to Bombay, reconciles with his dying father, and reunites with a former lover. The narrative also contains another dream sequence from Gibreel, set in the village of Titlipur. There, a young girl named Ayesha, raised by Mirza Saeed Akhtar and his wife Mishal, claims the angel Gibreel has told her Mishal has breast cancer but will be healed if the entire village walks to Mecca. The arduous pilgrimage proves deadly for many, yet the survivors press on toward their sacred destination.

Saladin's transformation is rooted in his deep alienation from his Indian origins. As an immigrant in Britain, he deliberately detaches himself from his past, renouncing his heritage in a bid to completely adopt a British identity. He adopts an English name, builds a successful career as a voiceover artist, and suppresses any visible markers of his ethnicity. Yet his monstrous, "demonic" appearance becomes a cruel reminder that no matter how diligently he tries to assimilate, he cannot escape the imprint of his roots. This transformation also mirrors his estrangement from both his homeland and his adopted country. As he grows more detached from his Indian background, he encounters harsh prejudice and racism in Britain, where his attempts to conform are met with rejection. Trapped between two worlds, he becomes rootless, unable to find a true sense of belonging in either culture. Saladin's journey is, at its core, a psychological exploration of how migration, cultural assimilation, and internalized colonialism fracture one's identity. His repudiation of his Indian heritage stems from a colonial legacy of shame and an ingrained sense of cultural inferiority. This is most visible in his resentment toward his father—who represents traditional Indian values—and his obsessive desire to become "fully English." His physical demonization, transforming him into a literal devil, serves as a powerful metaphor for the inner conflict born of colonialism, in which the colonized subject struggles to reconcile native traditions with the values imposed by the colonizer.

Saladin's determined efforts to assimilate into British society are ultimately thwarted by the racism he encounters. Despite his professional success in the West and his deliberate attempts to erase his cultural

roots, he remains marked as an outsider. This highlights the persistence of racial and cultural boundaries that cannot be easily crossed, no matter how rigorously one attempts to “blend in.” His grotesque transformation into a devil serves as a potent metaphor for the internalization of this societal rejection, suggesting that denying one’s heritage in favor of another can lead to deep self-alienation and even self-destruction.

Saladin’s journey is not defined by alienation alone—it also charts a gradual path toward self-acceptance, forged through pain, loss, and self-discovery. His return to India and reconciliation with his estranged father mark a pivotal moment, initiating his reconnection with his cultural roots. This meeting compels him to face the values he once dismissed, allowing him to recognize the significance of family ties and the enduring value of his Indian identity. In embracing these truths, he begins to mend the fractures within his sense of self.

By the end of his journey, Saladin moves beyond the rigid binaries of “Indian” versus “British,” embracing instead the reality that his identity is shaped by both his origins and his adopted home. This acceptance of hybridity allows him to confront long-held insecurities and find a sense of peace.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie deepens his exploration of identity through the recurring motif of naming.. Names in the novel function not merely as labels but as powerful markers of cultural heritage, self-perception, and social expectation. By examining how characters grapple with their names, Rushdie questions the notion of identity as fixed or singular, instead presenting it as fluid, shifting, and often fragmented—particularly within the postcolonial, diasporic experience.

Through the intertwined stories of Saladin and Gibreel, the novel dismantles simplistic ideas of identity, portraying it instead as a dynamic, multi-layered process shaped by cultural conflict, historical trauma, religious belief, and personal agency. It illuminates the profound challenges of navigating multiple cultural, ideological, and spiritual worlds, while also exposing the emotional and psychological costs of such negotiations. Ultimately, *The Satanic Verses* becomes a powerful meditation on the multiplicity of selfhood, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the enduring human quest for belonging in a fractured and globalized world.

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