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METAMORPHOSIS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S THE SATANIC VERSES

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Abstract: *Metamorphic spaces (temporal, geographical and mental) produce metamorphic bodies and identities. Metamorphosis arises as a dynamic principle of survival in borderline zones. Its biological value, however, is transposed and reworked in fiction as a prodigious interruption of natural development, breaking of natural laws and establishing its own magical reality.*

Metamorphosis as a mode of living on borderlines is exhibited at various levels in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Above all, it flashes in the author's creative ambition to translate between worlds, between cultures. At the level of the fictional reality the two protagonists Sala(hud)din Chamcha(wala) and Gibreel Farishta undergo the most spectacular metamorphoses that highlight two basic templates of development studied by Marina Warner.

The idea that a series of metamorphoses develops the form of an individual underlies the misadventures of the protagonist Lucius in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. Rushdie's protagonist Saladin Chamcha undergoes a similar degrading, yet not as a donkey but a satanic goat transformation. Gibreel Farishta's metamorphosis follows a different pattern – that of identity reduplication.

Rushdie's novel presents at least two possible and conflicting explanations of metamorphosis. On the one hand, it is a way of transcending physical boundaries, a liberating experience that allows for new beginnings and celebrates life's flexibility and productivity. On the other hand, constant shape shifting may entail identity crisis and expose the fluid self to the risk of vanishing into virtual worlds. Whatever the scenario, metamorphosis maps a vast landscape of possibilities, some – natural, others – supernatural, some – conspicuous, others – invisible. It embroiders the tapestry of life's polyphony, enables transitions in the spaces within and without us and inspires the hope that there is always an alternative.

Within the context of globalisation with spatial and temporal boundaries growing increasingly porous and unstable, the problem of identity and identification needs to be redefined. Postmodernism and postcolonialism locate contemporary human condition in the dynamics of boundary crossing. The multiplicity of worlds changing their forms in a cloud-like fashion, nested in each other in the manner of babushka dolls or Chinese boxes; or rubbing their boundaries against each other till they grow extremely thin; or splitting, doubling and hatching new worlds; makes living "here and now" a borderline experience. Time sifted through the semi-permeable membrane of memories and expectations reaches us fragmented and dream-like. Space is protean, shape-shifting.

The impossibility of history and geography to map the time and space of objective reality is reflected in the same impossibility to measure the world(s) within us. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs. Bauman further argues that identity building has always been an art of travelling literally and figuratively, with the persistence and zeal of pilgrimage, but stripped of its religious linearity that binds the pilgrims to a particular destination. Modern pilgrims cannot do more than walk, cannot walk to. For the modern pilgrim home is the place of the beginning, foreignness is a necessary step forward in the quest of identity. The "other" is the mirror where one sees one's own reflection, if no "other" exists, it can be invented, projected by the eye of imagination as another self, a double. Travelling is a veritable liminal experience triggered by the quest of identity.

The migrant's survival depends, as Rushdie puts it, on discovering how newness enters the world". Transcending boundaries – geographical, historical, cultural as well as the boundaries of the self, entails encounters with otherness, foreignness. The liminality of the migrant experience has a transitional, but also a translational value as it is coordinated in the interstitial spaces between the old and the new, the temporally inscribed memory of the past and its possible reinscription in the hope and planning of new horizons of thinking. The encounters with otherness provoke a reciprocal projection of fears and expectations and unlock certain resistance to the attempts at breaking otherness down to more familiar forms and meanings. Whatever the form of Otherness – a new world or a new self, it is always confronted with a certain narcissist sense of self-exaltation, of innate worry about a possibility of translation, subjugation and hence – appropriation of those identity ingredients that make us unique and irreplaceable.

Rushdie's idea of "migrancy" has come to us in two versions. In the first version, "migrancy" is given to us as the myth of unbelonging of all human beings. It is, however, replaced by the larger myth of excess of belongings that produces liminal existence. The complexity of liminal identity is problematized in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

The Satanic Verses projects a heterotopian world in terms of its construction and content and, as such, it problematizes the destructive and creative potential of liminality.

On the one hand, the boundary is represented as an abysmal space that cuts a gap between the worlds and engulfs them, or produces the haunting shadow of the "other", of the "double" that alters one's sense of identity. Rushdie's both protagonists Gibreel Farishta and Sala(hud)din Chamcha(wala) get trapped in the quick sands of liminality, the one teetering on the verge of hallucination and reality, the other vacillating between his Indian origin and the enchanting but slippery dream land of England. The other characters in the novel are also exposed to the risks of liminality – Alleluia Cone's transcendental Himalayan experience stamps its singularity upon the confinement of her everyday life even before she sets her mind on climbing the mountain; Ayesha's pilgrimage drives a wedge between her divinity and its impossibility; Mahound is another dream figure projected in-between the extraordinary and its more banal interpretation; furthermore, Rushdie's own audacious intrusion in the spaces between the sacred and the profane brings him the anathema of the Islamic world.

On the other hand, the boundary becomes a space of cross-fertilization and produces new forms and combinations with enhanced vitality. Alleluia's father Otto Cohen who wishes to be English – like Saladin, insists on an English floral garden with tidy flowerbeds round "the central symbolic tree, a 'chimeran graft' of laburnum and broom" (Rushdie 298-299). Played off against the walnut tree of Saladin's life, the chimeran graft is a mighty symbol of hybridity in the novel.

The very textual tissue of *The Satanic Verses* is hybrid – Indian words are grafted onto the English "rootstock" and thus their untranslatability is highlighted. This linguistic polyphony inherited from colonial times with the emergence of English in the colonial imagination as one of the many Indian languages, projects hybridity as an exceptional mechanism of attuning dissonances and finding the common grain of life buried under layers of disparities.

The novel tracks down what is lost and what is gained throughout borderline experience. Dream challenges reality, the miraculous confronts the mundane, time struggles with timelessness (history reclaims its share from the present), the profane banalizes the sacred, which is an act of blasphemy, East wreaks its revenge on the West. At the same time, certain reconciliation finds its way out of the turbulence of borderline experience. The focal planes of the ordinary and the extraordinary coincide; such synthesis makes it possible to see the ordinary states of affairs as miracles – life, love, the possibility of happiness. Marina Warner insightfully notes that magic may also be natural, not supernatural. The past gone down in memories, can be filtered through forgiveness and propelled into new beginnings to keep time going; the sublime may be brought down to earth, humanized, made more tangible; East and West may produce new creative patterns – and authors like Salman Rushdie. The traditional dichotomy between Good/Evil, Me/the Other, is dispersed in the shades of the Good in the Evil, the Other in Me.

Metamorphic spaces (temporal, geographical and mental) produce metamorphic bodies and identities. Metamorphosis arises as a dynamic principle of survival in borderline zones. Its biological value, however, is transposed and reworked in fiction as a prodigious interruption of natural development, breaking of natural laws and establishing its own magical reality.

Metamorphosis as a mode of living on borderlines is exhibited at various levels in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Above all, it flashes in the author's creative ambition to translate between worlds and cultures. Rushdie's encounter with Englishness is in itself metamorphic, the reality and myths of the postcolonial and postmodern world are in turn reshaped and sifted through the permeable boundary between reality and fiction – that transitional zone which is shaped by the author's creative imagination. Finally, the reader acts as another agent of forces of change when admitted to the fictional world.

At the level of the fictional reality the two protagonists Sala(hud)din Chamcha(wala) and Gibreel Farishta undergo the most spectacular metamorphoses that highlight two basic templates of development characteristic of the postmodern and postcolonial representation of human condition.

The first one is grounded in metamorphic integrity which can be exemplified by the universe described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's classical text is frequently referred to in Rushdie's novel and provides a possible yet not fully acceptable explanation of the "migrant condition ... from which", Rushdie suggests, "... can be derived a metaphor for all humanity" (Rushdie 394). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* presents the metamorphic unity of a universe which abounds in cases of shape-shifting. Rocks, flowers, trees, beasts, human beings interpenetrate and change their forms yet the spirit remains intact. The chains of transmutations entail only superficial, formal change. This principle of formal transformation is reflected in the following passage:

...As the pliant wax
Is stamped with new designs, and is no longer
What once it was, but changes form, and still
Is pliant wax, so do I teach that spirit
Is evermore the same, though passing always
To ever-changing bodies. (Ovid 370)

Rushdie embraces the "hot wax" image and disguises it in the name of the Club where marginalized migrants wreak their revenge on Madame Tussaud's wax figures of caricatured and mocked supremacy. It is significant that Chamcha's transformation back to his human form occurs in Club Hot Wax. However, this case of reverse transformation breaks away from Ovid's patterns of irreversible transmutation and approaches another classical route of identity development – that of the protagonist Lucius in Apuleius's epic *The Metamorphoses of Lucius*.

The idea that a series of metamorphoses develops the form of an individual underlies the misadventures of Lucius in Apuleius' *The Metamorphoses of Lucius*. Written in the second century and widely read from the fifteenth century onwards all over Europe, it recounts the misadventures of the first-person narrator and protagonist Lucius who after being changed into a donkey by a miscarriage of magic, manages to return to his shape as a man (a fantastic plot borrowed and developed by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Rushdie's protagonist Saladin Chamcha undergoes a similar degrading yet not a donkey but a satanic goat transformation. Rushdie was apparently influenced by this proto-novel as Saladin's and Lucius's metamorphoses go almost in parallel. Before his own metamorphosis into a donkey Lucius moves through the dark and shifting Thessaly, "a province notorious for magic and sorcery" (Apuleius 42-43), driven by his desire for adventure, but gets entangled in the labyrinth of the deceptive land. Prior to his satanic metamorphosis while still in Bombay, Salahuddin is left spellbound by a rainbow vision of England and later goes there to unravel its mysteries. Both are punished for their audacity, both undergo unfortunate, grotesque transmogrifications. Both have to suffer a sequence of probing trials to deserve the reverse transformation. Both are consequently reborn into a new existence in

their “proper” shapes. Lucius’s miraculous restoration follows his acknowledgement of the Great Goddess, Chamcha’s – his liberating anger against – and hence his acknowledgement of the greatness and invincibility of London. The characters’ development is presented by plunging them in shame and degradation in order to stir their hidden energies and bring out their hidden true selves. This epic model of character development foreshadows the later seventeenth century scientific perspective on metamorphosis grounded in observations of the butterflies’ life cycle.

Maria Merian, a seventeenth-century naturalist and artist who studied the life cycle of butterflies in Suriname and who belonged to the first generation of scientists to understand that insects lay eggs, writes “that the most beautiful caterpillars have transformed themselves into very ugly butterflies, and that there have emerged very beautiful ones from the ugliest caterpillars”¹ (Warner 79). Before this natural scientific revision of metamorphosis and its definition as changes of identity in a continuous existence, the process was represented within the framework of medieval thinking through the categories of regeneration/renewal and their religious analogue – repentance, conversion. Figuratively, they were seen as shedding skins. The new reading of metamorphosis suggests that change is not a progression in which each stage, however inconsistent and incongruous, expresses the full creature under another shape, but a process. Chamcha’s character follows this model of metamorphosis – the protagonist’s true self generates itself in its proper character in several partial transformations. The rhythm of the butterfly metamorphosis implies that the larger transformation and the appearance of the person’s fullness of being are unlocked by the accumulation of smaller transformations. Rushdie uncovers and reworks this technique of character formation, which confirms the postcolonial and postmodern condition of uncertainty of human identity with the subtle implication that the good and beautiful are often “hatched” by the accumulation of the ugly and evil, and certain traces of both types of nature are retained in the new being (Chamcha wreaks his satanic revenge on Gibreel after his retransformation).

The novel’s other protagonist, Gibreel Farishta, undergoes metamorphosis that follows the pattern of identity doubling/ reduplication. After a mysterious disease he develops the capability of dreaming and enters his dreamed worlds as an alter self assuming the mythological personalities of Archangel Gabriel, Mohammed, God and Shaitan/Satan. In this way, Gibreel’s identity is multiplied – he is the dreamer and the dreamed and acts under various disguises within the “dreamed”. Within the context of postcolonial representation Gibreel’s identity doubling can be seen as a case of identity crisis in which the self-other opposition is interiorized and takes the form of alienation within the self.

Dreams and hallucinations themselves are powerful representations that “ac[t] as a form of doubling...” as they “can exercise the power to make something come alive, apparently” (Warner 165). At least two suggestions about the possibility of dreamed worlds are proposed by the novel: their inferiority and their superiority as to the ontological level they occupy. The former establishes them as projected by Gibreel’s troubled hallucinative mind; the latter places them as a superior reality – a divine or satanic interception in common life. The first and more banal explanation of doubling suggests that it is a matter of self-representation. In his first dream of Mahound/Mohammed Gibreel sees himself as the Archangel, a cameraman or a spectator: “Gibreel: the dreamer, whose point of view is sometimes that of the camera and at other moments, spectator” (Rushdie 108). Among the other forms of artistic representation, the nature of film reflects best the paradox of the invisible yet visible reality and can be translated into the image of the “inner eye” of the imagination that projects pictures onto the screen in human mind. In his study of projections and optics *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* (1646), the German experimenter Athanasius Kircher explores the metaphor of the screen and relates it to the mind’s capacity to fabricate a reality which physical eyes cannot see. Brownie Ella Freeman Sharpe or “Brownie” Sharpe, a practical critic of psychoanalysis, argues that when dreaming, “A film of moving pictures is projected on the screen of our private inner cinema. This dramatization is done predominantly

¹ The passage is translated by Marina Warner.

by visual images” (Sharpe 58). The inner visualization of an alter self and the identity cleavage resulting from it is therefore seen as a work of the imagination which poses a threat to personality of possession by another, and alienation within self. At the same time, it inspires hopes of possible epiphanies of the true self even at the cost of becoming “other”.

Apart from being an individually experienced reality, Gibreel’s dreams are embedded in a fictional environment where the real and the marvellous overlap; and the characters themselves are so much prone to believe the worlds they project that, at times, it is no longer clear which world is imagined or dreamed and which – not.

In a spectacular and possibly paranormal performance of his other self Gibreel walks the streets of London and sees its inhabitants as living dead, as “zombies”. The zombie represents another emblematic case of transmutation. Initially the word “Nzambi” was the name of the Deity in Angolan language. It has changed in value today from a living god, a nature spirit or divine power to a vacant person, a husk, a shell. Marina Warner states that “the classical idea of soul migration, which underpins Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, was rediscovered and reconfigured in the growing imperial possessions, and became, in the fallout from slavery, a vehicle to express a new, psychological state of personal alienation, moral incoherence and emptiness” (Warner 124). This emptying of the body, the spirit flying away, the body left vacuous, yet pliant under the gaze turns out into a metaphor of colonial identity. Gibreel in his angelic metamorphosis is also a colonizer; his gaze has something of the “evil eye” symptom, to employ Homi Bhabha’s term, and is an epitome of the desire of the colonized to take the colonists’ place, to impose their will over soulless bodies, to perform a secret act of revenge.

Metamorphosis of the zombie type is once more conjured in the novel when Saladin Chamcha rubs the magic lamp which stands on a shelf of his father’s study. The magic lamp, which his father promised he would inherit after his death, invokes magical, other-world powers and is literalized in the closing chapter as it becomes evident that it is the hide of a “revolver”. The “fearsome djinnie” of old is represented as a degraded modern “descendant of mighty ancestors, [a] feeble slave of a twentieth-century lamp” (Rushdie 546). The fantastic metamorphoses into an everyday reality and we are left disappointed as the lamp still functions with its magic connotations. The apparent play on names – Aladdin/Saladdin – further induces the expectation of a miracle. Yet the unveiling of the symbolic significance of the lamp suggests other patterns of interpretation as well. Among its multiple meanings Saladin’s lamp is a symbol of a reality which has become a body too confining and demanding, too oppressive for the liberty seeking spirit. Similar to the zombic body which is a body without a self, the lamp slave has no will of his own and is expected to obey the commands of the lamp owner. The trapped condition of the lamp slave is strangely reminiscent of Gibreel’s self-estrangement and self-dissolution. His death-wish is a wish for the absolute, unchangeable, pure, for a possible new birth.

The postmodern and postcolonial concept of identity presented by Salman Rushdie accepts that identities are never unified and are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are constantly subject to a process of change and transformation.

Edward Said’s influential study, *Orientalism*, was published in 1978, and Rushdie’s novel makes its own contributions to the discussion of how Western culture constructs alien images of “others” in its discourses. *The Satanic Verses* takes theory as its subject matter and gives it a fantastic representation. This has double consequences: firstly, cultural theories are enhanced as they become capable of building the reality of the novel; secondly, the same theories receive ironic shades of doubt as they become mixed with fiction.

The heterotopian space of postmodernism becomes essential to postcolonialism. While colonialism deepens the gaps between East and West as well as their idealized representations as evil and good, satanic and angelic; postcolonialism makes their integration possible. A definite categorization of heterotopian entities would preclude any viable definition of borderline condition.

The space between East and West is dynamically constructed in the novel; the East-West relation is given a particular directionality in the dimension of the characters' pursuit of home. The categories of "home" and "belonging", however, are displaced in the context of postmodernity. Migration has its own contradictions: in many cases it has been propelled by need, motivated by ambition, yet also driven by persecution; for some migrants there is really no longer a home to return to. Consequently, migration can easily turn into exile as a condition of the soul, unrelated to facts of material life. Exile appears to be the basic metaphor for modernity and even for the human condition itself; it amounts to self-exile, associated with leaving because of "suffocation" in one's own space of this globe, as Aijaz Ahmad suggests. In this sense, both East and West get stripped of their geographical locations and should rather be seen as located in the imagination of the migrant who is in search of Otherness.

Perhaps Rushdie suggests that, similarly to Dorothy's return to the ordinariness of her Kansas life in Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, Saladin Chamcha's coming home (Gibreel remains in the Dream Land) does not necessarily prompt the conclusion that "there is no place like home" but rather that "there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us in Oz and everywhere, except the place from which we began" (Rushdie 57). Home is no longer associated with one's belonging but with one's beginning, one's true self. The search of home, above all, amounts to a search of identity.

Salman Rushdie's novel presents at least two possible and conflicting explanations of metamorphosis. On one hand, it is a way of transcending physical boundaries, a liberating experience that allows for new beginnings and celebrates life's flexibility and productivity. On the other hand, constant shape shifting may entail identity crisis and expose the fluid self to the risk of vanishing into virtual worlds. Whatever the scenario, metamorphosis maps a vast landscape of possibilities, some – natural, others – supernatural, some – conspicuous, others – invisible. It embroiders the tapestry of life's polyphony, enables transitions in the spaces within and without us and inspires the hope that there is always an alternative. The main theme that returns, "If the old refused to die, the new could not be born" (Rushdie 547) encapsulates the painful but liberating generosity of new chances that have to be embraced for life to continue, in spite of the cumbersome loads of history, memory, the socially and culturally determined positions, in spite of the enemies within us. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates the choice to remain in the liminal, unfathomable but exciting lands of "here" and "now".

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