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SALMAN RUSHDIE'S The Satanic Verses: A FAITH-AFFIRMING TRAGEDY

Bradley Hunter Swope

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Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*:

A Faith-Affirming Tragedy

by

Bradley Hunter Swope

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty

of the College of Graduate Studies

at Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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July 1999

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: A Faith-Affirming Tragedy

by

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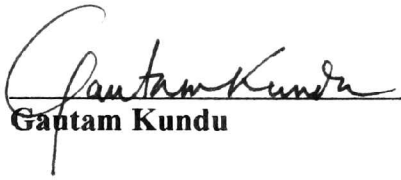

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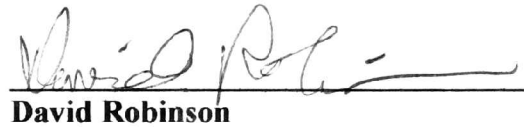

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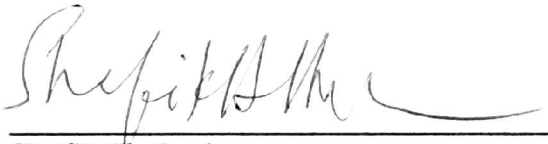

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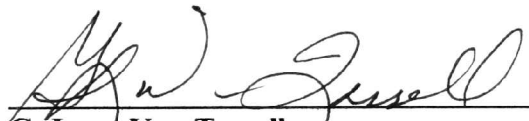

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July 9, 1999
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Introduction: Rushdie Today--Working and (Less?) Paranoid

Salman Rushdie the Target continues to be a bigger story than Salman Rushdie the Novelist. So do not be surprised if you turn on the television tonight to find Rushdie answering an interviewer's questions or pick up a newspaper and learn that the embattled author has delivered a speech somewhere in the world. And until last fall, advance notice of either interview or speech would have been out of the question. True, secrecy still surrounds Rushdie's movements, ten years after Iran's since-deceased Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, an Islamic religious edict, sentencing him to death for the alleged blasphemies against Islam in Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. But the police detail protecting Rushdie's life appears to have been scaled back, or at least it has adopted a lower profile. Carlin Romano, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* book critic who interviewed Rushdie this past April in New York, led his article by observing that "the security sideshow that has long accompanied Salman Rushdie now seems almost genteel, like a once-bustling Victorian household downsized and suffering from empty nest syndrome" (Romano F1). "No burly Scotland Yard agent guards the door of an anonymous hotel suite, as on an earlier visit. No earphoned security toughs mill about" (F1). And for the first time since the Ayatollah issued his infamous *fatwa* in February 1989, Rushdie gave a public--and pre-publicized--reading of his work (in this case, from his new novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*).

The newfound relaxation apparently stems from the Iranian government's September 1998 announcement that it was dissociating itself from the multimillion-dollar bounties on Rushdie's head that have been edging upward for years. With last fall's announcement, by the British and Iranian governments, that the *fatwa* is "inoperable and discouraged by all responsible parties," Romano wrote, "Rushdie seems almost back to a major author's normal publicity turns for a new book" (F1).

But other observers voiced deep doubts that Rushdie's situation has improved much, if at all. Daniel Pipes, a Mideast specialist who authored a 1990 book about the Rushdie controversy, wrote soon after last fall's announcement that "nothing in the statement by Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi suggested even the subtlest change in Iranian policy" (Pipes 19). Teheran had long told western governments that it had no intention of carrying out Khomeini's death sentence against Rushdie and had, moreover, already distanced itself from the non-governmental Khordad Foundation's reward, now up to $2.8 million, to Rushdie's murderer. Furthermore, Pipes suggests, the Iranian government apparently possesses little power to protect Rushdie from the country's more powerful fundamentalist leaders: "Despite what the diplomats say, to the Iranian elite the edict against Rushdie is a permanent sentence, one that both constitutes government policy and at the same time is beyond the government to affect" (20). Iran's "supreme power" (20), Pipes asserts, is not moderate President Muhammad Khatami, but Ali Hoseyni Khamane'i, Khomeini's successor as the nation's spiritual leader, and a *fatwa* supporter whose hard-line followers control Iran's chief legislative body.

Rushdie himself refrained from euphoria, telling Romano there is evidence

> that it's not quite the end of the story, because there are clearly cliques inside Iran that haven't been brought into line by the government. On the other hand, the British did tell me that it would be a major embarrassment to the Iranian government if anything were to happen [to Rushdie] now. In a way, [Iran's] credibility as a government now depends on it . . . The situation isn't perfect, but it's very different than it was. (F6)

Even before the recent shifts, Rushdie maintained a remarkably high profile for a novelist under continuing threat of assassination. He surfaced in March of 1998, when the University of Tromsoe in Norway (*USA Today* D1) presented him with an honorary degree for his free-speech struggle. The past few years include other surprising and brief sightings, usually well-publicized after the fact, that have eerily evoked the pop culture name-dropping that sprinkles Rushdie's own novels: he made (presumably unannounced) appearances, for example, on *The Phil Donahue Show* and *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno to promote the 1995 publication of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, his next-to-latest novel.

Book tours or no, Rushdie has spent most of the last ten years living far from the normal life of an author. A British subject, he accepts the constant protection of his nation's authorities, perhaps inhabiting a succession of temporary, undisclosed abodes. Available details are understandably sketchy. *Salon,* an Internet magazine that interviewed Rushdie in 1996, concluded that if he "seems . . . to be emerging from his underground exile, it is a cautious coming out" (*Salon*). On a promotional tour that year, the magazine reported that he gave semi-public readings and attended private parties in his honor all

across the United States. But he traveled, still, with bodyguards. No one, not even the reporters covering him, knew his whereabouts in advance. When *Salon*'s writer and photographer met Rushdie in San Francisco (where a party in his honor drew such guests as Robin Williams and Linda Ronstadt), the journalists first were obliged to meet the author's Pantheon publicist a few blocks from the bed-and-breakfast where he was staying. Then they were "screened by a phalanx of serious-looking bodyguards before they were allowed to enter his room" (*Salon*).

Screenwriter David Cronenberg, who interviewed Rushdie for *Shift* magazine in 1995, described an even more portentous protocol for an interview in London:

> The phone call from Scotland Yard came late Friday afternoon. At first I thought it was room service, and so I didn't catch the name or the title--Inspector? Sergeant? MacLeish? "A man will meet you in the lobby of your hotel on Monday afternoon at 1:30 p.m. His name will be Sinclair. You will take a cab together. You will pay for the cab." God, I thought. What penny-pinching. You really are from Scotland Yard. But then I thought, why should the Yard pay for my rendezvous with Salman Rushdie? (Cronenberg)

When Sinclair arrived in the cab Monday, the young security officer told Cronenberg that he normally was assigned to a member of Parliament, and "it's not as exciting as this great cloak-and-dagger stuff" (Cronenberg). The mock-breathless account continues: "The London cab lurches through heavy traffic. No one seems to be following us" (Cronenberg).

Rushdie shares Cronenberg's eye for the nearly farcical circumstances that come with living under the *fatwa*. As Rushdie summarized his situation to *Salon*: "I think it's a bad Salman Rushdie novel. And believe me, it's a very dreadful thing to be stuck in a bad novel" (*Salon*).

But Rushdie and everyone else recognizes the threats to him, and to others connected with publishing *The Satanic Verses*, as far from fictional. Although Khomeini died less than six months after issuing the death sentence in February 1989, attacks on Rushdie associates since then show that someone is serious about carrying out his orders. Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of Rushdie's novel, was fatally stabbed at his workplace in July 1991--the same month that Ettore Capriolo, Rushdie's Italian translator, suffered serious injuries in a knife attack. William Nygaard, the novel's Norwegian publisher, survived several gunshot wounds in October 1993 and has since written *The Price of Free Speech*, a book about the Rushdie affair.

Yet the *fatwa*, which Khamane'i reiterated upon his predecessor Khomeini's death, devolved even before last fall's diplomatic activity into a confused, ambiguous status--not as vehement as it once was, though seemingly very much alive. In February 1996, CNN reported, Iran's foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, said his country would not cancel the death sentence against Rushdie, but wouldn't (in CNN's paraphrase) "do anything to enforce the policy, either" (CNN transcript). Still, in February 1997, the Khordad 15 Foundation in Iran raised the bounty for Rushdie's life from $2 million to $2.5 million. And in October 1998, Khordad upped the price by another $300,000 after the Iranian government announced it would distance itself from the *fatwa*. Still, Amnesty

International, the human rights organization, has long faulted the Iranian government for its essential passivity--last fall's conciliatory rhetoric notwithstanding--in the face of terroristic threats.

Whether the western democracies are blameless in the Rushdie matter remains another perplexing question. Although President Clinton and several other western leaders have received Rushdie in visits as a show of sympathy for his plight, the author himself has complained that the West generally has done too little to thwart international hit squads. In an April 1997 public interview at the University of Pittsburgh (another of Rushdie's surprise appearances), the author claimed that both European and American leaders have long known of numerous Iranian assassins living in Europe and carrying out assignments against Iranian dissidents living there. "Yet nobody has done a thing about it because, frankly, of greed--the desire to cash in on Iran, to sell them both guns and butter," Rushdie told questioner Christopher Hitchens during the interview, later published in *Progressive* (Hitchens 35). He did, however, exempt the United States from complete condemnation: "The American government's position on Iran, which is a very hard-line one--and which was scoffed at by most European governments when announced--looks more and more correct by the day" (35).

Not surprisingly, Rushdie's plight has drawn elaborate expressions of sympathy from an international writers' community quick to recognize that his death sentence, while unprecedented in its ferocity and dramatic visibility, was far from the first attempt by a power structure to suppress controversial writings. In 1994, the Rushdie Defense Committee USA, among the author's most eloquent supporters, used the fifth anniversary

of the *fatwa*'s issuance to note that literary suppression had failed once more. Writing on behalf of the committee, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster lamented that, even though Rushdie has continued to write nearly every day, he has lost the right, precious to all writers, to immerse himself publicly in everyday affairs: "He is distanced from the people who have nourished his work and severed from the very texture of spontaneous life, the tumult of voices and noises, the random scenes that represent the one luxury writers thought they could take for granted" (DeLillo). Rushdie even garnered support in some Muslim literary circles. While acknowledging that the *fatwa* "was a very bad advertisement for Islam," he defended "Muslim writers and intellectuals--so many of them, with immense courage--[who] stood up against [the edict] . . . they were living in countries where writers were being killed every day: Algeria, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt" (Hitchens 35).

At the same time, of course, *The Satanic Verses* has drawn withering broadsides from other literary critics who insist that the heavily publicized controversy over the death sentence brought Rushdie book sales he could not have dreamed of realizing otherwise. In fact, the misguided assumption that Rushdie's work lacked literary merit became virtually an article of faith among some critics. Witness, for example, C.J.S. Wallia reviewing *The Moor's Last Sigh* for *India Star* magazine: "Salman Rushdie's unique predicament has made it high fashion for reviewers to pour generous praise on his books . . . The *fatwa* generated a global collective sigh of sympathy for Rushdie, hoisting him to the stratospheric height of the world's best-known living writer" (Wallia). Yet *Verses,* Wallia contended, "was virtually unreadable and remains widely unread, probably the most

widely unread controversial book of our time" (Wallia). *Last Sigh* was likewise "ill-crafted," but nonetheless received the obligatory "rave" reviews (Wallia). He concluded with a sweeping indictment: "The pervasive use of contrived, overly clever language and the lack of empathy-evoking characters are the besetting faults of much of Rushdie's fiction" (Wallia). Wallia's hyperbole does not warrant a point-by-point rebuttal, but his last assertion crumbles before *Verses*' finely rendered cast of sensitive, troubled, sometimes doomed characters.

Yet even critics who like Rushdie's writing acknowledge that his fame got a boost from the Ayatollah's dramatic pronouncement. Timothy Brennan, who has been following Rushdie's published work since the mid-1980s, contends that his literary reputation was well established as early as 1981, "with his books receiving prominent reviews in the best places . . . but there seemed very little to make him the lead story of the Six O'Clock News, as actually happened through the month of February 1989. So it is odd to see one's subject suddenly thrown into prominence" (Brennan viii).

A few commentators have put Rushdie in company (and here the hyperbole works in his favor) with some of history's literary giants, while heaping praise on *The Satanic Verses* and his other novels. Dust jacket blurbs on Viking Penguin's first American edition of *Verses,* for example, compare Rushdie to Swift and Voltaire (eighteenth-century writers persecuted by English and French authorities, respectively). Hitchens, prefacing his *Progressive* interview with Rushdie, suggests that the author's notoriety, far from bringing him unwarranted literary accolades, has actually prevented him from getting the critical honors he deserves: "If it were not for the threat of murder, and the

fact that his murder has been solicited by a religious leadership, I believe that Salman Rushdie might now be the Nobel Laureate in literature" (34). Hitchens credits Rushdie with creating " a body of fiction that explores the world of the post-colonial multi-ethnic and the multi-identity exile or emigrant" (34) and with linguistic experiments reminiscent of Joyce.

Hitchens' comparison of Rushdie with a seminal figure like James Joyce may be a bit overblown, but it suggests a valid underlying point: too much of the commentary about Rushdie has focused (though perhaps inevitably) on the political and legalistic aspects of the *fatwa*, and too little on his writing *per se*. Rushdie's playful diction, philosophical probings, thematic and symbolic complexity, and experiments with surrealism all warrant more critical attention than they have received.

Rushdie himself alluded to this neglect when he lamented the unplanned notoriety that came his way compliments of Khomeini. "I was fame-hungry beforehand, but I don't think more than averagely so" (Cronenberg), he said, referring to a quoted remark of poet and critic Al Alvarez, to the effect that Rushdie always had wanted to be the world's most famous writer and now, quite deservedly, had got his wish. Rushdie added: "And certainly it's of no pleasure to me that the thing I should be famous for is not my writing . . . people are now much more interested in writers than in their writing" (Cronenberg). Similarly, he told Hitchens, "One hopes that scandals don't last long and literature does. I felt that it was important to make sure my book outlasted the scandal so it could have the proper judgment" (36).

Rushdie, meanwhile, says he has done all he can to help other imperiled authors. Hitchens reported that the novelist was chairing the International Parliament of Writers, a Strasbourg, France-based organization that, among other activities, maintains a network of refuge cities for some of the thousands of writers facing persecution, censorship, and even death threats in their home countries.

All in all, the man at the center of postwar literary history's most monumental furor has apparently held up well against a life-changing event. *Salon*'s anonymous interviewer observed: "Rushdie is relieved and delighted to be writing novels and to be socially active again, however circumscribed his participation must necessarily continue to be" (*Salon*). Rushdie has indeed remained productive, publishing six books--as well as co-editing an anthology of Indian writing and authoring assorted magazine and newspaper pieces--since the Ayatollah condemned him in 1989. And though the *fatwa* nearly drove him away from writing for good, Rushdie said, he derives immense satisfaction from continuing to publish in spite of the death threat. He told Hitchens: "The best one can do is to show, by writing books, by continuing, that it didn't work (35).

In sum, Rushdie's uncomfortable status quo has developed its own peculiar sort of stability: he will likely continue writing in guarded secrecy, publishing regularly, speaking out for other oppressed writers, and popping up--announced or not--in diverse public forums. Barring an unforeseen security lapse, his would-be assassins are unlikely to fulfill their mission. But he will probably never again feel completely at ease.

Chapter One: The Debate; My Argument Framed

By the time the Ayatollah Khomeini's now-infamous *fatwa* forced Rushdie into hiding, *The Satanic Verses* already had prompted a wave of riots, book burnings and outright government bans in both hemispheres. But Rushdie, at least, must have taken solace in seeing his plight draw an outpouring of collegial solidarity that may be unparalleled in literary history. Within days of Khomeini's pronouncement, the International Rushdie Defense Committee loudly took up Rushdie's cause after forming itself from a coalition of writers, publishers, booksellers, journalists, trade unions, and human rights groups. Conservative writer Midge Dector, analyzing the Rushdie affair for *Commentary,* found that, within days of several book store chains' de-shelving of the book, "the literary community was up in arms on Rushdie's behalf" and pressured the chains into once more displaying *The Satanic Verses* (18).

Their most fundamental consensus--that Rushdie and all the rest of us should have the right to publish free of terroristic threats--is beyond dispute. I intend to build upon that essentially political position in a literary way, by showing how the offending parts of *Verses*, far from promoting blasphemy, actually serve the interests of a cautionary tale about the perils of faithlessness. Thus, tragic hero Gibreel Farishta's descent into madness after renouncing Islam sends a conceivably pro-religious message if a reader approaches the novel as the spiritual parable that Rushdie intended.

In the United States, however, other writers' responses to Rushdie's plight may have betrayed the taint of self-interest and pretension, Dector suggests. Yet she argues that "it is not enough to point out how ignobly and at the same time laughably a number of America's most celebrated 'literary lions' preened and strutted in their efforts to share in the cachet of someone else's peril" (22-3). She properly lambastes such pomposity but then over-generalizes in asserting that, despite those western editorialists who found the book unforgivably offensive to Muslims, the literary community revealed itself as lacking all religious and moral values:

> Salman Rushdie's supporters more than anything else made it clear that they can no longer understand, no longer even imagine, what it means to blaspheme. They live in and in turn are producers of a culture that has lost the power to say no to them about anything. Nothing is blasphemy, nothing is obscenity, nothing is even bad manners. (23)

This brickbat captured the spirit of the Rushdie affair's rhetorical free-for-all, which soon reached an impasse when most western commentators (Dector being one exception) failed to sympathize with non-western religious sensitivities, while Islamic critics generally refused to pay homage to the western novel's privileged cultural niche. The debate, however, produced a plethora of hybrid positions thoughtful enough to show that one need not be entirely for nor against Rushdie.

Dector's conservative critique, for example, overlooks the nuanced arguments of many Rushdie defenders who acknowledged not only Muslims' right to take offense at the book, but the West's own imperfect--and sometimes hypocritical--history in the free

speech department. Peter S. Graham, speaking at a March 1989 panel discussion on Rushdie at Rutgers University, made especially effective use of examples in framing just such a glass-houses argument:

> We need to be reminded that the religious views of others are important, and that simply flinging the free-speech gauntlet at those whose religion is an enigma to us will gain neither us nor the principle any ground. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that Christian fundamentalism, with which we are more familiar, is not a vanished phenomenon and that violence on its behalf is well within our memory. Larry Flynt, a [pornographic] magazine publisher, and the Jewish radio broadcaster killed in the Southwest, were each shot within the past decade for reasons related to religion. Let us not forget that the Pilgrim fathers who came to this country for their own freedom banished and hanged others who disagreed with them, and were accomplished censorers of books. John Milton was a Puritan forefather whose ringing defense of freedom of the press in *Areopagitica* we should recall; we should recall that in the same work he also said it shouldn't apply to Catholics, for since Catholics seek to extirpate other religions we should ourselves seek to extirpate Catholicism. (Graham)

Rushdie supporters united in deploring the death sentence. James Harrison's concise remark on that point was typical: "No government should be able to put out contracts on the citizens of other nations with impunity" (x). But beyond condemning violence, Rushdie's defenders made little claim to the moral high ground. "As for the

clash of values involved," Harrison concluded, "between the right to speak and write freely and the obligation to respect other people's most cherished beliefs, we may have to recognize that in this, as in other instances, no compromise that will satisfy everyone is possible" (xi). He neatly capsulized the dilemma, as he saw it, of the Rushdie case:

> Do we insist on Rushdie's right to say what, with a sincerity fierce enough to override considerations that would deter most of us, he is convinced needs saying? Or do we respect the fierce protectiveness toward their faith of people belonging to a culture that regards freedom of speech as trivial compared with the honor of the founder of that faith? (xi)

Although Islam's rich literary tradition shows that it has never trivialized freedom of expression, Harrison appropriately suggests that a clash of cultures focusing on the cross-cultural Rushdie--born in Bombay, educated in England--remains the issue most essential to understanding the furor surrounding him. Rushdie's Cambridge schooling imbued him with the western literary tradition that accords heroic status to satirical or socially conscious authors--Swift, Voltaire and Joyce, to cite only the biggest names--who faced persecution to challenge the established order, whether political, religious or artistic. But when Rushdie applied such irreverence to an eastern religion, he found himself facing the astonishing prospect of summary execution. As Brians aptly puts it, "Rushdie tried to bridge the gulf between East and West and instead fell into the void" (Brians).

Brians, elaborating insightfully on this immensely complex cultural gap, notes that although the Islamic heritage includes many honored storytellers, "the modern novel as such is not a comfortable form in the Muslim world. Often it is identified with the West,

with mere entertainment, with lax morals" (Brians). The cultural gulf, Brians suggests, entails no less than irreconcilable concepts of religion between East and West:

> To a conservative Muslim, Islam is not just a religion in the sense that most Westerners use the term, a private faith which provides hope and consolation within a secular world. Islam is a way of life, a body of law, an all-embracing cultural framework within which novels are distinctly unimportant and potentially troublesome. That a mere novelist should dare to satirize fundamental religious beliefs is intolerable. (Brians)

Although Islamic literature includes many critical and satirical works, it does not share Europeans' virtual enshrinement of satire as an essential prerogative of significant literature, especially after the eighteenth-century Enlightenment's rhetorical assaults on organized religion. As Brians observes: "Intellectuals in the West largely abandoned the Christian framework as an explanatory world view. Indeed, religion became for many the enemy: the suppressor of free thought, the enemy of science and progress" (Brians). Religious bigots drew scorn from such iconoclastic authors as Charles Dickens and Mark Twain.

True to that last line of attack, Chapter IV of *The Satanic Verses* includes a satirical portrait of a fanatical, exiled Shi'ite *Imam*, a character whose resemblance to Khomeini scarcely can be coincidental. The *fatwa* makes no clear reference to that burlesque--only to insults to Muhammad and Islam at large. But we are left to wonder, without clear proof either way, whether being ridiculed strengthened the Ayatollah's vendetta against Rushdie.

A related, and similarly irresolvable, question is whether Khomeini acted against Rushdie for political as well as religious reasons. James Harrison argues plausibly that, with the octogenarian Khomeini's health rapidly failing (and the just-ended war with Iraq no longer available as a scapegoat for Iran's poor economy), extremists in Iran saw the death sentence as a way to regain the upper hand in a power struggle with Iranian moderates: "What better opportunity than the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in the United States, 'the Great Satan,' to persuade Khomeini to give perhaps his last clarion call to the faithful and elicit new expressions of their devotion not just in Iran but throughout the world?" (Harrison 8).

Whether Islamic law authorized Khomeini to issue the death sentence may likewise lend itself to no definitive answer, judging from the splits in scholarly opinion. Bernard Lewis, analyzing the Rushdie affair for *American Scholar*, asserts that a Muslim who insults the Prophet Muhammad (as Rushdie, born into a Muslim family, was accused of doing) "is seen as an apostate, and apostasy is a capital offense in all schools of Muslim law" (189). But even if the sentence against Rushdie conforms to Islamic judicial precedent, Lewis argues, Khomeini's *fatwa* "goes beyond even the most extreme of earlier Shi'ite rulings in that it also condemns those involved in the publication of the book; that is to say, it extends the jurisdiction of Islamic law, and the execution of its penalties, to infidels living in the lands of the infidels" (193).

Although these intriguing ancillary issues merit some acknowledgement, the point most germane to understanding the Rushdie affair's complexity, in the literary as well as the political senses, is that many Muslim faithful took sincere religious offense at certain

of the book's passages, even while refusing to condone assassination of their author. Nor were these faithful--true to Brian's concept of clashing cultures--willing to grant Rushdie any leniency, any artistic license, for having couched the offensive passages as the dreams of the deranged protagonist Gibreel Farishta, as opposed to a more rational character's point of view. Some critics have read, or rather misread, an offensive message into Gibreel's dream about a doomed pilgrimage to Mecca led by a charismatic, butterfly-clad young woman named Ayesha; this fable, filled with a childlike sense of wonder, actually serves as testament to the beauty and power of true faith. However, the most publicized of the offensive passages involves a dream about a bordello with prostitutes who rename themselves after Muhammad's twelve wives. Many Muslims were equally outraged by a dream passage in which a character strongly resembling the Prophet considers, in the founding days of a monotheistic religion resembling Islam, a proposal to share temple space with three pagan goddesses; and another passage in which an impudent scribe makes textual changes while the Muhammad-like character dictates to him a Qur'an-like book, seemingly lampooning the Muslim belief that the Qur'an represents the inviolate word of Allah as conveyed to the Prophet via the Archangel Gabriel.

Although their crucial roles in Gibreel's tragic tale ultimately redeem all these dream passages, it enlightens non-Muslim readers to examine how distress over the dreams' irreverence prompted a thoughtfully ambivalent response from Ali A. Mazrui, a writer-filmmaker who, like Rushdie himself, is intimately versed in both eastern and western cultures--and thus in the valuable position to explain their sometimes incompatible philosophies. Writing in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Mazrui confesses to "conflicting

emotions" (348) about Rushdie's plight despite his prevailing distaste toward *The Satanic Verses*:

> I have been torn between being a believer in Islam and a believer in an open society, between being a writer and being a religious worshipper, between being a believer in the *Shari'a* [Islamic law] and an opponent of all forms of capital punishment in the modern age . . . I also have strong reservations about censorship. This is partly because I have myself been censored over the years. (348)

Debate over the book, initially at least, "was a classic case of the dialogue of the deaf between the West and the world of Islam" (348), Mazrui contends. "The West was bewildered by the depth of Muslim anger. The Muslims were bewildered by Western insensitivity" (348).

Seeking to "make some of the emotions of the Muslim world more intelligible to the West," he first explains a point he correctly rates as the most pertinent to the Rushdie case: "What the West does not understand is the idea of treason to what Islam calls the *Umma*, the religious community, treason to the faith . . . In Islam there is no sharp distinction between church and state. The concept of treason is often indistinguishable from apostasy" (348-9). Thus, Mazrui contends,

> Rushdie was perceived by many Muslims as being guilty of *cultural treason*. Rushdie had not merely rejected Islam; nor had he merely disagreed with it. Almost unanimously Muslims who had read the book concluded that Rushdie

> had abused Islam. What is more, he had been lionized, praised, and lavishly rewarded and financed by outright enemies and hostile critics of Islam. (350)

Another cross-cultural complication that helps explain Muslim anger, Mazrui usefully points out later in his essay, is that "Western law [unlike Islamic law] provides very little protection against libel for those who are dead" (354). Rushdie commits such libel against Muhammad's wives, Mazrui contends, by letting the prostitutes take their names--"a prostitution of the reputations of twelve innocent and respectable women" (355). Mazrui's line of reasoning suggests that, if Great Britain's libel laws followed the Islamic model, Viking Penguin's lawyers would have insisted on altering or deleting the prostitutes passage prior to the novel's publication.

Some of Rushdie's attackers, perhaps oversensitive to western criticism, felt obliged to defend Muslims intellectually. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, placing Rushdie in a long line of Europeanized writers whom they accuse of deliberately insulting and stereotyping Muslims, devote much attention to rebutting what they see as Rushdie defenders' chief assumption, that Muslims attacked the novel out of a profound intolerance inimical to most criticism and literary expression. The co-authors indeed argue convincingly against any notion that anti-intellectualism is culturally ingrained in Islam. On the contrary, they suggest, Islam has encouraged a tradition of self-examining rationalism:

> Islam does not sanction suppression of thought or banish freedom of expression. It is not against reason or criticism. It has not banned poetry, fiction or any other form of literature . . . It has not exiled doubt. It does not

> even believe that its worldview should be imposed on others. Islam is rooted in argument and reason, thought and discourse, criticism and counter-criticism, diversity and plurality. (88)

Sardar and Davies enumerate a pantheon of beloved Islamic authors through the ages while describing an immense and flourishing Islamic tradition of writing, publishing and reading in the arts and sciences dating back to the eighth century--roughly the same time, I would add, when the barbarians sacking Europe were using *its* books to start campfires. And Islam, Lewis points out, boasts "an old and indigenous literary tradition of satire and parody. Both are well-represented in classical literature, sometimes on very sacred themes" (186).

Many western observers, however, failed to recognize that Rushdie's treatment of Islam, while not anti-religious in its intent, transgressed that particular religion's acceptable boundaries of irreverence. Even though freedom of expression itself has "divine sanction" in Islam, Sardar and Davies contend, that brand of freedom comes, like all other brands, with "social responsibility" (93): a book, under Islamic protocol, can display skepticism but not abuse individuals. It

> can be used to offer any criticism, question anything, including even the notion of the divine itself, focus discussion on any aspect of the entire spectrum of human experience and ideas. But, because it is held in such high esteem, it cannot be allowed to be used as a vehicle for abuse or the dishonor of individuals in society in the name of criticism. Criticize as much as you wish, tear arguments or ideas limb from limb, but do not attack the honor or

> the person by abuse, ridicule or mockery. This is the responsibility that Islam places on the freedom of expression of writers. (93)

Yet Sardar and Davies, like so many of Rushdie's critics, mistakenly assumed that he set out with the sole purpose of abusing, ridiculing and mocking the Prophet Muhammad--and by extension, Islam and its followers--in writing *The Satanic Verses*. That he, in other words, committed deliberate blasphemy. Sardar and Davies go so far as to cite Rushdie's previous novels and his essays as supporting evidence of a shamelessly anti-Islamic bias.

This study finds it unnecessary to render any such judgments on Rushdie's religious and/or political orientation, although devout Muslims could have rationally found certain *Verses* passages offensive. At the same time, however, Rushdie needed to use these "offensive" components to assemble his unique and compelling tale of social and spiritual dislocation, of human tragedy and redemption. Thus, my chief contention is that a *purely textual* analysis of *The Satanic Verses* supports Rushdie's plea for artistic license--his declaration that the controversial passages, embedded in the fevered imaginings of the unfortunate Gibreel Farishta, function not as gratuitous insults to Muslims but as part of a fictive, *and by no means irreligious*, rendering of Farishta's loss of faith and ultimate disintegration into homicidal rage and suicidal despair. Gibreel's controversial dreams thus serve as integral characterizing elements for a central plot thread: by illuminating his deranged mental state, the dreams help us understand the tragic tale of an East Indian immigrant who loses his cultural moorings, his religion, and finally his mind. Far from

endorsing apostasy, as some critics have implied, Rushdie presents, in Gibreel's fate, a cautionary tale against spiritual nihilism that transcends questions of this or that religion's validity--yet seems to posit a human need to believe the universe more than a godless, meaningless void.

Furthermore, Gibreel's schizophrenia--his "split personality"--indirectly functions as a paradigm for one of the novel's broadest themes: the quintessentially postcolonial problem of the loss of, or confusion over, one's identity. In the dreams that ultimately spill over into his waking hours, Gibreel comes to believe himself the Archangel Gabriel, discharging increasingly grandiose missions. At home in India, moreover, Gibreel and co-protagonist Saladin Chamcha are media creatures without fixed identities of their own--the first is a widely cast actor in Hindu mythological movies, the second an unseen voiceover man in a thousand different commercials. The novel's ultimate identity crisis conflates human good and evil, fuzzing the question of which protagonist is which. In England, Saladin sprouts satanic horns and drives Gibreel mad with fiendish precision, but ultimately finds redemption and a sort of nobility in repatriation; the haloed and ostensibly angelic Gibreel saves Saladin's life but destroys his own lovers, emotionally when not physically, before destroying himself.

Chapter Two: A Critical Overview--Hate Mail to Islam or Artistic Triumph?

The political and theological furor surrounding *The Satanic Verses* quickly overshadowed literary aspects of the novel in the months following its publication. So in 1990, Rushdie met with six Muslim scholars in an effort to alleviate the outrage throughout Islam and, in the process, improve critical understanding of his novel worldwide. In "Why I Have Embraced Islam," a brief essay he wrote afterward, Rushdie laid out a crucially important defensive rationale for his novel:

> This meeting, described in some sections of the western press as a defeat, was in fact a victory for compassion, understanding and tolerance. For over two years I have been trying to explain that *The Satanic Verses* was never intended as an insult; that the story of Gibreel is a parable of how a man can be destroyed by the loss of faith; that the dreams in which all the so-called "insults" occur are portraits of his disintegration, and explicitly referred to in the novel as punishments and retributions; and that the dream figures who torment him with their assaults on religion are representative of this process of ruination, and not representative of the point of view of the author. This is not a disavowal of my work, but the simple truth, and to my great pleasure it was accepted as such. (Rushdie 431)

The six scholars, Rushdie said, agreed with him that the controversy over the novel stemmed from "a tragic misunderstanding" (431) and agreed that he had previously proven himself an ally of Muslims worldwide by writing and speaking against anti-Islamic discrimination over the years. Many angry people of the Islamic world, of course, would accept no explanations from Rushdie. In their view, his novel deliberately blasphemed against Islam and insulted the Prophet Muhammad, and such offenses were unforgivable.

Nonetheless, Rushdie's statement--that he used the so-called insults only to construct a parable about faithlessness--holds up under critical scrutiny of his text. The problem, from a literary standpoint, was that certain critics wrongheadedly saw offensiveness as the only purpose of the book. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, for example, seemingly follow such a premise in *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*, an angry book-length study in which they examined "Orientalism," the alleged tendency of western writers and scholars to stereotype Muslims as violent, ignorant and sex-crazed (seemingly a variation on Edward Said's earlier and well-known formulation of Orientalism as an intellectual-cultural framework for distinguishing East from West). The Indian-born Rushdie, Sardar and Davies charge, practices Orientalism as a "brown sahib," a kind of colonialized Uncle Tom figure willing to betray his own people for the amusement of European masters. Implicitly rejecting Rushdie's claim that *Verses* sincerely explores the loss of faith, the co-authors assert that close examination of his work instead reveals

> a writing lacking in empathy for the faith, and what comprises the experience of faith . . . there is no requirement of believing to be able to

> intimate something of the meaning cherished by those whose beliefs one does not share. It is the crucial litmus test of artistic imagination, however. It is also the basis for a valid claim of justified comment as opposed to bias or opinionated perversity. (Sardar 128)

On the contrary, Rushdie's novel develops a cast of empathy-evoking characters whose variously tragic or happy fates comprise an ultimate affirmation of faith.

Sardar and Davies also err in suggesting that Rushdie abuses Muslims, in both *Verses* and in the previous novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, as a way to deal with his own self-image problems:

> What one fails to find in Rushdie is any insight, any intuitive artistic truth through fiction to illuminate the accuracy of his name-calling and make it a genuine or significant analysis of the problems. His barbs are accurate enough, but . . . as analysis, whether political, social or religious, they are shallow in the extreme . . . here one has a genuine Orientalist-indoctrinated, secular-minded brown sahib whose response to the problem of his own Muslim identity, which he is saddled with wherever he goes, is to produce *bona fide* poison-pen letters. (Sardar 137)

The authors grossly misinterpret *Verses* on at least two counts. Rushdie's "name-calling" --presumably meaning Gibreel's dreams--serves the novelist's admittedly contrary method, which amounts to affirming faith by showing how its absence dooms Gibreel. Should Sardar and Davies not credit Rushdie here with an "artistic truth"? Secondly, their

"poison-pen" remark unjustly reduces *Verses*, a complex work indeed, to a simple anti-Islamic screed.

Some western commentators, for their part, may have reacted overzealously in dismissing Muslims' objections to Rushdie's novel. Daniel Pipes, in *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah and the West*, belittles the intelligence of Islamic readers unwilling or unable to grant Rushdie artistic leeway even though he, Pipes, later finds cause to support charges of blasphemy against the author:

> Assessing the accusations against the book requires that it be looked at in a literal, and very unliterary, manner, for this is the way it is understood by those who protest it. This means that every statement in the book must be taken as representative of the author's own thinking, even though that is clearly not always the case . . . intellectually deficient as it may be, such a narrow approach is unavoidable if one is to understand the novel's political meaning as understood by unsophisticated readers . . . Indeed, to understand its impact fully, *The Satanic Verses* ideally should be read excerpted, out of context, and preferably in translation [into a non-English language]--for that is how most of its critics became acquainted with it. (Pipes 53)

Pipes goes too far in implying that Muslim readers who objected to *Verses* were not smart enough to understand it. But he correctly suggests that their unwillingness to read the controversial passages within the context of the entire novel led them to conclude unfairly that Rushdie's sole purpose was to attack religion. Such literal readings prove, at the outset, categorically inappropriate for a postmodern novel whose phantasmagorical

approach becomes obvious from the opening scene, when co-protagonists Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha miraculously survive a 29,000-foot fall from the sky after on-board terrorists blow up their jet.

Pipes weakens his own case, in a sense, by assembling enough theological scholarship to suggest that a Muslim might, without intellectual deficiencies, be offended by Rushdie's treatment of Muhammad and Islam. But Rushdie critics such as Sardar and Davies commit the greater blunder in confusing the letter with the spirit of blasphemy, when the spirit alone matters. Indeed, they fail to recognize that Gibreel's dreams serve an end that is the virtual antithesis of blasphemy: to advance a faith-affirming tale of the tragic downfall inherent in faithlessness.

Muslims have taken umbrage at many details throughout *Verses*, but an examination of relevant chapters shows how the four most important such passages--those involving the actual "satanic verses" scriptural incident, the Ayesha-led pilgrimage, the mischievous scribe Salman, and the prostitutes at "The Curtain" brothel--fit inextricably, as necessary snapshots of Gibreel's unmoored and unraveling mind, into central plot actions centering on his troubled relationships with Saladin and Allie Cone, Gibreel's lover. The dreams, in short, help shape and color Gibreel's story as a variation of Greek tragedy--obsessive jealousy is his tragic flaw, or one of them--and a nearly clinical account of delusional, hallucinatory psychosis that turns insane jealousy into jealous insanity. The resulting sad tale of a postcolonial man's fall, *once bereft of faith in supreme being, himself, and others*, adds significantly to contemporary fiction's treatments of spiritual and psychological fragmentation and decay.

Chapter Three: *Verses* Chapter II ("Mahound")

This chapter, detailing the first of Gibreel's dreams, serves a vital role in the entire tale by establishing his delusional notion of himself as the Archangel Gabriel, a notion that later spills into his waking hours and ultimately leads him to assume the role of avenging and destroying angel. Fed by jealousy, his delusion of "angelhood" blooms tragically into a destructive psychosis by tale's end. Initially, though, he merely observes the dream action, and sometimes imagines himself participating in it, as the archangel. The first dream, which some took as an assault on the very foundations of Islam, does contain offensive implications when taken literally, but is nonetheless artistically defensible--the sort of dream a reader might well find believable in a character losing his religious faith. Dreams, after all, mirror the subconscious.

However, even relatively sympathetic critics such as Pipes tend to underplay the narrative importance that Chapter II's dream and its successors play in Rushdie's characterization of Gibreel. And though critics have done a good job of spotting and explaining offensive passages, none can prove from the text alone--as some have sought to--that Rushdie is irreligious.

The chapter's title itself offends--"Mahound' was an archaic sobriquet for Muhammad (Pipes 118), presumably disparaging since it originated in Medieval Europe. But it is this chapter's rendering of the so-called "satanic verses" incident, an apparently

apocryphal item of Islamic lore alleging that Muhammad briefly compromised his beliefs to accommodate three pagan goddesses, that provoked perhaps the single largest share of ire about the novel. Muslims felt that Rushdie was attacking Islam's monotheistic theology and, according to some interpretations, was slyly and blasphemously attributing the Qur'an to human rather than divine authorship. As Pipes duly notes, a non-Muslim seeking to understand the *Satanic Verses* furor--and the magnitude of Rushdie's alleged offenses--must first understand that "in Islam, the religion's irreducible core lies in the Qur'an [Koran] as the exact Word of God. To doubt this is to deny the validity of Muhammad's mission and to imply that the entire Islamic faith is premised on a fraudulent base" (56). Muslims, to be Muslims, must accept on faith that Allah (God) sent His message to humankind via the Archangel Gabriel, who then transmitted it unerringly to Muhammad.

Pipes also should have emphasized that to fully understand Chapter II's "satanic verses" dream requires familiarity with Chapter I's narrative, which is devoted mostly to Gibreel's and Saladin's respective personal histories in India. The first chapter shows specifically how the controversial dream fits the story line of faithlessness: here we learn that when Gibreel, an erstwhile Muslim, recovered from a mysterious, debilitating illness and "regained his strength, it became clear that he had changed, and to a startling degree, because he had lost his faith" (29). Then, after he and Saladin somehow survive their fall from the jet into the English Channel, Gibreel dramatically declares his renunciation of Islam by eating the forbidden pork, "the unclean pigs" (84), setting off the string of dreams that he imagines himself observing, and participating in, as the Archangel Gabriel:

> The dreams had begun that very night. In these visions he was always present, not as himself but as his namesake ["Gibreel" is Arabic for "Gabriel"], and I don't mean interpreting a role, Spoono, I am him, he is me, I am the bloody archangel, Gibreel himself, large as bloody life." (83)

Gibreel's loss of faith, in short, precipitates a personal crisis, from which troubled, punishing dreams that appear to be sacriligious are a logical outgrowth.

We see this logic more clearly in Chapter II, when the first of Gibreel's dreams focuses on the travails of Mahound, a Muhammad-like figure who, like the dreamer Gibreel, undergoes a spiritual self-reckoning. The dream opens with Mahound, the founder of a new monotheistic religion, inspecting the city of Jahilia, which closely resembles the holy city of Mecca and whose name means "ignorance" in Arabic (another point of offense to Muslims). Mahound's preaching of a rival religion has caused Abu Simbel, the ruler of Jahilia, to see him as an economic threat to the fortune that Simbel collects in offerings from pagan worshippers at the temples. So the ruler, in a plot to neutralize Mahound, tells him he will let him proselytize unmolested if Mahound, in turn, will give his blessing to the three goddesses whose temples provide the grandee and his wife with their livelihood. After anguished deliberations, Mahound agrees to do so, and "horrifies his followers by seeming willing to deviate from his message of strict monotheism" (Brians). After consulting with the Angel Gibreel, who has been dictating holy scripture to him, Mahound appears before the grandee, his wife and an audience of Mahound's followers mingled with pagan worshippers, and says, "Have you thought upon

Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other? . . . They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed" (114).

The usual interpretation of the second line is that Mahound is compromising his monotheistic beliefs by granting the three goddesses some sort of quasi-divine status, albeit of a lower order than Allah's. Later, Mahound repudiates the same words, the so-called "satanic verses," after the angel gives him to understand that Satan had deceived him into uttering them. But the damage is done; Mahound's integrity is compromised, though his faith survives its particular crisis. Here we could draw a contrast with Gibreel, whose faith does not survive.

Historical echoes increase the dream tale's offensiveness to Muslims. Brians notes that the time of Mahound "corresponds historically to the early days [that is, the early seventh century] of Muhammad's preaching in Mecca, where he was not widely accepted, and the Ka'ba [a temple district] was still filled with pagan idols, including those of the three goddesses who are the focus of the 'satanic verses' " (Brians). A very similar story involving Muhammad has appeared in the writings of more than one respected Muslim historian and, though most scholars consider the story apocryphal, Pipes says, "Muslims must deal with it. They can neither ignore the story nor dismiss it as a non-Muslim calumny intended to discredit Islam. And there is a long tradition of contending with this difficult issue" (61). But because of the wide consensus that the story is untrue, Pipes contends, "anyone who has the temerity of raising it [such as Rushdie] is seen as a provocateur intent on discrediting Islam" (62).

The very notion that Muhammad would acknowledge any gods but Allah strikes painful nerves among Muslims. But Pipes persuasively argues that Rushdie's complex narrative voice--in a source of even greater offense to Muslims--actually suggests Mahound himself as the sacred text's true author: "Rushdie is a skeptic. He treats the [satanic verses] incident as one of deceit. The prophet spoke the false verses not because Satan put them in his mouth, but because he saw an opportunity to advance his cause" (59). Pipes maintains that Mahound, in appearing to accommodate the three goddesses, uses verses that he secretly composes himself to reach a working agreement with the ruler empowered to make or break him. Among other revealing passages, Pipes contends, are three lines of quasi-poetry that Gibreel utters: "Being God's postman is no fun, yaar. / Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture. / God knows whose postman I've been" (Rushdie 112). Gibreel, Pipes implies, has been Mahound's "postman," ostensibly relaying messages from Allah, but in reality parroting Mahound's own satanic words back to him. And Mahound, "to cover his deception," Pipes says, "later comes up with the notion that the devil made him do it" (60). Pipes aptly distills the controversial implications of Rushdie's handling of the "satanic verses":

> Rushdie's offense goes beyond the charge that Muhammad weaved and bobbed as his interests changed; his story implies that the entire Qur'an derived not from God through Gabriel, but from Muhammad himself, who put the words in Gabriel's mouth. If this is true, then the Qur'an is a human artifact and the Islamic faith is built on deceit. (61)

Sardar and Davies, similarly, conclude that "the argument worked out through the character of Gibreel Farishta is that revelation arises from within the desires, personality and psychology of human prophets; hence, revelation is not divine" (151).

Having plausibly explained how Muslims found the Mahound dream offensive, many critics jump to the unfounded conclusion that Rushdie is calling both Muhammad and the Qur'an fake--even while they acknowledge that making the satanic verses incident part of a dream, and the dream of a man going insane, at that, should mitigate Rushdie's offense. Pipes is dismayingly ambiguous on this point: "Even if the dream quality does not absolve Rushdie of responsibility for the story, it does place him at considerable distance from it" (61). Pipes' often-perceptive analysis suffers here from vague reasoning and terminology: is Rushdie not, by definition, responsible for everything he publishes? Perhaps Pipes meant to imply--and if so, he is correct--that artistic license, as western critics understand it, should absolve Rushdie from having to apologize for the offense his dream sequence caused. Sardar and Davies, addressing essentially the same question, once more pursue their misguided case against Rushdie's ideological motives by seeking to demolish the argument that events dreamed by a fictional character are "doubly fictional" (157): "This is clearly the insulating foam advanced on Rushdie's behalf. In dreams we see reality jumbled and distorted" (157).

> Yet the significance of dreams is taken to be their ability to present insight into reality . . . the dreams of Gibreel Farishta are remarkable because they jumble only according to a strict ideological code, necessary to sustain the author's argument; the jumbling is entirely according to the canon of a well-

> known and easily identifiable convention of writing about Islam [known as Orientalism]. Dreams are Rushdie's strategem for presenting his own ideas about religion, monotheism, prophethood and, specifically, about Islam and its Prophet, without having to acknowledge the limits of propriety, respect for the sensitivities of others or the complexity of the historical record. (158)

Rushdie, of course, has taken pains to deny just such accusations of ulterior motives. We cannot rule on the exact nature of his inner thoughts. But Sardar and Davies, who seemingly cannot be dissuaded that Rushdie's primary mission is to slander Islam, err in concluding that the author was interested in flogging an ideological agenda rather than in telling an arguably didactic story.

The two authors, however, find they cannot completely reject the overwhelming --and indeed unavoidable--critical consensus that Gibreel's particular set of dreams, blasphemous or not, form an inherent part of his story over the novel's 500-plus pages, and in fact prove mightily appropriate to helping characterize the doomed, tragic hero that Rushdie sought to create. Sardar and Davies note that "the dreams reverberate and have their parallels in the narrative of the central characters [Gibreel and Saladin]" (176), especially as Gibreel increasingly "has trouble distinguishing his dreaming from his waking, and has to acknowledge that he is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia" (177). James Harrison, in his study of *Verses*, makes the puzzling remark that "on a first reading many readers may remain unconvinced that these dream episodes are an integral or essential part of the novel, despite its title" (90). One wonders how any reasonably attentive reader could fail to see the dreams as a primary means of characterizing Gibreel's state of mind.

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke offers one of the most thorough and perceptive analyses of Gibreel's dreams' narrative and thematic importance to Rushdie's loss-of-faith saga--specifically, he links them to Allie Cone's role as doomed savior, a narrative arc that extends from the first chapter to the last. Goonetilleke cites Harrison's point in asserting that the dreams could be considered essential to the novel "if these episodes are interpreted as projections of Gibreel's unbalanced mind, a mind seeking to recover the faith it has lost, and are taken as the explanation for the complete disintegration of his personality" (96). Goonetilleke explains how the same loss of faith that causes this formerly devout Muslim to start having his dreams ties in, narratively and thematically, to his possessive, troubled relationship with Allie, a mountaineer with whom he has a brief affair in India and with whom he reunites in Chapter III: "He meets Allie Cone [in Chapter I] at the very moment he breaks faith, conceives an instant love, and pursues her to London, though she had offered no encouragement, because he feels she could give him back faith" (85). Not coincidentally, then, Gibreel dreams that Mahound climbs Mount *Cone*, named for a mountain-climbing faith restorer, to receive his faith-restoring divine revelations. Goonetilleke notes further significance in the religious overtones of Allie's original name, Alleluia, because "she appears a redeemer to Gibreel" (85). By tale's end, Goonetilleke might have added, Gibreel has tragically and unjustly recast his would-be savior as a faithless betrayer.

In sum, then, Chapter II's Mahound dream sets the pattern for its successors in later chapters: its subject matter convincingly reflects Gibreel's spiritual disillusionment, a fall that, combined with the growing angelhood delusion, steers his story to its tragic end.

Chapter Four: *Verses* Chapter III ("Ellowen Deeowen")

This chapter introduces another way in which Gibreel's dreams form an inherent part of the narrative: his delusion that he is the Archangel Gibreel, conceived in Chapter II's dream, starts to bleed over into his waking hours and, by late in the book, has become all-powerful and determinative of his actions. Chapter III advances Gibreel's story by juxtaposing his growing delusions of angelhood-- again, a carryover from his first dream that will haunt him henceforth--and his growing recognition of his own psychosis. Chapter III also includes two incidents vital to developing Gibreel's story of mental decline and eventual collapse: his abandonment of Saladin at Rosa Diamond's, which leaves Saladin pondering a revenge that will eventually cost Gibreel his sanity; and Gibreel's reunion with Allie, ultimately the chief victim of his insanity.

The delusion, starting in Chapter III, produces Gibreel's persistent hallucination of a halo framing his head, just one example of the phantasmagoric physical action in the novel's alleged "real world" (not least of which is Saladin's metamorphosis into a demonic-looking hybrid of man and goat). The halo hallucination apparently is contagious --the abusive police officers who arrest Saladin (as a suspected illegal immigrant, no less) notice that "a pale, golden light . . . was in fact streaming softly from a point immediately behind [Gibreel's] head" (142). Harrison aptly observes how Rushdie's surrealism in this scene artfully parallels his character's deteriorating state of mind; in such passages,

"Rushdie seems to be deliberately blurring the frontier between magic and realism, letting the one leak into the other, as Gibreel's dreams leak into his waking life" (95). Gibreel recognizes the latter phenomenon after he recuperates from his sky-high fall at the home of his rescuer Rosa Diamond (whose spellbinding reminiscences have pulled him into their fantasy world): "Only then did he understand that he had to get away, because the universe of his nightmares had begun to leak into his waking life, and if he was not careful he would never manage to begin again, to be reborn with her, through her, Alleluia, who had seen the roof of the world [by climbing Mt. Everest]" (Rushdie 144). Gibreel, while craving redemption, also appears to be suffering from some sort of existential quandary, some paralysis of the will that may also serve to reveal his loss of faith:

> He was shocked to realize that he had made no attempt to contact Allie at all; or to help Chamcha in his time of need [before he was arrested]. Nor had he been at all perturbed by the appearance on Saladin's head of a pair of fine new horns, a thing that should surely have occasioned some concern." (144)

Soon we get another image of paralysis when, in an intriguing reference to Chapter II's dream, Gibreel decides that "he was being held prisoner and manipulated by the force of Rosa's will, just as the Angel Gibreel had been obliged to speak by the overwhelming need of the Prophet, Mahound" (150).

Above all, however, Chapter III leaves Gibreel convinced that he is going mad, whether or not his troubling dreams (the narrative thread started in the novel's preceding chapter) are contributors to, or merely manifestations of, his progressive psychosis. At Rosa's, he thinks, "I'm going crazy. . . she's dying, but I'm losing my mind" (152). Later,

riding the train to London, he is "once again seized, as who would not be, by the fear that God had decided to punish him for his loss of faith by driving him insane" (189). An erstwhile player of Hindu deities in Indian movies, Gibreel reflects on the irony that his newfound atheism and delusional thinking have now cast him in, of all roles, the part of an angel: "The terror of losing his mind to a paradox, of being unmade by what he no longer believed existed, of turning in his madness into the avatar of a chimerical archangel, was so big in him that it was impossible to look at it for long; yet how else was he to account for the miracles, metamorphoses and apparitions of recent days?" (189).

We see further evidence of Gibreel's deterioration in one particular apparition: the ghost of Rekha Merchant, a former lover back in India whom Gibreel's callous treatment has induced to commit suicide after she has murdered her own children. Rekha's ghost, which Gibreel starts to see all over London, may be another example of the supernatural events crowding the novel's "real world" sector. But the apparition seems more likely to exist only in Gibreel's head, as one more sign of his growing insanity. As he "argues" with Rekha on the street, passersby clear a space around this "wild man in an outsize overcoat and trampy hat," and when a child points out that Gibreel is talking to himself, the child's mother replies that "it's wicked to mock the afflicted" (200).

Gibreel soon develops an almost matter-of-fact view toward his own hallucinations, which may merely show how profoundly his insanity is rooting itself. When his train enters a tunnel, for example, "Gibreel saw that they were surrounded by a warm golden light that was coming from a point just behind his head. In the glass of the sliding door, he saw the reflection of the halo around his hair" (193).

Chapter III also establishes two narrative strands that will later become crucial to Gibreel's decline and fall. The first comes when Gibreel fails to intercede on Saladin's behalf during the latter's arrest by abusive, racist police: "When Chamcha reached the Black Maria, he saw the traitor, Gibreel Farishta, looking down at him from the little balcony outside Rosa's bedroom, and there wasn't any light shining around the bastard's head" (142). Saladin (who either wills away or doesn't see the same halo hallucination that the officers do) vows revenge on Gibreel and eventually gets it in a subsequent chapter when he drives his friend irreversibly insane by telephoning him using the impersonated voices of Allie's other supposed lovers.

The second narrative strand, in Chapter III's closing lines, is Gibreel's reunion with his old girlfriend Allie, who becomes the object and ultimate victim of his jealousy. Having finally mustered the resolve to look for her, he meets her on a London street, seemingly by chance, and promptly falls asleep at her feet, without a word of greeting:

> As if from a great distance he heard a shocked cry escape the woman's lips, a gasp in which disbelief, joy, and a strange resentment were all mixed up, and just before his senses left him he understood that Rekha had permitted him, for the time being, to reach the illusion of a safe haven, so that her triumph over him could be the sweeter when it came at last. (201-02)

The reference to Rekha may be Rushdie's way of suggesting that Gibreel's womanizing will contribute to his downfall. What is clear--or becomes clear--is that Gibreel's and Allie's bizarre reunion scene sets the tale on a tragic trajectory that will finally consume them both.

In short, Chapter III provides crucial stage-setting: along with introducing the angelhood delusion that will become key to the plot (and the link between the novel's dream- and waking-hour chapters), the chapter lays the groundwork for subsequent, catastrophic collisions between major characters; again, faithlessness will prove the common denominator of conflict and tragedy. Saladin, bitter over Gibreel's perceived faithlessness in abandoning him, vows a revenge that ultimately will involve exploiting Gibreel's faithlessness toward Allie, who never cheats on him despite his suspicions. Gibreel, falsely suspecting Allie of betrayal, finally destroys her and himself in a tragic denouement made possible only by Chapter III's resuscitation of the relationship.

Chapter Five: *Verses* Chapter IV ("Ayesha")

This chapter is best known for its satirical dream-portrait of a fanatical Islamic clergyman clearly based on the Ayatollah Khomeini--an interesting subject, in light of the *fatwa* against Rushdie, but less important to this study than the chapter's second dream. Rushdie's tale of Ayesha's pilgrimage, based on an actual mid-1980s account of pilgrims who drowned trying to reach Mecca (Brians), has been misinterpreted as an attack on Islam. Not so. Without changing the tragic outcome, Rushdie poetically transmutes a sad news story into a wondrous parable about the power of faith and belief in miracles. Mirza Saeed, the dream's materialistic skeptic, dies wishing he could have believed, like most of the dream's characters, in Allah's power to part the seas--inviting clear comparisons to Gibreel's anguish over his own loss of faith.

The chapter opens with Gibreel dreaming of an exiled, fanatical *Imam*, a high-ranking Muslim cleric--a portrait that observers agree can only represent Khomeini (expelled from Iran by Shah Reza Pahlevi), even though Rushdie's novel changes the city of exile from Paris to London. Pipes, scoffing at Rushdie's published denials that he modeled the character on Khomeini, persuasively argues that Khomeini (as well as the Islamic Republic he founded after the Shah's downfall) is "devastatingly portrayed in the chapter's opening pages," albeit Rushdie never mentions his "future arch-enemy" by name (Pipes 48). Sardar and Davies, referring to those same parts of Chapter IV, assert "there

is no possibility of mistaking the identity of this character when SAVAK [the late Shah's notorious secret police] is said to be on the loose observing the *Imam*" (174-75). Described as a creature of hairy-legged repulsiveness, the fictional *Imam* also says his subjects "love me for my habit of smashing clocks" (214)--a clear echo, Brians points out, of Rushdie's essay "In God We Trust," which asserts that the Khomeini-led Iranian Revolution set out "quite literally to turn back the clock. Time must be reversed" (Rushdie 383).

However insulting the burlesque, analysts find nothing actually blasphemous in the portrait, since Islam does not insulate its clergymen from criticism. Although Muslims may not with impunity question the Qur'an's authenticity, Pipes notes, the faithful are permitted to "blast the *mullahs* (religious leaders) for their greed and ridicule the religious establishment for its hidebound ways" (56).

Muslims besides Khomeini might well have found just cause for offense, some commentators mistakenly suggest, in the allegorical implications of Chapter IV's second dream: it launches the tale (to be finished in Chapter VIII) of Ayesha, a visionary young woman, clad only in butterflies, who leads a group of religious pilgrims to a watery death after promising them that the Arabian Sea will part to allow them passage to the holy city. Sardar and Davies, for example, miss the story's point in contending that

> the symbolism is clear and gives a highly conventional [western-style] portrayal: Islam with its puritanical fanaticism barbarically consumes the innocents. It could have marched straight out of any Orientalist diatribe of the Middle Ages or, indeed, any recent Western media coverage of the

> Muslim world, which is obviously where Rushdie stands in relation to Islam. What unites the dreams of the *Imam* and Ayesha's pilgrimage is the clear imputation that Islam is a force against the march of history, a thing of the past." (175)

To thus conclude, apparently from the fact of the pilgrims' drowning, that the story is irreligious, requires a superficial reading unworthy of the rich subtlety that Rushdie put into the nearly self-contained tale.

It reveals itself, on close reading, as a fable exploring the theme of human hopes for a miracle, sprinkled with some patently miraculous events--most memorably, of course, the beautiful clouds of color-changing butterflies that both clothe and feed Ayesha and, in Chapter VIII, pull the scattered pilgrims back together before finally forming the angel shape that gives the pilgrims their sign to enter the sea. That Ayesha subsequently convinces them to wade to their deaths--after relaying the Archangel Gibreel's claims that the waves will part for them--matters less than their being able to believe this miraculous parting possible, and to act accordingly. This transcendant belief becomes miraculous in itself, Rushdie's narrator suggests: "Human beings in danger of drowning struggle against the water. It is against human nature simply to walk forwards meekly until the sea swallows you up" (503). Even more significantly, surviving pilgrims Muhammad Din, Sri Srinivas and Osman all swear afterwards (without a chance to consult each other first) that they saw the waters part to let the pilgrims pass. Here we have testament to the power of belief to create miracles, or at least to make them seem real to believers.

But, like Gibreel Farishta, Mirza the unbeliever dies tormented by his unbelief. Grieving for his drowned wife (who believed the pilgrimage would cure her inoperable breast cancer), Mirza starves himself to death and, in a deathbed hallucination, imagines himself drowning with the doomed pilgrims--"the sea poured over him, and he was in the water beside Ayesha" (506). We can imagine Gibreel, beset by the demons of faithlessness toward God, himself and others, identifying with Mirza's final longing for the sort of belief that redeemed the pilgrims' lives, and their deaths.

On a more concrete level, Chapter IV measurably advances the story of Gibreel's psychiatric decline, as his dreams and the accompanying delusion of his own angelhood--two narrative threads from chapters II and III--come to seem more and more real. In Chapter IV's opening lines, he reflects that "in the aftermath of Rosa and Rekha, the dream-worlds of his archangelic other self begin to seem as tangible as the shifting realities he inhabits while he's awake" (205). In the chapter's first dream, the *Imam* presses Gibreel into service to fly him to the capital city of Desh (as the archangel is said to have flown Muhammad to Jerusalem) and Gibreel, who now finds the cleric riding him like a magic carpet, discovers that his increasingly bizarre dreams are, paradoxically enough, assuming a systematic quality that he seems to recognize as one mark of his madness:

> When the nocturnal story changes [from the Mahound dream to the *Imam* dream] . . . Gibreel briefly hopes that the curse has ended, that his dreams have been restored to the random eccentricity of ordinary life; but then, as the new story, too, falls into the old pattern, continuing each time he drops off [to sleep] from the precise point at which it was interrupted, and as his

> own image, translated into the avatar of an archangel, re-enters the frame, so his hope dies, and he succumbs once more to the inexorable. (216)

Thus, the chapter ends with the clear suggestion that Gibreel knows he is losing his mind but feels powerless to save it--even as the dream of Ayesha, of which he is after all the author, reflects a spiritual desolation that is at once an outgrowth of, and a contributor to, his incipient madness. This dream, perhaps more than any others, thus forms an inherent characterizing element of Gibreel's tragic loss-of-faith saga.

Chapter Six: *Verses* Chapter V ("A City Visible but Unseen")

This chapter significantly advances Gibreel's story of mental and spiritual decline, mostly by developing his and his nemesis Saladin's unwholesome characters and by establishing that the unhealthiness of Gibreel's and Allie's relationship is mostly the fault of his psychiatric problems; in fact, the chapter soundly establishes her as a sympathetic, innocent character. In its broadest outlines, Chapter V starts a chain of action that will later become tragically crucial: the faithless Saladin will victimize the faithless Gibreel, who subsequently will destroy an eminently faithful Allie. Chapter V builds suspense toward these eventualities by showing Saladin's rage and vengefulness growing inexorably toward the moment (in a later chapter) when Saladin will claim Gibreel's sanity as recompense; and by showing Gibreel's jealous streak clearly worsening from a sort of neurotic insecurity into actual delusions--faithlessness run amok--that Allie is cheating on him with specific men. Finally, although Gibreel's mental illness improves under medication, the chapter ends with his delusions of angelhood reclaiming him with an unprecedented and overpowering force that makes credible his hallucinatory roaming as "destroyer angel" in Chapter VII.

Early parts of Chapter V round out the vindictive character of Saladin, who had been separated from Gibreel and now finds himself newly enraged merely at the mention of Gibreel's name in a movie fan magazine. Saladin, remembering Gibreel's abandonment

of him at Rosa Diamond's, becomes downright apoplectic, shrieking, "Traitor, deserter, scum" (273) at the absent star. When Saladin, still in satanic goat-man form, later conjures up a mental picture of an archangelic Gibreel, we learn that Saladin's rancor does not lack its own tinges of jealousy:

> Chamcha was able to fix his thoughts . . . on the face that had finally coalesced in his mind's eye, radiant, the light streaming out around him from a point just behind his head, Mister Perfecto, portrayer of gods, who always landed on his feet, was always forgiven his sins, loved, praised, adored . . . the face he had been trying to identify in his dreams. (294)

The rest of the chapter emphasizes the mounting anguish of a progressively disintegrating Gibreel, now reunited with Allie and still fearful of his unnerving dreams, but too exhausted to fend off sleep. His condition worsens enough to become apparent to outsiders, namely Allie's mother. Better able than Allie to assess Gibreel's dire mental condition objectively, she makes clear her misgivings about the reunion; she declares him "a man possessed" and seeks explanation for his condition in Hebraic demonology, in "a kind of Singer Brothers dybukkery" (301). Gibreel's own sense of inner torment and impending doom, meanwhile, grows when Allie tells him of her visions of angels and an ice-city while she was on Mount Everest: he feels "an agitation born of this further evidence that the world of dreams was leaking into that of the waking hours, that the seals dividing the two were breaking, and that at any moment the two firmaments could be joined--that is to say, the end of all things was near" (304). This passage provides not only another reference to Gibreel's decreasing ability to distinguish between his dreaming

and waking personas; the final phrase's apocalyptic tone alludes presciently to the riot-born conflagration that strikes London's minority neighborhoods in Chapter VII.

The book's narrator (an elusive, quasi-Satanic figure himself) provides a crucial expository passage enumerating "serious flaws" (314) in Gibreel's and Allie's relationship, whose renewal is Gibreel's purpose in traveling to England. This passage, by making clear the obsessive jealousness of Gibreel's interest in Allie, makes the story's tragic outcome more plausible. As James Harrison notes, once their infatuation resumes, it becomes apparent that there are flaws in the relationship that neither can correct. Allie's fear of intimacy creates one problem, the novel's narrator suggests, but larger problems, of course, stem from Gibreel's "overwhelming possessiveness and jealousy, of which he himself had been wholly unaware, owing to his never previously having thought of a woman as a treasure that had to be guarded at all costs against the piratical hordes who would naturally be trying to purloin her" (Rushdie 315). Harrison correctly rates this "pathological jealousy" (93) as the relationship's chief flaw and argues that Gibreel has been unaware of his jealous streak because, before Allie, he has "never valued one woman highly enough above the rest to feel that way about her. To refer to the emotion as pathological, however, is no mere figure of speech; it quickly blossoms into full-blown schizophrenic paranoia as his dreams leak into his waking life and he changes into a full-time archangel" (93). Harrison thus recognizes a vital point: that Gibreel's sick, overblown jealously is inextricably linked or even fused--part of the same matrix of madness--to his delusion of angelhood that started with Chapter II's dream. The novel's narrator calls that delusion the relationship's "fatal flaw, namely, Gibreel Farishta's

imminent realization--or, if you will, *insane idea*--that he truly was nothing less than an archangel in human form, and not just any archangel, but the Angel of the Recitation, the most exalted (now that Shaitan had fallen) of them all" (Rushdie 315). In subsequent chapters this self-delusion will develop into that of destroyer angel, the capacity in which Gibreel's unfounded jealousy will ultimately drive him to destroy Allie.

The rest of Chapter V moves the story toward that unhappy resolution with a progression of scenes that trace, almost sequentially, the worsening of Gibreel's crazy jealousy and the swelling of his deluded angelic persona, spawned in Chapter II's dream and developed in Chapter IV's.

In one such scene, Gibreel's jealous suspiciousness of Allie actually creates a new set of delusions, when he becomes convinced, against all logic and evidence, that she is concealing an affair with the drunken and pathetic cartoonist Brunel, a friend of her father whom she had ushered from her home after he stripped off his clothes. The following passage goes far toward establishing Allie as a sympathetic innocent (thus making her eventual demise all the more troubling to the reader):

> Allie told Gibreel the [Brunel] story in an open, giggling manner . . . [but] Gibreel blew sky-high, accusing Allie of having falsified the story's ending, suggesting that poor Brunel was still waiting by his telephone and that she intended to ring him the moment his, Farishta's, back was turned. Ravings, in short, jealousy of the past, the worst kind of all. As this terrible emotion took charge of him, he found himself improvising a whole series of lovers for her, imagining them to be waiting around every corner. She had used the

> Brunel story to taunt him, he shouted, it was a deliberate and cruel threat. (318)

As our alarm at Gibreel's increasingly irrational jealousy mounts, we can only feel sorry for the blameless Allie, caught off guard by her unstable lover's unwarranted abuse.

Soon after, another scene gives us a clear glimpse of Gibreel's madness ratcheting up a notch--and his grip on rationality and his own identity slipping farther from him--as his certainty of his "archangelic status" (320) solidifies. With this grand delusion growing ever more grandiose, he takes what seems to him the next logical step, setting out to redeem the city of London,

> to bring this metropolis of the ungodly . . . back to the knowledge of God, to shower upon it the blessings of the Recitation, the sacred Word. He felt his old self drop from him, and dismissed it with a shrug, but chose to retain, for the time being, his human scale. This was not the time to grow until he filled the sky from horizon to horizon--though that, too, would surely come before long. (320)

He starts to consider Allie disloyal for questioning his mental health, and even begins thinking himself a prophet on the order of Muhammad, who feared for his own sanity when revelations began coming to him (Rushdie 321). Later, Rekha's vengeful ghost reappears to taunt Gibreel in his madness with a reference to his career in mythological movies: "You played too many winged types for your own good" (323). The gibe raises an interesting point: did Gibreel's delusional thinking, long before it grew into a textbook

symptom of paranoid schizophrenia, find its antecedents in a film career spent adopting the identities of supernatural entities?

The next section's characterizations further endear Allie to us while making Gibreel more sympathetic than before. Once Sisodia finds him wandering in a hallucinatory daze and takes him back to Allie, Gibreel's pitiful state, and his terror of his own schizophrenia, lets her replace her anger with compassion; we admire her loyalty toward Gibreel even as we admire his resolve to face his illness so bravely:

> It became plain that Gibreel had been shaken to the very marrow, and there was a haunted look to him, a scarified popeyed quality, that quite pierced her heart. He faced the fact of his mental illness with courage, refusing to play it down or call it by a false name, but his recognition of it had, understandably, cowed him. No longer (for the present, anyway) the cheerfully ebullient vulgarian for whom she had conceived her "grand passion," he became for her, in this newly vulnerable incarnation, more lovable than ever. She grew determined to lead him back to sanity, to stick it out; to wait out the storm, and conquer the peak. And he was, for the moment, the easiest and most malleable of patients, somewhat dopey as a result of the heavy-duty medication he was being given by the specialists at the Maudsley hospital." (339)

When Sisodia, a producer, proposes that Gibreel star in a series of films about the Archangel Gibreel's "long and illustrious career" (345), Allie shows a touching solicitude in hoping that this plan might help Gibreel's mental condition--

> Sisodia's purloining of the dream-narratives he'd heard at Gibreel's bedside could be seen as serendipitous: for once those stories were clearly placed in the artificial, fabricated world of the cinema, it ought to become easier for Gibreel to see them as fantasies, too. That Berlin Wall between the dreaming and waking state might well be more rapidly rebuilt as a result. (347)

But alas, the situation deteriorates--and we start to empathize all the more with Allie's distress--once the overbearing movie people relocate Gibreel to Sisodia's place and the actor's jealous obsessions return after he scales back his medication: a fatal error, considering how much the pharmaceuticals seemed to help. Allie's anguish peaks when she discovers, by chance, a report that shows Gibreel is having her followed (349).

Subsequent scenes show Gibreel (whose new stage-show costume wryly features a light bulb halo gadget) passing into a seemingly more advanced phase of his angelhood delusion, one that brings imaginary new "powers": he decides that he can and must perform a supernatural, angelic feat--improving the chill, rainy English climate--as a public service. Imagining himself hovering over London, he evokes the novel's central quandary of distinguishing good from evil in reflecting that "the moral fuzziness of the English was meteorologically induced" (354); because the days are no warmer or brighter than the nights, the land no drier than the sea, he reasons, the people can make no distinctions, moral or otherwise. Moreover, his announcement--"City . . . I am going to tropicalize you" (354)--serves a narrative function by foreshadowing an actual heat wave that soon settles on London, perhaps a coincidence, perhaps another case of Rushdie blurring the

line between fantasy and reality. The heat wave in turn prefigures, and may contribute to, the race riots that produce the hellish heat of burning buildings. Gibreel's self-delusion as a "tropicalizing" angel, meanwhile, may portend his subsequent, more ominous, role as flame-throwing destroyer angel.

In sum, then, Chapter V substantially develops the angelhood delusion introduced in Chapter III, vividly tracing the progressive worsening of Gibreel's delusional madness even while creating pathos on his behalf; he ultimately becomes the victim of his own insanity as well as of Saladin's vindictiveness. Perhaps more importantly, Chapter V's examination of Gibreel's and Allie's troubled relationship solidly entrenches them as empathy-evoking characters whose ultimate tragic meeting distresses us. Thus, the chapter both shows the intrinsic narrative and thematic importance of Gibreel's controversial dreams--the source, again, of his delusions--and makes us care more about the mental and spiritual deterioration that those dreams reflect.

Chapter Seven: *Verses* Chapter VI ("Return to Jahilia")

This chapter, which Brians calls the novel's most controversial one, centers on Gibreel's fourth dream with its two now-notorious main episodes, both of which reflect the loss-of-faith issues that are troubling his unconscious as well as his conscious thoughts. So, as in chapters II and IV, dreams become an important means--by revealing the dreamer's innermost conflicts--of characterizing Gibreel's spiritual turmoil. Chapter VI's first dream episode provides a plausible surrogate or alter ego for the newly agnostic or atheistic Gibreel--a disaffected scribe named Salman Farsi who takes it upon himself to make textual changes while Mahound, Rushdie's Muhammad figure, dictates scripture to him. The second episode details the fate of a brothel whose dozen workers, seeking to boost business in their newly converted Arabian community, adopt the names of Mahound's twelve wives. Although Muslims reacted especially angrily to the second episode, some commentators argue convincingly that the episode is not truly blasphemous and may even indirectly tout religion.

The first episode, in any case, presents a clearer parallel with Gibreel's spiritual plight: it presents, in Salman, a formerly pious man who, like Gibreel, suffered deeply for a loss of faith that he was reluctant to admit even to himself. Most pertinent to this loss are passages in which Salman decides that the revelations he has been transcribing are a bit too convenient for Mahound himself; Salman notices "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 . . . always supported Mahound" (364). As in Chapter II, we have the controversial hint that the "revelations" are coming straight from Mahound rather than from Allah speaking through his Archangel Gibreel. Salman, a recent convert to the new faith, clearly evokes Gibreel's sort of religious disillusionment as the scribe tells his friend Baal about how he tested Mahound by surreptitiously changing scriptural passages:

> If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as *all-hearing*, *all-knowing*, I would write, *all-knowing*, *all-wise* . . . Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the Word of God with my own profane language. But good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that . . . say about the quality of the divine poetry? Look, I swear, I was shaken to my soul. It's one thing to be a smart bastard and have half-suspicions about funny business, but it's quite another thing to find out that you're right. (367)

Salman (believed to be based at least partly on a real figure) eventually flees for his life after anticipating, correctly, that Mahound will detect the falsifications and resolve to punish his scribe. Despite this retribution toward the apostate, many Muslims found the episode offensive for the same reason they were angered by Rushdie's Chapter II rendering of the "satanic verses" incident. But this time, not only did Rushdie appear to satirically attack Islam's core belief that the Qur'an represents the unerring words of

Allah; he appeared to attribute its authorship partially to a flippant hired hand. Critics, most notably Pipes, once more do a thorough job of explaining why Muslims found the Salman dream offensive, but largely overlook its narrative rationale: what more fitting dream-creation of Gibreel's spiritually bereft mind--and what better echo of himself--than a man who desperately wanted to believe in a higher power, then found, to his everlasting sorrow, reasons why he could not? Thus, we have yet another striking instance of how Gibreel's dreams enrich his tragic loss-of-faith saga.

Scholars have done more useful, nuanced readings of Chapter VI's second controversial episode; while not as clearly applicable as the first episode to Gibreel's spiritual crisis, it may subtly reflect his envy toward religious men (even if, in this case, they are also prostitutes' customers). Gibreel dreams of Baal, a satirical poet fleeing the prophet's wrath and hiding out in a brothel called *Hijab* ("the curtain" in Arabic), where he learns that rumors about Mahound's twelve sequestered wives are prompting jealous sexual fantasies among the brothel's patrons; at Baal's suggestion, a teenaged prostitute renames herself Ayesha and her co-workers assume the identities of Mahound's eleven other wives. Business soon triples.

Rushdie's core offense seemingly boils down to his merely mentioning the Prophet's wives in the same breath as prostitutes, never mind giving the latter corresponding names. But several critics have argued persuasively that Rushdie does not intend the slander that the brothel episode's surface details suggest to a less-than-careful reader. Brians contends, "No scene in the novel has been more ferociously attacked, though as Rushdie points out, it is quite inaccurate to say that the author has made the

Prophet's wives into whores. Rather, the scene is a commentary on the tendency of the profane to infiltrate the sacred" (Brians). Pipes, though conceding that "every detail of this tale seems to be imbued with sacrilege and impiety" (65), emphasizes that "these offenses are not entirely gratuitous" (66)--the male patrons who flock to the renamed women display a kind of oblique piety because, as the novel's narrator says, "Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy" (Rushdie 380). As Pipes puts it, "The implication is clear: only because the men of Mecca had entered the Islamic faith could they derive salacious pleasure from imagining the prostitutes to be the Prophet's wives. In a perverse way, [Rushdie] is highlighting the religiousness of the new Muslims" (66). And perhaps Gibreel, dreaming all of this, wishes he could share their piety, just as he must envy the faith of pilgrims who believed the waves would part for them. Thus, Rushdie uses the controversial dreams of the brothel and the pilgrimage for similar ends, to flesh out Gibreel's story of spiritual desolation by suggesting his poignant longing for the faith that has deserted him.

But Sardar and Davies, far from allowing Rushdie any extenuating motives, see offenses in the brothel episode that go even beyond the surface details--they call the author's symbolic use of the facial veil, another definition of *hijab*, an insult to Muslim women everywhere. The co-authors' reasoning on this point seems a bit tortuous, however: "When a Muslim woman puts on the *hijab* she is, to a degree, performing a religious rite . . . The inference [of the brothel's name] is that women who veil themselves are prostitutes, and that the 'harem' of the Prophet . . . is little more than correspondence to the temple prostitutes of pre-Islamic times" (171). This reading, not well supported by

anything in the text, seems feasible only one when proceeds from the assumption, as Sardar and Davies persist in doing, that Rushdie's sole agenda item is ideologically attacking Islam. The brothel dream, on the contrary, indirectly argues for religion generally, if not Islam specifically, by intimating the lonely isolation of the dreamer, unable to believe in higher powers.

Chapter Eight: *Verses* Chapter VII ("The Angel Azraeel")

This long and eventful chapter emerges as the novel's most crucial, thus far, to Gibreel's story of delusional unraveling, which now begins to take a sinister twist. It is the chapter in which the vindictive Saladin finally pushes Gibreel into full-blown psychosis, setting up the tragic denouement of Gibreel's tale in Chapter IX (and ultimately leaving both protagonists shrouded in a moral ambiguity that speaks to Rushdie's larger theme, the problem of distinguishing good from evil). Chapter VII also shows the specific effect of Saladin's plot: Gibreel's dream-generated delusion of angelhood (the plot thread started in Chapter II's dream and continued in those of chapters IV and VI) reaches a grandiose culmination during the fiery race riots that break out in London: watching flames that he imagines himself starting with his Judgment Day trumpet, Gibreel finds his angelic self-delusion finally crystallizing into that of destroyer angel, a role that prefigures the double murder-suicide he carries out in IX. Finally, Chapter VII ponders, more than any previous chapter, the complexity of Gibreel's decline: is his fate a form of Greek tragedy and his tragic flaw not the traditional *hubris*, but a jealous streak that compels his actions? Or is it simply a sad clinical case of a man whose self-destructive insanity, albeit jealousy-induced, could have been adequately controlled had he not been too obstinate to take his drugs as prescribed? We need not, upon reflection, set up an either-or choice, for Chapter VII suggests a combination of explanations producing one tragic end. That is, if

we allow that a tragic flaw leaves the tragic hero no choice but to act as he does, then Gibreel's stubborn streak (akin to *hubris*, actually) must join his jealousy as a competing, and not mutually exclusive, candidate for that fatal shortcoming.

From the foregoing, we can divine a clear sequence that once again shows how Gibreel's dreams form an essential starting point for his tragedy: they spawn the angelhood delusion, a reflection of Gibreel's insanity that, in combination with the spiritual desolation that his dreams bespeak, sets him on a nihilistic mission of destruction.

Rushdie further casts his novel as tragedy when he borrows frankly from Shakespeare to offer Saladin as a Iago figure (Rushdie 424), malignantly engineering his enemy's downfall by planting the seeds of jealous suspicion. In a crucial scene that clearly advances Saladin's role in Gibreel's downfall, Saladin's resolve to punish his countryman flares up when he encounters him by chance at Sisodia's studio party--where Saladin discovers, also by chance, that Gibreel's jealousy is the Achilles Heel he has been seeking. About to stumble onto Gibreel's Othello-like susceptibility in this regard, Saladin begins conversing with the heavily medicated Gibreel and "in his ignorance . . . penetrated, by the merest chance, the chink in Gibreel's . . . armour, and understood how his hated Other might most swiftly be unmade" (429). Angrily reporting his wife Pamela's affair with Jumpy Joshi, the inebriated Saladin himself is at first unaware of those words' effect on Gibreel. But after Gibreel draws unfounded conclusions about Jumpy and Allie having an affair, then batters Jumpy with a boat oar, Saladin realizes that Gibreel's pathological jealousy--perhaps not fully controllable even with strong tranquilizers--will provide the armor chink he can exploit. Thus, we see--or are about to

see--Saladin assume his key part in Gibreel's tragedy: that of a nemesis who fatally exploits his enemy's faithlessness.

Where does the jealousy stop and the madness begin? Rushdie leaves the point maddeningly unsettled, but we are probably pondering a meaningless distinction. Talking to Saladin after the attack on Jumpy, Allie seems convinced the two problems are points on a continuum: "The doctors say the possessive jealousy could be part of the same thing; at least, it can set the madness off, like a fuse" (432). This notion seems consistent with a modified Greek-tragedy explanation of Gibreel's downfall: that his irrational jealousy, even if it feeds his madness, pre-exists it as a character flaw that controls his destiny. But again, Gibreel himself suggests prideful obstinacy as Tragic Flaw Number Two, as he retails the clinical explanation that all his behavioral and mental problems are illnesses requiring only the proper medication. Complaining to Saladin that the drugs make him clumsy, he confesses, "When I get sick of being this way I just cut down without telling [Allie] . . . and then the shit starts happening. I swear to you, Spoono, I can't bear the bloody idea that it will never stop, that the only choice is drugs or bugs in the brain" (434). Whatever the explanation, the scene provides a further reminder that Gibreel's downfall originates in a loss of faith that is manifested first in his troubling dreams, later in his faithlessness toward Allie.

In any case, the stage now is set for Saladin to act out the fiendish telephone plot that drives Gibreel completely mad, allowing his jealous insanity and his avenging angel delusion to combine tragically. Gibreel, feeling somehow robbed of his humanity by the prescription drugs (the twentieth century's defining panacea for all ills, mental and

physical), ill-advisedly persists in cutting back while Saladin, deploying an Iago-like solicitude to keep his foe off guard, harnesses his mimicry talents to fabricate an assortment of lovers for Allie. Using intimate details that Gibreel has unwisely shared, Saladin begins a series of obscene telephone calls that humiliate Allie (who sometimes answers), but whose full malice targets Gibreel; among the assorted voices, he soon finds

> the one that got deepest under his skin; a voice that spoke exclusively in rhyme, reciting doggerel verses of an understated naivety, even innocence, which contrasted so greatly with the masturbatory coarseness of most of the other callers that Gibreel soon came to think of it as the most insidiously menacing of all. (444)

Rushdie introduces a strong sense of Gibreel's tragic predestination when, sensing that his sanity is about to slip away for good, he becomes almost resigned to the dreaded doggerel voice, "having perhaps accepted, at some level deeper than consciousness, that this infernal, childlike evil was what would finish him off for good" (444-45). The voice's naive innocence, evocative of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," contrasts jarringly with the fiendishness Saladin exudes as he gloats about "how easy it all turned out to be! How comfortably evil lodged in those supple, infinitely flexible vocal cords, those puppetmaster's strings" (445). Recognizing the doggerel's "special potency" (445), he plans a final *coup de grace* call from the "poet" while biding his time using the other voices:

> One by one, they dripped into Gibreel's ears, weakening his hold on the real world, drawing him little by little into their deceitful web, so that

> little by little their obscene, invented women began to coat the real woman like a viscous, green film, and . . . he started slipping away from her; and then it was time for the return of the little, satanic verses that made him mad. (445)

In sum, the vividly drawn episode makes it clear that Gibreel's downfall, while a result of his faithless jealousy, remains contingent on a venomous antagonist waiting to exploit that weakness. In the above-quoted passage, Rushdie startles his reader with a palpable sense of Saladin's evil, of the false friend dripping the poison of suspicion into Gibreel's ear like Hamlet's uncle poisoning his father; Goonetilleke correctly observes that the malice behind Saladin's phone calls "exceeds the provocation" (87) of being abandoned at Rosa's--especially, I would add, since the calls also victimize the perfectly blameless Allie. The novel itself links Saladin's act to the "motiveless malignity" (424) of Iago, who, after all, destroyed Othello over a lost job promotion. Indeed, fully exploring *Verses'* meditations on the nature of good and evil--and the difficulty of defining and recognizing each--would require a dissertation unto itself. But for purposes of this study, we need primarily to recognize how the novel's plotting confounds, in converse ways, any clear moral judgments about its co-protagonists. That is, the implacably malicious Saladin ultimately atones, in a sense, for his evil telephone plot by returning to India as the good son to comfort his father on his deathbed; the haloed Gibreel heroically rescues Saladin from a burning building, but turns killer upon his return to India. Thus, we see how Gibreel's schizophrenically "split" personality, as noted earlier, serves as a paradigm for the general confusion about human identity that culminates in a blurring of good and evil.

In any case, the success of Saladin's telephone pranks sets up Chapter VII's next major episode, Gibreel's archangelic tour of London in a flamboyantly hallucinatory state. We sense that he has truly gone off the deep end--and that Saladin has therefore done his work well--as soon as Gibreel buys a trumpet and names it after Azraeel, Islam's angel of death and destruction. He takes it with him on his tour of riot-torn London; in his delusional state, he becomes an angel carrying another angel.

Theological explications of this episode soon become tangled, evoking as they do Jewish and Christian as well as Muslim theology; all three religions recognize an Angel Gabriel, but assign him differing functions. Therefore, Gibreel's self-concept during the riots is not completely clear. It conforms most closely to Jewish mythology, which sometimes regards Gabriel "as the angel of death, the prince of fire and thunder" (*Benet's* 361)--apparently corresponding to Azraeel's role in Islam (which sees Gabriel primarily as Allah's emissary to Muhammad). The trumpet, for its part, evokes Christian mythology, which holds that Gabriel will blow that very horn on Judgment Day.

If the precise iconography remains unclear, Gibreel clearly sees himself on some kind of retributive angelic mission against humanity as he wanders the burning Brickhall district, his delusional and hallucinatory state finally growing to a spectacular crescendo from the dream-seed that sprouted in Chapter II. As Harrison aptly observes, "Things reach a climax, as does the novel, in a night of fire" (96). With the persistent heat wave stoking civic unrest, a black activist's suspicious death while in police custody foments a full-scale race riot. As he wanders through this dangerous setting, Gibreel's angelic personas from previous chapters' dreams flood back to merge with his present

consciousness, providing perhaps the best evidence so far that the dreams form an inherent part of his story:

> Gibreel moves as if through a dream, because after days of wandering the city without eating or sleeping, with the trumpet named Azraeel tucked safely in the pocket of his greatcoat, he no longer recognizes the distinction between states--he understands now something of what omnipresence must be like, because he is moving through several stories at once, there is a Gibreel who mourns his betrayal by Alleluia Cone, and a Gibreel hovering over the death-bed of a Prophet, and a Gibreel watching in secret over the progress of a pilgrimage to the sea. (457)

Brians aptly notes that "it is not always clear, in what follows, how much is Gibreel's insanity and how much is fantastic reality" (Brians), an apparent reference to Rushdie's aforementioned magical realism. What is clear is that Gibreel is experiencing a world all his own--his dangerous madness now in full flower--and that it inspires some of the novel's most imaginative and vivid descriptive passages. The delusions start building to a fever pitch after Gibreel decides to become the agent of God's wrath rather than His love, and to punish sinners with his incendiary horn. Seeing a group of teenaged prostitutes makes him recall, and enumerate mentally, the fatefully renamed women at Chapter VI's "curtain" brothel--yet another way in which the controversial dreams from previous chapters weave themselves into this central and climactic scene of Gibreel's final unraveling. And we get an ominous forestaste of Gibreel's subsequent murderousness

when he decides to make the teenagers' pimps the first "victims" of his exterminating "trump":

> After the stream of fire has emerged from the mouth of his golden trumpet and consumed the approaching men, wrapping them in a cocoon of flame, unmaking them so completely that not even their shoes remain sizzling on the sidewalk, Gibreel understands . . . He is the Archangel Gibreel, the angel of the Recitation, with the power of revelation in his hands . . . let it be fire. This is a city that has cleansed itself in flame, purged itself by burning down to the ground. (461)

Subsequent scenes create foreboding about the catastrophes in Chapter IX while vividly hammering home the point that here is a madman lately driven insane by jealousy and now consumed by an obsession of avenging angelhood. Thus, we find Gibreel's schizophrenic symptoms growing to spectacular dimensions: his hallucinations have become so elaborate he can "see" his victims "burning," and his delusion of angelhood so grandiose that he now imagines himself exacting a wrathful deity's retribution against the sinners of London. One memorable passage vividly shows how Gibreel's diseased perceptions have transformed an actual riot scene, frightening enough in itself, into an apocalyptic nightmare dredged from the most forbidding depths of the subconscious:

> There is Gibreel Farishta, walking in a world of fire. In the High Street he sees houses built of flame, with walls of fire, and flames like gathered curtains hanging at the windows. -- And there are men and women with fiery skins strolling, running, milling around him, dressed in coats of fire. The

> street has become red hot, molten, a river the color of blood. -- All, all is ablaze as he toots his merry horn, giving the people what they want, the hair and teeth of the citizenry are smoking and red, glass burns, and birds fly overhead on blazing wings. (462)

Thus Rushdie takes us to a crucial point in the trajectory of Gibreel's tale--and another reminder of his dreams' crucial role: the dream-delusion of angelhood that began innocuously in early chapters has now metastasized into a malign, overpowering, *waking-hours* notion of avenging angelhood. Having incinerated sinners in his imagination, Gibreel is now prepared, in Chapter IX, to act out his destroyer-angel fantasy with tragically real results.

Chapter Nine: *Verses* Chapter IX ("A Wonderful Lamp")

The novel's closing chapter moves Gibreel's story of avenging angelhood and mad, faithless jealousy to its grim conclusion within a circular plot shape that brings both protagonists home on separate trips to India: Saladin, for a loving deathbed reconciliation with the terminally ill father from whom he has long been estranged; Gibreel, in desperate flight from his suicidal despair over his breakup with Allie, his slumping career, and the demons of his own mental illness. The sense of impending disaster--that Gibreel will come to a bad end--becomes nearly overpowering and is soon borne out. Saladin's initial optimism about Gibreel's redeemability quickly gives way to foreboding when he learns that Allie has returned to Bombay for a mountain-climbing expedition. He fears a "terrible doom" (541) for her and, with Gibreel's reappearance delayed until the closing pages, Saladin learns second-hand, through tabloid headlines, that his terrible hunch is right: "EVEREST QUEEN, FILM MOGUL PERISH . . . / GIBREEL FARISHTA VANISHES" (542).

Saladin's resurgent guilt over exploiting Gibreel's jealousy--"these killings were the dark flowers of seeds he had planted long ago" (543), Saladin tells himself--ushers Gibreel's tale to its artfully designed crux: Gibreel's dream-borne delusion of angelhood, grown to a notion of destroying angel in Chapter VII, now merges with his pathological jealousy, the second component of his madness, to produce the tragic denouement.

This crucial convergence--of jealously insane lover and insanely vengeful angel--becomes clear when a bedraggled Gibreel, now a fugitive from justice, shows up at Saladin's house to confess his crimes in an incoherent monologue. "I am the angel . . . the god damned angel of god," he tells Saladin. "And these days it's the avenging angel . . . Gibreel the avenger . . . always vengeance . . . why" (544). From his monologue, we can soon divine the jealousy factor: Sisodia, the producer, had innocently brought Allie--"he just wanted us to be together" (544)--to visit Gibreel's new residence at Everest Vilas. The taunting telephone doggerel that had made Gibreel wrongly suspect Allie's fidelity resurfaces in his rambling mind: "I like coffee . . . I like tea . . . Violets are blue. . . roses are red . . . remember me . . . when I am dead dead dead" (544). Gone is that moment of lucidity that let Gibreel suspect, after rescuing Saladin in Chapter VII, that his countryman had used his talent for mimicry to manufacture Allie's other lovers. Now, Gibreel mistakenly concludes that Allie is cheating on him with Sisodia --"I knew what they were up to . . . laughing at me . . . in my own home" (545)--so he fatally shoots the producer and then, blaming the act on Rekha Merchant's ghost, pushes Allie from the same parapet from which Rekha, Gibreel's old lover, had jumped previously.

With the innocents Allie and Sisodia slain, Gibreel has now avenged, in spectacularly angelic, apocalyptic fashion, a betrayal that never occurred. Having lost his religious faith, he has now, almost inevitably, lost faith in his beloved.

Here we can find a key implication about the dangers of spiritual nihilism, the self-destructive despair visited upon those unable to believe in anyone or anything. Gibreel's faithlessness, in some ways a classic case of twentieth-century anomie, leads him only to

madness, death and destruction. In misinterpreting Gibreel's dreams, adherents of the *fatwa* against Rushdie seek to punish, as a "blasphemous" tale, what ultimately positions itself as a cautionary tale against faithlessness because it casts Gibreel's apostasy into the "crime doesn't pay" category. Here, Rushdie invites us to consider, is what happens to the wretched unbeliever. Thus Rushdie's novel, accused by religious decree of undermining Islam, actually may have strengthened it in the eyes of some readers.

On levels more personal than theological, we mourn that Gibreel was unable to muster faith in the deserving Allie, and we reflect on the homily about how loving God means loving one another and ourselves. Saladin, after all, finally finds his elusive "small redeeming victory for love" (468) not in Gibreel's rescuing him from the fire, but in the final chapter's deathbed reconciliation with his father, part of a repatriation that finally allows him to stop playing the Englishman and be true to himself.

Of course Rushdie--a writer who revels in his own elusiveness--confounds any attempts to draw completely consistent didactic messages from his novel. Allie, the innocent, is punished along with the guilty--Pamela Chamcha, who perishes in the Brickhall fires, really *had* cheated on Saladin. And Rushdie was not so touched by the pilgrims' piety that he would save them from drowning.

Like so much of the novel, Gibreel's fate remains impenetrable to definitive analysis. The closing pages leave us once more asking if his downfall was, in tragic fashion, preordained by his jealous streak, the fatal flaw that would inexorably push him to destroy the woman he wanted but, finally, could not have. Or was his case, again, a medical misfortune whose outcome should have been preventable had he not refused, for

pride or whatever reason, to take enough of the drugs that could control his violence? Just before he shoots himself in the head, Gibreel reminds Saladin how he once remarked that "if I thought the sickness would never leave me, that it would always return, I would not be able to bear up" (546). Thus, we get a final reminder that the choice is "drugs" or "bugs," and Gibreel cannot stand either one. And again we must ask whether, granted that his schizophrenia represents a life sentence, his apparent inability to tolerate living in a drugged state--the only way to control and survive his disease--constitutes a sort of tragic flaw?

Ultimately, we find ourselves not answering questions, but admiring the structural artistry with which Rushdie has rendered the tale of a spiritually rootless immigrant's decline and fall. And Gibreel's controversial dreams form at once the core and starting point for this narrative achievement. Their irreverence is exactly what we would expect--since dreams, after all, speak for the subconscious--from a man who has lost his faith, a loss that somehow seems to trigger, or help to trigger, his mental unraveling. Moreover, by spawning Gibreel's self-delusion of angelhood, the dreams stemming from his loss of faith provide no less than a crucial narrative substructure for more than five hundred pages of text: by the time the dream-delusion has flowered late in the novel to an overwhelming, waking-hours obsession, the pathological jealousy that has already flared up in mid-story is inexorably warping the "angelic" mission toward one of grimly misbegotten self-destruction and punishment of the innocent. At the same time, we cannot fail to be touched by Rushdie's startlingly yet unsentimentally rendered tragedy, nor its haunting portrait of a mental illness treated too little, or too late. As for the dream sequences that

have caused Rushdie so much grief in real life: without using the dreams that he did, as he did, Rushdie could not have told the tale he felt needed telling--and that, a careful reading shows, deserved to be told.

Concluding Thoughts

Salman Rushdie offers a rich and complex work in *The Satanic Verses*. For reasons of time and space, this study considered only briefly, or omitted entirely, several facets of the work that would merit dissertations in themselves--not just the aforementioned good-evil dichotomy, but appositional images of death and rebirth, falling and flying, anglophilia and anglophobia. Or a student might profitably examine the hovering presence of police state racism, or father-son relationships, or man-woman relationships, or the influence of--and allusions to--dozens of history's greatest writers. In short, those who brand Salman Rushdie as little more than a shallow controversialist--and certainly not a "serious writer"--expose their own intellectual dishonesty or their outright failure to read him carefully. His thematic, philosophical and structural complexity, his linguistic adventurousness, and his outright erudition and intellectual vigor make him fit company for John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other fabled practitioners of demanding contemporary fiction.

That Rushdie's novel should upset Muslims does not, in itself, bode ill for either Rushdie or the future of literature. Controversy and execration often greet works that ultimately turn out to be immortal--witness Joyce's *Ulysses*, internationally reviled upon publication and even banned in the United States, but now routinely ranked as this century's greatest novel in English. And though I have sought to demonstrate how

Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is essentially faith-affirming rather than anti-religious, we can gain nothing by denouncing--or praising--the taste and intellect of those who read it as a blasphemous work. There is no such thing as an inherently right or wrong response to a given work--a response is what it is, always varying widely with the individual. This position pits me against K.M. Newton, who warned in 1992 against any figurative reading of *Verses* passages that Muslim readers, reading those same passages literally, found blasphemous:

> The major tendency of critical theory over the last ten years or so has favored a theorized and politicized historical criticism which contends that literature is not a discourse in which the figurative has an independent force but that even the works of a writer as canonic as Shakespeare must be read contextually and politically in a very specific sense. (242)

Given this shift in the critical winds, Newton argues, Rushdie's defenders should, figuratively speaking, say "uncle": "Literary critics and theorists would, I believe, make a positive contribution to the Rushdie affair if they openly admitted that Muslim readers are justified in finding *The Satanic Verses* offensive" (246). Again, we are back to the moot question of deciding whose response--those who like Rushdie versus those who do not--is more politically correct. My study passed over that question to examine what I considered a separate, and far more pertinent, point: that analysis of Rushdie's novel supports his contention that the controversial dream passages serve crucial roles in telling the story of Gibreel, whose downfall was the very sort of faithlessness of which Rushdie's attackers accuse him.

How disheartening, then, for us as well as him, to realize that his talent and hard work have left him in the crosshairs of fanatics' rifle scopes, the target of a thuggish vendetta that all decent people, including most Muslims, surely must condemn. It would be consoling to conclude that the death sentence against Rushdie, which may yet be carried out, was the work of a uniquely zealous ayatollah facing unique political circumstances--and that, therefore, a similar fate is unlikely to be visited upon any other writer. Unfortunately, the case of Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi novelist, already has proven otherwise. An obscure Muslim sect in that nation put a $2,500 bounty on Nasrin's head over her 1993 book *Shame*, which fictionalizes an actual account of Bangladeshi Muslim men raping Hindu women in alleged retaliation for Hindu fundamentalists' destruction of a mosque (Alam 429). The religious sect issued a *fatwa* accusing Nasrin, since dubbed "the female Salman Rushdie," of blasphemy and "conspiracy against Islam," but the very vagueness of the charges made her case even more disturbing than Rushdie's in its implications: while he was accused of specific insults against Muhammad and the Qur'an, Nasrin's would-be assassins did not explain how recounting a crime was blasphemous, even if the alleged perpetrators were Muslims. The incident raises the ominous prospect of religious fanatics using blasphemy as a catchall term applied to any writing they happen to find unflattering.

Thus, we face the even more alarming prospect that gifted writers will bowdlerize, or even avoid entirely, any probing fictional treatments of religion, for fear of offending overzealous followers of Islam or, for that matter, other faiths.

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