



## *Distortion, Messianism, and Apocalyptic Time in The Satanic Verses*

by Clara Eisinger

*Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.*

*A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.*

*Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.*

*Thus he establishes a concept for the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.*

(Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*: 263)

### INTRODUCTION: TEMPORALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The apocalypse as it occurs in Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* involves temporal events which cannot be described to the outside world by their participants. At least, they cannot be described without the application of three specific concepts: messianism, or 'return;' temporal elongation (iteration); and temporal condensation (metaphor). Though these concepts are not wholly able themselves to describe temporal apocalypse, iteration and messianism in particular guide Saladin to a point at which he can finally recognize and embrace it, glimpsing it



between the lines of linear time. Taken together, iteration, condensation and messianism possess implications for a larger diasporic community struggling to place itself within and overcome a sense of time which may be uncomfortably nonlinear in nature.

Pliable as clay, the migrant world is one in which psychic and physical landmarks mutate and oscillate, appear suddenly and then vanish as if they had never existed. It is one in which people may fall from the sky or feel as if they are doing so, and wake from sleep to discover that they no longer have an identity or any sense of belonging. Such a surreal gesture of a world is one which the UK, with its large ethnic populations, has courted since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In Europe, guest workers, Indian, and Pakistani immigrants form a significant part of the vast masses of the unwanted. Great Britain in particular has always prided itself upon racial purity (Paul 1997). In spite of Britain's desire to keep out the "blacks," however, many said "blacks" have found their way to British sea and airports by dint of their status as British Commonwealth subjects. In 1961, the number of incoming people hit a high of 136,000 (Paul 1997: 132). The government took measures to limit immigration, including issuing multiple classes of vouchers, the lowest of which went to Indians and Pakistanis whose projected wait times could exceed fifty years (*Ibidem*: 172).

"Black" immigrants to Great Britain faced challenges the likes of which many of their white counterparts could not imagine. Indians could attempt to become British, yet they would never fit the model for proper "British stock." Returning home was not a desirable option, either, since Indian and Pakistani immigrants often considered themselves members of the British Empire who deserved to experience its center and not merely its peripheries.

Salman Rushdie was a member of India's Muslim minority whose parents moved to Karachi before he began attending Cambridge University (Appignanesi/Maitland 1990: 1). As Homi Bhabha has noted in an excerpt from *The New Statesman*,<sup>1</sup> Rushdie's magnum opus represents his "painful and problematic encounter with the most intractable and intimate area of his imaginative life...a life lived precariously on the cultural and political margins of modern [British] society" (*Ibidem*: 114). In an interview with *The Observer*, Rushdie admitted, "I'm not who I was supposed to be...I stepped out of that world, rather like Gibreel. I have had the sense of having frequently to reconstruct my life" (*Ibidem*: 8). For Rushdie, the past represented a temporal break with the present, and the man he has become is not a natural, continuous extension of his personality in boyhood and adolescence.

Life is fragmented, fragile. It breaks and ruptures, and Rushdie appears to recognize this in his own experiences as well as in those of his characters. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie strives to answer diasporic communities' calls for help: to offer them examples of agency, power, and voice through a "timeline" in which forward-

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<sup>1</sup> This has been collected in *The Rushdie File*.



moving hours can also be read backwards, exploding possibilities contained within the past, working within the confines of the novelistic form to hint at alternative ways of perceiving time.

#### ELONGATED (ITERATIVE) TIME: SALADIN GAINS AN IDENTITY

Though both Saladin and Gibreel begin their adventures (their rebirth-by-airplane) with a range of possibilities open to them, only Saladin exploits these in a life-renewing manner, via a complex, implicit understanding of elongated or iterative time. Elongated time, associated with transitions, causes the sky-hurling Gibreel and Saladin to enter a realm reminiscent of stop-motion photography, expanding narrative time, or the space of the narrative, relative to the apparent time of the story itself. As the structuralist critic Gerard Genette (1980: 95) notes, narrative and dialogue “cannot [actually] be slowed down.” They can be expanded – more thoroughly described – but cannot avoid contributing to the overall movement of the work. Yet iteration can offer the practical appearance of slowness.

For instance, while Saladin and Gibreel fall, they are compared to “scraps of paper floating in a breeze,” invoking a lazy image of slow-moving material that completely contradicts the expected sight and experience of falling individuals. Gibreel and Saladin do not fall like ordinary one-hundred-eighty pound men. Their experience is interminable, imprinting itself upon them. Rushdie (2008: 4) writes, “In the void” above and below the pair, “there [hang] reclining seats, stereophonic headsets, drinks trolleys.” “Debris of the soul” “floats” along with the plane’s more material objects (4); seats and memories and “sloughed-off selves” (5) hang in the air as though waiting for something to happen to them while the men fall. A hovering, wavering motion also occurs inside Gibreel and Saladin as they sing and flap their arms at Saladin’s command, as if their fall is the very action which suspends everything else around them. Eventually, Rushdie writes, they “[float] down to the Channel like scraps of paper in a breeze” (10).

What begins as an acceleration through the clouds becomes a deceleration which enables the men to survive. If they had fallen at a uniform fast pace, they would have washed up on the Hastings shore as body parts, not as whole human beings. Still, they do slam into the water, thus ending their transitional period of sky-inhabitation and forcing them into a London-bound existence and a rebirth in which the desire to live (particularly Saladin’s) continues to be inextricably bound up with transmutation.

As Saladin’s narrative progresses, he comes to accept his lack of purity and stops attempting to claim the Englishness which he will never possess: he begins to understand that change and hybridity have enabled him to survive thus far. Even before he gains such wisdom, though, his early will to live and his ability to discipline both himself and Gibreel into a slower-plunging movement prefigures his ability to



slow down, to deliberate, to reflect, to think before acting, and to command a mixture of personalities in the form of "Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha" (5). He may want to be a straightforward, proper Englishman, but he has always contained within himself other potentialities and possibilities which can rise unbidden and unexpected, because he is able to slow time down enough to see them. Thus he breaks into the normal "flow" of so-called linear time and recovers it for his own purposes.

Saladin's breaking-in manifests itself in the linguistic play associated with his thoughts and actions. Lists of objects hurtling/floating down from the plane, comparisons to the Big Bang (4), oxymoronic word combinations such as "angelicdevilish" (5), and structurally complicated philosophical meditations prolong the event of his fall. Also, as he and Gibreel approach land, Saladin achieves a sudden, revelatory understanding of his situation:

He had no doubt; what had taken him over was the will to live, unadulterated, irresistible, pure...it wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that, and he found himself surrendering to it, yes, go on, as if he were a bystander in his own mind, in his own body, because it began in the very center of his body, and spread outwards (9).

Saladin's epiphany unfolds in one single, long sentence which is frequently interrupted by commas, digressions, and oppositional statements. He is a bystander aware of his body's center (center/periphery), he urges himself onward and engages in conversations with himself (contradictory/inconsistent behavior), and then Rushdie breaks into the drama with quasi-rhetorical questions; for instance, "who has the best tunes?" (10). Convolved though it is, Saladin's realization positions him as a reflective man who contains a diverse array of intellectual substances within himself that are highlighted by the fall, slow and careful in his thinking. Put another way, Saladin expands his possibilities in life by accumulating material and thought to himself, augmenting his supply of building-blocks for further growth. His accretion of debris, particularly that of other peoples' and his own souls and hopes, foreshadows his later recuperation of his previous selves, as well as his decision to retake and recuperate his given name.

#### CONDENSED (METAPHORIC TIME): GIBREEL LOSES HIS SANITY

Though Saladin presents an excellent example for other immigrants in his ability to decelerate and demystify time, pushing out against the heretofore-defined boundaries of narrative space, Gibreel does not share his ability. Ever since his days as a dabbawalla, Gibreel's sense of time is accelerated, much like that of the impatient little boy who yells "Fast forward!" at Saladin during a low point in the novel. Gibreel



runs from place to place, never stopping, wanting to run out of his old life as a Bombay film mogul because of Allie Cone and “the challenge of her, the newness, the fierceness of the two of them together, the inexorability of an impossible thing that was insisting on its right to become” (32). Gibreel desires newness, ever more newness, novelty in an almost grossly capitalistic sense. Late in the novel, when he grows jealous of Allie, he runs out on her as well, straight into his ostensible incarnation as an archangel of the streets.

Where Saladin comes to imagine life as an inconstancy, a process (297), Gibreel envisions it as a search for purity, asking himself whether he is supposed to be the “agent of God’s wrath? Or of his love?” (472). Though Gibreel is able to perceive the chameleon nature of London (330-338) as it crumbles and writhes around him, he views himself as stable (if schizoid) while only his surroundings change. London is a moving target which he, the presumably stationary archangel, can alter at will, encouraging its people to engage in holier behavior and its climate to adopt a more hospitable form.

But for all its positive intentions, Gibreel’s pacing, feverish desire to know his external world and to impose a vigilante sense of wholesomeness upon his surroundings possesses more in common with the character Rosa Diamond’s unproductive circular revisitings of the past and the Imam’s destructive, insomniac state of exile than with Saladin’s attempts to reconcile himself with his past and to (however reluctantly) acknowledge his chimerical heritage, embodied in his man-goat shape. Instead of acquiring an inward knowledge of the kind Saladin comes to possess, Gibreel’s sense of accelerated time and consequent desire for accelerated movement burns him out in a nervous, half-narcoleptic, half-insomniac state.

For Gibreel, London is a realm of metaphors and metonyms which condense ideas, making them easier for him to understand. Unlike iteration, which depends upon a recognition of each individual unit that is combined into a larger scene or movement, condensation depends upon Genette’s notion of a “singulative” narrative. This singulative narrative “would stand for all the others” (1980: 116) in a given story, rather than represent each narrative individually, as itself as well as part of a larger whole. While convenient and simple, in Gibreel’s hands this form of narrative often becomes a shorthand involving a reduction of possibility and a multitude of foreclosed options.

He sees himself as absolutely an Angel, imagining no other explanation for his feelings or his visions of angelic purity. For instance, in “A City Visible But Unseen,” after Allie breaks up with him, he experiences “that precise moment of his greatest wrath” and “the boundaries of the earth broke, he heard a noise like the bursting of a dam, and as the spirits of the world of dreams flooded through the breach into the universe of the quotidian, Gibreel Farishta saw God” (328). A metaphor is supposed to be abstract, figurative, but Gibreel believes that he truly looks upon God. Everything



abstract which he encounters automatically converts itself to a stagnant, confined literal truth, though notably unconfirmed by others.

As "A City Visible But Unseen" progresses, Gibreel's literal understanding of his pseudo-divinity grows to encompass the entire city of London itself and all of its inhabitants. His travels around the city follow a specific formula: Gibreel believes he is an angel, represents himself as such to others, and ultimately disillusions both himself and them. For example, when he kisses the "ka" or lost soul "in search of its mislaid body" (333), it very solidly smacks him across the face, though he could have sworn that it was a spirit and not a person. London is the unholy land of "Thamoud" (330) which must be brought back to the light – it is actually, truly a place the likes of Jahilia, with a profusion of prophets and supernatural events, and yet it cannot see Gibreel, though he can see all of it. In spite of Gibreel's intensity and fervor, only the questionably sane but devout Maslama recognizes him as a superhuman being, and his attempts to change the city's climate, while partially effective, do not produce the radical improvements/transformations which he anticipated, either within the city or within his own sense of power. Worse, when he attempts to bring the light of divine vision to the people stuck in Embankment rush hour traffic, Whisky Sisodia's limo strikes him and he is "returned to Allie's doorstep, badly bruised, with many grazes on his arms and face, and jolted into sanity" (347).

Though Gibreel engages in more physical activity throughout the novel than Saladin does, roving London's streets with the trumpet Maslama gives him and decreeing the city's tropicalization as well as his own angelic power, this heightened level of movement does not actually lead to any accomplishments or to a greater level of self-understanding. For him, London forever moves, shifts shapes and becomes what only he can see, while relative to this movement *he* remains still and nobody believes in his claims or his powers. His movements stir London, surprising it with his obtuseness, but they do not move him as he cycles through his angelic repertoire.

Gibreel Farishta is caught in what Lecia Rosenthal calls "the force of a future toward which he is compelled" (2011: 76), a "storm" that might be progress or might be something else, something even more catastrophic. Gibreel's archangelic incarnation is deeply ironic; Rushdie depicts him as seeing more than the average human being but nevertheless caught up in the juggernaut of a "progress" to whose pace he finds himself *subjected*, incapable of controlling. He moves backwards and forwards simultaneously, thus rendering ridiculous notions both of "progress" and of acceleration, as well as his desire to "remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man" (442).





SLASHING SALADIN: SALADIN CHAMCHA, APOCALYPTICALLY EMPOWERED MIGRANT

Gibreel cannot remain un-translated, as no migrant can. However, his wish for purity is typical of people in his situation. Vijay Mishra notes that what many migrants desire most of all is stability: a “wish to cling to ‘millenarian’ narratives of self-empowerment in which only the untranslated can recapture a lost harmony” (2007: 223). Upon the (inevitable) denial of such a narrative, individuals and ethnic groups alike find themselves pushed to the edge of conceptual madness. Even if a leader commands the act, nobody wants to be the first to abandon unified and certain identity. In the beginning of their narratives, both Gibreel and Saladin want firmness – a surety of self – a teleological journey from Indian brat to well-bred Englishman or Bollywood film star with no distractions along the way.

However, Saladin finally and irrevocably rejects linearity during his messianic (return) voyage to Bombay. On this trip into both his future and his past, Saladin must board an airplane named *Gulistan (Paradise)* a name eerily familiar to that of the hijacked plane *Bostan*, thus forcing himself to reoccupy the pain and fear of kidnapping, victimhood, and death. He relives his fear, doing things over or twice, but this time with the intention of breaking into the time-continuum in order to see his father again before his death, recovering that relationship before he loses his chance forever. Barriers had grown between Saladin and his father over the years; suddenly they have all dissolved. Saladin feels “hourly closer to many old, rejected selves, many alternative...Salahuddins – which had split off from himself as he made his various life choices, but which had apparently continued to exist, perhaps in the parallel universes of quantum theory” (538). Certainly, Changez Chamchawalla treats these selves as though they exist, not wanting to talk about his and Saladin’s long estrangement but instead acknowledging that the Saladin who visits him is not the same angry Saladin who left him.

As critic Rachel Trousdale (2010: 130) notes, Saladin/Salahuddin draws strength from “internal pluralism.” This involves an understanding of self which “[leads] to lesser certainty, as the ‘real’ self is revealed as one of many possible, nondefinitive selves (*Ibidem*: 131).” Trousdale adds, “When Chamcha stops peeling off the past, alternative presents become available; he loses his single-minded English self...but gains a set of varied Indian selves” (*Ibidem*: 131). Diving into his troublesome past in order to disrupt it and reclaim it for his own – not his stubborn father’s, not Zeeny’s, not Gibreel’s, but *his* – Saladin opens up a conference call or communication between all the selves he has ever been and is, “bleeding the wound” of trauma as Rosenthal (2011: 2) calls it, “[deepening] the sustaining cut, to experience again and anew a fantasy of the raw edges of splitting, breaking, and disfiguration” (*Ibidem*: 2). Saladin splits himself open, moving beyond the absolutist representation of one self into a realm in which the space of self is slashed and cut, changing his name to reveal his expanded understanding.



Once Saladin has extended his sense of self, he is able to move on with his life – beyond messianism, into a world greater and less comprehensible. While standing at his old bedroom window, he acknowledges: “Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than a... sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born” (561). Then he moves out of the pages of Rushdie’s representation, turning from the view to which he has returned. His “to the devil with it” represents an “an eventual homecoming...not projected onto the future but introjected into the present, thereby both interrupting it and multiplying it” (Mishra 2007: 213). Shards of Saladin’s past float in a now that is plural, changeable as a manuscript and thus open to, but venturing farther than, the messianic narrative which has subtly built into and between the more predictable previous narratives of Saladin’s life.

As he turns from the window, subverting his return home, he gestures toward the “after” of the novel. This “after” is its post-conclusion state, when unimaginable possibilities burst forth from within him and he rejects his lifelong capitulation to Englishness, adopting instead a belief in difference. He thus moves at a right angle to all prior versions of himself. With his non-representable movement Saladin achieves, relative to his audience, a state of “pure potency devoid of all positive...representations of the object” (Franke 2009: 52). Such “pure potency” is impossible to depict (for a novelist, at least) though it may allow itself to be glimpsed between words, like sunlight seen through blinds. The “potency” of Saladin’s experience is defined in large part by its peripheries, by what it is not rather than what it is. One can wish Saladin luck in his future, though one shall never know the details of said future. It is not over but is beyond the knowable.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF APOCALYPTIC (UN)ENDING

In its refusal to end conclusively and in its desire to negate monolithic discourse, *The Satanic Verses* enters a dialogue with the “post,” joining a movement/trend that Rosenthal says is typical of “late modernity.” The desire to “post,” as Rosenthal explains it, represents a need for the end, for fulfillment: for, most of all, the attempt of an exhaustion of exhaustion itself, without ever reaching the endpoint of this attempt (which is total, final exhaustion). She writes, “To be exhausted is to experience the finitude of resources and, at the same time, in that experience, not to succumb to finishing, or to transcend the limit, but rather to exist between the longing for ending and the nonarrival of the end” (2011: 114). Saladin, in his refusal to conclusively end his experiences with the end of the novel, embraces the “post” in its most positive sense by living a life that is post-suffering, post-English, post-colonial, and post-racist: a life of energy derived from the renewing apocalypse of the post.





However, Rosenthal notes that the post can also and even simultaneously be an experience of negativity if it emphasizes completion, as in “an exhaustive account or the making-present of a void” (2011: 114). Gibreel appears to engage at least partially in this destructive, purity-seeking form of self-posting by brandishing a gun at Saladin. The latter thinks, “how the universe had shrunk! The true djinns of old had the power to open the gates of the Infinite... how banal, in comparison, was this modern spook... this feeble slave of a twentieth-century lamp” (560). Recognizing the void that is Gibreel’s gun – its power to kill and to annihilate, however poor an imitation it is of the infinite – Saladin sits passively in his chair, doubting that he possesses the power to expand his options in the face of the “armed man” (560).

Yet as he limits options by threatening violence, Gibreel also expands them through his deployment of word-muddles which break off in mid-sentence, never concluding, failing to exhaust despite all attempts at exhaustion. He tells Saladin about his illness, admitting, “Always one part of me is standing outside screaming no please don’t no but it does no good you see when the sickness comes” (558). He does not end sentences, and Rushdie places odd spaces between words to highlight the unfinished quality of what Gibreel speaks.

In “posting” language by moving beyond correct English grammar into a more creative synthesis of word-thoughts, Gibreel nevertheless does not exhaust it, because he never reaches the end of language’s uses and never finishes the thoughts which he tries to express. Rather, his words, his re-invention of Saladin’s Satanic Verses, lie in between meaning, becoming potentiality. The novel’s narrator chooses to interpret them as a gesture toward freedom, though this freedom is, in Gibreel’s case, only attained through death itself.

Saladin sees in the repetition of his Verses a reflection of his guilt in Gibreel’s downfall, but once Gibreel dies, he refuses to wallow forever in this guilt. “In spite of all his wrongdoing,” he thinks at the novel’s conclusion, as Zeeny tugs at his shoulder, “he was getting another chance... There it simply was, taking his elbow in its hand” (561). To Saladin, Zeeny Vakil embodies good fortune (‘vacillation’) itself, an abstract concept mutating into a person. Thus the novel’s final gestures toward the exhaustion characteristic of the post, whether of language, action, or thought, never quite exhaust themselves but instead rest within a diasporic realm in which the “post” is recuperated as literal re-embodiment (‘Changez’ Chamchawalla as ‘change’; Gibreel as the Christ-heralding ‘Gabriel’) and a second chance. Rushdie’s desire to play with the post crafts it into a positive, identity-creating force, resulting in a modernity that is itself a diaspora and a constant migration as well as a messianic redemption from its colonial past into a mongrel future.



## CONCLUSION

But what is this mongrel future? To whom does it refer, and in whom does it reside, if not within Rushdie himself? Rushdie recounts some of his own migratory dilemmas in his latest work, the 2012 memoir *Joseph Anton*. After post-fatwa security breaches left him constantly searching for the next home-base, the next-rental house, and the next set of friends upon which to place his trust, Rushdie became acutely demoralized, lacking the type of grounding which he had previously given his character Saladin. Barred from India both emotionally and physically – but never intellectually – Rushdie often writes of himself in the third-person. He asks, “Was it possible to be – to become *good* at being – not rootless, but multiply rooted? Not to suffer from a loss of roots but to benefit from an excess of them? ... He needed to make an act of reclamation of the Indian identity he had lost” (2012: 54). Instead of choosing to stand un-rooted, unconnected in a state of confusion, Rushdie decides during his early writing years and post-fatwa years alike to reconnoiter with his Indian self (a la Saladin and his Salahuddins), embracing his heritage of a critical Islamic culture while remaining wary of narrow-minded evangelism.

Rushdie sought meaning in displacement and loss: fought for sense and a home, as so many immigrants do. Eventually, he redeemed his own self-worth by pursuing his writing career despite others’ criticism. Though some of his most famous fictional works lie behind him (including *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*), post-fatwa novels such as *The Moor’s Last Sigh* continue to explore migration, *mélange*, and hybridity after the fashion of their celebrated predecessors.

Also, and perhaps most importantly, Rushdie has moved far inward from the boundaries he once inhabited. No longer the marginalized writer who appeared in *The Rushdie File* describing his sense of discontinuity and rootlessness, Rushdie has become a pillar of contemporary postcolonial literature, inspiring a number of other Indian writers to tackle similar themes in their own works. For instance, Kiran Desai explores fractured and confused temporal landscapes in *The Inheritance of Loss*; Jhumpa Lahiri delineates migrants’ malcontent lives in her collection *Interpreter of Maladies*; Vikram Seth focuses upon cultural/generational (and thus temporal) gulfs within India itself, though he personally dislikes complicated writing styles such as Rushdie’s, calling them “thesis fodder” (Roopali 2005: 10).

Branching out from Indian novelists, one continues to see in postcolonial literature a trend towards the ‘apocalypticizing’ or unending ‘post’ of time, visible in works as disparate as Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This latter novel, in fact, stretches the “post” to its logical limits with a cliffhanger that withholds the ultimate fate of Hamid’s narrator. None of these writers let Schroedinger’s proverbial cat entirely out of its box, and in all of their works the pursuit is more interesting than any possible destination. With a number of postcolonial books published every year, the destination is barely reachable anyway,



evolving constantly, growing ever more distant with each new novel that appears and each novel perspective that becomes available.

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Clara Eisinger recently completed her MA in English literature at Wake Forest University. Her research examines Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, apocalypse in conjunction with global modernism and spatiotemporal distortion.

[ceising4@gmail.com](mailto:ceising4@gmail.com)