

“The Satanic Verses” by Salman Rushdie [B2]

Lo scrittore britannico di origine indiana intreccia elementi di mitologia, religione e storia indù e islamica in un’epopea moderna che sfuma i confini tra realtà e fantasia. Un romanzo ambizioso destinato a diventare la sua condanna a morte.

The fourth novel by Salman Rushdie is an imaginative work of historical fiction with elements of fantasy and satire. It is also one of the most controversial books of the late 20th century: its perceived blasphemy led to tensions with the Islamic community that escalated into extremist violence. Nevertheless, the Indian-born novelist still insists that the novel is not about Islam at all, but about Bombay (now called Mumbai), London, migration and identity.

TWO ACTORS

The novel intertwines different narratives across a timespan of hundreds of years. Central to the story is the relationship between two Indian Muslims: Bollywood star Gibreel Farishta and voice actor Saladin Chamcha. At the start, they are falling towards the English Channel from the debris of a plane. As they do so, Gibreel begins to transform into the archangel Gabriel and Saladin into a devil. The two become co-dependent, each echoing and reacting to the other. To show this, Rushdie joins up different names and words: “The two men, Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began.” “I due uomini, Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condannati a questa interminabile, ma anche quasi terminata, caduta angelicodiabolica, non si resero conto del momento in cui iniziarono i processi della loro trasmutazione.”

SALADIN CHAMCHA

Washed up on the coast, the survivors feel “born again”, but also caught between different cultural identities. Saladin is arrested as a suspected illegal immigrant. Escaping to London, he discovers his English wife in bed with his best friend. He is then summoned back to Bombay as his father is dying. There, he feels just as foreign as in England, and is given advice by a former girlfriend. “If you’re serious about shaking off your foreignness [...] then don’t fall into some kind of rootless limbo instead [...] You should really try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time. Try and embrace this city, as it is, not some childhood memory that makes you both nostalgic and sick. Draw it close. The actually existing place.” “«Se hai seriamente intenzione di sbarazzarti della tua estraneità [...] non cadere in cambio in una sorta di limbo senza radici. [...] Dovresti cercare di stabilire un rapporto adulto con questo luogo e con questa epoca. Sforzati di accettare la città quale è, e non come un ricordo infantile che ti suscita insieme nostalgia e disgusto. Avvicinala a te. La città reale, esistente».”

GIBREEL FARISHTA

Gibreel’s adventures are more interior. He pursues romance with a mountain climber, and begins to plan his comeback as an actor. Mainly, though, he broods, and his nightmares “leak into his waking life.” In his mind, Gibreel travels to a city called Jahilia, where an embellished story is told of the founding of Islam. There, a businessman-turned-prophet called Mahound is rising to prominence. The details of this dream, as well as the name Mahound — an insulting name for the prophet Mohammad — are provocative. The author offers some explanation. “Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, blacks all choose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn.” “Non è né Mahomet né MoeHammered; ha adottato invece l’epiteto diabolico che i “farangi” gli hanno accollato. Per trasformare gli insulti in forza, whig, tory, neri decisero tutti di portare con fierezza nomi che erano stati loro affibbiati con disprezzo.” The word ‘farangis’ means foreigners or Europeans, while the name Mahound was sometimes used during the Middle Ages by

Christians to insult Muslims. Rushdie suggests that Muhammad or “the Prophet” has appropriated or “owned” the derogatory name as a [means](#) of resisting racism.

BELIEF AND DOUBT

The novel [raises questions](#) about the nature of belief and doubt, both in the clash between religions and in conflicts between individuals. Rushdie suggests that we create [falsehoods](#) to demonise others, and these [falsehoods](#) are then reflected back upon us. “Our own false descriptions to counter the [falsehoods](#) invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves. A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he’s managed it. Playing God again, you could say.” “Le descrizioni false che diamo di noi per controbattere le falsità inventate sul nostro conto, nascondendo per motivi di sicurezza il nostro io segreto. Un uomo che inventa se stesso ha bisogno di qualcuno che creda in lui, per dimostrare che ce l’ha fatta. Di recitare ancora la parte di Dio, potreste dire.” The immigrants continuously reinvent themselves in response to their new surroundings. This is in part intentional and in part reactive, and the easy division of the men into good or evil is confused throughout the novel. The devil Saladin appears to have good intentions but [takes a terrible revenge](#) before the end. The angel Gibreel resolves to kill Saladin but rescues him instead. Later he kills the woman he loves, and commits suicide!

AFTERSHOCK

On its publication, The Satanic Verses was [shortlisted](#) for the Booker Prize. However, within a year, a religious edict had been [issued](#) that called for the author to be killed. Today, while most reject the extremist position, one criticism seems fair: that the novel, as The New York Times said, “does little to educate a [woefully](#) ignorant and prejudiced Western public about the Islamic faith.”

Glossary

- **advice** = consiglio
- **broods** = rimuginare
- **leak** = trapelare, filtrare
- **waking life** = trapelare, filtrare
- **issued** = emettere
- **debris** = detriti
- **Washed up** = portare a riva
- **joins up** = unire, connettere
- **pursues** = andare dietro a, inseguire
- **intertwines** = intrecciare
- **timespan** = periodo di tempo
- **mountain climber** = alpinista
- **comeback** = ritorno
- **falsehoods** = falsità, menzogna
- **takes a terrible revenge** = vendicarsi
- **shortlisted** = selezionare
- **woefully** = miseramente, tristemente
- **Nevertheless** = ciò nonostante
- **English Channel** = canale della Manica
- **raises questions** = sollevare domande
- **summoned back** = convocare
- **means** = mezzo