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Abstract: Salman Rushdie has been embroiled in controversies ever since his infamous book, The Satanic Verses hit the book stores in 1988. For some he has been an advocate of liberal values with a critical outlook, but for the most he is someone who insulted the core values of Islam and denounced the Prophet by portraying him as a human with all the flaws and follies intact. The paper seeks to situate the text outside the spectrum of controversies which largely emanate from the religious discomfort and thereby assigning it a place in the geopolitics of the postcolonial scenario which concern with the identity politics, the diasporic communities have to face once they cross the borders. In other words, the paper attempts a cosmopolitan reading of the text and flashes out the gaps and fissures in the cosmopolitan in the ideal/utopia the West adheres to however superficial it to be. Also the paper sheds some light on the secular model of the West practices and the viability of the same in the Indian context. The paper would help the readers be aware of the author’s allegiance to the cosmopolitan as well as secular ideal of the West which affects the sensibilities of the postcolonial reader in a myriad ways.

Keywords: Transcultural; Diaspora; Cosmopolitanism; Filiiative; Postnational.

INTRODUCTION

When *The Satanic Verses* was first published in 1988, the novel triggered a host of controversies and disagreements in the South Asian world, especially the Islamic countries, where Rushdie was accused of demeaning Prophet Muhammad by equating him with Satan and giving him a human character, hence fallible and prone to corruption. The novel was seen by many Muslim readers as a muck-raking attempt on Islam and its core values by an author who betrayed his own community and religion. In his defense against the stirred up storm, Rushdie claimed that the novel was not an insult to Islam or to the Prophet or any attempt to hurt the sentiments of the Muslims. Rather, it was a novel written from a secular point of view and a well-researched attempt to portray the Prophet through his mutant and transforming character to map out the predicament of the South Asian diasporic communities living in the West—their sense of dual belongingness to the native state and the host state; their “unhoused sensibility”, to borrow the term from Meenakshi Mukherjee, and their sense of shared identity and inhabiting of an imaginary world which only existed in their imagination and not in real temporal terms. In other words, one can argue that only fiction was capable of assigning them (the diasporic communities) that ‘imaginary world’, hence, this novel. Two main characters in the infamous novel, *The Satanic Verses* can be seen inhabiting this imaginary world created by Rushdie. While Saladin Chamcha endlessly oscillates between the host state of England of which he is a citizen but never feels home at and his native state i.e. India with which he shares a filiative belonging but can never call home, Gibreel Farsishta remains in a dreamy or say, schizophrenic state throughout the novel. Rushdie describes this
peculiar state of being in his essay, “In Good Faith” in the following words:

> If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition…” (394)

The idea of dual belongingness or shared identity is a concept which is related to a broader issue of cosmopolitanism or transnationalism or transculturalism, the central theme in the novel. Cosmopolitanism is generally defined as a state of belongingness where the individual is not only a citizen of the country he/she was born into a filiative position, but also a citizen of the world in a larger and humanitarian sense of the term an affiliative position. In humanitarian sense of the term, every individual can be said to have a cosmopolitan identity. As Socrates had once said, ‘I am not only citizen of Athens, but that of the world.’ Complexity, however, creeps in when we look at this position in political terms, especially from a post-colonial perspective. In the Post-colonial discourse, primarily under the framework of Nativism, it is generally assumed that to have a cosmopolitan or transcultural position/identity is to be loyal to the host state to which one migrates, leaving behind one’s native country, and to be disloyal and unnecessarily biased to the country of the birth—the native state. In other words, to hold a cosmopolitan or transnational position is popularly understood as “negating the national over the transnational” (Trousdale, 13) where the cultures and beliefs of the host state are embraced wholesale and that of the native state, denigrated and denounced. It is these assumptions or theories that We would like to explore further and thereby deconstruct them in our reading of cosmopolitanism in *The Satanic Verses* by quoting relevant portions of the text. We argue that despite Rushdie’s position as a cosmopolitan/transnational writer, he is not cosmopolitan in the Nativist sense of the terms, that is an ‘uncritical supporter of cosmopolitanism’, rather a critical supporter of cosmopolitanism. He questions and challenges both Western notion of cosmopolitanism as well as the notion of cosmopolitanism held by many Third World countries. His position of being ‘outside’ keeps him from a jaundiced point of view of the world and gives him a vantage point to see and analyse it from a perspective where both his filiative and affiliative associations merge—the so-called “migrant’s-eye view of the world.” Besides, we will also try to show how a migrant or an exile’s state of being in a foreign land is beset with many challenges and struggles where he/she has to ‘look forward by always looking back.’ That it is a position where the migrant holds a self that is constantly oscillating between “Desh” and “Vilayet”, to use Rushdie’s terminology from the novel, and attempting a marriage between the two but cannot, since, as Gibreel Farishta says in the beginning of the novel, “For the new to be born, the old has to die.” Also, towards the end of our paper, We would like to point out that as far as Rushdie’s critique of Western notion of cosmopolitanism is concerned, he is very much critical of it and does not treat it on face-value, but, as far as his critique of Western idea of secularism is concerned, he buys it wholesale and does not question or challenge it.

Western Notion of Cosmopolitanism

Usually, the West is perceived as a great supporter of cosmopolitanism and multicultural values. It is always seen as glorifying itself by permitting asylum to political exiles, expatriates or migrants, and promoting a coexistence of various cultures and beliefs in harmony. Particularly, in the case of Salman Rushdie, it is widely known that when *The Satanic Verses* (1988) hit the book stalls in September 1988 in England and elsewhere and led to an unprecedented controversy the world over owing to its blasphemous content which ran against the Islamic holy book, Quran, and when the Iranian religious and political leader Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) issued a ‘fatwa’ against Rushdie with a huge bounty over his head, it was the West which assured him of security to his life and gave him asylum. The recently published *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012) by the same author refers to this incident in great details where he talks about the ordeals he underwent in the aftermath of the...
publication of the controversial novel. Given this historical fact, one can argue that the West is a protective land where one can under serious threats due to socio-polio-religious factors seek shelter and be assured of one’s safety the so-called immigrant- or migrant-friendly image of the West. An important question arises here: Is Rushdie holding onto the same self-glorifying and self-congratulatory image of the West, in this case London, pertaining to his personal experience as he was offered shelter there when the killers were after him after the controversy or is he challenging and critiquing that self-glorifying image of the West through the novel? We would argue that Rushdie is critical of the West’s self-glorification on the issue of cosmopolitanism and is not prejudiced or jaundiced in his approach to the West’s idea of cosmopolitanism as is generally held. He questions and challenges the Western notion of cosmopolitanism as giving complete protection and security to the migrants or exiles, and deliberately pulls off the veil of progressivism held by the West. The following references from the novel will illustrate this point in detail.

The police harassment of Saladin Chamcha in Chapter Three of the novel, “Elloween Deewowen”, offers the first critique of such glib valorization of cosmopolitanism where the West’s image as a champion of cosmopolitan and multicultural values is cast into doubts. While Chapter Seven, “The Angel Azraeel”, can be cited as a second critique of the same glib valorization where the black radical leader, Uhuru Simba, is framed in Granny Ripper Murders and is later murdered in the lock-up under mysterious circumstances.

Chapter Three opens with Rosa Diamond peeping out of the window of her room and rescuing both Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, the two protagonists of the novel, who have survived the Boston Flight crash. Chamcha, to his astonishment, is arrested from Rosa Diamond’s residence soon after, in the midnight. His protestations and appeals against the tag of one of the “illegals” that the police officers hurl on him go unheard and he is thrown into the police van. What follows later is the series of harassments, beatings and intimidation where he is stripped, beaten up and humiliated beyond imagination in the interior of the van. The lines from the grieving mouth of Saladin Chamcha pull off the veil of cosmopolitan progressivism held by the West:

‘This isn’t England’ he thought…how could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire? He was being forced towards the conclusion that he had indeed died in the exploding aeroplane and that everything that followed had been some sort of after-life (124).

Besides, the words of the Immigration officer, Stein that “In this country, we clean up the messes” (125), are also testimony to the glibness of the West in its valorization of cosmopolitanism. The kind of harassment and humiliation Chamcha undergoes in the police van clearly suggests how the diasporic populations in the West have to go through a lot of humiliation and hostility at the hands of the Westerners who are just pseudo supporters of cosmopolitanism in real sense of the term. Here, we can argue that Rushdie, as popularly considered, is not an uncritical supporter or admirer of cosmopolitanism, rather even challenges the Western notion of cosmopolitanism. Also, Saladin’s transmutation into a goat-like figure after the Boston Fall allegorically suggests how the West treats its immigrants as not quite human. Here, we can also see the xenophobic attitude of Immigration officers who treat any person migrating to the West as a potential threat to the country, and in the post-9/11 world, there is hardly any room for disagreement.

The second critique of Western idea of cosmopolitan appears in the seventh chapter of the book where a black radical leader, Uhuru Simba is arrested for his alleged involvement in the Granny Ripper Murders—a case in which the murderer targeted only elderly women in Brickhall area of London—and dies in the lock-up under mysterious circumstances. The police administration brushes aside the public allegations by arguing that he was not murdered in the police custody, rather it was a
matter of suicide. But, later incidents of unabated murders of old women even after Uhuru Simba’s death who was a principal accused in the case, and the killing of Pamela Chamcha and Hanif Johnson in the Brickhall building fire who carried a briefcase of “explosive documents” which contained the truth about Uhuru Simba’s death, show that Uhuru Simba was not only innocent, but also a victim of his subaltern or marginalized position in the so-called cosmopolitan West. It becomes clear following the earlier harassment meted out to Saladin Chamcha in the police van and in the detention centre that Uhuru Simba’s mysterious death in the police custody could not be a case of suicide, but a pre-planned murder. The following lines by Gibreel Farishta in the wake of riots that engulfed the entire city in flames bring this out clearly:

‘What has happened here in Brickhall tonight is a socio-political phenomenon. Let’s not fall in the trap of some damn mysticism. We are talking about history: an event in the history of Britain. About the process of change’ (375).

Once again, it can be argued here that the projection of cosmopolitan image by the West to rest of the world is nothing but bogus and pseudo. There may be a projection of cosmopolitan and transcultural image on behalf of the West where many cultures exist together and intermingle into one another, but, in actual sense, there is no serious treatment of the issue at large. In other words, there is only hypocrisy and superficiality. Besides, one can also argue that although the West valorizes its image as a promoter of cultural diversity and hybridity, it, at the same time, maintains that the racial or cultural boundaries are kept intact. The racial-profiling of Uhuru Simba can be read in these terms. Mike Philips’ essay, “Broken Borders” sheds more light on the issue and asks for rethinking:

…we had a developing tradition of discrimination and marginalization towards those who came from the cultures we were celebrating. The idea of cultural diversity also started to become a useful tool for maintaining the barriers originally put in place by racial discrimination. To put it crudely, the argument said ‘you have a culture which we will support and praise, but that implies that we don’t have to make room in our culture for you’ (138).

The above statement by Mike Philips underscores the fact that though there has been a popular consensus on permitting the non-western cultures into the mainstream culture of the West, there is no real commitment or embracing of subaltern cultures. To put it crudely, the West is just an agent of talk, and not an agent of action. We can, therefore, expostulate that Rushdie is not all praise for the West and its notion of cosmopolitanism as is generally assumed. His affiliative position in the West does offer him a different perspective to look upon the West and its glib values, but he is not at all blind to the gaps and fissures that lie within. His British citizenship has not tinted or jaundiced his view of cosmopolitanism. Rather, it has enabled him to look at the predicament of the diasporic communities in the West from a critical perspective. This also brings me to challenge and refute the charge held by many Muslim and Nativist readers against Salman Rushdie that “he is too Western” in approach and outlook to “recognize his own insiderism as a form of false advertising”, hence such a devaluing and demeaning of native cultures and beliefs (Brennan, 70). I would argue that Rushdie’s embattled cultural position has not blinded him to the façade of cosmopolitanism in the West, but as far as his buying of secularist notion of the West is concerned, there may be some reservations which I would like to discuss next in the paper.

**Eastern Notion of Cosmopolitanism**

The Eastern notion of cosmopolitanism has always worked in the binary model of East/West or say, Desh/Vilayet. But, historically speaking, even the notion of cosmopolitanism in the East, particularly in the context of India, has undergone a transition under several socio-political factors in the past several decades. To quote from Pranav Jani’s book, *Decentering Rushdie* (2010), the notion of
cosmopolitanism can be read in two ways: first, the pre-Nehruvian notion of cosmopolitanism which is, as Jani calls it, “namak-halal” cosmopolitanism—a cosmopolitan position of the writer where he/she shares a cosmopolitan identity in philosophical or humanitarian sense of the term but remains rooted and tied to his/her nation. This definition of cosmopolitanism is indicative of what Anthony Appiah calls “partial cosmopolitanism” or “rooted cosmopolitanism” in his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in A World of Strangers* (2007). According to Appiah, the individual has obligations not only to the people he has been related to since his birth in a demarcated national or communitarian territory, but also to those who don’t fall within this demarcated territory—the strangers.

The second concept of cosmopolitanism that Jani cites is the post-Emergency idea of cosmopolitanism, or say “namak-haram” cosmopolitanism by which he means that the contemporary writer is no longer rooted or tied to his or her nation the way his/her predecessors once were. He argues that the Indian English novels written during Nehru’s prime ministerial position and after it, that is, novels written in the post-Emergency period, differed in their approaches to cosmopolitanism. Writers like Nayantara Sehgal and Kamla Markandya who were brought up under Nehruvian development model of India practiced “namak-halal” cosmopolitanism a cosmopolitanism that “remained true to its salt” and was “oriented toward and committed to the nation as a potentially emancipatory space” (Jani, 8)—the objective of nation-building is central here. While the latter group of writers like Rushdie and others in the post-Nehruvian period, the 1970s, turned away from the nation-oriented approach that their predecessors had once held, due to the disillusionment and faltering of the nation-building project under the dictatorial rule of Indira Gandhi. The democratic and secular India that the latter group had envisioned was lost, hence this drastic shift from national orientation of the preceding cosmopolitan writers to the “postnational orientation” of the contemporary cosmopolitan writers. This sudden shift also leads us to the proposition why Rushdie re-imagines India and creates “Indias of mind”—the fictional imaginary homeland, a land of the past that has now disappeared, and why he is so critical and disapproving in his approach to the East which many Third World readers take as abuses and insults hurled upon their sacred culture. The act of ‘looking back’ here in Rushdie can be interpreted as a restructuring and redefining process from a cosmopolitan vantage point to reclaim what is lost and sundered and not as a mere attempt to denigrate and denounce the native culture or beliefs.

The distinction made by Pranav Jani between national orientation to cosmopolitanism and postnational orientation serves to clarify Rushdie’s position in the present scheme of things and highlight why he is so often accused of being disloyal and ‘over-critical’ to his country of birth. But, as one can see, it would be a disservice to the author and his literary contributions to pigeonhole and stereotype him outright just because one is not able to understand the nuances of cosmopolitanism and its functioning in a Western and non-Western scenario. Here one can argue that Rushdie’s criticism of the East does not stem from the fact that he celebrates a cosmopolitan identity or is “too Western in approach” or that every cosmopolitan is, in some way or the other, an enemy to his/her country of birth. But by the fact that he himself has seen the secular and democratic values being done away with and the minorities being under threat which was not supposed to have happened in independent and democratic India. His criticism of the East, particularly India, rather should be seen, as Brennan argues, from his belief in the High Modernist view where he is a liberal supporter of democracy, egalitarianism and fairness in treatment as far as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality is concerned. His criticism of the East, as Bhabha argues in his essay, “How Newness Enters the World”, is a reference to the ‘third space’ where the migrant cultural position of the subject of “in-betweenness and indeterminacy” offers him/her a better and clearer view of the two worlds he/she is related with, both filiatively and affiliatively. It is this embattled and ambivalent position of the migrant, his dual-belongingness that we often encounter in Rushdie’s novels, especially, *The Satanic Verses*, where the writer’s oscillation or
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ambivalence enables him to question and challenge older systems of knowledge and imagine the new. Sissy Helff’s definition of “transcultural novel” can be read in support of this argument where she says that a transcultural novel is primarily dominated by protagonists or characters who are “self-doubting” or ambivalent; whose actions are determined by “uncertainty” and who constantly “challenge essentialist modes of identity construction (82).” Rushdie’s attempt to question and redefine the concept of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ in *The Satanic Verses* can be read in the light of the above remark, and one can see Saladin Chamcha’s indeterminate and ‘a bit here and a bit there’ identitarian dilemma between London and Bombay coming out of the same ambivalence.

Also, the charge held against Rushdie by the Nativists that in favor of the transnational or the cosmopolitan, he negates the national or the native culture, can be critiqued by arguing that the community of migrants always shares a “shared culture”—a culture of displacement and of self-invention where the migrant or the transnational writer is constantly negotiating with his/her multifarious identities, occupying more than one selves or identities (Trousdale, 8). If a writer like Rushdie is to be understood in real terms, without letting the misinterpretation creep in, one needs to be sensitive and alert to the kind of identity he holds that is, a split-identity, a dual-identity. In addition, the criticism of the national is not to be seen as a prejudiced attempt by the writer, rather as an attempt to redefining and re-appropriating the national or the native culture which has been corrupted and divested of any democratic values by those in power.

**Rushdie’s Treatment of Secularism in the Novel**

Although there is no room for disagreement over Rushdie’s critical treatment of the notion of cosmopolitanism held by the West, the same cannot be upheld about him if we divert our attention from cosmopolitanism to secularism. As far as the Western idea of secularism is concerned, Rushdie seems to be buying it wholesale, without even minimum space for criticism. It can also be argued that religion per se is a problem for him. His remark in the essay, “In God We Trust” can be seen affirming his Western secularist position where he argues that today God has ceased to be a “symbol” and has become an “everyday fact” of life where the public or the political always has its strong bearing upon the private or the personal, and even a slight deviation from the conventions popularly and conventionally followed, especially in context of Indian Subcontinent, can spell trouble or take “nationalist character” (Rushdie, 376-380). What follows is that he adores to a brand of secularism that is Western in its approach where politics and religion are always separate and not Eastern where the politics and religion are intertwined.

The Western concept of secularism holds that the Church and the State are two separate entities. That the State has no role to play in the religious or private realm of the individual, and all are equal before the law irrespective of one’s belonging to any religion. In contrast, the Eastern concept of secularism means that the State has an active role to play in the religious sphere of the individuals where there may be ‘separate’ laws for an individual if he/she belonged to a particular religion. For example, in India, there are some special provisions or ‘reservations’ in the Constitution for people belonging to Muslim community like laws regarding child marriage or inheritance rights, but in the West, there is no such provision. The first instance of Rushdie’s uncritical commitment to Western concept of secularism is found in Chapter One, “The Angel Gabreel” where Saladin Chamcha can be seen suffocating under the moralizing dictates of his father extracted from Islam and is not allowed to do what his “innermost desires” would press for. It is here that he develops his obsession for *Vilayet* which would let him do as he desired. As the narrator tells his state of mind when he is not allowed to rub the magic lamp his father possessed and to pocket the money he found in a street-lying wallet:

> After that the son became convinced that his father would smother all his hopes unless he got away, and from that moment he became desperate to leave, to escape, to place oceans
between the great man and himself (28).

Besides, Chamcha’s “transmutation into a Vilayeti” when he arrives in London for an “English education”, his new-found distaste or disgust for fasting and his living by instincts that his father and mother had always advised against, can also be seen as Chamcha’s transmutation into a secular being, and there is no doubt whatsoever that Rushdie welcomes it. There is a tacit suggestion here that the West liberates and the East restricts. But, Saladin Chamcha’s non-acceptance in London as a human being casts this secularist liberation in doubt too.

Another example of Rushdie’s preference for Western notion of secularism comes in Chapter Four, “Ayesha” which is later continued in Chapter Eight, and in Chapter Six, “Return To Jahilia.” Chapter Four tells the story of a mystical girl named Ayesha who is always clad in butterflies and who exHORTS the villagers of Titlipur to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca on foot to get salvation. The chapter brings out the debate between science or rationality and mysticism or superstition. Mirza Saeed Akhtar, husband to Mishal Akhtar who is suffering from cancer, stands for scientific thinking—a sign of European learning, while Ayesha signifies mysticism or superstitious thinking. These two characters can also be seen as East/West binaries. The death of the pilgrims by drowning in the Arabian Sea in the end of the chapter is a direct reference to the superstitious thinking of the people in the East, and a mockery of it by Rushdie. The following lines make this point clear:

‘Sethji, you don’t believe in that girl?’ [Srinivas a shopkeeper who sold toys asks Mirza Saeed Akhtar].
‘Srinivas, we are modern men. We know, for instance, that old people die on long journeys, that God does not cure cancer, and that oceans do not part. We have to stop this idiocy…’
‘...We are not communal people, you and I. Hindu-Muslim Bhai-Bhai! We can open up a secular

front against this mumbo-jumbo’ (377-78).

Chapter Six, “Return to Jahilia” too reiterates the same preference of Rushdie where the politics and religion should be kept apart. The chapter talks about the return of the Prophet to Jahilia with his crew and the establishing of Islam as the State’s religion. This sudden transition mandates that the temples of the earlier goddesses be demolished and be worshipped only the words of Allah written in the holy book, Koran. The new religion establishes “immorality laws” according to which the women will have to keep their faces veiled, no alcohol, ban on pork and other delimiting laws. What is arguable here is that before the arrival of Islam, the Jahilians practiced the religion of pagan gods where the State had no interference in their private lives or their lifestyles. But, now with the coming of Islam as new religion of the State, there is no room of their own for the Jahilians and the only life possible for them is that of submission. The killing of Baal, the poet and satirist under the patronage of the erstwhile king, Abu Simbel, too implies the omnipresence of the State in clear terms.

To conclude the argument, one can say that as far as Rushdie’s treatment of cosmopolitanism is concerned in the novel, he is very critical of the Western brand of cosmopolitanism and does not buy it wholesale. Whereas his treatment of secularism in the novel raises many questions and doubts as we have just seen. It is very clear that he is buying the Western concept of secularism wholesale and does not look at it critically. Rather, he is more critical to the Eastern concept of secularism where the people are not secular in the Western sense of the term that is, keeping the politics and religion apart. Following on this, we can also argue that since Rushdie does not accord enough space in his criticism to the Western meaning of secularism, he is largely misunderstood by the third world critics and readers alike. In other words, his celebration of Western idea of secularism obscures his criticism of Western notion of cosmopolitanism that leads to him being misinterpreted many a time. As Franz Fanon was seen practicing “critical nationalism” by Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism, one can argue that Rushdie is practicing ‘critical cosmopolitanism’
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where he is not biased or prejudiced in his celebration of a cosmopolitan or transcultural identity rather looks at it critically.

REFERENCES


Mukherjee, ”Whose Centre, Which Periphery?”, 37.

Illegal immigrants.

According to Appiah, there are two essential points to understand the concept of cosmopolitanism. One is that “we all have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin...The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.” He argues that loyalty offered to one portion of humanity is a denial of the same to all of humanity—a reference to Hitler and Stalin. He says that we need to develop a cosmopolitan position/identity that neither abandons the foreign in a nationalist term nor treats the foreign with “icy impartiality.” In other words, he wants a position that is simultaneously committed to local particularities and to a global conception of humanity. This is what he means by ‘partial or rooted cosmopolitan’ position. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics In A World of Strangers (New York: Norton, 2007).

See Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routlage, 1994).