

# *Postcolonial Differend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie*

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"Home" has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails.

SALMAN RUSHDIE (*East, West* 93)

**F**OR LARGE GROUPS of people around the world—Cubans and Mexicans in the US, Indians and Pakistanis in Britain, Canada, and the US, Meghrebis in France, Turks in Germany, Chinese in Southeast Asia, Greeks, Polish, and Armenians in various parts of the world, Chinese and Vietnamese in Australia, Canada, and the US, Indians in Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean (the list can go on and on)—the idea of "home" has indeed become a "damaged" concept. The word "damaged" forces us to face up to the scars and fractures, to the blisters and sores, to the psychic traumas of bodies on the move. Indeed, "home" (the *heimlich*) is the new epistemological logic of (post)modernity as the condition of "living here and belonging elsewhere" begins to affect people in an unprecedented fashion (Clifford 311). No longer is exile rendered simply through an essentially aesthetic formulation (note the geographical breaks, the "damaged" hyphens of Joyce [Dublin-Trieste], Pound [London-Paris-Rome], or Eliot [New England-London], for instance); on the contrary, it is a travail/travel to which we are becoming inextricably linked as we are progressively dragged into a global village. "Home" now signals a shift away from homogeneous nation-states based on the ideology of assimilation to a much more fluid and contradictory definition of nations as a multiplicity of diasporic identities. The Indian shopkeeper in Vancouver who comes to Canada via Fiji already has held two previous passports; his (for he is a man)

third, the Canadian passport, is one that gives him the greatest difficulty in reconciling his body with the idea of Canadian citizenry. He remains a negative yet to be processed, a penumbra in the new nation-state of Canada, his privileges as a Canadian citizen most obvious only when he is travelling overseas. Back at home his condition remains hyphenated because in Canada (as in Australia, Britain, and Europe, but not to the same degree in the US), "home" is only available to those passport holders, those citizens whose bodies signify an unproblematic identity of selves with the nation-state. For Indian shopkeepers who are outside of this identity politics, whose corporealities fissure the logic of unproblematic identity of bodies with citizens, the new dogma of multiculturalism constructs the subject-in-hyphen forever negotiating and fashioning selves at once Indian and Canadian: *Canadian Indian and Canadian Indian*.<sup>1</sup>

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the narrative of the "damaged" home thus takes its exemplary form in what may be called diasporas, and especially in diasporas of colour, those migrant communities that do not quite fit into the nation-state's barely concealed preference for the narrative of assimilation. Diasporas of colour, however, are a relatively recent phenomenon in the West and, as I have already suggested, perhaps the most important marker of late modernity. In the larger narrative of postcolonialism (which has been informed implicitly by a theory of diasporic identifications), the story of diasporas is both its cause and its effect. In the politics of transfer and migration, postcolonialism recovers its own justification as an academic site or as a legitimate object of knowledge. To write about damaged homes, to re-image the impact of migration in the age of late capital, requires us to enter into debates about diasporic theory. This is not my primary concern here, but a few words about it will not be out of place. One of the overriding characteristics of diasporas is that they do not, as a general rule, return. This is not to be confused with the symbols of return or the invocations, largely through the sacred, of the homeland or the home-idea. The trouble with diasporas is that while the reference point is in the past, unreal as it may be, there is, in fact, no future, no sense of a teleological end. Diasporas cannot conceptualize the point

towards which the community, the nation within a nation, is heading. The absence of teleologies in the diaspora is also linked to Walter Benjamin's understanding of the ever-present time of historical (messianic) redemption. In this lateral argument, an eventual homecoming is not projected into the future but introduced into the present, thereby both interrupting it and multiplying it. Diasporic history thus contests both the utopic and irreversible causality of history through heterotopic (Foucault) or subversive (Benjamin) readings. In these readings, time is turned back against itself in order that alternative readings, alternative histories, may be released. In this "diverse scansion of temporality,"<sup>2</sup> in this active re-remembering (as opposed to the mere recalling) of traces and fragments, a new space in language and time is opened up, and historical moments are sundered to reveal heterotopic paths not taken. The absence of teleologies, this intense meditation on synchronicity, thus opposes the tyranny of linear time and blasts open the continuum of history to reveal moments, fragments, traces that can be re-captured and transformed into another history. As Salman Rushdie has written:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (*Imaginary Homelands* 10)

We cannot trace the growth of diasporas in any systematic form here. All we can do is refer very schematically to one particular diasporic development that has a direct bearing on the texts discussed in this paper. 1963, the year the Beatles exploded on the world scene, may also be chosen as the watershed year in global migration. Demand for labour in Western Europe and Britain and the collapse of the colonial empires of Britain, France, and Holland meant that millions of non-white migrants from the outposts of the Empire, as well as guest workers from Turkey, began to enter the European city on a scale unprece-

dedented since the Moorish invasions. The contemporary European city, for instance, is now a very different demographic fact. It is no longer the centre out of which radiates imperial activity. Instead, European cities (there are 16 million non-Europeans who live and work in them; there are a million people of colour in Australian cities, and probably twice that number in Canadian cities) are no longer controlled by the logic of centre and periphery (the metaphor of the Empire). Instead, what we get, in Iain Chambers's words, is a new kind of demographic redistribution "along the spatio-temporal-information axes of a world economy" (*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 108). He continues, "the national, unilateral colonial model has been interrupted by the emergence of a transversal world that occupies a 'third space' (Bateson, Bhabha), a 'third culture' (Featherstone) beyond the confines of the nation state" (108). It is symptomatic of a greater awareness of the transnational nature of nation-states and the presence within them of degrees of difference that led Khachig Tölölyan, editor of the new journal *Diaspora*, to maintain that struggles from the margins for the centre and for definitions of the "national" subject are equally legitimate concerns for the constructions of identity or selfhood. Nevertheless, Tölölyan's cautious remarks towards the end of his editorial warn us of the difficult space occupied by diasporas and the dangers of displacing the centre (made up of the vast majority of citizens that do not define themselves in diasporic terms) totally by the margins. Tölölyan writes: "To affirm that diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment is not to write the premature obituary of the nation state, which remains a privileged form of polity" (5). This proviso is important.

Elsewhere I have spoken about this condition as the indeterminate, the contaminated condition of diaspora (Mishra, "The Diasporic Imaginary"). Here I want to do something slightly different, something at once bold and fraught with difficulties. I want to examine the literary production of an author—Salman Rushdie—whose works exemplify the blasting open of agonistic politics in embattled ethnicities within nation-states that can no longer construct their nationalisms through a homogeneous and synchronous imagining of a collective body consensually

reading its newspapers or responding to global events as a totality. Indeed, if we are to follow the hidden text of the previous sentence—Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities*—we begin to detect not so much the logic of capitalism at work here but the religious, millenarian dogma of an earlier age in which the issues were not necessarily that of imagining national identities but of participating, through sacred languages (Latin, Sanskrit, Pali, or Arabic), with communities across "nations." There is, then, a reverse scansion of history at work here, a desire for a lost unity within the ethnicized state that minorities continue to inhabit. In the cultural sphere, this leads to the end of consensual politics, the end of a community of speakers/thinkers that could be relied upon to arbitrate for the national good. In short, what is emerging is "the postcolonial differend." What I would like to offer in the following pages is an instance of this postcolonial differend with reference to the Indian-Pakistani diaspora in Britain.

The diaspora, however, stages a "difference" that can be accommodated only if consensual politics also takes into account the possibility of the diasporic subject itself initiating the consensus. In other words, the majority population has to concede that the diaspora's ground rules (what constitutes belief, what is a work of art, what is literary freedom) may be different from its own. It is here that postcolonial theory, through a careful study of diasporic archive(s), could address what Lyotard has called the differend. This is to anticipate my concluding remarks, however. What I would like to continue here is an examination of key texts of an author whose works have something of an exemplary status as proof-texts of diaspora as an intermediate, increasingly mobile idea. In the works of Salman Rushdie, the Indian-Pakistani diaspora in Britain is seen as a powerful source for the hermeneutics of the liminal, the borders of culture, the unassimilable, the margins, and so on. The critique of the centre through the kinds of hybrid, hyphenated identities occupied by this diaspora has been one of the more exciting and original theorizations of the project of modernity itself. As an ideological critique of, as well as a corrective to, established working-class British social histories, the pay-off has been considerable: one remembers how histo-

rians of the working class consistently overlooked the diaspora as a significant formation in class histories. There are no people of colour in E. P. Thompson.

### The Texts of Salman Rushdie

Few works of fiction have been the subject of debates as intense as those that have surrounded *The Satanic Verses* since its publication in 1988. Books have now been written on the Rushdie Affair, a film made on the author's death (much-deserved, as it turns out in the film) by the Pakistani film industry, and Tehran continues to re-emphasize Khomeini's *fatwa* on any staged denunciation of the West. The author's life, meanwhile, is one of double exile in the company of his "protectors" in the Welsh countryside of "unafraid lambs," country houses, and farmers from whom he must "hide [his] face," as Rushdie describes it in his poem "Crusoe."<sup>3</sup> However, he still hankers after travel, the diasporic condition, even though this travel, like V. S. Naipaul's "arrival," is towards the Arthurian "once and future Avalon." The cause of Rushdie's second exile, of course, was a book about migrancy, dispossession, cultural hybridity, and the absence of centres in diasporic lives. To give these themes an intertext, a frame, or a narrative template, they were hoisted on another moment in history when "newness" entered the world. The entry of strange people into so many parts of the globe presents the older inhabitants with precisely the threat of the new, the threat of "ideas" no longer commensurable with pre-existing epistemologies. In this retelling, Indian Islam (always contaminated by autochthonous gods, dervishes, the figure of the ascetic, and other borrowings from Hinduism) is seen as a hybrid, contradictory phenomenon that conjures strange dreams about the founding text and prophet of that religion. Indian Islam thus has a polytheistic splinter in the side of its monotheism in which the intercession of female gods in any act of worship is not excluded outright. Moreover, this kind of syncretism is truer still of Bombay, Rushdie's magical metropolis, *the* postcolonial city, that challenges the erstwhile metropolises of London and Paris. What is true of Indian Islam is also true of Indian narrative forms and culture generally. The Aryans, the Moguls, the British have all

been invaders, leaving their traces behind as the nation gradually reabsorbs multiplicity into a totality. Thus the central themes of the book—how “newness” enters the world, how the many coexists within the one, and why love remains the only organizing principle of our lives—get written in a hybrid discourse that is borrowed from the Bombay film industry, the idioms of Hobson-Jobson,<sup>4</sup> a colonial English curriculum, the *Katha-Sarit-Sagar* (342), the nativist jokes on the *ooparvala-nee-chayvala* (he who lives upstairs, he who lives downstairs), the narrative of the epic recast as the battle for the Mahavilayat (283), the populist narratives of Phoolan Devi,<sup>5</sup> the female dacoit, the fundamentalist world of the post-Ayodhya Hindus, the references to the Indian Penal Code section 420 (Gibreel sings Raj Kapoor’s well-known song from *Shree 420*), as well as the Indian Civic Code, section 125, and many more. *The Satanic Verses* situates itself in the midst of these heterogeneous discourses. It is from the space of hybridity, of multiplicity, that many of the characters speak. Mimi Mamoulian, for instance, knows very well the meaning of the world as “pastiche: a ‘flattened’ world” (261), and the author’s own, very postmodern intervention makes this clearer still:

Gibreel . . . has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous*—that is, joined to and arising from his past; . . . whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, “false”? [Where Chamcha is therefore perceived as “evil”] Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered “good” by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man.

—But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?—Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, “pure,”—an utterly fantastic notion—cannot, must not, suffice. (427)

Rushdie begins by offering the usual binary between the continuous and the discontinuous, between tradition and modernity, between good and evil, only to undercut it through the intervention of the hybrid. Indeed, what this extended statement about the construction of the self indicates, in the context of the diaspora and margins, is that subjectivity is now formed through modes of translation and encoding because erstwhile distinc-

tions “cannot, must not suffice.” This last phrase, in fact, sums up the agenda of the book as a whole: distinctions made through established cultural epistemologies (including the ubiquitous self-other distinction) will always fail. Yet, even as hybridity is celebrated, one gets the feeling that the disavowed leaves its traces behind because, as we shall see, *The Satanic Verses* itself failed to convince the diaspora that there is no such thing as an “untranslated man”: large sections of the diaspora wish to retain this nostalgic definition of the self and cling to “millenarian” narratives of self-empowerment in which only the untranslated can recapture a lost harmony but, paradoxically, the desire to retain a pristine sense of the past is only possible through the technologies of mechanical reproduction such as cassette tapes, films, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Since historical reconstructions through these apparatuses introduce the heterotopic into the utopian or the linear, what we get here is precisely a heterogeneous, contradictory rendition of history by making memory and cultural fragments metonymic representations of the whole. While cassette culture reconstructs the past as a synchronic moment (old Indian films can be viewed endlessly), it also contaminates the diasporic idea of culture as belonging to the homeland alone. As Paul Gilroy has argued so persuasively in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, the newer technologies of cultural transmission accentuate the fact that cultural commodities travel swiftly, criss-crossing geographical boundaries, creating new and vibrant forms. The Bhojpuri-Hindi songs of the Indian singers Babla and Kanchan, for instance, combine Hindi film music with calypso/hip hop, while in Britain, Asian Bhangra and Indian groups such as Loop Guru (post-Ravi Shankar music crossed with cyber-religion) show obvious influences of reggae and soul music of Black Africa. In this respect, *The Satanic Verses* affirms the impossibility of millenarian diasporic narratives while at the same time stressing that these narratives invariably will be the starting point of any radical re-theorizing of the diasporic imaginary, which, for Rushdie, is identical with modernism itself and may be read as a “metaphor for all humanity”:

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 . . . that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity.

(*Imaginary Homelands* 394)

Rushdie goes on to state:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (394)

The celebration of the hybrid—"the process of hybridization which is the novel's most crucial dynamic means that its ideas derive from many sources other than Islamic ones," writes Rushdie (403)—however, also leads to the endowing of the fiction itself with what Gilroy has called "an absolute and non-negotiable privilege" ("Cultural Studies" 190). The aesthetic order as somehow immune to a counter-attack through a non-aesthetic reading of the text has dominated much of the criticism that has been directed against Rushdie in the wake of Khomeini's *fatwa*. We shall return to the question of aesthetic privilege.

### The Diasporic Avant-garde

The story of "migration, its stresses and transformations, from the point of view of migrants from the Indian subcontinent,"<sup>7</sup> nevertheless drops the old realist modes of writing and embraces the European avant-garde. Yet it also keeps its realist nose sharply in focus. This is partly because the book is as much about South Asians in a racialized Britain as it is an avant-gardist break in the history of "English" fiction.<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, in fact, is quite explicit about this dual agenda:

[*The Satanic Verses*] begins in a pyrotechnic high-surrealist vein and moves towards a much more emotional, inner writing. That process of putting away the magic noses and cloven hoofs is one the novel itself goes through: *it tells itself*, and by the end it doesn't need the apparatus any more. (Interview with Blake Morrison 120)

It is, however, the use of non-European narrative forms, summed up in the Arabic narrator's correction of the reader's processes of

naturalization through a phrase such as “it was so, it was not,” that led Gayatri Spivak to remark that while *The Satanic Verses* was not part of the linear narrative of the European avant-garde, “the successes and failures of the European avant-garde is available to it” (“Reading” 41). Let us accept Spivak’s proposition but give the text a further twist. Instead of using the term “European avant-garde,” let us use the term “diasporic avant-garde” to mark out a generic space for a variety of literary texts that would use the European avant-garde to interrogate subject positions excluded or silenced by modernism by constructing allegorical or counter-hegemonic subaltern renditions of the geopolitical imaginary of South Asians in Britain.

At the risk of repetition, let me underline once again that *The Satanic Verses* is the text about migration, about the varieties of religious, sexual, and social filiations of the diaspora.<sup>9</sup> The work is the millenarian routed through the space of travel (the aeroplane replaces the ship) and then problematically rooted in the new space of the diaspora. In this respect the text’s primary narrative is a tale of migrancy and the ambiguities of being an Indian (or Pakistani) in Britain. In the process, the work explores the disavowal of so many fundamental assumptions and values because of a massive epistemic violence to the intellect. The narrative, in fact, begins with people who have already lost their faith in religion and who now have a truly diasporic relationship with India. As Rushdie has explained, these people are the new travellers across the planet; having lost their faith, they have to rethink what death means to the living and how desire can find expression when people cannot love (Interview with Blake Morrison 120-21). One of the key phrases that recurs deals with being born again (to be born again, you have to die, says Gibreel to Saladin), and the diasporic world is very much the world in which one undergoes a rebirthing. In the case of Gibreel and Saladin, the context in which this occurs combines the fantastic free-fall from an exploding plane (AI 420 from the height of Mt. Everest, a full 29,002 feet<sup>10</sup>) with the realistic narrative of terrorism and hijacking. The combination of these two generic modes is striking, since it forecloses the possibility of naturalistic readings because the work reveals a kind of simultaneous *karma* and

reincarnation: two people die and are immediately reborn as they were at the moment of their deaths. The rebirthing of Gibreel and Saladin, then, parallels, say, the rebirth of Amba Shikhandin in the *Mahabharata*, the founding Indian text that is simultaneously diachronic and synchronic: it happened then, it happens now. One becomes someone else but keeps the earlier history/biography intact. The relationship between Rushdie's writings and the Indian epic tradition of generic mixing is a narrative we cannot go into here, but it is nevertheless important to refer to it, if only because it reminds us of the fictiveness of the text and its relationship to the "eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition" (*The Satanic Verses* 70). Moreover, as Gibreel's song (from the film *Shree 420*) shows, the dominant cultural form of modern India, the Bombay film, the successor to the encyclopaedic pan-Indian epic tradition, constantly adapts itself to and indigenizes all global cultural forms, from Hollywood to Middle Eastern dance and music.

The "emigration" of Salahuddin Chamchawala from Bombay has close parallels with Salman Rushdie's own pattern of emigration. From the insertion of the well-known autobiographical "kipper story" (the young Rushdie was not allowed to get up from the dining table until he had finished his kipper, which he didn't know how to eat!) to his own uneasy relationship with his father, there are striking parallels between Saladin and his creator. It is not Gibreel but Saladin who is reborn and who accepts the need for change: the nostalgia for the past (a house, one's ancestral religion, and so on) is not something one can live by but something to which, in an act of both homage and acceptance of his father Changez Chamchawala, Saladin returns. The use of a fused sign—Salman and Saladin—allows Rushdie to enter into those areas, notably the body and the religious body-politic, that accentuate the diasporic condition. Relationships with women—Pamela Lovelace (wife), Mimi Mamoulian (professional partner), and Zeeny Vakil (mistress)—raise the interesting question of diasporic sexuality and gender relations. At the same time, the other autobiographical figure around "Salman"—Salman from Persia in the Mahound and Jahilia sections of the book—is also diasporic and connects with Islam as a political as well as religious

revolution staged by "water-carriers, immigrants and slaves" (101). Even the radical Iranian cultural critic suppressed under the Shah's regime, and for many the harbinger of Khomeini's revolution, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), refers to one Salman-e Faresi (Salman the Persian) who "found refuge in Medina with the Muslims and played such an important role in the development of Islam" (16). This Salman-e Faresi may not have been the prophet's contemporary, but the connection between Iran (through the figure of Salman) and the advent of Islam underscores the strength of the Iranian furor against Rushdie. In Al-e Ahmad's reading of the Islamization of Iran, what is emphasized, perhaps too simplistically, is the idea of Islam being invited into Iran. Unlike earlier Western incursions, Islam, another Western ideology, is not an invasion but a response to Iran's own need to embrace the austere harmony of the "one."

It is through Saladin/Salman (Rushdie) that the new themes of diasporic interaction are explored. Saladin sees in the relics of Empire in the heart of London, "attractively faded grandeur." Gibreel, on his part, only sees a "wreck, a Crusoe-city, marooned on the island of its past." When asked about his favourite films, Saladin offers a cosmopolitan list: "*Potemkin, Kane, Otto e Mezzo, The Seven Samurai, Alphaville, El Angel Exterminador*" (439), whereas Gibreel (the larger-than-life Bombay film actor modelled on Amitabh Bachchan and N. T. Rama Rao, the latter a hero-god in countless mythological films turned politician) offers a list of successful commercial Hindi films: "*Mother India, Mr India, Shree Charsawbees*: no Ray, no Mrinal Sen, no Aravindan, or Ghatak" (440). The lists, the choices made, the implied discriminations, the negotiations with the migrant's new land, all indicate the complex ways in which two diaspora discourses (the millenarian and the diasporic) work. Gibreel, for his part, does not undergo mutation but remains locked in the worlds of memory and fantasy. Saladin thus becomes the figure that is both here and elsewhere, and his return to the Motherland to be at his father's deathbed is perhaps the more cogent statement about the diasporic condition. Gibreel, on the other hand, acts out his actor's fantasies and becomes the conduit through whom (in his imagination) the Prophet receives the *Quran*.

Blasphemy, therefore, falls not to the hybrid mutant but to the nostalgia-ridden Gibreel. Further, the mutant condition of Saladin (names in the diaspora are similarly mutated, a Hobson-Jobson discourse gets replayed) is both linguistic as well as physical: the he-goat with an erratic pair of horns and the owner of a name that moves between the Indian Chamchawala to the trans-Indian Spoono (English for *chamcha*, "spoon," though in Hindi/Urdu a *chamcha* is a sycophant gleefully doing his/her master's work). In all this, two ideas—the idea of newness and that of love—keep cropping up. For Dr Uhuru Simba, "newness will enter this society by collective, not individual actions" (415). As for love, the combinations it takes—Gibreel/Rekha Merchant/Allie Cone; Saladin/Pamela Lovelace/Zeeny Vakil/Mimi Mamoulian—get complicated by other alignments: Jumpy Joshi/Pamela; Saladin/Allie Cone; Billy Battuta/Mimi; Hanif Johnson/Mishal Sufyan. All these relationships are part of the new diasporic combinations, a kind of necessary re-programming of the mind in the wake of the diasporic newness. At the point of interaction where the old and the new come together—as is the case with the diaspora's encounter with the vibrant politics of the metropolitan centre—new social meanings get constructed, especially in the domain of psycho-sexual politics. Thus the capacious Hind and not the bookish Muhammad effectively runs the Shaandaar cafe: her great cooking is what improves the material condition of the family rather than Muhammad's Virgilian rhetoric, which has no use value in Britain. Gender relations therefore get repositioned in the diaspora, and women begin to occupy a different, though not necessarily more equitable, kind of space. The manner in which a diasporic restaurant culture in Britain is actually based on wives as cooks is quite staggering. In another world, in the world of Jahilia, however, it is Hind, the powerful wife of the patriarch Abu Simbel, who has to battle with another new idea: "What kind of an idea are you?" (335), is the question asked of the Prophet. Yet the idea of the "new" (the idea of the "post" in any modernity) also has a tendency to get fossilized, which is where another narrative of the diaspora, the millenarian, becomes the attractive, and easy, alternative. As a heterogeneous, "unread" text, *The Satanic Verses* has been appro-

priated, positively and negatively, towards both diasporic (hybrid) and essentialist ends. I will return to the latter in the context of Rushdie and the sacred. For the moment, I want to explore further the question of racial politics and diasporic identity.

### Race, Identity, and Britishness

The late 1960s saw the emergence of a new racism in Britain for which Enoch Powell was the best-known, but not the only, spokesperson. In what seemed like a remarkable reversal of old Eurocentric and imperialist readings of the black colonized as racially inferior, the new racists began to recast races on the model of linguistic difference. This "difference," however, had to be anchored somewhere, and the easiest means of doing this was by stipulating that nations were not imagined communities constructed historically but racial enclaves marked by high levels of homogeneity. Thus a race had a nation to which it belonged. The British had their nation and belonged to an island off the coast of Europe, and so on. In the name of racial respect and racial equality, this version in fact gave repatriation theorists such as Enoch Powell a high level of respectability in that, it was argued, what Powell stood for was not racism but a nationalism that the immigrants themselves upheld. What the argument simplified was the history of imperialism itself and the massive displacement of races that had taken place in the name of Empire. Nowhere was this more marked than in the Indian, African, and Chinese diasporas of the Empire. More importantly, however, the new racism was used to defend Britishness itself, to argue that multiculturalism was a travesty of the British way of life, which was now becoming extremely vulnerable. The only good immigrant was one that was totally assimilable, just as the only good gay or lesbian was someone who led a closet life. Writes Anna Marie Smith:

Only the thin veneer of deracializing euphemisms has shifted over this period, with blatantly racist discourse on immigration being recoded in discourse on criminality, inner-cities' decay and unrest, anti-Western terrorism, and multiculturalism. Indeed, the fundamentally *cultural* definition of race in the new racism allows for this

mobile relocation of the racial-national borders to any number of sociopolitical sites. (62)

In *The Satanic Verses*, it is by way of the Sufyan family (Muhammad, the Bangladeshi schoolmaster with a weakness for European classics, his wife, Hind, and their daughters Mishal and Anahita) that we enter into changing demographic patterns and race relations in Britain, as well as see how homeland family norms negotiate the new gender politics of diasporas. The Sufyan family lives in Brickhall Street, the old Jewish enclave of tailors and small-time shopkeepers. Now it is the street of Bangladeshi migrants or Packies/Pakis ("brown Jews" [300]) who are least equipped for metropolitan life. Thus, in Brickhall, synagogues and kosher food have given way to mosques and halal restaurants. Yet nothing is as simple as it seems in this world of the diaspora. The space of the Shaandaar Cafe B&B becomes the space of new labour relations between husband and wife but also of new forms of sexuality. Mishal becomes pregnant by the second-generation diaspora Hanif Johnson, while Jumpy Joshi has sex with Pamela, even as her husband Saladin sleeps under the same roof. The diaspora here finally crumbles and falls apart because the pressures come not only from the newly acquired socio-sexual field of the participants in the diasporic drama but also because that drama has to contend with racist hooliganism as the diaspora becomes progressively an object of derision to be represented through the discourse of monsterism. It is through this brand of fascism that death finally comes to the diaspora and to those associated with it. Both the café and the community centre are burned down. Hind, Muhammad, as well as Pamela, die, and suddenly there is no room for nostalgia, no room for the discourse of mysticism (469) that had sustained the discourses of the homeland. Instead, the imperative is to transform one's memory into modes of political action because the world is far too Real (469). It is at this point in the narrative that diasporic identities become complicated by the presence in Britain of people who have already gone through the diasporic experience in other parts of the world. Having co-existed with Afro-West Indians, the Indian diaspora of the West Indies, for instance, is already a hybrid form. Thus Sewsunker Ram (Pinkwalla), the DJ,

and John Maslama, the club proprietor, have political and cultural orientations that bring them close to the kinds of diasporic politics endorsed by a Dr. Uhuru Simba. The alignments at work here—Bengali, Afro-Caribbean, East Indian Caribbean, East African Indian, Sikh, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and so on—gesture towards new forms of diasporic awareness and coalitional politics. From the Africanist ideal of Dr. Uhuru Simba to the multifaceted, decentred, simulative worlds of the Sufyan girls, Jumpy Joshi and Hanif Johnson, one now begins to see not one legitimization narrative of the diaspora but many.

“The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means,” stutters S. S. Sisodia (343). When those who were instrumental in creating that history (as subject peoples on whose behest the Empire believed it was acting) are within the metropolitan centres of the Empire itself, the idea of Britishness is threatened. Both the challenge and the threat are summarized elegantly by Iain Chambers, who writes:

It is the dispersal attendant on migrancy that disrupts and interrogates the overarching themes of modernity: the nation and its literature, language and sense of identity; the metropolis; the sense of centre; the sense of psychic and cultural homogeneity. In the recognition of the other, of radical alterity, lies the acknowledgement that we are no longer at the centre of the world.

*(Migrancy, Culture, Identity 23-24)*

Chambers’s “we” here is British, but the definition that he gives of the British is very much an intermediate one. It is a definition in which the subjects of the centre—the British as an ethnic entity—also begin to find that subjectivity is “interactively” constructed, on the move, so to speak. The cultural imperative that underlies Chambers’s move is that the diaspora now invades the centre and makes prior, essentialist definitions of nation-states based on notions of racial purity (Enoch Powell), a historical relic of imperialism itself. It is the privileged site of that imperialist history and its constructions of Britishness that get replayed in the doctrines of purity in postcolonial Britain. Yet, as I say this I think what is implicit in the Chambers thesis—the need for a radical pedagogy about ethnic identities—is precisely what needs underlining. How does one make decisive interventions in



the curriculum so that Britishness itself is opened up for debate? It is the agenda of the agents who would transform the apparatuses of control through which the idea of the self is constructed that requires further examination.

A "post-diaspora community" in Britain, to use Rushdie's own phrase (*Imaginary Homelands* 40), now becomes a site from which a critique of Britishness itself (and the imperial relationship between the British and Indians that has a 300-year long history) is now being mounted. The migrant living here and elsewhere would find it difficult to fit into, say, Margaret Thatcher's imperious definition of a Briton during the Falklands War. As Chambers again has stressed, any attempt to decipher this appeal to "Britishness" necessarily draws us to a complex, contradictory, and even treacherous terrain, in which the most varied elements "entwine, coexist and contaminate one another" (*Border Dialogues* 15). For the Indian diaspora, this trope of "Britishness" has multiple identities and can be expressed in a variety of ways. To be British in a post-diaspora Britain is to be conscious of multiple heritages and peoples' conflicting participation in the long history of Britain. For many, an easy, unproblematic re-insertion into a utopic or linear narrative of the British nation is impossible. In *The Satanic Verses*, we get a strong affirmation of the undesirability of this version of linear history.

We are therefore faced with "the possibility of two perspectives and two versions of Britishness" (Chambers, *Border Dialogues* 27). One is Anglocentric, frequently conservative, backward-looking, and increasingly located in a frozen and largely stereotyped idea of the national, that is, English, culture. The other is ex-centric, open-ended, and multi-ethnic. The first is based on a homogeneous "unity" in which history, tradition, and individual biographies and roles, including ethnic and sexual ones, are fundamentally fixed and embalmed in the national epic, in the mere fact of being "English." The other perspective suggests an overlapping network of histories and traditions, a heterogeneous complexity in which positions and identities, including those relating to the idea of the "citizen," cannot be taken for granted and are not "interminably fixed but tend towards flux" (Chambers, *Border Dialogues* 27).

The peculiar irony of Rushdie's own anti-racist rhetoric is that he has been used to fuel racism: the Muslim threat against Rushdie's life is used by the white majority to portray all Muslims as fundamentalists. As Rushdie himself has pointed out, "[t]he idea that the National Front could use my name as a way of taunting Asians is so horrifying and obscene to my mind that I wanted to make it clear: that's not my team, they're not my supporters, they're simply exploiting the situation to their own ends" (Interview with Blake Morrison 115). The uses made of Rushdie in defence of "Britishness" imply a problematic incorporation of the name "Rushdie" into British citizenry. The appropriation of Rushdie by British writers in the name of the autonomy of the aesthetic order again has a similar agenda. Rushdie, the politically correct defender of the diaspora, is now the equally correct "British" citizen under the protection of Scotland Yard and defended by Harold Pinter.

### The Diaspora, the Sacred, and Salman Rushdie

*The Satanic Verses* is one radical instance of diasporic recollection or rememoration. The questions that any such rememoration asks of the diasporic subject are: what is the status of its past, of its myths, of its own certainties? How has it constructed these certainties? Does anything or anybody have a hegemonic status within the diaspora itself? Or, do we read diasporas, as I have suggested, through the Gramscian definition of the subaltern? Do the Imams of Islam (in Bradford or in Tehran or in Bombay) constitute a ruling group within the subaltern?

Can one re-energize one's myths? One kind of re-energization was endorsed by Indian diasporas created in the wake of the British indenture system. In these nineteenth-century diasporas, loss was rewritten as a totality through the principle of a reverse millenarianism. There was a golden age back there that we have forfeited through our banishment. Let us imaginatively re-create this golden age, which would leap over the great chasm created in our history through indenture. One of the grand templates of Indian diasporic millenarianism was the myth of Rama and his banishment. The alternative to this millenarian ethos is a version of rememoration in which the

continuum of imperial history is blasted through a radical mediation on the conditions of migrancy and displacement. The recapitulation of one's history (and not just the re-invigoration of myth) leads to a confrontation with the narratives of imperialism itself. Where the old diaspora's myths were, after all, commensurate with the imperial narratives of totality (insofar as these myths were considered to be equally forceful from the subject's point of view), the new diaspora attempts to penetrate the history of the centre through multiple secularisms. When, however, the interventions into secularity threaten an earlier memory, diasporas turn to versions of millenarian remembrance and retreat into an essentialist discourse, even though they know full well that the past can no longer redeem.

It is in this context that I would like to explore the intersection of the radical agenda of diasporas and the idea of the sacred. No reading of *The Satanic Verses* can be complete without considering the reception of the text in terms of the sacred. The sacred, in this instance, refuses to accept the aesthetic autonomy of the text and connects the narrator's voice unproblematically with that of the author. In his defence—and in the defence mounted on his behalf by the world literati—it is really the relative autonomy of art that has been emphasized. What this defence raises is a very serious question about whether a diasporic text that celebrates hybridity and rootlessness can be defended with reference purely to the privileged status of the aesthetic order. In the ensuing debates, the British South Asian diaspora has been read as a group that does not quite understand the values of a civic society and has the capacity to relapse into barbarism, precisely the condition that gave the Empire its humanist apology. If I return to the saturated discourses surrounding the Rushdie Affair, it is because the discourse reminds us of yet another kind of privilege, and one that questions the non-negotiable primacy of modernity itself.

Now here comes the difficult part of the presentation in the context of *The Satanic Verses* as a commodity with quite specific effects. The British Muslim response to *The Satanic Verses* has not been through the narratives of hybridity nor through an interventionist politics that would use Rushdie's book to

point out the massive contradictions between the diaspora and the ideology of "Britishness"; rather, it has been through a re-appropriation of the myths of totality, of millenarianism, that was the survival mechanism of the old diaspora. In other words, the defence has been mounted not through a constantly re-validating and contingent subjectivity *in medias res* but through an unreal resistance based on the discourse of a prior diasporic mode of narrativization. *The Satanic Verses* as an intervention into the project of modernity now faces modernity itself as an unnecessary formation in diasporic culture. Clearly, the Bradford Imams cannot be both modern and anti-modern, but such indeed is the complex/contradictory narrative that is being articulated. Thus what we get is the second diaspora trying to cling to totalities, to the unreal completedness of the first, where, even for a Naipaul, there was never an unproblematic totality to aspire to in the first instance. The old diaspora, in spite of its ideologies of totality, could not have responded to *The Satanic Verses* with the same sense of unqualified rejection. The *fatwa* against Rushdie originated in the diaspora—in Bradford—and not in Iran.

From the borders, from the interstices of existence, from the liminal, the diasporic subject uses, in Rukmini Nair's and Rimli Bhattacharya's words,

fragments of religious faith . . . [to] "shore" up his existence, give him much needed stability in a hostile environment. When that stability is blown to bits by an author as well ensconced and integrated as Rushdie, panic results. The neurosis of *nemesis* replaces the certainties of *nostalgia*. (28-29)

One may disagree with Nair's and Bhattacharya's use of "certainties," but the point is valid. What is missing from diasporic theory is a theory of the sacred based not on the idea of the sacred as a pathological instance of the secular in itself defined along purely modernist lines but as a point from which interventions can take place. In short, as Al-e Ahmad pointed out, the sacred is a source of metaphors of empowerment easily available for ethnic mobilization. In all our debates about the diaspora, the sacred is missing. I return to *The Satanic Verses*, which, by its very title, foregrounds something highly contentious in Islam and in Islamic definitions of the sacred. Racialized politics meets its sacra-

lized other here. To emphasize this, to find how Rushdie reads the sacred and how the unified discourse of the sacred is used by the diaspora to defend a lost purity from within the hybrid, the hyphen, is not to say that *The Satanic Verses* is best read along these lines. What I am doing is selectively using *The Satanic Verses* to underline the dual narrative of the diaspora: the hyphen and the total, the fracture and the whole. Clearly, both have different historical antecedents for the diaspora: the hyphen is the presencing of the boundary where the politics of epistemic violence and a self-conscious re-definition of the project of modernity are located firmly within the global politics of migrancy (which also affects the construction of the non-diasporic subject); the “sacred” is a function of narratives that the almost self-contained diasporic communities constructed out of a finite set of memories. They gave permanence to mobility (the mothered space is always mobile—the child in the womb moves) by creating a fixed point of origin when none existed. The sacred refuses to be pushed to the liminal, to the boundary. It wants to totalize by centring all boundaries: the many and the one cease to be two dialectical poles. Since its narratives are transhistorical, the absurdity of the move for a disempowered diasporic community is overtaken completely by the illusory power of the act itself, from which the colonizer is excluded. This is true of all religious attitudes in the diaspora. As Ashis Nandy writes: “Hinduism in the diaspora, for example, is much more exclusive and homogenic. Out of feelings of inferiority, many Hindus have tried to redefine Hinduism according to the dominant concept of religion” (104).

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie, in fact, connects the moment of newness itself with the diasporic performance in the sense that the Prophet’s intervention into the staid politics and religion of Jahilia is made possible only through people who are always on the margins of society, “water-carrier immigrant slave” (104). The sacred is thus a means of radical self-empowerment, especially for those who work under the tyranny of the merchant classes of the Arab world. In that sacred discourse, the language, however, was not of the many, of the hybrid, but of the one. The radical, in other words, was not the idea of multiple narratives

and contingency or coalitional politics, it was not the affirmation of the hyphen, but the starkness of the total, of the one:

Why do I fear Mahound? [thinks the Grandee of Jahilia Abu Simbel]. For that: one one one, his terrifying singularity. Whereas I am always divided, always two or three or fifteen. . . . This is the world into which Mahound has brought his message; one one one. Amid such multiplicity, it sounds like a dangerous word. (102-03)

The radical one, however, also carried a dangerous principle of female exclusion. Where the many had always found space for female goddesses, the Prophet, finally, excludes them from the position of divine intermediaries, though not before toying with the idea of their symbolic incorporation into the "new":

"Messenger, what are you saying? Lat, Manat, Uzza—they're all *females!*

For pity's sake! Are we to have goddesses now? Those old cranes, herons, hags?" (107)

In the deserts of Arabia and at a particular historical moment, the radical, the new, could be conceived of only as an austere unity around the mathematical one. In the version of radical alterity that defines the modern diaspora, it is the many that must now splinter the impregnable fortresses of the one. This is the monumental irony of the debates around the book. The trouble is that the nation-state has never acknowledged the diasporic contribution to modernity, always reading diasporas as the "one," always regarding them as a dangerous presence in the West. At the height of the controversy surrounding the burning of the book, the British Home Minister responsible for Race Relations, John Patten, issued a news release entitled "On Being British" (18 July 1989), in which the ideology of the one is used to berate the excesses of another ideology of oneness. It can be seen that race relations in Britain itself produced a desire to return to the security of the past: both whites and Muslims in Britain return to their own essentialisms in moments of (perceived) crisis. Have the efforts of those who have struggled for a multiply centred nation-state therefore collapsed because the state itself created an environment in which a historical moment (that of the Prophet) would be de-historicized, reshaped, and used as a defence of the diaspora itself? Homi Bhabha confronts these questions in *The Location of Culture*:

The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical polarities—Islamic fundamentalists vs. Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (ironic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the “untranslatable.” (225)

Bhabha’s examination of the politics of *The Satanic Verses* very quickly becomes a kind of an aestheticization of the diaspora. The dominant semantics of this aesthetics may be stated through one of Bhabha’s favourite metaphors, the metaphor of the “trans-.” Applied to the diaspora, it means that a double time-frame, a double space, is always, everywhere, present. This is a good point, since the disjunctive temporality (both here and elsewhere; the space of present location and the remembrance of the past) is the diasporic condition. To ask the diaspora to function from one space, from one time, is to create what William Godwin in *Political Justice* (1793) called “impostures.” Yet the decisive question remains: what political articulations indeed can be made from the position of a disjunctive temporality? And if this is also the condition of hybridity (the term goes back to the nineteenth-century botanists), then what hope is there for hybrids to become agents of change and not just positions that one may occupy for purposes of critique?

Clearly, Bhabha’s reading of the diasporic subject within the European nation-state is more or less identical with the non-hegemonic or pre-hegemonic Gramscian subaltern whose histories are fragmented and episodic. In the context of the Rushdie Affair, the question that we may ask is, “Does hegemony always suppress difference?” Or does it entertain and even encourage difference provided that it is a “difference” that can be footnoted adequately in the grand history of Empire, which Sir Ernest Baker once referred to as a “mission of culture—and of something higher than culture” (qtd. in Asad 250)? When the hegemonic power loses its clarity of vision in terms of its own definition of unity, then a crisis erupts—and both Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha believe that post-imperial British society is

in crisis. Terms such as cultural minorities, ethnics, blacks, New Commonwealth immigrants, multiculturalism, are all used by a hysterical centre that no longer knows how to normalize the other in the nation within. It is then the celebration of difference by Rushdie that is endorsed by Bhabha:

It has achieved this by suggesting that there is no such whole as the nation, the culture or even the self. Such holism is a version of reality that is most often used to assert cultural or political supremacy and seeks to obliterate the relations of difference that constitute the language of history and culture. . . . Salman Rushdie sees the emergence of doubt, questioning and even confusion as being part of that cultural "excess" that facilitates the formation of new social identities that do not appeal to a pure and settled past, or to a unicultural present, in order to authenticate themselves. The authority lies in the attempt to articulate emergent, hybrid forms of cultural identity.

(qtd. in Asad 262-63)<sup>11</sup>

It goes without saying that social identities do need authenticating (Asad), but their authentication, according to both Rushdie and Bhabha, derives from our ability continuously to re-invent ourselves out of our hybrid cultural condition (Asad 263).<sup>12</sup> The sacred asks different questions. Hybridity for whom? Does the state apparatus always want homogeneity? Is it in its interest to pursue this? Or is difference (but difference within a panoptical power) the desired aim of the nation-state? At one level, how is postcolonial difference (as hybrid) to be re-theorized as post-colonial hybridity? Is hybridity the desirable aim or a fact of life? Does the sacred reject the aestheticization of culture? Is the sacred point of view homogeneous to begin with? The debates surrounding the aesthetic order, the diaspora, and the sacred reached a point of extreme dissonance once Khomeini invoked the *fatwa* against Rushdie. What the debates also underlined, in the general context of the relationship between diasporas and the nation-state, is that often the ground rules that govern the nation itself may not be applied uncritically to inhabitants who fashion themselves in ways that are not identical with those of the majority of the citizens of the state. By way of a lengthy conclusion, I want to examine the Rushdie Affair and its (mis)readings on the assumption that what we have in a diaspora's relationship to the nation is a case of what Lyotard referred to as the differend.



## The Rushdie Affair and the Postcolonial Differend

The Rushdie Affair draws us towards what Jean-François Lyotard has referred to as the case of the differend, in which the aesthetic and the sacred are so opposed to one another that there is no equitable resolution of the differences. Indeed, I would be even more forthright. *The Satanic Verses* has generated a number of discourses that quite simply are incommensurable with each other on any count. If one were to use Lyotard's legal terminology, we have a case of litigation in which there are no ground rules acceptable to all the parties concerned. At the extreme end is a position theorized by the Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad. In his intriguing book, *Plagued by the West*, Al-e Ahmad calls Westernization a pathology (*Gharbzadegi* or "western strickenness"), by which he means the manner in which Westernization functioning as a cosmetic ideal in the Orient effectively destroys the Iranian's understanding of his or her own culture. There is no room here for any kind of hybridity. Indeed, Al-e Ahmad writes,

The west-stricken man has no personality. He is a creature lacking in originality. He, his house, and his speech are colorless, representative of everything and everybody. Not "cosmopolitan." Never! Rather he is a nowhere man, not at home anywhere. He is an amalgam of individuals without personality and personality without specificity. Since he has no self-reliance, he puts on an act. Although he is a master of politesse and charm, he never trusts those to whom he speaks. And, since mistrust is a watchword of our times, he never reveals his true feelings. The only thing which might give him away and is visible is his fear. Whereas in the West the individual's personality is sacrificed to the requirements of specialization, in Iran the west-stricken man has neither personality nor speciality. Only fear. Fear of tomorrow. Fear of dismissal. Fear of anonymity and oblivion. Fear that he will be discovered for what he is, a blockhead. (70)<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Al-e Ahmad's pathologization of the hybrid would sit uncomfortably with hybridity as an essential component of the diasporic aesthetic—not simply uncomfortably, in fact, but in an incommensurable manner, because between Al-e Ahmad and Rushdie we see a clear instance of the differend at play. In the aesthetic domain, *The Satanic Verses* bears witness to differends by finding idioms for them. Yet in the political domain the reaction

to the text has been articulated through conflicting discourses that cannot lead to equitable resolution because the discourses presuppose rules of judgment that are totally at variance with each other. There is not an effective law that could accommodate these two competing positions because there is nothing in law that relates, with equal detachment and validity, to both. It is here that the Rushdie Affair itself becomes modernity's test case for the differend, and one, I would argue, that is more interesting than other literary debates such as those over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Lolita* or *Power Without Glory*. To pursue the differend here, I will limit myself to a handful of statements made both for and against Rushdie.

*The Satanic Verses* had a dual audience: English readers in the West and people from the Indian subcontinent, whether in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh or the eight-million strong "Indian" diaspora overseas. The fantasies recounted in the book are those of people who are Indian (especially Bombaywallahs), and much of the humour in the book is also very distinctly Indian, as are innumerable allusions that are readily accessible only to the ideal Indian reader. Rushdie's Islam, too, is Indian Islam with its mixture of strong Hindu elements. Not surprisingly, among non-white readers the book has been discussed most intensely by British Asians (largely British Muslims) and by Indians in India. In Pakistan and in Bangladesh, the critical reception has not been as great. For Indian Muslims its publication could not have come at a worse time. Already on the defensive in the wake of Hindu revivalism, the last thing the Muslims in India wanted to see was a book that exploded (or attempted to explode) Islam's non-negotiable position about Muhammad and the text of Gibreel's revelation. As the Persian saying goes, *Ba khuda diwana bashad/ Ba Muhammad hoshiyar* ("Take liberties with Allah, but be careful with Muhammad" [Naqvi 179]). Yet the Indian audience must have been of special significance to Rushdie because the first review of the book, by Madhu Jain (even before the book was launched in Britain), and interview with the author appeared in *India Today* on 15 September 1988. This was followed immediately by another interview with Shrabani Basu in *Sunday* (18-24 September). The *India Today* issue also carried excerpts from the

Mahound section of the book, clearly with the author's permission. The cynic could argue that this was a calculated risk by both Rushdie and Viking/Penguin, his publishers, and was aimed at creating vigorous but critical debates among the Indian intelligentsia.<sup>14</sup> However, politicians, too, read the review, and the Muslim Opposition MP Syed Shahabuddin, eager to fill the Muslim leadership vacuum in India, immediately asked the Government of India to ban the book.<sup>15</sup> Whether it was out of political expediency (the Muslim vote bank in India is huge) or out of a genuine worry that the book was indeed blasphemous, one does not know, but the book was banned within a month of the publication of Madhu Jain's review. Because the book was not officially launched until 26 September, it is unlikely that many people had seen the book before it was banned in India. In fact, the excerpts published in *India Today* were probably the only sections of the book that people had read. Before looking at Shahabuddin's own "reading" of the book, I want to go back very briefly to Jalal Al-e Ahmad's critique of Westernization in his remarkable *Plagued by the West*, because Al-e Ahmad positions the differend as the failure on the part of the Iranian Westernised bourgeoisie to understand and transform Iran's real, democratic concerns in the postwar period. Whether in regard to oil or to the dissemination of knowledge, Iran functioned under the Shah as an imperial outpost of the West. The Iranians themselves—at least those who belonged to the establishment—had acquired Western habits (through mimicry) but had lost their own much longer traditions of social concern and equity. Yet Al-e Ahmad also notes the crucial differend at the level of disputation when he writes, "whereas at one time a verse from the Koran or one of the traditions [hadiths] of the Prophet was enough to win an argument and put an opponent in his place, today quoting some foreigner on any subject silences all critics" (72). The other fear that Al-e Ahmad has is that Western liberalism contains within itself the seeds of fascism.<sup>16</sup> More precisely, and Al-e Ahmad returns to this point over and over again, he fears the manner in which an instrumental reason at the core of nineteenth-century Western liberalism transforms the self-reflexive and self-critical reason of the Enlightenment into an instrument of coercion that

reduces the Orient to a collective body of superstitions from which Oriental subjects can be saved only if they can be made to think like Europeans. The massive investment in Oriental archives in the West, to which imperialists sent their Oriental students, is symbolic of a belief that only when the Orient can be archived in the West, and Orientals exposed to research principles based on Western bibliographic practices, will they be able to study their own cultures. Reformulated, the Western Orientalist argument goes something like this: Orientals cannot understand themselves because they have no theory of research. Nor do they have a systematic archive collected in one place that they can use as their data. They must either learn from the West or use the work of Western scholars who have had the benefit of years of training in analytical techniques. The Oriental replies, but you plundered our resources, and you never allowed us to develop research skills in languages that came naturally to us, because you connected research with the acquisition of a Western language.

If we return to Syed Shahabuddin's argument in the context of the foregoing, it soon becomes clear that he continues to read imperialism's instrumental reason as if this were the same reason as the Enlightenment (and certainly Kant) interpreted the term. It is also of some concern that in defending "Islam" from a perceived threat, he played into the hands of the Hindu fundamentalists for whom Shahabuddin's ire confirmed Islam's perceived (and erroneous) inflexibility and totally closed world view. In this version, Shahabuddin made a religiously correct statement but a politically naive one. Let us explore the case a bit more. Shahabuddin's essay appeared in *The Times of India* on 13 October 1988. It is important to realize that by 1988 the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had become an extremely powerful political party with strong grass-root support, especially in North India. The Ayodhya Affair had reached a point of no return, and, looking back, one can see that the destruction of the mosque was simply a matter of time. It is important for us to invoke Ayodhya here because what Shahabuddin is really speaking about is the feeling of the average Muslim in India who is now being told about this unpardonable

affront to the prophet on the part of a renegade Muslim. This information was not available to the average Indian Muslim before Shahabuddin politicized Rushdie. In the same essay, Shahabuddin then becomes a defender of the many avatars, *rishis* ("our religious personalities"), for which the Quran has no place at all. In making this naive political remark, he in fact begins to speak precisely like the devil who can entertain a multiplicity of gods in the pantheon for the sake of civic harmony. In short, Shahabuddin speaks less like a Muslim and more like Rushdie at this point and fails to appease precisely the electorate he is in most need to convince—the vast Hindu electorate. This kind of counter-reading is possible because even Shahabuddin's non-fictional prose has another agenda: to speak of national harmony, even as he invokes a fundamental fact of Indian life, which is that there is precious little intellectual dialogue between Hindus and Muslims in India precisely because Islam cannot countenance idolatry. The Hindu, on the other hand, cannot live without it. As an instance of the differend at play, Shahabuddin's rhetoric exposes the differend within India, and the need, in that country, too, to discover other means by which dialogue can take place. The Hindu intellectual speaks with ease with the Marxist Aijaz Ahmad, but has great difficulty following Shahabuddin. There are, then, three levels at which Shahabuddin operates. At the level of the Islamic defender of the faith, the claim is a simple one of Rushdie giving offence to Muslims who revere the Prophet as the perfect man and whose name the devout Muslim chants five times a day. The connection between Mahound and the Prophet is made explicitly in *The Satanic Verses*, which, of course, suggests that the book was written to offend.

The second text of Shahabuddin is different. It is based on Indian legal codes that explicitly state (Article 295A of the Indian Penal Code) that offence to anyone's religion in India is punishable by fine and/or imprisonment (not by death, let us add). Shahabuddin here invokes a variant of a law that exists, in different forms, in the West. In this instance, it is a case of litigation that can be mounted and/or defended successfully. However, it is the third text of Shahabuddin, the use of the Affair to underline Islam's own respect for other religions (even those

that are not religions of the Book and condemned in the *Quran*), that is interesting. *The Satanic Verses* thus becomes a means by which Indian Islam distances itself from one of the fundamental characteristics of Islam (that the Hindu is essentially a Kafir). In 1989 this was an important move on the part of thinking Muslims in India who saw Hindu fundamentalism as their greatest threat. How to appease the Hindu, how to emphasize that Islam never condoned the destruction of temples, how to use *The Satanic Verses* to become a defender not only of Islam but of the multitude of religions within India? Indeed, how to be another Rushdie and yet uncompromisingly anti-Rushdie? These are the texts that have emerged from the debates thus far, as they touch on Indian social and political life. And the strategy backfired. The vernacular press did not support Shahabuddin, and Rajiv Gandhi's banning of the novel was seen as another act of appeasement of the Muslims not long after the Shah Bano case, in which Muslim Sharia laws were allowed to override Indian secular law. In Britain, where the protest began with the Islamic Foundation in Leicester's director Faiyazuddin Ahmad and where Muslims did read the book closely, the protests were directed not so much against the author as against his publisher, Viking/Penguin Books, which was asked to withdraw the book and pay compensation to the Muslim community for sacrilege. It was also in Britain that pan-Islamic support was mustered and, finally, if we are to believe one version of the events, a request made to Khomeini to act on behalf of all aggrieved Muslims. The request, however, seems to have been anticipated in remarks made by a number of British Muslims, one of whom, M. H. Faruqi, in fact, wrote, "[p]erhaps it would be more salutary if the author is allowed to enter into Islamic jurisdiction and prosecuted under relevant law" (qtd. in Appignanesi and Maitland 61). It hardly needs to be added that this "relevant law" condemns the offenders of Islam to death. Two points to Rushdie, two points to Islam, one to Hinduism (unwittingly).

It was against this furore that one would like to read Rushdie's most important defence, which was published on 22 January 1989. It is an interesting defence because it is straight out of the project of modernity that began, as many would argue, and

persuasively I believe, with the Enlightenment. The key to Rushdie's argument is to be found in his carefully written sentences against what he sees as the essentialist Islam of the "tribe of clerics," a "contemporary Thought Police" (qtd. in Appignanesi and Maitland 74-75). The "Thought Police" have established the ground rules for the discussion of Islam, not Islam itself. Rushdie writes:

They have turned Muhammad into a perfect being, his life into a perfect life, his revelation into the unambiguous, clear event it originally was not. Powerful taboos have been erected. One may not discuss Muhammad as if he were human, with human virtues and weaknesses. One may not discuss the growth of Islam as a historical phenomenon, as an ideology born out of its time.

(qtd. in Appignanesi and Maitland 74-75)

These are perfectly reasonable arguments, and not at all unusual among liberal intellectuals in the West, or, for that matter, in other parts of the world as well. However, in presenting the argument in these terms, Rushdie implicitly accepts that the book is a critique of Islam and, furthermore, assumes, against the evidence, that any religion can survive the kind of historicization that he has in mind. Since the spheres of religion and the state are not at all clearly demarcated in Islam, Rushdie's case makes sense only if the two spheres indeed were separate. The choice for civilization, as Rushdie argues, is simple: one has to choose between Enlightenment and barbarism. However, is the choice so straightforward that one can state quite simply, "It is time for us to choose"? Choose what? A secular sphere from which the Muslims are excluded and a religious sphere in which the laws of blasphemy do not apply? Diasporic ideology, as we have argued, resists the historical in favour of the mystical and universal. No matter how powerfully the argument is presented, it cuts no ice, even with British Muslims, as may be seen from Michael Foot's elegant defence of Rushdie. Foot's target text is Dr. Shabbir Akhtar's defence of the burning of the book in Bradford: "Any faith which compromises its internal temper of militant wrath is destined for the dustbin of history, for it can no longer preserve its faithful heritage in the face of corrosive influences," wrote Akhtar (*Agenda*, 27 February 1989; qtd. in Foot 243). The point that Akhtar misses is that if all religions were similarly militant

against each other, especially in those nation-states in which one of the religious groups has been defined traditionally as the outsider, we would all be in a dreadful mess. What is there in Islam that needs the temper of militancy and what is the political and social payoff of underlining this militancy? Foot's counter-argument is that the retreat from militancy has been Christianity's new-found strength, an argument with which Akhtar would not agree, or refuses to see. Clearly, the force of the argument (and Foot scores strongly against Akhtar here) is not at issue. What is at issue is whether Foot (and Rushdie) can see Akhtar's argument. Millions of Muslims can, just as many Westerners cannot. Two points to Rushdie here, two to Islam.

We can, of course, go through any number of defences of Rushdie. One, however, that is of some importance is Carlos Fuentes's essay "Words Apart," which appeared in the *Guardian* on 24 February 1989, just more than a week after the proclamation of the *fatwa*. Fuentes invokes Mikhail Bakhtin to make the case that the novel is *the* form of modernity, in which a multiplicity of languages and voices can expose the folly of a world view that locks itself into meaning. Such a world view—where "reality is dogmatically defined"—is that of the Ayatollahs of this world. For them, the source of all meaning is a closed sacred text that allows for no disagreement. Fuentes then goes on to counterpoint absolute truth against the idea of constantly searching for the truth. He affirms Luis Buñuel's position: "I would give my life for a man who is looking for the truth. But I would gladly kill a man who thinks that he has found the truth" (246). The statement exaggerates, in a surrealist sort of a way, but the point comes across clearly. It is this position that is reversed for those who have condemned Rushdie. They would gladly give their lives away for those who claim to have found the truth and would murder the unbelievers or those incapable of living with absolutes.

We can cite many more instances of the debates surrounding the Rushdie affair, but the lines of the differend return to a simple opposition. Rushdie views the case as one in which justice can be meted out provided all parties concerned can talk about the issues, but within an Enlightenment framework in which the



aesthetic object has a special place. As the *Affair* dragged on, Rushdie began to repeat the aesthetic argument. The book is fiction, a work of art, and therefore not subject to absolutely realist readings. In *Imaginary Homelands*, this position is extensively and monotonously argued. In a recent interview (October 1994), Rushdie states that the work of art is essentially an aesthetic object and should be read through aesthetic categories (sensibility, organization, design, etc.); its politics is only of secondary significance (Interview with Kerry O'Brien).

### Conclusion: The Postcolonial Differend

Can one theorize the Rushdie *Affair* and make an intervention into diasporic aesthetics without repeating the rhetoric of intractability? I have suggested in the second half of this paper that the Rushdie *Affair* dramatically draws our attention to diasporic politics within a nation-state as an instance of the differend. Through the use of the term "the postcolonial differend," I now want to make some (in)conclusive remarks about the uses of the differend as a mode of analysis that goes beyond consensual politics.

This is how Lyotard defines differend in the opening page of his book *The Differend*:

As distinguished from litigation, a differend [*diffférend*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule). (xi)

The most obvious modern instance of the differend is the claim on the part of certain revisionist historians such as Robert Faurisson and David Irving that the Holocaust needs to be rethought and the "facts" modified.<sup>17</sup> Faurisson, for example, goes on to dispute the very existence of gas chambers because he could not find a single individual who had actually seen a gas chamber with his own eyes. What is at issue here is the nature of the referent. Since reality is not "what is 'given' to this or that 'subject'" but a

“state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures defined by a unanimously agreed-upon protocol” (Lyotard 4), it follows that any object of analysis or knowledge comes into being only insofar as it “require[s] that establishment procedures be effectuated in regard to it” (Lyotard 9). When the establishment procedures unproblematically link up diverging phrase regimens within discursive laws that are fixed, laws such as dialogue, consensus, and so on, the matter is resolved. However, when the linkages cannot be effectuated by virtue of a radical heterogeneity of the items—by virtue of their intrinsic incommensurability—then we begin “to bear witness to the differend.” Lyotard continues: “A case of differend between two parties takes place when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (9). To give the differend any real presence or effectiveness, to make it legitimate in spite of the absence of assimilative linkages between the phrase regimens of the competing ideas, one needs to recast the phrases themselves through new idioms in order that the elements that make up a phrase—its referent (what it is about, the case), its sense (what the case signifies), the person to whom it is addressed (the addressee), the person through whom the case is made (the addressor)—can be given new meaning. Lyotard speaks of silence, a negative phrase, as an example of something that has yet to be phrased: since it cannot be staged, it has no effectiveness.

The claim here is not that every dispute must be resolved but “how to argue for a nonresolvable heterogeneity (the basis for all true discussion) that is not a simple pluralism” (Carroll 80). What the Rushdie Affair dramatizes so forcefully is that the diasporic imaginary and the postcolonial are phrases in dispute because in moments of crisis the parties concerned present their case in a language and through sets of manoeuvres unacceptable to the other in a court of law. The conflict is not a simple opposition between us and them, the postcolonial and the nation-state, or the colonizer and the colonized; rather, it is a consequence of phrase regimens endemic to the worlds engendered by these terms.

It seems that Rushdie's works confirm the radical practice of heterogeneity where the differend is affirmed and not "suppressed or resolved" (Carroll 75). The subjects in his works do not exist outside or prior to the phrases through which they are constituted. There is, then, no supra real or a real outside the subject positions so constructed through which arbitration can take place. This does not mean that there is no room for correct or proper political action from a position of consensus or detachment (the image of the law); rather, the flight from spurious ground rules (the "authentic base," as some would say) draws attention to the problematic nature of the subjects in these works. A refusal to grant objective history (the real) priority and, furthermore, to see this reality as an instrument of totalitarianism and injustice because the victim's testimony is considered to be without authority leads Lyotard to claim that history (rationality) is really unjust in cases of the differend. One has to return to disarticulations, to silence, to feelings, to the corporeal, and not simply to the mental, for counter-hegemonic positions.

In this respect, the aesthetic order especially signals the possibility of alternative worlds that do not seek legitimation purely through facts. The aesthetic then contains unresolvable "heterogeneities"—Keats came close to it with his phrase "negative capability"—because unbridgeable gaps are left in "dispute." Lyotard sees this in Kant's own claim that the ethical, for instance, could not be deduced from the cognitive. The aesthetic, too, cannot be demonstrated through recourse to the cognitive and hence to reality. The Kantian sublime is thus a celebration of heterogeneity because, while it demands a certain universality, it does not assume that the universal is a given. The sublime celebrates antinomy as the mind stretches it as far as it can. The mind embraces the sublime as if this were desirable and necessary and would continue to do so if reason were not to re-establish its law. Yet in that moment of celebration, in that dispute between faculties, in that incommensurable differend, no object can be represented that equals the idea of the totality.

In all this the urgent demand is that the differend should be listened to. The diasporic imaginary, as the littoral, is that which defies social assimilation with ease. If and when that assimilation

occurs, diasporas disappear. Until then what we have to address — as a matter of justice — is the radical politics of heterogeneity. Since the differend ultimately is unresolvable, and phrases cannot be linked unproblematically, the differend, as David Carroll explains, “proposes strategies . . . of resisting . . . homogenization by all political, aesthetic, philosophical means possible” (87)— except, of course, for a genre of discourse such as the novel, which does link the various phrase regimens together. These phrase regimens, such as the cognitive, the prescriptive, the performative, the exclamatory, the interrogative, in themselves represent mutually exclusive modes of representing the universe (Lyotard 128). The aesthetic then becomes a site for the differend to be presented even as the phrase regimens themselves remain incommensurable.

Ultimately, of course, Rushdie is speaking about justice for the diaspora. Is the concept of justice (not just the legal bourgeois term surrounding specific legal codes and acts) equally available to all citizens or is it that justice is the prerogative of only those citizens who are part of a homogeneous British family that includes not only white Britons but also the assimilable black? What I have done is think through some of the radical incommensurabilities in the texts of Rushdie from the perspective of what Lyotard has called the differend, as both the staging of and engagement with difference as dispute. In the politics of the Rushdie Affair, we encounter phrase regimes that are in conflict. So firmly grounded are the opposing views in a particular ideological and epistemological formation that either, from the point of view of the given epistemology or truth conditions, is equally true and valid. Given such a persuasive rhetoric, even the question of a communicative community capable of arbitrating, consensually, is out of the question. In the case of the Rushdie Affair, compromise or justice is not possible because the grounds of the arguments are incommensurable. There are no winners and losers in the Rushdie Affair, only the presencing of the differend through agonistic discourses and politics. What must be recognized is that in this presencing there is no possibility of a recourse to the grand narratives of the centre or the nation-state (recall both Powell and Thatcher here). The grand narrative therefore

is replaced by the local and by the differend, which, as I read it, is a phrase that designates precisely those conditions such as Rushdie's, where the rupture, the drift, the inconclusive, begin to designate the diasporic condition itself. In diasporic theory we must bear witness to the differend.

## NOTES

- 1 My thanks to Jim Clifford, Iain Chambers, Christopher Connery, Stephen Slemon, Brett Nicholls, Maria Degabriele, Abdollah Zahiri, and Horst Ruthrof for their help in writing this paper.
- 2 I owe this phrase to Iain Chambers.
- 3 The poem reads:  
 Let me tell you, boyo, bach: I love this place,  
 where green hills shelter me from fear,  
 jet fighters dance like dragonflies  
 mating over unsteady, unafraid lambs,  
 and in the pub a divorcée, made needy  
 by the Spring, talks rugby and holidays  
 with my protectors, drinks, and grows  
 more lovely with each glass. So, too, do they.  
 As for me, I must hide my face  
 from farmers mending fences, runners, ponied girls;  
 must frame it in these whitewashed, thickstoned walls  
 while the great canvas of the universe  
 shrinks to a thumbnail sketch. And yet  
 I love the place. It remembers, so it says, a time  
 older than chapel, druid, mistletoe and god,  
 and journeys still, across enchanted pools,  
 towards that once and future Avalon. (128)
- 4 See Rushdie, "Hobson-Jobson," in *Imaginary Homelands* (81-83).
- 5 Phoolan Devi was released on 19 February 1994 after spending 11 years in prison. She was imprisoned on charges of murdering 18 upper-caste landowners. She turned a dacoit after she was gang-raped in her village of low-caste Hindus. Wanted in 55 criminal cases on charges including murder, kidnapping, and robbery, she gave herself up in February 1983. Her story already has been made into films and books. It is very likely that Devi will now enter politics. See *San Jose Mercury News* 20 February 1994; Sen; and Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* (1994).
- 6 Millenarian narratives are an integral part of diasporic recollections and may be designated, for their respective diasporas, through terms such as the Indological, the Africological, and the Zionist.
- 7 *Observer*, 22 January 1989 (qtd. in Appignanesi and Maitland, 75).
- 8 Two of the novels that Rushdie admires most are *Moby Dick* and *Ulysses*.
- 9 "[T]he book isn't actually about Islam, but about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay," wrote Rushdie to the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (qtd. in Appignanesi and Maitland 44).
- 10 Air India Flight 182 exploded in 1985, one of the more audacious acts of Sikh terrorism that actually originated, it seems, in the Canadian Indian diaspora. 29,002 feet was compulsory knowledge for geography students in the colonies.

## 11 Asad asks in footnote 21:

Does Bhabha mean (a) that it is not worth appealing to the past as a way of authenticating social identities because the act of articulating emergent identities authenticates itself or (b) that the past, albeit unsettled, is not worth contesting because it is merely an aesthetic resource for inventing new narratives of the self? (263)

## 12 Asad notes that to speak of cultural syncretism or cultural hybrids presupposes a conceptual distinction between pre-existing ("pure") cultures. Of course, all apparent cultural unities are the outcomes of diverse origins, and it is misleading to think of an identifiable cultural unity as having neutrally traceable boundaries. (262)

13 Note that on his visit to an Islamic seminary in Qom, Naipaul chanced upon a book with a sepia-coloured cover that had been written by an Iranian who, the director of the seminary said, "had spent an apparently shattering year in England. This book was called *The West Is Sick*" (Naipaul 50).

## 14 See Naqvi, 166-69.

15 Unless otherwise stated, my source for the debates surrounding *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwa* against Rushdie's life is *The Rushdie File*, edited by Appignanesi and Maitland. See also Fischer and Abedi, Chapter 7.

## 16 "One of the basic problems of western civilization (in the Western countries themselves) is the constant threat of the seeds of fascism within the body of 19th century liberalism" (97).

## 17 See Lipstadt.

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