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***Foreign Home and Familiar Abroad  
in Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses***

**“Hogar” foráneo y extranjería familiar en *Los versos satánicos* de Salman Rushdie**

**Plabras clave:** humanismo, inmigrante, identidad, India, postcolonialismo, realidad

**Resumen:** Saladin Chamcha, el personaje principal de la novela de Salman Rushdie, *Los versos satánicos*, podría ser considerado un ejempló típico del ‘viajero’ entre mundos distintos, del inmigrante para el cual, el proceso de adopción por el nuevo país implica, de modo necesario, el rechazo sin derecho de apelación del país de origen. No obstante, la asimilación de los nuevos valores sin una previa comprensión y apropiación de los mismos, conlleva inevitablemente al conflicto dramático entre el personaje y la realidad del mundo que había idealizado, así como al rechazo del personaje como mero ‘extranjero’. Cuando Saladin Chamcha se da cuenta de que la identidad se construye a base de unos valores asumidos como personales y adquiridos tras un proceso individual y no a través de una sencilla imitación, su regreso a India, su país natal, deja de ser un proceso frustrado o un rechazo orgánico, para convertirse en un auténtico proceso de reevaluación integradora.

**Introduction**

One of the main characters in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, namely Saladin Chamcha, is likely to be identified as the prototype of the hoverer between worlds in his quest of feeling at home both with himself and as a context for an authentic living. Leaving India out of a prejudiced perspective upon it and equally blindly embracing foreignness as his home, Saladin builds a whole new identity, British, of course, forcing his acceptance in a space he unquestionably idealizes. This artificial becoming process runs parallel with an entire theory of hatred to his kindred and his Indian tradition, as a modality of enforcement regarding his English transformation. Home becomes foreign while everything abroad is familiar, according to a sound migration necessity. Faced with real England, the constructed image of the adopted / adoptive country cracking, Saladin returns to India which, once understood and assumed in terms of its genuine reality and values, eventually becomes his ‘home.’

**1. Voices of the “dream - Vilayet” – Rule, Britannia!**

**1.1. From Salahuddin Chamchawala to Saladin Chamcha: O, pounds, o, sensibility!**

The image of London in *The Satanic Verses* varies between fanatic adoration and bitter blasphemy, emotions that originate either in the prejudices of the participants to the discourse of the ‘polis’, or in the revelations related to its reality.

Salahuddin Chamchawala's first contact with England is by means of a wallet full of pounds that he finds in the street close to Scandal Point, his home: “pounds! Pounds sterling, from Proper London in the fabled country of Vilayet across the

black water and far away.”<sup>1</sup>(35). Not very much later, genuine London for the thirteen – year – old Salahuddin translates as archetypal London, the city of the common attraction points for any visitor or immigrant – “Proper London itself, Bigben Nelsonscolumn Lordstavern Bloodytower Queen. (...) Saintspauls, Puddinglane, Threadneedlestreet.” (38-39) – plus some ‘moral values’: “the dream – Vilayet of poise and moderation.” (37)

Salahuddin’s first trip to London, “the brave new world”, is associated with the “interplanetary migrations”, similar to those in Asimov’s *Foundation* or Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles*. Once in England where he will benefit a proper education, Salahuddin has to deny his Indian identity and the first step in achieving this is the symbolic rejection of his father and of all the values he symbolizes; he declares his secularity, “living without a god of any type”, as the necessary premise for becoming “a good and proper English man.” (43) Becoming an Englishman from this perspective means enduring all the negative English realities he has been warned about by his Indian family – “even if there was only paper in the toilets and trepid, used water full of mud and soap to step into after taking exercise, even if it meant a lifetime spent amongst winter-naked trees” (43) or “even if his classmates giggled at his voice and excluded him from their secrets” (43) – while the best way of coping with this is imitating the ones he admires – “and that was when he began to act, to find masks that these fellows would recognize, pale face masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was okay, he was people-like-us.” (43)

Salahuddin’s unconditioned surrender to idealized England proves successful due to his adopting and adapting policy: five years later, Salahuddin becomes Saladin, “after the fashion of the English school” (45), while, by graduation time, he has already received his British passport, wishing to continue his English experience as an actor. Saladin’s career choice goes hand in hand with his identity choice: being an actor needs all the ‘pathos’, ‘hedonism’ and ‘disguise’ present in a migrant as well, Saladin assuming the ‘Creator’s role’ in both directions: “A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, hedonism in his struggle (...). Or, consider him socio-politically: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves.” (49) Saladin’s project of becoming in accordance with the English standards includes leading a proper personal life too: he marries Pamela Lovelace, English, part of his “happy future”: “He tried to invent a happy future for them, to make it come true by making it up and then believing in it.” (51)

Saladin Chamcha constructs his English identity starting from mimicking the typical English facial expression to adopting the English perspective upon the world. “This face was handsome in a somewhat sour, patrician fashion, with long, thick, downturned lips like those of a disgusted turbot, and thin eyebrows arching sharply over eyes that watched the world with a kind of alert contempt.” (33)

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<sup>1</sup>All quotes are from Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, London: Vintage Books, 2006 (1988)

Within the same adapting process, learning the modulations of the foreign voice enriches his new identity.

Returning to India, faced with a reality that tries to impose on him, Saladin rejects it as 'not his home.' His home, England, 'tangible, material', is the space in which he has "success, money, wife." (61) For the actor of the thousand voices, London represents "the real world" he returns to after India's first attempt to recuperate him: "He was a neat man in a buttoned suit heading for London and an ordered, contended life. He was a member of the real world." (74) "Ellowen Deewen" (London) circumscribes the values that Saladin believes in as having been adopted as his own: "I am a man to whom certain things are of importance: rigour, self-discipline, reason, the pursuit of what is noble without recourse to that old crutch – God. The ideal of beauty, the possibility of exaltation, the mind." (135) England is the "moderate and common-sensical land" (158) whose "first class" (164) Citizen he was, also "a member of Actors' Equity, the Automobile Association and the Garrick Club." (163)

Even after the explosion of the return plane and his transformation into a monstrous devil goat, Saladin continues to deny his Indian self – "I'm not your kind' (...) 'you're not my people. I have spent half my life trying to get away from you" (he tells Sufyan, Indian owner of the Shaandaar Café) – and to reinforce the rightfulness of his English transformation: "Had he not pursued his own idea of the good, sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness? Had he not worked hard, avoided trouble, striven to become new? Assiduity, fastidiousness, moderation, restraint, self-reliance, probity, family, life: what did these add up to if not a moral code?" (256-257)

Assuming the label *Civis Britannicus sum*, Saladin Chamcha makes the apology of London as an "islet of sensibility, surrounded by the cool sense of the sea" (398), telling his/its love story. His initial attitude was one of prostration, followed by the desire of identification with it, annihilating his previous existence. London means hospitality – "We Londoners can be proud of our hospitality" (398) -, having a long tradition of an authentic refuge for those attracted by its splendor – London cannot be identified with "the new regulations that controlled immigration" or with the catastrophic experience while he was a monster. "Of material things, he had given his love to this city, London, preferring it to the city of his birth or to any other, had been creeping up to it, stealthily, with mounting excitement, freezing into a statue when it looked in his direction, dreaming of being the one to possess it and so, in a sense, become it." (398) For Saladin, London is "O Proper London!", the past and the present which he adopts and which is believed to circumscribe his future; imagined London is the equivalent of "culture, city, wife; and a fourth and final love, of which he had spoken to nobody: the love of a dream [having a baby]" (400).

### ***1.2. What is daddy saying? – "A freak, an actor!"***

Five years after Salahuddin's transformation into Saladin of the Vilayeti, for Changez Chamcawala, the father, England means his son's showing "contempt for his own kind" (45) as well as his son's transformation into "a faunteroy, a grand

panjandrum, (...) a freak.” (45) Once hearing of Saladin’s carrier choice, that of being an actor, Changez translates it according to Indian standards: “a confounded gigolo”, “a ghoul, a hoosh (...). An actor!” (48), labeling it as devil’s work, betrayal of his family’s values and of his country’s heritage. What for Saladin means a modality of conquering the hearts of the people he wants to belong to, a quick way of being one of “people-like-us” by mimicking them unconditionally, for Changez his son’s job means “spend[ing] your life jiggling and preening under bright lights, kissing blonde women under the gaze of strangers who have paid to watch your shame.” (47) Saladin’s English transformation equals with the interruption of the Indian family line and tradition, the annihilation of Changez’s posterity: “He has made himself into an imitator of non-existing men. I have nobody to follow me, to give what I have made. This is his revenge: he steals from me my posterity.” (71)

### *1.3. Pamela Chamcha, née Lovelace – (bloody) Britannia: warm beer, mince pies and common sense*

If, for Saladin Chamcha, the projected and idealized image of England is also the only reality he accepts as plausible and possible, his wife, Pamela, discriminates between fantasy, Saladin’s one, and what England really stands for. Talking to Jumpy Joshy, her husband’s former colleague and her present lover, Pamela accuses Saladin of his touristic approach to England: “Him and his Royal Family, you wouldn’t believe. Cricket, the Houses of Parliament, the Queen. The place never stopped being a picture postcard to him. You couldn’t get him to look at what was really real.”(175) More than that, Pamela herself, despite being his wife, is part of the same clichéistic approach, Saladin’s perception of her being a typological, never a particular one: “I was bloody Britannia. Warm beer, mince pies, common-sense and me. But I’m really real, too, Jumpy Joshy; I really really am.”(175) Pamela complains about being perceived as nothing more than all the other attraction points, part of Saladin’s ideal world, “with the voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream – England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit.”(180) The unseen, other world of their relationship is, however, an impossible dialogue – “I could never say anything to you, not really, not the least thing” (183) –, rudeness – “You interrupted me in public” (183) – and finally Pamela’s insight unveiling the “empty space” behind his acted certainty.

In addition to accusing Saladin of a distorted, prejudiced England-view, Pamela sketches the realistic portrait of London, an image Saladin is not or does not want to be aware of: it is a London of injustice, racial prejudices, social acceptance limitations, violence to the other. Pamela, the deputy community relations officer and “damn good at it, ifisaysomyself” (183), relates: “We just elected our first black Chair and all the votes cast against him were white. Down the hatch! Last week a respected Asian street trader, for whom MPs of all parties had interceded, was deported after eighteen years in Britain because, fifteen years ago, he posted a certain form forty-eight hours late. Chin-chin! Next week in Brickhall Magistrates’ Court the police will be trying to fit up a fifty-year-old

Nigerian woman, accusing her of assault, having previously beaten her senseless. Skol!” (183) The real English normality differs from Saladin’s “museum – values (...) hanging in golden frame on honorific walls” (399): Pamela refers to normality in terms of “coppers taking their clothes off and drinking urine out of helmets” or “black people (...) scared out of their heads, talking about obeah, chicken entrails, the lot. The goddamn bastards are enjoying this: scare the coons with their own ooga booga and have a few naughty nights into the bargain.” (280) Though “weird” or “unlikely”, this is the face of England that Saladin must “wake up” to and with which Pamela is realistically faced on a regular basis.

#### ***1.4. Zeeny Vakil – India’s calling***

Zeeny Vakil, Saladin’s Indian lover and intended rescuer, assumes the objective consciousness role, reflecting Saladin into the mirror of an unmythical reality. Thus Zeeny points to his “Angreez accent” bluntly trying to make him aware that “it’s [not] so perfect, it slips, baba, like a false moustache.” (52) What Saladin considers a successful English career in acting – he is the heart of *The Aliens Show* (together with Mimi Mamoulian), his gift for mimicry earning him the title of “Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice” (60) - , a fact that builds up to his Englishness, corresponds to Zeeny’s denunciation: “They pay you to imitate them, as long as they don’t have to look at you. Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face.” (60) Later, but not very late, the very producer of the show, Hal Valance, will unveil the truth about it and will delineate Saladin’s real position as an actor: “Audience surveys show that ethnics don’t watch ethnic shows. (...) They want fucking Dynasty, like everyone else. Your profile’s wrong. (...) you’re history.” (265)

Zeeny explains the evidence hiding beneath Saladin’s blindness as to his successful career, referring to the ‘wrong colour’ of his face as the reason for which only his voice is used. His ‘top’ position on the English voice scene is counterpoised, for Zeeny, by his travel to “wogland [India] with some two-bit company, playing the babu part (...) just to get into a play” (61), while Saladin’s enthusiasm and complete total dedication means nothing else than a “bloody slave mentality.” (61)

#### ***1.5. Jumpy Joshy – a friend, not really***

Jumpy Joshy, Saladin’s friend and next-in-bed with Pamela, shares the latter’s looking-down on Saladin, the Englishman in progress: his friend’s complex and full-hearted effort of becoming scales down to “an imitation of life, a mask’s mask.” (174) Saladin’s English world, laboriously engineered and passionately inhabited, translates, for Joshy, into “the caricature of an actor’s room, full of signed photographs of colleagues, handbills, framed programmes, production stills, citations, awards, volumes of movie-star memoirs” (174) – there is no sign in Jumpy’s Saladin-view of the latter’s English adopted moral values, life-style, behavior pattern, or family constellation. England, in Saladin’s case, is “his England, the one he believed in.” (175)

### **1.6. *Saladin back to Salahuddin – the sharp kick of reality***

After the explosion of *Bostan*, the plane, on his return from India and his landing on the British land, Saladin turns into a goat-resembling devilish creature, his minutely composed English appearance cracking to let go of an “Animal (...) You’re all the same. Can’t expect animals to observe civilized standards. (...) you little fuck” (158) England, the “cool Vilayet” (37), becomes a “universe of fear” (158) whose only entities are three immigration officers and five policemen. In the police van where he is boxed up under the suspicion of being an illegal immigrant or at least a serious social danger, Saladin experiences his first contact with real England – “he felt a sharp kick land on his ribs, painful and realistic enough” (158) – and realizes that he is perceived in the same way as the “riff-raff from villages in Sylhet or the bicycle-repair shops of Gujranwala” (159) and not at all according to his minutely constructed English identity. (Looking like Shaitan would have contradicted any English looks one way or another!)

The humiliation experienced by the still gullible Saladin is later sentimentally theorized into a self-oriented lamentation: if he obeyed and assumed all that England stands for, “then how cruel these fates were to instigate his rejection by the very world he had so determinedly courted; how desolating, to be cast from the gates of the city one believed oneself to have taken long ago! – what mean small-mindedness was this, to cast him back into the bosom of his people, from whom he’d felt so distant for so long!” (254)

After the disaster produced at the Hot Wax nightclub, where, because of him, everything was set on fire, Saladin, coming back to his human appearance, declares: “I’ll come back to life.” (400)

The real London forces him into explaining the abstract notions from his previous sterile discourse: “Easier said than done; it was life, after all, that had rewarded his love of a dream-child with childlessness; his love of a woman, with her estrangement from him and her insemination by his old college friend; his love of a city, by hurling him down towards it from Himalayan heights; and his love of a civilization, by having him bedeviled, humiliated, broken upon its wheel.” (401) Returning to India since hearing about his father’s imminent death, - but not because of this - Saladin approaches his much despised past differently, revalorizing what he, as a child, blindly rejected as being necessarily bad. From this new perspective, “His old English life, its bizzareries, its evils, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant, like his truncated stage-name.” (534) What has happened is not a reversal of roles – England: bad, India: good – but Saladin’s understanding and valuing of the two realities and, most importantly, of his relating to them (Saladin’s evolution from fanaticism to humanism is the topic of a different article).

## **2. India – between the Country of Oz and Assam**

### **2.1. *Saladin’s India – from dust to muck***

The image of India which Salahuddin repudiates by embracing the image of England instead breathes the same artificiality as the latter. Abjuring India originates in a prejudice, a mental cliché, not in the least the consequence of it

having been understood. As a matter of fact, Salahuddin cannot formulate any reproach to his native country when he leaves it, in the same way in which what he admires about London is an assembly of collected images, not the result of a lived experience. Once mesmerized by the “real pounds” standing for the fabled Vilayet, Salahuddin starts anathematizing “the Bombay of dust, vulgarity, policemen in shorts, transvestites, movie fanzines, pavement sleepers and the rumoured singing whores of Grant Road.” (37) The “poise and moderation” (37) England is theoretically associated with balances the actual “confusion and super-abundance” of the already estranged Bombay.

Five years after his immersion in the unconditionally admired England, ‘critical thinking’ stands as Saladin’s newest ability acquired as part of his education, applying it to everything that springs in his way during the short visit back home. His Indian home is the place where “the fans are fixed too loosely (...), the food is too fattening (...), the top-floor balconies are unsafe (...), we are just jungle people.” (44) Saladin’s adolescent – maybe understandable - revolt remains unabated as the process of building an English identity is in progress: his first mature visit home does not nuance any of his previous radical taunts addressed to everything that is Indian, his alien country being nothing else than “the old despised disorder. (...) rubble, litter, noise.” (54) Examples are picked up at a glance: while reading a newspaper, Saladin “neutrally” transfers the information about a Bombay ‘rail roko’ demonstration which proves Indian police as violent, corrupted and demagogic.

On the plane flying back to England, afraid that his speech has been infested with “the Bombay lilt”, Saladin rapidly enumerates all the “diabolic [Indian] humiliations” he expects to endure: “Would he take to putting coconut-oil in his hair? Would he take to squeezing his nostrils between thumb and forefinger, blowing noisily and drawing forth a glutinous silver arc of muck?” (34) All in all, Saladin rounds off his journey to India as a negative experience: “regression”, “unnatural”, “denial of time”, “revolt against history”, and “the whole thing was bound to be a disaster.” (34)

## 2.2. *Indians’ India*

The new identity of India consists, indeed, in inauthenticity, an amalgam of borrowed elements, guaranteed by the others’ outside perception, and not by the locals’ inside necessary delineation, the loan identity surpassing qualitatively the real one. Zeeny Vakil, the character who will fall in love with Saladin Chamcha after his separation from Pamela, his wife, is the author of *The Only Good Indian*, a book that perfectly illustrates India’s status: “She was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seem to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest? – had created a predictable stink, especially because of its title.” (52)

The real image of India could be built only as a result of concrete situations or based on testimonies from within – Bhupen Gandhi, a close acquaintance of Zeeny Vakil, narrates the locals’ reaction to the passengers involved in a railway disaster:

“After the accident, he said, the surviving passengers swam to the shore (the train had plunged off a bridge) and were met by local villagers, who pushed them under the water until they drowned and then looted their bodies.” (55)

Acknowledging, formulating and assuming their national identity prove problematic for Rushdie’s India citizens. Only by successfully achieving these can India claim its status as a civilized place; it is by means of orienting towards itself and assuming its gestures, however cruel they might be, that India could define itself as different from the other nations: “ ‘We always forgive ourselves by blaming outsiders, America, Pakistan, any damn place. Excuse me, George, but for me it all goes back to Assam, we have to start with that.’ The massacre of the innocents. Photographs of children’s corpses, arranged neatly in line like soldiers on parade. They had been clubbed to death, pelted with stones, their necks cut in half by knives. Those neat ranks of death, Chamcha remembered. As if only horror could sting India into orderliness. (...) ‘We are all guilty of Assam,’ he [Bhupen] said. ‘Each person of us. Unless and until we face it, that the children’s deaths were our fault, we cannot call ourselves a civilized people.’”(56)

Bombay represents a culture of duplicates, imitations, the success models from beyond borders being dreamt of and unmediatedly transposed locally. It is not only architecture works but also values and behaviours that are imitated: “Bombay was a culture of re-makes. Its architecture mimicked the skyscrapers, its cinema endlessly re-invented *The Magnificent Seven* and *Love Story* (...). Its millionaires, too, had taken to importing their lives.” (64)

The reality of Bombay is one under construction, in the process of self-defining, a process in which Saladin is involved as well, on a different trajectory, though. The image of Bombay when he leaves it illustrates this hypostasis: “The aeroplane lifted and banked over the city. Somewhere below him, his father was dressing up a servant as his dead wife. The new traffic scheme had jammed the city centre solid. Politicians were trying to build careers by going on padyatras, pilgrimages on foot across the country. There were graffiti that read: *Advice to politicians. Only step to take: padyatra to hell. Or, sometimes: to Assam.* Actors were getting mixed up in politics. (...) Saladin Chamcha, on Flight 420, closed his eyes; and felt, with deep relief, the tell-tale shiftings and settlings in his throat which indicated that his voice had begun of its own accord to revert to its reliable, English self.” (73)

The hypostases of India depicted in *The Satanic Verses* vary from the ignorant perception to the demagogy of “involvement”. Between the two poles the reader discovers a fragmented reality in which the lack of structuring leads to the violence of the lack of meaning, in which masks are mistaken for identities while unveiling truths could trigger crimes.

### **2.3. Old Salahuddin’s India, “solid and real”**

Zeeny Vakil used to accuse Saladin of ignorance to the real Bombay of the present and of the past, of indifference to the space he once rejected without having experienced its genuine image: “What do you know about Bombay? Your own city, only it never was. To you, it’s a dream of childhood. Growing up on Scandal Point is

like living on the moon. No bustees there, no sirrees, only servants' quarters. Did Shiv Sena elements come there to make communal trouble? Were your neighbours starving in the textile strike? Did Datta Samant stage a rally in front of your bungalows? How old were you when you met a trade unionist? How old the first time you got on a local train instead of a car with driver? That wasn't Bombay, darling, excuse me. That was Wonderland, Peristan, Never-Never, Oz." (55)

After Saladin's last return to India, the before despised reality proves unchanged: India is the country that can be defined as the place of sexual discrimination and humiliation, crimes involving armament scandals, religious atrocities, political corruption, social useless revolts. How does Saladin – turned – Salahuddin react? He senses it as a "world (...) solid and real" (534) that he is open to understanding and in which he wants to be involved: "Me, taking part in a CP(M) event. Wonders will never cease." (538)

Zeeny Vakil, finally satisfied with Saladin's acting career / acting life end, exposes Indian living and understanding rules: "If you're serious about shaking off your foreignness, Salad baba, then don't fall into some kind of rootless limbo instead. Okay? We're all here. We're right in front of you. You should really try and make an adult acquaintance with this place, this time. Try and embrace this city, as it is, not some childhood memory that makes you both nostalgic and sick. Draw it close. The actually existing place. Make its faults your own. Become its creature; belong." (541)

### **Conclusion**

The image of England that Saladin Chamcha worships from the very beginning of his identity quest is one entirely based on 'selling' preconceptions – from the fascination with the attraction points in London, continuing with behavioural patterns, to an entire moral system. Being a proper Englishman means, for Saladin, mimicking indiscriminately what he idealizes, in spite of the other voices (Pamela Chamcha, Zeeny Vakil, Changez Chamchawala) trying to make him aware of the hidden but real facet of the "cool Vilayet." It equally involves repudiating India, as a necessarily – to – be – blamed inferno, despite Saladin's superficiality in its approach and understanding.

Painfully experiencing the harsh reality of his imagined England, Saladin becomes conscious of the fragility and irreality of all values and assets he used to believe in and praise. English gods turn fake and vanish while Saladin is "miraculously" born back home. If "miraculously" to be explained necessitates an entirely new discussion (and a new article), Saladin's return home as "home" is the reality at the end of his waking –up journey. The India that Saladin finds now is not different from the one he left behind. What differs is his approach to it, no longer prejudiced and wrongly – intentioned, but a sympathizing and embracing one.