

## Others, old and new: Revisiting otherness in Shakespeare and Rushdie

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### Abstract:

The concept of otherness has become a cliché in the literature of post-colonial studies. But who falls into this category and how is it represented by two seemingly far-away writers like Shakespeare and Rushdie? The aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the multifaceted aspects of the concept as represented by the two above-mentioned writers and their respective works *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* on the one hand and *The Satanic Verses* on the other with a main focus on the foreigner/immigrant.

**Keywords:** *otherness, identity, fragmentation, hybridity, cultural translation*

### Stereotypes of Others

What/ who is ‘the other’?

Frantz Fanon was one of the first scholars to develop the concept of the *other* as the “not me” in his writing, which would later become a key concern in postcolonial studies. According to Ashcroft *et al.*, (2004) “the existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world.” (p.154) The *other* typically appears in a binary opposition with *self* and is essential in determining the identity of the subject. According to Lacan, another important scholar of post-colonial studies, the *other* is “crucial to the subject because the subject exists in its gaze.” (qtd in Ashcroft *et al.*, p.155)

This paper aims at looking at how literature approaches the *other*. Through a postcolonial reading of Shakespeare and Rushdie, it will show that there are several categories of *others*: racial, religious, ethnic and sexual, typically represented in the selected works by the black, the Jew/Muslim, the Jew/Indian (or other foreigners) and the female.

## Elizabethan images of otherness

To the *Elizabethans*, otherness was most commonly identified with blackness, blackness itself associated with perversity (especially sexual), fear (colour alluding to hell and Satan), superstition and magic (as contrasted to reason/logic). This would explain the reaction of Desdemona's father to the realization that his daughter loved a moor, a man she should fear to look at, which would lead Brabantio to eventually accuse Othello of bewitching Desdemona and send him before the Senate:

O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter  
Damned as thou art, thou has enchanted her,  
For I'll refer me to all things of *sense*,  
If she in chains of magic were not bound... (II.i.62-66)

Brabantio is thus implying that a choice must be *logically* motivated, or otherwise it is unnatural. Allusions to myths concerning Africans are made in the scene following: "...cannibals that each-other eat... and men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders ..." inferring this way that anything could be expected from a black person. Not surprisingly, "the colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as **primitivism** and **cannibalism**, as a means of establishing the **binary** separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view" (Ashcroft *et al.*, p. 155) even in the postcolonial approach.

Othello is the classic racial other - he is an alien among white people and as such a victim of racial prejudice. He is appreciated as a great general, but when he wants a white woman, things change: "What should such a fool/ Do with so good a wife?" (V.ii.231-2) The hero's darkness is the visual signifier of his otherness. So determining is it that nobody calls him by his name, including Desdemona - instead, he is identified as the 'Moor'. Shakespeare interestingly plays with colour contrasts, however, by saying: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, /Your son-in-law is far more fair than black (I.iii.285-6) and by presenting a character like Iago - the white man with black heart.

Although the characterization of Othello initially contradicts the stereotype of the black man, as the play progresses, Iago succeeds in making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face had initially excited. "A black man," Tokson (1982) says, "could on rare occasions turn out to be a decent human being, but only if he reached a consciousness and an acceptance of Christian ethics and white manners." (p. 135) No matter how successful Shakespeare's manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello

remains identifiable as a version of that type. The stereotype is there, deeply rooted in Shakespeare's play:

O, the more angel she  
And you the blacker devil! ...  
She was too fond of her most filthy bargain!...  
O gull! O dolt!  
As ignorant as dirt!

(V.ii.131-32, 156, 162-3)

Blackness, dirt, filth, ignorance and the devil seem to be complementary of each-other and part of the same construction. You could never, as the proverb says, wash the Ethiopian white. Othello's jealousy is the final missing clue to affirm Renaissance stereotypes about Moorish behaviour. Still, the worst thing, is when at some point Othello himself starts sharing the Venetian prejudice thinking that it is unnatural that a beautiful, fair lady like Desdemona has chosen him: "And yet how nature erring from itself" (III.iii.234). Othello is allegedly a "free" man in Venice, but because of his mercenary contract, he remains the "servant" of the Venetian state. The discourse of racial difference is an integral part of the play as it is part of Shakespeare's culture (and still persisting in our own).

Another stereotype of the *other* in Shakespeare's time was the one related to the ethnically and religiously different as in the case of Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice* who is always being referred to only as 'the Jew', even in the words of who should be less expected to prejudice, a 'man' of law – Portia dressed up as Balthazar in the famous trial scene: "Who is the merchant here and who the Jew?" Ironically, she is supposed to teach the virtue of mercy, but does not follow her own lesson. Nor is Antonio, the good Christian more merciful than Portia. Not only does he dehumanize Shylock through the use of a series of animal references, but he also insists that Shylock be forced to convert. Thus, in his revenge, Antonio is not very different from Shylock and the latter points this out:<sup>1</sup>

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge!  
If a Christian wrong a Jew what should his suffering be by  
Christian example? Why, revenge! (III.i)

Shylock is the typical example of the marginalized foreigner who often feels a powerlessness that finds compensation only in violence (verbal or otherwise) as when he asks for a pound of Antonio's flesh. The frustration of what it means to be a Jew is burst out in one of the best speeches ever written in the history of literature:

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<sup>1</sup>as opposed to the Bible: 'Revenge is mine, saith the Lord'

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III.i.52-61)

The above is a way of uncovering what is suppressed; it is a way of spitting out what has been forcefully kept in for too long. By being both Jew and foreign in Venice, Shylock is subject to laws that apply only to a religious minority and carry both financial and penal threats. As long as he is considered an outsider by the state, Shylock is helplessly vulnerable to its power.

In addition to Shylock, there are other *others* in *The Merchant* such as the two suitors who make bid for Portia's hand. Race and religion come out with reference to the Prince of Morocco who is described by Portia as having the "complexion of the devil" (MV I.i.95) making in this way an association between blackness and evil which is in turn responded with a plea by Morocco's Prince not to be judged by his skin colour: "Mislike me not for my complexion" (I.i, 1.121). He reminds her that though his skin may be black, the blood beneath is as red as that of any other man; under the skin all men are endowed with the same feelings and qualities.

The scene where the Prince chooses the casket (III.ii) is not to be neglected either. In the original myth, it is a woman who makes the choice; Shakespeare uses the motif in a different context probably with the aim of making it appear as a choice between ethnicities instead. Both, the Prince of Morocco and the one of Aragon are avoided as a possible threat to Venice, the threat coming from the 'outsider.'<sup>2</sup>

Women constitute another dimension of 'the other'. In *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, Bruce P. Smith (2000) writes about the 'Christian Knight' map of the World' published by Jodocus Hondius in 1597 which shows places newly discovered.

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<sup>2</sup>reference to Ovid's "Metamorphosis" whose message is not letting a foreigner rule your country



In the foreground, one can also distinguish the figure of a Christian Knight “outfitted according to St Paul’s description in Ephesians 6:13-17 with the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit [and] depicted in triumph over five sorts of evil.” (p.104) Sin is embodied in a woman who has a Medusa’s head and a serpent’s tail. Smith claims that the map “combines chivalric ideals with Christian doctrine to provide an epic frame for world dominion as Europe’s destiny. ... The entities to be dominated figure as women.” (p.105) This stereotype is to be found in one of Shakespeare’s sonnets as well:

Which like two spirits do suggest me still.

The better angel is a man right fair,

The worser spirit a woman coloured ill. (S 144.1-4)

In Shakespeare’s plays women become others not only when contrasted with men, but especially when they deviate from expectations such as Portia’s being learned and her studying law – a men’s domain, Jessica (a Jew) eloping with a Christian young man, both rebelling against their fathers’ will.

Smith sees the female other also as the destructive force of masculinity:

In Iago’s eyes Desdemona as female other emasculates Othello: “Our general’s wife is now the general,” he tells Cassio (2.3.307-8). [...] her erotic otherness is somewhat responsible for Othello’s destruction. [...] without Desdemona, Othello would still be a respected military hero. (pp. 112-3)

## Images of otherness in modern times

If one considers the time gap between Shakespeare and Rushdie, one is apt to think that in 400 years everything will be different. Strangely enough, this is not often so. Images of otherness in reference to colour, race, ethnicity and sex are as present today as they were four centuries before, although in a somewhat new shape.

### Post-Colonial Traits in Rushdie: The Migration Experience in *The Satanic Verses*

*The Satanic Verses* is a novel very rich in themes and literary techniques one could analyse, but this paper's focus will be limited to just one of the many faces of otherness –being a foreigner – which will be explored through an analysis of how the author deals with the theme of migration (and the elements accompanying the process – stereotyping, projection, third space, fragmented/hybrid identity, mimicry, 'translation'). Allusions will be made to Shakespeare as well, but major attention will be given to Rushdie's treatment of the theme, a product of an experience lived first hand.

The text's main narrative is a story of migration and the complexity of being an Indian in Britain. It starts with the experience of two people who have a diasporic relationship with India. One of the key phrases is *being born again*; the diaspora is very much the world in which one undergoes *rebirth*. Saladin and Gibreel fall out of an exploding airplane while flying to England and some of their *transformations*, or, as the novel terms it, "transmutations" begin: "...Gibreel Saladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angel devilish fall... ." (SV, p.5) As Gibreel and Chamcha fall, the image is one of rebirth: "Born again Spoono, you and me. Happy birthday, mister, happy birthday to you." (ibid, p.10)

"To be born again ... first you have to die" (ibid, p.3) Gibreel says to Chamcha. The echo of these words seems to come from *Othello*: Othello ironically becomes a real citizen only when he dies (he had tried to become a Venetian during the course of his life without being successful. In his case, cultural or religious death seems to be the prerequisite for a community to become homogeneous again.)

The shape that a modern migrant's *identity* takes after such rebirth is not only interesting, but also significant. On the one hand, he seems to enjoy the privilege of belonging simultaneously to two cultures, which could enrich him as a person. On the other hand, it is that very belonging to two dimensions at the same time that leads to the *fragmentation* of his

personality, now the migrant revealing many selves, and appearing in a crossroad not knowing which direction to take. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) speaks of in-betweenness and a *third space* between one's own and the *other's* culture, a space that acknowledges a certain "incommensurability between cultures." (p. 208) This space between cultures is the one in which migrants move and out of which they will have to develop their personal identity. Bhabha says that the fragmentation of identity is often celebrated as recognition of the importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity. What the migrant's identity displays is a form of *hybridity* rather than purity which is what Rushdie seems to be celebrating in his novel. It is this hybridity which undermines the racial or ethnic 'otherness' of the immigrant. Rushdie (1991) seems to be suggesting that there is no longer room for cultural purity. For Rushdie, the novel embraces the inevitable consequences of mass migration in terms of "impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas." (p.394)

Identity is one of the first things questioned since the very beginning: 'Who am I?' - a question which is again reminiscent of *Othello*, Iago saying: 'I am not what I am' (a counter statement of God's 'I am that I am'). Moreover, the traditional view of identity that a person's character is determined by the environment s/he grows up or lives in is questioned in Rushdie's novel because most of the protagonists are migrants who do not see place as a feature by which someone's personality is moulded. In the *SV*, Indian protagonists Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta migrate to England, go back to India in the end, and in between dream themselves into different times and places. What Rushdie seems to be implying is that in the cosmopolitan world we live now, it is easier to adapt in another culture.

What the migrant as a member of a minority feels is the difference and the tension between himself/herself and the Other and it is up to the migrant how to deal with it, the two possible extremes being either *identification* with or denial of cultural values. Indian Gibreel Farishta tries to hold on to a consistent idea of selfhood deciding not to adapt to English society; his fellow countryman Saladin Chamcha choosing just the opposite (his name significantly meaning 'spoon' in Urdu, *i.e.* a person easily influenced and as such likely to change. Even more significantly, his profession is that of an impersonator, which enables him to 'have many voices' at the same time).

Migrants in their quest for identity in their chosen new home can compare their identity with that of others, and some of the migrants (Saladin, for example) might be able to *translate* themselves culturally. If they choose to do so, they will form their identity in the tension between the already known and the new culture. ‘Cultural translation’ seems to be an inevitable and indispensable practise in a migrant’s experience in the metropolitan or post-colonial city, although certain aspects may remain untranslatable as the saying goes: ‘traduttore, traditore’ (translator, traitor). Something is always lost in translation, but Rushdie (1991) suggests that something is gained as well: “Having been born across the world, we (migrants) are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation, I cling to the notion that something can also be gained.” (p.17) Rushdie’s major technique, blending, also suggests the variety of a migrant’s identity. He says: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for the writer to occupy.” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 15)

As this quote shows, in Rushdie's novel, what a migrant can gain from his combination of two or more cultures is a new identity. And this is also the answer to one of the narrator's central questions in the SV: “How does newness come into the world?” (SV, p.8) The answer suggested by Rushdie seems to be: by joining the self with the *other*. The cost of gaining something new, however, is that something old has to be left behind, the most common of which seems to be loss of parts of their old identities.

Bhabha discusses Rushdie’s treatment of hybridity in terms of cultural *mimicry*. The mimic is a hybrid figure in that he or she reflects or appears to adopt the qualities and values of colonial authority. *Mimic man* is a collocation typically used with reference to a man from the colonies who tries to imitate the white men’s lifestyles, especially British. He speaks like an Englishman, dresses like an Englishman, etc., but is not English as his face is dark. Such people have been critically defined as ‘white, but not quite’. Race is what sets these people apart as outsiders despite their attempts to become insiders.

Gibreel dressed in the clothes of an ex-colonial landowner (Rosa’s dead husband) is just one example of post-colonial mimicry. The best personification of the mimic man is undoubtedly Saladin who acts like and wants to be an Englishman and even marries an English girl, Pamela Lovelace. If he did not succeed in winning her over, his transmutation into an Englishman would be severely impaired (though he would betray her

with the Indian Zeeny Vakil within forty-eight hours of arriving in Bombay). He reminds us of Othello (considered to be the first mimic man in English) who tries to be a Venetian by speaking like a Venetian, converting into a Christian and marrying a Venetian lady. Also like Othello, Saladin tries to enter the society by doing some service, in Othello military, here spectacle, as such implying that an immigrant has a role to play. Only Zeeny, the clever, practical, untraditional Indian woman manages to see through Saladin's English masque: "You know what you are, I'll tell you. A deserter is what, more English than, your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don't think it's so perfect, it slips, baba, like a false moustache." (SV, p.53) Like Othello, Saladin is subject to the ones who "have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (SV, p.168) as a mutant in the hospital tells Chamcha suggesting that they have become what the English have stereotyped them. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha appear as opposing figures. Whereas Saladin tries to adapt to English manners as much as possible (finally and funnily becoming more English than the English), Gibreel wants to stick to his Indianess. In the course of the novel, Gibreel is seemingly rewarded, because he obtains a halo and passes on his 'bad breath' to Saladin (SV, p.133) who in contrast is punished for having selected adaptation: Saladin grows horns and finally also a hoof. The relics of the Empire in London are to Saladin, "attractively faded grandeur" while Gibreel, only sees a "wreck, a Crusoe city, marooned on the island of its past." When asked about their favourite films, Saladin offers an international list, while Gibreel a number of commercial Hindi films.

The narrator comments on the migrant status of Gibreel and Saladin:

Should we even say that these two are fundamentally different *types* of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, (...) - has wished to remain, to a large degree *continuous* - that is joined to and arising from his past, (...) so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes we may describe as true (...) 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'? (...) While 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) homogenous, non-hybrid, "pure", - an utterly fantastic notion! - cannot, must not, suffice. (SV, p. 427)

At the Shaandaar Cafè, Chamcha has turned into a goat and has crawled back to the ghetto to his despised migrant compatriots. He is the “discriminatory sign of a performative, *projective* British culture of race and racism.” (Bhabha, p.228)

Rushdie's description of the Sufyan family: Mr Muhammad Sufyan, his wife Hind and their two daughters, Mishal and Anahita who are very Western in style gives a new dimension to the theme of migration. Hind regards England as the “Vilayet of her exile.” (SV, p. 124) She feels she has lost her identity, and is greatly saddened by this: “Everything she valued had been upset by the change, had, in this process of translation, been lost.” Racism in England presents new terrors for her:

Plus also: they had come into a demon city in which anything could happened, your windows shattered in the middle of the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands, in the shops you heard such abuse you felt like your ears would drop off but when you turned in the direction of the words you saw only empty air and smiling faces, and every day heard about this boy, that girl, beaten up by ghosts. (SV, p. 142)

The generation-gap between parent and child is even more difficult to contend with for; coupled with the usual problems, children are under pressure from parents to continue the traditions of their native lands. Parents, shocked by a culture so different from theirs are greatly distressed at seeing their own children accommodate this new culture:“ ... and worst of all, the poison of this devil-island had infected her baby-girls, who were growing up refusing to speak their mother-tongue, even though they understood every word, they did it just to hurt; and why else had Mishal cut off all the hair and put rainbows into it?” (SV, p.158)While the Sufyani daughters bear a typical contemporary example of the estrangement of new generations from a traditional cultural past, their mother Hind, on the other hand, embodies the migrant’s hopeless despair:“This was the history's lesson; nothing for women-like-her to do but suffer, remember and die.” (SV, p.168)

Gender relations also get a new dimension in the diaspora and women start to occupy a different kind of space as shown by the strange couples created: Saladin/Pamela Lovelance /Zeeny Vakil/Mimi Mamoulian/Allie Cone; Gibreel/Rhekha Merchant/ Allie Cone; Jumpy Joshy/Pamela; Billy Battuta/Mimi; Hanif Johnson/Mishal Sufyan. Such relationships are part of the new combinations created in the diaspora and an indication of the end of the myth of homogeneity.

Mimi Mamoulian provides an example of what it means to be female and foreign at the same time in a big Western metropolis: “Don’t talk to me about exploitation.... Try being Jewish, female and ugly sometimes. You’ll beg to be black. Excuse my French: brown.” (SV, p.263)

Such complexes, however, seem not to bother in the least another female character, Zeeny Vakil who is significantly a doctor and an art critic having a “book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folklorist 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 seemed to fit, Aryn, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest.” (SV, p. 52) As the central embodiment of Rushdie’s philosophy of hybridity, Zeeny refutes the nationalist fundamentalisms that posit pure origins and identities and that occlude the historical mixing that is crucially formative of all cultures. Her sexual relationship with Chamcha should be seen not merely as a literal one; Zeeny represents the understanding at which he finally arrives. At the very end, Chamcha may reconcile with father and nationality, but only to be present at their death, only to bid that past farewell. The future lies not in father’s house, but in Zeeny’s ‘place’ to which he turns leaving behind the landscapes of childhood about to be demolished by the necessities of adulthood. “If the old refused to die, the new could not be born” (SV, p.547) Bhabha speaks of characters being re-inscribed. In *The Satanic Verses* the character of Saladin only achieves the salvation offered in the end of the novel by accepting an identity forged out of different cultures, purity thus having been replaced by plurality. Saladin is not British nor can he yet return to India as if his life in Britain had left no mark. Saladin lives like Rushdie between two stools and occupies what Bhabha terms the ‘third space’.

## Conclusion

Two seemingly diverse and distant writers like Shakespeare and Rushdie both contribute through their writing by providing a literary perspective of the post-colonial concept of otherness in offering archetypes of the racially and ethnically different.

Being an immigrant himself and exploring his own migrant status, Rushdie tells the story of the contemporary migrant travelling between two or more cultures who eventually has to develop a sense of a ‘third space’, or hybrid identity. This message permeates the whole work and is once more confirmed towards the end of the SV:

(...) we are to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed; African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would had been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies (...) We have been made again: but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from bottom to top. (pp. 413-14)

Though written in the late 1980s, this final paragraph reminds a modern reader of current affairs – globalization – and the inescapable change we are to go through in a near future, hybridity being the major and inevitable consequence of this process. This passage is an invitation to put an end to frontiers and drop boundaries – racial, religious, and ethnic. And, most significantly, like Saladin who chooses to no longer look back, we are encouraged to lose something in order to gain newness.

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