Introduction: Implications of Transnational Texts

Post-colonial literary theory very often presupposes a historical continuum between the sets of regional texts it analyses. Thus, post-colonial literatures of, for example, India or Kenya are studied in view of the British colonial history, and those of Angola or Brazil with regard to the Portuguese colonial history. While there is on the one hand a rationale for this – the colonial history certainly does feature in, and has had effects on, post-colonial literatures – sometimes a simplification process takes place because the colonial history is often more complicated than one is led to understand.

Furthermore, in the case of transnational literatures, the trajectories of cultural influences are even more complicated and histories more varied, as the authors, texts, and literatures in question escape simplistic national, ethnic, linguistic and other identifying definitions. My focus in this article will be on Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) especially as a transnational text. Rushdie himself embodies this problematisation of definition as he ‘is’ a diasporic writer categorised by critics and scholars variously, among other things, as an Indian, Anglo-Indian, Anglo- or Indo-Pakistani, British-Indian, British, English, postcolonial, Commonwealth, or a world writer. His controversial novel, then, carries these

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10 Madeleena Gonzalez, *Fiction after the Fatwa: Salman Rushdie and the Charm of Catastrophe* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 2005) 197-8; Gonzales also discusses the overall problematics of categorising Rushdie.
various aspects with it, but especially in its narrative engagement with Islamic history it evades any such direct colonial/post-colonial routings and (dis)continuities.

In my article, I analyse especially the chapters set in the early Arabic history of Islam, and how these complicate, challenge and subvert the reading of them as a post-colonial narrative, and suggest as well that we cannot write the novel off as simply an example of parodic postmodern popular culture.\textsuperscript{12} The directions of influence, creation of interpretive communities, and justification of aesthetic, social, and moral issues cannot be determined through colonial history without problems. The Orientalist paradigm and practices have been strong in Western culture, and the subsequent Saidian critique of Orientalism has been strong in cultural and literary analyses during the past three decades. What implications do transnational texts and analyses have on the interpretations of cultural representations?

A significant term in this analysis is \textit{hybridity}. What I imply with hybridity is related to power relations between cultures contributing to the hybrid construction so that it ‘does not mean any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but implies a markedly unbalanced relationship.’\textsuperscript{13} Hybridity could mean different things, and the representations of relations need to be considered differently if they are in a post-colonial or in a transnational context. The reception of Rushdie’s book indicates that the binary trajectories such as colonial–post-colonial, East–West, traditional–modern, or local–global are not the only possible or available options for people to react to or engage with cultural artefacts and phenomena such as books. As Rushdie’s book deals with a historical period and place not directly within the parameters of British colonial history, it also sets out to study issues that are tangentially yet irrevocably connected with this particular history, thus ambiguating the influence of cultural contacts, interests, and readings.

Due to its main Indian-British diasporic context, Rushdie’s novel has often been studied as a postmodern post-colonial text, with particular attention to cosmopolitan subjectivity and diasporic identity.\textsuperscript{14} My treatment of it here as (at least partially) \textit{a transnational text} – that is, a text representing connections and influences beyond, or parallel to, the immediate colonial history and its post-colonial corollaries – aims to illustrate the ambiguous complexity of representation. The setting of the ‘Islamic’ parts of the novel predate the Western colonial era, and yet they are connected to the current trends of globalisation and transnationalisation through narrative linkages. By understanding these linkages, their cultural contexts, and the contexts of reception, it might be possible to propose more nuanced and perceptive interpretations of transnational cultural texts such as \textit{The Satanic Verses}.

‘Without Any Fixed Place’

Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) begins with an epigraph that is taken from Daniel Defoe’s *The History of the Devil* (1726). The quoted text runs as follows:

> Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is … without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.\(^{15}\)

In many previous studies and commentaries this has been interpreted – and not incorrectly or irrelevantly – as an image or metaphor for the migrant condition, a ‘motif of migrancy and vagabondage’;\(^{16}\) being uprooted, unfixed, and volatile. Taking my cue from this passage, I propose to look at Rushdie’s novel as laying out a more general condition for a transcultural, transnational\(^{17}\) literary (and other cultural) work that shares this allegedly ‘satanic’ quality of ‘a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition’ – being ‘without any fixed place, or space’.\(^{18}\)

In *The Satanic Verses*, the four chapters that form the so-called Islamic part of the novel cover only a quarter of the whole of the 547 pages. The first and third of these chapters, namely ‘Mahound’ and ‘Return to Jahilia’, are set in the context of the early Arabic history of Islam – named Submission in the novel – while the other two, namely ‘Ayesha’ and ‘The Parting of the Arabian Sea’, are set in contemporary albeit fictional India. The ‘Mahound’ chapter tells of the prophet Mahound and the emergence of a new religion, Submission, while ‘Return to Jahilia’ tells about its consolidation. ‘Ayesha’ is about an orphan Muslim girl Ayesha who persuades the village of Titlipur to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, while ‘The Parting of the Arabian Sea’ tells about this journey that seems to end in a catastrophe. All these chapters are of interest, especially as the first and third chapters have been at the centre of the *Satanic Verses* controversy,\(^{19}\) but here I will only concentrate on the early history.

All the four chapters are narrated as dreams, if not delusions, of Gibreel, one of the two main protagonists of the novel. Thematically these chapters do, however, come close to the main parts of the book. In her astute analysis, Feroza Jussawalla comments on the recurrent interpretations of the protagonists:

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\(^{17}\) For the present purposes, my definition of the *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* ‘transcultural’ refers to forms of cultural amalgamation, and ‘transnational’ to global connections between people, cultures, and nations. These can incorporate, but do not necessarily coincide with, the ‘post-colonial’ which is characterized by a shared colonial history.

\(^{18}\) For the explication of the ‘satanic verses’ in Islamic history, see Joel Kuortti, *Place of the Sacred: The Rhetoric of the Satanic Verses Affair* (Frankfurt/M etc.: Peter Lang, 1997) 105-111.

\(^{19}\) See Kuortti, *Place*. 

In contemporary academic criticism, the two main characters of The Satanic Verses, Gibreal Farishta and Salahuddin Chamcha, are seen as the essence of post-European colonality … as hybrid migrants. But migration and hybridization are not just conditions of recent postcoloniality. 20

Jussawalla discusses the way in which Rushdie has tried to bring forth the fact that it has not been only ‘Europe’ that has colonized India but there is also a history of Muslim colonisation. The features of hybridity in Indian culture are, therefore, at least as much the result of earlier layers of the history of colonisation.

What is of specific interest in the quotation from Jussawalla here, however, is not the history of colonisation in India but the claim that ‘migration and hybridization are not just conditions of recent postcoloniality’. Indeed, such historical multidirectional continuity is also what Rushdie’s text emphasises: cultures and people have mingled with each other throughout time, ‘not just’ in the post-colonial world. While I do not claim that the novel is not relevant from a post-colonial perspective, it is my contention that a transnational reading makes it more poignant.

What we can deduce from Jussawalla’s observation is that, in their inherent historical and cultural multiplicity, hybridity and migration are, indeed, central concerns for the novel. This is further attested by Rushdie himself in his essay ‘In Good Faith’ (1990), where he tries to explain his reasons for writing the novel during the controversy that followed its publication:

If The Satanic Verses is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity. 21

From this quotation it is clear how Defoe’s vagrant Satan befits Rushdie’s use of the concept in the context of the migrant. Furthermore, this migrant figure and migrant condition – whether real or fictional, referential or metaphorical – cannot be reduced to a post-colonial figure or condition, for it surpasses such a definition. An example of this can be found in the city of Jahilia which will be considered next.

Pre-modern Globalization

In the ‘Mahound’ chapter, the events take place at the beginning of the sixth century CE in a city called Jahilia (and later also in the city of Yathrib). Daniel Easterman notes that Jahilia is an Arabic term (jahiliyyah) meaning ignorance and is used by Muslims to denote the pre-Islamic period. 22 While Rushdie’s text is in many ways (as dreams, fiction) removed from the actual Islamic history, it clearly connects with the history through such naming practices as well as intertextual means; thus Jahilia reads as Mecca (and Yathrib as Medina) in the eve of Islam. It is not my intention here to

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analyse how closely or otherwise the novel follows the actual history but rather to comment on its transnational aspects.

Early in the chapter, after shortly introducing Mahound, Jahilia is described as a place where even settling down is based on inconsistency:

The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand … – the very stuff of inconstancy, – the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form … These people are a mere three or four generations removed from their nomadic past, when they were as rootless as the dunes, or rather rooted in the knowledge that the journeying itself was home.

– Whereas the migrant can do without the journey altogether; it’s no more than a necessary evil; the point is to arrive. – (SV 93–94)

This inconstancy, together with the dream framework, paves way for an interpretation that fixed, pure forms (of cultures, religions, languages, people) are impossible or unattainable.

Jahilia serves as an archetype of cultural unfixity – *unfixability* – as it is built at an intersection of caravan routes (SV 94). It is a buzzing commercial centre with international, intercontinental contacts through which

the caravanserais prospered. The produce of the world came up from Zafar to Sheba, and thence to Jahilia and the oasis of Yathrib and on to Midian where Moses lived; thence to Aqabah and Egypt. From Jahilia other trails began: to the east and north-east, towards Mesopotamia and the great Persian empire. To Petra and to Palmyra, where once Solomon loved the Queen of Sheba. (SV103)

What is depicted here is not some forsaken backyard in the desert but a thriving (even if threatened) cultural centre – albeit quite recently established. The previous quotation shows that international connections, global aspirations, were already in place in the Arabia of pre-modern times, long before the European nations that would become colonial powers were even formed. The people, products and places that are connected in Jahilia are truly a mixed lot:

O the splendour of the fairgrounds of Jahilia! … Merchants, Jewish, Monophysite, Nabataean, buy and sell pieces of silver and gold…. There is linen from Egypt and silk from China; from Basra, arms and grain. There is gambling, and drinking, and dance. There are slaves for sale, Nubian, Anatolian, Aethiop. (SV 96)

The novel is set in the economic sphere of pre-Islamic Arabia. In this historical context, the caravan routes brought people together in places that at the time would otherwise have been unreachable. The slave trade flourished, goods changed hands, and arms were in great demand. One could claim that all these transnational movements and transactions presaged globalisation. The way in which *The Satanic Verses* manages to capture the richness of this historical aspect textually is remarkable, and it emphasises the inescapability of hybridity. Then again, the novel is
not only concerned with the mixing of people through trade contacts, however important these may be. The crucial issue relates to religion – as it deals emphatically with Islamic history – which will be the final focus of this article.

**Transnational Hybridity**

One vital dimension for the use of the concept of hybridity in *The Satanic Verses* is religion.\(^{23}\) For this, the Islamic chapters are elemental, as they explore the questions of religious adherence and the birth of a religion from an a-religious perspective.\(^{24}\)

The novel depicts a context in which religion is used to attract visitors. In Jahilia, the city ruler Abu Simbel is concerned about the city finances and wants to get new religious tourists by including more deities in the local temple. All this is further done in competition with the city of Sheba:

Sometimes Abu Simbel suspects that only the pilgrimage stands between the city and its ruin. The council searches the world for statues of alien gods, to attract new pilgrims to the city of sand; but in this, too, they have competitors. Down in Sheba a great temple has been built, a shrine to rival the House of the Black Stone. (SV 103)

A new religion is emerging in the story, one with a decisive monotheistic motivation. Against this background, the idea of religious multiplicity is a critical one, and something that the novel explicitly examines.\(^{25}\) There is a demand for a global view of religion – statues of gods are drawn from all over the world – the world as it was known then and there. Here, the connections range from the Mediterranean to the Far Eastern, from the Central Asian to the Northern African. The interpretation of these hybrid, transnational constellations that are formed require sensitivity to non-hegemonic, non-Eurocentric histories.

This religious multiplicity is further explored in more specific terms in the novel in a description of the House in Jahilia, the destination of the pilgrimage tourists:

Hubal and Kain look down on Grandee and poet as they stroll. And the Nabataean proto-Dionysus, He-Of-Shara; the morning star, Astarte, and saturnine Nakruh. Here is the sun god, Manaf! Look, there flaps the giant Nasr, the god in eagleform! See Quzah, who holds the rainbow ... is this not a glut of gods, a stone flood, to feed the glutton hunger of the pilgrims, to quench their unholy thirst. The deities, to entice the travellers, come – like the pilgrims – from far and wide. The idols, too, are delegates to a kind of international fair.

There is a god here called Allah (means simply, the god). Ask the Jahilians and they’ll acknowledge that this fellow has some sort of overall

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\(^{23}\) For more on the issue, see Kuortti *Place* 18-24 & 89-117 and Joel Kuortti, *Fictions to Live In: Narration as an Argument for Fiction in Salman Rushdie’s Novels* (Frankfurt/M etc.: Peter Lang, 1998) 125-81.

\(^{24}\) I understand the novel as a non-theological, fictitious historical account. There have also been comments that Rushdie’s novel is anti-religious or more specifically anti-Islamic. On the other hand, for example, Jussawalla discusses the novel as Rushdie’s earnest engagement with Islam (Jussawalla “Rushdie’s” 50-73).

authority, but he isn’t very popular: an all-rounder in an age of specialist statues. (SV 99; ellipsis original)\textsuperscript{26}

While the text takes an explicit irreverent attitude towards religion and especially its monotheistic forms, it simultaneously records its deeply effective nature in its multiple cultural guises by presenting the variety of deities as parallels. There is what John Erickson calls a ‘process of leveling’\textsuperscript{27} in this whereby differences are equalised rather than destroyed. All this suggests an ethical call for transnational literature and culture in general.

In face of such a representation of the amalgamation of cultures already in the sixth century, we can conclude that it is impossible to maintain the idea of hybrid migrancy as (predominantly or originally) a post-colonial phenomenon. The analysis of \textit{The Satanic Verses} indicates that the interpretation of the representation of the early Islamic history would be different from a transnational rather than from a post-colonial perspective. The interpretation would not depend on, for example, the Indo-British colonial history that is essential for the interpretation of most of the other parts of the novel, but would demand a contextual reading that would be more attentive, for example, to the specificities of pre-Islamic and Arabic histories.

In the current discourse of post-coloniality, however, certain formations of migration tend to be represented more often and with more emphasis while other forms are marginally present, or are silenced. Apart from its literary and immediate socio-political aspects, the acknowledgement of the transnational historical and cultural multiplicity of hybridity is more than ever an ethical issue that needs to be addressed in order to maintain the relevance of discussions of post-colonial, transcultural and transnational issues.

\textsuperscript{26} Rushdie’s source for this is very likely F. Hommel’s entry ‘Arabia before Islam’ in \textit{E. J. Brill’s First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913–1936}, vol 1 that was republished in 1987, ed. Martijn Theodoor Houtsma et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

\textsuperscript{27} Erickson 153.