**Abstract**

      This paper examines the different ways Salmon Rushdie uses air—as a distinctive setting, as a reoccurring metaphorical motif closely tied with larger themes, and also as symbolic imagery—in his ambitious novel about change, relationships and the search for belonging. Rushdie’s novel is a keen study of humanity and human connections. When I first read my primary text, I was drawn immediately by Rushdie’s stylistic prose and use of magical realism. But as an immigrant myself, I also felt a deeper connection with the story’s authentic portrayal of cultural duality and identity crisis. The character development of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, the two protagonists, was acutely relevant and understandable to myself as a reader. By focusing on these aspects of the novel, I re-read specific sections of the text in attempt to understand more clearly how Rushdie sheds light on such a complex issue. The reoccurring motifs that I discovered from my investigation were images of air and flight, and thus I drew my conclusion that Rushdie uses this extended, multi-faceted metaphor to draw verdicts on the effects and consequences of cross-cultural migration and more broadly, human change.

      Rushdie contrasts air’s supernatural, transitory and fluctuating properties with the stability of the earth, offering both as possible homes for human characters. Given both options, it is the choices that each protagonist makes throughout the story that determine their fates. The image of a man in the air is paradoxically both inspiring and anxious; in the novel, one man eventually succumbs to the ethereal temptations of air while the other understands the need to return to a more stable environment.

      In my essay, I use analysis to examine the various uses and implications of air as a literary element in Salmon Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.

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**Introduction**

*Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic, --because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible—wayupthere, at any rate, changes took place… (Rushdie 5-6)*

Air is the element of instability, of change, where anything and everything might happen. In the air, there is nothing to hide behind and nothing to hold onto; in the air, all suspended beings are in a state of migration. Because air is an alien environment for humans, Rushdie postulates it is only natural that within it, strange and fantastic things are all the more probable to occur, resulting in the unearthing of great truths and the creation of surreal fantasies. But there is a component of danger associated with air as well: unless one can get back to Earth and is able to once again embrace their roots, they are doomed. After all, humans cannot stay afloat forever.

In Salmon Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses,* the element of air symbolizes times of transformation and change. The novel itself is a celebration of the change and fusion humans undergo when different cultures, generations and people collide into each other. Throughout the book, this unstable environment is set up as a metaphorical and literal transitory space that characters must pass through; when they do so, they arrive at their destinations with changed perceptions of the land surrounding them. In the air, anything can—and does—happen. Rushdie’s idea of air is used as part of various literary elements in the novel.

Yet Rushdie is quick to point out the consequential loneliness and perils of air. His air is a supernatural realm, the home of angels, devils, and above all, ghosts. It is not meant to be a permanent setting for ordinary humans. Rushdie understands that although change is necessary in life, there must also be a point where characters are able to trascend the fluctuations around and within themselves to plant their own roots. Men that remain in the air, rejecting solid ground, will eventually turn into ghosts as well.

*The Satanic Verses* examines many of man’s most fundamental traits and the consequences thereof: the thrill of wanderlust and of new challenges, the struggles to find ones’ self, and the overwhelming need to come back to a place called *home*. Through a series of fantastic journeys in air-space, a story of transformation unfolds. The open expanse gives Rushdie room to develop his characters, examine themes of change and human conditions, and then to bring the readers back down to the ground again.

**Air as the Setting for the Story’s Central Transformation and Emigration**

Air is, first and foremost, a fluid setting. It is by no accident that the catalyst for the book’s events occurs while the main characters are plunging through the atmosphere. The scene is what first cements the relationship between air and life’s fluctuations; set against this back-drop, every change is magnified so that the drastic alterations in the protagonists’ minds cannot be overlooked, and the actions that later stem subsequently from the initial fall make sense in terms of their magnitude. During the opening scene of the novel, the air’s natural turbulence echoes the changes that are occurring within Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta as they plunge through the sky. Subject to a fantastic freefall after the jumbo jet *Boston*’s terrorist hijacking and subsequent destruction, they experience a physical loss of control that is similar to the collapse of their carefully built realities. Whereas the ground represents logic, stability and physical density, the air represents the disintegration of all these things; surrounded by air, the men are effectively stripped of several important possessions: their original bodies, Chamcha’s English citizenship and threads of Farishta’s sanity.

The disappearance of all these earthy belongings allows for the unpredictability of air to take over; Chamcha and Farishta are miraculously reborn by virtue of losing everything. Chamcha and Farishta are very much alive as they fall, engaging in a singing competition, and in Farishta’s case, flailing about in different positions like some deranged acrobat. But Chamcha’s stiff nosedive is also “going down head first, in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal” (Rushdie 5). It is a stark contrast from the debris and death surrounding them, which Rushdie describes with nostalgic imagery to reinforce the idea of life and death as occurring in never-ending cycles, instead of in straight lines with conceivable ends. This emphasis of cycles occurs because nostalgia, created by the rambling and expressive diction, softens the brittle edges of death and creates relatable characters of the hijacking victims. The victims are unfortunate migrants, “broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues… extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*” (Rushdie 5). This idea of unfinished business, lingering in the air, helps transition the reader into understanding Rushdie’s use of setting by invoking a quality of inevitable change. Change and its cyclical habits are reoccurring themes in *The Satanic Verses* that are strongly connected to his symbol of air.

The author also establishes the atmosphere as a kind of freezing fantasy setting where transformation is the norm, with clouds “ceaselessly metamorphosing, gods into bulls, women into spiders, men into wolves” (Rushdie 7). Saladin Chamcha even feels that he has “acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid” (Rushdie 7). It is within this cloudiness that the characters’ grip of reality begins to slip, allowing for another transfer—the supernatural, fantastic power of air consumes the faltering bits of earthy reality carried by the men. It is very much a violent takeover where fantasy declares itself and creates change.

Because the air is such a volatile place, it is perfect for use by Rushdie as a transitory space in which to set turning points in plot or character growth. One is the transformation that occurs during the freefall is that of the characters’ bodies. Chamcha and Farishta have no control over how they are reborn and they are turned into a barbaric, half-man demon and an angel-on-earth, respectively. The assertion of the fantastic, which accompanies the forfeiture of human self-mastery, deliberately makes the men into physical manifestations of some single facet of their own personalities. In this case, air is, in itself, a supernatural entity that divinely decides to exploit its victims in order to launch a journey of realization.

The characters’ new bodies are specific to the journeys that are about to embark upon. Saladin Chamcha becomes “the devil”: he gains a brutish appearance and bestial habits, which is ironic because his greatest fear is to be seen as uncivilized. He has gone to great lengths to reject his Indian heritage and assimilate into British culture, which he regards as the greatest on earth. The cultural identity crisis that results has crippled his entire life; his relationships with others are stunted and his worldviews ignorant because of his inability to merge his clashing worlds. When the transformed Chamcha lands on the ground, he senses that he has been transported to “some other place, not England or perhaps not-England…” (Rushdie 136). This feeling of unease foreshadows the “other” side of England he is about to encounter; it is one where he is a barbaric illegal immigrant (having no proof of his English citizenship), and is mistreated and rejected by the people he once strove so hard to claim as his own. The fact that he has become the very caricature of barbarity forces him to finally confront his cultural duality before he can regain his former body.

Gibreel Farishta, an Indian movie star having found great success in playing religious deities, is transformed into an angel. Although this supernatural mutation causes anyone he comes in contact with to adore him, it eventually becomes a curse as his angelic appearance becomes a haunting reminder of his past sins and religious insecurities. For Farishta, England is a land of ghosts. Even the romantic intentions that led Farishta to the country involved pursuing the ethereal Alleluia Cone—a woman haunted by spectral ghosts of her own, and driven to escape the earth in order to experience the sprawling landscapes of open air from mountaintops. Fragile like the element of air, and given a pale physical appearance that emphasizes airy imagery, Alleluia Cone’s character traits are foreboding of events to come.

The two protagonists’ freefall through the air is metaphorical re-birth. It becomes an emigration, the beginning of cross-cultural journeys where Chamcha and Farishta become immigrants in the most literal sense: they have come, completely new, in order to inhabit new worlds. The unpredictability that is characteristic of the air symbolizes the danger of literally crossing cultural worlds, and of the multiple changes that take place within a person when this event occurs. Although flying—or falling—is in some ways a celebration of freedom from the confines of gravity, there is always the ever-present danger of not being able to find a safe place to land.

**The Danger of Remaining Airborne**

Why is it that, at the end of *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha is able to find a balance between his two cultural identities and reconcile with his past, while Gibreel Farishta is doomed to desperate suicide following the deaths of his friend and former lover? At the beginning of the novel, it is Chamcha that is at a clear disadvantage, rejected by the people around him due to his monstrous appearance while Farishta seems immune to the consequences of his actions. The time and general circumstances of when they lose any semblance of control over their own lives—during the plane crash—are similar. However, Farishta’s slow descent into insanity and inability to address his transformation is singular to himself. This outcome is foreshadowed throughout the novel by the differing element natures of Chamcha and Farishta’s respective ghosts, obsessions, and surreal adventures—these things, when grounded in reality, can be resolved, but roots that dangle “in the air” are in a perilous position.

Cultural identity crisis, Chamcha’s central conflict, is presented through the contrasting imagery of London and Bombay, Pamela Lovelace and Zeeny Vakil, his business associates and his family. However, these incompatibilities that haunt Chamcha are earthly and strongly rooted in the ground, or reality. Two of the most persistent images that anchor Chamcha’s past and guide him towards the future are that of the walnut tree, planted by his father at Chamcha’s birth, and of Zeeny Vakil. Changez Chamchawala disapprovingly writes to his son: “*I have your soul kept safe, my son, here in this walnut tree”* (Rushdie 48). Despite Saladin Chamcha’s abandonment of his heritage, Changez Chamchawala shares this sentiment in hopes that one day Chamcha will return to India—the living walnut tree symbolizes a place where Chamcha will always be welcomed home. And so unlike the devil described in Daniel Defoe’s *A History of the Devil*, which is quoted in the very beginning of the novel, Chamcha is able to find a place to rest on the earth and call home, freed from the burden of being doomed to wander aimlessly about the skies. Zeeny Vakil’s dark skin and passionate commitment to India seem tangible when compared to the foggy dreams and soft speaking voice of Pamela Lovelace, Chamcha’s English wife. Zeeny inhabits both Chamcha’s early childhood memories and his most recent ones, giving him something solid to hold onto when he is lost in the depths of his surreal transformation and the uneasy sleep it brings him.

On the other hand, Farishta’s descent into insanity is accompanied by the image of dizzying expanses of air. From the very beginning of the book, when the novel flashes back to the characters’ time in the hijacked plane, Farishta confesses to Chamcha that he avoids sleep because of reoccurring nightmares, which star a very personal ghost, his former lover Rekha Merchant. Rekha committed suicide by flinging herself from the top of her apartment building, and Gibreel’s haunted dreams show that at least his subconscious is plagued with the guilt of responsibility. It even states that he had been the one to “[recommend] flight,” since as he had known her, she had been “a creature of the sky, [drinking] Lalique champagne, [living] on Everest” (Rushdie 15). The doomed relationship between Farishta and Rekha is the first step in Farishta’s association with air: it is a relationship that disintegrates into Farishta’s inability to distinguish reality from his own haunted dreams. During one of his most memorable breakdowns, he feels he is “losing the last traces of his humanity, [and that] the gift of flight [is] being restored to him, as he [becomes] ethereal, woven of illumined air” (Rushdie 346). Drunk on his own delusions, he imagines soaring over the entire city as Londoners look on in fear. Imagining that he is truly an angel that belongs in the air, Farishta attempts again and again to escape the ground. Even in his later dreams, which make up the three subplots in the novel, he is either forced to watch events unfolding below as an airborne spectator, or the dream is heavily laden with airy imagery. During the story of Mahound and Jahilia, Farishta looks upon the scenes from the Archangel Gibreel’s point of view, above the mountain that Mahound travels to in order to converse divinely with the Archangel and receive instructions. In the story about Ayesha and the pilgrimage across India, Farishta is not given a specific character he is tied to in terms of shared bodies, but the entire arc contains images of the airborne butterflies which often end up crushed in Ayesha’s mouth as some sort of fluttering meal. In another sub-plot, he is forced to carry the Imam through the sky so that he can battle the Empress, Al-Lat, the “queen of the night” (Rushdie 221).

Keeping in mind Rushdie’s use of the air and ground as metaphors, we can see the contrast between what haunts Chamcha and what haunts Farishta. Because Chamcha’s anchors are connected to the earth, he is able to ultimately find rest and peace at the end of the story, as well as continue on his journey to possess some idea of *home*. The physical hardship that Chamcha endures throughout the book symbolizes the reality of his journey. Farishta, on the other hand, may physically inhabit the earth but his mind is constantly in the air. He is unable to confront his ghosts, hiding behind his own angelic delusions and skirting physical pain. Alleluia Cone, the woman he tries to make his anchor, is similarly ghostly and airborne in many aspects of his life. Therefore, with no stable handhold to grasp onto, Farishta remains in the air and is unable to come to any conclusions in his life. This lack of conclusion is ultimately what leads to his chronic insanity; because he never plants his feet firmly in the ground, he is subject to constant delusions and ghosts, and susceptible to his ghosts’ suggestions to carry out the double homicide.

**The Use of Literal Flight to Symbolize Change**

Any plane flight spanning thousands of miles across two radically different countries and cultures is bound to have some affect on an individuals’ perception of the world. There are four distinct flights described in *The Satanic Verses* that directly affect the novel’s storyline and the character development of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta by symbolizing important turning points within the plot.

The first flight occurs before the story’s beginning: Saladin Chamcha travels to India to perform in the play, *The Millionairess*. He recounts his journey back to his home country after fifteen years as “an unnatural journey; a denial of time; a revolt against history” (Rushdie 34). During this flight, he finds his perfectly cultivated British manner of speaking slipping into a Bombay dialect as he orders a whiskey soda (Rushdie 34). Horrified, he vows that his trip to India will not result in having the country’s “hooks” dragged into him again. However, during his stay, he is reunited with his father and becomes involved with Zeeny Vakil. It is clear throughout the story, as his thoughts stray to the two individuals over and over again, that he had been extremely affected by his visit to India and the realization that he cannot successfully escape his cultural roots grows. This flight to India forebodes the circumstances that will cause Chamcha to confront his cultural identity crisis.

The second flight, which Chamcha and Farishta share, is that of the doomed jumbo jet *Boston*, Flight AI-420.

The last two flights occur after the two characters’ adventures in England. After receiving a telegram from his father’s second wife that his father is on his deathbed, Chamcha once again takes a flight back to India. After receiving his visa and buying his plane ticket, Chamcha stands frozen, unable to board when he hears the voice of S.S. Sisodia, a wealthy Indian film producer with a stutter that is also close with Farishta. “*I used to chichi chicken out also…but now I’ve got the titrick. I fafa flap my hands during tatake-off and the plane always mama makes it into the isk isk isky”* (Rushdie 526). Although Sisosdia’s advice seems inaccurate in dealing with Chamcha’s current situation (after all, it is not his fear of flying but instead his fear of facing his father and native country that is crippling him), it does faithfully reflect the new perspective that Chamcha had adopted after his London adventures. The phrase “and the plane always makes it into the sky,” is, ironically enough, indicative of Chamcha’s new position as a grounded creature. He now possesses the ability to embark safely upon journeys that will bring on change because he is closer to finding a home on the ground. He is the one that flaps his hands to become airborne, instead of remaining at the mercy of the supernatural element of air. When Chamcha arrives in India, he undergoes a rather late coming-of-age moment as he reconciles with his dying father and also with his cultural duality. After his father’s death, Chamcha remains in Bombay with Zeeny Vakil. This third flight symbolizes resolution in Chamcha’s life and his “coming home” to a stable environment.

The fourth flight signals the conclusion of Farishta’s tale, and also signals the end of his life. While living his new life in Bombay, Chamcha reads in the paper that Alleluia Cone has come to the city with a group of mountain-climbers. At the news, he muses, “*Now I know what a ghost is… Unfinished business, that’s what”* (Rushdie 554). Gibreel Farishta has returned to India some time earlier before Alleluia’s arrival, and is investing in box-office flops—movies remaking traditional tales with the moralities of the characters switched. Farishta also displays the moody insanity that plagues him earlier on in the novel when he is thoroughly convinced he holds the honor of being an archangel. Farishta also goes back to living in his luxurious apartment in Everest Vilas, a metaphor demonstrating that he has still not been able to “come back to Earth.” The fact that both Alleluia Cone and Farishta are still aiming for lofty objects is foreboding considering Rushdie’s symbolic use of air. This far along in the story, both characters should have landed on the ground, yet they remain airborne—a dangerous situation for them both, because it symbolizes that they are both still at the mercy of ghosts.

Surely enough, Chamcha later reads in the papers that Alleluia Cone, the “Queen of Everest,” has ironically fallen to her death from the roof of the Everest Vilas. This echoes the extremely similar death of Rekha Merchant described earlier in the novel, and also points to Farishta’s re-entry into the storyline. At the same time Alleluia’s body is discovered, Sisodia’s body is also found with a bullet hole in his heart, lying in the middle of Farishta’s vacated apartment. Chamcha, driven by guilt and a dark feeling of responsibility, locates Farishta.

At this point, Farishta has gone completely mad, with eyes that are “unfocused, lightless, dead” (Rushdie 557). Farishta narrates, in broken language, his story, insisting to Chamcha that he is indeed, the “angel… the god damned angel of god and these days it’s the avenging angel” (Rushdie 558). He admits to shooting Sisodia, but also insists the presence of ghosts; according to his story, it is the airborne ghost of Rekha Merchant, “floating on her carpet” (Rushdie 559), that urges Farishta to take Alleluia to the top of the skyscraper and it is also Rekha who actually pushes Alleluia off the building. After his confession, Farishta places the barrel of the gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger.

The last three paragraphs of the novel bring together the subsequent actions that have occurred since the final airplane flights of both Chamcha and Farishta, and also bring in a full circle the events of the novel. While first plunging his two protagonists through the atmosphere in the exposition, Rushdie invokes ideas of newness, change and birth. However, as Chamcha stares out of a window at the shining surface of the moonlit Arabian Sea, his thoughts turn to endings and finality. “If the old refused to die, the new could not be born” (Rushdie 561). As Chamcha is led away by Zeeny Vakil, the book ends on this human note that emphasizes the passage of time and cycles of life. The two characters also *walk* away, their footsteps carrying them across a solid grounded surface, indicating that the cycles of emigration and change have been resolved for the moment.

**Conclusion**

As examined through three instances in which air plays the part of various literary elements, Rushdie’s extended metaphor cohesively ties the various narratives and subplots in *The Satanic Verses* together by creating imagery that is consistently symbolic for certain things. By associating air with the supernatural as well, Rushdie succeeds in writing a plot of magical realism, which allows him to explore more deeply into human relationships by the use of fantastical metaphors. In this way, reading Salmon Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in an exercise in studying humanity and the acts of migration that transform individuals.

Chamcha and Farishta encounter their first true airborne encounter while freefalling from the explosion of the jumbo jet *Boston*, a plunge that totally strips away their carefully constructed ideas of reality and forces them to open their eyes anew. From this point onward, they are metaphorically still airborne as they attempted to adjust to the changes in their life and environment, with only past reminders and elusive goals to determine their destination. Because Chamcha’s past and future are both grounded in reality, he is able to endure a turbulent but ultimately fulfilling journey. On the other hand, Farishta is emotionally and spiritually adrift, with nothing solid to hold onto—the woman he tries to make his anchor was similarly ghostly, and thus, unable to find a stable home, he remains plagued with dizzying hallucinations and eventually commits murder and then suicide. Throughout the novel as well, we see airplane flights signaling turning points within the plot.

Air and flight are critical motifs that represent times when individuals are at their most vulnerable moments—when everything is stripped away and they are placed in uncertain situations, left to the mercy of the macrocosm. The subsequent actions that follow the transitions and emigrations that Rushdie’s characters go through reveal Rushdie’s opinion on the necessity of remaining open to change, but also the danger of being unable to reach a conclusion. Air and change are beautiful things, but it is the idea of *home*, lying at the end of such journeys, that pulls individuals through.

**Works Cited**

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