

# “A City Visible But Unseen”: The (Un)Realities of London in South Asian Fiction

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JOHN CLEMENT BALL

London occupies a privileged place in the post-colonial imaginary. As the “heart of empire,” London was the seat of imperial power, trade, and cultural influence reaching its long arms out to Britain’s colonies. In the post-war decolonizing era it has become a destination, a site where formerly colonized peoples could enact what is sometimes called “imperialism in reverse”: they have occupied and even reterritorialized a city that metonymically (as the “metropolitan centre”) had done the same in colonial space. In the literature of the Indian diaspora, London features prominently: as a real place to live or visit; as a symbolic site of struggle and conquest; as an object of desire and the idealizing imagination.

H.G. Wells, writing in imperial times, said that London represented “how much must be moved if there was to be any [social] change”; his London is an “obstacle,” a place of solid materialities that need to be budged (Williams 5). Wells’s view resonates with the experiences of characters in many post-colonial texts. For Africans, West Indians, and South Asians in London, the city presents numerous obstacles: racism, segregation, and solitude; an alien climate and built environment; the colour bar, poverty, and cultural conflicts. Since the 1950s, novels by such writers as Buchi Emecheta, Caryl Phillips, Sam Selvon, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Salman Rushdie have documented the concrete difficulties and struggles faced by London’s “New Commonwealth” immigrants. But if the metropolis regularly confronts the post-colonial subject with seemingly immovable realities, in many South Asian novels it also exemplifies *unreality*, insubstantiality, and transformation. In the play between these seemingly polarized constructions — often coexisting in the same text — lie deep ambivalences towards London.

In what follows, I will explore the implications of London as real and unreal space in several novels from across the Indian diaspora, with special emphasis on Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

It might be tempting to see the dissolving of hard realities into immaterial unrealities as a very Indian kind of post-colonial resistance — the metropolis as *maya*, if you will. But the duality is handled with too much variety and complexity to see in it any consistent political implications. Moreover, the perceptual paradox examined here is not exclusively Indian; many urban theorists describe the city as a mix of the material and the ethereal, the stable and the unstable. Ihab Hassan calls the city “intractable” but also “Immaterial,” a “gritty structure” that is nevertheless “invisible, imaginary, made of dream and desire, agent of all our transformations” (94). For Jonathan Raban, cities are “plastic by nature,” the product of human consciousness: “The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps [and] in statistics” (10). Rushdie's view of the city is similar. As he says in an interview:

I think the things that cities have in common are precisely their fantastic nature — that cities are, after all, invented spaces, artificial spaces. They're spaces which look very permanent, solid, but which in fact are extremely ephemeral and transitory, and huge buildings can fall overnight. The shape of a city constantly changes, but at any given moment it looks absolutely solid and permanent, so it's a kind of fiction. (Ball, “Interview” 32-33).

London's most permanent and unchanging spaces are its historic monuments. Burton Pike writes that a city's “stubborn spatiality” is “epitomized by its monuments” (132); the urban geographer Jane M. Jacobs shows how in contemporary London — a place where global and local, past and present cohabit — efforts to preserve the historic built environment in the name of “heritage,” as well as some redevelopment schemes, show a nostalgic desire to memorialize, preserve, and even commodify the grandeur and might of Empire (40). When post-colonial migrants inhabit London's historic spaces they may, like the narrator of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), experience pleasure and even euphoria in being able to walk on Waterloo

Bridge or Charing Cross Road: “to say these things, . . . to have lived in the great city of London, centre of the world” (121). But others respond by debunking London’s monuments, cutting them and the imperial city they symbolize down to size — noting, for instance, that Big Ben is “not so big” (Atwood 145), that Piccadilly Circus is not really a circus (Frame 183-84), and that the celebrated city of imperial light is rather grey and drab. For some, the response to famous landmarks is more mixed: Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* finds St. Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey “awesome” and “overpowering” (67), but he also feels “uneasy” that they seem not so much expressions of religious power and passion as “temples dedicated to the British Empire” (68).

The geographer Doreen Massey has persuasively argued for a conception of space as a socially constructed, simultaneous expression of time. Any spatial entity, she says — a neighbourhood, a building, a field, a road — is saturated or infused with temporality (154-59). For “New Commonwealth” migrants in London, those material spaces where the city most obviously expresses historical time are overdetermined by associations with Empire, and so the experience of such spaces is often ambivalent. On one hand they are concrete symbols of the ways the imperial past continues in the present — a continuance migrants can feel in the quotidian obstacles to living, working, and feeling at home in London. On the other hand, just to occupy such famous spots, often “known” and mythologized in the imagination beforehand, carries the promise of reterritorializing, taking over, renewing the politics of global space at the local level.

The fact that London is “known” in the imaginary of once-colonized peoples who have not been there has important implications for its treatment in post-colonial novels. Of course, the colonial education system — the Empire’s PR machine — ensured that it *was* known: as political, economic, and cultural “centre”; as literary setting; as distant object of desire where famous landmarks beckoned and where leaders, foreign and indigenous, were “naturally” produced. But because it begins as an idea, a set of ideologically loaded representations, a place no one goes to without some mental image, London is *a priori* an “unreal” place for the post-colonial migrant, and various kinds of unreality persist in representations of it.

For the Lalani family in M.G. Vassanji’s *No New Land* (1991), it remains unreal for a very concrete reason. Moving from Tanzania to Toronto,

they feel they should see London "at least this one time in their lives." For them,

London was not a foreign place, not really, it was a city they all knew in their hearts. To hear Big Ben chime for real, see the Houses of Parliament and London Bridge, Buckingham Palace, perhaps the Queen and Prince Philip, and Westminster Abbey where David Livingstone lies buried. London — the pussycat and Dick Wittington, nursery rhymes clamoured in their brains. (33)

This cluster of images and associations is destined to stay in their brains, however; the Lalanis' London never materializes because they are barred entry at the airport. But even for those who do experience London "for real," unreality persists. In Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972), the Indian immigrant Srinivas and his British housemate experience "a curious state of unreality" after he suffers a racial attack (224). The realization of insecurity in Britain (the new home-country) is materialized in the image of a house that suddenly seems flimsy and insubstantial:

His mind . . . considered illusions, of men and the castles they built, himself in particular, and the houses on two continents in which he had lodged, which each when the time was ripe had repudiated the contracts of security to which it had not in the first place been signatory. . . . He sighed, and looked about him at the attic, which had once presented aspects of solidity. Its walls were fragile now, reduced by the general paring away that was taking place. Was it really here, he asked himself, that he had sought and found refuge? He pondered, and was lost in wonder that these rafters and laths, which were so patently made of paper, could ever have seemed to promise him more than the flimsiest physical shelter. (225)

The feeling of unreality may be caused by the barriers and racism that keep idealized dreams of London in their unreachable place, but it may also reflect a more general sense that the metropolis represents alien space. The first sentence of *The Lonely Londoners*, a novel steeped in gritty detail about material hardships, reads in part: "One grim winter evening, . . . it have a kind of unrealness about London, . . . as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet" (7).

The city as dreamscape: in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), Ralph Singh flees Caribbean "disorder" for a "dream" of "order" in London, but finds only "emptiness" and disappointment. "The god of the city was elusive," he says (18, 8). In expressing his disillusion, Singh plays repeatedly with images of substantiality and insubstantiality: "We seek the physical city and find only a conglomeration of private cells," he says: "In the city . . . we are reminded that we are individuals, units." After this image of citizens as atomized materiality, the city's "physical aspect" is said to be a "marvel of light": "a light which gave solidity to everything." Singh continues, "In the great city, so solid in its light, which gave colour even to unrendered concrete . . . — in this solid city life was two-dimensional" (18-19). This image of flattened-out unreality is developed further in a later passage which calls London "the too solid three-dimensional city in which I could never feel myself as anything but spectral, disintegrating, pointless, fluid" (52). Here, then, the city is substantial (though made so by its light), and it is the migrant citizen who flattens out into invisibility. In another sense, the city is itself reduced by Naipaul's book; like everything else in the book it is processed through Singh's highly controlling consciousness, and we are reminded that the city — a material text to be read — is also, in fiction, a text written. As such, it has no material existence beyond the minds that construct it and the words that represent it.

Amitav Ghosh foregrounds this idea directly in *The Shadow Lines* (1988). For the narrator as a boy in Calcutta, London is a distant place he imagines into existence by listening to stories and memorizing maps; he authoritatively claims to "know" it before ever experiencing it. When he does visit London as an adult, his knowledge proves both real and illusory. Navigating expertly through a district fully mapped in his imagination, he has trouble separating past from present. The image of the bombed-out street he knows from Tridib's stories of the war supersedes the visible present reality, and he discovers that "I . . . could not believe in the truth of what I did see" (56). In a novel obsessed with simultaneity and overlappings — of different times and distant places, of realities remembered, imagined, and experienced, of borders crossed — Ghosh recognizes in this scene that what is "real" transcends what is materially, physically present. If we accept, with Massey, that space is infused with time, with Jacobs that the global inheres in the metropolitan local, and with Rushdie that the city's solidity is an

illusion, then we can identify the city as a palimpsest, its present spaces layered with local and global pasts. For Ghosh, it is important not only to see “that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination” (21), but also to bring to a site like London something of the archaeologist’s imaginative attentiveness: to see in its present materiality the spectre of previous realities, alternative possibilities, worldly connections.

Dev in *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, in his obstreperous way, shows something of this attentiveness. He arrives in London full of images derived from a colonial-style education in English literature, able to recognize scenes and name local objects based on this imaginative preparedness: “He had known them all . . . before, in the pages of Dickens and Lamb, Addison and Boswell, Dryden and Jerome K. Jerome; not in colour and in three dimensions as he now encountered them, but in black and white and made of paper” (10). He remarks at “how exact the reproductions had been, how accurate” so that although he had never experienced “this world” before, it was still “known, familiar, easy to touch, enjoy and accept because he was so well prepared to enter it” (10, 11). He feels empowered by the materialization of what he knew as a “paper replica” because that image seemed “larger than life,” whereas “what he now saw and touched and breathed was recognisably the original, but an original cut down to size, under control, concrete, so that it no longer flew out of his mind and hovered above him like some incorporeal, winged creature” (11). This passage is intriguing in many ways. In appropriating and subsuming London to his own experience and perspective, Dev the post-colonial migrant begins to take possession of it. But he does so by establishing a line of temporal continuity between past and present (and between a textual image and an actual site) in a contained space — the scene takes place in a pub — where the differences between Britain’s post-colonial present and its imperial past are papered over by a nostalgic traditionalism. The pub is an artifice, a replica of a former reality; the time with which it is infused denies time (in the sense of change). If Dev can paradoxically figure the actual city as smaller than literary representations of it, and therefore as under his control, this is because he is making a false synecdoche between “city” and a rather unreal, packaged space within it — the pub.

Another way in which Dev is prepared for London is through his experience of colonial architecture in India. Buildings and planning in

colonial cities often “mimicked” the design of European cities (Jacobs 20); this was one way imperial powers reterritorialized alien space. Walking through London, Dev finds that the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park — which looks “like a piece of architecture having a nightmare following an ample Victorian repast” — seems familiar. Its shapes “recalls to him similar nightmares of stone and marble in India” such as Bombay’s Victoria Station, Calcutta’s Victoria Memorial, and the statue of Victoria outside Delhi’s railway station (83). For Dev, these are anachronistic examples of those “pockets and stretches of Victorian India which continue to have a life of their own, a dream life out of touch with the present” (84). Yet he finds the Albert Memorial oddly compelling:

Dev is not sure whether he comes to it, again and again, in order to look upon the face of England as it had existed in his imagination when he was a child . . . or because it reminds him of that Victorian India that formed a part — unreal and, therefore, all the more haunting, omnipresent and subliminal — of the India he had known. (84)

Here certain material elements of London and the big cities of India make them seem like simulacra of each other — unreal and mutually reflective. In another scene, Dev contrasts the “tight, insular clusters” of Indian cities with the “space and depth” he experiences in London’s “vistas,” which give him the empowering “sensation of an explorer on the verge of discovery” (69-70).

Although he does experience the reality check of racial slurs and difficulties getting a job, Dev is prone to see London in idealized, even deluded ways. To this extent he resembles his friend Adit, with whom he is ostensibly contrasted. Indeed, Dev is most enthused about London when it seems least touched by time. Standing on a high hill from which he can see the city in a glance, he reverentially “observes that the English have a genius for preserving beauty . . . from the ravages of time and decay, so that it affects generation after generation in precisely the same manner” (82-83). The scene he describes, featuring churches, flowers, tufted grass, the ghost of Byron, and “the sunlit city of London lying far below them” (83), is a romantic escape from alienating street-level reality. The hilltop setting enables this; as Michel de Certeau observes, to look down at a city from above “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’

into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, . . . looking down like a god" (92). Richard Sennett also notes the ways a choice of perspective allows the viewer to make a city "cohere," often with "an undertone of possessive domination" (155-56). Reading the city from on high, then, is for Dev an empowering discovery or repossession of something now containable and legible. But it is also a fantasy: this power and readability do not exist at street level — where the slammed door is a defining image (Desai 120) — and certainly not below ground, which is described in a scene at Clapham tube station as an "unearthly," labyrinthine prison that makes a panicky Dev think of Kafka, Alice in Wonderland, martians, and tombs (57). If such images of underground unreality draw on literary conventions, what Dev "sees" from above, which feels so liberating, is also what he has been trained and predisposed to see. He finds security in a textual city untouched by time, known because read, but ultimately unreal.

Both Dev and the *Shadow Lines* narrator discover in London a version of what they already "know" as mental images derived from texts. The effect in Ghosh's novel is of London imbued with a dense time-space — full of its own past and of connections to elsewhere — that offers a compelling model of what a truly *post*-colonial revisioning of London and of global space might look like. Desai's Dev, by contrast, wavers ambivalently between an empowering nostalgic unreality and an alienating present-tense reality. On occasion his mappings do re-orient metropolitan spaces in ways that support a post-colonial reclamation. When Dev sees the Battersea power station as a monumental shrine to British power, its inside takes on a quite Hindu imaginative reality for him. Dev envisions the station as a "temple" with a "sacrificial bonfire" presided over by saffron-robed priests conducting a *puja*; it is they who he pictures generating "the electricity of London" (54). Here, as in his ebullient fancy of Indian realities invading London in order to "turn the tables" (61) on imperial history (a precursor of Gibreel's tropicalization fantasy in *The Satanic Verses*), and as in the Victorian architectural links he sees, Dev acknowledges that the imperial might represented by London's spatial monumentality is inseparable from the energy and resources of the colonies that propped it up. London, as Roy Porter argues, was built by Empire (1-2). Dev symbolically acknowledges this by seeing some of its most stubbornly concrete sites as infused or overlaid with India.



This may be a more promising coming-to-terms with England for Dev than the climactic countryside epiphany, a later experience that finally prompts him to see England not as an imperial aggressor to be fought but rather as “something quite small and soft” that he can “hold and tame and even love” (229). In a moment of what Tony Hiss would call “simultaneous perception” (3-4), Dev recognizes a pastoral idyll which confirms that his dreams of England back home (again, derived from nineteenth-century literature) were an “exact” and “mirrorlike reflection of reality” (170). The ecstasy caused by this discovery enables him to feel connected with England. The location of this epiphany is significant: as David Sibley shows, the countryside is traditionally stereotyped as the essence of timeless pure “Englishness” in contrast to the fluid cosmopolitan space of the city, and thus the countryside is an exclusive space that “cannot accommodate difference” (108). But overcoming this excluding myth with Romantic-Victorian nostalgia, as Dev does, does not affiliate his appropriation of English space, rural or urban, with a progressive post-colonial politics. The psychological comfort and peace it provides is based on a kind of willed self-deception, and will have limited application back in the city.

It is interesting that Adit, the former anglophile, does find the countryside excluding: it alienates him suddenly from England and London. For him, the English landscape becomes displaced by contrasting images of India’s “moonscape,” and this irrevocably corrupts his former image of London as a “Mecca” (177, 181). Like his English wife Sarah — who privately already feels herself to be an “fraud,” an “impostor . . . playing a part” on stage (34-35) — Adit starts calling his metropolitan life “unreal,” and London a place of inauthenticity and theatrical falseness. However, his response — to return to India and “start living a real life” (204) — is no less embroiled in imaginary geographies than Dev’s fantasies. Leaving London so melodramatically, Adit and Sarah seem to be trading one unreal object of desire for another.

This view of London as theatrical — in the sense of inauthentic or imitative — links *Bye-Bye Blackbird* to other novels. In Markandaya’s *Possession* (1963), there is something theatrical about Vaimiki’s life with Caroline in London; in this colonial allegory he is the jewel in her crown, the object of display who, with his monkey and his faux-Indian costumes, learns to exploit “the Oriental extravagance that had come to be expected of

him" (120). But for this artist whisked from the gritty materiality of his Indian village to the glossy surfaces of high-society London, it is one thing to create images but another thing to be one. Life as a spectacle proves dispiritingly unreal; Caroline makes it especially so when she props up his muse with fake letters from Swami. Once he discovers her self-serving deception, he leaves London for what to him is the higher reality of Swami's cave in India.

Novels by Vassanji, Hanif Kureishi and others also construct London as a performative space trading in false and theatrical images of the oriental. In Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994), Ali is seen (wrongly) by London society as a "prince," touted in tabloids as "a son of an oriental chieftain"; his marriage breaks up when Rita can't "act the princess" (290-91). But London as theatrical space is not only seen negatively. Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) uses performative role-playing as a controlling metaphor for the transformations that migrants — whether from South Asia or the South London suburbs — undergo in the metropolis, and for the identities, authentic and inauthentic, that they assume.<sup>1</sup>

Theatrical performance also serves as a metaphor for the migrant experience in *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Rushdie's novel of post-colonial "invasion" and would-be "conquest" invokes various unrealities: the magical transformations of Gibreel and Saladin into angel and goat; both men's denial of the city's realities in favour of imposed "dream-cities" of their own; debates over whether brown-skinned migrants are "really" British. But the performative realm has a special significance. Saladin and Gibreel are performers and purveyors of illusion by profession. As such, they are suited to London, a city whose economy is increasingly geared to the production of intangibles such as advertising, culture, tourism, fashion, and financial services rather than the concrete industrial goods of old. As in Kureishi's novel, Rushdie's London is in many important ways a postmodern city trading in illusions, simulacra, and what David Harvey calls "time-space compression" (284): a city whose defining image could be the Victorian film-set city, the "abridged metropolis" built for the Dickensian musical *Friend!* (421-22). But if theatricality is associated with nostalgia and artifice, *The Satanic Verses* also makes the theatrical an important realm of agency and change. It is through performance and spectacle that Saladin and Gibreel, for better or worse, make things happen. And even if some of their activities are

misguided —their dream-images of London not only illusions but delusions — in this novel about urban and psychic renewal they do in their different ways acknowledge the need for a renovated vision of the “city visible but unseen” (241). For Rushdie, the migrant is not only transformed and metamorphosed as a *result* of London, but can be both spectator and actor in dramatic changes happening to the city because of its new communities.

*The Satanic Verses* provides a measure of change in the migrant’s London since an earlier text like *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Desai’s novel, the story of two Indian migrants with anglophile tendencies who foil each other and finally switch roles, has much in common with Rushdie’s and is, I believe, one of its important pre-texts. Both books portray men who would “possess” or “conquer” London developing ambivalent relationships with it. Both begin with arrivals, end with departures, and set late pivotal scenes in the countryside. Both make much of the different ways the city appears from various heights: knowable and containable from above; alienating and offensive at street level; unearthly and deathly from the Underground. Indeed, both novels strongly affiliate what can be *known* of the city with what the seeing eye *perceives*, and what the imagination makes of this — what Kevin Lynch calls the city’s “imageability” (10).

The theatrical realm — a specific manifestation of the visual imagination — offers one site where the difference between Desai’s London and Rushdie’s becomes clear. For Desai’s mid-1960s immigrants, theatricality connotes an excluding artifice, not a space of transformation and play with the apparently real. Moreover, for Dev, perceptions of London’s “unreality” are driven by anxiety and fascination with imperialism’s spatial symbols, together with a tentative will-to-power over them that may involve overlaying them with Indian realities, but most often involves identifying London as the original of its own nostalgic myths. Desai’s immigrants are still reacting to the city, largely on its own terms; while it changes them, they do not transform or significantly reterritorialize it. Written in the mode of literary realism, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* constructs a spatially stubborn London still grounded in the imperial past. In Rushdie’s mid-1980s London (or “Vilayet”), magic and realism cohabit; his novel portrays a metamorphic city lurching through a painful process of renewal towards a future in which the static spatial and racial geopolitics of the past are rendered obsolete, melted down like the wax effigies of “History” in Pinkwalla’s nightclub (292-94).

Rushdie's Saladin begins, not unlike Adit and Dev, holding comfortable delusions of London as a "dream-city" of "poise and moderation" (37). But unlike Desai's protagonists, he moves convincingly beyond this image; he is jolted out of his anachronistic isolation through a kind of magical reality check. Through his mutation into a goatish beast and back again, he is forced to join the crowd — a visibly different crowd now than the one T.S. Eliot associated with the "Unreal City" in *The Waste Land* (65). His Englishness aggressively challenged, his former career and love-life suddenly beyond reach, Saladin is compelled to seek refuge with the Bangladeshi Sufyans, people of his "own kind" that he had formerly avoided (253). His moral education involves dissolving "his old certainties" (259) and finding himself not in his dream-London — he's been "cast from the gates" of that city (257) — but in the multiplicitous "newness" of a city that is continually becoming. As his horns become an icon of inter-racial solidarity, and as he starts acknowledging his previously denied racial identity, Saladin moves into the fluid space of the demographically transformed metropolis. He is forced into the kinds of encounters across race, space, and class divides that metropolitan life constantly promotes and that, as Jacobs remarks, make cities places "saturated with possibilities for the destabilization of imperial arrangements"(5).

Indeed, it is through collectivity and street-level action that Rushdie envisions London's post-colonial renewal, not through the literally top-down fantasies of a tropicalized metropolis imagined by the monomaniacal Gibreel (354-55). For Rushdie, social transformation happens gradually and communally, not instantly and unilaterally as Gibreel, in his delusory attempts to "redeem" London by angelic imperative, would have it (322). The activist politics represented in the novel, and which Saladin's education requires him to experience, are messy, discordant, and even factionalizing as old racial hierarchies and divisions are challenged. And if the collectivities are grounded in the neighbourhood and ghetto spaces that are the local legacy of imperialism's global segregation of peoples, the transgressions of boundaries endemic to riots aim at the larger obliteration of segregating borders; as Malcolm Cross writes, racial segregation can perpetuate social inequities by making deprivation and differentiation seem natural or common-sensical (111). For Rushdie, the reclaiming of London by immigrants is all about erasing borders and renovating material reality. In some discourses of urban

design, weak or transgressable borders are valued for encouraging the narrative use of space (Sennett 196); Rushdie's narrative places a high value on the intermingling of "incompatible realities" (314) and the generation of "newness" through hybrid combinations. Moreover, if he is conceptually redesigning the city, Rushdie is also, as Vijay Mishra notes, redefining the nation (7-10).

Theatrical performance is all about the design, transformation, and occupation of space; it is also about erecting and interrogating borders — between reality and illusion, on-stage and off-, actors and audience. One model of transgressive performance with particular applicability to Rushdie's vision of city-space is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnival." While the theories of the grotesque body and Menippean satire that Bakhtin develops from carnival are very applicable to *The Satanic Verses* (though beyond the scope of this paper),<sup>2</sup> the aspect of carnival itself of greatest interest here is its sociopolitical capacity to destabilize official orders and hierarchies. For Bakhtin, carnival is a participatory performance involving spectacle and play, and affiliated with "becoming, change, and renewal"; located "on the borderline between art and life," carnival suspends established norms and social boundaries, and "does not acknowledge any division between actors and spectators" (*Rabelais* 10, 7). Although culturally its world is far from the medieval and Renaissance Europe in which Bakhtin's theory originates, Rushdie's Rabelaisian novel is nonetheless infused with the revolutionary spirit of the carnivalesque. Saladin's old image of London is carnivalized, made topsy-turvy, as he is jolted out of ossified views into the recognition of an urban world characterized by transition, transformation, and uncertainty.

Both Saladin and Gibreel, like Desai's Dev and Adit, undergo processes of radical reorientation towards metropolitan London. All four men find their views of the city transformed over the course of their respective novels, but if Saladin's is the most promising *post-colonial* re-vision — and I believe it is — this is because, despite its elements of surreal fantasy, his experience is grounded in social reality in a way that the others are not. I have shown above some ways in which Dev's and Adit's final comings-to-terms with London are limited. These limitations are partly a function of the solitary detachment and myopia with which both men experience the city; their attitudes to London are formed not through wide-ranging community experience, but mostly internally and unilaterally: in the mental and imaginary realms,

and through literary and theatrical models. Even the novel's most promising post-colonial images of London — Dev's fantasies of Battersea power station as Hindu temple and of English space overlaid with Indian (54, 61) — seem merely idiosyncratic, without social or political valence. Perhaps they *can* be no more than delightfully incongruous fancies in a London so demographically and spatially linked to its imperial past: a city where Indian communities are still at an early stage of formation, and where Indians are outside established power bases and thus mere spectators or witnesses to the occupation and transformation of urban space.

Two decades later, when Gibreel has his similar fancy of a "tropicalized" London, it is as both spectator and actor: he imagines himself to have the power of the Angel Azrael to dramatically transform the metropolis from on high. The possibilities for empowering agency are certainly stronger in 1980s London, which has larger and more well defined and rooted Indian communities than it did in the 1960s. But Gibreel's model of top-down, unilateral urban renewal proves a negative foil to that of Saladin; not only do his proposals to achieve "increased moral definition" (354) by obliterating shades of grey and reinforcing binaries sound regressive, but Gibreel himself is a deluded man whose grip on reality is tenuous. He is also a largely isolated figure in the novel; his attitudes are derived from extended dreams and misapprehensions about the nature of social change. The effect on the masses he may have as a screen idol, in the realm of theatrical fantasy, does not translate to street-level reality. Saladin's preferable experience of community entanglements is inaugurated by his bodily transformation, which is much more real in its way than Gibreel's. The latter may have a halo, but every time he attempts to do something angelic, he is humbled by his "real" humanity and his illusory empowerment evaporates. Saladin's goat-body is clearly not illusory: the Sufyan girls wonder if it is "a trick, . . . make-up or something theatrical" (257), but his metamorphic eight-foot-high beast-self is a material (if temporary) fact. And this change prompts the kinds of grass-roots community identifications that, in a London increasingly occupied by people of colour, can lead to real, material transformations of urban space and power. Through the recognitions of Saladin, Rushdie posits a London-to-be in which the spectator-actor divisions of personal fancy or conventional theatrics give way to the participatory tradition of carnival. He envisions an inclusive, hybridized, and revolutionary

urban space in which old rigid realities can be played with and changed — a space where the post-colonial migrant need not be just a spectator responding to and influenced by the city, but an actor on stage imagining, performing, and designing its new realities.

### Notes and References

1. For a discussion of these aspects of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, see Ball, "Semi-Detached" (20-25).
2. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais* (esp. 303-436) for carnival and the grotesque body; see his *Problems* (esp. 112-37) for carnival and Menippean satire.

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Professor of English  
 University of New Brunswick  
 Canada