'The God of the Imagination': Postcolonial Postsecularism and Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) invokes religion and mythology in its representation of miracles, wonder, sorcery, revelations, infernos, frontiers, metamorphoses, and other worlds as it narrates the lives—across the United States, India, and Europe—of celebrated rock singers Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. This article analyzes how Rushdie represents elements of secularism and religion in order to gesture toward and search for inspirational, generative, and creative potentials. I argue how Rushdie's literary representation of secularism and religion is an expression of *postcolonial postsecularism*, as an imaginative possibility emerging from the historical conditions and contexts—across India and western Europe—of philosophical and political secularism, religious thought and practice, and postcoloniality.

1. Introduction

It is no provocation to state that diverse regions of the contemporary world are facing challenges with political secularism, from debates in Europe and Canada on the wearing of religious symbols in public spaces, to debates in India about the state's legal intervention in seeking to ban the Muslim practice of *triple talaq* (instant or irrevocable divorce). A marked and persistent dichotomy in these challenges is between, on the one hand, the lifeworld of religion, with its doctrines and ideas of the transcendental life, and, on the other hand, the frame of secular thought, with its focus on the present and the immanent. From the perspective of secular thought, religious belief and practice (particularly the latter, and particularly its visuality) can appear as manifestly other, as alterity itself. From the perspective of religion, secular thought can also appear as other, as a narrow and constraining mode of experiencing and thinking of human life and the world. Charles Taylor argues that modern western society is constituted by a secular immanent frame. According to Taylor, this immanent frame is a "self-sufficient immanent order" (543). By self-sufficient, Taylor means that this frame can be "understood on its own, without reference to interventions from outside" (543), including "without reference to God" (543). When the secular-religious dichotomy is nuanced by the individual and combined factors and forces of cultural, linguistic, gender, racial, and ethnic difference, the dichotomy becomes heightened, perhaps even exacerbated. The challenges for a multireligious and multicultural polity thus become that much greater. In such a framework, how can there be peaceful co-existence and a sense of national belonging shared by all? Can there be guiding values that allow for social harmony among radically different forms of thought, belief, and practice?

This article intervenes in these academic debates on secularism and religion by bringing perspectives from the postcolonial Global South, and specifically from India. After the Partition of India in 1947,[1] the independent Indian state adopted a policy of secularism to ensure respect for and inclusion of all religions. Although the word *secularism* did

[1] The ending of the British colonization of India by dividing India into India and Pakistan, based on religion.

not appear in the Indian constitution until 1976, secularism was part of a nation-building project to ensure democracy and the protection of minority rights, with this state secularism thus functioning as a form of nationalism. Rather than aspiring to separate religion and the state as in the Euro-American wall of separation model, the Indian state takes a principled distance (*Bhargava*) from religious communities, intervening as necessary to protect democracy, equality, and freedom. India, however, has faced, and continues to face, numerous crises of state secularism. Most prominent among these is interreligious violence, itself based on communalism (as it is termed in South Asia), a politicized and exclusionary antagonism based on the real or imagined affiliations of group identity or community, so often religious identity. Instances of communal violence include the genocide of Sikhs in 1984, and the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Ahmedabad (itself sparked by a series of retaliations between Hindus and Muslims). Postcolonial India also continues to witness crises of religion, given religion's vulnerability (for example, as a legitimizing factor) to being linked with violence. As an instance of the politicization of religion, there is *Hindutva*, or politicized Hinduism, a form of Hindu nationalism. In the wake of communal violence, while Hindu leaders condemn such violence as a crisis of secularism, they seldom, if ever, mark it as a crisis of Hinduism, which no less is the majority religion (Sunder Rajan 69).

Given these ongoing challenges of secularism, it seems one step forward is imagining an ethics and a possibility that combines the inspirational, affective aspects of religion (such as faith, awe, wonder, enchantment) with the hard-won gains of political secularism (such as democratic representation and minority rights, including state protections of religious freedom). It is this combination that we can understand as *postsecular*, similar to the paradoxes of a "non-religious religion" or a "non-secular secularism" (Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination* xx). For Indian writers that are diasporically situated in the west, their postsecular searches and gestures—including toward enchantment—are also informed by and emerge within the disenchantments of a western philosophical secularism (as skepticism about religious, other-worldly beliefs). As Max Weber has argued, the west's development of industrialization

and scientific-rationalist worldviews, with their associated mechanization and technologies, has resulted in a certain degree of disenchantment in western societies (Gerth and Mills 155). Weber's reference to mechanization and technologies coheres with Charles Taylor's argument that, in the worldview of a secular immanent frame, "instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular" (542). One aspect of the secularism of time is that it disciplines people into viewing time as a finite resource, "to make use of wisely and to advantage" (Taylor 542), and thus to be used for the ends of productivity and profitability. It might be worthwhile here to reflect on the definition of *enchant*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "to exert magical influence," "to bewitch, lay under a spell," and "to endow with magical powers or properties." According to the OED, *enchanting* can constitute the ability to "charm, delight, enrapture." We can thus appreciate how the search for enchantment, including literary enchantment, can be marked (including historically and politically) by a search for some sense of magic and enrapture given the pervasiveness of secular pressures and the disciplining forces of mechanization, instrumentalism, and rationality (the last suggesting that reason is best manifested and exercised in relation to instrumental ends, rather than speculations on the transcendental or non-secular). As an example of the challenges of conceptualizing and representing enchantment, consider Saurabh Dube's description of the enchantments of modernity:

> [They] extend from the immaculately imagined origins and ends of modernity, to the dense magic of money and markets, to novel mythologies of nation and empire, to hierarchical oppositions between myth and history, ritual and rationality, East and West, and tradition and modernity. (729)

For Dube, these enchantments are "intensely phantasmic but concretely palpable, tangible representations and forceful practices [that] order and orchestrate the past and the present" (729). The rhetorical form of the above two sentences mirrors the plenitude of enchantment itself, with

the sentences consisting of amplified metaphors ("concretely palpable"), amplified images ("dense magic", "immaculately imagined", "intensely phantasmic"), dramatic verbs ("force", "order", "orchestrate"), and a rhythmic series of oppositional dualities. The theorist's turn to animated rhetorical devices demonstrates the pressures of representability that enchantment exerts on form. We see this same rhetorical challenge of representation in literary texts. The rhetorical challenge is not only to capture enchantment through literary representation, but to represent enchantment in the wake of religion's long historical association with, if not epistemological and ontological claim to, enchantment.[2] To capture some of postsecularism's abovementioned paradoxes (a non-secular secularism, a non-religious religion), and especially the challenges faced by writers in working through postsecularism, in my work I have drawn upon deconstruction's engagement with paradox and representation, as in Jacques Derrida's description of messianicity as an "opening to the future […] but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic figuration" (Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination* 56). Derrida's theorization of the possibilities of openness and the future, unconstrained by expectation and (pre-)figuration, are themselves possibilities and qualities of literary representation, particularly as such representation can represent an instrument and forum to the writer: as openness, as writing to the future, as imaginativeness that is unconstrained.

Postsecularism, as indeed secularism itself, is historically and regionally specific. For instance, given the history of secularization in Europe, and writing within a western European context, Jürgen Habermas uses postsecular to designate the challenges faced by secularized societies in contemporary nation-states in which "religion maintains a public influence and relevance," while "the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground" (21). I present this European trajectory of postsecularism to demonstrate the historical and regional specificity of the concept, and to foreground that postsecularism carries a certain distinctiveness within postcolonial settings. The *postcolonial postsecularism* I have theorized is historically

[2] As an example of religion's link with enchantment, we can consider Catholicism's association with ritual and magic; see Pecora 11.

and politically informed by the intersections of political secularism, philosophical secularism, politics, literature, and religious thought and practice (see Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination* and Ratti, "Theoretical Framings"). Writers explore these intersections within literary space under the political edges of postcoloniality, diaspora, nationalism, majoritarianism, and minoritarianism. For these postcolonial writers, their postsecular literary searches are individualistic, experimental, and risky as they gesture toward forms of thought and practice. Postsecular moments in postcolonial literature require an immense imaginative maneuver, moments that are constituted by "human decisions and human risks, without the fixity of the nation-state. Such moments will not result in immediate juridico-legal change, but they can gesture to an epistemic change, which is unpredictable, and the trajectories of which are unknown" (Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination* xxiii).

Across these Indian and Euro-American contexts, Salman Rushdie's novels are well-known for their meditations on religion and secularism, both as fascination with belief and as criticism of the breakdown of secular state policies. The most well-known among these are *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988). *Midnight's Children* includes Rushdie's response to the Emergency of 1975, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled by decree, curtailing civil rights and eroding democracy. *The Satanic Verses* is an extended meditation on the nature of faith, in the context of religious belief (particularly Islam), mediated in the novel through the Indian immigrant experience in the United Kingdom. *The Satanic Verses* famously earned Rushdie a *fatwa* or decree by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, calling for Rushdie's death. The Rushdie Affair, as it came to be termed, was marked by global debates on freedom of expression and its relationship with censorship and blasphemy laws (see Appignanesi). Rushdie's first extended work of fiction after *The Satanic Verses* was *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), narrated as a children's tale and examining the nature of storytelling, including censorship. Rushdie's first major novel after *The Satanic Verses* was *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which laments the rise of the Hindu right in Mumbai. Whereas in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie speaks of *faith*, in his writings after *The Satanic Verses*—showing the effects of the fatwa—he

speaks of organized *religion*, and a particularly virulent strain of religious practice marked by violence and intolerance.

I focus in this article on *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), given in part the relatively little critical attention the novel has received in literary criticism of Rushdie's work, and given its rich engagement with Rushdie's recurring fascination with religion, enchantment, aesthetics, and creativity. Artists form the main characters in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and the device of magical realism (which also appears in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*) becomes a way of extending the narrative to the enchantment of another frontier. The novel is a secular text: it does not seek to convey or proselytize religious ideas. At the same time, the novel abounds with the lexicon of religion and mythology. The novel refers to miracles, sorcery, revelations, infernos, frontiers, metamorphoses, other worlds, and invokes the Orpheus myth. In the following reading of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, I will explore the various tropes that Rushdie invokes in his effort to represent the seemingly unrepresentable. The concatenation of epistemological and ontological difference—the novel presents, among other oppositions, secular and fantastical worlds—reflects the postsecular collision of the mutually reinforcing and contrastive lifeworlds of secularism and religion.

2. Reading *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

The Ground Beneath Her Feet takes within its globally ambitious scope India, the UK, the USA, and Mexico as its narrator, the photographer Umeed Merchant ("Rai"), tells the love story of two rock singers, Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. Rai is the childhood friend of Ormus and Vina, accompanying them from Mumbai to New York as they reach global fame. Ormus and Vina come from traumatic pasts. Ormus's twin brother died at birth, but Ormus feels he can hear his brother communicating with him. Vina was born to a Greek American mother and an Indian father, who abandoned the young family. One day, Vina returns home from school in the US to discover that her mother has killed Vina's siblings and hanged herself. Vina then moves to Mumbai to live

with distant relatives, where she meets the older Ormus. They become singers and their talent ultimately takes them to New York.

Ormus's vision from his left eye becomes increasingly unreliable, and he must cover it with a patch. At the same time, he begins having visions into another world and frontier. The boundary between the material world and the envisioned world becomes increasingly blurred for Ormus. As his eyesight and hearing degenerate, he finds himself locked in his own reality, haunted by the uncertainty of his knowledge of the world, the specter of his dead brother, and an instantaneously materializing lover who can disappear as quickly as she appears. Vina dies in an earthquake that swallows her body whole. Devastated by the death of Vina, Ormus enters seclusion, living alone in an apartment. The end of the novel presents to us the young singer Mira Celano, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Vina. Mira meets the aging Ormus, who is inspired and revived by her. They perform together in the US and internationally until Ormus is shot in New York, by an anonymous woman. Mira continues with her music, carving a niche and identity different from the legacy of Vina.

In keeping with his earlier fiction, particularly *The Satanic Verses*, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie explores the nature of literary representation and the creative imagination, raising questions about what constitutes realism (including the secular world), knowledge, faith, and the mysterious. Self-reflexively pointing to literary representation allows Rushdie to capture some of the lifeworld of that which might ordinarily resist understanding or representation, as in the lifeworld of the magical, other-worldly, and mysterious. For example, Rai characterizes realism as follows: "Realism isn't a set of rules, it's an intention […]. The world isn't realistic any more, what are we going to do about that?" (449). To mark realism as an intention is to introduce an element of agency, that it is something created (such as by a novelist), the same way that religion can be created by communities of believers. The fact that realism is not a set of rules but, rather, intentions, points to the fallibility and inherent constructedness (and thus contestability and dubitabil-

ity) of realism and, by extension, of religion.[3] In contrast to the seeming impoverishment of realism, Rushdie postulates an "other" world, describing it as the "unseen." In the following passage, Rushdie presents readers with a kind of aesthetic manifesto, affirming the power of art to gesture toward the mysterious:

> Five mysteries hold the keys to the unseen: the act of love, and the birth of a baby, and the contemplation of great art, and being in the presence of death or disaster, and hearing the human voice lifted in song. These are the occasions when the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden; an eff of the ineffable. Glory bursts upon us in such hours: the dark glory of earthquakes, the slippery wonder of new life, the radiance of Vina's singing. (20)

The above passage has a certain lyricism, with Rai speaking of glory, the ineffable, the wondrous, and the radiant. In case any of Rushdie's imaginative offerings seems fanciful or escapist, he reminds readers of their (connection with) secular worldliness. The lives of Ormus and Vina represent the inextricable contiguity between the greatness of art (as an example of the magical and mysterious) and the secular presentness of damage:

> They have both been damaged, are both the repairers of damage. Later, entering that world of ruined selves, music's world, they will already have learned that such damage is the normal condition of life, as is the closeness of the crumbling edge, as is the fissured ground. In that inferno, they will feel at home. (148)

[3] For a parallel analysis on the constructedness of the "real," see Ana Mendes's argument that Rushdie's representation of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in the novel has a dualistic, even palimpsestual, quality, between conventional representability (particularly as oriental stereotype) and unrepresentability or unknowability (174).

When Rushdie describes their damage as "the normal condition of life," this is similar to the political edge of postcoloniality in India, constituted as it is by the seemingly perpetual crises of both state secularism and (religious) violence. It is within this historical situatedness that writers (and the characters they create) take a certain postsecular leap of faith in their exploration of faith, awe, wonder, transcendence, and enchantment.

Such a leap of faith can be enacted by what the narrator Rai terms the "creative imagination," itself contrasted with scepticism toward religious belief:

> I can still give no credence whatsoever to systems of belief. They seem flimsy, unpersuasive examples of the literary genre known as "unreliable narration." I think of faith as irony, which is perhaps why the only leaps of faith I'm capable of are those required by the creative imagination, by fictions that don't pretend to be fact, and so end up telling the truth. (123)

What Rai here calls "irony" fits with Rushdie's earlier critique in *The Satanic Verses* of religion as something that has hegemonic and political control by presenting itself as infallible, as something that cannot be doubted or challenged. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie makes explicit this notion of "faith as irony." In the above passage, Rushdie characterizes religion as a kind of fiction, and thus as something untrue and socially constructed. Here is Rai speaking of imagination and the miraculous:

> I allowed myself the supernatural, the transcendent, because, I told myself, our love of metaphor is pre-religious, born of our need to express what is inexpressible, our dreams of otherness, of more. Religion came and imprisoned the angels in aspic, tied our winged beauty to a tree, nailed our freedom to the ground. In these sequences I tried to reclaim the sense of the miraculous without having to

> bend the knee before any god. The god of the imagination is the imagination. The law of the imagination is, whatever works. The law of the imagination is not universal truth, but the work's truth, fought for and won. (447)

"Fought for and won" indicates Rushdie's recognition of the exigencies of history, that political secularism is historically developed and re-worked. Rushdie is fascinated by the transcendent possibilities of metaphor, with its imaginative power to express the seemingly inexpressible, an imagination that is unconstrained by the dogmas of religion. "The god of the imagination" is a paradox, meaning that it has the miraculous (creative) power of God—a power that is autonomous and self-referential ("imagination is the imagination")—without the constraints of politicized religion ("bend the knee"). There is value and strength contained in such imaginative manoeuvres: the ability to perceive cultural mores and patterns. Vina says to Rai that "if you want to solve the riddle, you've got to step out of the frame" (427). It is those outside of the frame—the visionaries (including artists), the marginalized, the excluded, the migrants, the colonized, the postcolonial—who have particular insights into solving riddles. By way of examining the above dynamics of stepping out of the frame, including the exploration of dichotomies such as that between the worldly and the other-worldly, in the following two subsections I will examine two particular thematics in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: music and metamorphosis.

2.1. The Representation of Music in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

Music, and rock music in particular, is one of the organizing motifs of this novel, if not the central motif. Because of its global reach, rock music marks a worldliness in the novel (creating a "world"), at the same time that such music offers a kind of enchantment. Asserting that rock music is "the mythology of our time," Rushdie explains that he used this motif as a "language of cultural reference that I could use which people all around the world would easily get, just in the same way that

people once might have got a range of classical or mythological reference" (Kadzis 222-23). As a sign of her increasing freedom and confidence, Vina walks naked in the streets of New York, becoming as passionate about the liberation of women and their rights as she is about music. This characterization recalls that of the prophet Ayesha in *The Satanic Verses*. As her revelations increase, Ayesha walks naked through her village, an image resonant with the devotional *bhakti* poetry of medieval India. This includes the work of the the twelfth-century poet Akkamahadevi, whose poems (or *vacanas*) describe her walking naked in enchanted devotion to the Hindu god Shiva, whom she considered her lover, having faith that his omnipresence covered and protected her. Rushdie's secularization of a religious text demonstrates the influence of religion in his literary representation of secular enchantment. Bhakti poetry itself resisted the caste, occupation, and gender hierarchies of orthodox Hinduism (Tharu and Lalita 57), allowing for social cohesion among communities. Another parallel between bhakti poetry and Rushdie's novel is that many bhakti poems are set to music, as in the bhakti songs of the sixteenth-century poet Mirabai (Tharu and Lalita 91), with collective singing another mechanism for social cohesion.

Vina's devotion to her music in turn inspires people's devotion to her:

> [I]n spite of all her star antics, her *nakhras*, she was never resented, something in her manner disarmed people, and what bubbled out of them instead of bile was a miraculous, unconditional affection, as if she were the whole earth's very own new-born child. Call it love. (9; emphasis in original)

Love becomes something "miraculous," and Rushdie connects that miraculousness with the music of Ormus and Vina. In many instances, Rushdie imbues Vina with divine qualities: "[E]ven strangers would come [to Vina], following her star, hoping to receive redemption from her voice, her large damp eyes, her touch" (20). It is this affective and human connectedness that comes to replace any community founded upon religious belief. Rushdie attempts to capture some of the miraculousness and enchantment of a religious worldview while avoiding the

empty superstitions and political dogmas of religion. The "truth" delivered through art (music) becomes itself a form of "non-religious religion." This music also has the power to cross frontiers and borders:

> Among the great struggles of man—good/evil, reason/unreason, etc.—there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey. And if you are Ormus Cama, if you are Vina Apsara, whose songs could cross all frontiers, even the frontiers of people's hearts, then perhaps you believed all ground could be skipped over, all frontiers would crumble before the sorcery of the tune. (55)

The frontiers that Rushdie suggests could be those between nations (India, the UK, the USA, Mexico), including between peoples and cultures. Rushdie also suggests that the enchanting "sorcery" of music can make such differences "crumble," allowing for a form of recognition and connection among people, a cosmopolitan (even ecumenical) recognition transcendent to the politics of "ground" (or religion).

Rushdie seems to make similar gestures toward transcendence, through the domain of music. Perhaps Vina's and Ormus's childhood traumas make them search for a love that can cross the frontiers of cultures and nations. The narrator states: "The rest of us get our personae off the peg, our religion, language, prejudices, demeanour, the works; but Vina and Ormus insisted on what one might call auto-couture" (95). In contrast to the historical exigencies of worldliness—among which Rushdie includes the politicization of religion—Rushdie creates a certain exceptionalism for Vina and Ormus. This exceptionalism is self-sufficient and self-generating (the *auto* in *auto-couture*), constituted and referenced only by Vina and Ormus. The two become increasingly absorbed in their music and locked in their own world. Through music, however, their fans can recognize them and join them, driven by a kind of faith and enchantment.

2.2. The Representation of Metamorphosis in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

There are numerous metamorphoses in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, including multiple world music traditions fusing into the hybrid form of Ormus's and Vina's rock music, the cultural metamorphosis of Ormus and Vina across diverse national influences (India, the US), and the radical change in their life circumstances from childhood trauma to global fame. Perhaps one of the most overtly symbolic forms of metamorphosis is when Ormus begins to perceive another world, dream-like and imagined. Rushdie develops the idea of the outsider and vision to its logical extreme by having Ormus move so outside of the frame that he enters another world, the metaphor for which becomes his changing eyesight: "*It's as if his two eyes are looking into slightly different worlds, or rather two variations of the same world, almost the same and yet utterly separate*" (325; emphasis in original).[4] Ormus eventually loses vision in his left eye. Another vision, however, becomes manifest through that eye. Given its rhetorical density, the passage is worth quoting at length:

> I am trying to set down the true-life account of the life of a man who saw, long before the rest of us, the artificiality of [the separation of fantasy and fact]; who witnessed the demolition of that iron curtain with his own eyes and courageously went forth to dance on its remains. […] When he is by himself in his gigantic empty apartment Ormus removes his eye patch and the double vision returns. He looks into the heart of the otherness, the streaming. The barriers between the world of dreams and the waking world, between the spheres of the actual and the imagined, are breaking down. There is a progression. Something changing. Instead of the gashes through which he formerly saw these visions, the windows to the other quiddity now have blurry edges. Sometimes they grow very large; it's difficult to tell where this world ends and that begins. His apartment here looks exactly like his apartment there. (388)

[4] For an analysis of Rushdie's representation of simultaneous worlds in the novel, see Leggatt.

"The other quiddity" captures well the alterity that religious thought (or difference in general, such as postcolonial difference) can represent to non-believers or secularists (and vice versa). We can read Ormus's progression from one world to another as a metaphor for Rushdie's insistence on the presence, process, and power of the imagination ("I am trying to set down"). Magical realism here is not merely a device, strategy, or whim. Rather, Rushdie characterizes it as a worldview, as constitutive of a reality and a way of knowing similar to the powers of religion (to some, "fantasy") or secularism (to some, "fact"). Rai states that "a principle of uncertainty is also a measure of certainty. It's not a lament about shifting sands but a gauge of the solidity of the ground. […] Metamorphosis isn't whimsy. It's revelation" (462). Rushdie establishes here a certain seriousness to metamorphosis, that it can allow for the discovery of knowledge. The paradox of the simultaneity of certainty and uncertainty mirrors postsecularism's double bind with both secularism and religion. Rachel Falconer has argued that *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* reworks the classical and medieval genre of *katabasis*. She offers Raymond Clark's definition of katabasis as "a Journey of the Dead made by a living person in the flesh who returns to our world to tell the tale" (Falconer 470). According to Falconer, "the most significant aspect of *katabatic* narrative" that Rushdie retains in the novel is "the sense of lived experience as at once historical (forward-directed) and extratemporal" (471; emphasis in original). This sense of historical time is the time of secularism itself, given secularism's historical meaning as a reference to human time rather than God's time.[5] "Extratemporal" can suggest an extra-human world, similar to the imaginations of religion. Rushdie's combination of the historical with the extratemporal is literalized in the image of Ormus dual vision, perceiving both the secular world and a world that seems to exist outside of reality and time. This combination of the real with dream-like visions represents the postsecular challenge for literary form that must write through and within secularism (and secularization)

[5] The Latin *saeculum* denotes the age, generation, and world of humanity, as opposed to those of God. This secularized time then develops parallel to political economy and colonization (see Mignolo 928).

while searching for and gesturing toward some affective and inspirational intensities, such as faith, awe, wonder, and enchantment.

If Ormus's vision of simultaneous worlds is evanescent, then the most direct and graphic metamorphosis in the novel is when Vina dies in an earthquake, her body swallowed whole, with Rai taking a photograph of this momentous transformation. Toward the end of the novel, Rushdie offers us a final meditation on metamorphosis:

> Metamorphosis […] is what supplants our need for the divine. This is what we can perform, our human magic. I'm talking now not about the ordinary, quotidian changes that are the stuff of modern life […] nor even about the adaptive, chameleon natures which have become so common during our migrant century; but about a deeper, more shocking capacity, which kicks in only under extreme pressure. When we are faced with the Immense. At such a hinge moment we can occasionally mutate into another, final form, a *form beyond metamorphosis*. A new fixed thing. (461; emphasis in original)

Reading the image of Vina's body succumbing to the earthquake, Vasuki Nesiah argues that "the dislocation of the ground under her feet is not the end of hope as such, but the shift to a different place from which to situate her hope" (37). According to Nesiah, this hope is constituted by "the ground being reconfigured and re-imagined many times, shaped by new circumstances, enabling new projects" (37). I endorse Nesiah's argument, for the novel views crisis (including metamorphosis) as productive and creative. The novel is ambitious in its imagination of the newness of form that emerges from crisis. As the end of the above passage states, this form (in the face of an "Immense" no less) is final, new, fixed, shocking, and beyond metamorphosis. The rhetorical energy and anxiety to express and represent such form demonstrate the determinative influence of crisis. Such crisis shows how the exigencies and political edge of the secular world can provoke and condition postsecular searches.

3. Conclusion

With secularism's and religion's markedly different paradigms of knowing and being, and the contemporary pressures of achieving sociopolitical harmony among inexorably diversifying polities, literary postsecularism can gesture toward the generative lifeworlds of both secularism and religion. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* invokes and rethinks the secularism and religion binary through the representation of music, enchantment, frontiers, other worlds, metamorphoses, and revelations. In its search for generative and creative possibilities, the novel enfolds the secular and the religious onto themselves, with the postsecular caught in a double bind between the two. In 1991, Rushdie stated: "Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with the problems of incompatible views of the world through which we all move" ("Imaginary Homelands" 19). Rushdie asserted this view presciently before 9/11 and the varieties of extremism, nationalism, and populism that have proliferated since then, with the incompatibility of worldviews in part fueling the racialization of religion (in some western contexts, Islam becomes the problem of non-whiteness, which becomes the problem of immigration, as in debates about Brexit and the US border wall—see Ratti "Intersectionality"); the rise in hate crimes against religious, ethnic, and racial minorities since the election of Trump and, in India, Modi; racialized and religiously-motived terrorism, as in the 2018 attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and the mass shooting of Muslims in New Zealand in 2019; the advent of ideological phrases such as "radical Islam" to stoke fear and justify violence, such as military intervention in the Middle East. The above crises are informed by, and in turn exacerbate, a series of distinctions, including between secularism and religion, the secular west and the non-secular non-west, reason and fundamentalism, and the west and Islam. These distinctions are mutually constructive, and thus also mutually deconstructive: defined in opposition to one another, the distinctions can also be collapsed into one another. A call we frequently hear—in at least electoral politics—is to achieve reconciliation and restoration by finding common and compatible ground. Such material and political praxis can find its

parallel in literary postsecular experimentation on the borders of the secular and the religious and under the political edge of postcoloniality.

To return to *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, while it exemplifies Rushdie's above reference to fantasy, the novel is not unproblematic. Anshuman Mondal and Tim Gauthier have argued that for all of the novel's cosmopolitanism, it reinforces the provincialism and domination of a singular (American) culture (Mondal 181-82, Gauthier 166; see also Regev and Rose). Mariam Pirbhai has similarly argued that while the novel attempts to represent globalization's positive "cultural productions and interactions" (65), it reinforces globalization's "exclusion and exploitation" (65). These constitutive contradictions speak to the novel's historical situatedness as a secular, worldly object and production. But the contradictions and fallibilities of worldly situatedness of course do not foreclose the literary imagination. That the search for and gesture toward wonder and enchantment—"the other quiddity" (388)—occur within secular situatedness constitutes, in part, the postsecularism of this novel.

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