POSTSECULARISM AND THE ETHICS OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN
SALMAN RUSHDIE’S THE SATANIC VERSES AND ZADIE SMITH’S NW

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ABSTRACT

What I aim to accomplish below is an analysis of the commitment exhibited within The Satanic Verses and NW to portraying the complexities of the relationship between the religious and the secular in a postcolonial and postmodern age. Through a thorough and intricate depiction of the presence of difference in the urban center of London, both texts are clearly committed to establishing an ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in the Western metropolis. I propose that this appeal to ethics mirrors that of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of the ethical universal, since both texts make narrative and aesthetic maneuvers that emphasize their concern with humanism and the power of the individual. In The Satanic Verses this is on display through a form of metafiction that implicates all narratives in the web of discourse, resulting in an equivalence of all texts, from the novel itself to the Qur’ān. While Rushdie was evidently eager to contest the ideas of fundamentalist Islam throughout the novel, this metafictional move confirms that even his own authority is highly questionable, and thus his own text is up for equal contestation. Combined with its attentiveness to Islamic beliefs and history, The Satanic Verses illustrates a type of critical, postsecular ambivalence that values tolerance, and the existence of a pluralism that requires constant confrontation and negotiation.
This same form of agonism is on full display in *NW* as Zadie Smith’s paratactic style embodies the type of ethno-religious confrontation that occurs daily in contemporary postcolonial London. Its distinctly postmodern form simultaneously embodies the oppressive nature of Paul Gilroy’s postcolonial melancholia, which seems to take hold of the majority of the characters within the text. Nevertheless, Smith’s deliberate juxtaposition between the religious and the secular throughout the text, as well as the main protagonists’ ability to break from their melancholic state through alternative modes of belief, prove *NW*’s value as a postsecular text that also envisions tolerance and contestation as crucial components of an ethics of pluralism in London. Despite their status as elite Western authors, Rushdie and Smith have created two clearly empathetic texts, and I argue that this empathy should not only be acknowledged and lauded, but it should be put into action, particularly by Western political subjects. Undoubtedly, a postsecular sensibility is at the heart of what it means to acknowledge and persist amongst ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in a democratic society.
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This thesis is dedicated to everyone above, and to those who believe that democracy will continue to endure through its encounters with difference.

Many thanks,

CJT
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INTRODUCTION

“Religions, like all other ideas, deserve criticism, satire, and, yes, our fearless disrespect.”
--Salman Rushdie, in response to the Charlie Hebdo Attacks

“If religion is the opiate of the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister. If religion is a tight band, a throbbing vein, and a needle, tradition is a far homelier concoction: poppy seeds ground into tea; a sweet cocoa drink laced with cocaine; the kind of thing your grandmother might have made.”
--Zadie Smith, White Teeth

It is evident, based on the quotes above, that Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith possess, at the very least, a healthy skepticism of religion as an institution. For Rushdie, this is certainly understandable, given that he was for so long a target and potential victim of the politicization of fundamentalist religion. But regardless of any outright or speculated disregard of religion by either Rushdie or Smith, it remains indisputable that both of these authors, as made clear in their respective oeuvres, have been determined to portray how religion maintains a substantial influence in our contemporary and global age. This thesis will examine one work from each of these critically acclaimed and disputed writers—The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie, and NW by Zadie Smith—in an attempt to trouble how both authors re-work and re-imagine the religious/secular dichotomy in a pluralistic Western world. Throughout, primarily through literary analysis, I hope to deeply explore the following questions: How do Rushdie and Smith consider and depict the intersections between postcolonial and postmodern thought? How do both authors incorporate issues of religion into each of these interrelated modes of thought? How do both The Satanic Verses and NW represent the current existence and future possibilities of ethno-religious pluralism in London, and what are the ethical stakes of their portrayals? And lastly, in what ways does each of these novels establish a humanistic foundation for discussing
the ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in London? Below I will argue that both Rushdie and Smith display a critical ambivalence to essentialist ideas of both religion and secularism in an effort to establish an ethics of pluralism that is grounded in humanism. Despite their arguably hypocritical status as elite and canonical authors writing for the voices of minorities, both authors, through their literary craft, display a level of sensitivity and empathy that defines their ethical stance on the complicated relationship between the religious and the secular.

First, I must note that I use the word “pluralism” throughout this paper deliberately, as distinctly different from terms such as “multiculturalism” or “cultural diversity.” Whereas cultural diversity simply acknowledges that various cultures exist within a particular area, and multiculturalism emphasizes the ability for cultures to live freely amongst one another, pluralism provides a much more realistic assessment and rigorous approach to cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. When only loosely defined, pluralism appears almost identical to the definition of multiculturalism, as “the presence or tolerance of a diversity of ethnic or cultural groups within a society or state; (the advocacy of) toleration or acceptance of the coexistence of differing views, values, cultures, etc.” But tolerance in a pluralistic society is a more active process than is described here. As both Rushdie and Smith creatively depict, in both its aesthetic and affective form basic interaction within the practice of pluralism consists of a perpetual encounter with difference and an inevitable experience of confrontation. As a result of the confrontational nature of a pluralistic society, the need to establish an ethics of pluralism remains self-evident.

\* “pluralism,” Oxford English Dictionary. \*
I derive this concept of pluralism as a state of confrontation from the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who, in her acclaimed work *The Democratic Paradox*, promotes a form of confrontational pluralism known as “agonistic pluralism.” When conceptualizing the term for her brand of pluralism, Mouffe is quite insistent about her coinage, proclaiming that agonism, not antagonism, defines this particular approach. She writes, “Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while agonism is struggle between adversaries. We can therefore reformulate our problem by saying that envisaged from the perspective of ‘agonistic pluralism’ the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism” (Mouffe 102). The result of the embrace of such a style of pluralism is the hope that through constant, respectful forms of confrontation, the minority culture can manage to have influence on the majority culture in a democratic society—this, after all, is the essence of pluralism. Mouffe’s belief that pluralism should be agonistic differs greatly from the prior belief amongst political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls that passion should be “eliminated from the sphere of the public in order to render a rational consensus possible”; instead, in agonistic pluralism, the goal is “to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs” (Mouffe 103). As I will reveal below, Rushdie and Smith undoubtedly view agonistic pluralism as the natural state of postcolonial urban life in London. Through an emphasis on a ceaseless encounter with difference and hybridity in each of their texts, particularly in relation to religion, both authors accentuate how postcolonial and postmodern thought meaningfully collide in contemporary and pluralistic London.

The first section of this paper will delve deeper into these foundational intersections between postcolonialism and postmodernism through a close reading of Kwame Anthony
Appiah’s “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” Within this essay, Appiah laments postmodernism’s status as a privileged and merely aesthetic mode of thought, specifically due to its attempted universalization of rationality upon the rest of the world. This, of course, is adverse to postcolonialism, which has always sought a space for the political, though it has at times perpetuated norms established during the colonial and imperial age. Nevertheless, by way of an analysis of contemporary African postcolonial literature, Appiah envisions a space for the postmodern and the postcolonial to engender an ethics of addressing difference through an appeal to humanism. Because Appiah’s work, much like that of Rushdie and Smith, is so deeply rooted within the intersections of postmodern and postcolonial thought, I use Appiah’s conception of the “ethical universal” to serve as an example of the form of ethics that I believe is present within both The Satanic Verses and NW, and as a potential form of political and ethical praxis for individuals in a pluralistic society. The remainder of this section discusses the incorporation of religious studies into postcolonial studies, the relationship between secular thought and the postcolonial, and most importantly, the concept of postsecularism: a type of critical ambivalence toward both religion and secularism that is present within both novels, and that formulates the space where postmodernism, postcolonialism, and religious studies all come to a head. Postsecularism serves throughout this paper as an example of the type of humanistic and critical ethics that is essential to the discussion of ethno-religious pluralism.

The second section below will focus specifically on The Satanic Verses as an example of historiographic metafiction, and its subsequent appeal to an ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in the face of the controversy that surrounded its release. I call upon Linda Hutcheon to help
conceptualize my analysis of the novel’s most distinctive and memorable metafictional moments, and how these moments relate to our understanding of history, discourse, and authority. At once, *The Satanic Verses* undermines the authority of all narratives, including that of Islamic historiography, in an attempt to lambast essentialized thoughts and practices. Nevertheless, through its metafictional self-reflexivity, as well as its hyper awareness of English culture’s larger discursive structure, the novel implicates itself at the level of discourse amongst the other narratives it seeks criticize. As a result, *The Satanic Verses* expresses a form of “agonistic respect” in which it remains critical of the ideologies of which it disapproves, while remaining open itself to similar contestation. Analyzing the text at the level of discourse, I aim to deflect authority away from Rushdie for two reason: first, to focus specifically on the text itself rather than the controversy it sparked, and second, to dispel the notion of an Author-God, which is a concept that ultimately reified the separation between the religious and the secular throughout the Rushdie Affair. While this metafictional maneuver may appear merely aesthetic and postmodern, I am keen to point out that Rushdie establishes his supposed blasphemy with incredible religious attentiveness and empathy, one that respectfully and intricately imagines non-Western secular formations as a part of Islamic historiography. This type of move epitomizes the presence of a postsecular sensibility in regard to the ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in London.

The third and final section of the paper will concentrate on Zadie Smith’s most recent release, *NW*, more specifically how its postmodern style, its utilization of parataxis, and its characters exhibit various forms of postsecularism. Relative to Smith’s critically acclaimed novels *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, *NW* was not incredibly well received and as a result, has not
attracted the same amount of critical attention. However, when examining the narrative style of NW in relation to her previous releases, this does not come as much of a surprise: NW is a clear departure from Smith’s traditionally Forsterian style of narration where the audience is blatantly exposed to the inner thoughts and motivations of her characters. Instead, the language throughout NW is choppy, restless, and disconcerting, while the characters make questionable and secretive decisions without much explanation. As a way to discuss this formal aspect of the text in political terms, and in an effort to encapsulate the cultural atmosphere of the tiny NW corridor of London’s urban center depicted in the novel, I will call upon Paul Gilroy’s concept of “postcolonial melancholia.” Gilroy argues that English culture’s incessant nostalgia for imperial and colonial times ultimately creates a mood of melancholia within the culture at large. NW’s erratic form and the actions of its main characters, Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake, consistently perpetuate this notion of postcolonial melancholia, confirming Gilroy’s belief that the nature of this form of melancholia is oppressive. However, in the brief moments throughout the text when religion is either discussed or embraced, NW reveals how a postsecular sensibility may be central to creating an ethics that undermine this sense of melancholia and allow for the flourishing of pluralism rather than the reification of difference.

Thus, my argument insists that both The Satanic Verses and NW exhibit, through their various methods of experimentation with postsecular thought, a humanism that is neither innately religious nor secular, but instead acknowledges and remains empathetic to both. While this may not align with the publicly expressed opinions of either Rushdie or Smith on religion, I seek here to not concern myself entirely with the authors at hand, but rather to embrace the
political potential of literature and its ability to imagine and promote ethics in the face of never-ending confrontations with difference in the age of globalization.

**Situating Postsecularism: The Postcolonial, The Postmodern, and Postsecular Ambivalence**

In the title of his renowned essay, Kwame Anthony Appiah astutely asks, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” As Appiah confirms, there is an unquestionable overlap between the two fields through their similar attempt to “clear space,” or to transcend the essentialist notions that predate their existence (Appiah 348). What both fields appear to resist, according to Appiah, is the modernist conception of rationalization primarily informed by the work of Max Weber. Weber’s understanding of modernity rests on the idea that 20th century Western rationalization ultimately possesses “universal significance and value” (Appiah 343, emphasis his). For Appiah, it is this very concept of the “universal” that begins to complicate the relationship between the postmodern and the postcolonial. In an effort to conceptualize postmodernism, he writes:

Postmodernism can be seen . . . as a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space. Modernism saw the economization of the world as the triumph of reason; postmodernism rejects that claim, allowing in the realm of theory the same proliferation of distinctions that modernity had begun. (Appiah 346)
Within this conceptualization, Appiah dismantles two critical assumptions: first, he reveals that modernism and postmodernism both exist as a “proliferation of distinctions” that, as a result of their Eurocentric origins, undermines their self-proclaimed universal value. And second, by stating that postmodernism remains dependent upon a similar set of distinctions as those of modernism, Appiah ultimately conflates the two fields, revealing how the “post” in postmodern is not distinctly tied to the erasure of modernism, but rather that the two modes of thought share fairly foundational ideals. While this is not a particularly novel critique of postmodernism, here Appiah confirms the existence of a Eurocentrism that inevitably haunts space-clearing modes of thought deriving from the West.

Throughout his essay, Appiah further criticizes the Eurocentric origins of postmodernism by dissecting the curating process of an African Art show organized in New York City in 1987. The curating process called for ten individuals, consisting mostly of African art critics and collectors from the United States, to select ten works from a random assortment of African art to be included in the show. However, to much intrigue, these qualifications were changed for one curator, a Baule artist and diviner from the Ivory Coast, on the grounds that he would most likely criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups “in terms of his own traditional criteria” (Appiah 337). Appiah uses this absurd justification to continue his criticism of postmodernism, as this is a clear example of how rationality is universalized and how postmodernism as a mode of thought encourages often hypocritical efforts to eliminate the self-other binary it consistently claims to deconstruct. On this matter, he writes:

The message is that this Baule diviner, this authentically African villager, does not know what we, authentic postmodernists, now know: that the first and last
mistake is to judge the Other on one's own terms. And so, in the name of this relativist insight, we impose our judgment: that [he] may not judge sculpture from beyond the Baule culture zone, because he, like all the other African "informants" we have met in the field, will read them as if they were meant to meet those Baule standards. (Appiah 339)

Thus, the primary flaw in postmodernism, according to Appiah, is an inherent inability of its advocates and users to avoid a universalization of rationality that is delivered from a privileged position. This, of course, is a valid critique of the field and is particularly relevant to the work of both Rushdie and Smith, as I will address below.

For Appiah, postcolonialism, or more specifically, contemporary postcolonial African literature, ultimately departs from this unjust universalization of rationality. Immediately following the end of colonial rule in Africa, postcolonial literature tended to be both anticolonial and nationalist in nature (Appiah 349). As a result of its nationalist message, Appiah classifies the literature from this era as “realist legitimations” that promoted a return to tradition while acknowledging the “demands of a Weberian rationalized modernity” (Appiah 349). However, novels published in Africa following this first wave of postcolonial literature began to dismiss, in “misleadingly” postmodern fashion, both realism and nationalism. Using Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* as an example, Appiah argues that postcolonialism distances itself from postmodernism by achieving politicization rather than mere aestheticization, and by promoting an ethical universal rather than a rational one. He writes:

Because *Le Devoir de violence* is a novel that seeks to delegitimate not only the form of realism but the content of nationalism, it will to that extent seem to us,
misleadingly, postmodern: misleadingly, because what we have here is not postmodernism but postmodernization; not an aesthetics but a politics, in the most literal sense of the term. After colonialism, the modernizers said, comes rationality; that is the possibility the novel rules out. Ouologuem's novel . . . is not written by someone who is comfortable with and accepted by the new elite, the national bourgeoisie. Far from being a celebration of the nation, then, the novels of the second, postcolonial, stage are novels of delegitimation: they reject not only the Western imperium but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of delegitimation cannot be the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal. (Appiah 353)

Here, the more contemporary, African novel’s ability to disregard Western modes of distinction and rationality, and to promote, instead, an “ethical universal” through the delegitimation of both Western and nationalistic ideals ultimately separates the postcolonial from the postmodern. In this separation, postmodern aesthetics are present, but they extend beyond mere aestheticization or the preaching of rationality, and instead result in a postmoderization, a politics, a praxis.

Still, Appiah’s distinction here is a bit obscure: if contemporary postcolonial literature appeals to an ethical universal, then how exactly does this “universal” differ from the postmodernist universalization of rationality that he criticizes so harshly earlier on, especially if there remains a hint of the postmodern in the postcolonial? For Appiah, the difference exists not only in the delegitimation of Western and nationalistic ideals, but in an appeal to humanism. He reveals this call to humanism at the conclusion of the essay, stating that postcoloniality is “a
condition of pessimism, and its post-, like that of postmodernism, is also a post- that challenges earlier legitimating narratives. *And it challenges them in the name of the suffering victims of more than thirty African republics*” (Appiah 353, emphasis mine). This last sentence here is crucial to understanding Appiah’s position: the humanism that Appiah describes is directly concerned with the acknowledgment and subsequent elimination of violence upon and cruelty towards minority subjects. This brand of humanism also seems to exist outside of sovereignty, in that it overrides any form of political subjectivity that would make such an appeal exist as a universalization of rationality. Instead, contemporary African postcolonial literature, deriving from the Global South, exhibits a delegitimation and empathy that substantiates its appeal to an ethical universal.

While both Rushdie and Smith have published texts that equally delegitimize Western thought and nationalism (one in the same when dealing with Western authors), and in humanistic fashion, are empathetic with minority culture, death, loss, and diaspora, in relation to Appiah’s argument, they are incapable of appealing to an ethical universal because of their Western privileged positions and elite status in the market economy\(^b\). Are these authors then, due to their elevated status, unable to similarly shed their political subjectivity in the name of ethics and humanism, as Appiah argues of Ouologuem? Perhaps before addressing this question we must ask: how do *The Satanic Verses* and *NW* address and complicate the responsibility of Western

\(^b\) According to Appiah, Weber ultimately believed in a rationality that resembled the concept secularism, or the prevailing of Enlightenment thought and reason. Appiah argues this secularism was actually the result of commodification, that in fact what epitomizes a postmodernism absent of political praxis is basic participation in the market economy (Appiah 344). While acknowledging the crucial part that the capitalist system has in relation to pluralism, I will argue quite differently, stating that the divide between the religious and the secular, not commodification, is the dichotomy that Rushdie and Smith choose to acknowledge and overcome in order to achieve an ethics.
subjects in a contemporary postcolonial world, particularly in the city of London? As I will argue below, it is Rushdie and Smith’s engagement with religion, primarily their embrace of the concept of belief and their ambivalence towards secularism (an embrace of postsecularism), that opens up a space for the incorporation of Appiah’s concept of the ethical universal into the conversation surrounding the state of ethno-religious pluralism in contemporary London. The postsecular imaginations exhibited in both The Satanic Verses and NW, though deriving from the West, undoubtedly appeal to an ethics that is grounded in humanism and that embody a postmodernization, a political praxis, of their aesthetics. Though similar to Appiah’s ethical stance, I am keen to point out that this appeal is not grounded in pessimism, as posited by Appiah, for it instead proposes a sense of optimism that ultimately opens up the possibility for an ethics of pluralism in Western democratic metropolises.

Historically, postcolonial studies have been limitedly concerned with religion, though the concept of secularism is undoubtedly ingrained in the colonizer/colonized binary that remains a fundamental component of the field. Still, the majority of the canonical postcolonial texts, including but not limited to Orientalism, The Location of Culture, and A Critique of Postcolonial Reason contain little to no interaction with the concept of religion. Perhaps this is the case because at a very fundamental level, space-clearing gestures such as postcolonialism require intellectual tools that are innately democratic, rational, modern, and indeed, secular (Robbins 247). In fact, this is the point from which Appiah launches his criticism of postmodernism. Though another reason for the absence of religion in postcolonial studies perhaps could be European states’ arguably conscious effort to avoid imperial conquests that could potentially possess religious consequences. As Talal Asad argues in Formation of the Secular, the modern
doctrine of political secularism that arose in European politics as a solution to the wars of religion ensured peace not by eliminating violence but by “shifting the violence of religious wars into the violence of national and colonial wars” (Asad 7). Yet it is undeniable that the politicization of Islam, beginning first with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, carrying through the 1980s to the fatwā against Salman Rushdie in 1989, and culminating more recently in the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, has forced postcolonial critics to consider more closely the religious/secular dichotomy within a globalized world.

The rhetoric following the Rushdie affair serves as proof of this transformation, as postcolonial critics were quick to either defend Rushdie’s right to freedom of speech, or accuse him (and his defenders) of secular rationality and blasphemy; nevertheless, Rushdie criticism from both of these camps focuses intently on defining and debasing the origins and attempted universalization of secularism, rather than fully addressing issues of religion. As critic Anshuman Mondal succinctly argues: “[The Satanic Verses] is a classic statement of secular liberal humanism, and it rehearses the same universalizing gestures deployed by its liberal defenders during the controversy it ignited” (Mondal 71). While Mondal draws this conclusion mostly as a result of Rushdie’s depiction of Muhammed in the novel, his belief that the text is

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innately secular opens a pandora’s box to determining what exactly makes a text “secular.”

Where did the idea and practice of secularism originate? Is it merely a Western phenomenon?

Channeling Bernard Lewis, Anouar Majid argues that secularism is in fact a Western and Christian idea born out of very specific historical circumstances. He writes:

There is nothing in Islamic history remotely comparable with such epoch-making Christian events as the Christological controversies, the schism of Photius, which split the Greek and Latin churches, the Reformation, the holy office of the Inquisition and the bloody religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries which in effect compelled Christians to secularize their states and societies in order to escape from the vicious circle of persecution and conflict. (Majid 174)

Though if Majid’s foundational argument about secularism is correct, and a separation between religion and state did originate from Christian tradition, how then do we explain the rise of secularism in countries such a Turkey, where a separation between religion and state has existed since the early 20th century? Are we to believe that forms of secularism cannot arise from religions other than Christianity? What about increasing secularism in Asian and African nations? Is the spread of secularism around the globe influenced solely by a Western, Christian historiography? Justin Neuman’s critique of Rushdie sheds further light on the expansion of secularism. He writes:

But as Rushdie is no doubt aware, the secular humanism espoused here depends on its own ‘cosy complicities’ that have themselves come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. As subaltern studies scholar Partha Chatterjee argues, ‘In the case of the countries of Asia and Africa, secularization is necessarily a
normative project formulated and directed by an elite minority’; it is thus a ‘fundamentally coercive’ affair. (Neuman 25)

Regardless of whether it is implemented globally by the West or domestically by an “elite minority,” secularism has been ultimately deemed “fundamentally coercive,” as Appiah would confirm, since it derives from a privileged position and preaches a universalization of rationality. Still, the case of Rushdie and his novel’s effect on postcolonialism is particularly telling because it serves as proof of the lack of nuance such a controversial issue permits. At a broader level, postcolonial critics who address religion and its effects on postcoloniality refuse to acknowledge the intricacies of issues such as immigration that have very distinct effects on the religious/secular dichotomy. Loyal to the colonizer/colonized binary that was fundamental to the field’s creation, postcolonial critics intentionally disregard significant aspects of the secular/religious dichotomy, for example, the solidification of President George W. Bush’s status as the torchbearer for the war on fundamentalist Islam, despite his own deeply religious values (Robbins 248). The Satanic Verses and NW are two texts that are evidently open season for these very disparate critiques: they are both authored by members of an elite class, and both attempt to speak for minorities through the utilization of postmodern aesthetics and apparent secular principles. Nevertheless, these two texts also serve as prime examples of the deep critical consciousness and religious attentiveness required to establish an ethics outside the traditional colonizer/colonized and religious/secular binaries, ultimately embodying a type of postsecularism.

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Yes, Christian values—the same values that were responsible for the birth of secularism. But they are still religious values, which is why we must further penetrate the relationship between the religious and the secular.
By contemporary political, religious, and literary scholars, postsecularism has been defined in two ways: first, by the renowned Charles Taylor as representing “a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged”—Taylor is also keen to point out that postsecularism does not imply a decline in belief or practice, which he argues is most certainly not the case, at least not yet (Taylor 534); and second, by Jürgen Habermas in his "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society.” Within this essay he argues that Europe’s present sociological status is undoubtedly postsecular because secular nation-states of the West are finally succumbing to the realization that “religion maintains a public influence and relevance” in the 21st century (Habermas 21). What Habermas views as the biggest challenge to this realization is the (in)ability of European states to reach the consensus needed to establish a deep, ethno-religious pluralism. He asks, “How should we see ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious world views? (Habermas 21). While Habermas’ vision of consensus differs greatly from the type of pluralism imagined in both The Satanic Verses and NW, his call for civility and his evidently ethical and humanistic concern mirrors the ethical appeal of both Rushdie and Smith.

It is within this intersection between postcolonialism and postmodernism, religion and secularism, ethics and politics, that I believe a postsecular sensibility originates. As is on display throughout The Satanic Verses and NW, both authors are wholly aware of and dedicated to illustrating the numerous complexities of life in the urban center of contemporary postcolonial London. Yet beyond merely depicting its intricacies, they seek to establish an ethics that
remains attune to the uniqueness of their own subject positions while blurring the line between what constitutes the religious, and what constitutes the secular. Ultimately grounded in a heightened awareness of the complex ethno-religious configuration of their home city, Rushdie and Smith reveal the potentially oppressive nature of a pluralistic society that subsists on consistent encounters with difference. But both texts imagine a way, through an appeal to humanism, to ethically embrace ethno-religious pluralism and undermine any essentialist notions of difference along the way.

**Metafictional Self-Reflexivity and Agonistic Respect in *The Satanic Verses*  

Question: What is the opposite of faith?  
Not disbelief. Too final, certain closed.  
Doubt.  
--*The Satanic Verses* (94)

Given its classification as a work of postmodern fiction, it should not come as much of a surprise that, upon its release, *The Satanic Verses* created such a pronounced divide between defenders of freedom of artistic expression, and critics who deemed the work as blasphemous. Postmodern fiction, as we recall from Appiah, has a tendency to utilize aesthetics to universalize Western forms of rationality. Yet, while postmodernism is, as Linda Hutcheon notes, often characterized solely by its “intense self-reflexivity” (metafiction) and “overtly parodic intertextuality,” *The Satanic Verses*, to both its benefit and detriment, adds a noteworthy element to these two foundational characteristics: that is, a wholly self-conscious engagement with history (Hutcheon 3). For Hutcheon, fiction that possesses all three of these facets is classified
as historiographic metafiction, a brand of literature that “works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction . . . it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (Hutcheon 4). Hutcheon’s first qualifier of historiographic metafiction confirms the root of what many critics viewed to be the intrinsic problem with critical acclaim of Rushdie’s text: that defenders of secular liberal humanism somehow believe a work full of blasphemous depictions can, without consequence, re-write history whilst arguing for the text’s “autonomy as fiction.” As historiographic metafiction possesses a deliberate connection to the “world,” both real and literary, a call for the autonomy of fiction without repercussions may seem untenable. However, as Hutcheon points out, it is the type of relationship, a textual relationship, to literature’s surrounding worlds that remains integral to the understanding of historiographic metafiction’s ethical and political potentialities.

For Hutcheon, it seems the essence of historiographic metafiction is textual, in that through parody, self-referentiality, and references to other discursive texts, literary or historical, it paradoxically distances itself from the past it satirizes, while simultaneously working to “affirm, textually and hermeneutically” its very connection to that past (Hutcheon 6). But if historiographic metafiction’s connection to history itself is merely textual, then how can it have any real connection to the world we live in, or possess any political or ethical potential? Hutcheon elaborates:

When that past is the literary period we now seem to label as modernism, then what is both instated and then subverted is the notion of the work of art as a
closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts. In its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the "world," postmodernism both asserts and then undercuts this formalistic view. But this does not necessitate a return to the world of "ordinary reality," as some have argued (Kern 216); the "world" in which the text situates itself is the "world" of discourse, the "world" of texts and intertexts. This "world" has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality. It is a contemporary critical truism that realism is really a set of conventions, that the representation of the real is not the same as the real itself. What historiographic metafiction challenges is both any naive realist concept of representation and any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world. The postmodern is self-consciously art "within the archive" (Foucault 92), and that archive is both historical and literary. (Hutcheon 6)

If, as Hutcheon posits, the text returns to the world of discourse rather than the world of reality, it would seem that this forecloses the opportunity for an ethics or politics. However, Hutcheon’s conception of postmodernism as engrained in discourse opens up the possibility, contrary to Appiah’s conceptualization, that postmodern aesthetics are complex, textured, and nuanced

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As is evident, Hutcheon’s conceptualization of postmodernism is markedly different from that of Appiah: while Appiah views postmodernism sans postcolonialism to be innately aesthetic and apolitical, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism as analyzed through discourse is thoroughly connected to historical and literary realities. Thus, Hutcheon allows for a discussion regarding how postmodernism promotes an optimism that is opposed to Appiah’s aforementioned pessimism.
rather than dominant, coercive, or divisive. In fact, historiographic metafiction, through this particular understanding, begins to share the characteristics of another “post”: postsecularism.

Thus, through an analysis of a few metafictional moments in the novel, I aim to explore how *The Satanic Verses*’ emphasis on both its self-reflexivity and its place within a larger discursive structure offer a commentary on the ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in London. Rushdie grandiosely identifies religion as a major component of the potential for pluralism in Western metropolises, and does so through an understanding of the limitations of secularism, contrary to most of the critiques of the novel. As Justin Neuman eloquently states, “…in his novels, Rushdie offers potent reminders that because religious differences are often invoked as the boundaries between peoples, religious reason must inflect cosmopolitan^f thinking. In practical terms, this means that since exclusive humanism^g has lost its universality, secularism has shed something of its former worldliness” (Neuman 48). Therefore, despite its apparent postmodern and secular form, Rushdie presents an understanding within *The Satanic Verses* that since religion is a primary factor in the creation of difference both within London and the world as a whole, it cannot be wholly eradicated as part of a solution. From its very first page, the

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^f Similar to multiculturalism, I stray away from the use of the cosmopolitanism so as to stress a more rigorous, rather than lofty, approach to the concept of ethics and difference. This is not a condemnation of the terms themselves, but rather of the criticism that has stripped them of their effective use.

^g Charles Taylor defines “exclusive humanism” in *A Secular Age* as follows: “A standard subtractionist story would convince us that once the old religious and metaphysical beliefs withered away, room was finally made for the existing, purely human moral motivation. But this was not the case. It may seem to be, because the locus now of the highest moral capacities was identified as in “human nature.” And that links up with centuries of non-exclusive humanism, and in particular with the moral theories that came down to us from the ancients… But it is already evident that, in one sense, this modern humanism is different from most ancient ethics of human nature, in that it is exclusive, that is, its notion of human flourishing makes no reference to something higher which humans should reverence or love or acknowledge. And this clearly distinguishes it from, say, Plato, or the Stoics” (Taylor 245, emphasis mine).
novel’s metafictional approach and deep display of empathy toward Islamic history and belief embody a postsecular sensibility that serves a foundation for developing an ethics of ethno-religious pluralism.

The novel, of course, begins with a bang: that is, with the explosion of a plane and the miraculous descent of its two main protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. As readers, we are shortly informed that the novel is structured within a frame in which the narrator, presumably Satan\(^h\), is telling the story of Gibreel and Saladin. We are also informed, though not with clarity, that the narrator is homodiegetic, or that he possesses an actual presence within the universe of the story he is telling. After the protagonists magically collapse safely upon land as the only survivors of the wreck, a relieved Gibreel turns to Saladin and says, “God, we were lucky…how lucky can you get?” to which the narrator responds, addressing the reader:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and –potence I’m making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope.
Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed . . .Who am I? Let’s put it this way: who has the best tunes? (Rushdie 10)

Two particular aspects of this passage reveal how the metafictional components of the novel begin to complicate the religious/secular dichotomy: first, the dissociation of the implied author from the narrator via the frame narrative serves as a reminder to the reader that the words on the page are not the implied author’s attempt at a truth claim, but rather a form of fictional discourse. While this is at its core a fundamental aspect of frame narration, the move is of particular importance because it reveals the novel’s place in what Hutcheon (channeling

Foucault) terms the “archive” of discourse. If Satan, as narrator, is mischievously concocting a narrative, if he, not Rushdie, has blasphemously changed Muhammed’s name to Mahound and is the counter-voice against established power, then the audience is directed not toward the story itself, but to how it is being told and how it relates to historiography. The novel forces its audience to ask, “What is the relation between the creation of fictional narrative and the making of historical narrative?” Hutcheon lucidly troubles the relationship between narrative and history when she writes:

The past really did exist, but we can only "know" that past today through its texts, and therein lies its connection to the literary. If the discipline of history has lost its privileged status as the purveyor of truth, then so much the better, according to this kind of modern historiographic theory: the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction's challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts. (Hutcheon 10)

From the very beginning of the novel, *The Satanic Verses* appears to be challenging history as the “purveyor of truth” and using metafiction to challenge the “presumed transparency” of language. The religious/secular dichotomy is complicated further by Satan’s presence as a narrator and an active participant at the level of human plot events who actively questions his own omnipotence (“As to omnipresence and –potence I’m making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope”). Existing as both a creator of and subject within this particular scene and the novel as a whole, Satan as narrator/character serves as an example of the diffusion and decentering of authority and unity in any given narrative—an aspect emphasized through this
metafictional narrative. But perhaps most importantly, as Satan begins to literally doubt (“I hope”) his own reliability in terms of both power and narrative, he reveals, once more, the narrative and subjective components of history-making. By juxtaposing and questioning, simultaneously, the omnipotence of a religious figure and the omniscience of a narrator, the text establishes the belief that any form of discourse, whether narrative or historical, is both a product of, and a contributor to, discourse as a whole.

The ethical value of frame narration and metafiction may not seem apparent initially, and it certainly was not apparent to those who criticized the novel upon its release. In fact, the postmodern aspects of the text have led many to believe that Rushdie is pushing a specific secular, Western, and modern worldview onto the reader, particularly because most of what we understand about discourse in relation to history derives from the West (see: Foucault). Rushdie himself is of an elite class, had already been canonized by English-speaking critics as of result of his first acclaimed release, *Midnight’s Children*, was educated in England, and still resides in England; of course, this does not appear to make him the most viable candidate for depicting a reputable account of minority identity crises and the potential for ethno-religious pluralism in the Western world. Nevertheless, the frame narration and metafictional aspects of the text trigger a conversation surrounding the death of the author (ironically here, in the face of the fatwā against Rushdie), and the ways in which the novel tries to implicate itself, as well as all other texts, amongst a larger discursive structure. Through the narrator’s own self-reflexivity, the novel reflects back upon itself as well as yet another text in the archive: the end result is the elimination
of authority (omniscience, omnipotence, and Author-God\textsuperscript{1}, if you will). According to Hutcheon, this is a primary attribute of historiographic metafiction, since novels of this genre by nature “put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality (Hutcheon 11-12, emphasis mine). In other words, by identifying itself as part of a discursive structure, the text deflects authority away from Rushdie himself, and decenters any potential for its narrative to exist as hegemonic.

Rushdie further emphasizes the novel’s place in a larger discursive structure through Gibreel’s dream sequences, a controversial metafictional reoccurrence in the text. One of the many sections in which Gibreel is experiencing part-schizophrenia, part-dream-creating includes the infamous retelling of Muhammed’s rise to power and the creation of Islam. Gibreel dreams up a plot in which a businessman by the name of Mahound, loosely based on Muhammed, begins to promote a form of monotheism and preaches the word of God in the city of Jahilia, much to the dismay of the city’s ruler and henotheisitic supporter, Abu Simbel. Perturbed by Mahound’s presence, Abu Simbel forces Mahound to acknowledge the power of the three goddesses who rule the temples of the Jahilia. Confused as to whether to continue to promote monotheism or acknowledge the existence of the goddesses, Mahound summons the Angel Gibreel, our dreamer, to help him with a decision. Controversy ensues when it is revealed that Gibreel received a message from Satan, not from God, to tell Mahound to support the three goddesses;

\textsuperscript{1}Barthes’ deconstruction of the Author-God in “The Death of the Author” is known for its poststructural nature, yet it is also clearly postsecular, both conceptually and visually: similar to Hutcheon, Barthes describes texts as innately discursive, while also separating “author” and “God” by a hyphen, displaying a simultaneous divide and a coexistence of the two religious and the secular.
when it is discovered that Mahound received his message from Satan, he is ultimately banished from Jahilia and forced into exile.\(^j\)

Again, in an effort to avoid the relation between this scene and the controversy it sparked, I would like to focus first on the intertextual language used by the narrator to generate the scene, and second, on the metafictional components of the scene that implicate the text within discourse. The narrator dictates the scene as though Gibreel is a director of a film, and has full control of the ways in which he is able to view to episode as both a creator and spectator. It seems peculiar on Rushdie’s part to structure this particular moment as one that is imagined through a camera, yet it undoubtedly points to the novel’s vast intertextuality (or “interdiscursivity,” a term coined by Hutcheon regarding historiographic metafiction, since it portrays more “collective modes of discourse” including but not limited to, “literature, visual arts, history, biography, theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, [and] sociology” (Hutcheon 12)). The passage reads as follows:

Gibreel: the dreamer, whose point of view is sometimes that of the camera and at other moments, spectator. When he’s a camera the pee oh vee is always on the move, he hates static shots, so he’s floating up on a high crane looking down at the foreshortened figures of the actors, or he’s swooping down to stand invisibly between them, turning slowly on his heel to achieve a three-hundred-and-sixty-

\(^j\) According the Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān, this plot line mirrors the debated historical account of the actual satanic verses. The satanic verses refers to an “incident known in the Muslim tradition as “the story of the cranes” (qiṣṣat al-gharānīq) or “the story of the maidens.” According to various versions, this is the assertion that the prophet Muḥammad once mistook words suggested to him by Satan as divine revelation that is to say, as verses of the Qurʾān — the words reportedly interpolated by Satan are called the ‘satanic verses.’” The historical veracity of the account is rejected widely amongst modern Islamic orthodoxy.
degree pan, or maybe he’ll try a dolly shot, tracking alongside beside Baal and Abu Simbel as they walk, or hand-held with the help of a steadicam he’ll probe the secrets of Grandee’s bedchamber. (Rushdie 110)

Within this excerpt there exists a noteworthy amount of references to filmmaking, particularly various types of camera shots including “pee oh vee” (the spelled-out version of the acronym POV, which stands for ‘point of view’), “pan,” “dolly,” and “steadicam.” In filmmaking, each of these shots serve a very specific purpose: point of view shots are framed as though the spectator is also the subject at hand and can see every bit of action from his/her perspective; panning shots focus on the filmic subject but are keen to include background landscape, as if to equally value both; dolly shots, or tracking shots, track alongside a moving subject to emphasize motion but to remain purposefully focused on said subject; and a steadicam gives a more personal, immersed, and raw viewpoint of any given scene. All this said, Rushdie here is not seeking to give his audience an overview of the wide array of approaches to capture a scene with a camera. Instead, it seems Rushdie is alluding to the various ways in which a narrative can be constructed and/or visualized. What Rushdie appears to be prioritizing in this moment, and often throughout the novel, is the way in which the scene is constructed rather than the content of the scene itself. He is, so to speak, pulling back the curtain and unveiling how narrative, especially historical narrative, is ultimately a construction that can be portrayed in a number of ways depending on the motives of the subjects doing the assembling. At the same time, Rushdie utilizes this interdiscursive technique to implicate his own text within the ever-extending web of discourse and narrative, as the audience is forced to ponder why Rushdie may be including these allusions in the first place.

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In similar fashion to the introduction of the frame narrative at the start of the novel, Gibreel’s dream takes on the form of metafiction to deflect authority away from its composer, that is, Gibreel himself. Rushdie achieves this effect once again through a form of homodiegesis, where Gibreel as creator of the dream is sucked into the dream’s plot while he gradually becomes conflated with the character of Mahound. This metafictional development reads as follows:

And then, without warning, Hamza [Mahound’s uncle] says to Mahound: ‘Go ask Gibreel,’ and he, the dreamer, feels his heart leaping in alarm, who, me? I’m supposed to know the answers here? I’m sitting here watching this picture and now this actor points his finger out at me, who ever heard the like, who asks the bloody audience of a ‘theological’ to solve the bloody plot? – But as the dream shifts, it’s always changing form, he, Gibreel, is no longer a mere spectator but the central player, the star . . . yes yes, he’s not just playing the archangel but also him, the businessman, the Messenger, Mahound, coming up the mountain when he comes. (Rushdie 110-111)

Authority is decentered within this passage on a number of levels: first, with a direct address to the creator of the dream, Gibreel, who has now seemingly lost control of the narrative he supposedly constructed, since he is openly shocked by Hamza’s suggestion; second, at the level of narration where the narrator (Satan) has apparently taken on the voice of Gibreel, using first-person pronouns without the use of the quotation marks that are consistently present throughout the text—as a reader, the change from third person to first person is unquestionably jarring; and lastly, Gibreel’s transformation into the character of Mahound, which even further troubles the
notion of a unitary narrative, as any distinct lines between narrator and character, and now character and character, are remarkably effaced.\textsuperscript{k}

At the above points in the novel, the text’s self-reflexivity and its apparent elimination of a discursive hierarchy, especially in relation to religion (as much of the text is deeply invested in the religious/secular dichotomy), combined with its willingness to contest essentialist beliefs, certainly encapsulates the essence of postsecularism. As a story that is set in London, the postsecular imagination of the novel also sets up an intriguing discussion regarding ethno-religious pluralism in the Western metropolis. In fact, the various metafictional occurrences presciently posit an ethics of pluralism that political theorist William Connolly attempts to create nearly 15 years after the release of *The Satanic Verses* in his 2005 *Pluralism*. Connolly’s concept of agonistic respect, a concept greatly influenced by the work of Chantal Mouffe, encourages a similar Mouffian contestation in democratic societies, but also attempts to establish an ethics through which to act in a pluralistic space. Connolly utilizes the idea of agonism to propose an ethics within which oppositional political subjects can coexist, knowing fully that their beliefs are always subject to respectful dispute. Of agonistic respect, Connolly writes:

> The ethos of agonistic respect grows out of mutual appreciation for the ubiquity of faith to life and the inability of contending parties to demonstrate the truth of one faith over others. It grows out of reciprocal appreciation for the element of contestability in these domains. The relation is agonistic in two senses: you absorb the agony of having elements of your own faith called into question by

\textsuperscript{k} A similar moment of self-reflexivity and the blending of narrator and character occurs again with Gibreel during a dream sequence in the “Ayesha” chapter of the novel (Rushdie 222).
others and you fold agonistic contestation of others into the respect that you convey toward them. (Connolly 123-124)

Similar to Habermas, Connolly aligns himself with the belief that religion will continue to be a primary component of democratic, pluralistic societies. Yet, the concept of agonistic respect, contrary to Habermasian thought, encourages the balance of confrontation and self-reflexivity needed in order for an ethics of pluralism to exist at all.

If we examine the aforementioned metafictional components of the novel through the lens of ethno-religious pluralism in London, Rushdie’s formal, self-reflexive move seems to both predate and mirror Connolly’s concept of agonistic respect. By implicating itself within a larger discursive structure, *The Satanic Verses* arrives within, in Connolly’s words, the “elements of contestability” by becoming subject to the same contestation it is respectfully\(^1\) enacting. Though Rushdie and Connolly both deliver their appeal to ethics through a Western perspective, their attempts should not be disregarded as a practice in Western privilege or rationality, but instead as a portrayal of how each political subject position requires a unique approach to responsibility and a unique understanding of empathy. When acknowledged for its postsecular play between the religious and the secular, *The Satanic Verses* in particular strikes a balance of contestation and self-reflexivity that simulates the clashing of cultures that occurs in both real and fictional London. And more importantly, it achieves balance that ultimately creates a space where negotiations, rather than divisions, between the religious and the secular can occur.

\(^1\) While the novel’s ability to implicate itself amongst a larger discursive structure may not seem to be a blatant act of respect, I will argue below that it expresses a deeper level of respect through its religious attentiveness.
In an attempt to both reveal and refute a potential counterclaim to the novel’s postsecular nature (and perhaps to postsecularism as a whole), I would like to turn once more to the interdiscursivity of the novel. Even outside of its blatantly metafictional moments, such as the narrative intrusions above, *The Satanic Verses* is an epic work of hybridity and interdiscursivity. Take, for example, this passage from Gibreel’s fall to the earth in the opening chapter:

‘To be born again’ sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, ‘first you have to die . . . I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you’ . . . Gibreel, the tuneless soloist, had been cavorting in moonlight as he sang his impromptu gazal, swimming in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching himself into a ball, spread-eagling himself against the almost-infinity of the almost-dawn, adopting heraldic postures, rampant, couchant, pitting levity against gravity. (Rushdie 3)

Here, Rushdie describes Gibreel’s song as an “impromptu gazal,” more commonly referred to as a *ghazal*, a classical Persian poetic form. This is one of Rushdie’s many references to Urdu, a language that the author weaves in and out of the text, blending it seamlessly with the English it juxtaposes throughout the novel. But even more fascinating than Rushdie’s utilization and references to language in this passage is his allusion to texts both literary and pop-cultural. The line “I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you,” is most famously stated by Jim Morrison of The Doors in “Alabama Song.” However, this song was, in fact, originally a poem, written by Bertolt Brecht in 1927 and eventually became an operatic number composed by Brecht himself in 1930; Brecht of course is known for his massive contribution to all forms of discourse: poetry, theatre, fiction, theory—but the discursive chain continues even further from here. Brecht’s very first full-length play was titled *Baal*, a tale in which the eponymous character stands in defiance
of bourgeois society, a theme also evident in *The Satanic Verses*. What is more, Baal is also the name of the satirical poet in Gibreel’s dream sequence who helps slander Mahound in favor of Abu Simbel. Digging further, the source of the name Baal is fascinating: the name was originally the name of a Middle-Eastern sky-god dating back to the second millennium BC, around 1000 BC (Healey 124). Baal was equally praised and worshipped by Jews, but severely denounced by Christians who eventually viewed the name as synonymous with “devil” or “Satan” in the New Testament. So simply through a reference to a song (or a poem, depending on who he was channeling as his origin), Rushdie is able to reveal the cultural influence of a collection of religions, a character in his own novel, an opera, and an American psychedelic rock cover of a German poem. While I have identified this facet of the novel as an interdiscursive (and ultimately an ethical) technique, Rushdie critic Stephen Morton views the text’s hybridity as quite the opposite. He writes, “The danger of this hybrid literary form is that it transforms the scriptural foundations of Islam into an aesthetic object, and thereby subordinates Rushdie's fictionalized version of Islam to the secular values of the West” (Morton 48). Morton’s critique forces a question in the vein of Appiah’s critique of postmodernism: is postsecularism, particularly through the lens of discourse, merely an aestheticization of difference that universalizes without a humanistic or ethical end goal?

Due to Rushdie’s commitment to religion in the text, especially toward a religion he has learned to oppose, Morton’s critique appears to dismiss Rushdie’s elaborate aesthetic efforts, which in turn implies a simultaneous dismissal of Rushdie’s attempt to establish an ethics of

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m The name appears in various forms in the New Testament, including baalzebul, beelzeboul, and beezeboul.
ethno-religious pluralism—the result is a return to the religious/secular dichotomy that reiterates difference. Conversely to Morton, I am in agreement with critic Sara Suleri Goodyear, who argues that Rushdie has created, in *The Satanic Verses*, a “deeply Islamic book,” and that even notions of blasphemy and doubt that arise from the novel are brought into existence only through an intense and empathetic attentiveness to religion (Goodyear 191). This understanding is fitting, since doubt serves as both the engine that drives religion, but also as the engine that drives a postsecular sensibility, agonistic respect, and an ethics of pluralism. In the words of Goodyear, “The figure of desecration is thus rendered coterminous with a desire to embody the continuing attractions of Islam in history, so that the narrative can represent cultural leave-taking and homecoming as mutually interchangeable terms” (Goodyear 192). The portion of the novel that best epitomizes this postsecular ambivalence is the novel’s concluding chapter.

The closing chapter of *The Satanic Verses* consists of Saladin’s return to India to attend to his ailing father, who he has always disliked. Gibreel has also returned home, depressed and maddened that he has lost the love of his life, Allie Cone. Immediately, the reader is aware that the pacing and the syntactical structure of this particular chapter are more noticeably tame and realistic than the chapters prior. In alignment with Goodyear’s quote, after an entire, laborious attempt by both Rushdie and his protagonists at “cultural leave-taking,” all three conclude the novel at home, back in Bombay. Goodyear once more, perfectly captures the affective qualities of the novel’s conclusion in relation to postsecularism, as she writes:

Finally, in the closing of the narrative, the blasphemy that had been previously embodied is allowed to die, producing a curious textual atmosphere in which the narrative appears to be forgiving itself for its own transgressions, even as it
reconfirms the inevitability of their utterance. The somewhat surprising stress of the tropes of forgiveness and reconciliation with which the narrative ends again emphasizes its religious impetus, exuding a nostalgia for the unitary—the Islamic—that it had earlier sought to banish. (Goodyear 193)

Much like Saladin who is forced to return home and make peace with his father before his father’s death, the text, after experimenting with the plural forms offered by the cultural sources of discourse, returns to a sense of unity at the novel’s conclusion. This is not to say, like most critics of the text believe, that the novel is attempting to universalize secular thought. Rather, as Goodyear posits, the text is deeply devoted to fundamental aspects of religion, primarily the notion of forgiveness, an attribute that is surely part of a healthy form of agonistic respect. Forgiveness, like doubt⁴, is an example of a form of ethical humanism that is intertwined with both the religious and the secular. It is fundamental component of Abrahamic religions and is deeply invested in contestation, subsequent self-reflexivity, and ultimately, agonistic respect. Thus, Rushdie’s decision to conclude the novel with an act of forgiveness both at the level of plot through Saladin, and at the level of authorial intention and form, through a style that mirrors realism, acknowledges its prior offenses, and exhibits a postsecular sensibility grounded in respect and empathy.

The novel’s penultimate line from Zeeny, Saladin’s lover, reads, “Let’s get the hell out of here” (Rushdie 561). If read literally through a secular frame of mind, then it may seem as though Rushdie is referring to religion as a whole as some form of hell. However, if read with a postsecular sensibility, something the text certainly asks of the reader, the quote serves as a call

⁴ See epigraph of this section.
to end the harsh politicization of religion ("get the hell out") from the daily encounters with difference that occur at the urban centers ("here") in an ethno-religious pluralistic society. The novel, thus, achieves both a pluralization of unity and a unification of the plural—the former through implicating all narratives within the realm of discourse, and the latter by implicating itself in a larger discursive structure, concluding in unity, and ultimately seeking forgiveness for its prior transgressions. As I have expressed above, this ambivalence is at the heart of postsecularism and possesses inherent political value: in the words of Hutcheon, through pluralization and hybridity, "...margins and edges gain new value. The "ex-centric"-as both off-center and de-centered gets attention. That which is ‘different’ is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated ‘otherness,’ and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture" (Hutcheon 12). This in combination with the novel’s religious attentiveness, its acknowledgment of its own decentered authority, as well as its call for forgiveness at the conclusion of the novel, epitomizes Connolly’s concept of agonistic respect and the fundamental aspects of humanism. Through this postsecular sensibility, The Satanic Verses defies its critics by appealing to an ethical universal, and offers an appropriately intricate appeal to establish an ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in plural and democratic states.

**Postcolonial Melancholia and the Power of the Individual in NW**

While The Satanic Verses’ contribution to the postsecular dialogue is undeniable, given the time of its release and its subsequent impact on the critical discussion surrounding religion and postcolonialism, the novel exists mostly as a macro- and global-level commentary on these
issues. Contrary to *The Satanic Verses*, Zadie Smith’s *NW* provides a much more local and individual illustration of the current postcolonial conditions of London, and the tempered role that religion appears to have in an increasingly modern age. In aesthetics and in affect, *NW* channels a similar political and ethical message as Paul Gilroy’s renowned 2005 release *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Within this text Gilroy describes postcolonial melancholia as a “pathology” that subsists within English culture as a result of a reoccurring combination of shame and willful repression regarding the nation’s colonial past. But perhaps more significantly, Gilroy stresses two main points about this state of postcolonial melancholia: first, that contemporary postcolonial London is defined by its inability to acknowledge its colonial past in any way other than nostalgia or melancholia; and second, that there is ethical potential outside of melancholia that can be accessed through an embrace of prior imperial atrocities. In his own words, Gilroy states:

…I argue that the political conflicts which characterize multicultural societies can take on a very different aspect if they are understood to exist firmly in a context supplied by imperial and colonial history. Though that history remains marginal and largely unacknowledged surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia, it represents a store of unlikely connections and complex interpretative resources. The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries. (Gilroy 2)

What *NW* confirms is that even for second- and third-generation immigrants, the imperial and colonial past of England continues to shape the lives of its citizens. From the novel’s opening page, it is clear that Smith possesses a distinct ability to capture the intensified anxieties and
urgencies of London’s present moment. Through the use of parataxis, a disjointed narrative structure, and an intelligent juxtaposition of its major and minor characters, *NW* evokes an affective melancholia and oppression that subsumes the text throughout its entirety. But unlike Gilroy, Smith does not find hope for an ethics in the collective embrace of a colonial past; in fact, the oppressive nature of postcolonial melancholia seems to trap each of the novel’s characters—politically, spatially, and emotionally—into a space where it remains evident that any wide scale efforts to modify the national approach to pluralism are unrealistic (the novel itself was also incapable of having a widespread effect, it seems). I will spend the majority of this section discussing how Smith depicts the state of postcolonial melancholia as deeply embedded into English culture. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the section, I will discuss how Smith sees an escape from this melancholia at the local level, that is, at the level of the individual, particularly through a postsecular sensibility. While the novel’s two major characters, Leah and Natalie, consistently reify postcolonial melancholia from two different racial perspectives (Leah being white, and Natalie being black), each character is able, albeit in a few brief moments throughout the text, to escape the tight embrace of postcolonial melancholia and obtain agency through alternative approaches to religion. For Smith, these two characters represent how Londoners of all races, cultures, and religions are implicated in a colonial history that emphasizes difference. Yet, as Smith implores, it is the responsibility of the individual to ensure that history can be adequately acknowledged and reclaimed, and it is the responsibility of the individual to ensure that fundamental humanism and an ethics of pluralism can be effectively explored.⁰

⁰ This is not to say that Gilroy does not also believe in humanism and ethics in relation to pluralism. In…
*NW* is formatted in a distinctly postmodern fashion, primarily in three large sections, each through a different character’s focalization: the first, through the perspective of Leah, a middle-aged white female of Irish descent, told with an anxiety-ridden tone and a persistent use of parataxis; the second, through the perspective of Felix, a middle-aged Caribbean immigrant and former drug addict on the mend, told with a more fluid syntactical structure; and the third, through the perspective of Natalie, Leah’s black best friend, told through a collection of short, paratactic, numbered, and cleverly titled chapters, as if the narrator was writing a brief journal entry for all of Natalie’s memories. The titles of the individual sections—Visitation, Host, and Guest, respectively—are never fully explained or obvious enough to identify with a particular moment in the text. Chapter numbers, which only exist in the first two sections, are at times chronological, but will occasionally appear as numbers of local bus lines, and there are multiple chapters labeled as chapter number 37, a number that a former female lover of Leah’s had a particular affinity for (Smith 46). The result is a text that feels incomplete, a text that leaves the reader feeling disoriented, and a text that contains characters who evidently feel a bit of both.

This disjointed narrative structure, combined with the use of parataxis in both the first and third sections, results in a restlessness that persists throughout the novel. At the level of plot, this restlessness is matched by an anxiety that results from a constant reiteration of difference,

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...his book’s introduction, he writes: “We need to know what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile...We need to consider whether the scale upon which sameness and difference are calculated might be altered productively so that the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of a basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant. We also need to consider how deliberate engagement with the twentieth century’s histories of suffering might furnish resources for the peaceful accommodation of otherness in relation to fundamental commonality” (Gilroy 4). Surely, Gilroy and Smith agree on the existence of a “fundamental commonality,” but they appear to have different beliefs regarding the means to the end.
specifically in terms of class, race, gender, and religion. Gilroy argues that this form of restlessness occurs through an inability to acknowledge a colonial past. As the families of all three of the main characters can be classified as “victim minorities,” the anxiety regarding England’s colonial past continues throughout NW. On this matter, and the reasons why this melancholia persists, Gilroy writes:

The victim minorities resent depending on the majority for redress. The majority resents depending on the minority for forgiveness. Since forgiveness would foreclose future claims, victims tend to withhold it; since redress implies culpability, it too is withheld. So the politics of argument is replaced by a politics of blackmail and stonewalling . . . In Britain these arguments are tied to an obsessive repetition of key themes—invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity—and the resulting mixture suggests that an anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover. (Gilroy 14)

Here, Gilroy reveals how the perpetually damaged and cyclical relationship between minority and majority cultures is ultimately reified by the dominant culture’s nostalgia for imperialism (“invasion, war”) and a fear of minority success and uplift (“contamination, loss of identity”). It is these antiquated sentiments toward England’s imperial past that maintains the melancholic state among the subjects of postcolonial London. Smith seems entirely attune to this, particularly in one of the more memorable scenes in the novel, when Leah attends a dinner party full of “barristers and bankers” at Natalie’s house. The use of parataxis in this scene, as well as Smith’s
effortless transitioning between topics of difference—from colonialism to class differences, the effect of technology on human interaction, and the West’s the newest outsider threat, Islam—epitomize the state of postcolonial melancholia:

Meanwhile parents have become old and ill at the very moment their children want to have their own babies. Many of the parents are immigrants—from Jamaica, from Ireland, from India, from China—and they can’t understand why they have not yet been invited to live with their children, as is the custom, in their countries. Technology is offered as a substitute for that impossible request. Stair lifts. Pacemakers. Hip replacements. Dialysis machines. But nothing satisfies them. They work hard so we children live like this. They “literally” will not be happy unless they’ve moved into our houses. They can never move into our houses. Pass the heirloom tomato salad. The thing about Islam. Let me tell you about Islam. The thing about the trouble with Islam. Everyone is suddenly an expert on Islam. But what do you think, Samhita, yeah what do you think, Samhita, what’s your take on this? Samhita, the copyright lawyer? Pass the tuna.

Solutions are passed across the table. (Smith 98)

One of the effects of the use of parataxis here is that all of the issues that are addressed in this passage are portrayed as existing on the same plane, as merely discrete signifiers for representing the prevalence of difference. While Gilroy prioritizes race thinking as the primary reason for ceaseless anxiety, Smith works here to portray that all of these issues—colonialism, race thinking, class distinctions, religious intolerance—are interconnected, and that they all can be boiled down to a reification of difference that perpetuates a state of restlessness for contemporary
subjects in postcolonial London. After all, these issues do encapsulate the very themes of invasion, war, contamination, and loss of identity that Gilroy emphasizes as catalysts for this very state of restlessness.

_The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics_ states that parataxis “is especially suited to rendering thoughts and actions from the urgent perspective of a participant caught in the immediate flow of events... a paratactic style lends itself naturally to the rush and chaos of life as it is lived in the immediate first-person experience” (Greene 650). While this definition certainly applies to the passage above, it also applies to the parataxis of high modernism, which was used primarily to portray the fragmentation of experience and history. What, then, makes the parataxis in _NW_ different from that of high modernism? For the reader the use of parataxis is experienced in two equally significant ways: first, as a rapid and panicked form that seemingly moves the narrative forward at will, without opposition, and without the potential to be stopped. This ceaseless momentum and permanence of the narrative encapsulates the oppressive nature of postcolonial melancholia, and mirrors high modernism in its attempt to represent the modern experience via fragmentation. However, the excerpt above is not limited to first-person experience; in fact, it is a conversation, a representation of the encounters with difference and divergent beliefs that often occur in a pluralistic metropolis like London. As a result, within this passage, Smith effectively portrays the potential for a healthy pluralism _amidst_ the oppressive state of postcolonial melancholia.

This oppression is also exhibited through the characters of Leah and Natalie at the level of plot. Though it may seem, based on the narrator’s portrayal of Leah’s inner thoughts at the dinner scene above, that Leah herself is merely cynical of the type of postcolonial melancholia
that reifies difference, she is also guilty of preserving a reification of difference, primarily through race thinking in terms of her own best friend Natalie. Growing up in a middle-class white family in a racially diverse area of town, Leah spent her childhood quite comfortably; Natalie notes her jealousy of the Hanwell family’s spacious and quiet apartment, as well as her envy toward smaller perks, such as tea with milk “on a tea-tray” (Smith 204). But after both Leah and Natalie receive their college degrees, Leah decides to work in social services, while Natalie becomes a highly paid attorney with an affluent husband. Despite Leah’s love for Natalie, she still identifies her in terms of race, as a “coconut,” black on the outside and white on the inside (Smith 71). She sits in awe of her friend’s fancy dinners and ornate house decorations believing that perhaps Natalie is living the life that she could have had for herself; but instead, she is the sole white woman working in an office of Afro-Caribbean females who refuse to view her as one of the “women in [their] community” (Smith 37). Simply put, Leah is dumbfounded by how she can feel more alienated and less successful than the people of minority races around her; it is the expression of these feelings, primarily her emphasis on race, that result in Leah’s participation in the reification, perhaps unintentionally, of a postcolonial melancholic sentiment.

Natalie also seems to, more knowingly, perpetuate a state of melancholia. From a young age she is aware of the disadvantages that come along with being black, as she astutely identifies how her level of “access” changes as a result of befriending Leah (“In the absence of Leah—at school, on the streets, in Caldwell—[Natalie] felt herself to be revealed and exposed. She had not noticed until the break that the state of ‘being Leah Hanwell’s friend’ constituted a sort of passport, lending her a protected form of access in most situations” (Smith 225)). Though Smith never provides an explanation, perhaps this issue of access is why Natalie changed her name
from Keisha Blake to Natalie Blake—Smith partially confirms this reasoning through the mouthpiece of another black character, Leah’s husband Michel, who states, “From the first day I was stepping into this country I have my head on correctly; I was very clear: I am going up the ladder, one rung at least” (Smith 32). Regardless of whether access or uplift are the reasons behind her name change, it is very clear from the moment of Natalie’s introduction in the text that she is set on repressing any past racial atrocities, events that ultimately have an effect on her identity, in attempt to construct her identity anew. This deliberate avoidance of contemporary racial issues and the potential cause of these issues, more specifically, a colonial and imperial past, confirms Natalie’s culpability in the preservation of colonial repression and melancholia.

Seemingly as a challenge to her protagonists to break from this melancholia, Smith creates two figures of otherness to haunt Leah and Natalie throughout their respective sections of the novel. Leah’s section opens with an uncanny encounter with a woman named Shar, who knocks on her door asking for money; Leah invites her in, remains suspicious of her intent, yet hands over the money regardless. Shar reappears multiple times to Leah: in the streets of London and in a photograph; yet it is unclear if Leah is simply fascinated by the stranger, or if she believes Shar fooled her into believing she was genuinely a person in need.

Natalie’s encounter with otherness occurs at the conclusion of her section, after she leaves her house distraught following a confrontation with her husband regarding her infidelity, when she unexpectedly comes across a former classmate, Nathan Bogle. Nathan was a student of promise, with good looks and equally good grades, but now is a homeless drug addict. They walk together to an overpass that overlooks the city, their conversational tone similar to that of Shar and Leah, both empathetic and dubious, until their encounter ends in a dispute and a cry of
mistrust from Nathan who yells, "What do you know about it? What do you know about me? Nothing. Who are you, to chat to me? Nobody. No-one" (Smith 377).

At the novel’s conclusion, Leah and Natalie appear to officially fail at their test to fully embrace otherness, as they call in Nathan as a “person of interest” regarding the murder of Felix, Natalie justifying her decision based on merit: "We wanted to get out. People like Bogle—they didn't want it enough. I’m sorry if you find that answer ugly, Lee, but it’s the truth. This is one of the things you learn in a courtroom: people generally get what they deserve” (Smith 400). Surely, both Natalie and Leah’s decision to report Nathan to the police, while assuring one another that it is “the right thing to do,” underscores their participation in the perpetuation of postcolonial melancholia, as they are unable to acknowledge systemic issues, such as institutional racism, as potential reasons for why certain people from NW may not have been able to obtain an ostensibly comfortable life like each of them (Smith 401). Still, aside from the reprehensible\(^\text{P}\) conclusion of the text, the ambivalence on display in both Leah and Natalie’s respective encounters with otherness, this small glimpse of empathy shown by two privileged, but internally complex characters, serves as evidence of the capability of the individual to locally undermine the oppressive nature of postcolonial melancholia. In fact, both of these scenes serve as potential moments of forgiveness, similar to the multiple occurrences of forgiveness displayed at the conclusion of *The Satanic Verses*. While the protagonists are not able to entirely fulfill their act of forgiveness, each of their encounters represents how commonplace moments of transgression and forgiveness on various scales can be in a pluralistic society. Furthermore, the hesitation on display in these scenes shows how difficult it is for the individual to break away

\(^\text{P}\) I mean this here in terms of the characters’ integrity, though *NPR*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* heavily criticized the quality of the novel’s conclusion.
from essentialist thought, and act through Appiah’s accordance, with history and humanism in
mind.

Nevertheless, it is the encounters with these two doppelgängers that mirrors the
protagonists’ own double lives in the text, alternative and secretive sides that both Leah and
Natalie possess in order to gain agency outside of the oppression of postcolonial melancholia.

On the characters’ double lives, Smith critic Lynn Wells writes:

…the characters in NW, with their secretive double lives, play dual roles as
representations of certain aspects of the multicultural reality of contemporary
urban Britain and as manifestations of the ethical dangers of reducing others to
essentialized identities based on race or other factors while denying their
uniqueness. (Wells 100)

The double lives of the two main characters are most on display in relation to familial and social
issues: Leah steals Natalie’s birth control pills in attempt to refrain from bearing the child that
her husband Michel so deeply wants; it is also implied throughout the text that she has received
an abortion without telling Michel. Natalie surreptitiously surfs the internet for potential sexual
encounters, a pursuit which she actually completes at the end of the novel, and one that is
eventually revealed to her vehemently disapproving husband. For Wells, these two blatantly
controversial secrets epitomize a certain “multicultural reality of contemporary urban Britain”
and deny the essentialized identities that form within a postcolonial melancholic state.

However, I believe the more subtle aspects of their double lives, particularly their
experimentation with postsecular forms of belief, truly emphasize an ethics of pluralism in
contemporary urban Britain. In a text that is so blatantly postmodern and apparently secular,
Smith broaches the topic of religion only a few times. In fact, there are only two mentions of Islam in the entire book: one at the dinner party scene which I addressed above, and one more by a gregarious women waiting for a bus next to Natalie. To Natalie she confesses, “But in a sense I really did not become a good Muslim until I came to Kilburn. This is really where I become very holy” (Smith 397). This line certainly seems out of place. What is the purpose of such a line in a seemingly secular text? Why would Smith portray religion as mostly background noise, as an afterthought throughout, but include such a profound line about devotion and about practice in her erratic plot? Natalie’s reaction to this line, I believe, reveals its purpose:

The bus came. Natalie sat with her forehead rumbling on the glass. The Cock Tavern. MacDonalds. The old Woolworths. The betting shop. The State Empire. Willesden Lane. The cemetery. Whoever said these were fixed coordinates to which she had to be forever faithful? How could she play them false? Freedom was absolutely and everywhere, constantly moving location.

(Smith 397)

It is within these lines and within Leah and Natalie’s hybrid forms of belief at earlier moments in the text where the novel exhibits a postsecular sensibility. Here, Natalie wonders why she feels spatially controlled and trapped by her geographic location—I have equated this sense of oppression above to the cultural phenomenon of postcolonial melancholia. But most importantly, she longs for a desire to break out, and she longs for a desire to “play them false.” Through individual moments of exposure to alternative modes of belief, both Natalie and Leah are able to render essentialist beliefs (whether in terms of culture or geography) false, and undermine the sense of melancholia that deprives each of them of agency throughout the text.
Natalie, who derives from a religious family, acquires agency through experimenting with secular cultural alternatives in the face of her religious foundations. Arguably, Natalie’s first true postsecular action in the text occurs when Leah gives her a dildo for her 16th birthday, and Natalie feigns illness on a Sunday morning so she can stay home and put the gift to use. The juxtaposition of the religious and the secular in this scene warrants inclusion within a discussion on postsecularism. Smith writes:

The following Saturday morning she began approximating the early signs of a cold, and on Sunday claimed a severe cough and stomach ache. Her mother pressed her tongue down with a fork and said it was a shame, Pastor Akinwande was going to talk on the topic of Abraham and Issac. From the balcony Keisha Blake watched her family walk to church, not without regret: she was sincerely interested in the topic of Abraham and Issac. (Smith 219)

Why was Natalie Blake interested in the topic of Abraham and Isaac? This is never explained to us; however, Abraham in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is remembered as one of the most faithful religious figures, as a result of his willingness to bind his son Isaac to an altar to be sacrificed at God’s will. Luckily God realizes Abraham’s immense amount of faith, and does not force Abraham to sacrifice his son. Natalie, too, possesses an enormous amount of faith…in apparently secular interests, that is. Smith writes,

She found politics and literature and music and cinema. ‘Found’ is not the right word. She put her faith in these things, and couldn’t understand why—at exactly the moment she’d discovered them—her classmates seemed to be giving them up for dead. (Smith 247)
This type of faith is not faith in a system of secularism, as she is clearly not following the interests of the college crowd, but rather a faith that seems to emerge for Natalie out of secularism itself. Smith’s peculiar wording here makes the reader wonder, what does it mean to place faith into secular interests such as politics, literature, music, or cinema? Is this faith compatible with a faith in God, or are they mutually exclusive? Regardless of the answers to these questions, Natalie’s experimentation with alternative cultural sources than the ones prescribed to her, point to both her capability for tolerance and her attempt to reach a space outside of essentialist beliefs prescribed to her.

For Leah, her alternative exploration arrives in the form of surreptitious religious practice, again, presented as an incredibly minor detail in the novel as a whole. Leah’s first expression of her love of church appears in the form of a defense against her mother’s rant on a train about priests and their treatment of children. Smith writes:

Seeing as how they are speaking to the whole carriage, Leah mounts a mild defense, thinking of the smell of the censer, the voluptuous putti babies, the gold sunburst, cold marble floor, dark wood carved and plaited, women kneeling whispering lighting candles…Wish we had confession. Wish I could confess.

(Smith 52)

As someone who has held many secrets from her husband, perhaps the desire to confess would not seem to be a particularly religious desire. However, it is Leah’s desire for the space itself, the physical aspects of the church that can potentially shield her from the geographic and cultural oppression she feels in the NW corridor of London. What is more, her desire to partake in religious practice remains significant because it suggests a religious/secular hybridity that sees
tolerance of and value in both lifestyles. Leah and Natalie later on in the novel stumble upon the church once more. Natalie states, “This can’t still be Willesden. Feels like we’re in Neasden already,” to which Leah replies “The church is what *makes* it Willesden. It marks the parish of Willesden” (Smith 76). The emphasis on location here is significant in relation to postsecular ambivalence: while the church serves for Leah as a type of safe haven away from the oppression she faces, it still embodies that very geographic location that suffocates her. As Leah enters the church, “she becomes her mother, assumes her mother’s face: mouth drawn downwards, eyelids fluttering against the world’s specks and their determination to fly into Pauline’s eyes,” while the narrator adds “They can ridicule their mothers but they can’t break the somber spell of this place” (Smith 78). The implication that Leah and Natalie ridicule their mothers regarding religion is proof that their generation has been radically secularized. Nevertheless, Leah’s decision to see herself as her mother within the church doors proves that she is not merely enamored with the beauty of the church itself, but mostly with the prospect of religious practice as an exercise that can potentially serve to improve her own life. This acknowledgement of the past is one that does not reinforce difference like that of postcolonial melancholia, but instead is a critical and loving embrace of the historical events that allow both Leah and Natalie to be present in the church on that very day.

Leah’s religious practice becomes official only days later after she becomes lost in the city:

Walking back from a training day in Harlesden she finds herself lost in the back streets. She takes a series of random left turns to keep moving, to lose a surely innocent hooded stranger, and then here is that strange little church again, tolling
six o’clock. She goes in. Half an hour later she comes out. She does not tell Michel or anybody. She begins to do this most days. (Smith 103)

This passage is the last we hear of Leah’s religious practice: we do not receive an overview of her beliefs, or a detailed reason why she desires to practice in the first place, nor do we receive an account of her actually practicing. Instead we are left to reason why a secular woman would value such a practice at all. Yet this seems to be the point: despite how nonchalant Smith makes this practice seem, it is clearly an integral part of her character’s outlook on life, and as readers, we are forced to accept and tolerate Leah’s decision. Since Leah is unwilling to share with anyone that she partakes in this practice, it may be safe to assume that she does not expect the same tolerance from those around her. Still, her own individual tolerance of both the religious and the secular, combined with the tolerance expected of the readers in relation to this plotline, encapsulate the postsecular sensibility of the novel. And through an embrace of otherness, Leah is able to acquire a sense of agency that she does not seem to have through her plainly secular and melancholic life.

On these hybrid forms of religious experience, Smith critic Magdalena Maczynska states, “Such truncated, iconoclastic spiritualities reflect the complexity of religious belonging in a contemporary multicultural world,” while Smith’s writing ultimately “rejects theological dogmatism and secular materialism to propose new, weakened and hybridized idioms of belief (Maczynska 138). Though undoubtedly weaker than the regenerative strength of postcolonial melancholia in contemporary postcolonial London, the postsecular sensibility exhibited by both protagonists throughout the novel, combined with Smith’s careful inclusion of religion within such an ostensibly postmodern and secular text, speaks to the novel’s efforts to establish an
ethics of ethno-religious pluralism. Smith portrays the difficulties, possibilities, and responsibilities of being a postcolonial subject in a Western metropolis, and her promotion of the power of the individual displays her commitment to humanism, and the idea of an ethical universal in the face of difference.

CONCLUSION

What I hope to have accomplished above is a strong analysis of the commitment exhibited within *The Satanic Verses* and *NW* to portraying the complexities of the relationship between the religious and the secular in a postcolonial and postmodern age. Through a thorough and intricate depiction of the presence of difference in the urban center of London, both texts are clearly committed to establishing an ethics of ethno-religious pluralism in the Western metropolis. I have proposed that this appeal to ethics mirrors that of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of the ethical universal because both texts make narrative and aesthetic maneuvers that emphasize their concern with humanism and the power of the individual. In *The Satanic Verses* this is on display through a form of metafiction that implicates all narratives in the web of discourse, which results in an equivalence of all texts, from the novel itself to the Qurʾān. While Rushdie was evidently eager to contest the ideas of fundamentalist Islam throughout the novel, this metafictional move confirms that even his own authority as Author-God is highly questionable, and thus his own text is up for equal contestation. Combined with its attentiveness to Islamic beliefs and history, *The Satanic Verses* illustrates a type of critical, postsecular ambivalence that values tolerance, and the existence of a pluralism that requires constant confrontation and negotiation. This same form of agonism is on full display in *NW* as Zadie
Smith’s paratactic style embodies the type of ethno-religious confrontation that occurs daily in contemporary postcolonial London. Its distinctly postmodern form simultaneously embodies the oppressive nature of Paul Gilroy’s postcolonial melancholia, which seems to take hold of the majority of the characters within the text. Nevertheless, Smith’s deliberate juxtaposition between the religious and the secular throughout the text, as well as the main protagonists’ ability to break from their melancholic state through alternative modes of belief, prove *NW*s value as a postsecular text that also envisions tolerance and contestation as crucial components of an ethics of pluralism in the metropolis of London. Despite their status as elite Western authors, Rushdie and Smith have created two clearly empathetic texts, and that empathy should not only be acknowledged and lauded, but it should be put into action, particularly by Western political subjects. This type of postsecular sensibility is at the heart of what it means to acknowledge and endure amidst ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in a democratic society.

**Works Cited**


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