

Getting the Hell Out: Redefining the Satanic in *The Satanic Verses*

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*For my parents*

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the representation and redefinition of the satanic occurring in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. Taking my cue from the novel's title, I treat the Devil and writing together, exploring the satanic as an aspect of authorship in the text. My reading considers the different ways in which authors in the novel become human manifestations of the Devil and the Devil himself becomes an author. It focuses on doubt as the defining characteristic of the Devil for the novel and as a major theme in the text.

*The Satanic Verses* attempts to humanize the Devil by making him a secular figure free from the negative connotations assigned to him by religion. Through this secular treatment, doubt becomes a positive force, functioning not as rebellious blasphemy as it would in a religious context, but rather as a secular alternative to religious belief. By rejecting the religious moral system that defines the Devil's negative identity, the novel enables a redefinition of the satanic that privileges its doubting and doubt-inducing authors.

In this thesis, I provide an overview of definitions of the satanic relevant to the text, including the adversarial and evil associations created by the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, the sense of self-empowerment assigned to the Devil by artistic movements, and the creative and necessary advocacy of doubt espoused by Rushdie's novel. I conduct extended readings of figures in the text representing both authorship and the satanic. Readings of Baal and the transformed Saladin Chamcha explore self-empowered identifications with the satanic, while those of Salman the Persian and the re-humanized Saladin Chamcha identify doubt-creating roles of the author as the version of the satanic preferred by the text. The novel itself reflects the manifestation of the satanic demonstrated by its author characters through its narrator, narrative structure, and treatment of Rushdie as its author.

The novel's use of the Devil as its mascot invokes a vast array of deeply embedded associations for its readers, some of which may result in responses based not on the content of the novel itself, but with what we independently connect with that content. By identifying a version of the satanic supported by the text that contradicts other pre-established definitions of the Devil's role, I intend to show the effect preconceived notions of the satanic can have on a reading of *The Satanic Verses*.

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Figure 1. Photograph of Salman Rushdie, 40

## Introduction: Defining the Satanic

Despite the fact that the Devil supposedly stands for all that is evil, wrong and harmful to humankind, modern literature often portrays him as a character deserving pity, empathy or admiration. Many literary devils play dual roles: Milton's Satan is both a malefactor and a tragic hero in *Paradise Lost*, Bulgakov's Woland is both a creator of social chaos and a benefactor of outcasts in *The Master and Margarita*, Blake's Devil is an admirably passionate combination of both good and evil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. These combinations of positive and negative aspects create complex portrayals of the Devil, making him resemble a human character. In other words, literature humanizes the Devil. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* is no exception; it redefines the satanic invoked in its title as an aspect of human activity.

However, the redefinition of the Devil's role in *The Satanic Verses* is hardly straightforward, as the wide range of responses to this novel can attest. After its initial publication in 1988, many of Rushdie's opponents completely rejected any valid redefinition of the Devil occurring within the novel, viewing the text and its author as blasphemous, sacrilegious, and deserving of condemnation. Others saw the novel as an admirable rebellion against the close-minded constraints of the Islamic community and a daring expression of an artist's right to free speech.<sup>1</sup> More aesthetically inclined critics focused on the novel's use of the satanic as a meditation on migrancy and the translation of identity.<sup>2</sup> All of these responses can

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1 Responses to *The Satanic Verses* ranging from Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa demanding Rushdie's execution to rallies of support from other writers are documented in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited in the text.

2 See for example David W. Suter, "Of the Devil's Party: the Marriage of Heaven and Hell in *Satanic Verses*," *South Asian Review* 16, no. 13 (1992): 64; Jaina C. Sanga, *Salman Rushdie's Postcolonial Metaphors: Migration, Translation, Hybridity, Blasphemy, and Globalization*, vol. 109 of *Contributions to the Study of World Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,



find justification in Rushdie's novel, which takes an all-inclusive approach to the various possible definitions of the satanic.

In an attempt to sort through *The Satanic Verses*' vast array of allusions and direct references to various devils of religious, cultural and literary origin, I have chosen to look to the novel's title as a prescription for a reading of the Devil's role in the text. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines satanic as "[o]f or pertaining to Satan" or "[c]haracteristic of or befitting Satan; extremely wicked, diabolical, devilish, infernal." The use of this term in the title as a modifier for verses—prosodic combinations of words—forges a link from the onset between the Devil and literary creation, suggesting both that the Devil creates verses and that verses themselves are satanic. As a result, the Devil becomes an author. Likewise, the many authors contained within the text become manifestations of the Devil through their creation of verses. Their behavior and their treatment within the text constitute a redefinition of the Devil's role and identity in terms of the novel's main operating mode: the acceptance of doubt. This redefinition rejects the negative connotations of the adjectives used to define the term satanic in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, focusing instead on the potential positive benefits of an association with the Devil.

In his essay "In Good Faith," written two years after *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie describes his novel as "in part, a secular man's reckoning with the religious spirit."<sup>3</sup> This description helps to explain the novel's treatment of the satanic as an aspect of human activity divorced from the negative moral associations religious texts and traditions assign the Devil.

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2001), 33-7; Simona Sawhney, "Satanic Choices: Poetry and Prophecy in Rushdie's Novel," *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 269. Hereafter cited in the text.

3 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 396. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "IH."

There is an ongoing attempt to “get the hell out of here,” explicitly stated in the novel’s second-to-last paragraph.<sup>4</sup> This idiomatic command, which in the context of the scene merely suggests physical departure, identifies a major endeavor for the novel: the effacement of preconceived notions of the satanic in favor of its own secular, doubt-based definition. The secular stance of the novel makes doubt into a positive attribute rather than the rebellious blasphemy it constitutes from a religiously committed point of view. For *The Satanic Verses*, doubt becomes a secular alternative to religious belief. My reading shows how this novel rejects the system of morals that defines the Devil as a negative figure, thereby enabling a redefinition of the satanic that privileges doubting and doubt-inducing authors.

The connection of the satanic with deception and doubt is reinforced by the novel’s depiction of the historical episode also indicated by its title. *The Satanic Verses* borrows its title from an event that supposedly occurred during Muhammad’s initial recitations of the Qur’an, Islam’s foundational text. In his dissertation on the subject, Mohammed Shahab Ahmed explains: “The Satanic verses incident or *qissat al-gharaniq* is the occasion on which Muhammad is reported to have mistaken words of Satanic suggestion as being Divine Revelation.”<sup>5</sup> Ahmed claims that although the early Muslim community accepted the validity of this incident and its implication that the Prophet could make mistakes, many of today’s Muslims reject the Satanic verses as a violation of Muhammad’s assumed infallibility.

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4 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989; reprint, New York: Henry Holt and Co., Owl Books, 1997), 561 (page citations refer to the reprint edition). Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “SV.”

5 Mohammed Shahab Ahmed, “The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of the Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of the Early Riwayahs and their Isnads” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1999), abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts International* 60/09 (Mar 2000): 3491. 4 March 2004 <[wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/fullcit/994624](http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/fullcit/994624)>.

Rushdie's novel presents a thinly veiled reenactment of the satanic verses incident in its depiction of the Muhammad-like character Mahound. After reciting verses that compromise the oneness of God, Mahound determines that these verses were actually inspired by the Devil, "not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly, but satanic" (SV 126). The verses that Mahound attributes to the deceptive Devil cast Mahound's authority as God's prophet into doubt, forcing him to admit that he can make mistakes. By identifying the false verses as the work of the Devil, Mahound establishes the relationship between the Devil, authorship, and doubt and deception implied by the novel's title.

Mahound's alleged interaction with the Devil invokes the definition of the satanic operating in the Near-Eastern religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Going by the name of Satan in Jewish and Christian texts and as Iblis or Shaitan in the Qur'an, the Devil plays a similar part in all three traditions. He is a proud and rebellious figure who plays "an adversarial role" in the Hebrew Bible, functions as a fallen angel "locked in a cosmic struggle with the Lord [God]" in Christian texts, and earns expulsion from heaven for refusing God's command that he bow down to man in the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> In the Christian and Islamic traditions, the Devil's enduring rebellion against God is his quest to destroy or corrupt the humans God created. Fazlur Rahman describes the Islamic Devil as "a professional evilmonger" bent on confusing mankind.<sup>7</sup> Activities identified by the Qur'an as satanic include invoking fear, hatred or strife;

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995), 39; Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 30; The Koran, trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin, 1974), 15:31-4. All hereafter cited in the text. Rushdie acknowledges this translation of the Qur'an as the one he referred to while writing *The Satanic Verses* (SV 562). Throughout this thesis, I shall refer to this text as the Qur'an, corresponding with the Rushdie's spelling.

<sup>7</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca, 1980), 27. Hereafter cited in the text.

misleading, inhibiting, or tempting humans; causing forgetfulness; befriending non-believers and acting as a general foe or enemy to mankind.<sup>8</sup> Terms in the Christian New Testament describing the Devil's role include "enemy," "tempter," "adversary," "father of lies," "murderer," "deceiver," "accuser" and "one disguised as the angel of light."<sup>9</sup> These Qur'anic and Biblical descriptions emphasize the Devil's deceptive tendencies. The creation of doubt falls under this category of deception as an activity that misleads by presenting possible alternatives to religious truths.

Alternative methods for defining the satanic appear in *The Satanic Verses*. The novel contains multiple embedded narrative levels, switching frequently between a primary narrative set in contemporary London and Bombay, embedded narratives dreamt by Gibreel Farishta (one of the primary narrative's protagonists), and the commentary of the narrator. The text also references its own author, including playful references to Rushdie himself throughout. Multiple characters found on all the narrative levels of the text function as secular versions of this Devil defamed by Mahound and religious texts, often paralleling one another in their activities and treatment by the novel. They are the human authors of fictions that create doubt by undermining authority. These fictions take many forms, as do the types of authority they attempt to destroy.

*The Satanic Verses* includes several instances of more openly rebellious activity that it associates with the Devil. The author characters who engage in this kind of rebellion take on the Devil's characteristic pride and anti-establishment attitude rather than his desire to deceive and

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<sup>8</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM ed. v.1.0, s.v. "Shaytan." Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "EI."

<sup>9</sup> *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997, 1992), s.v. "Satan."

create doubt. This positive redefinition references various non-religious artistic groups that upheld the Devil as a figure of self-empowerment, most notably the pre-Islamic Arabic poets and the British Romantic poets of the late-eighteenth century. Many poets in pre-Islamic society claimed to rely upon the supernatural assistance of a “Daemon of poetry.”<sup>10</sup> This daemon was referred to as a *shaytan*, a neutral spirit not yet endowed with the evil identity later bestowed by the Qur’an (*EI*). The Qur’an condemns poets in large part because of their association with the Devil, seeing them as a subversive threat (*EI*). According to Peter Schock, the Romantics adopted the Devil as a figure of “moral transgressiveness” divorced from religious implications who embodied their anti-establishment attitudes and “project[ed] the oppositional values of their social groups.”<sup>11</sup> *The Satanic Verses* invokes the British Romantics by directly quoting William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. For the Romantics, the Devil was a figure of individualism, rebellion and defiance (Schock 5).

The most prominent author figures in *The Satanic Verses* that take on these kinds of associations are Saladin Chamcha and Baal. In the primary narrative, two Indian men undergo sudden transformations when they fall from a plane over Great Britain. Gibreel Farishta—whose name means Gabriel Angel—develops an angelic halo, while his companion Saladin Chamcha becomes a living parody of the Devil’s stereotypical image, complete with horns, tail and smoking nostrils. As Gibreel descends into madness, Saladin becomes an emblematic figure for the marginalized masses of London’s immigrant communities. In his commentary on the novel, Rushdie points to this proud reclamation of demonizing stereotypes as an explanation for the

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10 A.F.L. Beeston et al, eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 40. Hereafter cited in the text.

11 Peter A. Schock, *Romantic Satanism: Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley and Byron* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

novel itself (*IH* 403). Within Gibreel's dreams, which operate as fictionalized re-interpretations of various events within the history of Islam, the poet Baal becomes subversive by making himself into a parody of Mahound, the Muhammad-like figure who demonizes him. In the dream narrative, Baal rebels through mocking imitation. However, the text's treatment of British immigrants and Baal calls into question the extent to which the novel actually upholds the aspects of the satanic they represent as secular interpretations of the Devil's identity.

Authors' uses of deception and doubt in attacks on authority are much more central to the novel. Within Gibreel's dreams, various characters cast doubt upon the authority of Mahound's recitations, including Mahound's adversary Baal the poet and scribe Salman the Persian. On the level of the dreams, Salman the Persian begins to create fiction when he purposely mis-transcribes Mahound's recitations, casting doubt on Mahound's words by introducing inaccuracies into the prophet's authorized text. Once returned to human form, Saladin Chamcha uses doubt as an effective rhetorical device, reciting anonymous verses to Gibreel over the phone that drive Gibreel insane. These verses destroy Gibreel's self-authority, plaguing him with doubt so great that he loses his ability to distinguish truth from fictions and delusions.

Whether they embrace the Devil's pride and anarchist tendencies or his more devious capacity for creating doubt, the authors depicted by the text are all explicitly human. They are not actually the Devil, nor are they influenced by any sort of external evil force. By representing satanic verses in the text as fictions written by human authors that merely engage in activities associated with the Devil, Rushdie's novel redefines the satanic as a symbolic force—an author's useful tool rather than an evil being's identity.

The novel invokes the satanic as a literary device, paralleling the authors it depicts. The text establishes itself as an untrustworthy source of narration, forcing us to doubt what we read

as straightforward claims of the novel's intent. The narrator hints at his own falsification in narration and strongly suggests that he is actually the Devil. He is a salient presence throughout the text, constantly making us as readers aware of his power to alter events through narration to serve his own devious ends. Corresponding with this blatant unreliability is the complex narrative structure of the text itself, for which doubt is a major operating premise. Various references to the author of the novel on all the narrative levels of the text suggest Rushdie himself as a parallel for the authors in the novel, playfully setting out to deceive and mislead his readers, espousing doubt as a literary technique as well as a theme.

In my first two chapters, I analyze characters within the text that assume satanic roles as authors. The first chapter considers the rebellious activities of Baal and Saladin Chamcha in devilish physical form as secondary redefinitions of the satanic that parallel the novel's more primary consideration of doubt. The second chapter looks at those author figures who play with doubt and deception in their satanic activity, namely Salman the Persian and Saladin Chamcha in human form. In the final chapter, I extend these analyses to include the novel itself as the product of an author representing the satanic by considering its narrator, narrative structure and author. Through these analyses, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the satanic becomes a secular force in the novel, which humanizes the Devil by making human authors his main manifestation in the text.

## Chapter One: Pride and Defiance

*The Satanic Verses* certainly acknowledges the potential of the Devil as a symbolic figure of subversion. Such a redefinition is a long-established method for harnessing the satanic for more secular ends. The Devil's artistic significance is suggested by the literary activities of the pre-Islamic and British Romantic poets, and it is realized as a method of racial empowerment in novels like Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. Rebellion against established authority is the most public of the roles assumed by author figures in the novel that draw upon associations of the satanic. However, public responses within the text to the figures of Saladin Chamcha and Baal often clash with the personal experiences of the characters themselves, suggesting a discrepancy between effect and intention. While authors in *The Satanic Verses* may seem to embody rebellious roles corresponding to the reclamation of a negative label by demonized racial groups and anti-establishment artists, the text partially undermines such designations. As this chapter will show, the text of *The Satanic Verses* ultimately does not uphold the self-empowered rebellious figure as its preferred secular redefinition of the satanic.

### Saladin Chamcha as Racial Pride Icon

In one of its manifestations, the rebellious Devil figure in *The Satanic Verses* represents minority groups that are demonized by the moral rhetoric of an oppressive dominant culture. This association of outsiders with the Devil is a long established propagandistic tactic. According to Peter Stanford, the Devil sometimes functions within the Christian tradition as "someone to blame when trouble and dissent cast a cloud, the eternal and convenient



scapegoat.”<sup>1</sup> In his “biography” of the devil, Stanford describes the early Christian practice of creating solidarity by diabolizing opponents (71). In *The Satanic Verses*, these demonized groups attempt to reclaim the symbolism of their marginalization as a subversive source of empowerment. Rushdie claims the Devil’s role as hero of the marginalized groups present within *The Satanic Verses* as a role for the novel itself, writing in his essay “In Good Faith”: “Central to the purposes of *The Satanic Verses* is the process of reclaiming language from one’s opponents” (IH 402). He goes on to explain how migrants, like the transformed Saladin Chamcha in his novel, are demonized by a hostile culture that describes them as invading devils. Rushdie asserts:

The very title, *The Satanic Verses*, is an aspect of this attempt at reclamation. You call us devils? it seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil’s version of the world, or ‘your’ world, the version written *from the experience* of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. (IH 403)

This is a truly empowering vision, one that aims to justify the novel as the voice of the oppressed. It makes the satanic a characteristic of the “other” rebelling quite justifiably against the oppressive establishment. However, Rushdie’s declaration conveniently forgets the other satanic roles played by parallel authors in the text, ones that make pointed attempts to deceive and confuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stanford, *The Devil: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

Rushdie also fails to mention how the text treats the demonic pride of the Asian youths wearing toy devil-horns. In his book-length study of Rushdie's fiction, Timothy Brennan offers a powerful refutation of Rushdie's claim that he voices the interests of the oppressed. He argues that *The Satanic Verses*' treatment of Britain's non-white communities draws insulting caricatures of ethnic minorities that he describes as "embarrassing and offensive".<sup>2</sup> In its satirical modes, the novel spares no one from its critical gaze. Brennan puts forth as examples the vacuous dub poetry of "the repulsive Pinkwalla," a seven-foot Indo-Caribbean albino; the "comically stupid and overweight Afro-Caribbean community activist" Uhuru Simba; and "the clownish West Indian Underground employees speaking dialect as though it were fit for low comedy" (Brennan 164). Combined, these portraits create a negative undercurrent that opposes the more empowering portrayals of minority groups in the novel.

The idol of the horn-wearing youths in *The Satanic Verses* also fails to live up to the heroic role assigned to him. Within the primary narrative of *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha's transformation into the widely-accepted physical image of the devil makes him an appealing figure for London's non-white immigrant community, whose dreams he unintentionally invades. The African, Caribbean and South Asian populations of London identify with the devilish Saladin as a "what-else-after-all-but-black-man, maybe a little twisted up by fate class race history, all that, but getting off his behind, bad and mad, to kick a little ass" (SV 295). One of the minority youths tells Saladin: "you're a hero. I mean, people can really identify with you. It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own. It's time you considered action"

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1989), 164. Hereafter cited in the text.

(*SV* 296). These sentiments correspond with those Rushdie claims for the novel itself in “In Good Faith”. However, in the novel, Saladin’s response rejects his new role as the heroic Devil; he replies: “This isn’t what I wanted. This is not what I meant, at all” (*SV* 296).

Saladin’s assumption of a heroic role seems especially ironic in light of his actual nature, views and behavior. In fact, he is a blatantly self-loathing assimilationist who defines his “conquest of England” as his successful metamorphosis into a true Englishman (*SV* 44). He goes to great lengths in his attempts at self-transformation, even re-working his accent into a proper British clip and marrying a blonde, aristocratic British woman. His assumed surname—Saladin Chamcha is a shortened version of his given name, Salahuddin Chamchawala—indicates his rejection of his Indian identity. The term literally means “spoon” and refers to people in post-colonial nations who continued to support, or “spoon-fed,” the former British Empire (Brennan 86). Saladin expresses often racist hostility towards other members of his own ethnic group. His rejection of the South-Asian community that takes him in and makes him its icon lacks subtlety; out of earshot, he says, “I’m not your kind [...] You’re not my people. I’ve spent half my life trying to get away from you” (*SV* 262). In a dream, his racist sentiments take an even more blatant form when he tells a congregation of black church-goers, “I feel sorry for you [...] Every morning you have to look at yourself in the mirror and see, staring back, the darkness: the stain, the proof that you’re the lowest of the low” (*SV* 264). In projecting his own anxieties as a non-white member of British society, Saladin himself plays into the hierarchies that oppress and marginalize black minorities (white = high, black = low), making him an ill fitted figurehead for a movement attempting to transgress those very hierarchies.

Despite Saladin’s physical appearance as an iconic figure of rebellion, he himself never attempts to rebel. The text establishes Saladin’s characteristic passivity early on when

describing his molestation as a child: “Salahuddin had never known how to fight; he did what he was forced to do” (SV 38). This narrative statement establishes Saladin’s passive nature for the majority of the novel. While transformed into a figure resembling the Devil, Saladin takes no self-motivated action. He allows himself to be arrested by immigrations officers despite his access to proof of his citizenship, and, while under arrest, consumes his own excrement at the command of his arresting officers. During his sojourn as the Devil in the flesh, Saladin never once “consider[s] action,” as his admirer instructs (SV 296). He is resigned, both in his passivity and in the submissive attitude he adopts toward his transformation:

*I am, he accepted, that I am.*

Submission. (SV 298)

The narrator’s one-word description of Saladin’s acquiescence—“Submission”—places him in the role of an adherent to Islam, which is also the Arabic term for submission. This acceptance of his identity contrasts with the pride and self-motivated action Saladin exhibits when in human form. Once he returns to a more recognizably human state, Saladin does “consider action,” attempting to regain his old life and destroy his perceived adversary, Gibreel. This later activity emphasizes all the more the incongruity of truth and appearance created by his physical Devil-like transformation.

Admittedly, Saladin is the one author that actually takes on the physical form of the Devil within *The Satanic Verses*, and is perhaps the author within the novel whose behavior most resembles that of the actual Devil, motivated purely by his evil nature. However, his appearance is a red herring; his most Devil-like role is not the rebellious one thrust upon him in his transformed state. Saladin does recite some verses in his transformed state that certainly sound satanic, “singing...in a voice so diabolically ghastly and guttural that it proved impossible to

identify the verses" (SV 294). Although these verses may sound demonic, they are indecipherable, making it impossible to determine whether or not their meaning and intent reflect any qualities associated with the satanic. Furthermore, these verses only exist in the dreams of the minorities who adopt Saladin as their symbol of pride; they are the dreamed creations of those who misinterpret Saladin's satanic role and assign him one of their own making. Saladin does not become a true avatar of the Devil until he reassumes human form and recites the deceitful and anonymous verses that plant destructive doubt in the mind of Gibreel. No longer the posterdevil of the oppressed, the re-humanized Saladin engages in activity that corresponds with the more dominant manifestation of the satanic in *The Satanic Verses*.

### **Baal as Anti-Establishment Author**

Rebellion against authority becomes a characteristic of artistic freedom as well, both within the novel and in subsequent critical commentary on the text. Here, the designation of a writer as a hero fighting the authorities comes from Rushdie's supporters, who banded together in demonstrations and publications to defend the author's right to write. *For Rushdie*, a collection of essays by Rushdie's Arab and Muslim supporters, demonstrates the type of rhetoric invoked in Rushdie's defense.<sup>3</sup> The collection's preface locates itself on the side of "intellectual rebellion against terror" (3), and amongst the hundred contributions are such titles as "Concerning Repression, Liberty, and the Affirmation of the Right to Be Different," "The Liberty of the Word" and "Freedom." These titles all identify free speech as the issue ultimately at stake in the fate of *The Satanic Verses*.

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<sup>3</sup> *For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).

This concept of the writer as a justified voice of opposition finds its best demonstration within the text of *The Satanic Verses* in the figure of Baal, a poet located within Gibreel's dreams. He stages a rebellion against authority, asserting his own rights as an author in the face of an adverse religious and political system. Like Saladin, Baal becomes a rebellious adversary of authority, opposing Mahound and his newly-established religion and social order.

Anticipating Rushdie's own near-fate as a result of *The Satanic Verses*, Baal is put to death for his poetry. However, as is also the case with Saladin, Baal's assumption of a rebellious role is at least partly unintentional and against his own will. Various aspects of Baal's activity undermine a definitive declaration that the text views him as a truly rebellious figure.

Baal operates in opposition to a religion obviously based on Islam, but he exists within a text influenced by Western literature. While the form of his rebellion—the refusal to bow down to a man at God's command—suitably corresponds to that of the Islamic Devil, his activities within the dream-text also parallel those of a literary, Christian Devil prototype: Milton's Satan. In *Paradise Lost*, the fallen Satan establishes the palace of Pandemoneum, his "infernal court," as a grotesque inversion of Heaven with himself as Hell's version of God.<sup>4</sup> Each aspect of this hellish capitol directly parallels its heavenly counterpart. Baal's activity follows this Miltonic model. Fleeing from the wrath of Mahound invoked by his many satirical verses directed against Mahound and his new religion, Baal seeks sanctuary in a brothel named "The Curtain" and subsequently encourages its twelve prostitute inhabitants to assume the names and roles of the twelve wives of Mahound's harem. Eventually the prostitutes decide to adopt Baal as their Mahound figure, even conducting a formal wedding ceremony. In his new role, Baal slowly begins to take on more of the traits of his parodied adversary. When put on trial by Mahound,

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<sup>4</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (London: Longman, 1998), 1.792.

Baal straightforwardly confesses his subversive actions, provoking mocking laughter from his audience and insulting Mahound with the implications of his burlesque parody.

Even without this direct attack, Baal's very occupation as a poet makes him Mahound's adversary. This opposition parallels the condemnation of poets by Muhammad and early Islam. Muhammad's opponents accused him of being a poet, insinuating that he was both a liar and under the influence of a satan rather than God (Beeston 195, 323). In the Qur'an, this association is vehemently denied, and poets come under heavy criticism (Rahman 93). Similarly, in *The Satanic Verses*, Mahound denies any fraternity with poets when he rescinds the Satanic Verses, saying, "This is a gathering of many poets [...] and I cannot claim to be one of them. But I am the Messenger, and I bring verses from a greater One than any here assembled" (SV 116). Baal gets his name from an ancient Middle Eastern deity, suggesting that Mahound sees him, and all poets, as yet another false god he must exterminate.<sup>5</sup>

Mahound subtly demonizes Baal when he describes the poet's actions, saying, "Now you return to dishonour my house, and it seems that once again you succeed in bringing the worst out of the people" (SV 404). This description delegates Baal to the role assigned to the Devil in the Qur'an. When God condemns Iblis, one of the Qur'an's devil figures, for refusing to bow down to man, Iblis responds, "Lord [...] since you have led me astray, I will seduce mankind on earth: I will seduce them all, except those that faithfully serve you" (Qur'an 15:37). In the Qur'an, Iblis actively tries to tempt humans to do wrong as an act of rebellion against God. In addition to inspiring evil behavior in other people, Baal also parallels Iblis in his refusal to become one of Mahound's followers. Like Iblis, Baal refuses to submit to God's command that he bow down to

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<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2003, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Baal," 7 December 2003 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article?eu=11711>>.

man and is therefore exiled. He goes into hiding and becomes a seducer by living and working in a brothel.

Once Mahound comes into power, the grudge he continues to bear against Baal contrasts with the universal pardon he grants his other former adversaries. This continued adversity suggests that Baal's poetic subversion has succeeded, since even Mahound recognizes the threat the poet poses as a voice of opposition to Mahound's authority. Early in the narrative, Baal himself describes the poet's role as a necessary instigator of change and voice of opposition: "To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" (*SV* 100). This defines his authorial function as a balancing, opposing voice to an overly dominant authority, corresponding with the self-defined role of the British Romantics.

However, the finer details of Baal's activity as a subversive poet problematize his identity as a rebellious artist. To begin with, Baal becomes Mahound's opponent before Mahound himself has assumed a position of authority. In fact, their initial relative positions are reversed: Mahound represents a subversive group attempting to defy the dominant culture, religion and political system, while Baal is the hired hand of the local authority figure. Baal assumes his role unwillingly, protesting, "It isn't right for the artist to become the servant of the state" (*SV* 100). Baal himself acknowledges the artist's oppositional role heralded by Rushdie's supporters. However, his eventual subversive activities against Mahound are not initiated by this moral stance, but rather by blackmail: the political leader Abu Simbel threatens to kill him if he does not produce a satirical campaign of poetry directed against Mahound (*SV* 103). Even when Baal's later attacks attempt to undermine Mahound as an authority figure, he continues to do the government job initially assigned to him.



Although the power structure eventually reverses, pitting Baal in the rebellious role, Baal still has difficulty maintaining his subversive identity. As is arguably the case in *Paradise Lost*, Baal's imitation eventually loses its subversive intent. Sawhney explains this alteration by claiming: "Baal [is] exposed in his own secret desire to be the mirror image of his enemy, the prophet" (271). Gradually, Baal's parody becomes simply a confusion of identity. The prostitutes lose their former identities, to the extent that they are unable to remember their original names (SV 402). Likewise, Baal begins to identify himself with Mahound, actually defending his adversary by stating, "You can see his point of view" (SV 399). This empathy negates the motives underlying Baal's "final confrontation with Submission" (SV 391), since his insulting imitation has led to understanding rather than continued adversity.

Baal's subversive activities come to the attention of Mahound when Baal publicly recites verses written to his prostitute wives. These verses become the tangible symbols of Baal's rebellion, paralleling the verses he initially wrote to insult the new faith Mahound represented. However, the motivating factors for Baal's final, rebellious verses stem not from his desire to oppose Mahound, but rather from his profound lack of faith and his sincere love for his "wives." Initially, he is religiously devoted to Al-lat, one of the goddesses identified as the Devil's daughters by Mahound's followers (SV 385). Mahound's victory over the goddesses causes Baal to lose rather than change faith, so that his "final confrontation with Submission" is motivated by his own state of "godlessness" rather than an espousal of a competing deity or demon (SV 391). The immediate inspiration for the verses that condemn him is his need to express his devotion to his wives, his "dozen Muses" (SV 404). It is therefore only incidental that the subversive, satirical element imbedded in Baal's poetry functions as a form of revenge for his wives' arrest and execution at Mahound's command. Baal's actions as an author may function as rebellion,

but, aside from the moment when he decides to assume a subversive role and refuses to submit to the newly authorized Mahound, he is motivated more often by fear or love.

Baal's textual status as a character located within Gibreel's dreams, which Rushdie describes as "dreams which persecute a dreamer by making vivid the doubts he loathes but can no longer escape" (*IH* 399), also makes uncertain the novel's recognition of him as a rebellious author representing the Devil. While these dreams cast doubt on the authority of Islam as a religion purely sanctioned by God, they also cast doubt on doubters, as Baal's questionable motivations demonstrate. As a "dream-figment" (*IH* 400) produced by Gibreel's troubled mind, Baal struggles to maintain a truly rebellious identity when manipulated by the perspective of a character that doubts the validity of his religious subversion.

While the treatment within *The Satanic Verses* of Saladin Chamcha and Baal acknowledges and invokes the potential of the Devil as a source of rebellious power for racial pride and artistic freedom, the text of the novel does not uphold this function of the Devil as its main method for redefining the satanic in terms of secular authors. Rather, this rebellion against authority is overshadowed by the satanic author's play with his own authority and creation of doubt, a topic addressed in the next chapter. The treatment of Baal and Saladin actually furthers the novel's doubt-creating agenda. These characters show alternate ways that the Devil can become a secular symbol, while their ambivalent treatment by the text functions as an aspect of the novel's own creation of doubt, thwarting any definitive reading of these characters' roles in the text.

## Chapter Two: The Ascendance of Doubt

Authors in *The Satanic Verses* demonstrate a tendency to play with the authority of their own texts, suggesting another function of the satanic redefined in secular terms—the planting of doubt, which translates into both uncertain authority and the creation of fiction. According to Sawhney, the novel toys with the issues of authority and the Devil's identity in order to make a larger claim. Referencing the novel's epigraph, which refers to Daniel Defoe's vagabond Satan, Sawhney finds within *The Satanic Verses* an argument about the nature of literature itself, claiming the novel suggests:

that perhaps all verses could be satanic and that literature itself is migrant, not only because it wanders wantonly from reader to reader, but also because it does not derive authority from its source or origin, as for instance Mahound's words claim to do. (269)

However, Sawhney argues that, within the text, literature seeks to shed its migrant state, aspiring to the status of authorized revelation represented by Mahound while undermining the authority of revelation itself. She writes: "The hidden desire of literature is to be the law itself, even as its work is to transgress the law" (272). I would like to put forth a slightly altered version of Sawhney's argument, approaching literature's lack of a source for its authority as a strength of the satanic rather than a weakness. This chapter addresses the authors within *The Satanic Verses* who create doubt while consciously and intentionally rejecting their own claims to authorship. Their verses are not satanic as a result of their migrant status, but rather because of the intents of their authors, who play with the status of their own authority as a means of creating doubt for their audiences.

Various authors in *The Satanic Verses* willingly or inadvertently take on roles corresponding to the Devil's role as deceiver and planter of doubt. In response to criticisms of *The Satanic Verses* that identify these doubting authors as blasphemous voices issuing forth from the novel, Rushdie writes, "how could a book portray doubt without allowing the uncertain to articulate their uncertainties?" (IH 401). The authors defined by their undermining creation of doubt reflect the mode of the novel as a whole. The status of anti-establishment pride and rebellion requires an authority to rebel against. Instead of this oppositional stance, the novel puts forth doubt as a preferable alternative, both for its characters and its own operating premise. The establishment of doubt as a valid stance takes form in the novel in part through the activities of its author characters.

In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Devil starts off his career as a rebel. After his initial act of defiance, he then becomes for Islam and Christianity a liar and deceiver bent on confusing and misleading humans. This is his enduring role, and it is the one adopted by the most tangibly successful authors within *The Satanic Verses*: Salman the Persian in his permanent corruption of Mahound's recorded recitations and the re-humanized Saladin Chamcha in his destruction of Gibreel Farishta through the power of his devious verses.

### **Salman the Persian as Textual Corrupter**

Within the dream narratives of *The Satanic Verses*, both Baal and Salman the Persian mirror the revelatory activities of Mahound. However, in their versions of revelation, both author figures steal authorship from God, claiming their verses as their own while at the same time questioning the validity of Mahound's. In their treatments of revelation, authority becomes a debatable issue. While Baal attacks Mahound through rebellious subversion, Salman the

Persian's literary activity casts doubt upon Mahound's words as well as his own, undermining Mahound's authority by establishing uncertainty as part of the literary condition. This planting of doubt becomes the main expression of Salman the Persian's association with the satanic.

Rushdie identifies Salman the Persian's activity as "[t]he most extreme passage of doubting in the novel" (IH 399). This character espouses an explicitly secular identity as well, consciously rejecting the spiritual rather than reckoning with the religious spirit as Rushdie prescribes.

Salman the Persian opposes not God, but the man who claims to represent Him.

In Gibreel's dreams, Mahound receives his Revelation through an interaction that Gibreel's interior monologue describes as a division of the self in which "I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies *listening*, entranced" (112). Baal's poetic inspiration while living in the Curtain takes on a similar form; as he describes it, "It is as if I see myself standing beside myself. And I can make him, the standing one, speak; then I get up and write down his verses" (397). Baal's version differs from Mahound's in that there is no assumption of divine inspiration. Instead, Baal himself reveals and recites. This implies the blasphemous assertion that Mahound's verses may also be self-inspired.

Similarly, Salman the Persian also takes part in a parody of Mahound's Revelation, recounting a dream in which he assumes the role of Mahound's supernatural inspiration. It is a dream that explicitly questions the source and validity of Mahound's authority:

it struck [Salman] that his point of view, in the dream, had been that of the archangel, and at that moment the memory of the incident of the Satanic verses came back to him as vividly as if the thing had happened the previous day.

'Maybe I hadn't dreamed of myself as Gibreel,' Salman recounted. 'Maybe I was Shaitan.' (SV 379)

By identifying with the Devil in his dream, Salman the Persian establishes his own doubt of Mahound's authority. He also consigns himself to the Devil-associated role of creating doubt, both in his dreams and his waking life. Mahound enlists Salman as his official scribe, reciting verses for the literate Persian to convert into a written text. The transcription of early Islamic texts was a tenuous endeavor, since the lack of a standardized system of punctuation increased the potential for accidental textual corruption in the copying process—small variations could greatly alter the meaning of a text (Beeston 13). In the course of transcribing Mahound's verses, Salman the Persian conceives as a result of his dreams what the narrator describes as a "diabolic idea" to purposely "change things" as he records them, inserting his own subtly different words in place of those recited (*SV* 379). Although it is unclear whether the characterization of this idea as "diabolic" comes from the narrator or paraphrases Salman the Persian's own words, Salman the Persian himself goes on to relegate himself to the Devil's role, saying, "So I went on with my devilment, changing verses" (*SV* 380). By inserting his own words in place of Mahound's, Salman the Persian adds himself as an author to a text that Mahound sanctions as the words of God. Secretly assuming the role of a devious ghostwriter, Salman the Persian calls Mahound's entire enterprise into doubt, at least for himself and those who know what he has done.

Salman the Persian does not reserve the undermining of authority for Mahound alone. He does the same thing to himself later in the novel when he becomes a self-proclaimed "professional liar," composing personal and business documents for others that he describes as "beautiful falsehoods that involved only the tiniest departure from the facts" (*SV* 398). This also functions as an apt description both for Salman the Persian's activity as Mahound's wayward

scribe and for the author Salman Rushdie's practice in the composition of *The Satanic Verses* itself: falsehoods are what make Salman the Persian an author of fiction.

By describing fiction as a form of lying, Salman the Persian casts the author in the satanic role of religious tradition. The Qur'an contains the following verses:

Shall I tell you on whom the devils descend? They descend on every lying sinner.

They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars.

Poets are followed by none save erring men. Behold how aimlessly they rove in every valley, preaching what they never practise. (26:221-7)

By creating a parallel between devils and poets as beings who lead people astray, the Qur'an draws an explicit connection between poets and devils. The suggestion that their cohorts are liars further supports Salman the Persian's connection with the Devil as a creator of fiction.

However, Salman the Persian's decision to identify with the Devil does not translate into a literal identification of the sort the schizophrenic dreamer Gibreel forms with the archangel. Despite the implications of Salman the Persian's dream, it is Salman the Persian's activity that is associated with the Devil, not the scribe himself. When he inserts his own words into his transcription of Mahound's recitations, he claims it is a matter of "his Word against mine" (SV 381). In an action that reflects his loss of faith, Salman does not identify the Word with which his words compete as specifically divine. The designation of "his" instead of "His" in Salman's declaration assigns the "Word" of Revelation to Mahound instead of God, reflecting Salman's loss of faith and grounding his rebellion as an opposition to an explicitly human adversary. When contrasted with his earlier declaration as a follower of Mahound that "There is no god but God" (SV 108), this visual marker of Salman's verbal rejection of divine authority emphasizes his de-conversion. Salman the Persian is not attempting to test God; he is testing His messenger.

Although Salman the Persian ultimately behaves like a coward when confronted by Mahound—he runs away, then when captured he “blubbers whimpers pleads beats his breast abases himself repents” and turns informer on his former ally, Baal (*SV* 387)—his creation of doubt is ultimately more enduring than Baal’s unfaltering rebellion. While Baal’s attack on Mahound ends when Mahound has Baal executed, Salman the Persian’s fictionalizations remain embedded in his transcriptions of Mahound’s text. The existence of Salman the Persian’s alterations continue to call the monolithic authority of Mahound’s written recitations into doubt.

Also, unlike almost every other character in the novel, Salman the Persian gets a happy ending. He is not put to death for his crimes; instead, he is given the opportunity to return to his homeland and throw off the migrant status Sawhney identifies as the novel’s main definition of the satanic. Baal’s parting words to him make the fate of Salman the Persian assigned by the text clear: “I hope you find home, and that there is something there to love” (*SV* 400). If the novel’s power to bestow happy endings upon its characters is any sign of which figures it prefers, this offer of redemption for the doubting satanic author is telling.

### **Saladin Chamcha as Planter of Doubt**

The verses Saladin recites after regaining human form are perhaps the most malicious use of doubt and the masking of authorship in the novel. They are also highly effective in terms of material consequences, far surpassing his active engagement as a rebellious figure while in physical satanic form; they achieve their author’s desired results, even tragically exceeding his expectations. While he is transformed into the physical representation of the Devil, Saladin’s passivity is marked. Once he regains human form, his verses bring about tangible results, causing irreversible damage to Gibreel’s sanity and ultimately resulting in the death of both



Gibreel and his lover Allie Cone. However, despite the supposedly evil nature of Saladin's verses, Saladin's role as an author remains grounded in the secular realm by his treatment in the text.

Halfway through the narrative, Saladin is "apparently restored to his old shape [...] *humanized* – is there any option but to conclude? – by the fearsome concentration of his hate" (SV 304). The narrator suggests that the hate Saladin feels toward his adversary, Gibreel, is what re-transforms his appearance, implying that hate is better defined as an aspect of human nature than as a result of the Devil's influence. In his reassumed original form, Saladin recites the "little, satanic verses" that drive Gibreel to madness and eventual murder (SV 460). These verses take the form of simple, innocent-sounding, yet sexually-suggestive rhymes recited anonymously over the phone. They make insinuating comments about Gibreel's lover, fuelling the obsessive jealousy that already possesses him. For example:

*I like coffee, I like tea,  
I like things you do with me.*

*Tell her that. (SV 459)*

The simplicity of the rhymes contributes to their satanic nature. Gibreel makes this connection, thinking, "There was something demonic [...] something profoundly immoral about cloaking corruption in this greeting-card tum-ti-tum" (SV 459). This thought connects the demonic with deception, reinforcing the association of devils and liars put forth by Salman the Persian and the Qur'an.

Another element of the satanic in these verses is their intent to harm through the power of subtle suggestion. Saladin's method of reciting his verses echoes the Qur'an's description of "the mischief of the slinking prompter [Shaitan] who whispers in the hearts of men; from jinn

and men” (114:4-6). The anonymity of Saladin’s phone calls parallels the obscured source of Shaitan’s “whispers” from a decentralized source among “jinn and men” in the Qur’an, while his ability to manipulate Gibreel’s deep paranoia through the planting of doubt can be seen as a literal interpretation of whispering into his heart.

The associations with the satanic that the narrative attaches to Saladin’s actions are offset by the narrator’s self-aware and possibly facetious meditation on the nature of evil as it applies to his subject. The narrator provides a lengthy commentary on the intentions of the text itself as the novel’s co-protagonist prepares to commit his satanic act, stating, “The question that’s asked here remains as large as ever it was: which is, the nature of evil, how it’s born, why it grows, how it takes unilateral possession of a many-sided human soul” (SV 439). Such an explicit announcement of intent from such an unreliable narrator calls into question the function of the narrator’s comments throughout this section. However, at least superficially, the narrator’s discussion rejects Saladin’s verses as directly influenced by the Devil. The narrator dismisses the conclusion that “[e]vil is evil and will do evil” (SV 439), suggesting instead that evil is “*not against our natures*.[...] Saladin Chamcha set out to destroy Gibreel Farishta because, finally, it proved so easy to do; the true appeal of evil being the seductive ease with which one may embark upon that road” (SV 442). In this framework, evil is an aspect of human nature defined by actions instead of an independent and malicious force. Saladin is motivated not by any supernatural influence of the satanic, but rather by the evil tendencies of his own human emotions.

Saladin mirrors Salman the Persian in his choice of a secular adversary. The novel reveals Saladin’s firmly entrenched secular status: while still a teenager, his loss of faith in his father “make[s] him a secular man,” and he vows to “do his best, thereafter, to live without a god

of any type” (SV 43). For Saladin, there is no God. His adversary claims to represent God as the angel Gibreel, but it is jealousy and not religious opposition that motivates his insidious attack. Just as Salman the Persian pitted himself against Mahound in place of Mahound’s God, Saladin attacks Gibreel rather than the God on whose behalf Gibreel claims to act.

Saladin also shares Salman the Persian’s happy fate. Awash as a migrant and prodigal son for the majority of the novel, he also eventually goes home, returning to Bombay to find the love of both his father and of his former lover, Zeenat Vakil. Saladin does not “die for his verses” as he at one point believes he will, and instead receives the same validation of a happy ending the novel bestows upon his dream counterpart, Salman the Persian (SV 560).

*The Satanic Verses* privileges doubt as the primary secular mode of the satanic operating in the activities of its author characters. This primacy of doubt finds validation in the tangible effectiveness of authors utilizing doubt relative to the comparatively uncertain effectiveness of authors engaging in pride and anti-establishment rebellions. The doubt-creating authors addressed in this chapter also receive preferential treatment in the doling out of their textual fate. While Baal is put to death and Saladin’s interlude as a Devil icon ends when his human features replace his devil-like appearance, Salman the Persian and the humanized Saladin return to home and love at the novel’s conclusion. Although their behavior in the novel often makes them seem unappealing and unlikable, they receive the happiest endings the novel offers any of its characters. Both their effectiveness and kind treatment suggest that their engagement with doubt is the preferred mode of the satanic in the text. In *The Satanic Verses*, their doubt functions as a secular alternative to the traditional negative nature of the satanic. As the final chapter will show, this mode of doubt also applies to the adoption of the satanic for secular ends by the novel and its author.

### Chapter Three: Satanic Structure

The previous chapters discussed the satanic and its secular treatment as they apply to the characters within the novel *The Satanic Verses*. The text itself mirrors the activities of its doubt-creating author figures, associating its own author with the version of the satanic it defines within its pages. In the current chapter I extend my analysis of doubt, authors and the satanic to include the novel as a whole, treating Rushdie as an author adhering to the guidelines for satanic verses outlined in the text. The self-aware play of *The Satanic Verses*, with its various obvious Salman Rushdie doppelgängers, seems to teasingly invite this course of analysis. Dismissing Rushdie's appearances in the text as a practical joke is one way of dealing with the author's presence in the novel, but it does not give full consideration to the effects this self-referential placement has on the novel as a mirror text for the various satanic verses composed by its author characters. My own extra-textual approach does not follow the tradition of critiques that place Salman Rushdie as an author in society, but instead looks at how he functions as an author recreated by his novel. Instead of focusing on the novel's subversive, misleading, blasphemous nature as its main invocation of the satanic, this reading looks at how the novel and its author apply their association with the satanic to the creation of literature itself.

The narrator of *The Satanic Verses* may himself be viewed as a character acting in the novel, functioning as yet another author representing the satanic contained within the text. This narrator actively engages in confusing his readers, playfully referencing his own powers to deceive as a narrator and blatantly attempting to make us doubt his identity and his accurate transmission of the characters and events he narrates. The narrator's treatment of Saladin Chamcha in the passages addressed in the previous two chapters demonstrates how characters within the text are at the mercy of this devious narrator.

The novel's structure, itself an aspect of narration, complicates the functioning of the novel's characters and events even further, creating doubt through the uncertainty of second- and third-hand transmission. The novel's many embedded narrative levels create multiple filters for the events and characters that must pass through various unreliable perspectives before they are transmitted to the reader. Although, according to theories of narrative, everything in the text is subject to this narrative corruption, the dream figments Baal and Salman the Persian in particular function as apt examples of this phenomenon. They are dreamt by an unreliable, disturbed, and possibly insane character, whose dreams are in turn narrated by the novel's unreliable narrator.

Finally, we arrive at the author underlying them all, Salman Rushdie, who thwarts literary theories that reject the presence of the author by continually planting playful self-references within his novel. By planting characters bearing his name, appearance and occupation in the text, Rushdie seems to say that the author may be dead, but he lives on in Hell, having one Devil of a time. This play with authority on the author's part suggests a redefinition of the satanic as an artistic tool aiding in the creation of literature.

### **The Narrator's Play with the Satanic**

The narrator in *The Satanic Verses* broadcasts his unreliability, making even his own identity uncertain in his play with narrative authority. He operates as what Mieke Bal describes as a "character-bound narrator," a narrator who becomes a part of the text by making self-referential comments in addition to telling of other characters<sup>1</sup> (Bal 22). The narrator sets the stage for his uncertain yet implied identity as the Devil early in the novel, asking two questions which direct the play of his uncertain persona: "Who am I? / Who else is there?" (SV 4). Hints

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 22. Hereafter cited in the text.

of possible answers to this question are interspersed through the text. The narrator refers to himself as “Higher Powers” (SV 137), identifies himself as the force causing Saladin’s misery (SV 265), and finally claims to be the figure who appears to Gibreel and issues a divine command, informing the reader, “I sat on Alleluia Cone’s bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel. *Ooparvala* or *Neechayvala*, he wanted to know, and I didn’t enlighten him” (SV 423). This last example explicitly names two possible identities for the narrator: *Ooparvala*, “the Fellow upstairs,” or *Neechayvala*, “the Guy from Underneath” (SV 329). Several other narrative comments tip the scales of doubt in favor of the latter identification. The narrator directly follows the statement “I know; devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel” with a one-word paragraph: “Me?” (SV 95). One page later, he begins a sentence with the phrase “I, in my wickedness” (SV 96). If this justifies naming the Devil as the narrator of *The Satanic Verses*, the Devil then becomes an author himself whose behavior functions as an example for the use of satanic characteristics by other authors in the text. In this interpretation, the narrator sets the guidelines for what constitutes the satanic aspect of authorship within the novel.

Regardless of whether or not these teasing comments definitively identify the narrator with the Devil, the frequent, transparently misleading commentaries of the narrator make the distinction of his identity ultimately inconsequential. His style of narration still adheres to the behavior of other authors in the text that the text explicitly or implicitly associates with the satanic. He is a playfully deceptive narrator—one of the picaresque trickster figures Frederick Luis Aldama identifies as a common feature of writers like Rushdie.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 34.

The narrator's voice causes the novel to operate as a self-aware text, pointing out the power of a narrator to distort events with his inherently subjective and unreliable point of view. The narrator's references to the "wickedness" of his nature make plain the possibility of ulterior motives. This activity on the part of the narrator corresponds to a tendency of Rushdie's writing that Brennan identifies in Rushdie's earlier novel *Midnight's Children* (1980):

Rushdie deliberately prevents his readers from being caught up in a story with its own 'organic' life, that progresses uninterrupted, and that creates a completely imagined world. We are instead always shown 'the hands holding the strings' (MC p.72), are having metaphors cut short by on-the-spot examination [...]  
(Brennan 85)

These metafictional interjections are also present in *The Satanic Verses* to some extent, with the narrator mimicking the tendency of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* to show us his hands as he operates the strings of his narrative. However, while Saleem's awareness of his unreliability acknowledges the subjectivity of personal memories, the narrator in *The Satanic Verses* flaunts the fallibility of his narrative as proof of his power as a narrator. The location of this particular author figure at the highest level of narrative within the text privileges his words over those of the authors nested within lower, interior levels, granting him a certain degree of authority over them since he is able to comment on and edit their assertions and activities. By making this plain to his audience, the narrator reminds us that the text we read is influenced by his diabolical intentions. In *The Satanic Verses*, reading becomes a process of uncertainty in which we cannot know exactly what role the influence of a devious narrator has had on the fictions we read.

The narrator's treatment of Saladin Chamcha exemplifies the narrator's tendency to create doubt. The comments and self-refutations surrounding the descriptions of Saladin and his

actions have the net effect of making the narrator's final assessment of Saladin's evil seem superficial and unsettled. In the passage discussing the evil motivations underlying Saladin's decision to destroy Gibreel, the narrator assumes the tone of a pompous critic assessing the apparent implications of his own narrative. He provides a parody of objective critique, analyzing the actions of the characters as they occur in the first person plural: "Let's observe, first, how isolated this Saladin is [...] and next, let us appreciate the effect on Chamcha [...] of the golden, pale and glacial presence by Farishta's side of Alleuia Cone" (SV 439). Later, the narrator interjects, "But we may permit ourselves to speculate a while about the true nature of this Ultimate, this Inexpiable Offence" (SV 440). This self-aware commentary mocks its own assertions even as it puts them forth. The narrator asserts the binary judgment that Saladin is "evil" for denying his true self while Gibreel is "good" for remaining "untranslated," only to counter this argument by stating that it "sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?" (SV 441-2). With this statement, the narrator criticizes attempts to determine the intent of the author even as he goes on to do the same himself, disqualifying his own assessment of the narrative. The narrator's final conclusion in this passage—that evil is a natural, human phenomenon—exists within the self-questioning realm of his parody, and therefore remains inconclusive. If we are searching for the true intentions of the text and its author, the narrator is certainly not the one to ask.

The narrator also complicates the argument that Saladin's second transformation returns him to truly human form, making his final satanic verses secular ones. While Saladin does revert back from devilish to human form before composing his verses, the narrator's editorializing comments make the completeness of the retransformation somewhat uncertain:



At the centre of the carnage, sleeping like a baby, no mythological creature at all, no iconic Thing of horns and hellsbreath, but Mr Saladin Chamcha himself, apparently restored to his old shape, mother-naked but of entirely human aspect and proportions, *humanized*—is there any option but to conclude?—by the fearsome concentration of his hate.

He opened his eyes; which still glowed pale and red. (SV 304)

Certain words and phrases in this passage require special attention. The adverb “apparently” modifying “restored” suggests that this restoration is questionable. Similarly, the insertion of the rhetorical question “is there any option but to conclude?” increases the speculative tone of the narrator’s claim that Saladin’s hate has actually humanized him. By interjecting these self-undermining narrative asides, the narrator negates his own apparent authority in claiming that Saladin has been “*humanized*,” leaving open the possibility of alternate interpretations of Saladin’s physical alteration and subsequent actions. The narrator creates doubt by providing multiple options for interpretation.

### **The Satanic in Narrative Structure**

The narrative structure of *The Satanic Verses* itself parallels the narrator as a source of uncertainty for a reading of the novel. The text operates on multiple narrative levels—a character-bound narrator narrates events that occur both on the primary narrative level of the novel’s present-day protagonists and in Gibreel’s dreams.<sup>3</sup> In both the primary and dream narratives, characters narrate their own dreams and past experiences to other characters. The commentary of the narrator operates as an additional embedded narrative. The status of a

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the terminology in this section derives from Bal’s *Narratology*.

narrative level influences how its events and characters function relative to the text as a whole. Additionally, each layer of embedment adds another subjective perspective to its narration. The location, intention and mental state of a narrative's narrator affect both what occurs in the narrative and how these events are portrayed.

The novel's treatment of Baal and Salman the Persian exemplifies the uncertainty narrative structure can create for a reading of the text. The role of these two characters depends upon the identity of their inventor and the status of their narrative. They may be real to themselves and to other characters sharing their narrative level, but to Gibreel they are nocturnal fantasies whose doubt-inducing activities haunt his waking existence. Rushdie himself points out the effect such a placement has on their status within the text, describing their embedded narrative level as "dreams which persecute the dreamer by making vivid the doubts he loathes but can no longer escape" (*IH* 399). Such a discrepancy in status complicates a straightforward reading of Baal and Salman the Persian as authors representing secular versions of the satanic.

The text continually identifies the embedded narratives interrupting the novel's primary narrative as Gibreel's dreams, in which Gibreel maintains his very human identity despite his casting within the dreams as the archangel Gabriel. Throughout the dream sequences interspersed in the text, Gibreel intermittently asserts his presence, not as an archangel but as a human dreamer, protesting and contradicting the proclamations of his dreams' actors. When Mahound comes to question Gibreel, the dreamer protests his misidentification:

*Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I'm just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help. Help. (111)*

Paralleling the doubt-planting function of the novel's narrator, Gibreel's voice persistently reiterates the lack of an objective reality within the embedded narrative, reinforcing the status of its characters as dreams.

Gibreel's mental state influences the content and presentation of his dreams. Rushdie describes Gibreel's dreams as "a 'nocturnal retribution, a punishment' for his loss of faith," claiming, "This man, desperate to regain belief, is haunted, possessed, by visions of doubt, visions of skepticism and questions and faith-shaking allegations that grow more and more extreme as they go on" (*IH* 398). As the dream products of Gibreel's insanity and inner turmoil resulting from his loss of faith, the actions of Baal and Salman become allegorical manifestations of Gibreel's own loss of faith and subsequent rejection of God. This interpretation reinforces their secular nature as undermining doubters, making them the figurations of a denial of rather than a rebellion against divine authority.

However, when the narrator, posing as God, claims authorship of the dreams Gibreel experiences, stating, "We sent Revelation to fill your dreams," he potentially reverses the status of Baal and Salman the Persian (*SV* 329). This claim redefines the dreams as orchestrated texts created with a specific rhetorical agenda and intended message. If this is in fact the case, Baal and Salman the Persian's roles within the dream Revelations take on a different meaning. They still parallel Gibreel's own disillusioned state, but in this context, they function as examples of the ways in which Gibreel's loss of faith and rejection of God are misguided and blasphemous.

The method of narration of Gibreel's dreams adds yet another layer of interpretive uncertainty to a reading of Baal and Salman the Persian. Bal's theory of focalization sheds light on the subjective aspects of narration. Bal describes focalization as "the layer between the linguistic text and the fabula," which in less technical terms describes the subjective space of

interpretation between the words on the page and the events they depict (Bal 146). A key aspect of this theory is the possibility of difference in a text between the person who perceives and the person who relates those perceptions (Bal 143). This difference between perspective and narration becomes a key aspect of narrative technique for Gibreel's dreams. In these dreams, the focalization is doubled and sometimes tripled. Often, the method of focalization remains ambiguous. Although Gibreel makes assertions in the first person, and the tone and content of the dreams reflect his personality, verbal style and personal knowledge, the narrator here is the same as in the primary narrative. Gibreel's interjections function as interior monologues narrated by an omniscient voice who also comments on Gibreel's experience, prefacing Gibreel's "*what the fuck do I know, yaar, what to tell you, help*" with the analysis that "Gibreel's fear, fear of the self his dream creates, makes him struggle against Mahound's arrival" (SV 111).

Focalization becomes even more complex in the narration of Salman the Persian's experiences, beginning with:

And Gibreel dreamed this:

At the oasis of Yathrib the followers of the new faith of Submission found themselves landless, and therefore poor. For many years they financed themselves by acts of brigandage, attacking the rich camel-trains on their way to and from Jahilia. Mahound had no time for scruples, Salman told Baal, no qualms about ends and means. (SV 375-6).

Here, the phrase "Salman told Baal" indicates Salman the Persian as a character-bound focalizer, located within the text and narrating events from his perspective. However, the subsequent narrative describes Salman's experiences in the third person, using "Salman" rather than "I" to indicate that an external focalizer is describing the events here. On top of this, the opening

phrase “Gibreel dreamed this” makes Gibreel the focalizer of Salman the Persian, while the use of the third person “Gibreel” creates another focalizer external to Gibreel as well. This is more than a little confusing. The many layers of focalization created by this setup make the origins of perspectives voiced within the passage uncertain. For instance, when the text describes Salman the Persian’s decision to alter Mahound’s verses as “diabolic” (SV 379), does this designation come from the narrator, Gibreel, Baal or Salman the Persian himself? Within the web of perspective the narrative’s structure establishes, this label lacks a certain origin. Without a source for Salman the Persian’s diabolic designation, the implications of his assigned satanic status remain uncertain, since we cannot know who in the text identifies him as satanic.

Salman the Persian and Baal show up in the text of *The Satanic Verses* filtered through multiple levels of narrative and focalization. At each level, the unreliability of the text’s portrayal of these figures increases. The text of *The Satanic Verses* not only portrays uncertainty through the actions of Baal and Salman the Persian; it creates uncertainty as well. In this respect, the content and style of the novel correspond with each other, suggesting that Rushdie as the novel’s author assumes the same sort of secular personification of the satanic as the novel’s author characters.

### **The Dead Author in Hell**

The author died a slow death through most of the twentieth century, struck down in 1946 by Wimsatt and Beardsley’s intentional fallacy and eulogized by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in the 1960s and 1970s. Foucault writes: “[I]t is about time that criticism and philosophy acknowledged the disappearance or death of the author” (605), while Barthes claims: “To give a

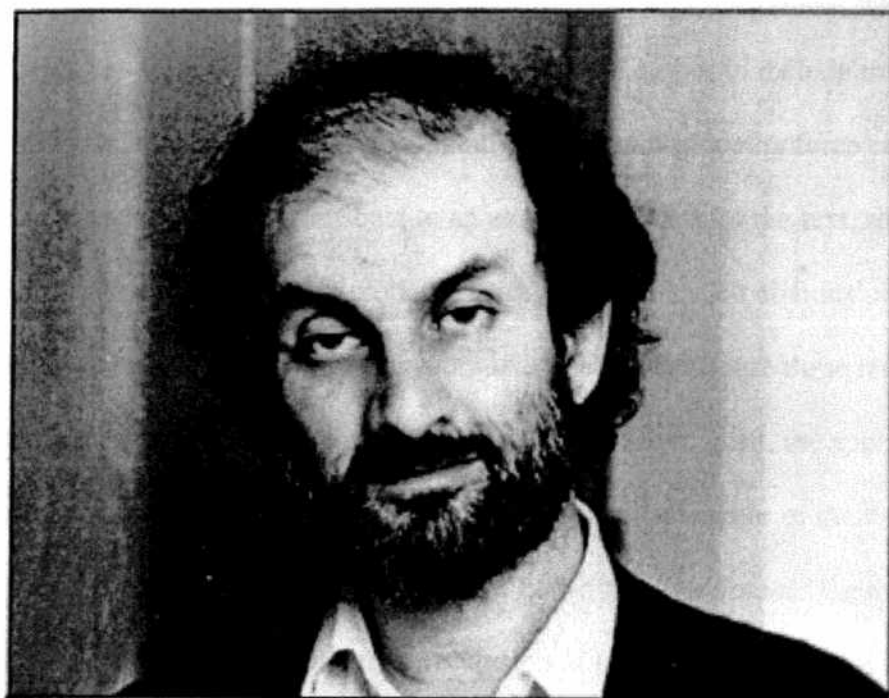
text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (122).<sup>4</sup>

However, in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie inserts himself into his own text at various points, adding his own identity as the author of the satanic verses that are *The Satanic Verses* to the elements establishing the nature of the satanic within the text. As Anuradha Dingwaney claims in her study of Rushdie's novels *Shame* (1981) and *Midnight's Children*, "Rushdie's constructions of authority are sensitive to the problems of authority in a postmodern age."<sup>5</sup> Sawhney comments on the self-awareness of Rushdie's autobiographical gestures, writing, "Of course, we recognize here a parody of an outmoded conception of writing and authorial power" (272). Rushdie inserts himself into his text, playfully thwarting the general critical acceptance of an author's absence, in a sense adding himself as an implied character in his own novel. This is achieved in part through doppelgängers that mirror Rushdie's own activities as an author. Brennan identifies Rushdie as the "offspring" of both Baal and Salman the Persian, seeing Rushdie's self-association with a state-employed slanderer and cowardly blasphemer as "a joke at [Rushdie's] own expense" (163). Rushdie himself acknowledges this practice, describing Salman the Persian, his namesake within the text, as an "ironic reference to the novel's author" (IH 399). Rushdie also appears physically within the text in a possible self-deprecating cameo role. When the narrator appears to Gibreel, his physical appearance reads like a self-deprecating description of the novel's author, pictured here.

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4 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" Trans. James Venit, *Partisan Review* 42, no. 4 (1965): 605; Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 122.

5 Anuradha Dingwaney, "Author(iz)ing *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: Salman Rushdie's Constructions of Authority," in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, vol. 42 of *Contributions to the Study of World Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 165.



**Reprinted from Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989).  
Photograph by Jerry Bauer. © Jerry Bauer.**

This photograph, found on the back flap of the first American edition of the novel published in 1989, reveals that Rushdie's appearance around the time of *The Satanic Verses*' publication closely corresponds with that of the novel's supposed narrator when he appears to Gibreel in the text:

[Gibreel] saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. (SV 329)

Like Gibreel, Rushdie was around 40 years old when writing *The Satanic Verses*. The image, although lacking such details as glasses and obvious dandruff, shows Rushdie with a close-cut beard and a receding hairline.

These strategic placements of the author in the text create a pointed self-awareness for the novel that widens its treatment of the nature of the satanic author to include the actual author of the novel itself, signposting him as a manipulative and doubt-inducing force controlling the text. These self-referential gestures contribute to an uncertain reading of the text, since we are located as readers after the critiques of post-modern critics made even such obvious placements of the author in his own novel unreliable. We cannot tell whether the figure these references indicate is Rushdie himself, or a fictional author figure created by the text. Still, the appearance of someone in the text at least representing Rushdie gestures towards an endeavor of the text as a whole from within its own pages. It suggests that the activity of writing *The Satanic Verses* is a secular act that redefines the satanic by creating its own version of the Devil. This Devil is defined in terms of creative rather than moral value.

By referencing its own author, the text of *The Satanic Verses* indicates its own status as a secular text exhibiting the characteristics assigned to the satanic through its self-contained authors. In its depiction of authors representing the satanic, it mirrors their activities, creating doubt about the status of these doubters and questioners through the playful unreliability of its narrator and its manipulations of narrative structure. As a work of fiction, the novel shows how the satanic can be yoked to achieve literary ends without assuming a morally corrupt or openly rebellious satanic identity.

Rushdie, in one of his many commentaries on the novel, describes art as “the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds,” claiming that this mediation results in “a secular definition of transcendence” (IH 420). In this novel, the satanic becomes a mode of literary creativity, originally religiously defined, but here secularly enacted. The novel’s playfulness enables a reading like mine, in which the satanic is treated as a structural element



and a literary technique. The satanic is secularized by the play of doubt, abandoning the evil implications of its traditional definitions to become a literary style. This is not so much a mediation as it is a replacement, but Rushdie's basic claim still rings true in light of my reading. In treating the satanic from a secular viewpoint, the novel does not actually "get the hell out" after all, as the novel's second to last line seems to indicate. Hell is still there as an integral source of content, style and technique. It has, however, been translated into something new, losing its implications of religiously and morally defined evil to become a functional textual element.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to show how *The Satanic Verses* connects the Devil with authors by making authorship an aspect of the satanic and the satanic, manifested as doubt, an aspect of authorship. In so doing, the novel questions the nature of both the Devil and the author. The Devil attains a human identity in the novel through the explicitly human and secular motives of the author characters that represent him. At the same time, authors take on the identities of secular devils by demonstrating characteristics and behaviors associated with the satanic—self-empowered pride, the resistance of authority, and, most importantly, the creation of doubt.

The Devil's representation through human authors in the text does not straightforwardly redefine the satanic as a positive, admirable quality. The novel gives little credit to inherent human decency, so that the humanized Devil sometimes becomes increasingly repulsive as a result of his secular redefinition.<sup>1</sup> Doubt-creating authors in the text engage in activities highlighting the negative aspects of an association with the satanic; Salman the Persian and Saladin Chamcha are by turns jealous, cowardly, racist and intent on the destruction of other human beings. The novel goes to great lengths to establish hate as an embedded aspect of human nature. However, although the author figures in *The Satanic Verses* may not be the most likeable of characters, they still possess sympathetic characteristics. Saladin's frustration and unbearable feelings of inadequacy are evident in the text, as is Salman the Persian's disillusionment. The text puts forth a complex version of the Devil in human form resembling that of its literary predecessors, one that combines positive and negative aspects. The human characters

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<sup>1</sup> This point came to light after a discussion with Professor Sadia Abbas, 1 March 2004.

representing the Devil in the text may be unappealing, but their imperfections are part of what makes them human.

There is a problem with describing Saladin and Salman the Persian's unappealing aspects as failings. Even as I try to assess the personal qualities of the novel's characters, I am reminded of a comment Eileen Pagels makes in *The Origin of Satan*. Pagels discusses the instinctive associations the Devil possesses for us as readers, regardless of whether or not we are actively religious. She gestures towards the ubiquity of the moral rhetoric associated with our treatment of the Devil, stating:

Many religious people who no longer believe in Satan, along with countless others who do not identify with any religious tradition, nevertheless are influenced by this cultural legacy whenever they perceive social and political conflict in terms of the forces of good contending against the forces of evil in the world. (182)

In its attempt to redefine the satanic, *The Satanic Verses* contends with preconceptions that have extended beyond religious discourse to become culturally pervasive. Much more is at stake here than the nature of the Devil. The novel's advocacy of doubt calls for a redefinition of the entire moral system underlying the negative characterization of the Devil, forcing readers to question what they define as good or evil when assessing the novel's characters.

This is no easy task, considering how deeply embedded many moral assumptions are for individuals and society as a whole. While these assumptions may make the Devil's role as a privileged figure in *The Satanic Verses* difficult to accept, they present even more problems for the claims of confraternity the novel makes between authorship and the satanic. Can the satanic really be treated in *The Satanic Verses* as a literary device—one that intends to create doubt

through literary play — without embroiling the text and its author in the other associations of the satanic already assumed by its readers? Rushdie seems to argue in favor of this by granting its doubting authors happy endings, but the fate of the novel itself suggests otherwise.

My reading of *The Satanic Verses*' treatment of the satanic and authorship reveals a textual claim at odds with the reality in which the novel exists. Responses to the novel have applied their own versions of the satanic to the novel, resulting in readings that contradict the redefinition of the satanic occurring in the text. I hope that my own reading of Rushdie's novel has helped to demonstrate the influence that preconceptions readers bring to the text have on their interpretations of *The Satanic Verses*, pointing out the difference between the actual content of the novel and external associations of the satanic. Such a reading gestures toward the necessity of a greater awareness of the preconceived assumptions operating in any textual analysis. In its endeavor to "get the hell out," *The Satanic Verses* attempts to dismantle the version of the satanic brought in by the reader.

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