

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Re-visiting India's Past

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Abstract

*This paper explores how Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) re-visits the political history of post-independence from the British Empire in 1947 including significant moments such as the Partition of Pakistan and India and Indira Gandhi's state of Emergency. What is significant in the literary text is Rushdie's ability to fictionalise history, fantasize his depiction of historical reality and combine history with politics through the portrayal of the individual, Saleem Sinai the narrator, about the larger historical context that fashions the Indian society. *Midnight's Children* creates a history of India that is extremely heterogeneous and diverse, replete with stories, images and ideas- a multifarious hybrid history. By revisiting the past of India, and re-writing one's own history, one which allows for the infinite variety of experiences, cultures and perspectives that make up our world, Rushdie's novel clears up a place in the historical record for those the suppressed and the silent voices of history.*

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In his collection of essays, *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (1984), the literary critic Edward Said argues that “the point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly.” (35) The purpose of this paper is to explore how Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) re-visits the political and social history of post independence from the British Empire in 1947.

What is significant in the literary text is Rushdie’s ability to fictionalise history, i.e. fantasize his depiction of historical reality and combine history with politics through the portrayal of the individual, Saleem Sinai the narrator, in relation to the larger historical context that fashions the Indian society.

Midnight’s Children creates a history of India that is extremely heterogeneous and diverse, replete with stories, images and ideas- a multifarious hybrid history. Thus, the narrative addresses the political and social problems of modern India and questions established methods of historical discourse and storytelling. By re-visiting the past of India, and re-writing one’s own history, one which allows for the infinite variety of experiences, cultures and perspectives that make up our world, Rushdie’s novel clears up a place in the historical record for the suppressed and silent voices of history.

In writing his novel, Rushdie also brought the history of twentieth-century India to the West that is far from cementing the Anglo-Indian cultural bond. Rather than forcing the self into the image of the nation as British colonial protagonists, Rushdie “comically and mock- heroically insists on creating Nation in the imaginative image of self” (Shah 78). As a product of postcolonial India, Saleem must piece together the multifarious fragments of his identity, just as India must begin anew in rebuilding her identity in the wake of colonialism.

The novel traces the development of Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist, and the history of his family as his modern Indian nation develops. Saleem is depicted as the embodiment of his national, deeply historic culture. By simply being born along with a thousand other children, on the stroke of his nation’s birth/independence, does in fact symbolize his nation, modern political India. Saleem’s need to confront his relationship with the history of India begins with his birth on the hour of midnight on 15 August 1947, “mysteriously handcuffed to history [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country” as the narrative announces. It is also a response to a letter he receives from the prime-minister of India, stating that [Saleem’s] life will be a “mirror of our own” (*M.C* 22). From that moment on, the novel follows its complex path through the twinned histories of Saleem’s family and India as Reena Mitra poignantly remarks “the story traces the various events in the life of the central character that synchronize with major happenings in the recent history of India”. (23)

Salman Rushdie’s vision is clearly historical rather than personal in the sense that he is inclined to see the individual in relation to the larger social and historical forces that condition his life. He himself declares in an interview directed by Gordon Wise that everything in the novel “has had to do with poetics and with the relationship of the individual and history.” (59) History in the novel is mediated through the narrator’s consciousness and hence the apology for whatever distortions there may be. Born of history, the narrator creates history and this reciprocal creative

activity remains till the latter is “sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes.” (M.C 463)

The essential characteristic of Rushdie’s novel is to explore the history at the margin and to recover India’s past. He gives the reasons of his decision to write the novel:

The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind’s eye, now my two eyes were assaulted by colours, by the vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of cactus-leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillea creeper. It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight’s Children* was really 215 born; when I realised how much I wanted to restore the past to myself ... I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim. (*Imaginary Homelands* 9-10)

The novel is not meant to be a chronological linear account of the period depicted, but is rather a blend of fantasy and reality. As a result, the narrator lacks punctuality regarding the order of chronology, as the literary text does not follow a linear movement with a beginning, middle, and an end but rather moves forward and backward in time that makes it hard to trace the common order of events, causes, and results that make up India’s pre-and post-independence years.

The mistakes, elisions, exaggerations and solipsism in the narrative are not simply the result of a foolishly unreliable narrator, but they are intentional on Rushdie’s part. In his book of essays entitled *Imaginary Homelands*, he states that he made Saleem “suspect in his narration” through “mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance to show the inevitable problems in any historical discourse”. (10)

As a matter of fact, for the past several centuries the Western discourse has been concerned with creating and maintaining grand overarching narratives that give a single and unifying identity to a nation and it is in response to this that backs up a Western civilization that Rushdie proposes Saleem’s historical narrative, an expansive, meandering, and fantastic one, to attempt a new way of writing one’s own history, one which allows for the infinite variety of experiences, lives, and perspectives that make up our world.

The political and ideological dominance of the West over the rest of the world is manifested in the commonly accepted view of history as a linear and progressive narrative of colonization and civilizing missions, overseas expansion and profit engineered through an enlightenment discourse so as to justify the dominance and superiority of the white race and the subjugation of others. Michael Dash claims that history as presented in Western narratives is a “fantasy peculiar to the Western imagination in its pursuit of a discourse that legitimizes its power and condemns other cultures to the periphery”. (qtd in Gikandi Simon,7)

Anything written outside these particular confinements is branded as “a collective fiction” because “a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which although it has five thousand years of history [...] was nevertheless quite imaginary”. (M.C150). In *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations* Tim Gauthier clearly points to Rushdie’s belief that such “progressive history is fundamentally untrue and repressive” since it

does not “accurately speak for the multitudes, [is] repressive in its attempt to eradicate those differences that undermine its wholeness”. (136)

Such progressive histories include a “cleansed reading of the past that simply washes away whatever does not accord with the imagined national narrative” (Narrative Desire 144) negating, thus, the supposed historical value of such readings. These “enlightened” narratives are simply incomplete as they ignore the trauma of the past, and focus solely on one single Truth. Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands* that “history is always ambiguous:

Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, everyday, attempt to ‘read’ the world”. (25)

Rushdie’s focus on the indeterminacy of truth in the text is not to completely negate the typical Western historical discourse, but to rather to decenter it. Michael Reder claims in “Rewriting History and Identity” that Rushdie “wants to open up the notion one Truth, showing the many versions of possible truths” (234)

Throughout the text, Saleem alters the facts of India’s history, mixing up dates or changing the reasons and results in order to fit the specific story he wants to tell. Many of the errors seem intentional. The following passage from *Midnight’s Children* captures not only Saleem’s self-awareness of narcissistic narrative but also invokes one of the many intentional errors in the text, bringing it to the foreground and imploring the reader to situate this error in the realm of a reality created by human memory:

Reality is a question of perspective [...]. Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Ghandi occurs, in these pages, on a wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Ghandi will continue to die at the wrong time.
Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?(220)

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie discusses the writing of *Midnight’s Children* and how he “went to some trouble to get things wrong” (23). Introducing these errors into the story, Rushdie mimics the workings of memory and how a person’s memory creates a reality that may not conform to recorded facts, yet is as valid for that person as those recorded facts. Saleem later decides, however, that the error is simply a part of his narrative pinpointing the true nature of memory. He declares “memory’s truth, however memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events”. (*M.C* 292)

Hence, memory, which is intrinsically flexible and malleable, plays a vital role in the creation of history or story. Reder observes that “when Rushdie speaks of ‘memory’, he is not speaking of cultural memory or national consciousness but of individual memory, [...] the history in *Midnight’s Children* is seen through the eyes of an individual: it is not the dominant, official,

‘History’ but a history that is personalized and therefore given life, significance, and meaning” (*Rewriting History and Identity* 226)

Not only does Saleem alter the facts of the story or remarks on the very nature of history and historical discourse, putting into question his role as a narrator, he frequently focuses on himself. Though he claims that his story is about the life of India, he nevertheless connects himself to the major events of post-independence India. This egocentrism is clearly revealed through his role as the most powerful of the midnight children, the 581 children born during the midnight hour of August 15, 1947. This latter sees himself and his story to be more important than the external history, the history of India.

The best example is represented in the moment of India’s independence. He states “For the moment, I shall turn away from the generalized, macrocosmic notions to concentrate on a more private ritual[...] I shall avert my eyes from the violence in Bengal and the long pacifying walk of mahatma Ghandi. Selfish? Narrow-minded? Well, perhaps; but excusably so, in my opinion. After all, one is not born everyday”. (*MC* 150) Linda Hutcheon argues that this kind of narrative is “narcissistic”. (*Narcissistic Narrative* 20) Saleem, from the very beginning, is aware of his “centrality” in giving directions to the major events in the history of the nation. At a moment in the narrative, he even considers himself as “a competitor for centrality” (420) along with Indira Ghandi. Such novels that exhibit characteristics of narcissistic narrative emphasize the creative process and do so with an awareness of that process, breaking down old conventions and proposing replacements for those conventions. The need for a new way of looking at older historical forms makes *Midnight’s Children* a prime candidate for analysis in terms of narcissistic narrative, providing an example that explores new views of history.

The novel invites the reader to discover an alternative to the typical historical traditions of archaic historical truth as merely recorded facts. Saleem considers himself to be indissolubly linked to the fate of India and that he is “linked literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively” (*MC* 330). In fact, in the novel Saleem’s “life is the microcosm that reflects and affects the macrocosmic life of the state” (Reena mitra, 12). Reder considers that individual history can be an “alternative historiography for the recapturing of Indian history” (228). As a result one would consider that Saleem’s individualized perspective offers a new way of seeing and writing history, one that endorses the inevitable influence of the narrator or writer on a story.

Saleem embarks on a desperate search for meaning as he attempts to link his own history with that of his nation. Saleem wonders if he is prepared to “re-write the whole history of [his] times purely in order to place [himself] in a central role,” (*M.C* 191) and in doing so, Saleem’s project of “chutnification”- of writing history- results in cracking, “a destruction manifested in his physical deterioration as well as that of his country both politically and geographically” (183) as Todd Giles notes in his article. By looking for one unified meaning, rather than accepting the multiplicity of meanings, Rushdie depicts the disintegration of the traditional conventions of a unified, history as a unity of meaning.

Therefore, any re-writing of history is bound to subjectivity, because as Giles believes that “the history of India, [...] is already bound to failure, [and] Saleem feels compelled to rectify it, but in doing so , he recognizes his own inability to attain absolute truth.” (183) Saleem uses the

metaphor of “chutnification”, a culinary metaphor to give a message that history has undergone a process of confusion and alterations. The term “chutney” is an Indian dish, which is a side dish and tangy, adding flavor to any course of the meal. And it is understood as such in English. By adding “fication”, Rushdie has changed an Indian word into an English one to stand for transformation, so the chutnification of history comes to mean the rewriting of it along some specific lines derived from the word “chutney”.

In an attempt to “enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories”, (*Culture and Imperialism* 260) *Midnight's Children* is, therefore, a way for Rushdie to reject any claim that establishes a single way of representing India's history. At the end of the book, Saleem, the narrator, tells us that “Every pickle- jar [...] contains [...] the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time [...] in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods,” (*M.C* 642) only possibilities and distortions, no certainties, no absolutes. According to Reder “History, like making chutney, involves both preserving and combining a finite number of ingredients from an almost indefinite number of choices. It also involves the altering of form, changing yet preserving”. (242).

Likewise, the narrator-author Saleem is given voice through his attempts to write his story and the history of his country, the purpose behind his narrative is to offer the reader the opportunity to question narratives that we have come to accept as official and historical truth. Michel Foucault gives importance to power and knowledge nexus in writing history and his emphasis on the role played by power leads to question which discourses have been privileged, and which histories have been told, in whose name and for what purpose if one takes into consideration that the write always writes from a position of authority. Unlike traditional history, contemporary histories deal with the interrogation of the past from a marginal position, clearing up a place in the historical record for the suppressed and silent voices.

Midnight's Children offers a new way to view the past that turns from the enlightened discourse of progress and its rules to an always expanding narrative of the nation; which opens up various possibilities for postcolonial subjects to re-right/re-write their past. Foucault sums it up in making “the success of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who have used them, to disguise themselves so as to perfect them , invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially impose them.” (*Language ,Counter-Memory, Practice* 151)

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