

The theme of partition in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's children*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the History, Consciousness, Interpretation, Partition, Political Freedom, Post Colonialism and Nationalism with reference to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. India has so many stories to tell about the past, the present and the future. It is true that a nation is not there if it is not part of one's own consciousness. A nation does not exist as a physical entity, but lives by and speaks to us through the culturesoul. *Midnight's Children* is Rushdie's interpretation of a period of about 70 yrs of India's modern history dealing with the events leading to the partition and beyond. The identification between the public and private strands is complete in this novel and that gives unity to the novel. Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai successfully tells the stories of his life and India's pre and postcolonization. Saleem flashes back to major moments in his life while commenting on those events in the present. He offers his opinion on how his life unfolded in order to give the reader different perspectives, from struggles and tragedies to victories and joys.

Keywords: partition, post colonialism, nationalism, rushdie, magical realism

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is an imaginative tale that centers on the life of Saleem Sinai. Saleem is a boy who is born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the precise moment that India becomes independent. Because of his timely birth, Saleem believes that his life is infinitely tied to his nation, so as India goes through the struggles of stabilizing as a sovereign state, he undergoes his own ordeals. Saleem's birth is so remarkable that he, along with the thousand other midnight's children, is given a magical ability: he can hear the thoughts of all the midnight children and of others around him. So, Saleem creates the Midnight's Children Conference and uses its members to observe the social and political changes that reinvent the country, offering insight on the religious differences that led to the separation of India and Pakistan. Saleem's tale is divided into three parts: the first describes his family history, the second talks about him being brought up as India is transforming, and the third recounts Saleem's various endeavors in adulthood that eventually led to his death. Throughout the novel, Rushdie uses Saleem Sinai to chronicle India's pre and postcolonial history by having him narrate his tale through flashbacks, experience memory loss for major national events, and encounter personal struggles and tragedies at the exact moment India does.

Saleem recites his story through flashbacks, offering vivid descriptions of his family, life, and India's development. He is currently thirty years old and begins his narrative by stating that time is running out, and he will most likely die before his next birthday. Therefore, Saleem decides to tell his story for his son who also has to bear the blessing and curse of a midnight birth. He states, "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really *began*, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock ridden, crime stained birth" (Rushdie 4). Throughout the entire narration, Saleem tells his tale to Padma, his caretaker, avid listener, and biggest critic. In doing this, Saleem is able to record his life, while flashing back to crucial moments in

India's past that shape his family's history. M. Madhusudhana Rao writes, "*Midnight's Children* begins on the midnight of August 15, 1947, problematizing history, both retrospectively and prospectively...to provide 'alternate history' through Rushdie's own narrative voice, along with Saleem's subjective self" (11). By flashing in and out of the past, Saleem is able to offer his own opinion on the various events that parallel his life and India's colonization.

Saleem begins off his tale in Kashmir, the place where his grandparents met in 1915. At this point in India, the British Raj is still very much in rule, but Kashmir remains untouched because the partition has not yet wreaked havoc on the city. Saleem's grandparents see each other for the first time on the day World War I ends. Saleem continues to chronicle his grandparents' marriage, their move to Agra, and finally, the moment when Saleem's parents meet. By the time his parents, Ahmed and Amina Sinai, move to Bombay to settle down, India is on the verge of collapse because of religious differences. On June 8, 1947, Amina finds out that she is pregnant, and the partition of India is announced. Moreover, a fortuneteller prophesizes Saleem's timely birth, claiming to Amina, "A son, Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland—neither older nor younger" (96). So, Saleem Sinai is brought into the world on August 15, 1947, and celebrations take place to mark the independence of India and the fall of the British Raj. Adult Saleem mentions that Prime Minister Nehru wrote him a letter, saying,

"My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention: it will be, in a sense, a mirror of our own" (139).

By doing so, Nehru gives Saleem, along with the other midnight children, the responsibility of pushing India into becoming the great nation that it can be.

As Saleem up in a swiftly changing India, he is able to observe

events that threaten to tear down the newly formed nation. Soon after Saleem's birth, the government freezes Ahmed Sinai's assets, causing the family to struggle to make ends meet. During this terrible period, the Sinais receive the horrendous news of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. The tragedy causes the Sinais to fear for their lives because they are terrified that a Muslim has killed Gandhi. Amina's brother warns the Sinais to hide, stating,

“Get out of here, big sister— If a Muslim did this thing, There will be hell to pay” (163).

The killer turns out to be a Hindu extremist, and the Sinais are saved. The occurrence reveals that relations between Muslims and Hindus, even after the Partition, are still strained, and neither side trusts the other. Another event that limits India's development is the 1956 language march in which protesters call for a division of Bombay, separating inhabitants by language. By retelling both India's history and his own, Saleem ultimately creates a different account of the nation's past. Regarding this, Critic Abraham P. Abraham states,

“The reader is taken to a world of Imagination where he/she believes that Saleem's story is one version of (his) story and Saleem indirectly suggests that he has created India's history by thinking it into reality” (23).

However, adult Saleem realizes that he has not accurately depicted India's past but believes that he should still keep his version because it is what he remembers about his nation, and his version is crucial to telling his own story correctly.

As Saleem becomes an adult, his life is thrown into turmoil, causing him to lose everything he ever cared about. His family moves to Pakistan, the young nation that is the complete opposite of India. While Saleem struggles to adjust to the Muslim dominated country, India faces its own fight with China over border disputes. Simultaneously, relations between Pakistan and India start to completely crumble, and in 1965, the two fight a war over Kashmir. With this war, Saleem loses his family from a bombing raid over Pakistan. Eventually, he ends up back in India but only to find that Indira Gandhi has become the new prime minister, whom Saleem believes, is going to ruin the country. His predictions come true because Gandhi is convicted of campaign malpractice. On June 25, 1975, she declares a State of Emergency against anyone who opposes her and begins a sterilization campaign against the midnight children, trying to cut off the magical abilities. But at this point, Saleem already has an infant son, Aadam Sinai, who carries on the magic. After his sterilization, Saleem states,

“No longer connected to history, drained above and below, I made my way back to the capital, conscious that an age, which had begun on that long ago midnight, had come to a sort of end” (508).

In the end, the story comes back to adult Saleem, and he says that Padma has finally gotten him to say yes to a marriage. However, on the wedding day, Saleem's body crumbles into dust, and he dies. Abraham writes,

“Throughout the novel, Saleem's effort is to contain all of India within himself—to depict his personal story with the stories of his country—only to disintegrate and collapse at the end of his attempt” (23).

In telling his story, Saleem tries hard to adhere to the accuracy of the events he describes, but he realizes that there is no way to fully tell both stories without having some flaws. As Saleem flashes between present and past, the reader is allowed to hear what Saleem really thinks of his own history and what occurrences in India's colonization are important to his own tale.

Another way that Saleem depicts India's colonization is by suffering memory loss for key events that take place in India as well as in his own life. First, Saleem forgets the actual date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Referring to his mistake, he states, “But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; In my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time” (190).

This reveals that Saleem realizes his mistake in remembering the event, but he must continue with the wrong date because that is when the event unfolds in his memory. However, this mistake in memory seems ironic because Saleem claimed long ago that his life is tied to India's, and he must tell the past in order for people to remember these events later on. Yet Saleem himself forgets a major moment in India's history that almost led to another war between India and Pakistan. Nonetheless, the flaw allows Saleem to stick to both stories as he knows them, and he does not try to make readers believe everything he says. Commenting on Saleem's mistake in Gandhi's death, critic Syed Manzurul Islam asserts,

“Saleem admits both his incompetence and his fabrication...which he justifies with a selfparodic meta-commentary that signals, given a particular location, the fallibility of his memory” (127).

Saleem's realization of the inaccuracy of his tale, then, makes himself aware as he narrates the rest of his tale and chronicles the rest of India's history.

Saleem also cannot remember whether the 1957 general election took place before or after his tenth birthday. The election was significant because while the All India Congress won the election, the Communist Party became the largest opposition group. The results of the election frightened politicians and citizens alike. On this, Saleem remarks,

“The election of 1957 took place before...my tenth birthday; but although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events. I don't know what's gone wrong” (254).

Saleem is still shown trying to correct his memory, but a part of him wants to stay with the interpretation he already has. On the other hand, he realizes that if he keeps repeating these small lapses in memory, they will eventually add up to create a large gap that he will not be able to fill in with his own feelings on the events. Earlier in the text, Saleem comments, “Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone...that I'm prepared to distort everything—to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order the place myself in a central role?” (190). Saleem does not seem to know what to make of the failure in memory: is the time or full context of the occurrence too important to forget or is it simply a minor detail that does not affect the meaning of his tales? Throughout the rest of his story, Saleem ponders this question as he faces more problems with his memory.

The biggest lapse in Saleem's recollection of thoughts occurs when he loses his entire memory. Immediately after a bomb

falls down on his parents during the air raid in Pakistan, Saleem is struck on the head by a silver spittoon. The impact of the spittoon causes him to forget all of his memories, which adult Saleem later calls his process of purification. He ends up at a secret camp of the Pakistani army and travels with them for a period a time, being referred to as "Buddha" since he cannot recall his own name. One day, while carrying out army orders, he and two other soldiers get lost in the Sundarbans, a huge jungle between Bangladesh and India. After spending two days in the jungle starving and hallucinating, Saleem's memory comes rushing back when a snake bites him in the heel. He states,

"I was rejoined to the past, jolted into unity by snake poison, and it began to pour out through the Buddha's lips. As his eyes returned to normal, his words flowed so freely that they seemed to be an aspect of the monsoon" (419).

Saleem believes that he is now purified because his remembrance of events that wreaked his family needed to be forgotten and wiped away so that he could start over again. Saleem's memory decides the way his two tales unfold, determining when and how events have taken place. While he is aware of his faulty memory, he does not seem to have a solution for solving this dilemma. So, he figures that he should just keep going on with the stories, trying to fill in the missing parts as best as he can. Rao writes,

"Saleem creates the special type of history of an unreliable narrator, as he has his own perspective of history. He combines 'fiction' with 'facts' to emphasize the ambiguous nature of history" (11).

His memory serves as a way for Saleem to shape India's history to fit in with his own, and the reader sees only his interpretation of the country's history. But, Saleem's mistakes cause his readers to be skeptical of his narratives because the truth behind them is flawed by the missing information.

Padma, his caretaker, even has a hard time believing the stories after she finds out that Saleem fails to inform her of who his real parents are. Yelling at Saleem, she cries, "You tricked me. Your mother you called her; Your father, your grandfather, and your aunts. What thing are you that you don't even care to tell the truth about who your parents were? You are a monster" (131). The fact that Padma cannot fully trust Saleem's tale is significant in that she is his biggest supporter. In addition, if no one can trust Saleem, then there is really no reason for him to be recounting his stories for future generations. Julian Droogan points out, "The problem faced by Saleem is that if nothing can be true absolutely, then how meaning can be created? As...his memory errors become increasingly obvious, Saleem himself becomes...unsure of the truth of his narrative" (211). Saleem's unreliable memory is simply a factor that he must take in account when trying to chronicle India's colonization because he knows that his faultiness will cause people to view him as untrustworthy.

Lastly, Saleem is able to recount India's colonization by encountering personal struggles, tragedies, and other crucial events at the precise moment that India does. His own birth happens to take place as India is partitioned and created into a new nation. This incident marks the beginning of Saleem's journey into becoming completely tied to India. He prospers as India does but also suffers the same way that India does. He calls the country his twin because the two share such a close

bond, which is why he chooses to tell India's history in the first place. He states, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape" (3). Saleem is essentially an allegory of India because he brings together India's past, present, and future in order to fully describe what happened to the nation after being split up and reinvented.

In 1956, language marches take place in Bombay with protesters fighting to divide the city up by language. At this time, hundreds of voices fill Saleem's head, forcing him to hear the thoughts of citizens all across India. Saleem soon discovers that these voices not only belong to ordinary people but also to the children of midnight, his brothers and sisters. His gift allows the midnight children to connect with each other, letting them share their thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, they offer Saleem insight on various events that take place all across the country, which in turn, lets Saleem talk about the different aspects of life in India. But, Saleem does not always use his newly acquired gift in a positive way. He says,

"Despite the many vital uses to which his abilities could have been put by his impoverished, underdeveloped country, he chose to conceal his talents, frittering them away on inconsequential voyeurism and petty cheating" (196).

This reveals that Saleem's ability to read thoughts of the midnight children corrupted him for a period of time because he did not use the gift in a way that would benefit anyone or anything except himself. Similarly, India was being corrupted and tormented by protesters who approved or opposed the division of Bombay based on language.

In September of 1962, India reaches an all-time low as it battles China over border disputes. When relations between these two nations worsen, India makes a declaration saying that it will use any force necessary to stop the Chinese from moving into Indian Territory. The Sinais are currently living in Pakistan with Amina's sister because Ahmed Sinai has become consumed by alcoholism. As India crumbles under the pressure from the Chinese, they receive news that Ahmed Sinai has suffered a heart boot, a type of heart condition, which makes them urgently return to their homeland. Referring to this, Saleem says,

"I had overstepped the boundaries of what I was permitted to do or know or be; as though history had decided to put me firmly in my place. I was left entirely without a say in the matter" (338).

Amina helps her husband gain his health back, and the family is able to mend their relationships. As the Sinais enjoy being reunited and getting along again, India loses the war with China. These events in Saleem's life oppose each other because as India suffers greatly, Saleem is able to regain his family and be happy again. Soon after this occurrence, Saleem loses his entire family when India enters yet another war with Pakistan. In this case, he and the nation are both devastated because circumstances have caused them to experience terrible losses. The final events that shape Saleem's life are Indira Gandhi's election to the position of prime minister and the birth of Saleem's son, Adam Sinai. Gandhi's election affects Saleem in ways that he could never have imagined. Saleem feels as though she is corrupting the government to the point where he refers to the Gandhi years as the darkest hour in India's history.

To make matters worse, she calls for an Act of Emergency because she fears that her opposition will try everything to take her down. She invokes the sterilization campaign against the midnight children, causing them to lose their magical abilities and connections to one another. Ram Sharma states, "In the emergency period, the rights of people were curtailed. It was the undoing of the children of midnight who symbolized hopes and promises" (63).

When the midnight children lose their gifts, they give up on the thought that someone will be able to get rid of Gandhi's grueling policies and orders. Throughout this period, Aadam remains sick with tuberculosis, which Saleem blames on Gandhi's ruling of the government. Eventually, Gandhi calls for a reelection and loses, forcing her out of office. After she is gone, India seems to be improving and Aadam is no longer ill. These events conclude Saleem's story and the story of India's colonization because there is no longer a Midnight's Children Conference to connect him with the rest of India. Jon Thompson contends,

"*Midnight's Children* enacts the different moments of Indian history in a mode...both diachronic and synchronic, history and story, the past and the present, chronicle and life experience all at once moving...into the future" (10).

Saleem's crumbling death represents how large and vast India has grown and improved since its Partition and indicates that it is now time for Saleem to conclude the two stories.

"At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will wake to life and freedom."^[1] 1947 was a year of inconceivable chaos and shock for the Indian people. As Lord Mountbatten carved up the subcontinent in his haste to secure a position of political indifference for the British towards the impending civil war, hundreds of thousands of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were being subjected to the most macabre of tortures and death. Still more were left with no idea of whether their homes now fell into Indian or Pakistani territory. At the time, this was of no consequence compared to the constant threat of savage revenge attacks from opposing religious factions. The terror and deep suspicion which permeated the bloody birth of India and Pakistan were to become the new nations' recurring nightmare. The trauma of Partition threw into question whether Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a 'New' India could possibly survive. The apportioning of blame and bitter anger at what had been allowed to happen was directed with full force by the media at key political figures which now assumed responsibility for the implementation of peace and progress. The next three decades did nothing to assuage fears of further bloodshed, and incredulity towards the grand promises of the future became a complete loss of faith.

In 1981, a novel as grand in scope and substance as those promises was published.

Midnight's Children, written by Salman Rushdie, exquisitely allegorised the legacy of Partition to create a commentary addressing its reality. By accident of birth, the story's protagonist, Saleem, is born at midnight on August 15th 1947 – the moment of India's Independence, and so he is "handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country."^[2] The novel's conceptualisation of Saleem as India itself is the book's central premise, and Rushdie's most forceful accusation regarding the cause of the country's continual political victimisation. As soon as he is borne from his mother's womb (a metaphor for the relative comfort of British rule),

Saleem is under immense pressure to 'end up meaning...something.'^[3] His subsequent authorial quest for such meaning leads him to the construction of a self-centered past in which he alone assumes responsibility for key events in national history. This can be interpreted as Rushdie's critique of India's idea of itself as central to its failure.

The importance of nationalism in India's struggle to gain independence from the British was paramount because it united the masses in common purpose. Through strengthened self definition, it became easier to project the idea of 'other' onto their rulers. For the Indian people, however, a unified identity was hard to conceive because of the country's inherent multitude of varying languages, cultures and religions. Much of the coloniser's hegemonic success relied upon the internalisation of *its* definition of 'Indian' by those it sought to dominate. In so doing the population of India began to categorise itself according to the simplified British view of Indians – through religion. The Indian Nationalist Movement saw its greatest weapon against Empire as the foregrounding of religious identity. This required new interpretations of ancient texts and of historical events, many of which had not been recorded in writing, but passed down orally through the generations. As religious identity became more clearly defined, a growing chasm appeared between not only the Indian and the British, but between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus themselves.

Rushdie's scepticism towards nationalism and the ultimate reality of nation itself as little more than myth is a fundamental theme in *Midnight's Children*. Just as India attempted to define itself as a united nation which incorporated all its constituent diversities, Saleem tried to unify "the so called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike [which] jostled for space within my head."^[4] By right of birth, he had inherited the magical ability "to look into the hearts and minds of men."^[5] Saleem's self-conscious reconstruction of his past is Rushdie's theory of how 'nation' is formed as an ideological tool. As noted by Abdulrazak Gurnah in his *Themes and Structures in Midnight's Children*, Saleem is absent from his own history for one hundred and sixteen pages of the novel; It actually begins with the story of his grandfather. According to Timothy Brennan in his seminal work *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, the marking of a distant "point of origin"^[6] plays a key role in the formation of national identity:

"This zero point or starting point is what allows ritual repetition, the ritualization of memory, celebration and commemoration – in short, all those forms of magical behaviour signifying defeat of the irreversibility of time."^[7]

Throughout the narrative, Saleem makes repeated references to the legacy left to him by his forefathers, including his extraordinary olfactory powers and the "superb silver spittoon, inlaid with lapis lazuli"^[8] By also 'filling in the gaps' of a history in which he is ultimately found to be uninvolved, Saleem situates himself in a present which is firmly rooted in the past. The representation of time in the novel emphasises the creative and therefore artificial nature of history. As highlighted by Brennan, the narrative is constantly interrupted:

"We are...always being shown 'the hands holding the strings' (MC, p.72), are having the metaphors cut short by onthespot explanation, are being directed to the future or the past, the beginning or end of the book, instead of being ushered on to 'whathappenednext.'^[9]

This constant, nonlinear shifting of time is important for two reasons. The first is that it illuminates the selectiveness of writing; the juxtaposition of events from different time periods puts them in an altogether different context than when presented chronologically, thus revealing much about the author's intentions. In Saleem's case, his purpose is to place himself as a central character in his story with strong genealogical heritage. The second is that it shows the reliance of the historian upon the inaccuracy of memory, despite the distortion it must inevitably undergo if the memory is not first hand. Rushdie deliberately presents Saleem as an unreliable narrator in order to show the fragility of 'nation' as a concept; That although it has the power to '...rouse unlike peoples in dramatically unlike conditions in an impassioned chorus of voluntary cooperation and sacrifice,'^[10] it is fundamentally a construct.

The myth of nationhood is further exposed through the Children of Midnight themselves, of whom Saleem and his nemesis Shiva are both members. The Conference signifies the five hundred and eighty one men and women who were to become members of the new Indian parliament. That they all possess some form of supernatural power according to their proximity of birth to the hour of midnight emphasises the impossible promise they carry for the realisation of national fulfilment. ...corruption and cynicism could not allow [them] to survive. Nehru's great ambition for postindependence India begins to disintegrate almost as soon as India is founded, in the partition violence and in the language marches.^[11]

After three Five Year Plans, the end of the Nehru era and India's conflicts with Pakistan and China, the most frightening moments of the country's fledgling history arrived. Under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, her father's vision of a free and democratic India was forgotten. After her party and the people realised the transparency of her image of democracy, they saw the emergence of her true "inclination and conviction [as] a dictator."^[12] Having been found guilty on two out fifty two charges of campaign malpractice during previous elections, the Prime Minister declared that India was in a state of emergency. This period was to last almost two years, during which time Gandhi proved her true nature. Depending on whose reports were to be believed, anywhere from "a few thousand [to] fifty thousand"^[13] strike leaders and protesters were imprisoned, the press was meticulously censored and opposition parties were banned. Perhaps the most shocking violation of human rights imposed by her were the wholesale demolition of slum areas and the enforced sterilisation of "men with two children or more, especially in crowded...towns"^[14]

Rushdie's scathing representation of Indira Gandhi in *Midnight's Children* belies an anger felt by the masses at the time:

...green and black the Widow's hair and clutching hand and children muff and little balls and onebyone and torninhalf and little balls go flying green black her hand is green her nails are black as black.^[15]

Saleem is unable to describe her as anything other than the monster of nightmares, and the absolute failure of the legacy of Partition is made clear. He and the majority of the other Children of Midnight are rounded up and forcibly subjected to sterilisation; The parliamentary members they signify are rendered impotent, unable to wield their governmental powers. Despite the hopelessness of Rushdie's representation of the Emergency, he still has faith in yet another positive vision of

India. Saleem's wife at the time, Parvati the witch, is pregnant, and her long, agonising labour lasts thirteen days, the amount of time between Gandhi's indictment and her announcement of the Emergency. Aadam Sinai is borne from the coupling of two the most powerful of Midnight's Children, Parvati the Witch and Shiva. He is offered as India's new promise, as are all the other children whom Shiva has fathered:

We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; He Emergencyborn, will be is already more cautious, biding his time; But when he acts, he will be impossible to resist.^[16]

Although *Midnight's Children* consistently exposes the idea of nationalism and nation as myth, Rushdie implies that hope is to be found in the new generation of Indian people who, with the benefit of hindsight and caution, will be able to generate a countermyth of their country. Acknowledgement is made of the defensive power of nationalism, as long as careful consideration of its contrived nature is taken into account. Yet the novel ultimately displays a distinct cynicism towards the possibility of a new vision based on collective 'imagination' which can realise a free and tolerant human reality. Despite the meticulous and exquisitely skilful creation of a narrative which continually sheds new light upon a myriad of contemporary issues, Rushdie failed to make any mention whatsoever of Gandhi's National Movement and "*rushes from Amrits* Magic Realism and New Historicism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie uses the narrative style of magical realism in which myth and fantasy are blended with real life. *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* are examples of magical realism. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary define magic realism as, "a literary genre or style associated especially with Latin America that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction—called also *magical realism*" ("magic realism"). It is a narrative technique that blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality. Magic realism is characterized by an equal acceptance of the ordinary and the extraordinary. It fuses lyrical and, at times, fantastic writing with an examination of the character of human existence and an implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite. The term was coined first by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, and Alejo Carpentier first described its current usage in the prologue to his book, *El reino de este mundo*.

Midnight's Children is a loose allegory for events in India both before and, primarily, after the independence and partition of India, which took place at midnight on 15 August 1947. In the temporal sense, *Midnight's Children* is post-colonial as the main body of the narrative occurs after India becomes independent. The narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of tale which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wifetobe Padma. This selfreferential narrative recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted *Arabian Nights*. The events in Rushdie's text also parallel the magical nature of the narratives recounted in the *Arabian Nights* (Stewart).

His family is active in this, as they begin a number of migrations and endure the numerous wars which plague the subcontinent. During this period he also suffers amnesia until he enters a quasimythological exile in the jungle of Sundarban, where he is reendowed with his memory. In doing so, he reconnects with his childhood friends. Saleem later becomes involved with the

Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay's "cleansing" of the Jama Masjid slum. For a time Saleem is held as a political prisoner; These passages contain scathing criticisms of Indira Gandhi's overreach during the Emergency as well as what Rushdie seems to see as a personal lust for power bordering on godhood. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the *Midnight Children*, and there is little left for Saleem to do but pick up the few pieces of his life he may still find and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his still young nation; a chronicle written for his son, who, like his father, is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history. Now, nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing that his death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell his life story. Padma, his loyal and loving companion, serves as his patient, often sceptical listener.

This marked break in chronology in the novel reveals the author's intention of giving not a record of events in order of their occurrence but of projecting the basic historical truth as interacting with and affecting the life of the individual, that is chiefly, the author himself as represented by the protagonist. On the one side, we have Saleem's personal life, and, on the other, corresponding to this is the life and history of the nation. The story traces the various events in the life of the central character that synchronize with major happening in the recent history of India. The parallel that is worked out, though strained at times, is designed to allow an understanding of the individual's life in terms of historical forces. (4) Regarding the break in chronology in the novel, it is clear from the very beginning that the author never had in mind a sustained biological account of the life of the hero or a record of historical events in order of time. In the novel, on the one side we have Saleem's personal life, and on the other, corresponding to this is the life of the nation. Mitra writes:

The story traces the various crises in the life of the protagonist that synchronize with the major events and movements in the history of modern India. The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, the Quit India Movement, the role of Muslim League, the post Independence riots, the Five Year Plans, the reorganization of the states in India, the language agitation, the Chinese aggression, the theft of the sacred relic from Hazratbal mosque, the war with Pakistan, the independence of Bangladesh, the Emergency and other historical landmarks. (12) After that, every major event in Saleem's life is linked with some incident in the life of the nation. Saleem returns to India after a period of exile in Pakistan. In a fit of anger, Saleem resolves to give the nation the right to choose a better future, for he looks upon the country as "not only my twin in birth but also joined to me (so to speak) at the hip, so that what happened to either of us happened to us both" (Rushdie 385). At this critical moment in the life of both, Saleem and the nation, the pace of history accelerates and there are a number of synchronous events on either side. Shiva's "explosion" (Rushdie 410) into the life of Saleem at the magician's ghetto coincides with India's surprising nuclear capability demonstrated with the first nuclear explosions in the deserts of Rajasthan on 18th May 1974. The marriage celebrations of Saleem and Parvati synchronize with the Republic Day festivities in the country and from then onward the parallels drawn between the life of the protagonist and that of the nation continue through Laylah Sinai (Parvati). The moment Laylah enters labour room, Indira Gandhi is found guilty of malpractices in the previous elections.

Laylah's son, Aadam Sinai is born on 25th June 1975, the very day Emergency was imposed in India. He too, like Saleem, is "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (Rushdie 420) and his fortunes are inseparably linked with those of his country. His distress caused by tuberculosis is suspected of having "something darkly metaphorical" (Rushdie 422) in it. It seems to be manifestation of his connection to history. In the words of Rushdie,

" . . . in those midnight months when the age of my connection to history overlapped with his, our private emergency was not unconnected with the larger macrocosmic disease, under whose influence the sun had become as pallid and diseased as our son" (422).

And then Saleem is arrested and imprisoned. He loses his freedom and he loses with it his silver spittoon swallowed by bulldozers to sever him from "the last object connecting me to my more tangible, historically verifiable past" (Rushdie 432).

The *Midnight Children* are a magic realist device emphasising the continued struggle to come to terms with identity within the polarities of the postcolonial. They are, by virtue of their midnight birth, 'children of the times,' as Rushdie has asserted, as much as magical creations. This freedom, at the end of the text, is described as being 'now forever extinguished,' and there is a sour irony inherent in Saleem's thoughts that the children 'must not become . . . the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind.' Rushdie implies that Saleem's generation has failed to consolidate the possibilities inherent in independence. The possibility exists in each passing generation of *Midnight Children*, who are the children of each successive era. Each generation, as Saleem muses, will erase the presence of a previous generation that has not yet learnt to define a stable and solid sense identity. The individual voice is swamped by the creeping progression of time and history: nevertheless, the text's conclusion is open ended. There may be no such thing as a single national identity in the contemporary world, where media and communication link cultures and countries: there is perhaps an interchange of cultures, to varying degrees, between all countries. This delicate ambiguity is emphasised in the final sentence of the text, which links magic with realism, the individual with history, the individual and regional identity and self assertion with the magnet of the universal. Rushdie weaves a text that fuses tradition and current cultural influences to create an open ended postcolonial discourse (Stewart).

The voyage of the Indian Novel in English entered a new phase with the emergence of the new crop of writers on the literary scene. 1980s has been a witness to the revolutionary change in the technique and attitudes of these writers. These young writers were in fact a source of inspiration to their predecessors too and we observe a few 96 veteran writers like Khushwant Singh adopting new modes of fiction writing, particularly historical fiction. Rushdie rejected the traditional, social realist novel in favor of larger than life allegorical characters and events in the tradition of magic realism. He not only showed a fluency in Standard English but also the confidence that allows the use of various kinds of Indian English. Rushdie made extravagant use of myth, oral tradition, and different versions and ideas of history. The style was sprawling, rambling, full of digressions and humor. He aimed at providing an opportunity to the members of marginalized groups or national minorities to place themselves centre stage in the drama of national history, rather than feeling the pressure to subsume them in the

mainstream, official version. He thus dared to challenge the official version of 'History'. As Ron Shepherd puts it: *Midnight's Children* differs from earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of fiction are broken: the unities of time and place and characters are, at best, unstable: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person: ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straightforward sense religious or metaphysical, the novel is full of cryptic clues, archaic utterances.... It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight of hand narrated with a passion for narrating rather than for clarifying meaning. Many other writers of historical fiction writing after Rushdie followed in his footsteps. Some tried to follow him whereas others encouraged by his success tried their hands at different techniques and methods to approach history, thereby producing works which took the Indian Historical Novel to greater heights.

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