



A critical analysis of Salman Rushdie's Midnight Children

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Introduction

English literature has sometimes been stigmatized as insular. It can be argued that no single English novel attains the universality of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or the French writer Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Yet in the Middle Ages, the Old English literature of the subjugated Saxons was leavened by the Latin and Anglo-Norman writings, eminently foreign in origin, in which the churchmen and the Norman conquerors expressed themselves. From this combination emerged a flexible and subtle linguistic instrument exploited by Geoffrey Chaucer and brought to supreme application by William Shakespeare.

Chaucer was described by his immediate success or as the Father of English poetry and as a touchstone for defining both what was 'English' and what literature was. How does that make sense to us now, six hundred years later in literary history? Through close readings of a wide selection of Chaucer's writings we will not only celebrate the power and complexity of his use of language, but also investigate some of the questions posed by these early claims. How do we understand literary origins and what is at stake in our attempts to do so? How far does Chaucer contribute to a national (or nationalist) sense of English literature? How does the literature of the medieval past shape our current critical reading practices?

English literature is therefore not so much insular as detached from the continental European tradition. Across the Channel, it is strong in all the conventional categories of the bookseller's list. In Shakespeare, it has a dramatist of world renown; in poetry, a genre notoriously resistant to adequate translation and therefore difficult to compare with the poetry of other literatures, it is so peculiarly rich as to merit inclusion in the front rank; English literature's humour has been found as hard to convey to foreigners as poetry, if not more so, a fact at any rate permitting bestowal of the label.

Idiosyncratic, English literature's remarkable body of travel writings constitutes another counterthrust to the charge of insularity. Among the later writers, the most notable is Salman Rushdie, born in India, now living in the United Kingdom. Rushdie with his famous work *Midnight's Children* (recipient of Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1992, and Best of the Bookers 2008) ushered in a new trend of writing. He used a hybrid language English generously peppered with Indian terms to convey a theme that could be seen as representing the vast canvas. He is usually categorized under the magic realism mode of writing most famously associated with Gabriel García Márquez.

Midnight's Children

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. 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 skeptical audience. Saleem's story begins in Kashmir, thirty-two years before his birth, in 1915. There, Saleem's grandfather, a doctor named Aadam Aziz, begins treating Naseem, the woman who becomes Saleem's grandmother. For the first three years Aadam Aziz treats her, Naseem is always covered by a sheet with a small hole in it that is moved to expose the part of her that is sick. Aadam Aziz sees his future wife's face for the first time on the same day that World War I ends, in 1918. Aadam Aziz and Naseem marry, and the couple moves to Agra, where Aadam, a doctor whose loss of religious faith has affected him deeply sees how protests in the name of independence get violently suppressed.

Aadam and Naseem have three daughters, Alia, Mumtaz, and Emerald, and two sons, Mustapha and Hanif. Aadam becomes a follower of the optimistic activist Mian Abdullah, whose anti-Partition stance eventually leads to his assassination.

Following Abdullah's death, Aadam hides Abdullah's frightened assistant, Nadir Khan, despite his wife's opposition. While living in the basement, Nadir Khan falls in love with Mumtaz, and the two are secretly married. However, after two years of marriage, Aadam finds out that his daughter is still a virgin, as Nadir and Mumtaz have yet to consummate their marriage. Nadir Khan is sent running for his life when Mumtaz's sister, Emerald, tells Major Zulfikar, officer in the Pakistani army, soon to be Emerald's husband about his hiding place in the house.

Abandoned by her husband, Mumtaz agrees to marry Ahmed Sinai, a young merchant who until then had been courting her sister, Alia.

Mumtaz changes her name to Amina and moves to Delhi with her new husband. After being pregnant, she goes to a fortune-teller who delivers a cryptic prophecy about her unborn son, declaring that the boy will never be older or younger than his country and claiming that he sees two heads, knees and a nose. When a terrorist organization burns down Ahmed's factory, Ahmed and Amina move to Bombay. They buy a house from a departing Englishman, William Methwold, who owns an estate at the top of a hill. Wee Willie Winky, a poor man who entertains the families of Methwold, says that his wife, Vanita, is also expecting a child soon.

Unbeknownst to Wee Willie Winky, Vanita had an affair with William Methwold, and he is the true father of her unborn child. Amina and Vanita both go into labor, and, at exactly midnight, each woman delivers a son. Meanwhile, a midwife at the nursing home, Mary Pereira, is preoccupied with thoughts of her radical socialist lover, Joseph D'Costa,

wanting to make him proud, she switches the nametags of the two new born babies, thereby giving the poor baby a life of privilege and the rich baby a life of poverty. Driven by a sense of guilt afterward, she becomes an ayah, or nanny to Saleem.

When it occurs at the exact moment India gains its independence, the press heralds Saleem's birth as hugely significant. Young Saleem has an enormous cucumber like nose and blue eyes like those of his grandfather, Aadam Aziz. His mischievous sister, nicknamed the Brass Monkey, is born a few years later. Overwhelmed by the expectations laid on him by the prophecy, and ridiculed by other children for his huge nose, Saleem takes to hiding in a washing chest. While hiding one day, he sees his mother sitting down on the toilet; when Amina discovers him, she punishes Saleem of silence.

Unable to speak, he hears, for the first time, a babble of voices in his head. He realizes he has the power of telepathy and can enter anyone's thoughts. Eventually, Saleem begins to hear the thoughts of other children born during the first hour of independence. The 1,001 midnight's children a number reduced to 581 by their tenth birthday all have magical powers, which vary according to how close to midnight they were born. Saleem discovers that Shiva, the boy with whom he was switched at birth, was born with a pair of enormous, powerful knees and a gift for combat. One day, loses a portion of his finger in an accident and is rushed to the hospital, where his parents learn that according to Saleem's blood type, he couldn't possibly be their biological son. After he leaves the hospital, Saleem is sent to live with his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia for a while. Shortly after Saleem returns home to his parents, Hanif commits suicide. While the family mourns Hanif's death, Mary confesses to having switched Saleem and Shiva at birth. Ahmed now an alcoholic grows violent with Amina, prompting her to take Saleem and the Brass Monkey to Pakistan, where she moves with Emerald.

In Pakistan, Saleem watches as Emerald's husband, General Zulfikar, stages a coup against the Pakistani government and ushers in a period of martial law. Four years later, Ahmed suffers a heart failure and after that Amina and the children move back to Bombay. India goes to war with China, while Saleem's perpetually congested nose undergoes a medical operation. As a result, he loses his telepathic powers but, in return, gains an incredible sense of smell, with which he can detect emotions, entire family moves to Pakistan after the war. His younger sister, now known as Jamila Singer, becomes the most famous singer in Pakistan.

Already on the brink of ruin, Saleem's entire family saves Jamila and himself dies in the span of a single day during the war between India and Pakistan. During the air raids, Saleem gets hit in the head by his grandfather's silver spittoon, which erases his memory entirely.

Relieved of his memory, Saleem is reduced to an animalistic state. He finds himself conscripted into military service, as his keen sense of smell makes him an excellent tracker. Though he doesn't know exactly how he came to join the army, he suspects that Jamila sent him there as a punishment for having fallen in love with her. While in the army, Saleem helps quell the independence movement in Bangladesh. After witnessing a number of atrocities, however, he flees into the jungle with three of his fellow soldiers. In the jungle of the Sundarbans, he regains all of his memory except the knowledge of his name. After leaving the jungle, Saleem finds Parvati-the-witch, one of midnight's children, who reminds him of his name and helps him escape back to India. He lives with her in the magician's ghetto, along with a snake charmer named Picture Singh. She becomes disappointed that Saleem will not marry her, Parvati-the-witch has an affair with Shiva, now a famous war hero. Things between Parvati and Shiva quickly sour, and she returns to the magician ghetto, pregnant and still unmarried.

There, the ghetto residents shun Parvati until Saleem agrees to marry her. Meanwhile, Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, begins a sterilization campaign. Shortly after the birth of Parvati's son, the government destroys the magician's ghetto. Parvati dies while Shiva captures Saleem and brings him to a forced sterilization camp. There, Saleem divulges the names of the other midnight's children. One by one, the midnight's children are rounded up and sterilized, effectively destroying the powers that so threaten the prime minister. Later, however, Indira Gandhi loses the first election she holds. The midnight's children, including Saleem, are all set free. Saleem goes in search of Parvati's son, Aadam, who has been living with Picture Singh. The three take a trip to Bombay, so Picture Singh can challenge a man who claims to be the world's greatest snake charmer. While in Bombay, Saleem eats some chutney that tastes exactly like the ones his ayah, Mary, used to make.

He finds the chutney factory that Mary now owns at which Padma stands guarding the gate. With this meeting, Saleem's story comes full circle. His historical account finally complete, Saleem decides to marry Padma, his steadfast lover and listener, on his thirty-first birthday, which falls on the thirty-first anniversary of India's independence.

A Study of Midnight's Children

Born at the dawn of Indian independence and destined, upon his death, to break into as many pieces as there are citizens of India, Saleem Sinai manages to represent the entirety of India within his individual self. The notion that a single person could possibly embody a teeming, diverse, multitudinous nation like India encapsulates one of the novel's fundamental concerns: the tension between the single and the many. The dynamic relationship between Saleem's individual life and the collective life of the nation suggests that public and private will always influence one another, but it remains unclear

whether they can be completely equated with one another. Throughout the novel, Saleem struggles to contain all of India within himself to cram his personal story with the themes and stories of his country-only to disintegrate and collapse at the end of his attempt.

Politically speaking, the tension between the single and the many also marks the nation of India itself. One of the fastest growing nations in the world, India has always been an incredibly diverse. Its constitution recognizes twenty-two official languages, and the population practices religions as varied as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism, among many others. Indian culture is similarly hybrid, having been influenced by countless other cultures over the millennia of its development. At the same time, however, maintaining India's sprawling diversity in a peaceful fashion has often proved difficult: India's division into the Islamic nation of Pakistan and the secular, but mostly Hindu nation of India, a process known as Partition-remains the most striking example of the desire to contain and reduce India's plurality. In *Midnight's Children*, the child, Saleem watches as protestors attempt to divide the city of Bombay along linguistic lines, another attempt to categorize and cordon off multiplicity.

Saleem, a character who contains a multitude of experiences and sensitivities, stands in stark contrast to the protestors who demand their own Language-based region, the strict monotheism of Pakistan, and Indira Gandhi's repression of contradictory dissension. His powers of telepathy allow him to transcend the barriers of language, while he himself with his English blood, poor background, wealthy upbringing, and eclectic religious influences reflects India's diversity and range. The *Midnight's Children's* Conference that he convenes in its initial phase, a model for pluralism and a testimony to the potential power inherent within coexisting diversity, which is a natural and definitive element of Indian culture.

Factual errors and dubious claims are essential aspects of Saleem's fantastic narrative. He willfully acknowledges that he misplaced Gandhi's death, an obviously seminal moment in India's history, as well as willfully misremembers the date of an election. He frets over the accuracy of his story and worries about future errors he might make. Yet, at the same time, after acknowledging his error, Saleem decides to maintain his version of events, since that's how they appeared to occur to him and now there can be no going back. Despite its potential historical inaccuracies, Saleem sees his story as being of equal importance as the world's most important religious texts. This is not only his story but also the story of India. The errors in his story, in addition to casting a shadow of doubt over some of what he claims, point to one of the novel's essential claims: that truth is not just a matter of verifiable facts. Genuine historical truth depends on perspective and a willingness to believe.

Saleem notes that memory creates its own truth, and so do narratives. Religious texts and history books alike stake their claim in truth not only because they are supported by facts but also because they have been codified and accepted upon, whether by time or faith. The version of history Saleem's offer comes filtered through his perspective, just as every other version of history comes filtered through some alternate perspective.

For Saleem, his version is as true as anything else that could be written, not just because this the way he has arranged it, but because this is the version he believes.

Independence from Britain, thus, as Saleem notes, his miraculously timed birth ties him to the fate of the country. He is thirty-one years old now and feels that time is running out for him. Saleem believes that his life is ending and he must tell all of the stories trapped inside of him before he dies. Saleem begins the story with his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, on an early spring morning in Kashmir. Saleem describes

Kashmir as a place of incredible beauty and notes that in 1915, Kashmir was still pristine. Looking just as it had during the time of the Mughal Empire. At this point in the story, Kashmir is free from the soldiers, camouflaged trucks, and military jeeps that will come to characterize it in later years.

While praying. Aadam bumps his nose against the hard ground, and three drops of blood fall from his nose. As a result, he vows never again to bow before man or god, and consequently a "hole" opens up inside of him. Aadam has recently returned home from Germany, after five years of medical study. While Aadam was away, his father had a stroke, and his mother took over his duties in the family gem business. As Aadam stands on the edge of a lake, Tai, an old boatman, comes rowing toward him. Saleem describes Aadam's features particularly his prominent nose. Saleem also describes the enigmatic

Tai and the local rumors that surround him. Tai's boat draws a loser. He shouts out to Aadam that the daughter of Ghani the landowner has fallen ill. Here, Saleem interrupts his narrative to note that most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence, but he reassures us that he has the ability to see things he didn't actually witness. In this way, he is able to describe Aadam taking care of his mother, attending to the land owner's daughter, and being ferried across the lake by Tai, all at the same time. At the land owner's opulent house, Aadam realizes that the old man, Ghani is blind. While waiting to see the patient, Aadam gets nervous and considers fleeing, but then he has a vision of his mother and decides to stay.

Aadam is taken in to see the patient, who is flanked by two extremely muscular women holding a white bed sheet over her like a curtain. In the center of the sheet is a hole, approximately seven inches in diameter. Ghani tells Aadam that, for modesty's sake, he can only examine his daughter through the seven-inch hole. Saleem Sinai opens the novel by

explaining the exact date and time of his birth: August 15, 1947, at midnight.

Saleem's birth coincides precisely with the moment India officially gains its Amina in a Hospital. Saleem is not a beautiful baby, but he is a large one, with an enormous cucumber nose and Blue eyes that the family assumes came from his grandfather. Padma becomes upset at Saleem because he has used the word love in reference to her.

Saleem returns to his story and describes a painting of Walter Raleigh that hung above his crib as a child. In the painting, a fisherman points off into the distance, and Saleem speculates as to what his finger might be pointing at. Amina and Ahmed bring Saleem home from the hospital. The residents of the estate pass him around like a doll, and Mary and his mother dote on him. Wee Willie Winkie continues to come to the compound and sing, eventually bringing his son, Shiva, who has knobby knees and, according to Saleem, will later be saved by a war. The baby Saleem witnesses all of the compound inhabitants' private lives, their affairs, fights, and habits. Saleem the grown-up narrator claims responsibility for almost everything that happens, including his father's eventual alcoholism. Feeling neglected by his wife, Ahmed begins to flirt with his secretaries and curse Amina. He later embarks on a scheme with his neighbor, Dr. Narlikar to reclaim land from the ocean with tetra pods. One day, Ahmed receives a letter from the government saying his assets have been frozen, presumably because of his Muslim faith. The news gives him a permanent chill and sends him to bed, thereby allowing for the conception of Saleem's sister, the Brass Monkey.

Saleem tells us that Lord Khusro, today the wealthiest and most famous guru in India, was once his childhood friend, Cyrus-the-great. After Cyrus's father dies from choking on an orange seed, Cyrus's fanatical mother begins claiming her son is a holy child and invents a history for him based, impart, on a Superman comic book that Saleem had once given to Cyrus.

As the Narlikar women begin to demolish the houses of the estate, Pia calls to tell the family that Hanif has committed suicide. The entire family gathers at the house for a forty-day mourning period. Infuriated by the dust from the demolition, as well as Pia's refusal to mourn, Reverend Mother vows not to eat until her daughter-in-law shows her dead son some respect.

After twenty days, Saleem breaks the stalemate by apologizing to his aunt for his previous indiscretion. Pia tells Saleem that she refuses to mourn because Hanif always tried to avoid melodrama in his films, and she wants to respect that. Once she finishes explaining this, however, Pia breaks into a torrent of grief that amazes everyone. Pia begs Reverend Mother for forgiveness and places herself in her mother-in-law's control. Reverend Mother declares that Pia will move to Pakistan with her, where they will realize Reverend Mother's long-held dream of purchasing a petrol pump. To conclude that "It is memory's truth", he insists in order for Saleem to reach Bombay and discover Mary, one final battle for supremacy must take place. Picture Singh, who claims to be world's greatest snake charmer, takes his meager savings and travels to Bombay to assert his title. There can only be one greatest, according to Picture Singh, and he is willing to sacrifice everything to prove it. He succeeds in proving his skills, but only after he literally descends into a world of darkness, and nearly destroys himself in the process. Picture Singh's victory is ultimately a defeat, or a ladder that becomes a snake. Even in its final moments. Life proves to be ambiguous and full of ironies.

"Abracadabra" proves a fitting title for the novel's final chapter, since the chapter is as much about the continued presence of magic as anything else. As Aadam Sinai's first word suggests that, despite everything that has happened the wars, the tragic deaths, and the chaotic political turmoil, the next generation of midnight's children retain the magic of

potential, and the ability to change the world. In Aadam's mouth, it becomes a word of defiance, accumulated over the months of silent listening that marked the first three years of his life. A sense of cautious hope pervades the last chapter. Saleem is set to marry Padma, and in her strong body, he sees a flicker of hope that his own, cracked body might somehow be preserved. Perhaps, armed with Padma and with love, he won't disintegrate and be consumed after all.

Despite all the changes and exiles he has undergone, Saleem ends up almost exactly where he began: at a house on Methwold's Estate, his son in the care of Mary Pereira, just as he was once in her care himself. Saleem has succeeded in telling his story, thereby preserving it for his son, just as fruit gets preserved for chutney. That initial optimism is tempered, however, by Saleem's final prophecy, which spills out in a stream of consciousness. Imagining his future, Saleem sees himself falling apart on his birthday and crumbling into millions of specks of dust, just as his grandfather Aadam crumbled into dust in his time. Saleem's birthday is, of course, the anniversary of his nation's independence. Crumbling into dust becomes a symbolic act of both exhaustion and unity.

Having given everything he has within him not only through his life, but through the telling of his story as well Saleem can surrender himself, dissolve in into a metaphor for his nation, as he crumbles into pieces of dust as there are people in India.

Conclusion

Rushdie invites the reader to analyze the function of memory and the definition of historical truth. In doing so, he concludes and encourages the reader to conclude that "It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own". According to Rushdie sensory information for a few seconds or less after an item is perceived. The ability to look at an item, and remember what

it looked like with just a second of observation that's why he always talk about such studies and always write such things in his literature.

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