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**CORRESPONDENTE**

**POLYPHONY IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN***

**por**

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*In memory of  
my father and my mother*

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**ABSTRACT****POLYPHONY OF *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*****UMA VISWANATHAN****UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA  
2007****Supervising Professor: Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei**

This dissertation explores the different voices or polyphony in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*. The essence of polyphony, according to Bakhtin, who discussed this term as a literary concept, is the presence or use of different independent voices that are not merged into one dominant voice. Hence, to listen to the polyphony in the novel, I approach the text with a view to explore the multiplicity or the co-existence of different meanings rather than to find a final, single meaning. For this, I focus on the aspects of different narrative modes such as history, polyphonic novel with carnival features, the epic, myth, fantasy, and folk tales in *Midnight's Children*. Within each of these modes various voices or viewpoints are explored. The eclecticism and postmodern features in the novel do not lead to a negation of meaning but to multiplicity of meanings.

In our age of rapid changes in concepts, styles, and modes of representation, it is more appropriate to direct our attention to multiple realities than to look for one definitive, unchanging meaning. Further, polyphony means a dialogue between various

entities such as the author, the narrator, the characters, the reader, the form of the narrative, the content of the narrative, and so on. Each one of these entities takes on a different aspect in different contexts of time, space, and culture. This means that the voices in the reading of the novel go on multiplying. Reality is capable of being given many meanings. In other words, there is not one reality but several. Reading a novel such as *Midnight's Children* as a polyphony of different voices in a dialogue can serve as an analogy for a mode that we can adopt in our attempts to understand our world and realities in a dialogic manner.

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**RESUMO****POLYPHONY OF *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*****UMA VISWANATHAN****UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA  
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Esta tese explora as diferentes vozes ou polifonia no romance *Midnight's Children* de Salman Rushdie. A essência da polifonia, de acordo com Bakhtin, o qual discutiu este termo como conceito literário, se concentra na presença ou no uso de vozes diferentes e independentes, que não se fundem em uma única voz dominante. Portanto, a fim de dar ouvidos a tal polifonia, aborda-se aqui o romance com o intuito de explorar a multiplicidade e a coexistência de diferentes significados, ao invés de buscar um sentido único e cabal. Para tanto, o trabalho investiga os aspectos de diferentes modos da narrativa, tais como história, romance polifônico com características de carnaval (no sentido Bakhtiniano da palavra), o épico, mito, fantasia e contos folclóricos. Dentro de cada um destes modos, várias vozes ou pontos-de-vista são explorados. O ecletismo e as características pós-modernas do romance não levam a uma negação de sentido mas a uma multiplicidade de significados.

Nesta era de mudanças rápidas em conceitos, estilos e modos de representação, torna-se mais apropriado direcionar nossa atenção a realidades múltiplas do que procurar um sentido

único, imutável e definitivo. Além disso, polifonia implica um diálogo entre várias entidades tais como o autor, o narrador, os personagens, o leitor, a forma da narrativa, o conteúdo da narrativa etc. Cada uma destas entidades assume um aspecto diferente em diversos contextos de tempo, espaço e cultura. Isto significa que as vozes na leitura do romance se multiplicam infinitamente. Pode-se dar à realidade inúmeros significados. Vale dizer, não há uma realidade, mas várias. A leitura de um romance como *Midnight's Children* como uma polifonia de diferentes vozes em diálogo pode servir como uma analogia para um módulo que podemos adotar em nossas próprias tentativas de entender o mundo e as diferentes realidades de uma forma dialógica.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. DISPERSION OF VOICES IN <i>MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN</i> .....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 The Novel as a Genre and the Dispersion of Voices.....	3
1.3 Multiplicity of Genres in the Novel.....	4
1.4 Dialogism, the “Other,” and the Reader.....	6
1.5 Eclecticism of <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	15
1.6 Multiplicity of Meanings.....	28
1.7 <i>Midnight's Children</i> as Postmodern Narrative.....	29
CHAPTER 2. THE VOICE OF HISTORY.....	40
2.1 History and the Novel.....	41
2.1.1 Similarities and Differences.....	41
2.1.2 Historical Method in <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	54
2.1.3 Meaning in the Novel and History.....	59
2.2 The Problematic Origins of History.....	66
2.2.1 Second-hand Sources, Hearsay-Accounts, Fragments, Rumors, and Gossip...66	
2.2.2 The Media and the Fabrication of History.....	69
2.3 The Historical, Unhistorical, and Superhistorical.....	77
2.3.1 The Historical (Conventional History).....	78
2.3.2 The Unhistorical: Amnesia, the Past, Present and Future.....	80
2.3.3 Amnesia, Postcoloniality, and Postcolonialism.....	85
2.4 History and Postcoloniality.....	89

2.4.1 Desire, Envy, Mimicry, and Complicity.....	89
2.4.2 Alleged Superiority of the West; White Skin, Black Skin and Blue Skin.....	106
2.4.3 The Culture of the Colonizer: Western Education, Art, and Ideas.....	117
2.4.4 Self-hatred.....	129
2.5 Postcolonial History and the Divided Nation.....	131
2.5.1 Religious Conflicts.....	131
2.5.2 Class Divisions.....	136
2.5.3 Conflicts of Languages.....	145
2.5.4 Nation, Nationalism, and National Allegory.....	149
2.6 Postcolonial History and Forms of Resistance.....	153
2.7 Understanding History.....	160
CHAPTER 3 THE VOICE OF CARNIVAL.....	163
3.1 Grotesque Body and Grotesque Realism.....	164
3.2 Polyphonic Novel and Carnival.....	169
3.3 Other Carnival Features in <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	174
3.3.1 Reversals.....	174
3.3.2 Misalliances.....	179
3.3.3 Insanity, Dreams, Deliriums, Suicide.....	180
3.3.4 Crowning and Uncrowning.....	184
3.4 Metamorphosis, Multiplicity, Heterogeneity.....	187
3.5 Slum Naturalism, Picaresque Wanderings, Symbolic Hell and Heaven .....	191
3.6 The Grotesque and the Macabre as Comical Treatment Sex and Death.....	196

3.7. Dialogue and Polyphony in <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	201
3.7.1 Voice of "Other" .....	201
3.7.2 The Voice of Radical Questioning.....	204
CHAPTER 4. THE VOICE OF EPIC.....	215
4.1 Comic Epic.....	215
4.2 Parodic-Epic: The Man-God and Man-Dog.....	218
4.3 Epic and the Comic Hero.....	219
4.4 Epic Fate and <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	228
4.5 Paradoxical Epic: Fate and Choice.....	237
4.6 The Epic of Formulaic Epithets.....	241
4.7 Epic-like Invocations.....	243
4.8 Romance-Epic, Heroic Romance and Romance.....	245
4.9 Epic Memory of Eternal Truth and Fallible Memory of <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	246
4.10 The Self-conscious Epic.....	248
CHAPTER 5. VOICES OF FANTASY AND MYTH.....	253
5.1. Voice of Fantasy Against Realism.....	253
5.2 Voice of Myth.....	259
5.2.1. Mythical Rituals in <i>Midnight's Children</i> .....	261
5.2.2 Voice of Sacred Myth in Prayer.....	262
5.2.3 Fertility Ritual.....	265
5.2.4 Mortification.....	269
5.2.5 Purgation.....	270
5.2.6 Invigoration.....	271
5.2.7 Jubilation.....	274

5.2.8 Mythical Motifs of Death, Expulsion, Return, and Reunion.....	275
5.3 Myths from Different Cultures and Religions.....	276
5.4 Legends and Folktales.....	285
CONCLUSION.....	292
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	296

## CHAPTER 1

### DISPERSION OF VOICES AND GENRES IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

#### 1.1 Introduction

Polyphony, in music, refers to a piece that has two or more different voices or melodies that are of relatively equivalent importance and explore a complementary theme. What is important for my purpose in this dissertation is that the different voices or melodies in polyphony are independent, fully valid and unmerged. Mikhail Bakhtin extended this concept of polyphony to literature, in his study of Dostoevsky's novel (which he called a "polyphonic" novel). So, polyphony in a novel refers to the plurality or multiplicity of voices, points of view, consciousnesses, meanings, etc., that we hear in the narrative. For Bakhtin, the defining characteristic of a polyphonic novel is that the author of such a text "excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single extreme of life or thought, to be absolutized. All one-sidedness . . . is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who causes them all to collide in the 'great dialogue' of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and leaves no finalizing period at the end" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 165).

Polyphony in the novel includes not only the transcribed dialogues between the various characters, but also the implicit or explicit voices of the author, the narrator and all the characters in the novel, the different points of view, the different consciousnesses, the different genres that are used and parodied in the novel, the different modes of narrative that are used (such as realism, naturalism, fantasy, postmodernism, etc.), and the different languages of different classes and periods (or

heteroglossia, to use Bakhtin's term), the form and content of the novel, and so on. In addition to these voices from within the novel, polyphony in the novel, (especially in our contemporary age) includes other the voices from the world outside the novel: the historical, social, cultural, and political context in which the novel was produced, published, advertised, given award, bestowed with a preface from a notable figure, reviewed, critiques, distributed, and consumed by the readers—all these factors also contribute to and constitute the polyphony since they also affect and influence our expectations and understanding of the novel. It is this polyphonic aspect in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* that I explore and discuss in this dissertation.

In this chapter, I discuss the general tendency of the novel to disperse voices, and the use of different genres in the novel. The exploration of truth in a dialogue between many voices, the inclusion of the voice of the 'other' by various methods, the unfinalizability of meaning and truth, the multiplicity of meanings, the eclecticism that one finds in *Midnight's Children*, and the postmodern aspect of the novel—these are the other topics that I discuss in this chapter.

In the next chapters I discuss the features of different genres that are used as well as parodies in *Midnight's Children*, such as History, Epic, and Myth, and the use of fantasy. These do not exhaust the genres and modes that the novel uses. For instance, I have not discussed features such as allegory, melodrama, literalization of metaphors, cinematic devices, etc. that the novel uses, since such a discussion would need more space and time. The topics included in this dissertation will give an idea of the polyphony that we hear in *Midnight's Children*, but they are not the whole, but only parts of the whole.

## 1.2 The Novel as a Genre and the Dispersion of Voices

The idea that the novel is a genre of dispersion of voices is not new. Henry James, for example, recognized the pull exerted on the novel from opposite directions, one centripetal and the other centrifugal. He came to see the novel as a genre whose essence lies in treating social reality in a complex and multifarious manner so that the “capacious vessel” of the novel can be filled to the brim with a multiplicity of voices (*The Critical Muse* 404). The point of view—of the narrator or a character—in the novel gives some control and equilibrium, but in a lengthy composition like the novel it is practically impossible to keep the point of view or the voice limited to one. Even when the novel appears to be written from the point of view or voice of a single character or a narrator, the other characters in the novel become the objects of attention for this voice, and become subjects with their own different voices, and these new subjects in turn have other objects of attention, which will become subjects with their own voices, and so on. So, the central voice or point of view loses itself in a dispersion of voices, as the original point of view/voice shifts its attention to each of the characters, and even to the reader. The novel has to balance this force of dispersion with a centripetal force in order to prevent loss of all control and focus. Earl Miner discusses the illusion of a single point of view (or a single voice) in a lengthy work such as a novel; he stresses the need to take into account not only the seeing or speaking subject, but also the object of this subject’s attention. The various objects of attention lead to a dispersion of the voices or to a shifting of the point of view. Miner calls the various objects of the narrating voice and the viewing eyes, as the “narrative points of attention, or simply point(s) of attention” (188).

James was aware of the difficulty in maintaining a center in the novel’s structure. He describes his failure to keep the center of consciousness from slipping away:

. . . again and again, perversely, incurably, the centre of my structure would insist on placing itself *not*, so to speak, in the middle . . . I urge myself to the candid confession that in very few of my productions, to my eye, *has* the organic centre succeeded in getting into proper position . . . These productions have in fact . . . specious and spurious centres altogether, to make up for the failure of the true. (*The Critical Muse* 516-17)

As already mentioned, though the novel may employ a character, or a narrator who serves as a window or center of consciousness through which everything could be seen and felt, the house of fiction has “not one window, but a million” and therefore, there are countless ways to tell a story (James, *The Critical Muse* 485). The novel, he said, has for its subject “the whole of human consciousness;” hence it will “stretch anywhere—it will take in absolutely anything” (*The Critical Muse* 337-38).

### 1.3 Multiplicity of Genres in the Novel

Matching this dispersion of voices, there is also a multiplicity of genres in the novel. Raymond Williams in *Marxism* has noted that actual writing as a cultural practice has a multiplicity of styles, genres, and types of discourses; that it surpasses the dichotomies such as ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ and the divisions into specific genres and the divisions within the genres (148).

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg describe the inevitable mixing of different genres of narratives in *The Nature of Narrative*:

. . . in general, narrative artists have sensed the dangers of purity in their art and shied away from it, consciously or not. The narratives which men have admired most are those which have combined powerfully and copiously the various strands of narrative: the epic and the novel. The epic, dominated by its mythic and traditional heritage, nevertheless included fictional, historical, and mimetic materials in its powerful amalgam. The novel, dominated by its growing realistic conception of the individual in an actual society, nevertheless has drawn upon mythic, historical and romantic patterns for its narrative articulation . . . Myth, mimesis, history, romance,



and fable all function so as to enhance one another and reward the narrative artist whose mind and art are so powerful that he can contain and control the richest combination of narrative possibilities. (232-33)

Scholes and Kellogg point out that before the written narratives, the oral narratives such as the Homeric epic combined various materials such as religious, historical, and social, and shaped them into a unity. Oral narrative did not distinguish between myth and history. Once myth and history came to be distinguished, a process that happened gradually first and then gained momentum, literary production came to be seen as having two branches: history and romance. Or, empirical and fictional. These two streams which were united in the epic, separated, but came to be united again in the novel.

Bakhtin points out that almost any genre could be included in the construction of the novel, and that it would be actually difficult to find any genre that has not been incorporated into a novel by someone at some point (*The Dialogic Imagination* 321).

The above comments of literary theorists and artists illustrate the mixing of multiple voices and genres in narratives in general, and especially in the novel. Concerning the diversity of voices and genres in the novel, it is probably in Mikhail Bakhtin that we find the most radical study, theorized in his essay "Epic and Novel," and in his development of various interconnected concepts such as polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival, and grotesque realism. Each of these terms captures, though with a different emphasis, the dialogic interrelationship of utterances as a complex unity of differences. Even on the surface level, these terms display the meeting of various areas such as music-theory, linguistics, popular culture and literature. They argue powerfully against homogenization and monologism. The essence of Bakhtin's theory lies in its emphasis on the need to take into account others and otherness. Plurality and

variety form the backbone of Bakhtin's theory of the novel and infuse his concepts of dialogism and polyphony.

#### 1.4 Dialogism, the "Other," and the Reader

In Bakhtin's theory, dialogue occurs simultaneously on multiple levels, as a universal phenomenon. For Bakhtin, our concept of truth, knowledge, and meaning are based on dialogue: we know the world through a dialogue between our mind and the world. The site of knowledge is not unitary. It is neither purely in mind nor purely in the world. Michael Holquist, in his book *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, explains that Bakhtin's view was similar to Kant's; that while Kant's predecessors such as Leibniz had either overemphasized the role of ideas (or mind), thus diminishing the role of the world outside the mind, and while thinkers such as Locke went too far in the opposite direction and saw the mind merely a receptor of information provided by sensation from the world, Kant made a breakthrough by insisting on "the necessary interaction—the *dialogue* as Bakhtin would come to interpret it—between the mind and the world" (Holquist, 4).

Bakhtin traces the dialogic tradition to the Socratic dialogues and explores the connection between the Socratic dialogues, carnival, and the polyphonic novel in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and his world*. He points out that in the Socratic dialogues one can see the notion that human thinking about truth have to be explored in dialogues, and not in one's isolated thinking. Such a means of seeking truth is opposed to official monologism and to the naive self-confidence of people who believe that they possess *the* truth. But in dialogism, truth is not to be found in the mind of an individual person. It is born among people who are collectively searching for truth

in a dialogic interaction. In the Socratic dialogues, people are brought together, they argue, collide, quarrel, and in the collective effort truth is born. This is the model that Bakhtin prefers and he finds it in the novels of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin's term for such novels is "polyphonic." Polyphony does not mean relativism or a denial to take any stand. It means a willingness to listen to other voices in a dialogue, to other views that are different from our own. Bakhtin affirms that polyphony "has nothing in common with relativism . . . [B]oth relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all . . . dialogue by making it either unnecessary . . . or impossible . . ." (*Problems* 69).

For Bakhtin, a dialogistic novel (or, any discourse) differs from a monologicistic novel (discourse) in that the latter is single-voiced, recognizes only itself and its object, and does not recognize other people's words, while the former recognizes other voices (*Problems* 185-87). In Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, consciousness is based on otherness, and it is a relation between a center and all that is not that center. But the center is relative, and has no claim to absolute privilege. 'Self' and 'other' serve to differentiate each other, but 'self' is not given a higher place than 'other,' since the two are interchangeable, depending on the reference point. And there are many self/other relations, because, despite the 'di' in 'dialogism' the relation and dialogue is not limited to only two. Dialogism does not refer to a mere opposition of binaries. Dialogism is not a dualism but a multiplicity in human perception. The multiplicity manifests itself as a series of distinctions between categories appropriate to the perceiver (self) and categories appropriate to the perceived other. But dialogue takes place even within the same self, as each self can see itself as "I" or as "other" (when it views itself as an object, as the "other," or taking the position of "other" towards itself, the "I"). In addition to the perceiver and the perceived, or the self and the other, there are additional factors of situation and relation. We are in dialogue, not only with other human beings,

but also with the natural and cultural world. So any specific instance of the two poles or binaries becomes more than a mere opposition of categories.

The dialogue or relation is never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade. Hence, in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, meaning in the novel is understood as something that is still in the process of creation, something still bending toward the future, as opposed to that which is already completed, as in the completed genre of the epic.

Bakhtin's use of 'polyphony' as a literary term is closely related to his concept of dialogism. As mentioned in the beginning, polyphony in music is constituted by different melodies or voices that have nearly equivalent importance; though they are harmonically connected, they maintain their uniqueness. The different voices are not merged or submerged into one. Bakhtin elaborates the concept of 'polyphony' as a literary term in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. He cites Dostoevsky's novel as the prime example of polyphonic novel. Bakhtin explains that the meaning or truth of a polyphonic novel is positioned within multiple and various consciousnesses rather than in a single consciousness. Bakhtinian polyphony refers to a plurality of independent, fully valid, unmerged voices and consciousnesses in the novel. The characters' voices are not subordinated to the single perspective of the author. Despite being the creator of the characters, the author occupies a place alongside the characters, as their equal, as one of the many consciousnesses in the novel. The voice which may be identified with the author's is not necessarily the most engaging or persuasive of all the voices in the novel. In the polyphonic novel there is no longer a direct expression of the author's truth as the final truth. Instead, such a novel shows an active creation of truth in the dialogue between the consciousnesses of the author, the characters and the reader. In the polyphonic interplay of the voices of the various characters, the author, and the

reader, no voice or worldview is given priority over others. With these ideas as the background, I discuss below some aspects of Salman Rushdie's prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981).

A striking passage which echoes the extended concept of dialogue as polyphony occurs in *Midnight's Children* when the protagonist-narrator Saleem discovers his magical telepathy. His power becomes more than a telepathy in his relation with the midnight-children, because it allows dialogue. Saleem finds that

it was possible . . . to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through me. So, in the early days of 1958, the five hundred and eighty-one children would assemble, for one hour, between midnight and one a.m., in the lok sabha or parliament of my brain. (227)

Saleem describes "the views of a typical selection of the Conference members" and we see a veritable dialogue between different (often conflicting) philosophies and aims such as collectivism, individualism, filial duty, infant revolution, capitalism, altruism, science, religion, courage, cowardice, rights for marginalized groups of society, fantasies of power, and so on (228).

A polyphonic novel invites and persuades the reader to participate actively in the dialogue of the novel. The dialogic interaction in the novel "provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively)—and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 18).

Saleem indicates the importance of the reader/audience at various points in the novel, as part of the polyphony in the novel. The dialogic relation with Padma, who is his audience, is of immense importance to him. He calls her his "necessary ear"(149).

He compares the interrelation between himself as the author/narrator and Padma as the audience to that between the two points that form the two corners of a triangle the third corner of which is constituted by his memory of the past. When Padma leaves him temporarily, he wonders: “I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus-goddess [Padma] of the present . . . but must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line?” (150). Without the participation of the audience, the narrative will become one-dimensional or monologicistic, giving us only the philosophical monologue of the narrator. Saleem seems to be aware of the importance of dialogism in his narrative: He gives equal importance to his memory (which enables him to narrate the past) and Padma, his audience within the novel, who connects him to the present and keeps his feet on the ground. When she leaves him temporarily, Saleem misses the dialogic input of Padma’s reactions, critique and questions. He sees his audience’s qualities as the “necessary counterweights” to his own, which keep his feet “on the ground” (150). He gives us some evidence that he constructs and adjusts his narrative, to some extent, according to her demands and expectations, using her responses as his guide (32, 270, 278). Saleem’s awareness of the influence of audience on a writer is seen in his admission that Padma, his audience is “leaking” into him (38). Saleem gives an even more important role to his audience in general, not only to Padma but also to the wider audience outside the novel, when he remarks that they construct his story along with him: “I have not, I think, been good at describing emotions—believing my audience to be capable of *joining in*; of imagining for themselves what I have been unable to re-imagine, so that my story becomes yours as well” (293; Rushdie’s emphasis). In this admission that the reader participates, as one of the voices contributing to his story, Rushdie/Saleem reflect the extended concept of

polyphony. Saleem/Rushdie, in the manner of the author of a genuine polyphonic novel, refuse to assume a privileged place among the different characters, and are willing to give the reader also a role in the construction of meaning in the novel.

The dialogue between the author, characters and reader is an ongoing activity. The characters participate, not as mere objects of the author's consciousness but as free people, capable of standing alongside, agreeing or disagreeing with, even rebelling against, their creator. The characters are not merely the objects of authorial discourse but they are subjects of their own directly-signifying discourse. The reader also, like the characters, is not subordinated to the author.

The idea of polyphony is related to the concepts of unfinalizability, of the self and the other(s). Bakhtin's conception of unfinalizability respects the possibility that a person can change, and that a person is never fully revealed or fully known in the world. Amina in *Midnight's Children* echoes this idea when she realizes that there would always be something fresh about her husband that she does not know yet, and she reasons with herself, "Who, after all, ever truly knows another human being completely?" (68). And Saleem, despite his telepathy and magical gifts of smelling thoughts and feelings, is not absolutely omniscient. There are times when he is surprised by the turn of events, and he often engages in self-questioning and self-debates about different possible explanations. These instances corroborate Bakhtin's concept of unfinalizability.

Bakhtin's use of the terms "heteroglossia," "carnival," "grotesque body," and "grotesque realism" is related to the ideas of dialogue and polyphony. Heteroglossia in the novel refers to a plurality of relations, such as those between the novel and other texts, the relation between different discourses used in different historical periods and

by different social classes, the relation between different readings in different specific social and historic situations, and so on. To quote Holquist, “Heteroglossia is a plurality of relations, not just a cacophony of different voices” (*Dialogism* 89). In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie describes a literal “polyglot frenzy” and a “fish-market cacophony” that goes on inside Saleem’s head when he first discovers his telepathy. But eventually, when Saleem’s gift of “more-than-telepathy” is fully realized after an accidental collision of his head with Sonny’s, Saleem hears the signals of the other 580 midnight-children from all over India, and a veritable parliament-like conference among the 581 children gets started. Through this device, Rushdie describes Saleem’s dialogue with all the other midnight-children, and presents the multifarious and opposing viewpoints of the children, their philosophies, aims, political-economic theories, and various ‘isms’ (see 228, 256). We actually hear the polyphony of the various midnight-children. Though Saleem is accepted as their leader, his voice is not the only voice or the dominating voice in the dialogue which presents us with various alternative possibilities of their purpose and meaning.

In Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, his concepts of polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival, grotesque realism etc. demonstrate that the variety and multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view in a polyphonic novel cannot be reduced to a homogeneous discourse. Dialogism takes place between different entities at various levels simultaneously, and the novel moves towards a dialogue between many participants in the search for meaning and truth. The novel absorbs and appropriates many different genres. The inclusion of various genres of narratives and the different voices in the novel contribute to the plurality and multiplicity in the novelistic discourse. Multiplicity is seen even within the same character, since the same character has different voices and points of view at different times, under different conditions, in



different situations and contexts. As mentioned before, a character can see himself or herself as an object or 'other.' Rushdie shows this capacity for a character to be both 'self' and 'other,' to be both the subject and the object, in Saleem's referring to himself in the third person at various points in the narrative. From his perspective in 1978 Saleem looks at his earlier selves, and refers to himself in the third person; sometimes he uses both "I" and "He," in the same sentence (172, 236-37, 316-17, 319-20, 323-25, 345-373, 434). Such dialogue between different selves form part of the larger dialogism of the novel.

Bakhtin reminds us that the novel took shape precisely at the point when the epic distance of the absolute past was disintegrating; when both the world and man were assuming a degree of comic familiarity; when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of contemporary reality that was inconclusive, fluid, decentered, or open-ended. The other genres that are used and parodied in the novel, as Bakhtin explains,

become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving, contemporary reality (the openended present)" ("Epic and Novel" rpt. in McKeon, 323).

We see this openendedness in the polyphony and dialogism of *Midnight's Children*. We might say that Rushdie's novelistic masterplot opens with an appearance of a simple autobiographical novel, inclining the readers to expect a perception of unity—one hero, one voice, one genre, etc., but almost immediately it goes on to deconstruct itself to a growing knowledge of ever-increasing difference and variety that cannot be overcome in any simple, unifying synthesis. I see in this a similarity to Bakhtin's concept of

polyphonic novel in which truth is not a finalized, unchanging product but an ongoing process in a dialogue that is left open, with no finalizing period. I explore this thesis by studying the multigeneric aspects of *Midnight's Children* and by exploring the multiplicity of meanings and voices in the novel.

Given the all-absorbing nature of the novel, any attempt at complete artistic control aimed at a single voice, a single meaning, and single genre is bound to be unsuccessful. Rather than lamenting over this unavoidable predicament, novelists such as Rushdie revel in this possibility. They make a virtue out of necessity and allow us to see the deconstruction of this impossible attempt. In *Midnight's Children*, despite its form of an autobiography and a single narrator, we have a multiplicity of voices, meanings and genres. Instead of emphasizing a unified whole, the novel highlights the inevitable fragmentation of our perception and knowledge of reality.

In the next chapters, I explore some of the various types of narratives in *Midnight's Children*, starting from the postmodern, to history, polyphonic novel, picaresque novel, Menippean satire, the epic and the myth. In keeping with Bakhtin's idea of the unfinalizability of meaning, and Rushdie's inclusive literary art, I proceed with the assumption that it is more profitable to explore the possibilities of meaning rather than search for a final, definitive meaning. Each subsequent reading by the same reader changes the previous meaning in some way. Similarly each new reader will set up a dialogue with the novel, the characters, and the author, from his or her particular situation and context to create new meanings. Hence I explore the several co-existing possibilities of meaning in the novel rather than engage in the search for one dominant, definitive, final meaning.

### 1.5 Eclecticism of *Midnight's Children*

It is relevant to see how critics have viewed the eclecticism of *Midnight's Children* and how Rushdie himself sees it. *Midnight's Children* defies the attempts to confine it to one particular type of narrative. Rather, it fits many labels. It can be seen as: a historical novel about twentieth-century India; as a national allegory; as a postcolonial novel; as a political novel; as a postmodern novel; as a novel of magic realism or of fantasy. In addition, it has elements of metafiction. Hence Linda Hutcheon groups it under historiographic metafiction or postmodernist fiction. *Midnight's Children* exhibits characteristics of all of these types of novel and it incorporates elements of many other genres such as epic, myth, legend, folklore, folk tales, fairy tales, mimesis, romance, melodrama, allegory, autobiography, biography, family saga, picaresque novel, Menippean satire and so on. M. K. Naik and Shyamala Narayan's description of *Midnight's Children* as "a multi-faceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical *bildungsroman*, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory, a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy, and a daring experiment in form and style" gives an idea of the multiplicity and variety that the novel manifests (39). John Haffenden calls it a "fecund, dynamic, baroque, transformative fable of memory and politics—'a commingling of the improbable and the mundane'," borrowing the last phrase from the novel itself (Reeder 30; *Midnight* 9). Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm notes that in addition to being "socially charged to the utmost, Rushdie's novels draw copiously on politics, history, mythology, religion, theology, philosophy, fiction, poetry, folklore, anecdotes and all the varieties of life's quotidian experiences in the contemporary First and Third Worlds" (260)

Interestingly, the reading of the novel in the West has been observed to be quite different from that of the Indian readers. Rushdie has remarked on the varied reception:

“Many people, especially in the West, who read *Midnight’s Children*, talked about it as a fantasy novel. By and large, nobody in India talks about it as a fantasy novel; they talk about it as a novel of history and politics. And memory, which is the other thing it is essentially about” (“Midnight’s” 15). Aleid Fokkema notes three types of reception of Rushdie’s novels: “The reception of Rushdie can be roughly divided into three categories: one that focuses on the literariness of the text, one that focuses on the identity, or the nationality of the writer, and one that emphasizes the political and satirical strategies employed in Rushdie’s texts” (364). In addition to these variations in reception, there is also the difference in the emotional register. Some see *Midnight’s Children* as celebratory, as manifested in its exuberance of language, style, and abundance of life, while others see it as a pessimistic critique of India. Tariq Ali sees *Midnight’s Children* as a very political novel. Writing in 1982, he observes:

Rushdie’s work provokes comparisons not only with [Gunter] Grass and Marquez, but with other writers who have made India their subject. The reason this has not been done so far is because English critics and commentators have tended to downplay the politics of *Midnight’s Children*. Whether this is the result of guilt, embarrassment, ignorance or a combination of all three is a matter for speculation. What is beyond doubt is that Rushdie’s novel is centrally an attack on clearly identifiable targets: the indigenous ruling classes in South Asia. His book is not simply a pleasing mosaic of everyday life in the South Asian sub-continent. It is a devastating political indictment of those who rule these countries and, by implication, of those who placed them in their present positions of power and privilege. In that sense it is fair to say that the publication of *Midnight’s Children* marks an important turning point in the relatively short life-span of Indo-English literature. (“Review” 87).

All these different receptions, in a sense, reflect the variety and multiplicity present and found in the novel.

Rushdie has often expressed his penchant for eclecticism and hybridity in his writing. He speaks against the unattainable quest for “a pure, unalloyed tradition” from which one can draw a national authenticity. In his opinion, only religious extremists believe in such a thing.

The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the center of the best work done in visual arts and in literature. (“Commonwealth” 67).

Rushdie has declared that throughout his life he had attempted a literary renewal with a “determination to create a literary language and literary forms in which the experience of formerly colonized, still disadvantaged peoples might find full expression” (“In Good Faith” 393-94). To create a different form to suit the needs of colonized people, he uses English differently—the English in *Midnight’s Children* is different from the received, academic English and the English of canonized English literature; and the form of the novel draws from different traditions, such as the oral traditions of narration, and also from the traditions of the epics, myths, fairy-tales and so on. Nor does Rushdie feel obliged to restrict himself to the literary tradition of one culture. Citing the raiding of the storehouses of the non-West by Western writers, Rushdie affirms that non-Western writers also should feel free to claim literary forefathers from other cultures, in addition to those from their own culture. “Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forbears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy.” In addition, Rushdie reminds us that in our global world of “cultural transplantation,” writers become inescapably international because in the contemporary era the novel has become “a more international form” than ever and “cross pollination is everywhere.” He adds, “My own [literary parents]—selected half-consciously, half not—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong” (“Imaginary” 20-21). He has also claimed and acknowledged literary lineage from other authors such as Laurence Sterne, Charles Dickens, Rabelais, and Boccaccio.

Going back to Rushdie's concern and desire to create a literary language and literary forms in which the experience of formerly colonized, still disadvantaged peoples might find full expression, the comments of Arun Mukherjee are relevant. Mukherjee has pointed out that the indigenous reality of the non-West needs new structures in art, because the experience of selfhood and reality in India or Africa is different from its Western counterpart. For Mukherjee, the "decentering of the individual protagonist" is the determining difference between the Western novel and novels from the former colonies:

. . . the Indian novelist [and by extension, the African novelist] often creates forms which are markedly different from the fiction which is structured around a central hero figure. All of these novels [the novels of Indian novelists such as Bhibhutibhushan Banerjee, Premchand, and Raja Rao and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*] are crowded with characters who may be considered extraneous according to the conventions of the main plot and central characters. However, when these novels are read as explorations of community life and its historic transformations, everything seems to fall into place. (348)

In Mukherjee's depiction of the non-West's literary art, we see a difference from and an opposition to the nineteenth-century Western novelistic tradition that favors a well-defined center, essentialism, control, individuality, a single voice, a single meaning, and so on. In its place we see a tendency to decenter, digress, and incorporate multiplicity and community.

Corroborating Mukherjee's view of the non-Western representation, Philip Engblom declares that there are at least 115 specific voices in *Midnight's Children* that speak through the voice of the "other" and that constantly challenge Saleem's veracity and authority as the sole narrator (300). Engblom declares: "By my count the novel teems with over 115 major and minor characters who bear names. There are dozens of characters besides who are not named, not to mention the roughly 995 of the 1001 children of midnight who remain largely an anonymous mass" (299). The numerous characters, to use Mukherjee's words, can be read as explorations of community life

and its historic transformations, and the numerous ‘other’ voices who decenter the narrator’s voice.

Engblom, like Arun Mukherjee, observes that readers, conditioned by the Western tradition, attempt to find a central hero and a central voice as the ultimate authoritative reference for the closure of meaning in a novel. Because of this, the readers take Saleem’s pessimism at the end of the novel as *the* meaning of the novel. But Saleem’s is only one voice in this polyphonic novel, despite its form as an autobiography. Though the novel is cast largely as an account of an eye-witness-and participant, many other voices take over the narration indirectly. Saleem admits, on various occasions, to narrating the versions of many other people.

Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony emphasizes that the author/narrator’s voice is not a privileged one, enjoying monopoly over point of view, consciousness, or meaning. Saleem-the-narrator’s voice, despite his authorial position, is not to be taken as the dominant voice, but rather as just one more voice interacting with others; it is to be sensed against the background of the other voices, including the author’s and reader’s, co-existing in a dialogue.

In an interview by David Brooks, when asked about the readers’ tendency to treat his works as metaphorical, allegorical, and symbolic, Rushdie says that he does not construct his works with allegory in mind. But he also adds that it is wrong for writers to prescribe readings of their work. He adds, “. . . so the fact that I don’t construct like that doesn’t mean you’re not right—who knows? . . . but who am I? I’m just one of the book’s readers!” (Interview by David Brooks. 63). Here Rushdie, despite being the author, shows his willingness to forego any special privilege, and to be seen just like any reader of his novel, exemplifying Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony.

Since Saleem’s voice is not the only determining voice, Rushdie does not see

*Midnight's Children* as a pessimistic, despairing novel. He also distinguishes the author's voice from the protagonist's:

The point of view of the narrator is not entirely that of the author. What I tried to do was to set up a tension in the text, a paradoxical opposition between the form and content of the narrative. The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems'. The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can really be called a despairing book. (*Imaginary Homelands* 16).

Rushdie realizes that the ending of his novel is its most criticized part, as the central character ends in despair. Because Saleem does not achieve anything great for himself or his country, despite all the hopes and optimism of the beginning, readers and critics tend to see the novel as pessimistic. However, Rushdie suggests that the form of the novel, like another voice, opposes the protagonist's pessimism and defeat:

Indian critics particularly began to see the decline of the narrator as the author's message, which of course it is partially. But it is only one part of the author's message. The other part, which I think, has not been properly appreciated, has to do with the actual form of the book itself. I tried quite deliberately to make the form of the book a kind of opposite to what the narrative was saying . . . the optimism in the book seems to me to lie in its "multitudinous" structure. It is designed to show a country or a society with an almost endless capacity for generating stories, events, new ideas, and constantly renewing, rebuilding itself. In the middle of that you have one rather tragic life. The two have to be seen together. And simply to say that the book despairs is to see it in too linear a way. (Interview by Jean-Pierre Durix, Reder 13).

In addition, as Rushdie explains, if it is a despairing vision, it is that of Saleem's generation, of the midnight-children, born in 1947. The midnight-children "are a metaphor for potential destroyed, or hope betrayed" (Interview by Una Chaudhri 27). For that generation, what happened in India from 1947-1975 was a matter of despair; the culmination was the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi with suspension of civil rights in 1975, accompanied by governmental acts of violence such as the arrests of dissidents. However, despite this bleak scenario of autocracy, *Midnight Children* gives a glimpse



of the next generation at the end of the novel. Aadam Sinai, born at the same time as the Emergency rule, is different from Saleem Sinai. Saleem describes the contrast between himself and Aadam Sinai who is the representative of the next generation: “We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be is already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I . . . Aadam Sinai . . . does not (as far as I can tell) surrender to dreams” (425). A little later, the less-than-two-year-old Aadam Sinai elicits this remark from Saleem: “I understood once again that Aadam was a member of a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in prophecy or the stars, but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills” (447). Thus, the novel implies that there is another generation on the way; it does not imply the end of hope and possibility. Rushdie reminds us that the novel was written mostly during and immediately after Indira Gandhi’s Emergency rule, and those periods were not optimistic times. “And so it bears the mark of that” (Interview by Una Chaudhuri 28). Thus the novel is both pessimistic and optimistic, depending on whether one identifies with Saleem’s view or the one implied by his description of the next generation. In my opinion, if we see the end separated from the entire text, it seems pessimistic. But if we consider the whole text, and note the implied phenomenon of continuing cycle of “sons” that goes on even after Saleem’s death, the novel does not seem very pessimistic though there are many episodes that are almost tragic.

D. H. Lawrence has warned us not to trust the artist but to trust only the tale, in his essay “The spirit of place” (122). Perhaps we should take Rushdie–the–author’s comments and explanations concerning his own novel with a grain of salt. Perhaps we should train ourselves to consider the possibility that Rushdie, like Saleem–the–

protagonist in the novel, may be unreliable. However, we should consider his voice as one of the many voices contributing to the polyphony, in our attempts to understand the novel and to explore the different meanings of the novel.

Though the novel looks and begins like the autobiography of one person, the title hints at the plurality embedded in it. First we see one midnight-child, Saleem Sinai; then, some hundred pages later, in page 117, we come to know the existence of a second midnight-child Shiva whose name-tag was switched with Saleem's by Mary, the midwife. Then after many pages, we come to know that a total of 1001 midnight-children were born at the hour of India's independence, in page 195. Rushdie explains his predicament:

I had this terrible problem: how would you write a novel with 1001 major characters? How do you write a novel when you not only have 1001 major characters, but they are divided geographically across a country which is 3,000 miles long and 3,000 miles wide, when they all speak different languages, all come from different social classes, and they have no way of ever meeting? How do you write a book about a thousand people who never meet each other? Well the first problem was to kill 420 of them, which I did by the normal process of child mortality, but to reduce the problem to 581 was not really to solve it. So in the end I had to use this curious device of allowing Saleem, the narrator, to become a telepath, so he could become a kind of ham radio and they would all meet in what he calls the parliament of his brain. This was a kind of technical solution to a technical problem of some size. ("Midnight's" 5).

Thus the device of omniscience that is commonly used in third-person narrative becomes available to this first-person narrative, through the ploy of telepathy. Rushdie combines the devices of autobiographical and semi-historical narratives with the novelistic strategy of omniscience. In addition, while the various characters in a traditional realistic novel may not meet each other, Saleem and the other 580 surviving midnight-children meet in "his head," thanks to his radio-like magical communication with all of them.

*Midnight's Children's* narrative of the history of the nation reminds us of Benedict Anderson's ideas in *Imagined Communities*. In Anderson's reading, the imagining of

the nation displays specific features exemplified by the realistic novel and the newspaper. Nations gather together a variety of people into one collective body, but it is highly unlikely that all these people will meet their fellow nationals. Realist novels also bring a variety of characters together within a certain time and space, though all the characters are not likely to meet. Rushdie manages to make 581 characters meet inside Saleem's head, in the Midnight Children's Conference, in addition to the many other characters that he meets in the world outside his head. Rushdie brings the two imagined communities, namely, the nation, and the novel, together in *Midnight's Children* by intertwining the nation's history in the novel, and for added measure brings hundreds of the characters to meet one another inside Saleem's head.

The single initial hero is decentered and dispersed into 581 contesting voices, in addition to the voices of the many other characters that we hear in the novel. The novel transforms a traditional narrative with a central, single voice into a postmodern-type narrative, with decentralized, relativised meanings. It also problematises the discourse of history, and the idea of 'truth'. Questioning conventional history, it purports to tell the true story, if not *the* true history, at least those parts that were left out of conventional history. At the same time, it deconstructs itself, often highlighting its own unreliability and subjective view. Saleem narrates the stories told by others at various points in the novel. Since Saleem's unreliability as narrator is highlighted in the novel, his story is on an equal footing with all these other versions and does not have a privileged place as the authoritative version, thereby echoing the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony in which no single voice becomes the vehicle of a final, unchanging truth.

Arun Mukherjee's observation that non-Western traditions favor the story of many rather than of a single hero is corroborated by Saleem's words about his identity:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything

whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (383)

Saleem does not see himself as a single person with a single voice with a homogeneous, single identity. He feels that he is all the things that he lists in the quote.

Saleem's creator, Rushdie, is in favor of those novels that attempt to include "as much as possible." He attributes the length of *Midnight's Children* to this desire for inclusion. He distinguishes two kinds of novels: one kind "proceeds on the basis of excluding most of the world, of plucking that one strand out of the universe and writing about that;" the other kind tries to "include everything" ("Midnight's" 10). He admits that his novels, which are of the second kind, would roughly fall into what Henry James called "the loose, baggy monsters" (*The Critical Muse* 515); in Rushdie's opinion, the baggy monster description is probably true, but he is not sure that it is "loose". He goes on to explain that the form of *Midnight's Children* conforms to the idea of a Hindu temple. The Hindu temple, he adds, is a representation of the world mountain. On this world mountain, the sculptor "places as much as he possibly can. The mountain is crowded, it swarms with life, all forms of life. So the idea, the purpose of the temple is to include as much of life as it can . . . I thought that I would do that, to make an echo there in the form of the book with that architectural notion" ("Midnight's" 10).

Saleem also, like Rushdie, reveals that he has a similar aim as the sculptors of the Hindu temple. In the very first page of the novel he tells us, "And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (9).

Rushdie has often admitted that the novels he admires are those that “attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, that attempt to do what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew” (“In Good” 393). Bakhtin also put great value in the ‘novelness’ of the novel. As Michael Holquist points out,

Novelness, and not just the novel, is the name of Bakhtin’s hero because it is the force that enables such particular texts as *Don Quixote* or *The Brothers Karamazov* to be “great expectations,” i.e., good education in the Bakhtinian sense of putting the future into dialogue by being always in advance of current states of consciousness. Literature, when it enacts novelness . . . is a loophole through which we may see a future otherwise obscured by other forms of discourse. (*Dialogism* 83)

In an essay, Rushdie also emphasizes novelness or newness, and he sees eclecticism and hybridity as the means for attaining it. Defending his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie declares that he celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, and the transformation that comes out of new and unexpected combinations; that his novel rejoices in mongrelization and it fears the absolutism of the Pure. “*Melange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*” (“In Good” 394. Rushdie’s emphasis). He declares that such novels are “the most freakish, hybrid, and metamorphic of forms” and the novelists who create them are also freakish, hybrid, mutant, exceptional beings (“Is Nothing” 425).

*Midnight’s Children* exemplifies the dialogic interpretations embedded in a polyphonic novel. Summing up his discussion of the carnivalization, dialogism, and openendedness in Rushdie’s novels, Engblom declares that these features are the means by which Rushdie breaks out of the imperial containments of official, metropolitan, monologic Western versions of the novel (303). The different receptions and interpretations of *Midnight’s Children* seem to demonstrate that the readers also participate in the construction of meaning, and the meaning changes according to the social and historical context of reading.

Rushdie’s argument and Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony indicate that the narrator’s

version reflects only one view, while the novel as a whole is the site of contesting versions. Saleem himself admits that his narrative is only one version among the hundreds of thousands of possible versions. Hence we can envision the possibility of other versions, each one of them taking on centrality by turn, pushing Saleem's version to the margins. However, side by side with the decentralizing view, Saleem often insists on the truth of his version, and this makes it appear that he is claiming to give *the* version, or *the* truth. This struggle between the two tendencies, and the eventual deconstruction of monologism and essentialism characterize the novel.

The dialogic or polyphonic aspect in *Midnight's Children* is also highlighted by the use of a mixture of different literary traditions and genres. In order to include, as much as possible, the variety of life in general and life in India in particular, Rushdie had to choose a commensurable form for his novel. He explains the choice of the form for *Midnight's Children*:

What I was trying to do in *Midnight's Children* was to make a plural form, since it seemed to me that I was writing about a world as manifold as it's possible for a world to be. If you were to reflect that plurality, you would have to use as many different kinds of form as were available to you—fable, political novel, surrealism, kitchen sink, everything—and try to find an architecture which would allow all those different kinds of writing to co-exist. (Interview by John Haffenden 45)

Rushdie's preference for using different literary forms and genres in his novel reminds us of the quote from Scholes and Kellogg cited earlier, which emphasizes that the most powerful narratives are made of a mixture of genres.

Rushdie has commented on the fragmentation in our contemporary life: "One of the things that has happened in the twentieth century is a colossal fragmentation of reality" ("An Interview" 15). Fawzia Afzal-Khan argues that since our contemporary world is fragmented,

the mode or genre equal to dealing with the exigencies of political fragmentation must perforce be equally fragmented. In fact, the narrative must be a mishmash of conflicting genres and modes, a narrative in which the comic and the tragic, the real, the surreal, and the mythic all ‘defuse’ one another, so no one genre can predominate and ‘unify’ the others. (154)

Keith Wilson also sees the use of one single mode as a way to court failure: “The realities of public history or private experience [both are the topics of narration in *Midnight’s Children*] are never reducible to the encompassing forms that the absolutist artist may wish to impose upon them” (25).

Tim Parnell, commenting on Rushdie’s self-professed eclecticism in his novels, notes that since “on the formal level, the novels are characterized by an eclectic blending of genres, modes and motifs drawn from Indian, English and international ‘traditions’, the reader is, in part, licensed to emphasize any one element in his or her reading without feeling that they have failed to grasp the whole” (241-42). As Rushdie sees eclecticism and hybridity as an endemic and positive element of Indian culture, Parnell adds: “In an important sense, then, the novels’ eclectic narrative modes are informed by Rushdie’s view of what is most admirable in Indian culture. Over against the dogmatic ideologies of the communalists, which he sees as threatening to tear India apart, Rushdie sets hybridity” (245). A character in Rushdie’s later novel *The Satanic Verses* writes a book that argues for “an ethic of historically validated eclecticism” drawing upon the Indian “national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-leave-the-rest” (52). Parnell points out the irony that while such eclecticism succeeds at the level of form, at the thematic level Rushdie’s novels document the real factional strife in India and Pakistan (246).

## 1.6 Multiplicity of Meanings

One of the striking features of *Midnight's Children* is the highlighting of multiple meanings for events, actions, and so on. To consider just one example, the meaning of the “midnight children” is given differently at various points in the narrative (118, 195, 200, 229, 291, 304, 434, 438-39). Saleem tells us that midnight’s children “can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom . . . ” (200). They might even become “the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind,” though Saleem is vehemently against this possibility (200). He asserts that the midnight-children were only partially the offspring of their parents; that they were “also the children of the *time*: fathered . . . by history” (118). It was “as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time” (195). In contrast to this hopeful, utopian expectation, Saleem gives another view of the midnight children, retrospectively: “we [the midnight-children] refused to look at the dark side, and not a single one of us suggested that the purpose of *Midnight's Children* might be annihilation; that we would have no meaning until we were destroyed” (229).

Describing the overthrow of the President of Pakistan and his forced exile, Saleem gives us another philosophical thought: “Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepperpots . . . I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I—even I—had dreamed” (291).



Speaking from the perspective of the autocratic Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976, after her decree of Emergency Rule, Saleem describes the midnight-children as she would have seen them: “that fearsome conspiracy which had to be broken at all costs—that gang of cut-throat desperadoes.” He describes the “astrology-ridden Prime Minister” trembling in terror before these allegedly dangerous midnight-children, these “grotesque aberrational monsters of independence, for whom a modern nation-state could have neither time nor compassion” (434). Broken in spirit, after being imprisoned and forcibly sterilized, Saleem gives a very dejected picture of the midnight-children: “Who were we? We were are shall be the gods you never had” (438); “Who were we? Broken promises; made to be broken” (439).

In a similar manner, throughout the narrative, *Midnight's Children* presents us with different possible meanings for many things, highlighting the multiplicity of voices and consciousnesses implied by polyphony.

### **1.7 *Midnight's Children* as Postmodern Narrative**

Eclecticism in *Midnight's Children* could also be understood in terms of postmodernism. The decentering of meaning, characters, voices, genres, etc., that we find in *Midnight's Children* makes the novel an easy target for labeling it as a postmodern fiction. In addition, other features of *Midnight's Children*, such as its playful style with its exuberance and word-play (that are in stark contrast with the fate of the protagonist), the profusion of self-reflexive comments, its metafictional, and metahistorical elements, use of magic realism, fantasy—all these features contribute to the impression that it belongs to the class of postmodern fiction.

Tim Parnell and Kumkum Sangari have discussed Rushdie's double allegiance in his literary mode. In Parnell's reading, Rushdie's novels “self-consciously partake of Euro-

American as well as Indian literary traditions” (237). Kumkum Sangari describes the tendency of Rushdie to address both a Western and the Indian subcontinental readership as “double coding” (912). She adds that Rushdie’s narratives

play provocatively with disparate ways of seeing, yet are riven by the strain of double coding for different audiences. Further, drawing on culturally different modes, they are caught between different ideological systems, pressured by different demands. In the attempt to negotiate two terrains Rushdie’s narratives confirm and unsettle much on either side. (912-13)

In my view, it is exactly this “disparate ways of seeing” and the use of different cultural modes that contribute to the polyphony in *Midnight’s Children*, the polyphony that Bakhtin valued in a novel. Given Rushdie’s double heritage from India and England during his growing up, it is not only to be expected, but perhaps inevitable that his work reflects his double allegiance and double coding that Sangari mentions. The simultaneous ‘confirming’ and ‘unsettling’ of both sides that Sangari notes, is again, a feature of dialogism. If it were not for this feature, the novel would be monologic. Linda Hutcheon sees the simultaneous confirming and unsettling as a feature of postmodernist fiction/metafictional historiography. Regardless of what it is called, the multiplicity of views and modes, and their confrontation in a dialogic manner, provide a strategy of avoiding absolutism, giving expression to different voices.

Tim Parnell sees in Rushdie’s narrative a simultaneous engagement with postmodernist poetics and postcolonial politics. Parnell observes that radical textual strategies are not always seen as revolutionary politics, but “have often been seen as bespeaking little more than a gestural politics of despair,” because “the extreme scepticism of much postmodernist thought has arisen in the West alongside a massively diminished faith in the real possibility of political action” (237). The general complaint

against postmodern fiction is that it destabilizes the concept of meaning itself, and thereby depoliticizes writing.

The connection between postmodernism and politics makes it relevant to assess the effects and strategies of postmodernist fiction. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, argues that postmodernism, which is paradoxically self-reflexive and inward-looking on the one hand, yet at the same time, is grounded in historical actuality and looks outward at the world, is best able to reveal the contingent and constructed nature of oppressive discourses. In Kumkum Sangari's reading, the narrative strategies of Rushdie [and Marquez], which include non-mimetic modes, "inhabit a social and conceptual space in which the problems of ascertaining meaning assume a political dimension qualitatively *different* from the current postmodern scepticism about meaning in Europe and America" (900; Sangari's emphasis). Thus, *Midnight's Children*, even if we call it a postmodern fiction, does not represent a crisis in meaning in the way many Western postmodern fictions do. Sangari also points out that Rushdie's "narratives may employ a comparable nonmimetic mode, but they can neither be bracketed with García Marquez's, nor seen as continuous with postmodernism, and need to be 'contextualized' separately" (912).

Since Rushdie's novel straddles the categories of both postcolonial and postmodernist fiction (however disparate the members of each category may be), it seems to present opposite tendencies. The postcolonial aims at describing the condition of the former colonies, often showing an anti- or post- discursive purchase in culture; hence it "calls forth issues of identity, of political agency and of value, in a manner which appears to bring it into direct conflict with the centreless scepticism of much postmodern theory and practice" (Parnell 238). The arguments against the postmodernist features in Rushdie's novel include the complaint that he adopts

relativizing discursive strategies which threaten to dismantle the very critique that he articulates; in addition, Parnell points out that “such strategies are implicated within a peculiarly *western* way of seeing” (238-39; Parnell’s italics). The problem with using postmodern techniques is the “issue of the degree to which they can be said to carry with them the culturally specific ideologies which grow out of the late-capitalist West” (239). However, some, like Stephen Slemon, suggest a pragmatic position between the two opposing discourses of postcolonialism and postmodernism: Postcolonialism can “draw on post-structuralism’s suspension of the referent in order to read the social ‘text’ of colonialist power and at the same time would reinstall the referent in the service of colonized and post-colonial societies” (5). In other words, the features of postmodernist fiction such as the decentering and relativizing of truth and meaning can be seen not as a world-view, but as offering a set of literary and theoretical strategies that can assault the certainties of oppressive discourses, such as that of Euro-American colonizers, but not destabilize meaning and purpose for the native subalterns. Within postcolonialism there has been a move away from essentialism, towards hybridity, since essentialism and binarism of self and the other that paradoxically helped both the imperial project and the anti-colonial native project become obsolete and even harmful after independence; if not controlled, the binarism of self and other will begin to disintegrate the independent nation into different factions, leading to communal conflicts and internal wars. Edward Said sees the “potential for an emergent non-coercive culture” in the novels such as *Midnight’s Children* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and texts such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, since they offer alternative discourses. Commenting on their subversive strategies, Said says:

These are not new master discourses, strong new narratives, but . . . another way of telling. When photographs or texts are used merely to establish identity and presence—to give us merely representative images of *the* Woman, or *the* Indian—they enter what Berger calls a control system. With their innately ambiguous, hence

negative and anti-narrativist waywardness *not* denied, however, they permit unregimented subjectivity to have a social function. (*Culture* 405; Said's emphasis)

Parnell points out that in this light we can understand Rushdie's use of postmodern fragmentation of truth with his concomitant condemnation of the kind of narcissistic postmodernism found in a novel like *Foucault's Pendulum*. Like Said and Rushdie, Homi Bhabha also points out that postmodern decentering need not lead us to despair; it can open up "the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities" (*The Location* 5). The carnivalist features, the heteroglossia, and the heightened sense of dispersion of voices that we see in *Midnight's Children* also serve a similar function, enabling us to hear voices of marginalized people, voices that are not often heard in conventional narratives. In such arguments, as Parnell points out, postmodernism and postcolonial criticism interpenetrate rather than collide.

The intertextual play in *Midnight's Children* such as the use of strategies that are reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*, the evocation of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* by having a Doctor Aziz in the novel as a major character, the reference to *Cyrano of Bergerac*, the use of the idea of the son of a White man being brought up as an Indian reminding us of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and the use of the name "Wee Willie Winkie" which is also the title of a story by Kipling with the protagonist bearing this name taken from a nursery rhyme, the Midnight's Children's Conference MCC of Saleem perhaps alluding satirically to the other MCCs, such as the Mayapore Chattrajee Club in Paul Scott's imperial novel *The Jewel in the Crown*, and "the famous British refuge of colonial privilege, the Marylebone Cricket Club" (Brennan, 82), and to the Chandrapore Club in E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*, which is a club into which "Indians are not allowed even as guests"(41), etc., attest to the influence of Western literary sources. In

addition, Rushdie's novel shows likeness to the novels of Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera, and García Marquez. Both postcolonial and postmodern fictions use intertextual elements. But the difference, for many critics, lies in the politicized use of intertextuality in the postcolonial discourses. To quote Parnell,

By interweaving the techniques of Indian oral narrative with allusions to colonial and contemporary western texts, Rushdie is able both to indicate the real sense in which the postcolonial India and Pakistan cannot simply efface the colonial legacy, and to construct an alternative discourse which does not merely replicate the dogmatic discourses of cultural nationalism. (245)

In other words, Rushdie's novel opposes colonial texts without simply inverting their ideologies. In Parnell's reading, Rushdie's novels also attempt to absorb their colonial precursors "in order to indicate that the representational boot is now on the other foot" (245). The allusions to the colonial novels can be seen as ironic and satiric, rather than emulation or copying.

In general, postmodernism and postmodern fictions are seen as apolitical. But Rushdie has made it clear that he cares very much about what goes on in the world and does not believe in the separation of writing from public issues. Rather than being apolitical, he sometimes gets uncomfortably involved with politics. In a conversation with Gunter Grass in 1985, he explains his dislike of a postmodernism that separates writing and public issues:

There are two bodies of thought at the moment which would hold that politics is none of our business as writers. There is, certainly inside English literature, but I suspect in all literatures, an attitude towards writing which says that it is somehow separate from these public issues, and ought to be separated from them. And, on the other hand, you have the whole apparatus of the post-modernist critique, which also, for very different reasons, seeks to separate the text from the world. So you have both a radical and a conservative discourse suggesting that writers should not meddle in public affairs. My own inability to believe that that's the case is very strong. ("Fictions" 74).

Rushdie, echoing Edward Said, has expressed his belief that texts “do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and that the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, [there is] a context” (“Outside” 92). He does not agree with “the part of structuralism which talks about the text as a kind of entity which is first of all separate from the world and secondly almost separate from its author” (Interview by David Brooks 58). In the same interview, Rushdie affirms that books “are about things which are outside books. If books are not about the world then they are not interesting to people, not even interesting to write, to me” (58). He agrees that consciousness of one’s narrative strategies, of form and technique (self-conscious, metafictional, self-reflexive digressions) can sometimes show in the writing and this is seen as a post-modernist device. The tendency of books to occasionally discuss themselves, for him, “has nothing much to do with fashions in criticism.” He attributes the self-commentary in his writing to a desire to “provide critical tools *in* the writing” because in India and Pakistan [at least until the 1980s] he felt the absence of a critical method flexible enough to cope with the rapid changes taking place in writing (Interview by David Brooks 59; Rushdie’s emphasis); the critical methods in the two countries, as Rushdie saw them in the 1970s when he started to write the novel, “tend[ed] to be rather atrophied into either a very traditional, classical Arabic and Persian, or Hindu and Sanskrit approach, or else something handed down from the English—the Great Tradition view of literature—and there seem[ed] to be nothing else” (interview by David Brooks, 58-59).

Rushdie’s involvement with the world outside the text and his firm belief in and desire for the non-separation of writing from the world are features that distinguish his novel from apolitical postmodern fiction. *Midnight’s Children* does not simply

destabilize *all* meanings. The strategic destabilization of meaning in *Midnight's Children* is closer to the dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony discussed by Bakhtin.

Bakhtin, in his essay "Epic and Novel" points out that when a straightforward genre such as the epic is parodied in a new form, it is not the heroes themselves (of the epic) who are parodied, but the heroization. Bakhtin affirms that the word is revealed in all its limitations and insufficiency, but only after being made into a laughing image of itself, but it is by no means discredited in the process. In other words, meaning itself is not nullified; rather, the singular meaning is replaced by the various possibilities of meaning. *Midnight's Children* exemplifies this feature by presenting multiplicity and uncertainty, but it does not deny meaning or history itself. Rushdie disagrees with those aspects of post-structuralism and post-modernism that deny the outside world, and the possibility of meaning itself. In the interview by David Brooks in 1984, Rushdie says that he has almost no knowledge of Structuralists, except what one reads in the papers. He admits to having read some Barthes, but not Lacan, Derrida, or Foucault. But he adds, "That doesn't mean that their thought doesn't filter through, and I do think there is a good and bad part of structuralism. The part of structuralism that does not interest me is the idea that the book is self-referential, that the book is a kind of closed system" (Reder 58).

In an interview by Kumkum Sangari he admits that some aspects of postmodernism might have entered his fiction, but he also makes clear that he does not agree with all the aspects of postmodernism: "... one of the reasons I don't accept the postmodernist label is that they don't accept that literature is referential. It says that there is only the text, the world of the book, and the world outside the book has very little to do with the inside. Postmodernism has entered me, in the sense that it's in the air, but I haven't really studied its lexicon or its processes. Of course there are useful things about textual



analysis—about how the text exists in the world, in society, about fictiveness and play and the nature of reality—but it’s not an ideology of fiction to which I subscribe. Because I do think books are about the world” (69).

One of the reasons that Rushdie’s fiction highlights uncertainty, like postmodern fiction, is that realism, in his opinion, has become outmoded and inadequate to deal with the reality of our contemporary world. (However, there is no reason to think that only postmodern fictions use the feature of destabilization of meaning.) Social realism, Rushdie points out, is a convention that has tried to impose itself as some kind of objective truth; but it is “actually as artificial as everything else” (Interview by Una Chaudhuri 22). He reminds us that Brecht had discussed the need to treat literary form not merely as an aesthetic problem, but as a political problem, moral problem, and “all sorts of things.” So, in order to describe reality “you do not have to write realism, because realism is only one rule about reality: there are lots of others” (22). Realism, Rushdie asserts, has become outmoded, partly because the convention of realism was formed to describe a reality that no longer exists; the world has changed. Realism seems to be appropriate for the world of the nineteenth-century, but not for the world of twentieth-century. Since the world has changed, the form we use to represent it must also change. One of the things that twentieth century taught us, according to Rushdie, is that “human beings are not discrete from each other” (23). So Rushdie’s fiction focuses on how things, people, ideas, meanings etc., “leak” into each other.

In addition, in our contemporary world, even physical science does not rest on certainties. Psychology, the concept of time, space, matter, all have undergone and still undergo changes that destabilize earlier certainties. “We have question marks now in place of certainties,” says Rushdie. Saleem’s omniscience in *Midnight’s Children*, for instance, is not real omniscience, as Rushdie explains: “Saleem claims, or pretends to,

the role of omniscient narrator, but that is partly because he's fallible, and partly because he's mistaken about some things, including himself. He is obviously not omniscient" (Interview by Una Chaudhuri 23). Saleem himself admits gaps in his omniscience on various occasions, when many events catch him unawares. Even a human being, Rushdie points out, is not a single person. In his view, this is another difference that separates the twentieth century from the earlier times: "Another idea that we have and that they didn't have is that human personality can be many things, that people can shift enormously, that the way they behave in different circumstances with different people at different times in their lives can be hugely different. Saleem is several different characters, really, all of whom happened to be called one thing" (23). Perhaps this is why Saleem and many other characters such as Mumtaz/Amina, Naseem/Mother Superior, the Brass Monkey/Jamila Singer, Parvati/Laylah, Mian Abdullah/the Hummingbird, Wee Willie Winkie and Picture Singh—we never learn the real names of the last two—have different names in the novel. Saleem is called by various derogatory nicknames such as Snotnose, Stainface, Mapface, Baldy, Sniffer, and the buddha. Saleem refers to himself in the third person at various points in the narrative implying that he was a different person in the past. But this type of uncertainty about identity, and Saleem's uncertainty about his memory and the meanings and motives of various events and acts that he narrates, are not merely 'play' or aesthetic devices; nor do they deny the existence of all meaning as such.

Critics like Mark Edmundson argue that the main difference between Rushdie's brand of postmodernism and that of Western novelists lies in its resistance to containment; in its strategy of liberation that is marked by a celebration of freedom. Western postmodernist novelists like Thomas Pynchon, according to Edmundson, treat the demystification of all systems of truth and belief as an end in itself; hence their

works produce a tone “perpetually tentative, anxious, remote” (65). Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* also demystifies systems of truth, belief, etc., but Engblom points out that it provides “riotous comedy, exuberant play, and irrepressible carnival” (295). And carnival, like postmodernism, is associated with decentering, destabilization of established order, a mingling of the high and low, and hybridity; it is a form of opposition to established norms and hierarchies, not a cancellation of all meaning.

It is possible to read the unreliability and uncertainty in Saleem’s narrative as a ploy to make the readers more skeptical and suspicious in general, and to wean them from the habit of relying on the author to tell them the truth. I have included Rushdie-the-author’s own comments about his novel, as they constitute one of the voices that contribute to the polyphony, one of the voices from the world outside the text that add to the polyphony from within the novel. We do not have to take his explanations and comments as the final word, as he himself has said in an interview by David Brooks that he is just like one of the readers, not any special authority with respect to the interpretation of his novel (63). He has also suggested at the end of his essay “ ‘Errata’: or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children*” that the reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration could serve as a useful analogy for the way we all “ ‘read’ the world” (25); and the “world” includes his novel. No single reading, including the author’s, is to be taken as the final meaning, as Bakhtin’s concept of polyphonic novel says unequivocally that the great dialogue of the novel is left open, with “no finalizing period at the end” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 165).

As Stephane Tyssens observes, Rushdie’s brand of uncertainty may be a device “precisely to deflate the myth of the genius at work and to discourage the reader from swallowing indiscriminately anything he is told” (28).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE VOICE OF HISTORY

This long chapter explores the various aspects of history in *Midnight's Children*. As a preliminary, I note the relation between the narratives of fiction and history, and their similarities and differences before discussing the depiction of history in *Midnight's Children*. The topics in this chapter include: Rushdie's use and parody of the rules of historical method, the novel's depiction of the mediated nature of history, the different sources—both conventional and unconventional—from which different versions of history are constructed, and the distortion and fabrication of history by the media and governmental agencies, the mixing of conventional history with fiction, the use of fantasy, legends, rumors, gossip, etc., the role of memory, and amnesia in historical consciousness, and the various attitudes towards memory and forgetting with respect to our perception of the past and the present, postcolonial theorizations about forgetting the colonial past with its painful and shameful memories, the novel's treatment of the unusual aspects in the colonizer-colonized-relations, such as the seductive side of the colonizer's power and the native's complicity in responding to this seduction, the forces of desire, envy, and mimicry, the colonization of the minds of the natives through the myth of the superiority of the colonizers and their culture, the inferiority-complex and the self-hatred that are spawned among the natives through the mechanism of colonization, and the problem of the divisions within the nation along the lines of race, skin color, religion, class, languages, etc., as illustrated in the novel. The different unconventional forms of resistance the natives use against colonial hegemony that we encounter in the novel are also explored. The different versions of history that Saleem-the-narrator presents are seen as constituting a dialogue and persuading the readers to

actively participate in that dialogue, in their search for truth and meaning.

*Midnight's Children* blends the private story of Saleem (and his family) and the public history of the nation, thereby combining autobiographical fiction and history. The fictional elements elaborate aspects of history that are usually not included in conventional history; they are the aspects that would be difficult to narrate in other ways. Rushdie blurs the boundaries between history and fiction in this novel just as he blurs the boundaries between different genres and modes.

## 2.1 History and the Novel

### 2.1.1 Similarities and Differences

Many novelists, historians and critics have commented on the close kinship between the novel and history. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* highlights this relation in a striking manner, and mixes the two types of narratives. I will cite the comments of some historians on this subject.

In *The Idea of History*, R.G. Collingwood discusses the ancient Greek ideas about history and poetry. He points out that because the Greek historical consciousness was one of violent, catastrophic changes from one state of things to its opposite—from smallness to greatness, from pride to abasement, from happiness to misery, that is how they showed human life in their dramas and narrated it in their history. History served as a basis for prognostic judgements, laying down what was likely to happen (not what will happen), indicating the points of danger in the rhythms of the changes in human life going on in the present. Collingwood describes the classical Greek attitude toward history and poetry:

. . . valuable as the teachings of history are, their value is limited by the unintelligibility of its subject matter; and that is why Aristotle said [*Poetics*, 1451b 5ff] that poetry is more scientific than history, for history is a mere collection of empirical facts, whereas poetry extracts from such facts a universal judgement.

History tells us that Croesus fell and that Polycrates fell; poetry, according to Aristotle's idea of it, makes not these singular judgements but the universal judgement that very rich men, as such, fall . . . Thus poetry is for Aristotle the distilled essence of the teaching of history. In poetry the lessons of history do not become any more intelligible and they remain undemonstrated and therefore merely probable, but they become more compendious and therefore more useful. (24)

As Scholes and Kellogg point out, for Aristotle, the superiority of poetry over history was its ability to represent not actuality itself but the typical. While history was limited to describing events as they actually happened, poetry could present hypothetical events as they might happen. The agents in a poetic action were universal in that they said and did things one would expect from men of certain types. Their actions were consistent in that they followed the laws of probability and necessity. Its consistency, universality and representation (not of actuality directly, but) of the laws governing actuality made poetry superior to history. For Plato, poetry was an imitation of an imitation, because for him actuality itself was an imitation. For Aristotle, poetry, because of its generalizing and universalizing, was moving toward the real, and not away from the real as it was for Plato (Scholes and Kellogg 120-21).

However, Scholes and Kellogg add that in our age,

Science seems to have demonstrated that Aristotle's distinction between history and fiction was one of degree, not of kind. [because] All knowing and all telling are subject to the conventions of art. Because we apprehend reality through culturally determined types, we can report the most particular event only in the form of a representational fiction, assigning motives, causes, and effects according to our best lights rather than according to absolute truth. (151)

Modern empiricism in narratives has blurred the distinction between the purely historical (and mimetic forms of narratives such as biography and autobiography) from the novel. Novels of Proust, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and others show the powerful impact of the autobiography on the novel. The convergence of the novel with history, biography, and autobiography, according to Scholes and Kellogg, has resulted "from a modern skepticism of knowing anything about human affairs in an entirely objective

(non-fictional) way” (151).

Scholes and Kellogg also observe that the original union that existed between empirical narratives such as history and fictional narratives in the oral tradition came to happen again in the novel, especially when realism became the dominant mode of the novel. The desire to combine the empirical approach of history and the fictional (such as the traditional and mythical) approach had inspired ancient works such as *The Golden Ass* and the *Satiricon*, and it inspires modern novelists also. Artists who seek such a compromise, to use the phrase of Scholes and Kellogg, want to have the empirical bread as well as eat the fictional cake (255). Such novelists have a narrative voice that postures as a *histor* or an inquirer of truth, and sometimes also assumes an omniscient posture, with an omniscience that roams freely through space and time. Because of this mixing of the modes of history and fiction, there will be always borderline cases “that will create problems if we try to make our dividing line coincide with some sort of division between fiction and non-fiction or between artful and factual narrative” (Scholes and Kellogg 257).

As in the times of Plato and Aristotle, in our time, the relation between novel and history, between the novelist and historian, continues to engage the attention of historians, novelists, critics and theorists. Collingwood points out that that a historian is bound to use imagination for his narrative, not merely for ornamental purpose but to structure his work. Such use of imagination, in history as well as fiction, is not arbitrary or merely fanciful; “it is necessary or in Kantian language, *a priori*” (240). Expanding his comparison of the novelist and the historian, Collingwood observes:

Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events; partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole . . . The novel and the history must both of them make sense . . . Both the novel and the history are . . . the product of an autonomous or self-authorizing activity; and in both cases this activity is the *a priori* imagination. (245)

The difference between the works of historian and the novelist lies in our expectations of each type of narrative. As Collingwood points out,

As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian's picture is meant to be true. The novelist has a single task only: to construct a coherent picture, one that makes sense. The historian has a double task: he has both to do this, and to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened. This further necessity imposes upon him obedience to three rules of method, from which the novelist or artist in general is free. (246)

The three rules of method that a historian has to obey are discussed in the following section. At this point, suffice it to note that Saleem takes the trouble to follow these rules and thus attempts to assume the posture of a historian.

The historian and the novelist usually treat different types of events, but they could take up the same kind of events for elaboration in their work. Historians are concerned with events that can be assigned to specific time-place locations and events that are or were observable. Novelists, poets, and playwrights, on the other hand, are concerned with these events as well as with events that are imagined, hypothetical and invented.

For Hayden White, what should interest us is

the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other. Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts. (*Tropics of Discourse* 121)

For White, despite our "specific preconceptions about the [different] kinds of truths" that the novel and history are supposed to represent, both the novelist and historian aim the same; both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality" (*Tropics* 122). White points out that the image of reality which the novelist constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less "real" than that described by the historian; he adds that if we forego the "Western prejudice for



empiricism as the sole access to reality,” the novel and history need not represent a conflict between two kinds of truth (*Tropics* 122). Rather than associating the novel with the truth of coherence only and associating history with the truth of correspondence only, White argues that both the novel and history must meet the standards of both coherence and correspondence. He points out that prior to the French Revolution, historiography was regarded as a literary art, as a branch of rhetoric, and its part “fictive” nature was generally recognized and tacitly accepted. Though “fact” and “fiction” were distinguished by theorists, historiography was not seen as a representation of facts unalloyed by fancy. The inevitability of the use of fictional techniques, such as rhetorical devices, tropes, and figures, in the representation of real events in historical discourse was recognized. As White explains,

Truth was not equated with fact, but with combination of fact and the conceptual matrix within which it was appropriately located in the discourse. The imagination, no less than the reason had to be engaged in any adequate representation of the truth; and this meant that the techniques of fiction-making were as necessary to the composition of a historical discourse as erudition might be. (*Tropics* 123)

Saleem echoes this idea that truth and fact are not the same when he says, “What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same” (79). He thinks that truth lies hidden inside the stories which combine fiction with realism. “*True*” for Saleem is something “concealed just over the horizon” towards which the stories point (79; Rushdie’s italics). In other words, truth is neither a simple thing, nor something that can be easily perceived.

Going back to the early idea of historical accounts as a mixture of fact and fictional devices, White describes the moving away of history from fictional techniques. After the unforeseen excesses and failures of the French Revolution, Western historians wanted to demythify history and this resulted in the opposition of fiction and history. Historians began to identify truth with fact, and came to regard fiction as the opposite of

truth. History and fiction (especially the novel) came to be seen as opposites, the former as the representation of the 'actual' and the latter as the representation of the imaginable. However, as already noted, historians such as Collingwood and White note many similarities between the aims, methods and products of art and history.

Scholes and Kellogg also point out that in the ancient world, history was clearly an art and historiography had not become scientific enough to cause a dispute between two forms, namely, the scientific history and the artistic history. Histories and biographies which aspired to artistic status tended to move away from merely chronological narrative toward more esthetically satisfying patterns. That is, historical narrative will borrow mythical and fictional elements and devices to the extent it is willing sacrifice science to art. The esthetically or artistically minded historian or biographer, "even before he writes a word, is looking esthetically satisfying patterns in the people and events he considers as potential subjects for his work" (Scholes and Kellogg 217).

The best narrative would strike an optimum balance between science and art. "The historian who succeeds in marrying science and art with the fewest sacrifices on either side is no doubt the one with whom Clio, Muse of history, is best pleased" (Scholes and Kellogg 228). Historical narrative and its "younger relative the novel" are both unstable compounds pulled in different directions. Historical narrative is always in danger of giving "way too much to one or the other of the opposed fictional and empirical pressures which continually beset it" (Scholes and Kellogg 228).

For White, scientific statements and artistic (or metaphysical) statements need not be seen as mutually exclusive categories. Science also, like history, often has to fall back on the devices of tropes and analogies to conceptualize and describe its hypotheses and findings. As White points out, an explanation need not be assigned unilaterally to the category of the literally truthful on the one hand or the purely imaginary on the other;

the governing metaphor of a historical account “could be treated as a *heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data from consideration as evidence*” (*Tropics* 46; White’s emphasis). In White’s reading, a historian, like a modern artist and scientist, “seeks to exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field” (*Tropics* 46; White’s emphasis).

It is not unusual for a writer of empirical accounts such as biography or autobiography to use the techniques of fiction and the methods of the novelist. E.M. Forster describes the quarrel of the critic Norman Douglas with D. H. Lawrence for the latter’s alleged use of “the novelist’s touch” in a biography of mutual friend (see *Aspects of the Novel* 75). Forster quotes Douglas’s irate complaint against Lawrence’s long introduction to *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion* by Maurice Magnus, in *D.H. Lawrence and Maurice Magnus: A Plea for Better Manners*. The novelist’s touch, according to Douglas,

consists . . . in a failure to realize the profundities and complexities of the ordinary human mind; it selects for literary purposes two or three facets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular and therefore ‘useful’ ingredients of their character; and disregards all the others. Whatever fails to fit in with these specially chosen traits is eliminated; must be eliminated, for otherwise the description would not hold water. Such and such are the data; everything incompatible with those data has to go by the board. It follows that the novelist’s touch argues, often logically, from a wrong premise; it takes what it likes and leaves the rest. The facts may be correct so far as they go, but there are too few of them; what the author says may be true, and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist’s touch. It falsifies life. (qtd in Forster 75)

Douglas’s complaint about the novelist’s touch seems, to some extent, unreasonable because the strategy of selection and elimination in the choice of one’s subject is unavoidable regardless of whether one is a historian or a novelist. If there is a difference in the use of this strategy between historians and novelists, it is one of degree rather

than of kind. Collingwood, a historian and philosopher himself, sees what Douglas sees as the novelist's touch as the historian's touch as well. He makes it clear that this impossibility of including everything or perceiving everything in their entirety is common to all of us. It is not limited to the novelist or historian. The historian, for instance, can neither contemplate the whole of the present nor the whole of the past:

The perceptible here-and-now can never be perceived, still less interpreted, in its entirety; and the infinite process of past time can never be envisaged as a whole. But this separation between what is attempted in principle and what is achieved in practice is the lot of mankind, not a peculiarity of historical thinking . . . [In this] history is like art, science, philosophy, the pursuit of virtue, and the search for happiness. (*The Idea* 247).

Even the so-called universal histories, every one of them, Collingwood asserts, "is a mere selection of the facts which the writer happens to think important or interesting or in some way capable of grinding his particular axe" (*The Idea* 454). Collingwood describes the common lot and common strategies of the artist and the historian as follows: A landscape painter may fancy that he is reproducing, in his own medium, the actual reality. But,

however hard he tries to do this he is always selecting, simplifying, schematizing, leaving out what he thinks unimportant and putting in what he regards as essential. It is the artist, and not nature, that is responsible for what goes into the picture. In the same way, no historian, not even the worst, merely copies out his authorities; even if he puts in nothing of his own (which is never really possible), he is always leaving out things, which, for one reason or another, he decides that his work does not need or cannot use. (236)

The above arguments make it clear that both the historian and the novelist attempt to make sense out of the chaotic, infinite materials that constitute our reality. They select from their raw material what they want, and then they impose order, rearrangement, and distortion (by means of emphasis or minimization) on what they have selected. They cannot avoid being subjective in their narration. Both the novelist and the historian use memory and imagination, though to different degrees.

Saleem in *Midnight's Children* admits at various points that he uses selection, exaggeration, minimization and the like, which, to use Douglas' term, is the novelist's touch. But his method of selection and elimination is also like the historian's, if we follow Collingwood and White in their description of the historian's technique.

Saleem makes it clear at various points that his idea of history is not literal 'truth'. A sample of his comments drive home this point: "Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts" (47); " 'What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same.' *True*, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me" (79; Rushdie's italics); "reality is a question of perspective" (165); "I told you the truth. Memory's truth, because 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" (211). Saleem reminds us that each person prefers his or her own version of truth above everybody else's: "no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than one's own" (211). He also insists that reality "can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real" (200).

An interesting comment of Saleem about "family history" can be extended to history in general. He compares the restrictions and prohibitions imposed on the writing of family history to the dietary restrictions in many religions: "Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood" (59). Commenting on the Emergency decreed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Saleem observes: "the Emergency too [like the Prime Minister's hair, which was white on one side and black on the other side] had a white part—public, visible, documented, a matter for historians—and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a

matter for us” (421). Saleem’s words point to the practice of historians to select what is conventionally permitted to be included, and leave out what is, by convention, considered unsuitable, distasteful, shameful, or inappropriate. When state power is authoritative, it suppresses those parts of history that are unflattering or even injurious to the reputation of the ruling members. The selective approach of historians, whether it is their own voluntary choice, or imposed upon them by those in power, is similar to the “novelist’s touch” that Douglas criticized in Lawrence’s biographical writing. Saleem’s comments indicate that the historian, as much as the novelist, uses the selective approach.

When we consider the impossibility of total inclusion, we are forced to admit that some kind of selection is an unavoidable necessity, both for the historian and the novelist. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* and White (who cites Lévi Strauss to corroborate his point) in *Tropics of Discourse* describe the inevitable selection and elimination involved in any representation. In order to give coherence and meaning, the historian, like the novelist, must impose an order and a limiting perspective on the infinity of reality (see *The Idea of History* 247, 451-52; *Tropics of Discourse* 90).

We see this idea of the unavoidability of selection/exclusion expressed in a different form in *Shame*, another novel of Rushdie, namely, that for every voice an author chooses to express, many others get left behind: “Every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales” (*Shame* 72-73). White echoes this same idea, with respect to history:

We can construct a comprehensible story of the past, Levi Strauss insists, only by a decision to “give up” one or more of the domain of facts offering themselves for inclusion in our accounts. Our *explanations* of historical structures and processes are thus determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in. For it is in this brutal capacity to exclude certain facts in the interest of constituting others as components of comprehensible stories that the historian displays his tact as well as his understanding. The “overall coherence” of any given “series” of historical facts is the coherence of story, but this coherence is achieved

only by a tailoring of the "facts" to the requirements of the story form. (*Tropics* 90-91; White's emphasis)

In the last chapter of the novel Saleem elaborates his comparison of his history-writing to pickle-making. In addition to the raw materials, both arts (pickle-making and writing of history) need a critical perception that is "undeceived by the superficial blandishments," that can see "corruption beneath," that can discern "the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humours and messages and emotions," and the ability to "include memories, dreams, ideas" (460). He admits that his history is at times "overly-harsh," that it shows some "ambiguity," "vague possibilities," "questions that are not fully answered," and sometimes a "discordant note." Referring to himself in the third person, he self-critiques: "Sometimes, in the pickles' version of history, Saleem appears to have known too little; at other times, too much" (460). Like pickles, history also needs "spices" and sometimes even "the flavourful contributions of the occasional speck of dirt" (461). And in the spice bases, one has to reconcile oneself "to the inevitable distortions of the pickling process" (461). Both history and pickles embalm the raw materials, giving them a kind of immortality. But Saleem admits that they also lead to "a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste," and pleads that this alteration be seen as "a small matter." Both arts should "change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all . . . [the art] is to give it shape and form—that is to say, meaning"(461).

Blurring the distinctions between the autobiographer, a literary artist, and a historian, Saleem makes it clear that even the autobiographer (who is, in a sense, a micro-historian) is more concerned with the persuasive power of his writing than with what actually happened: ". . . in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe" (271). The rhetorician in Saleem-the-autobiographer-historian is as dominant as the

rhetorician in the novelist.

Derek Walcott, in his essay “The Muse of History: An Essay” reminds us that in the ancient view, history was “myth, the partial recall of the race,” or “fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory” (2). Saleem echoes this view of memory when he describes his dependence on the “wild god of memory” for narrating the past (150). By the seventeenth-century, Francis Bacon had divided the map of knowledge into the three great realms of poetry, history, and philosophy, ruled over by the three faculties of imagination, memory, and understanding (see Collingwood 58). However, the three branches of knowledge and the three faculties are not really isolated from one another. The poet needs memory and understanding in addition to imagination; the historian needs imagination and understanding in addition to memory, and the philosopher also needs all the three faculties. Thus it is that we often find in the poet the historian and the philosopher also; and find history and philosophy in fiction.

Walcott goes on to add that the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction. “In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention. The further the facts, the more history petrifies into myth.” In the writing of history, “everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim” (2). Thus, instead of a single, authoritative version of history, there can be many histories written from different perspectives and memories, and each one of them partakes of fiction, since memory is not immune to imagination. And history possibly never completely escapes from the nature of myth.

E.M. Forster, in *The Aspects of the Novel*, locates the novel in a region between Poetry and History. In other words, the novel shares boundaries with imaginative works and with factual (or empirical) works. If poets, historians, and novelists share



boundaries in their work, it is not surprising that their techniques show similarities.

Brook Thomas, in his essay “Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*,” quotes from Joseph Conrad’s *Notes on Life and Letters*, as follows:

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting—on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience. (qtd in Thomas 237)

Conrad, contrary to the usual perception of the nineteenth-century, (but analogous to Aristotle’s ideas), sees fiction as nearer to truth than history. It is so, Conrad argues, because it is based on the author’s own, first-hand observation, while history has to rely on documents, on “second-hand impression.” In *Midnight’s Children*, the narrator Saleem, like Conrad, sees his writing as an act of preserving history: “. . . my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings—by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks” (38).

Collingwood does not see narratives such as memoirs, biography, or autobiography (which are allegedly empirical) as history. For him, these narratives, at best, may fit in the category of literature, but not in history. He clearly distinguishes biography, memoir and the like from history proper:

. . . a biography, however much history it contains, is constructed on principles that are not only non-historical but anti-historical. Its limits are biological events, the birth and death of a human organism: its framework is thus a framework not of thought but of natural process. Through this framework—the bodily life of man, with his childhood, maturity and senescence, his diseases and all the accidents of animal existence—the tides of thought, his own and others’, flow crosswise, regardless of its structure, like sea-water through a stranded wreck. Many human emotions are bound up with the spectacle of such bodily life in its vicissitudes, and biography, as a form of literature, feeds these emotions and may give them wholesome food; but this is not

history. Again, the record of immediate experience with its flow of sensations and feelings, faithfully preserved in a diary or recalled in a memoir, is not history. At its best, it is poetry; at its worst, an obtrusive egotism; but history it can never be. (304)

But Saleem's narrative is not mere memoir/autobiography. Though it has elements of what Collingwood would call "literature" or "poetry," it has elements of history also, since it deals with national history, politics, military activity, economic activity, morality, and other aspects of India and Pakistan. Since Rushdie blends literature and history in his novel, the narrator of *Midnight's Children* blurs the boundaries of fiction and history in his narrative.

### **2.1.2 Historical Method in *Midnight's Children***

Rushdie studied History in Cambridge, and so it is not surprising that the narrator in *Midnight's Children* follows the rules of method for writing history. In an interview by David Brooks in 1984 Rushdie says: "history was my academic discipline. I suppose I have always used a kind of historical method, in the completely unmethodical way which is the luxury of fiction" and he stresses the connection between 'history' and 'story' in the Italian word *storia*, and also in the Urdu word *qissa* (69).

As Collingwood explains in *The Idea of History* (246), the first rule of historian's method is to localize persons, events and actions in specific place and time. This Saleem does exceedingly well. The narrative is littered with an excessive number of references to places, dates, days, and time. As David Lipscomb observes, the novel is also glutted with prepositions such as "at" and "on" to specify time and place, parodying modern historical accounts, especially of wars and other politically important events. The section in *Midnight's Children* dealing with the Bangladesh War is especially full of markers of place and time such as "at" and "on," in what seems to be a parody of

Stanley Wolpert's account of the Bangladesh War in his text-book *A New History of India* (see Lipscomb 181). Lipscomb points out that "[I]n the eight pages devoted to the Bangladesh War in *A New History*, the prepositional phrase "on," followed by a specific date, occurs twenty-three times, six times at the beginning of a paragraph" (187 n7). Such parody of attention to specific places and dates is evident throughout the narrative. Saleem uses the prepositional phrase "on" at the beginning of a paragraph thirteen times—beginning thirteen consecutive, short paragraphs with the phrase "On my tenth birthday"—at the end of the chapter "My tenth birthday," mimicking historical accounts. The excessive references to place and time, and excessive use of prepositions such as "at," "in," and "on" in *Midnight's Children* simultaneously imitate historical accounts and parody them.

The second rule in the writing of history is to be coherent and logically connected. Saleem's history shows connections between all the events and characters, though magical and supernatural elements abound, and some characters and actions are only tenuously connected to his story. On the whole, Saleem's history agrees with the facts of conventional or textual history in terms of dates, places and other statistical data; but Rushdie also introduces some errors in chronology about very important events such as the date of assassination of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, and the 1957 elections in India. These errors seem to point that Saleem's narrative cannot be taken as a very accurate version of history. They remind us that the novel mixes fiction and history.

The third rule of method for the historian, cited by Collingwood, concerns evidence. Saleem is very much aware of the importance of evidence. However, he often insists on the truth of his version, not because of evidence, but because of his belief. On a number of occasions he admits that he does not have proofs to confirm the truth of his version. "There was no proof" (56); "And it is said (though I can't be sure of this) . . ." (72); ". . .

. I was beginning to suspect him [Shiva] of terrible crimes—although I found it impossible to find any evidence in his thoughts, because he, alone of the children of midnight, could close off from me any part of his thoughts he chose to keep to himself” (226); “But what can never be proved for certain is that . . . ” (392); “(I know, I know—no proof)” (407); “No, I can’t prove it, not any of it. Evidence went up in smoke: some was fed to pie-dogs; and later, . . . files were burned . . . ” (440). About his belief that Jamila has not died, he explains his reason: “because . . . I dreamed . . . that she fled by air from the capital city to Karachi” and took refuge in a convent (393-94); “I know, I know, I know. How do I know? A brother knows, that’s all” (394). Even if we believe in a brother’s intuition, we have the additional irony that he is not really Jamila’s brother.

He often demands to be believed simply by insisting on his truth, without giving any evidence for his version: “Why do I say that?—Because it must be true; because what followed, followed; because it is my belief that . . . ” (412); “So—believe me, don’t believe me, but this is what it was like!” (356). He tells Padma, “Do not think that because I had fever, the things I told you were not completely true. Everything happened just as I described” (209);

Thus, side by side with his insistence on the truth of his version, he also betrays the weaknesses of his position as a historian. He draws our attention to the fact that he is reconstructing history from second-hand sources, rumors, hearsay, and so on. Given this ambivalence, Saleem’s very insistence on the truth of his version looks like a sign of his insecurity.

However, Saleem retrieves one irrefutable, material evidence that can support at least some details of his story. He tells Padma:

Quite recently, I visited a cactus-garden where once, many years ago, I buried a toy tin globe . . . and extracted from its insides the things I had placed there all those years ago. Holding them in my left hand now, as I write, I can still see—despite yellowing and mildew—that one is a letter, a personal letter to myself, signed by the Prime Minister of India; but the other is a newspaper cutting. (119)

Saleem had buried the toy tin globe with its contents in the garden of the house in Bombay in 1963 on the eve of his second exile to Pakistan (305). The tin globe provides an excellent evidence as it holds two documents: one of them is a personal as well as official document. It is a letter to him from the Prime Minister of India, with the official seal of the Indian government, “a letter on high-quality vellum, embossed with the seal of state—the lions of Sarnath stood above the dharma-chakra” (122); the other is a public document, a newspaper cutting from *The Times of India*. The cutting has the headline “MIDNIGHT’S CHILD,” a large photo of baby Saleem (with birthmark stains on his cheeks that attest to his identity), the name of the photographer, and a text attesting to the time of his birth at “the exact moment of our Nation’s independence” (119). Saleem mentions the photographer again when he describes the people who frequent his uncle’s card-evenings (246-47). These details add to the realism and credibility of Saleem’s version. In the episode of the recovered toy globe, Saleem’s evidence is literally archaeological (since he has to dig under the earth to find it), parodying the archaeological evidence used in history.

Saleem’s awareness of the importance of evidence is seen in another episode. During Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule in 1975, when Sanjay Youth Central Committee bulldozes the magicians’ slum where Saleem had been living, Saleem loses his silver spittoon, a family heirloom from his mother’s first marriage. Saleem laments that he has been deprived of “the last object” connecting him to his “more tangible, historically-verifiable past” (432).

Saleem narrates at once like a historian and a fabulist; he is aware of the historian's method; but his account is mixed with miracles and supernatural elements. Like his creator Rushdie, Saleem also studies history in college (310). We see an example of a parody the historian's methods in Saleem's method: a literalization of the metaphorical name of a historical method, the "scissors and paste method" described by Collingwood in many of his writings (see *The Idea of History* 33, 257). Collingwood uses this term to refer to a method of compilation, to a construction of a patchwork-history whose materials are drawn from many sources, from the work of many other historians. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem constructs his anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati by cutting pieces out of newspapers; he cuts out a few letters from each of the numerous headlines and pastes them together. He literally uses scissors and paste. And he describes this act of constructing the fateful note as his "first attempt at rearranging history" (260). Saleem rearranges history in two ways: he cuts out pieces from different histories, namely the newspapers, and combines the pieces in a specific order to suit his purpose, thereby rearranging the history published in newspapers. He also rearranges national history in a more serious way, though unintentionally, because his note provokes the trial of a national figure, the naval hero Commander Sabarmati. The event marks a precedent in the judicial history of India. Saleem admits to "[C]utting up history" to suit his nefarious purposes (259), since his intention for cutting the newspaper headlines is to punish Homi Catrack, Lila Sabarmati, and his own mother. His note provokes the Commander to shoot his wife and her lover. Since the Commander is next-in-line to become Admiral, the ensuing court-trial becomes a subject of heated debate in the wider national scene. Saleem's "vengeful irruption" into the history of his age has consequences beyond his immediate circle of acquaintances and family, and proves to be "no trivial affair" (264). This episode in the novel is based

on the trial of a real Commander called Nanavati in the late 1950s. Rushdie combines a real event and fiction, deliberately blurring their boundaries, at the same time parodying the ‘scissor-and-paste’ method of writing history. Collingwood sees this method of writing history as the unscientific or pre-scientific mode, where the historian merely repeats what his sources say. In Saleem’s case, he changes the meaning of the sources completely, since there is no connection between the headlines that he cuts up and the text of the note he constructs from the pieces of the headlines. Further, Saleem’s message is not based on other people’s versions, but on his own telepathic spying of the adulterous lovers.

The various headlines that Saleem uses give us a brief outline of Indian history in the year 1957. This is one of the many instances in the novel where Rushdie uses conventional contemporary history, as given by the newspapers. The numerous headlines summarize the current events and actions in the political, economic, and cultural domains of India. Saleem uses political articles, advertisements of consumer products, sports-news, cinema advertisement, etc., to cut out the alphabetical letters he needs to construct his note.

While Saleem uses contemporary history to construct his note, his creator, Rushdie, uses it to construct his novel. He deliberately interweaves history and fiction to show an extraordinary level of correspondences between national historical events and Saleem’s personal history.

### **2.1.3 Meaning in the Novel and History**

What Saleem dreads most is the lack of meaning or “absurdity” in his writing (9, 461). And it is the desire to give meaning that motivates both the historian and the novelist in their narratives.

The historian and the novelist both aim at making their picture a coherent whole that must make sense. Reflecting this concern, in the very beginning of the novel Saleem expresses his almost desperate preoccupation to make sense and to avoid absurdity: “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (9). Saleem’s reference to Scheherazade of the fabulous tales of *Arabian Nights* and to his fear that he may not have “a thousand nights and a night” to finish his story, give a hint that his narrative will have elements of fantasy.

At a later point in the novel Saleem wonders whether his “desperate need for meaning” has made him distort and rewrite the whole history of his times in order to place himself in a central role (166). His doubt is confirmed by his creator’s words. Rushdie describes his unreliable narrator Saleem thus:

He is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants to shape his material [so] that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is cutting up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati. The small errors in the text can be read as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates. (“ ‘Errata’ ” 24)

Saleem’s obsession with meaning remind us that meaning is not immanent in history or reality. The novelist and historian construct meaning by a process of narrowing the field of focus, by choosing a point of view, by selection, elimination, and other such strategies. If history and the novel attempted to give us reality in all its chaotic profusion, it would be practically impossible to see any “meaning,” form, or teleology in such accounts.

Saleem’s narrative resembles the philosophy of history rather than merely an account of events, actions, and facts that form the content of history. As Collingwood points out, history means both a special kind of subject or knowledge and a special kind of object,



namely, the object of that knowledge (434). History in its subjective aspect is a knowledge of the past; and in its objective aspect, it is the past itself. In its subjective aspect, history means the thinking that goes on in the historian's mind and is reported upon in his writings; history in its objective aspect means the facts or events about which he thinks and whose nature he expounds as far as he discovers it. Saleem's history manifests both the subjective and objective aspects. His self-reflexive comments reveal that he is studying his own thoughts and his own writing.

Collingwood's distinction between memory and history is relevant to study Saleem's story. "History and *memory* are not the same thing, though they are akin . . . [They] are akin in that their object is the past; but whereas the object of history is the past as inferentially 'reconstructed' from evidence, the object of the memory is the past as immediately 'apprehended' by an act in which inference plays no part" (435). History, Collingwood tells us, is more like real knowledge than memory because it has an element of self-criticism about it which memory lacks. Because of this, he suggests that memory is not to be judged as true or false. "Memory is fallible (it may be reasonably said) not false: it may lead us into error, but it cannot itself be erroneous. History, on the other hand, consisting as it does of reasoned judgements about the past, is true or false" (436). Saleem's narrative mixes memory and history. Sometimes, like history, it checks his memories with other sources of information and points out his own errors. At other times, it is more like memory, not particularly concerned about evidence or accuracy. However, since Rushdie's narrative is a novel, and not proper history as such, it cannot be judged as true or false, but on other criterions.

Saleem's asides, and self-conscious comments, which are often meta-fictional and meta-historical, make his story not a mere remembrance but a kind of philosophical narrative of history. His narrative is recounted with hindsight, inevitably tinged with his

present perspective. On various occasions Saleem refers to the prominent role of hindsight in his recollected memories (89, 125, 175, 225-26, 236). Saleem's narrative hints at the possibility that it is the historian's hindsight that constitutes 'meaning' in historical accounts of the past.

Sometimes Saleem parodies the use of hindsight, such as when he projects his present thoughts on to his earlier self, the baby Saleem, who would not have been in a position to understand what goes around him: "Now, looking back through baby eyes, I can see it all perfectly—it's amazing how much you can remember when you try" (125); describing himself as a baby in a pram, he adds: ". . . looking back now through the eyes of Baby Saleem, I can reveal most of the secrets of my neighbourhood, because the grown-ups lived their lives in my presence without fear of being observed, not knowing that, years later, someone would look through baby-eyes and decide to let the cats out of their bags" (129). He calls himself as "someone" who has knowledge of the things that happened long after the time of the infant Saleem, someone who looks through the eyes of his earlier self of some thirty years ago, and attributes this later self's thoughts to his earlier self. He proceeds to describe what he can see through the "baby eyes" of the infant Saleem in the late 1940s, but mingles those memories with his hindsight as an adult in the late 1970s.

Thus the long, detailed description of various events, peoples, and the like that he saw as an infant is mixed with philosophical and critical comments about them in the manner of the adult Saleem, a manner clearly impossible for a baby just few months old. Similarly, he gives a new interpretation to the violent fight between his sister and Evie that happened 21 years ago: "More interesting . . . is a thought which occurs to me now, as I look back down the tunnel of time" (225-26). Holding before his eyes the image of the two girls fighting and rolling in the dirt, Saleem says, "I seem to discern the driving

force behind their battle to the death” (226). With his hindsight he concludes that though the two girls were ostensibly fighting over the fate of some cats, they were really fighting over him; that Evie’s kicks were aimed at him, perhaps because of her anger at his invasion of her mind; that his sister also was fighting out of sibling loyalty, not merely for the sake of the cats.

Often Saleem self-consciously draws our attention to his use of hindsight, and therefore, to the constructed nature of his alleged autobiography. He parodies the use of hindsight, by exaggeration. He gives his earlier self, the ten-year-old Saleem, some thoughts that could have been possible only if he knew later events, thoughts that would be possible only for an adult mind to think: “. . . And now I, Saleem Sinai, intend briefly to endow myself-then with the benefits of hindsight; destroying the unities and conventions of fine writing, I make him cognizant of what was to come, purely so that he can be permitted to think the following thoughts,” and proceeds to philosophize about the opposition between the homogeneousness of one’s body and the heterogeneousness of one’s inner self (236). Here Rushdie parodies the use of hindsight and foreshadowing in literature as well as in history. This self-satire also reminds us that historians also, when they write about the past, cannot help using their hindsight to interpret past events.

Saleem’s exaggerated use of hindsight is parodic. Historians, though they cannot help the interference of their present knowledge in their narration of the past, use moderation in employing their hindsight. But Saleem uses hindsight freely, as the novelist uses omniscience in his narrative.

Though Saleem often repeats that most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence, he adds, “I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail, such as the

way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air . . . everything, not just the few clues one stumbles across ” (19). He is able to use his nose, which has acquired magical gifts, to sniff the atmosphere in his grandfather’s house, to detect the smell of “things concealed,” the “burgeoning romance” between the daughters of the house and some gentleman-visitors, his grandmother’s curiosity and strength—all such things as they were at a time when he was not yet born. In such incredible accounts of Saleem’s knowledge of the past Rushdie is lampooning excessive use of imagination in an allegedly empirical account. All the above examples indirectly emphasize the mediated nature of historical representation. Graham Huggan, in his essay “Prizing ‘Otherness’: A Short History of the Booker” notes that it is Rushdie’s awareness of the mediated representation of the past, more than the post-independence time frame or the colonized viewpoint, that marks *Midnight’s Children* as a work of postcolonial fiction (424).

The history of one’s self, according to Collingwood, is not memory as such, but a peculiar case of memory. In his view, while memory as such is only the present thought of past experience, historical knowledge is that special case of memory where the object of *present thought* is *past thought*, the gap between present and past being bridged not only by the power of present thought to think of the past, but also by the power of past thought to reawaken itself in the present (Collingwood, 293-94). The autobiographer, though his past thoughts are inextricably confused with his present ones, in theory, attempts to disengage them with the help of evidence. In a similar manner, the historian uses evidence to recover the thoughts of others. For Collingwood, the gap of time between one’s present thought and its past object is bridged not by the survival or revival of the object, but only by the power of thought to overleap such a gap; and the thought which does this is memory (293). Saleem also seems to think so. He uses the memory of the perforated sheet of his grandfather to recover the past thoughts, feelings, events and

acts that happened thirty-two years before his own birth. However, Saleem's magical memory is a "talisman," "an open-sesame," a magical abracadabra to recover the past, not a physical evidence that can serve as a tool for recovering the past (10).

Saleem describes acts that could not have been witnessed by anybody that he knew: for example, the secret seduction of Vanita by Methwold, of which nobody knew. Vanita died at the moment of his birth and Methwold left India before his birth. So Saleem had no way of knowing the liaison between the two, except by his magical smell which divines things of the past. He declares that his telepathy, his psychic travels, and later, his magical sense of smell enable him to enter into the thoughts and feelings of people all over India, even of people who lived more than three decades before his own birth. His alleged autobiography thus has an omniscience that we expect only in fiction and fantasy. Rushdie seems to be having fun with the blurring of the distinctions between these different types of narratives and with the confusing of the expectations of the reader.

A historian often has to fill in the gaps of his knowledge, by interpolating, by joining different facts. As Collingwood points out in *The Idea of History*, if our source says Caesar was in Rome on a particular day and on a later day in Gaul, but tell us nothing about his journey from Rome to Gaul, we interpolate his journey with a perfectly good conscience, without feeling that we have violated history with fiction. Such acts of interpolation are in no way arbitrary or merely fanciful. They are necessary. But Saleem often interpolates and constructs like a novelist, giving fanciful details such as "the way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air" on a day when he was not yet born (19). Saleem's license to use fantasy in his alleged autobiography is a deliberate ploy used by Rushdie. One possible motive for this device is to drive home the need, for the readers, to develop a critical attitude toward what we read. Such mixing of history, realistic-fiction, and fantasy make us hesitate, by their mutual interruptions into one

another, and wonder whether alleged history could be sometimes fiction and alleged fiction and fantasy could be true in a non-literal sense.

## **2.2 The Problematic Origins of History:**

### **2.2.1 Second-hand Sources, Hearsay-Accounts, Fragments, Rumors, and Gossip**

One of the recurring themes in *Midnight's Children* is the idea that history is constructed from different fragments, different sources (and often from a retrospective standpoint, as seen in the previous section). For instance, before narrating Shiva's later career, Saleem begins with a disclaimer:

What follows is a reconstruction of the recent career of major Shiva; I pieced the story together from Parvati's accounts, which I got out of her after our marriage. It seems my arch-rival was fond of boasting to her about his exploits, so you may wish to make allowances for the distortions of truth which such chest-beating creates; however, there seems no reason to believe that what he told Parvati and she repeated to me was very far removed from what-was-the-case. (407)

Saleem presents his version as suspect and at the same time pacifies us that it is probably not very far from the truth. His information is third-hand, because he gets it from Parvati, and Parvati herself has got it from Shiva. Saleem reminds us that Shiva's version is suspect because of Shiva's tendency to boast. Saleem shows by example how to make allowance for Shiva's boastful distortions: he divides by half the number of women who were allegedly in love with Shiva according to Shiva's own account. Saleem's editing of Shiva's story hints at the various modifications, revisions, expunctions, erasures, and expurgations that history can undergo in each of its subsequent versions. As Saleem hears Shiva's story from Parvati, she also could have distorted Shiva's version, consciously or unconsciously, while recounting it to Saleem. This is one of the many instances where Saleem makes the audience aware of the uncertain and derivative nature of his history. On another occasion, he confesses: "I am obliged, perforce, to rely on the account of others; only Shiva could tell what had

befallen him; it was Resham Bibi who described Parvati's departure to me on my return, . . . and only Parvati could recount to me what befell her while she was away" (411). And it is from Parvati's account that Saleem reconstructs what happened during the four months of her liaison with Shiva. Saleem's frequent asides and glosses on his narrative repeatedly bring to our awareness the dependence of history on sources other than the historian.

Saleem includes many unconventional histories in his version: such as the rumors about Tai (14-15), Naseem (44, 55), Mian Abdullah (47-48), the Ravana gang (72), and Dr Schaapsteker (137, 257); the speculations about the theft of the holy hair of the Prophet Muhammad from the Mosque in Kashmir (277), the stories and legends "recounted" by the West Pakistani soldiers at the Rann of Kutch (335), the strange stories told by the surrendering Indian soldiers within the hearing of his cousin Zafar (335), Mustapha's version of events in Pakistan gathered through diplomatic channels (393), and many other second-hand reports. Saleem often says, "I'm told" (127), "This is how I have heard the story" (148), "This is the story that got back to Methwold's Estate" (176), "It was said . . .," "Mostly, I heard about it from the Estate servants" (177), and so on, clearly indicating the second-hand nature of his version. He also admits the gaps in his memories on numerous occasions and admits that he has already made some errors in his narrative (166, 222).

Rushdie depicts Saleem as an unreliable historian, but one who is aware of the methods and tools of a historian. In a comic manner, Saleem often insists on the truth of his version on such grounds as his belief, intuition, magical telepathy, and sometimes simply insists that that is how it was, brushing away any further argument. Despite his own admission of the lack of rigor and evidence in his method, and despite his self-acknowledged errors, he ironically boasts that his version would serve as the guide-

book for future historians: “It is possible, even probable, that I am only the first historian to write the story of my undeniably exceptional life-and-times. Those who follow in my footsteps will, however, inevitably come to the present work, this source-book, this Hadith or Purana or *Grundrisse*, for guidance and inspiration” (295). Saleem’s claim suggests the manner in which mistakes can travel from one version of history to another. If future historians take as their guidebook Saleem’s error-prone version, one can see how erroneous histories will be perpetuated in the future.

In contrast to Saleem’s confidence as a historian, his creator Rushdie has a different opinion about Saleem. Rushdie tells us: “Saleem is not an oracle; he’s only adopting a kind of oracular language. His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes . . . Many readers wanted it [the novel] to be the history, even the guidebook, which it was never meant to be . . . [the] variously disappointed readers were judging the book not as a novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia” (“ ‘Errata’ ” 25).

Saleem’s assertion that his error-prone and miracle-laden history will serve as a source-book for other, later historians, is a comical and ironic reminder to us to be critical and skeptical about the histories we read. Rushdie and Saleem obliquely remind us of the possibility that an inaccurate version of history can become the guide-book for later historians. Saleem makes a similar point when he describes how a long acceptance of something untrue as truth makes it almost impossible for a new truth to dislodge the former untruth and take its place. Saleem and his sister grow up believing that they are children of the same parents. But when he is eleven years old, his family comes to know that he is not the son of the Sinais. As a young adult Saleem finds himself in love with Jamila, with whom he had grown up as her brother. But neither Jamila nor Saleem is able to overcome their previous belief in their sibling relationship. When he tries to give



arguments to prove that his love is not incestual, “even as he spoke he could hear his words sounding hollow, and realized that although what he was saying was the literal truth, there were other truths which had become more important because they had been sanctified by time” (325). This reminds us that in historical accounts also, an untruth, because of its long-established status may be powerful enough to persist, despite a later truth which disproves it. It also reminds us that literal truths are often powerless against long-established beliefs.

### **2.2.2 The Media and the Fabrication of History**

#### **Newspapers, Radio, Political Speeches, Government Announcements**

Throughout *Midnight's Children* we come across various accounts of history as they are given in the media. We see many headlines and brief accounts from newspapers. The first example belongs to the colonial period of India, roughly about three decades before Independence. It is from a troubled period of confrontation between native resistance and colonial oppression. In 1919, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, newspapers, pamphlets, and wall-posters, all blaze the word “*Hartal!*” in India; this Hindi word literally means “a day of mourning, of stillness, of silence”; but Mahatma Gandhi used this word to decree that “the whole of India shall . . . come to a halt. To mourn, in peace, the continuing presence of the British” (33). So this word has come to mean a strike, a refusal to work or conduct the normal business, a form of civil disobedience. The newspapers play an important role in making the Hartal a nation-wide event, and their crucial role in the history of the nationalists’ efforts to drive the colonizers out of the country is undeniable.

Later, in 1947, newspapers publish the photo of the baby Saleem under the caption MIDNIGHT’S CHILD, along with a text celebrating him as the baby who was “born at the exact moment of our Nation’s independence—the happy Child of that glorious

Hour!” (119). This photo and the text, cut from the newspaper serve to authenticate Saleem’s story later.

At various points in the narrative Rushdie/Saleem make fun of the tabloid newspapers. Describing his magical radio-like connection to 580 midnight-children throughout India, Saleem seeks support in the newspaper-stories of unbelievable phenomena: “. . . no literate person in this India of ours can be wholly immune from the type of information I am in the process of unveiling—no reader of our national press can have failed to come across a series of—admittedly lesser—magic children and assorted freaks” (197) and adds that he can himself remember children with two heads, sometimes one human, one animal, and with other curious features such as bullock’s horns.

At another point, he seems to ridicule newspapers for publishing sensational items. Describing a disaster in the water supply system of Bombay, Saleem says, “The newspapers were full of talk of saboteurs; speculation over the criminals’ identities and political affiliation jostled for space against reports of the continuing wave of whore-murders” (224).

Like Saleem, Mary also comments about the supernatural stories in newspapers. After describing the rumors about the appearance of epic heroes of *Mahabharatha* in modern-day India, and other such miracles, Mary cites the newspapers to confirm her account: “It was in the papers” (245).

In these examples, Saleem seems to be ridiculing sensational tabloid papers. But Saleem’s account itself includes many supernatural elements. Rushdie satirizes both the newspapers and Saleem’s unbelievable account. Saleem’s narrative parodies other discourses, and it parodies itself.

In the last part of the chapter called “My tenth birthday” Saleem practically reproduces the official reports and history text-book accounts of India’s economic history, industrial production, problems of illiteracy, population increase, the problem of homeless people, the government’s difficulty in repaying the development loans from the rich countries, and so on. But he adds some personal comments and adds personal pronouns to make the account look subjective. David Lipscomb has pointed out the almost word by word excerpts from Stanley Wolpert’s *A New History of India* in *Midnight’s Children* at various points in the narrative.

Newspapers not only record and narrate history, they also influence and shape history by influencing the opinions of the readers. Saleem demonstrates this in the episode of Commander Sabarmati’s trial. In the beginning, a newspaper says of the Sabarmati affair: “It is a theater in which India will discover who she was, what she is, and what she might become” (262).

A columnist of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* writing a pen-portrait to go alongside the ‘Personality of the Week’ full-colour caricature of the Commander said: ‘In the Sabarmati case, the noble sentiments of the Ramayana combine with the cheap melodrama of the Bombay talkie; but as for the protagonist, all agree on his upstandingness, and he is undeniably an attractive chap.’ (262).

The newspapers have a point in mentioning his attractiveness, since it plays a part in affecting the jury’s decision.

The Commander is the heir-apparent to the post of Admiral of the Fleet. And there is a hitch in putting him in a jail because naval regulations decree that no man who had been in a civil jail could aspire to the rank of Admiral of the Fleet. So, Admirals, city politicians, and the Commander’s lawyer demand that he must stay in a Navy jail. They argue that since a man is considered innocent until he is proven to be guilty, the Commander’s career should not be ruined, if it can possibly be avoided. The authorities yield to this demand and allow the Commander to stay in the Navy jail instead of in the

ordinary civil jail. The Commander's lawyer argues absurdly that his client intended suicide, but at the moment of discovering his wife and her lover red-handed, he lost his mind, and without premeditation he shot them. The lawyer thus pleads that it is not a first-degree murder and asks the jury to acquit the Commander. The jury, composed mostly of women, not rich ones, and therefore doubly susceptible to the Commander's charm and the lawyer's wallet, pronounces 'Not guilty.' But the judge reverses the jury's absurd verdict and pronounces the defendant guilty. Still, the powerful group of Naval dignitaries, Bishops and politicians manage to keep the Commander in the Navy jail pending the High Court appeal. When the High Court finds him guilty, the press has headlines, "SABARMATI FOR CIVIL JAIL AT LAST?" (264). But the State Chief Minister makes an exception to the law and permits the Commander to stay in the Navy jail, pending the Supreme Court decision. There are "more press headlines, stinging like mosquitoes: STATE GOVERNMENT FLOUTS LAW! SABARMATI SCANDAL NOW A PUBLIC DISGRACE!" Saleem correctly observes, "When I realized that the press had turned against the Commander, I knew he was done for" (264). This is one of the instances that illustrate the power of the press. In this case, the press fights for the upholding of the law and for the impartial treatment of the accused, despite his high position and popularity. It is one of the heartening instances where the newspapers play an impartial and honorable role.

It is during the times of war and elections that mass media such as newspapers and radio usually mask reality and give the public a false impression. Saleem's narrative illustrates this phenomenon. Saleem tells us that during the Indo-Chinese War of 1962, the "newspaper headlines marched towards war," and declared, "INDIAN ARMY POISED FOR ALL-OUT EFFORT," and six days later, have headlines saying "UNPROVOKED ATTACK ON INDIA" (297-98). On the other hand, an official

Peking statement announces, about the same incident: “*In self-defence, Chinese frontier guards were compelled to strike back resolutely*” (298). When the Indians are defeated by the Chinese, the Indian newspapers attempt to instill an artificial optimism, in order to mask and cope with the defeat. In the *Times of India*, “a cartoon captioned ‘War with China’ showed Nehru looking at graphs labeled ‘Emotional Integration’, ‘Industrial Peace’ and ‘People’s Faith in Government’ and crying, ‘We never had it so good!’ ” (300). Such forced, and exaggerated optimism cloaks fear, anxiety, and the refusal to face reality. When it can no longer be denied, news of the defeat of Indian soldiers “flooded through radio and press,” and the newspaper finally “proclaimed the end of the optimum disease: PUBLIC MORALE DRAINS AWAY” (301).

We see a similar effort on the part of newspapers, this time in Pakistan, during election. The newspapers give a version which gives no hint of the unfair methods used by the President’s friends to win the election. In other words, the newspaper version becomes a distortion of reality. When the Nawab of Kif makes a mockery of the elections in Pakistan by preventing his guests from voting for the Opposition Party, the newspapers such as *Jang*, *Dawn*, and *Pakistan Times* pronounce a crushing victory for the President’s Party. The newspapers, Saleem declares, prove to him that he has been “only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case” (326). Neither in India nor in Pakistan Saleem feels certain that there is a single, true version of reality. In India, he feels there are too many versions of reality; in Pakistan, too many versions of falsity. He describes the difference between his Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence: “in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift,

disoriented, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies” (326). Newspapers, radio and pamphlets contribute to this situation.

In contrast to the Indian newspapers which fought against the powerful groups and the popular hero Commander Sabarmati, we see a case in Pakistan where the newspapers protect a corrupt General and fail to expose the truth. General Zulfikar smuggles a host of foreign consumer products along the Rann of Kutch border by bribing the border patrol, and makes a fortune selling them to the elite in Pakistan. But when the truth is about to come out, the newspapers engage in a tactic to distract the public attention away from the scandal and towards an imaginary patriotic war against Indian soldiers. Commenting on the situation during this episode, Saleem observes:

The war in the Rann lasted until July 1st. That much is fact; but everything else lies concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-believe which affected all goings-on in those days, and especially in the phantasmagoric Rann . . . so the story I am going to tell, which is substantially that told by my cousin Zafar, is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told. (335)

The newspapers support the official reports. “Hidden behind newspaper reports—DASTARDLY INDIAN INVASION REPELLED BY OUR GALLANT BOYS!—the truth about General Zulfikar became a ghostly, uncertain thing; the paying-off of border guards became, in the papers, INNOCENT SOLDIERS MASSACRED BY INDIAN FAUJ” (337). Since every General and politician possessed the transistor radios, imported watches and air-conditioning units smuggled by Zulfikar, no General or politician comes forward to expose General Zulfikar’s smuggling activities.

During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War official reports from both countries contradict each other just as the warring countries India and China did in the Indo-Chinese War of 1962. The Indian side claims that Pakistani troops in civilian clothes crossed the cease-fire line in Kashmir and infiltrated the Indian sector; but Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Bhutto denies it vehemently, at the same time including a barb in his reply that the

indigenous people in Kashmir are rising against the tyranny of the Indian government. The Indian Prime Minister tells, “We promise that force will be met with force, and aggression against us will never be allowed to succeed!” On the Pakistani side, jeeps with loud-speakers tell the people, “The Indian aggressors will be utterly overthrown! We are a race of warriors! One Pathan, one Punjabi Muslim is worth ten of those babus-in-arms” (339). Each side accuses the other as aggressor and justifies its own military response. It is hard to know which country attacked and which country merely defended itself.

David Lipscomb observes that the historian Stanley Wolpert in his book *A New History of India* (1977) “merely alternates between the Pakistani and Indian interpretations of events . . . [and] Rushdie has fun with the inadequacy of the official, documented sources” (179). Rushdie practically lifts such a passage (which merely repeats the contradictory announcements of the Indian and Pakistani governments) from Wolpert’s book to put in Saleem’s narrative. Lipscomb adds that Rushdie “mocks the historian’s posture of concentrating only on verifiable facts” (179). Saleem repeats what Wolpert says in his book with some mocking additions:

I am trying to stop mystifying. Important to concentrate on good hard facts. But which facts? One week before my eighteenth birthday, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, did Pakistani troops in civilian clothing cross the cease-fire line in Kashmir and infiltrate the Indian sector, or did they not? In Delhi, Prime Minister Shastri announced “massive infiltration . . . to subvert the state”; but here is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, with his riposte: “We categorically deny any involvement in the rising against tyranny by the indigenous people of Kashmir.” (338)

Radio also partakes in the control and manipulation of news. Voice of Pakistan brags its ‘victory’ in such exaggerated terms that Saleem mocks it: The Pakistani national radio “announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed”. Similarly, he mocks All-India Radio, the national radio of India, that it announced “the massacre of the Pakistani Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man” (339).

Both sides want to impress their people about their alleged victories and for this purpose they use the government-owned, government-controlled national radio. Unable to decide what is the truth, Saleem tells us, “Nothing was real; nothing was certain” (340). Since the official reports of All-India Radio deny air attacks of Pakistani cities by Indian forces, Saleem describes the events with irony: “Aircraft, real or fictional, dropped actual or mythical bombs” (341). Though governments deny bombings, Saleem’s aunts, grandmother, parents, cousin, all die by the bomb explosions. Saleem himself escapes death, but after being hit at the back of his head by a spittoon during the bomb explosion he becomes unconscious and loses his memory.

Near the end of the novel, Saleem explicitly says that the history told by newspapers, radio, textbooks etc., have many gaps; that they do not tell the stories of the oppressed and the subalterns. Describing Parvati’s prolonged labor pains, he says:

History-books newspapers radio-programmes tell us that at two p.m. on June 12th, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty, by Judge Jag Mohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court, of two counts of campaign malpractice during the election campaign of 1971; what has never previously been revealed is that it was at precisely two p.m. that Parvati-the-witch (now Laylah Sinai) became sure she had entered labour. (417)

Saleem’s history tells about the ghetto-resident Parvati, while history-books, newspapers, radio etc., focus on what happens to the Prime Minister. Just as conventional history in the old days concentrated their attention on kings, military Generals, and wars, the modern newspapers, history-text-books, radio etc., focus on the powerful heads of state, and events related to them. The history of the common people is not found in these accounts.

It is from the wind-blown newspapers that Saleem learns that “the Prime Minister of India went nowhere without her personal astrologer” (427). In another scrap of the *Times of India*, he sees the Prime Minister’s own words about her “determination to combat the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been growing” (427).



At one point Saleem makes a remark about text-book histories, in passing. He says of Mary, his childhood ayah-cook: “Look into the eyes of a cooking ayah, and you will see more than text-books ever know” (205). Since newspapers, radio, text-books, official reports, official announcements, etc., often omit the history of the common people, Saleem declares that one has to seek other sources, such as the eyes of a working-class woman, to read such neglected histories.

### **2.3 The Historical, Unhistorical, and Superhistorical**

As already noted, Saleem sees his writing of his history as an act of preservation. He calls his nightly writing “the great work of preserving” (38). He pickles fruits in the pickle factory during daytime and at night pickles his memories. “Memory, as well as fruit, is saved from the corruption of the clocks” (38).

For Saleem, pickles of history with the authentic taste of truth may be “too strong for some palates” and they may bring tears to the audience’s eyes by their overpowering smell, but they are acts of love (461). In an essay discussing two of Rushdie’s novels, Aruna Srivastava points out that Saleem’s words echo Nietzsche’s idea of a remedy to the ills arising from the conventional mode of history. In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche writes: “The unhistorical and the superhistorical are the natural antidotes against the overpowering of life by history; they are the cures for the historical disease. We who are sick of the disease may suffer a little from the antidote. But this is no proof that the treatment we have chosen is wrong” (70). Nietzsche argues for a combination of three modes of history: the first, termed ‘unhistorical,’ comprises the power of forgetting, of limiting one’s horizon. The second is the historical, the conventional history; according to Nietzsche, we suffer from an excess of this type of history. The third type of

history is the superhistorical consciousness that allows for a greater cultural vision encompassing art and religion. Rushdie includes all these different varieties of histories in *Midnight's Children*: in Saleem's version we see conventional histories and amnesia of histories; arts such as fiction, and fantastic accounts have a large part; other arts such as paintings, poetry, music, cinema, etc., also play a role in the narrative; religion is also not left out of the narrative. .

### **2.3.1 The Historical (Conventional History)**

A substantial amount of conventional history is included in *Midnight's Children*. As pointed out before, David Lipscomb has shown that Rushdie has lifted many passages out of Stanley Wolpert's textbook of Indian history. Such versions appear as Saleem's own account, or as media versions and official versions.

Saleem does not give too much space for the world events such as the two World Wars, Nasser's blocking of the Suez Canal, the sending of Sputnik into space, etc. He juxtaposes them with the events in his family history, and compares them ironically. For instance, while "the Great War (World War I) moved from crisis to crisis . . . Doctor Aziz was also engaged in a total war against his . . . patient's [his future wife Naseem's] inexhaustible complaints" (25). "On the day the Word War ended, Naseem developed the longed-for headache. Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (27). World War II is mentioned in passing, for illustrating Aadam Aziz's optimism: "Far away, there was a World War in progress once again . . . But still my grandfather whistled" (39). The dropping of the Atom Bomb on Japan is also mentioned in passing, in the guise of an afterthought. Explaining that 'Zulfikar' is the sword carried by Ali, the nephew of the prophet

Muhammad, and that it is “a weapon such as the world had never seen,” Saleem adds: “Oh, yes: something else was happening in the world that day. A weapon such as the world had never seen was being dropped on yellow people in Japan” (61). Similarly, Nasser’s blocking of Suez Canal is compared to his sister’s habit of setting fire:

In the summer of 1956 . . . my sister the Brass Monkey developed the curious habit of setting fire to shoes. While Nasser sank ships at Suez, thus slowing down the movements of the world by obliging it to travel around the Cape of Good Hope, my sister was also trying to impede our progress . . . Obligated to fight for attention, possessed by her need to place herself at the centre of events . . . she carried her war into the world of footwear, hoping, perhaps, that by burning our shoes she would make us stand still long enough to notice that she was there” (150).

Continuing in the same manner, Saleem speaks of the world’s first space satellite Sputnik in a comic spirit. The young boy Saleem and his dog watch the Sputnik carrying the first dog Laika in space: “it was a time of great canine interest in the space race” (212). Saleem’s view of these world-famous events show a perspective very different from the West’s. He mentions them in passing, deflating the customary importance given to them.

As already mentioned, while parodying the ‘scissor-and-paste’ method of writing history in Saleem’s construction of an anonymous note, Rushdie gives the conventional contemporary history, as given by the newspapers/textbooks.

Rushdie manages to include the history of the city of Bombay by having a fictional character, the William Methwold of the twentieth-century, as a descendant of the historical, real William Methwold of the seventeenth-century (92). Similarly he includes the real event of the infamous Jallianwala massacre in Amritsar in 1919(35-36). The 1971 Emergency Rule by Indira Gandhi, and the Allahabad High Court’s verdict against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for campaign malpractice during election campaign of 1971, and many other real events get included in the novel.

We also see brief biographical sketch of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the real General Sam Manekshaw (who is still alive) which belong to the type of empirical narrative (421, 377). He also mentions various real persons such as famous cricket players, film stars, playback singers, dancers, ministers, political party leaders, Prime Ministers, Military leaders, Presidents, and so on, giving the semblance of a historical narrative, deliberately blurring the borders between fiction and fact.

### **2.3.2 The Unhistorical: Amnesia, the Past, Present and Future**

Saleem's sense of history includes all the three modes described by Nietzsche. The 'unhistorical' mode of historical consciousness is exemplified most obviously in Saleem's amnesia during the period 1965-1971. In addition, Saleem refers to many other instances of forgetfulness: the Brass Monkey forgets the language of birds, cats and dogs (151); the boy-soldiers forget the "lessons of the jungle" when they get out of the Sundarbans (369). Indians "are a nation of forgetters," Saleem explains: "This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget" (37).

Describing the post-Emergency period in India in the late 1970s, Saleem deplors that the Communists in the magicians' ghetto

were losing their memories . . . had mislaid their powers of retention, so that now they had become incapable of judgment, having forgotten everything to which they could compare anything that happened. Even the Emergency was rapidly consigned to the oblivion of the past, and the magicians concentrated upon the present with the monomania of snails. Nor did they notice that they had changed, they had forgotten that they had ever been otherwise, Communism had seeped out of them . . . they were beginning to forget their skills in the confusion of hunger, disease, thirst and police harassment, which constituted (as usual) the present. (444-45)

Speaking of himself in the third person, Saleem declares: "Saleem had come through amnesia and been shown the extent of its immorality; in his mind, the past grew daily

more vivid while the present (from which knives had disconnected him for ever) seemed colourless, a thing of no consequence; I . . . was deeply shocked by the magicians' unwillingness to look behind them" (445). Saleem sees amnesia as immoral because it provides a convenient excuse for jettisoning responsibility. Reflecting on his period of amnesia, he says, ". . . how convenient this amnesia is, how much it excuses!" (356). He points out that in 1978 the people of India seem to be already forgetting the 1975-77 Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi, with its "suspension-of-civil-rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements" (419). Writing in 1978, Saleem muses, "Today, perhaps, we are already forgetting, sinking willingly into the insidious clouds of amnesia" (385). Saleem does not want to forget, nor does he want the nation to forget, the Emergency period.

After he is rendered permanently impotent and sterile by forced sterilization, Saleem loses hopes and interest in the present; so, he clings to the past and scorns the present. He describes the sterilization of the 420 midnight-children as "Sperectomy: the draining-out of hope," the excision/cutting off of hope (437). His disinterest in and contempt for the present seem to be produced by *ressentiment*. Feeling "disconnected" (445) from the present, he feels he does not and cannot have the present and so devalorizes it. Saleem's remarks about the washerwoman Durga reveal his hatred and contempt for those who value the present and not the past:

She was a monster who forgot each day the moment it ended. It is with the greatest reluctance that I agreed to make her acquaintance; it is with the greatest reluctance that I admit her into these pages. Her name, even before I met her, had the smell of new things; she represented novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories events complexities, and I was no longer interested in anything new. (445)

Durga, in return, expresses her opinion of those who live in the past: "when a man loses interest in new matters, he is opening the door for the Black Angel" (446). Saleem represents one extreme: obsession with the past to the extent of ignoring the present.

People like Durga and the magicians-Communists represent the other extreme, that of forgetting the past and its lessons, and focusing only on the present and the new.

While Nietzsche in *The Use and Abuse of History* (43), and Marx in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (595) recommend forgetting of the past and shedding of its burden, Saleem often insists on the memory of the past. He does not see the past, and memory of it as a burden or a nightmare, except when he is roused to an uncharacteristic fit of anger, such as the time when he is squashed under the dead body of Ayooba in the Sundarban jungles, or when he lands in Delhi after being transported in Parvati’s basket of invisibility.

At one point, Mary, after hearing all sorts of rumors about people of past centuries appearing in the present, exclaims, “why these old things can’t stay dead and not plague honest folk?” (245). The ten-year-old Saleem listens to these rumors of supernatural events wide-eyed. Recollecting that period, Saleem declares,

I remain, today, half-convinced that in that time of accelerated events and diseased hours the past of India rose up to confound her present; the new-born secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant . . . so that people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic began to crack. (245)

Here Saleem complains that the past ‘confounds’ the present; that old myths, loyalties and prejudices hamper the new myth of freedom and secular democracy. This is one of the few occasions when Saleem speaks against the hold of the past on the present. Except on these rare occasions, Saleem sees the forgetting of the past as “nothing short of obscene” (445).

There are times when Saleem admits his obsession with the past, but he also insists that he is turning his attention away from the past. Using the third person, the adult Saleem describes his former self as a sixteen-year-old boy in Pakistan where his midnight

conference with the other midnight-children is not possible: “His dreams, denied the children of midnight, became filled with nostalgia to the point of nausea, so that he often woke up gagging with the heavy musk of regret overpowering his senses; . . . jerking my narrator’s eyes away from the *described past*, I insist that Saleem, *then-as-now*, succeeded in turning his attention towards the *as-yet-undescribed future*” (316; emphasis mine). Here the nostalgia for the past is associated with negative terms such as “nausea” and “overpowering” regret. The past is what is already “described” and fixed; the future, on the other hand, is not yet described, and has the potential of many possibilities. Saleem declares that after hearing about the death of his grandfather, he “became even more determined to drown the past in the thick, bubbling scent-stew of the present” (316). Here Saleem expresses his desire to shed the past and concern himself with the present. The present is “formless” before he “began to shape them” (316-17). He orders the chaotic, mind-boggling variety of life around him in a scientific manner, using the method of classification. Soon he understands that his work, “if it was to have any value, must acquire a moral dimension: that the only important divisions were the infinitely subtle gradations of good and evil . . . ”(318). After realizing the crucial nature of morality, and the difference between sacred and the profane, he invents the science of nasal ethics, based on his magical gift of smelling everything, including “emotions, and all the thousand and one drives which make us human: love and death, greed and humility, have and have-not” (317-18). Thus, when he is under emotional stress he turns away from the past and tries to occupy his mind with the present and the future. But by the end of the novel Saleem has no hopes for the present or future.

Another instance when Saleem is tempted to think about the future is when Padma proposes marriage, and dismisses his protests with, “Never mind all that fancy talk anymore. There is the future to think of” (444). Padma’s talk of future offers a contrast to

his own “stoic fatalism” about his own impending death. In Padma’s plans for their future together he smells “the dream of an alternative (but impossible) future” (384).

At the end of the novel Saleem toys with various possibilities of how to end his story, and finally wonders whether he should end it with his dream of the previous night, in which his grandmother looks down from a cloud, waiting for his death and he himself floats outside his body, looking down on his own image. He decides, “I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet” (462). But he also knows that the future cannot be preserved in history like the past. The one empty jar on his shelf of pickles that stands alongside the thirty jars of pickle of past history, is the one for future. What has not taken place cannot be pickled in history. The wish to fix, to set down with ‘absolute certainty,’ can be fulfilled only in the narration of the past. Perhaps this is the attraction of the past as material for narrating. Only prophets may claim to set down with certainty the future, as Ramram Seth does in the novel. Saleem also tries this mode at the end of the novel. He uses the future tense, then present tense, and back again the future tense in the last two paragraphs of his narrative. Apart from the few examples cited above, of his concern with future, it is the past which dominates his narrative.

Though Saleem insists that one should not forget the past, the narrative also shows instances where clinging to the past methods and values hinders openness and progress. Aadam Aziz, Saleem’s grandfather, feels that in India the past exerts a crippling effect. He attempts to fuse the skills of Western and hakimi medicine, but the hakims refuse to cooperate with him. He concludes, “the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo and all things magical would never be broken in India” (67). The Germany-educated Aadam Aziz associates India’s past with superstition and refusal to accept modern things. Ironically, the “things magical” that Aadam Aziz deplores abound in Saleem’s narrative,



as if to corroborate Aadam's opinion. Saleem believes in many superstitions such fate, prophecy, the power of names, curses, etc. There are many other characters such as Naseem, Amina, Resham Bibi, Shaheed, Picture Singh who are superstitious. In the portrayal of such characters Rushdie seems to confirm the West's stereotypical perception of Orientals as frozen in a past. Tai is another character who embodies the West's perception of the East as static and timeless. He is described as the "living antithesis" of the "belief in the inevitability of change" that Aadam Aziz's German friends embody (15).

We hear different voices about the past and about forgetting it, in *Midnight's Children*. In this polyphony, sometimes we hear voices that urge that the past should not be forgotten; at other times, forgetting the past, and becoming free of all the painful and shameful memories of the past, is seen as a way of purification, a new start with a clean slate. There is no single view that is upheld unequivocally. This polyphonic mode suggests that no single attitude toward the past, or forgetting of the past, (and all other matters) is the absolutized, universal, or correct option for all contexts and situations. What is best for a specific situation and context has to be decided in a dialogue between different views.

### **2.3.3 Amnesia, Postcoloniality, and Postcolonialism**

#### **The Old and the New: the Difficulty of Shedding the Past and Beginning the New**

Saleem's amnesia is caused by a head injury during the bombings of Indo-Pakistan war; but many colonized people have "self-willed historical amnesia" (Leela Gandhi 7). Fawzia Afzal-Khan reminds us that amnesia, like myth, serves to protect the narrator from facing up to the cruel reality of history. When history becomes too painful to bear,

“a desire to escape it through some means is only natural” (156).

Discussing postcoloniality, Leela Gandhi stresses the importance of the “ameliorative and therapeutic” effort and effect of remembering the forgotten, painful memories of the colonial past (8). She describes the desire among the postcolonial people to forget the past and begin a new present:

The emergence of anti-colonial and ‘independent’ nation-States after colonialism is frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the colonial past. This ‘will to forget’ takes a number of historical forms, and is impelled by a variety of cultural and political motivations. Principally, postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination. As it happens, histories, much as families, cannot be freely chosen by a simple act of will, and newly emergent postcolonial nation-States are often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance. The mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounters. (4)

Echoing Leela Gandhi’s observation about the postcolonial nation’s desire to start ‘new,’ the newly-independent-India’s Prime Minister Nehru expresses this wish for a new beginning, in his address to the people: “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance . . . We end today a period of ill-fortune” (*Midnight’s Children*, 116-17). But the new is always plagued by the old. The present cannot shed its past at will. As Leela Gandhi points out, the postcolonial nation is “painfully compelled to negotiate the contradictions arising from its . . . political and chronological derivation from colonialism, on the one hand, and its cultural obligation to be meaningfully inaugural and inventive on the other” (6). Albert Memmi, the Tunisian anti-colonial revolutionary also argues that the colonized people are deluded if they hope that a new world will magically emerge from the ruins of colonialism. “And the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now, I do not like to say so, but I must, since decolonization has

demonstrated it: this is not the way it happens. The colonized lives for a long time before we see that really new man” (Memmi 88). When Saleem’s parents emigrate to Pakistan, they entertain a hope similar to the naïve hope that Memmi critiques. They say, “We must all become new people” (310). Amina thinks “it will be a fresh start” (305); In Pakistan, “the land of the pure,” purity becomes their ideal. But, ironically, in this land of purity Saleem feels impure because, he says, “his body was to show a marked preference for the impure” (310). He feels that his love for Jamila Singer is impure though they both know that they are not real siblings. But their past, as brother and sister, makes it impossible for them to re-imagine themselves as non-siblings. Starting something new without the burden and baggage of the past is an illusion, as these instances demonstrate.

The difficulty of changing established ideas of the past and getting free of misconceptions and misrecognitions is brought out in another instance. The Sinais accept Saleem as their son, despite Mary’s revelation that she switched Vanita’s baby with the Sinai baby. Saleem says, “we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts” (118). Leela Gandhi suggests that perhaps “the only way out is by thinking, rigorously, *about* our pasts” (9).

Describing the uneasiness and fear of West Pakistanis before the separation of East Pakistan into the new country of Bangladesh, Saleem philosophizes about the relation between the past, present, consciousness, and personality: “. . . past and present . . . are divided by an unbridgeable gulf . . . consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now” (351). In other words, our past cannot be discarded without danger to one’s personality and sense of wholeness.

Leela Gandhi sees postcolonialism as a theoretical resistance to the amnesia of the colonial aftermath. Postcolonial theory and literature often engage in the task of “revisiting, remembering, and crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (4). Colonial past comprises not only memories of colonial oppression and native resistance, but also of (perhaps rare) instances of colonizers’ solidarity with the colonized, and native complicity with colonial exploitation and oppression. Such painful and humiliating memories as their complicity with the colonizers are usually repressed by the colonized people, often unconsciously. But, colonized peoples’ remembering their own complicity in the terrors and errors of colonial rule can enable them to confront the past rather than repudiating it. Forgetting and repressing the past will only result in repeating it and will not help in surpassing it, since it amounts to an avoidance of coming to terms with the past and learning some lessons from it.

Saleem uses the metaphor of a cinema screen to explain the way in which we perceive the past and the present:

Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems—but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars’ faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (165-66)

In an essay Rushdie describes his own use of different perspectives for the past and the near present in *Midnight’s Children*. The distance from the past enables a perspective that is not possible for viewing the present. Rushdie explains that the

movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative’s movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more ‘partial’. I wasn’t trying to write about (for instance) the Emergency in the same way as I wrote about events half a century earlier. I felt it would be dishonest to pretend, when writing about the day

before yesterday, that it was possible to see the whole picture. I showed certain blobs and slabs of the scene. (“Imaginary Homelands” 13)

Leela Gandhi points out two disadvantages of the view that clarity occurs progressively in time: one, it can provide an excuse for depoliticisation; secondly, it can be seen as monopolizing the understanding and theorization of the past by later generations, denying it to the people actually living and participating in the present (174-75).

## **2.4 History and Postcoloniality**

### **2.4.1 Desire, Envy, Mimicry, and Complicity**

Leela Gandhi, in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, points out that Frantz Fanon (in *Black Skin, White Masks*) invokes Hegel and Sartre to diagnose the condition of the colonized slave as a symptom of imitativeness. In the Hegelian model, the slave must ultimately turn away from the master to forge the meaning of his existence. But in the situation of the colonizer/colonized, the racial factor in master-slave relationship breeds a new and disabling discontent. Whenever the non-white slave faces the white master, the slave now experiences envy and desire. The slave wants to be like the master and therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes the Negro slave’s situation: “In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object” (221 note). To become free, the colonized, like the Hegelian slave, must also turn away from the colonizer, and decline any invitation of the colonizer. Mahatma Gandhi also pointed out in his anti-colonial writings that the desire of the colonized Indians for the civilization of the colonizer had to be overcome before genuine independence could be achieved. He asked the Indians: “Why do you forget that our

adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible? Your hatred against them ought to be transferred to their civilization” (Gandhi, M.K. 66). He identified the Indians’ problem in their fascination with the English culture: “. . . we want the English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature but not the tiger . . .” (Gandhi, M. K. 30).

Colonization involves not only the more obvious colonial oppression, but also a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and the colonized. Colonial power operates not only by force but also by seduction. Rushdie gives a concrete form to the seductive power of the colonizer in William Methwold. The allegory and metaphor of the seduction of the Indians by the English is literalized in Methwold. He seduces the Indian woman Vanita, the wife of an Indian street entertainer who is known only by his nickname Wee Willie Winkie because nobody in the Methwold Estate knows his real name (the name is an allusion to an English nursery rhyme as well as to a story of Kipling by this name). Methwold is Saleem’s biological father. It is from him that Saleem gets the legacy of his enormous nose. Though he has never set his eyes on Methwold, Saleem describes him with admiring words:

a six-foot Titan, this Methwold, his face the pink of roses and eternal youth. He had a head of thick black brilliantined hair, parted in the centre . . . this centre-parting, whose ramrod precision made Methwold irresistible to women, who felt unable to prevent themselves wanting to rumple it up . . . Methwold’s hair, parted in the middle, has a lot to do with my beginnings. It was one of those hairlines along which history and sexuality moved. (95)

Saleem waxes further on Methwold’s “languid gleaming teeth,” “devastatingly combed hair,” his prominent nose bequeathed from a patrician French grandmother, his “courtly charm,” etc., but he also hints at “something crueller, some sweet murderous shade of absinthe” that darkened his charm (95). Saleem later reveals the first secret of the centre-parting of Methwold, “because it has dripped down to stain his face” (102). The stain is the guilt of his manipulation of Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita, whom

he had invited to sing for him privately in his house. He sends Wee Willie away on an errand and thus manages to be alone with Vanita. Methwold's seductive power pulls his victim toward him even though he himself is immobile: "Vanita was alone with the centre-parting, feeling it exert a pull on her fingers that was impossible to resist, and as Methwold sat immobile in a cane chair . . . she found herself approaching him, fingers outstretched, felt fingers touching hair, found centre-parting; and began to rumple it up. (103)

Methwold and Vanita seem to be allegorical figures of the colonizer and the colonized. They exemplify the desire and attraction between the conqueror and the conquered and the complicity between them. Vanita is like the colonized country, which the West usually represents as a female, to be conquered and entered. Vanita's husband, like the natives, is cheated by Methwold, the usurper and seducer. Like the colonized country which is bled of all its resources by the colonizers, Vanita hemorrhages while giving birth to her baby and dies. In this allegory, the bastard child Saleem stands for the new independent nation. Saleem and independent India are born at exactly the same moment. Saleem inherits the big nose and the blue eyes of Methwold; the independent nation of India also cannot help inheriting some features of its colonizer-parent. Tariq Ali in his review of *Midnight's Children* comments on this colonial inheritance. On the eve of independence, the Indian elite class is waiting to step into the shoes of the former rulers. Ali points out the budding neocolonialism of the Indians sketched obliquely in the figure of Ahmed Sinai, the elite businessman, about two months before India's independence: "We see him purchasing an Englishman's mansion in fashionable Bombay in an area previously reserved for the 'pink conquerors.' This image stays with us throughout the novel: the houses, offices, uniforms, attitudes, style and manners of the *raj* are being usurped by a new ruling class" (Ali 89). Ali reminds us that the leaders

of the two new nations, India and Pakistan, (into which the subcontinent is split by the British before their departure) speak in the language of the former colonizers: “Even its most urbane and cultured spokesmen speak an unfamiliar jargon” (89). The Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, addresses the nation in English, and his speech is broadcasted by the national radio through out the country. “His sentiments are comprehensible to the poorest and humblest citizens, but the language in which he chooses to communicate with the masses is English” (Ali 89). In the neighboring Pakistan also, M. A. Jinnah, the Prime Minister addresses the masses of illiterate peasants in English. Ali declares that Rushdie’s description of the important transition period “is acute and, at times, comic, if lacking in the power and the anger of the novel’s second part” in which he critiques the Bangladesh War and the Emergency (89).

Ironically, Ali’s charge against the Indian and Pakistani leaders’ speaking in English can also be leveled against Rushdie for writing in English. Kathleen Flanagan, for instance, has this remark: “When postcolonial writers such as Rushdie use the language of the colonizer to create fictions, it is difficult to see how such narratives could be other than schizophrenic” (38). Given the linguistic complexity of India with its enormous diversity of languages, there is a kind of legitimate excuse for using English, and a certain advantage that one can cite for English over the numerous Indian languages. English serves as a common language that will reach readers in different parts of India, while a text written in one of the Indian languages can be read only by a small fraction of the total Indian population that can read that particular language. The problem with writing in English is that only the elite Indians would be able to read English novels. So, it is a difficult question to settle. When asked about his choice of English for his writings, Rushdie answered, “It wasn’t a choice. By the time I started writing there was only one language I could write in” (Interview by David Brooks 63). Though he can still



speak his native language Urdu, he says that Urdu is not suited to his method; that though Urdu is a very beautiful language, it has very strict rules of grammar, and not flexible enough for his purpose. His being sent to England by his family to study there from the age of fourteen, his continued stay in England after graduation, his becoming a British citizen, his getting married to a British woman—all these circumstances are responsible for his greater ease with English than with his mother tongue. But the very reason for his being sent to England for studies is an example of the elite post-colonial people's fascination and admiration for the colonizer's culture, even after formal independence of the nation. However, Rushdie appropriates the colonizer's language and makes it his own, mixing it with Urdu, and local expressions, changing the rules of grammar, or making his own rules of grammar for his English which is strongly tinged by the speech patterns of Indians.

Going back to Rushdie's description of Methwold as the seducing colonizer, we learn a second secret about Methwold. While Vanita is heaving to give birth to her baby, Methwold, at the precise instant of sunset (mirroring the sunset of the empire where the sun allegedly never set), pulls off his hair, revealing his devastatingly seductive hair, with its center-parting, to be a false hair-piece. On hearing this revelation during Saleem's narration, Padma exclaims, "A baldie! That slicked-up hair of his . . . I knew it; too good to be true!" (114; Rushdie's ellipses). The falsity of Methwold's attractive hair is the mirror image of the false representation of the colonizer's culture as superior. But despite the falsity, the colonizer's culture (with its Enlightenment blandishments of progress and humanism) is as devastatingly seductive as Methwold's false hair and centre-parting.

The affair between Vanita and Methwold shows not only the seduction by the colonizer but also the complicity of the colonized. Leela Gandhi describes "the

complicating logic and reciprocity of desire” in the colonizer-colonized relation (11). The colonized person’s predicament, in her view, is “at least partly, shaped and troubled by the compulsion to return a voyeuristic gaze upon Europe” (11). In the Vanita-Methwold affair, we see the Orient’s desire and longing for its conquering other. We also see that power is seductive, though it often uses coercion. Michel Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge*, makes it clear that power is best able to disseminate itself through the collaboration of its subjects (98). More importantly, such apparent ‘collaboration’ is really symptomatic of the pervasive omnipresence of power. Power begins to insinuate itself both inside and outside the world of its victims. It functions not only as a form of subjection, it is also ‘subjectivised’ within the individuals. Thus there is no ‘outside’ to power. It is always, already everywhere, in Foucault’s theory. It colonizes not only the outer space of the colonized people, but also their inner space, their minds.

Rushdie gives us many instances of the tenacious hold of colonial power on the Indian elite. On the eve of independence, the British colonizers are leaving. Yet, Ahmed Sinai, “apeing Oxford drawl, anxious to impress the departing Englishman,” invents a distinguished ancestry for himself, to match the vaunted ancestry of Methwold, who claims an ancestor “who had dreamed the city [Bombay] into existence” (110). Ahmed, lubricated by Methwold’s whisky, invents a royal Mughal ancestry for himself. To hammer his point home, he adds a fictional “family curse”. This fictional curse, invented out of his envy and mimicry of the colonizer, in later years, “obliterate[s] all traces of reality” for Ahmed (110). Vexed by his inability to remember the words of this fictional curse, Ahmed begins to practise different formulae for this curse on his dog. When the curses do not work on the dog, he treat his dog cruelly, and eventually causes its death on the road in a heartless manner that shocks his children and wife.

Whisky, which makes Ahmed retreat from reality, is a legacy from Methwold, the

colonizer. Ahmed is forbidden to drink alcohol by Islamic code. Yet, he is seduced by Methwold's gracious offer of drink, and gradually becomes an alcoholic. Here again, there is seduction and complicity. Methwold, during the two months the new residents of his houses have to wait to have legal ownership of his houses, offers them whisky every evening at the "Cocktail hour" (95). The elite Indian occupants of his houses become addicted to drinking whisky. On Methwold's insistence, Ahmed keeps the whisky cabinets that come with the house until the date of legal transfer, but by the time Methwold leaves, Ahmed is not in a position to get rid of it. He has already become addicted to alcohol.

Methwold insists that "his houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new comers" (95). The buyers move into the houses, but are forced to keep the colonizers's things intact, and have to wait for two months to have legal ownership, because Methwold wants to transfer power only on the day of India's independence. In the meantime, the new owners get addicted to the previous residents' (the colonizers') things and ways. They are forced to keep the pets, moth-eaten dresses, used clothing, pianolas, fans, pictures of old English women, pictures of European children, and so on. Forced to keep pictures of old Englishwomen everywhere, Amina laments, "No place to hang my own father's photo on the wall!" (96). There are "advantages and disadvantages" in this deal, because some of the things such as the whisky cabinets and the pianola become the favorites of the new owners, and the price of the houses is "fantastic," making it almost impossible to resist (95).

When there are still twenty days left for the legal transfer of ownership,

things are settling down, the sharp edges of things are getting blurred, so they have all failed to notice what is happening: the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is changing them. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford drawls, and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation,

is mumbling under his breath. (99)

What Methwold mumbles in Hindi, “Sabkuch ticktock hai” means ‘All is well’ [or “Everything is all right”] (99). If Methwold plans a “transformation” of the new Indian owners of his houses, and is satisfied that his plan is succeeding, he has all the more reason to be satisfied about what happens after he leaves.

After Methwold leaves, the aftermath still reeks of colonial remains. Wee Willie Winkie, whose name evokes the colonizer’s culture, and whose real name none in the Methwold Estate knows, comes once a week to Methwold Estate “to sing songs which were, like himself, relics of the Methwold era. ‘Good Night, Ladies,’ he sang; and, keeping up to date, added ‘The Clouds Will Soon Roll By’ to his repertoire, and, a little later, ‘How Much Is that Doggie In The Window?’ ” (128). Colonial legacy affects not only the elite but also the poor such as the street singer who sings and tells jokes to entertain the westernized Indian elite that come to live in Methwold’s Estate.

Though “after the Englishman’s disappearance his successors emptied his palaces of their abandoned contents,” Lila Sabarmati keeps the colonizers’ pianola; Ahmed Sinai keeps the whisky cabinet left by Methwold; old Ibrahim comes to terms with the ceiling fan which he had dreaded in the beginning (98, 128). The cocktail hour has already become “a habit too powerful to be broken” (128); “the fading clothes in the old almirahs were distributed amongst the sweeper-women and other servants on the Estate, so that for years afterwards the heirs of William Methwold were cared for by men and women wearing the increasingly ragged shirts and cotton print dresses of their erstwhile masters” (128). The irony that the postcolonial Indian elite are “cared for” by men and women who wear the old clothing of the former colonizers hints at the continuance of colonial policies by the new Indian government. Rushdie’s description echoes the idea that former colonies often dressed their nationalism in European hand-me-downs. The

concepts of nation and nationalism are generally seen as Western ideas, and as Leela Gandhi observes, “And so it is that the project of Indian nation-making is plagued by anxieties of imitativeness, by the apprehension that Indian nationalism is just a poor copy or derivation of European post-Enlightenment discourse” (114). Saleem’s representation of himself as the embodiment of India also hints at this derivation from Europe, since he is the son of Methwold, the Englishman (and the Indian woman Vanita).

Dr Narlikar, one of the new residents, consciously or unconsciously, tries to copy the First Methwold’s alleged project of reclamation of land from the sea. He persuades Ahmed to invest the capital needed for this scheme. But Narlikar dies unexpectedly, while clinging to a tetrapod used for land-reclamation. And Ahmed loses all his capital and profit. Saleem cites various possible motives behind Ahmed’s investment in the “fantasy of every island-dweller” and the “myth of conquering the waves,” but we cannot rule out the possibility that it was partly, if not wholly, out of a desire to imitate the colonizer, the first Methwold of the seventeenth-century. This first Methwold allegedly dreamed of a British Bombay and years later, after his death, his dream was materialized when Bombay was given as a dowry gift on the marriage of Catherine of Braganza to King Charles II of England. Soon the East India Company of Britain got the island and realized the first Methwold’s dream of building a British port and fort in Bombay. Rushdie thus introduces a bit of the early colonial history when European powers gave each other as gift the land of other people outside Europe.

Mimicry of the colonizer is a feature of the colonized, born from desire and envy, and it continues in postcolonial nations, perhaps even unconsciously. In the post-colonial India, Ahmed buys a car “a 1946 Rover with running-boards, just like William Methwold’s” (132); in addition to the implied hint of Ahmed’s mimicry of Methwold in

the choice of his car, the year of the car 1946 also hints at the colonial attitudes that still persist in post-colonial nation after its independence in 1947.

As a comic addition to the serious subject of mimicry, Rushdie includes a description of the mimicry-and-hybridization of the American Western films in India. According to Saleem's version, an Indian film called "Gai-Wallah" (which means "cow-fellow" and is Rushdie's parody of "Cowboy") enjoys huge success in the pre-independent India of 1942. Saleem classifies this film as an "eastern Western" (49). He gives a picture of the Indian actor playing "a sort of one-man vigilante force for the protection of cows," single-handedly saving the many herds of cattle that are being driven across the plain to the slaughterhouse. The film, Saleem says, was made for Hindu audiences for whom the cow is a sacred animal. This weird mimicry of the Hollywood Western unwittingly causes riots: Muslim Leaguers (a Muslim political party that was keen on the partition of India and creation of a new Muslim nation to be named "Pakistan") drive cows past the cinemas to the slaughter (perhaps to provoke the Hindus and to mock the movie), and get mobbed by the Hindus. And this "eastern Western" also incorporates songs and dances, with an Indian dancing girl in a "ten-gallon cowboy hat" (50). In this episode Rushdie lampoons the moviemakers in the colonies that attempt to mimic Hollywood films and make strange and often ludicrous hybrids of Western films to suit local audiences. But this mimicry also shows that the colonized use the colonizer's modes of representation to their own purpose, introducing native elements and contexts into the borrowed art form.

As for the cocktails that Ahmed becomes addicted to (thanks to William Methwold), unexpected results follow in the postcolonial nation. As Bombay was declared a dry state, the only way to get a drink was to get certified as an alcoholic. So, a new breed of doctors spring up, to give these certificates. Every month, on the first day, Ahmed, his

neighbor, and “many of the city’s most respectable men queued up” outside the door of such doctors, and emerged with pink papers of certification (132). As Ahmed finds the permitted ration too small for his needs, he uses his servants, gardeners, bearers and drivers to get more certificates. “The poor, having little else to peddle, sold their identities on little pieces of pink paper” (132); Saleem wryly adds, “and my father turned them into liquid and drank them down” (132). The habit engendered by the departing colonial among the Indian elite leads to further exploitation, manipulation and degradation of the poor in the postcolonial India.

Rushdie’s depiction of the postcolonial elite in *Methwold Estate* echoes Edward Said’s view that postcolonial nation-States often become rabid versions of their enemies. In his study of Joseph Conrad’s *Nostramo*, Said sees imperialism as a system, where the life of the subordinated people comes to be imprinted by the “fictions and follies” of the dominant colonizers (*Culture and Imperialism* xxi).

The kind of mimicry described in *Midnight’s Children* does not empower the Indians. Ahmed and Narlikar come to bad ends by mimicking the colonizer’s drinking habits, his boast of ancestry, and land-reclamation projects. Mimicry, in general, is usually seen as a sign of subservience; sometimes it is seen as evil, as when the victim becomes as bad as the victimizer. George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, allegorized in a bitter satire the phenomenon of the slave-like animals becoming exactly like their previous oppressors and masters, despite their initial revolution.

However, mimicry can be seen and used in a different way. Homi Bhabha has discussed the phenomenon of mimicry in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man” in his book *The Location of Culture*. He argues that the colonizer’s representation of the colonized people is ambivalent because it makes them knowable, harmless and domesticated on the one hand—by constructing knowledge about them and forming negative stereotypes

of them as inferior—and at the same time it attempts to make them appear as strange, very different from and inferior to the colonizer, and thus unknowable on the other hand. The project of bringing the colonized people inside Western understanding through the Orientalist project of constructing knowledge about them, the attempts to domesticate the colonized people and abolish their ‘otherness’—these function contrary to the colonizer’s attempts to maintain the “essential” difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The Manichean binary opposition becomes destabilized by the colonized person’s successful mimicry of the colonizer. The colonized subject, in Bhabha’s theory, is thus split by his contradictory positioning simultaneously inside and outside Western knowledge. This ambivalence of the colonized subjects, their always being in motion between the polarities of similarity and difference, is a threat to the colonizer’s authority based on his allegedly different, superior essence. The colonized people’s ambivalence between two opposite positions—between those that can be taught the ways of the colonizer and therefore brought closer to the colonizer, and those who are irrevocably the ‘other’—jeopardizes the colonizer’s alleged authority. The colonized person’s adopting of the language, manners, education, and culture of the colonizer becomes both a blessing and a menace to the colonizer (and to the colonized). Like most things, mimicry is ambivalent. It can help and support the colonizer’s rule by making the colonized people serve the colonial administration in various ways. But it also makes the colonized person a menace since it lessens the distance and difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The mimic men among the colonized are not always the disempowered, slavish individuals required by the colonizers. By their successful learning of the colonizer’s ways the mimic men demonstrate that the two groups, the colonizer and the colonized, are not really very different. They come to resemble him. The ambivalent position of the colonized person, “almost the same but



not quite,” according to Bhabha, is a source of anti-colonial resistance since it presents an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of the colonizer’s discourse of different essences, the colonizer’s superiority and the colonized people’s inferiority (89). By speaking English, the colonized have not succumbed to the power of the colonizer; instead, they challenge the colonizer’s representations which attempt to fix and define them, in order to justify their colonizing projects. However, the danger to the colonized person from this mimicry is that native languages, culture, knowledge etc., are in danger of vanishing due to neglect, due to the great importance given to mastering the colonizer’s language and to the adoption of the education, values, knowledge, and cultural forms of the West.

Bhabha’s view of mimicry shows that colonialism’s projects and discourses generate the possibilities of their own critique and eventual downfall. The customary view of mimicry is that it is a condition and symptom of the colonized people’s subservience, powerlessness, and identity crisis. But Bhabha’s theory shows mimicry as ambivalent, having the potential of something positive, active and insurgent, and not as a merely passive, subservient mode.

In *Midnight’s Children*, however, we do not see many clear instances where mimicry is used as a mode of subversion or resistance. As discussed earlier, we see Ahmed Sinai and Narlikar courting disaster by mimicking the colonizer.

However, there are hints that the Indians’ mimicry has reached a stage of fighting and resistance against the British by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not all the Indian elite have awakened from their blind mimicry, but leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, trained to be a lawyer in England, decide to enlist the masses of India to fight against the British non-violently. Mahatma Gandhi was not the first or the only such leader.

Rushdie mentions briefly this resistance-movement, in his description of the incident

in Amritsar in 1919. Aadam Aziz is in Amritsar in 1919, and he observes, during the preparation of the nation-wide protest against British rule, that Indian soldiers have fought for the British, have seen the world, and “will not easily go back to the old world” (33). We hear not the voice of submissive mimicry, but the voice of resistance. The mimicry of the colonized people, cultivated during their fighting for the colonizer and their travelling to the West, now clamors with insistence that the colonized people have their rights to shed their old way of submission to colonialism.

Ghani’s buying of a painting “from an Englishman down on his luck,” not troubling to “beat him down” to lower the price, and proving that he is “a lover of culture” shows the native in a superior position to that of the Englishman. Aadam Aziz tries to fuse the skills of Western and hakim medicine instead of merely copying the Western mode, though he does not succeed (67).

Rushdie’s own achievement as a successful writer in the colonizer’s language, his winning awards, etc., are examples of mimicry’s potential to make the formerly colonized people successful rivals to the colonizer in his own territory, in his own language. Rushdie does not merely copy the English handed down by the colonizer but makes it his own, mixing it with Urdu and Hindi, telling his stories imbued with cultures different from that of the colonizer.

The colonizers needed the self-deception and justification that they were doing good to the colonized people by bringing civilization and its benefits to the backward and primitive non-Europeans. Thus, Methwold, not surprisingly, sees the colonial legacy of the British in India as beneficial. He tells Ahmed Sinai:

Bad business Mr Sinai. Never seen the like. Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You’ll admit we weren’t all bad; built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly, independence. Seventy days to get out. I’m dead against it myself, but what’s to be done? (96)

While Methwold's tone is self-congratulatory about the services the British have rendered to India, Karl Marx's essay "On Imperialism in India" describes lucidly all the disservices the British had done to India. "There cannot . . . remain any doubt but that the miseries inflicted by the British in Hindostan [India] is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before" (Marx 654); Marx declares that while all the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, etc., did not go deeper than its surface, England broke down the entire framework of Indian society; that it imparted a special melancholy to the Indian because of the "loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one" (655); that England separated India "from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history" (655). Marx accuses the British in India of neglecting the department of public works such as agriculture and irrigation. "British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry" (656). He also describes how England, by destroying the local Indian textile industry, blew up the "economical basis" of the village communities (657). Marx declares that England, in causing a social revolution in India, "was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them" (658). But he also adds that if mankind cannot fulfill its destiny without a social revolution in Asia, then, "whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution" (658). For Marx, British colonization was a necessary evil for the eradication of feudalism in India.

Methwold's claim that the British brought all "worthwhile things" such as schools and railways masks a hidden agenda. The schools were meant to serve the interests of the British, to train the Indians to assist in the administrative work and in the armed forces. In Marx's words, "From the Indian natives, reluctantly and sparingly educated at

Calcutta, under English superintendence, a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government and imbued with European science” (660). Lord Macaulay of England expressed this very same intention in his ‘Minute on Indian Education’ in 1835: he wanted to “form a class of Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” and to this class he wanted to leave the job of refining the vernacular dialects and “enriching those dialects with terms of science borrowed from Western nomenclature” and this class was to be rendered “fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (see Ashcroft *et al. The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 430).

In *Midnight’s Children*, the geography teacher Zagallo seems to have got the kind of education that Macaulay wanted Indians to get. Zagallo does not even want to admit his part-Indian origin. He claims to be Peruvian (we can reasonably assume that he does not mean that he is a descendant of the native Peruvian Indian, but of the Spanish colonizer of Peru) and affects a Latin accent; “he hung a print of a stern, sweaty soldier in a pointy tin hat and metal pantaloons above his blackboard and had a way of stabbing a finger at it in times of stress and shouting, ‘You see heem, savages? Thees man eez civilization! You show heem respect: he’s got a *sword!*’ ” (230; Rushdie’s italics). He calls his Indian students “savages” and calls the European soldier with the sword “civilization.” But it is Zagallo who behaves like a savage, not his students. He pulls the hair off Saleem’s head and holds the bloody scalp of his student in a bizarre imitation of savages with the scalps of their enemies. Zagallo’s savagery is not even directed at an equal but at a small boy.

Zagallo teaches not in colonial India, but in the postcolonial India of the late 1950s. The colonial legacy’s hold on this teacher is evident. Macaulay’s wish to have a certain kind of educators who would be “vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of

the population” seems to be realized in Zagallo, who insists on the supremacy of the civilization of the conquistador and the savagery of the non-Europeans.

As for the railways that Methwold lists as one of the blessings that the British bestowed on the Indians, Marx makes it clear that this also served the interests of the colonizers. Writing in 1853, Marx predicts: “The day is not far distant when, by a combination of railways and steam vessels, the distance between England and India . . . will be shortened . . . and when that once fabulous country will thus be actually annexed to the Western world” (660). He describes the benefits which the railways in India will bring to the English textile mills: “I know that the English millocracy intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting at diminished expenses the cotton and other raw materials for their manufactures” (662). Marx describes many other benefits that the British were to gain by introducing railways in India, such as the advantages to the military establishments and the increase in taxes (663). Branko Milanovic, in his essay “The Two Faces of Globalization: Against Globalization as We Know It” makes a similar point: “Telegraph cables and railroads were built to bring the world closer and to accelerate the transfer of goods. In Cuba, the main producer of sugar, railroads were built before any existed in Italy or Holland” (669).

Marx adds: “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism” of England’s bourgeois civilization “lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked” (663). One instance of this naked barbarism of England is seen in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre committed by the British Brigadier R. E. Dyer that Rushdie describes briefly in *Midnight’s Children* (see 35-36).

As for Methwold’s claim that Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it, Taj Mahal would not have been so neglected in the first place if the

British had not displaced the Mughal rulers who had built it.

The thoughts of Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz tell us that some things about the British that Methwold's remarks omit. On the eve of Mahatma Gandhi's Hartal (nation-wide strike, a form of civil disobedience) in 1919, Aadam Aziz is in Amritsar. He reads about the Rowlatt Act passed by the British, against political agitation by Indians. He sees a soldierly young man in the street and thinks: "the Indians have fought for the British; so many of them have seen the world by now, and been tainted by Abroad. They will not easily go back to the old world. The British are wrong to try and turn back the clock" (33). While England and Europe in general, claim to have carried out the mission of bringing modernity to the non-West, what they really want is to keep the colonies in the "old" ways, trying to "turn the clock back" for the natives of the colonies.

#### **2.4.2 Alleged Superiority of the West; White Skin, Black Skin and Blue Skin**

In addition to his imitation of Oxford-drawl, Ahmed Sinai develops another feature of the colonizers. His own comment about it reveals the colonized people's, especially the elite class's, admiration, desire and envy for the colonizer. After the unnatural and untimely death of his business-partner Narlikar, Ahmed begins, "literally, to fade . . . until within a few months he had become entirely white except for the darkness of his eyes" (179). Although he pretends to be "worried by his transformation into a white man," and goes to doctors, he is "secretly pleased" when they fail to explain the problem or prescribe a cure, "because he had long envied Europeans their pigmentation. He jokes: "All the best people are white under their skin; I have merely given up pretending" (179). All his neighbors, darker than he, laugh politely at his joke and feel "curiously ashamed" (179). The admiration and envy of the colonized people for their

colonizers is the result of a hidden violence: the instituting of “enduring hierarchies of subject and knowledge—the colonizer and the colonized, the Occidental and the Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the developing,” to quote Gyan Prakash (*After Colonialism*, 3). Many political activists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Franz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and writers like Ashis Nandy and Salman Rushdie have pointed out that in colonialism, not only bodies and territories are colonized, but, more importantly, minds are colonized; and it is much more difficult to decolonize the minds than to achieve formal independence of the nation. This psychological colonization makes the colonized people accept the superiority of the colonizer in all aspects; it makes them admire and envy the conquerors. This is why Ahmed envies the Europeans’ pigmentation, affects an Oxford drawl, invents an imaginary royal ancestry, and imitates the drinking habit and the land reclamation project of the Methwolds. And perhaps it is for the same reason that Ahmed’s neighbors feel “ashamed” though they laugh at his joke. Ahmed’s skin-color change seems to be his involuntary and unconscious mimicry of the colonizer.

Tariq Ali sees Indians’ color-prejudice as one of the ideological heritage of the British *raj*. Imperialism, he says, imprisoned the consciousness of those whom it oppressed in a powerful web and “instilled a self-hatred based on race and colour that redoubled the discriminations of caste society. The natives were ‘taught’ to regard the white skin as a mark of superiority” (88). He reminds us that the alleged White superiority was backed up by writers like Kipling, by the hordes of missionaries, and by the material strength and privileges of the British. As Ali explains, the prejudice of the Indian Northerners against the darker Southerners, is the “illegitimate offspring” of colonial racism and it flourished in the three interrelated sections of the South Asian society: “the ruling class, the civil service and the Army”; all three are “direct

descendants of the *raj*” (88). Rushdie has a representative of the Army (which, in Pakistan is also the ruling class) in Zulfikar and a representative of the civil service in Mustapha; and these two are among the most despicable characters in the novel.

Though circumstantial evidence suggests that Ahmed’s turning white was due to the shock of Narlikar’s death, Saleem gives another explanation. Reminding us that Ahmed is a businessman, Saleem avers that not only Ahmed, but also a large section of Indian businessmen suffered a similar pigmentation disorder.

All over India, I stumbled across good Indian businessmen, their fortunes thriving thanks to the First Five Year Plan, which had concentrated on building up commerce . . . businessmen who had become or were becoming very, very pale indeed! It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the colour from their cheeks . . . in which case, perhaps my father was a late victim of a widespread, though unremarked phenomenon. The businessmen of India were turning white. (179; Rushdie’s ellipses)

The phenomenon of Indian businessmen becoming “white” in post-colonial India can be read allegorically, as a trope that indicates the lasting influence of colonialism. The elite businessmen in postcolonial India copy their former colonizers in exploiting commerce to become rich. Among the various dictionary meanings, ‘white’ also means “(politically) ultraconservative” (Random House). It is possible to read these different layers of meaning in the phenomenon of Ahmed’s (and the other Indian businessmen’s) becoming white. The Five Year Plans implemented by the government for the progress of the nation as a whole, and especially for the uplifting of the poor of India, are exploited by the elite businessmen to amass more wealth for themselves. In this description of Indian elite becoming “white,” Rushdie points to the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized elite, even after formal decolonization. It is also an example of neo-colonialism.

Ahmed is white enough to have the recourse to move his money from India to Pakistan when he migrates. He leaves very little behind in India because “there are ways



of transmitting money with the help of multi-national companies” (305).

In *Midnight's Children*, Naseem's and Zohra's prejudice against black skin is the other side of the colonized people's adoration of white skin. Mumtaz's black skin “stood between her and the affections of her mother” Naseem (52); she is the “blackie” whom Naseem “had never been able to love because of her skin of a South Indian fisherwoman” (56). Ahmed's cousin Zohra expresses her marked preference for pink skin, when she praises Ahmed's fair skin: “Oh look, pink! But then you are so fair, cousinji! . . . Just like me, don't you think. Lovely pink babies we'll have, a perfect match, no, cousinji, pretty white couples?” She then goes on to describe the problems of black-skin. “How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course they know; even blackies know white is nicer, don't you think so?” (70). Afraid that the black-skinned Amina might have overheard her bigoted opinions about skin-color, Zohra adds, “Oh, present company excluded, of course! Oh, Ahmed, cousinji, you are really too dreadful to think I meant our lovely Amina who really isn't so black but only like a white lady standing in the shade!” (70). Her attempt to correct her tactless remarks, comparing a black Indian woman to a white lady in the shade, is even more ridiculous and racist than her blatant racist remarks.

Padma also understands the disadvantages of black skin, especially for a girl who has yet to get married. She pities Mumtaz for her dark skin: “Poor girl. Kashmiri girls are normally fair like mountain snow, but she turned out black. Well, well, her skin would have stopped her making a good match, probably” (57). Showing no attempt to hide the implied racism, she refers to Mumtaz as “the poor blackie” (56). In contrast to the elite Zohra who sees black-skin as a mark of inferiority, the lower class Padma probably sees it merely as a disadvantage for a girl, since it prevents the girl from getting a good

marriage offer.

Fair skin becomes a symbol of superiority and a reason for internal oppression within the community, even within a family, among the natives. Saleem describes for us “fair-skinned [Indian] northerners reviling Dravidian ‘blackies’ ” of South India (254). In West Pakistan, Saleem’s uncle General Zulfikar dismisses the East Pakistanis as “those damn blackies” and does not want to worry about their safety (286).

Amina cannot believe that a white person could be seen begging in the street, in a poor section of Delhi. When Lifafa Das takes her through the poverty-stricken section of Delhi, she “finds herself looking into the face of—impossible!—a white man, who stretches out a raggedy hand” and begs her to give him something; Amina “looks on with embarrassment into a white face . . . embarrassment, because he was white, and begging was not for white people” (81-82). Whether she accepts the superiority of white people or not, Amina finds it hard to believe that white people can be seen begging, because colonial rule has determined her expectations.

The white “man” who begs Amina in a high voice for alms turns out to be a white woman, when she tells Amina that the European who was one of the killers of thousands of Indians in Calcutta in the previous year was her husband. In this episode Rushdie inserts an example of the figures that Ashis Nandy calls the “non-players” (xiv). Such figures as the White person who does not subscribe to the ideology of the colonizer are the non-players and they are usually left out of “history proper” (Leela Gandhi 173). For Nandy, the term “non-players” refers to both the ‘other’ West which refuses to participate in the imperial world view, as well as the non-West which is able to live with this alternative West, while resisting the loving embrace of the West’s dominant self. The white woman who is ashamed of the killing of Indians by her husband and other White men is such a non-player. She does not express racial

solidarity when faced with the brutal, unfair acts of White men, just because she belongs to their race; instead she has put on the clothing of a man, and walked in shame all the way from Calcutta to Delhi, and begs in the streets of a poor section of Delhi for alms from native women. Amina is also a non-player, because rather than being a counter-player who is the standard opponent of the West, she wants to tell the white woman: “Wait, white woman, just let me finish my business, I will take you home, feed you clothe you, send you back into your own world” (82).

Leela Gandhi sees the omission of the Western and non-Western “non-players” in the conventional accounts of history as the loss of “those countless, unrecorded histories of affect, conversation and mediation; in other words, histories of what [Mahatma] Gandhi calls *ahimsa*, or non-violence” (Leela Gandhi 173). Rushdie’s history tells us about the exceptions to the stereotypical binaries of players and counter-players.

Rushdie also hints at the anxieties gnawing upon the British at the imminent end of their Indian Empire: the husband of this white woman, “deranged by the futility of his kind” becomes one of the killers of the Indians.

Going back to the subject of white skin, the earliest example of an Indian who turns white in *Midnight’s Children* is the Rani of Cooch Naheen. Her skin becomes white in blotches in the 1940s, before India’s Independence. Saleem describes “a conversation going on” in an old photograph which shows the Rani, Aadam Aziz, Mian Abdullah, and Nadir Khan. The Rani, Saleem avers, whispers through photographed lips that never move: “I am the victim, the hapless victim of my cross cultural concerns. My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit” (45). Her internationalism is evident in her “brilliant circle of friends who were as much at home in Persian as they were in German” (47). The Rani does not envy or desire the white skin of Europeans, like Ahmed. Her turning white is a symbol of her openness,

acceptance and friendship with the scholars and artists of the Occident.

Saleem describes the Rani's skin color change as "a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence" (45). The Rani dies before Independence and does not become a neo-colonial like the postcolonial Indian businessmen. Nevertheless, her turning white is described as a disease.

The Rani describes herself as a "victim" of her internationalism. In international cultural encounters under imperialism, the colonized people become the victims; the elite among the colonized, like the Rani, end up as the "victims" of the colonizer's dominant culture, even if they try only to enrich themselves by cultural diversity, and not merely mimic Europeans.

Racial prejudice and discrimination do not end at the moment of national independence and official decolonization. We see a confirmation of this sad fact in Saleem's narrative which gives a striking and ironical example of the persistence of racism in the independent India. Saleem describes the Breach Candy Swimming Club near Methwold's Estate in Bombay, just two months before Independence of India. It is "where pink people could swim in a pool the shape of British India without fear of rubbing up against a black skin" (94). After Independence, the situation does not change automatically. In post-colonial India, the nation's first swimmer of the English Channel, Mr Pushpa Roy comes clad in the colors of India's flag, to the segregated Breach Candy Pools. He "has declared war on the whites-only policy" of the baths. When he marches through the gates, hired Pathans seize him and fling him into the dust. The added irony is that it is the Indian Pathans who throw out their fellow Indian out of the racist club. Saleem wryly comments, "Indians save Europeans from an Indian mutiny as usual" (126). He is referring to the many revolts by natives that were suppressed by the British with the help of Indian soldiers in the colonial period. The complicity of some among

the people of the non-West in the oppression of their own people by Europeans is a sad historical fact. Marx points out this irony in his article of 1853, “The Future Results of British Rule in India”. The one great and incontestable fact, he says, is that “even at this moment India is held in English thralldom by an Indian army maintained at the cost of India” (659). Marx’s words are prophetic of what happened four years later, and again in 1919 in two notorious events. The British suppression of the Indian mutiny in 1857 and Brigadier Dyer’s massacre of Indians in Amritsar in 1919 would not have been possible without Indian troops. Even the day-to-day governance by the British would have been impossible for the British without the complicity of the natives. This same complicity is seen in the Indian Pathans’ throwing the Indian swimmer out from the segregated pool in postcolonial India, soon after independence.

Saleem proceeds to give the ending of Pushpa Roy’s resistance. The swimmer is not deterred in his resolve to break the segregationist barrier, and promises to be back on the next day. “And in the end his indomitable campaign won a victory, because today the Pools permit certain Indians—‘the better sort’—to step into their map-shaped waters. But Pushpa does not belong to the better sort; old now and forgotten, he watches the Pool from afar” (126). The ending of Pushpa’s story has an ironical twist. The Pools become desegregated, but there is a new, hidden segregation now, allowing only the ‘better sort’ of Indians, the elite, to use the pool. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, has written about the dangers of neo-colonialism, about the danger of the elite of the decolonized nations taking on the role of the colonizers in exploiting and alienating the poor and in amassing the advantages of wealth. Saleem’s narrative tells the forgotten, suppressed history of people like Pushpa, who, despite their valiant resistance to racial discrimination, finally get excluded from the benefits in the allegedly decolonized nation.

Saleem describes the events of 1957 and mentions that the pool of the Breach Candy Club which threw out Pushpa Roy, was still restricted for the Whites a decade after official decolonization. European girls from the school that his sister attended use the pool. But not Indians, not even elite Indians like the Sinais. He says, these girls “could be seen from our bedroom window, cavorting in the map-shaped pool of the Breach Candy Club, from which we were, of course, barred” (184). In the postcolonial nation, ten years after Independence, the natives are not allowed in the pool in a Whites Only club. One does not need a more glaring example of the lasting effects of colonialism that persist long after official decolonization. In the late 1970s when Saleem is writing his narrative, certain Indians, ‘the better sort,’ can use the pool, but not the non-elite Pushpa Roy, despite his past achievement as the nation’s first swimmer of the English Channel.

Rushdie describes a comic episode that combines the color problem and the predicament of the Catholic missionaries in India. After Joseph D’Costa chides Mary to leave “white gods for white men,” Mary resolves to clear her doubt about the color of Jesus Christ by talking to the priest. The young, inexperienced priest has been instructed by his superior, the Bishop, as follows:

Problems with recent converts . . . when they ask about colour they’re almost always that . . . important to build bridges, my son. Remember, God is love; and the Hindu love-god, Krishna, is always depicted with blue skin. Tell them blue; it will be a sort of bridge between the faiths; gently does it, you follow; and besides blue is a neutral sort of colour, avoids the usual colour problems, gets you away from black and white: yes, on the whole I’m sure it’s the one to choose. (103; Rushdie’s ellipses)

In order to win and retain native converts to Christianity, the Catholic Church tries to incorporate some elements of the Hindu religion. For this, the Bishop is willing to graft the blue color of the Hindu god Krishna on to Jesus. By such a move, he hopes to avoid the black-and-white-skin binarism. Mary, however, is not willing to accept the unnatural blue color for Jesus. She argues with the priest: “But how, Father? People are not blue.

No people are blue in the whole big world! . . . What type of answer is blue, Father, how to believe such a thing? You should write to Holy Father Pope in Rome, he will surely put you straight; but one does not have to be Pope to know that the mens [*sic*] are not ever blue!” (103, 104). The priest tries a counter-attack: “Skins have been dyed blue. The Picts; the blue Arab nomads; with the benefits of education, my daughter, you would see . . .” (104; ellipses original). Mary retorts with contempt: “What Father? You are comparing Our Lord to *junglee* wild men? O Lord, I must catch my ears for shame!” (104). The priest tries to minimize the issue of color: “Come, come, surely, the Divine Radiance of Our Lord is not a matter of mere pigment?” (104).

This incident also reveals Mary’s own contempt for those that she calls “junglee,” meaning those of the jungle, those she sees as wild and uncivilized. Mary’s contempt and denigration of “junglee wild men” is similar to the colonizer’s contempt for non-white people. Racial prejudice is not restricted to Europe; it is possibly already present among the colonized people due to previous conquistadors and invasions, but European colonization aggravates the problem and adds to it the myth of European superiority.

In this episode of *Blue Jesus*, though Rushdie uses an exaggerated parody of the missionaries, his parody has a basis of truth. Leela Gandhi, discussing the mutual transformation of the colonizer and the colonized, points out that the “evangelical activities of colonial missionaries frequently required the paradoxical and threatening indigenization of the gospel” in colonial India (133); and the “colonial archive itself records the administrative imperative to—at least—‘appear native’ in the performance of governmental power” (133). The British viceroy Curzon, for instance, chose to use the Mughal Durbar, a public audience held by the previous Mughal princes, “to proclaim [his administration’s] hegemony through the transculturated form” (Leela Gandhi 133).

Rushdie gives us some examples of the colonizers' mimicry of the natives in *Midnight's Children*. The Englishman Methwold claims that he has got an Indian trait. He describes himself to Ahmed Sinai: "It seems Mr Sinai, that beneath this stiff English exterior lurks a mind with a very Indian lust for allegory" (96). What lurks behind his exterior may be his own original tendency, but he gives the adjective 'Indian' to his 'lust for allegory' implying that his contact with India had infected him with this habit. It is also relevant to note that he uses the term "lust," a derogatory attribute the West claims to perceive in the non-West and uses in its stereotypical representation of the colonized people. Edward Said has familiarized us with this type of stereotypical representation in his book *Orientalism*.

Another example of the White men mimicking the natives is seen in the European snake-expert Dr Schaapsteker. In Saleem's words, "like other Europeans who stay too long, the ancient insanities of India had pickled his brains, so that he had come to believe the superstitions of the Institute orderlies, according to whom he was the last of a line which began when a king cobra mated with a woman who gave birth to a human (but serpentine) child " (257). Like Methwold's "mind with a very Indian lust for allegory" (96), Schaapsteker's strange ideas are blamed on "the ancient insanities of India" and the superstitions of the natives that leak into the European doctor. In the 1970s Saleem describes an American youth with a shaven head and a local peacock-feather fan, travelling in the train from Delhi to Bombay. This American youth "lectured to occupants of the carriage on the intricacies of Hinduism and began to teach them mantras while extending a walnut begging bowl" (451).

The above instances of the Westerner mimicking the natives leads us to conclude that mimicry takes place on both sides of the cultural divide. But it takes place to different extents, and under different conditions, because of the asymmetry in power



relations. Because of the hierarchy set up by European colonizers, the mimicry by the colonizer is called “going native” and generally looked upon with disapproval by the colonizers and the colonized. The colonizers fear that colonial settlers might become infected with and eventually be overcome by the ‘depravity’ of the colonized people. The colonized people also often look down upon the colonizer who gives up his culture and adopts their ways, as if it is a mark of craziness or depravity. But when the colonized people adopt the language and culture of the colonizer, they are usually rewarded with better jobs, and prestige.

#### **2.4.3 The Culture of the Colonizer: Western Education, Art, and Ideas**

One of the effects of colonization is the dissemination of the belief that the colonizer’s race, culture, knowledge, system of education, etc. are superior to the colonized people’s and therefore to be emulated, even at great cost. This belief and its inculcation are not only the effect but the very basis that supports and maintains colonial rule. We have already seen an example of the belief in the superiority of the colonizer’s race in Ahmed’s envy and mimicry of European’s skin color. We see in the earlier generation an example of the belief among the colonized elite that Western education is something that is worth almost any sacrifice. Aadam Aziz’s parents dedicate their life and their gemstone business to put Aadam through medical college in Germany. Aadam’s father has a stroke during his son’s stay in Germany. But his mother keeps this news a secret from her son because his studies abroad are “too important” (12). Until her husband’s stroke, she had spent her life housebound, in purdah, but then finds suddenly the enormous strength to go out and run the gemstone business in order to put Aadam through medical college. She suffers shame and guilt for giving up her traditional purdah in order to run the gemstone shop. The financial and psychological

sacrifice that this middle class Muslim family undertakes in order to educate their son in the West demonstrates the prevalent belief among the native elite in the superiority of Western science and knowledge.

Aadam's future father-in-law, the landowner Ghani also sees Aadam Aziz's foreign education as a valuable asset: "good medical training. Good . . . good enough family" (20); Ghani's words indicate that it is Aadam's "good medical training," which means 'Western training,' that weighs more than his "good enough family." Aadam's mother correctly guesses Ghani's motives for repeatedly requesting Aadam's medical services for his daughter Naseem. She tells Aadam, "that Ghani thinks you are a good catch for her. Foreign-educated and all . . . otherwise why would he look twice at our family?" (26). Two generations later, we see the same fascination and emphasis on Western-style education. Aadam's grandchildren in postcolonial India go to English schools in Bombay. (So did Rushdie. He also went to England to enroll at high school, and later to study at Cambridge University, proving that even in the 1960s the elite Indians valorize Western education).

During the colonial period, Aadam learns another side of the myth of European superiority in Germany. In Heidelberg, along with medicine and politics, he learns that "India—like radium—had been 'discovered' by the Europeans" (11); even his German friend, the anarchist Oskar is "filled with admiration for Vasco da Gama, and this was what finally separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors" (11). It is not surprising that his European friends, despite their anarchist ideology, admire European explorers like Vasco da Gama who opened the sea route to the Orient, and were instrumental for the onset of European colonialism in the Orient, and Europe's ascendancy.

Some three decades after Aadam's return from Germany, India becomes a free

nation, getting Independence from British rule in 1947. Writing in 1978, Aadam's grandson Saleem describes the expectant and exciting hours preceding India's becoming a nation. There is an ironic echo of the words of Aadam Aziz's European friends, when Saleem refers to India as "a nation which never previously existed" and he gives a paradoxically eulogizing-deprecating picture of India.

. . . there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (112)

On the one hand, Saleem refers to India as a "new myth" and a nation that "had never existed before," yet proceeds to list evidences of its antiquity ("five thousand years of history"), its civilization, inventions, and its trade with other parts of the world. His terms such as "myth," "imaginary," "mass fantasy," "dream," "fiction," "fable" etc., in the above passage echo the concepts of nation put forth by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Homi Bhabha, and Eric Hobsbawm. For these thinkers, the nation is a construct, an "imagined political community" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6). The concept of nation is based on notions of collectivity and belonging. The diverse people of a 'nation' imagine that they all share a mutual sense of community, common history, common origins and traditions. The people of India, with their mind-boggling diversity, have to overcome their differences and age-old enmities in order to have the collective dream of a common nation for all of them; but Saleem points out that these differences do not go away but periodically erupt into violent clashes. Saleem's ironic reference to the necessity of periodic renewal of the national identity by "rituals of

blood” reminds us of the repetitive performances of various narratives, rituals, symbols, and icons that are necessary to stimulate and keep alive a people’s sense of belonging to a nation. While the common examples of such performative rituals are the raising of the national flag, singing of the national anthem, celebrating national days such as the Independence Day, etc., Saleem tells us, satirically, of a very different repetitive ritual: the gruesome, bloody conflicts between different groups of the nation’s population.

In a sense, the nation of India was an invention of the English. The idea of nation is generally seen as a Western idea. If one accepts this view, the forming of the nation of India was indeed ‘invented’ by Europeans, as Aadam Aziz’s Euro-centric German friends had said in the early twentieth-century. Rushdie says in an interview, “[India] was a fiction invented by the British in 1947. Even the British had never ruled over more than 60 per cent of India. But it was a dream that every one agreed to dream. And now I think there actually is a country called India” (Glendenning 38). India was made up of many different kingdoms of different sizes in the different parts of the subcontinent; many of these kingdoms were ruined and defeated during British occupation, and after Independence the rulers of these kingdoms were persuaded to join the nation of India, in return for some benefits. So, the Punjabis, Bengalis, Jats and Madrasis that Rushdie mentions, despite being far apart and each having a different language and traditions, agreed to form a nation, together in 1947.

Going back to the times before Independence, when Aadam returns to his native Kashmir, he has stacks of “copies of *Vorwarts* and Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* and other pamphlets, dusty echoes of his half-faded German life” (19). His German life may be half-faded, but nevertheless it persists. They “have blurred so much” else, though they have not deprived him of the “gift of seeing” that Tai had taught him. On his return, Aadam is still able to see what is waiting under the surface of the lake water: the

future ice waiting below the water (13). In Aadam the influence of the West and his homeland co-exist, and sometimes the two influences compete with each other. While he subscribes to Western medicine when he returns from Germany as a young man, he is also torn by the fact that this attitude of his in favor of the West alienates him from his childhood friend, the old storyteller Tai. The conflict between the West and the East within Aadam is especially evident in the way his religious faith gets unsettled. In his later years, Aadam “dedicate[s] himself to an attempt to fuse the skills of Western and hakimi medicine” but his attempt gradually wears him down, because the hakims refuse to cooperate (67).

One effect of Aadam’s medical training in Germany is that his modern European medicine threatens to displace the age-old, traditional, native ways of curing. Aadam’s second-hand leather case which has the word HEIDELBERG burned into the leather on the bottom, provokes the old-fashioned Tai’s rage. For Tai, this pigskin leather bag is an invader into his way of life, religion, culture, medicine, in short, into his universe.

While the lower class, illiterate Tai resists European influence, Aadam’s future father-in-law, the landowner Ghani, claims to love European art. He displays proudly a large, European oil painting of Diana the Huntress in his house. He wears thick dark glasses, and explains to Aadam, “I purchased it from an Englishman down on his luck . . . Five hundred rupees only—and I did not trouble to beat him down. What are five hundred chips? You see, I am a lover of culture” (18). Later we learn that he is blind. The irony of this blind, elite Kashmiri landowner’s love of European painting hints at the ‘blind’ love of many of the colonized elite for European culture.

Two generations later, we see a repetition of this love of European culture in the Sinais’ house. In the bedroom of the infant Saleem Sinai, a picture of the boyhood of Sir Walter Raleigh hangs just above the crib. For his seventh birthday, Saleem is dressed in

a replica of the outfit of the Elizabethan boys in the picture. Lila Sabarmati exclaims, “Look, how *chweet!* It’s like he’s just stepped out of the *picture!*” (122). Ironically, the birthday-boy does not feel happy in the alien attire. Feeling “hot and constricted in the outlandish garb,” Saleem sandbags his “tears of heat discomfort,” hiding his disappointment at not seeing his favorite chocolates among the pile of presents (156). The copying of the attire of the English milords is symptomatic of the less obvious copying of the West that takes place in the minds of the colonized people, long after official decolonization. The description also hints at the sense of pain and loss involved in adopting a foreign culture.

The colonized people’s fascination with Euro-American culture is again hinted in the episode of Saleem’s crush on the American girl Evie Burns. Ten-year-old Saleem falls in love with Evie Burns. Saleem explains this phase of his life:

In India, we’ve always been vulnerable to Europeans . . . Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. (We had done *Cyrano*, in a simplified version, at school; I had also read the *Classics Illustrated* comic book.) Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce. (185)

This passage also reveals the institutionalized dissemination of European culture, especially through literature taught in schools. Elite children are inculcated with the sense of the superiority of European literature so that they acquire and develop a taste, desire and admiration for it. This strategy elaborated by the colonial Lord Macaulay in the nineteenth century and put in practice by colonial administration in India continues to have its effect in the late 1950s-postcolonial India of Saleem’s boyhood, and even in today’s India. The desire and admiration also get directed toward Europeans. The story of Saleem’s love for Evie does not have a happy ending. He suffers many humiliations and abuses from her, and is finally cured of her. However, the European tragedy becomes a farce when it is mimicked by Indians. Tragedy’s becoming a farce when

repeated is also an allusion to Marx's words in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte": "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (594).

The ten-year-old Saleem dreams of dancing with European girls during the School Social. The spell of the European girl Masha Miovic on Saleem is such that, in a rare demonstration of his manhood, he kicks his mocking classmates and for a brief moment becomes a hero.

While Saleem gets a crush on Evie Burns, his sister the Brass Monkey is also enamored of Europeans and their ways. She attends an English school which is "full of tall, superbly muscled" European girls. These white girls cavort in the segregated swimming pool, reserved for whites only, but the Brass Monkey "somehow attached herself to these segregated swimmers, as a sort of mascot" (184). These older girls help the Brass Monkey to strip Sonny Ibrahim when he is waiting at the bus stop. They leave Ibrahim naked on the road. The Brass Monkey fawns over the European girls and manages to be accepted by them, and with the help of these former colonizers humiliates her own kind, her neighbor, and would-be lover, the Indian boy Ibrahim.

The Muslim Brass Monkey also flirts with Christianity, partly due to the influence of her European school-friends, and partly due to the Christian ayah Mary who regales the children with Bible stories (253). The wild, mischievous, tomboyish Brass Monkey becomes docile and speaks highly "of gentle Jesus meek and mild" and goes around the house humming hymns. When she is believed to have died in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Saleem insists that she found refuge in a convent in Karachi, to escape from the retaliation from the Pakistani government for speaking against it. Europe's influence on Saleem's family seems to continue on many levels and in many generations.

Even Saleem's toy tin globe bears the label "MADE AS ENGLAND." It serves as the time capsule for Saleem's memorabilia of his life: Prime Minister Nehru's letter written in 1947 to greet baby Saleem, and a newspaper cutting of the same period showing a large photo of infant Saleem with the headline "MIDNIGHT'S CHILD." Saleem buries the toy globe with its memorable contents in the garden of his house in Bombay on the eve of his family's emigration to Pakistan in 1963. The adult Saleem, narrating his life later, tells Padma that he had a world of his own in this toy tin globe: "It was a world full of labels: *Atlantic Ocean* and *Amazon* and *Tropic of Capricorn*. And, at the North Pole, it bore the legend: MADE AS ENGLAND" (266). Instead of the customary and expected "MADE IN ENGLAND," Rushdie slyly uses "MADE AS ENGLAND" (emphasis mine). Though Rushdie does not say so, the unusual legend with the adverb 'as' in the place of the usual preposition 'in' suggests that this is a linguistic error committed by the local, formerly-colonized manufacturers, and that this toy could be a counterfeit, a local product with a false legend to pass for a product from England. Rushdie hints at the sad fact that the elite among the former colonized people still prefer English-manufactured goods, just as they value the English culture. And to exploit this tendency, counterfeits of the Western products appear in the postcolonial nation.

The toy's label, with the prepositional mistake, serves to comment on the colonized people's tendency to mimic the colonizer's products, and their desire to be "made as England." The description of the toy globe signals ambivalent feelings. This tin globe, made of "two cheap metal hemispheres, clamped together by a plastic stand," has lost its stand by August 1958. It has to be stuck together by a Scotch Tape at the Equator. When the eleven-year-old Saleem's "urge for play" overcomes his "respect," he uses the globe as a football, kicking it around. He clanks his tin sphere around the Methwold



Estate, “secure in the knowledge that the world was still in one piece (although held together by adhesive tape) and also at my feet” (266). The tin globe is not only kicked in play, but is also literally crushed by the Brass Monkey in a fit of anger.

The tin globe with its inscription bearing the name of England “had lost its stand” by August 1958. The northern and southern hemispheres have come apart and Saleem has to stick them together with a scotch tape. The tin globe mirrors the fortunes of England, and the state of affairs in the era when European colonies and empires were breaking apart. By 1958, the British Empire had literally come apart by the decolonization of many of its colonies, and by the mounting resistance to colonialism in other colonies in the Southern Hemisphere. The deterioration of the tin globe which has the legend “MADE AS ENGLAND” and the kicking and crushing of the globe by Saleem and his sister mirror the decline of England and its power over the rest of the world. The world is not ‘made as England’ anymore. Rushdie playfully hints at this situation in the toy tin globe’s fate. Nevertheless, it plays an important role in Saleem’s history by serving as the evidence for his story.

Saleem alludes to this tin globe again while describing Ayub Khan, the top military General of West Pakistan in 1958. The General has a head “round as a tin globe . . . not labeled like the orb which the Monkey had once squashed; not MADE AS ENGLAND (although certainly Sandhurst-trained) . . . ” (288). Ayub Khan puts an end to democracy in Pakistan by a military coup. It is a telling fact that many of the military dictators in many parts of the world have had military training in the West.

Ayub Khan’s gracious hostess Emerald (Saleem’s aunt) is allowed to emigrate, after her son Zafar kills his father General Zulfikar in 1965. She chooses to “leave for Suffolk in England, where she was to stay with her husband’s old commanding officer, Brigadier Dodson” (337). This Dodson appears earlier in the novel, briefly, as the

military commander of Agra in 1942, in colonial India. When his army car passes through the streets where old men are playing the game of hit-the-spittoon, the car knocks over the spittoon, spilling the red betel juice on the road. We see a hint of the Brigadier's symbolic role in the description: "A dark red fluid with clots in it like blood congeals like a red hand in the dust of the street and points accusingly at the retreating power of the Raj" (44). By 1965, this Brigadier who is the symbol of the retreating power of the Raj "had begun, in his dotage, to spend his time in the company of equally old India hands, watching old films of the Delhi Durbar and the arrival of George V at the Gateway of India" (337). It is with this colonial officer, who basks in the nostalgic memories of the glories of the erstwhile British Empire, that Emerald is planning to stay, "looking forward to the empty oblivion of nostalgia and the English winter"(337). Emerald's choice typifies the preference of many postcolonial elite for their former colonizers. The elite in the European colonies, shaped by the Europeans, come to identify more with their (former) colonizers than with the people of their own country. The situation does not change much, or immediately, in postcolonial nations by the mere fact of formal independence.

English people's nostalgia for the grand colonial days, especially during Margaret Thatcher's government, is a theme that Rushdie returns to in his non-fictional writings. In his 1983 essay "Outside the Whale," Rushdie comments on the nostalgia among some of the British for their imperialist days. Seeing the spate of British films, television series, and books about the colonial period in India as a sign of this nostalgia, and also as a means to boost the self-image of the British people, he calls such "Raj revival" as revisionist history.

And there can be little doubt about that in Britain today the refurbishment of the Empire's tarnished image is under way. The continuing decline, the growing poverty and the meanness of spirit of much of Thatcherite Britain encourages many Britons to turn their eyes nostalgically to the lost hour of their precedence. The

recrudescence of imperialist ideology and the popularity of Raj fictions put one in mind of the phantom twitchings of an amputated limb. Britain is in danger of entering a condition of cultural psychosis, in which it begins once again to strut and to posture like a great power while, in fact, its power diminishes every year. The jewel in the crown is made, these days, of paste. (91-92)

Rushdie declares that Margaret Thatcher “nailed her colours to the old colonial mast, claiming that the success in the South Atlantic [Falkland victory] proved that the British were still the people ‘who had ruled a quarter of the world.’ Shortly afterwards she called for a return to Victorian values, thus demonstrating that she had embarked upon a heroic battle against the linear passage of Time” (“Outside the Whale” 92).

The kind of films that Brigadier Dodson watches with nostalgia are kindred in spirit to the various films, television productions and novels about colonial India that Rushdie condemns as “fake portraits inflicted by the West on the East” (“Outside the Whale” 88). He reminds us that works of art and entertainment do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; the way these products operate in a society cannot be separated from politics and history; for every text, there is a context. Rushdie adds:

the rise of Raj revisionism, exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, is the artistic counterpart of the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain. And no matter how innocently the writers and film-makers work . . . they run the grave risk of helping to shore up the conservatism, by offering it the fictional glamour which its reality so grievously lacks. (92)

Rushdie, echoing Edward Said’s views in *Orientalism*, argues that the purpose of such false portraits is to provide moral, cultural and artistic justification for imperialism and for its underpinning ideology. The praise and popularity of such artistic products is an indirect way of condoning imperialism. The glories of the British Raj depicted in such representations are false, because they were built on inglorious exploitation, greed and injustice.

Going back to the prevalence of Western culture among the elite of the former colonies, we see other examples of Pakistan’s fascination with the cultural products of

the West. The cinema theaters of Pakistan show “cheap tawdry . . . imported spaghetti Westerns and the most violent martial-arts films ever made” (317). Saleem’s narrative includes the American commentator Herbert Feldman’s sad observation that the city of Karachi had a dozen aerated waters and soft drinks, but only three suppliers of bottled milk. For Feldman, the drinks were “a manifestation of capitalist imperialism” (317). The movies, soft drinks, contraband cigarettes, etc. from the West that circulate in Karachi are also a manifestation of the postcolonials’ craving for Western products.

We see another example of the power of European culture over the elite class in ‘postcolonial’ Pakistan in Mutasim, the son of the Nawab of the kingdom of Kif. He “had traveled abroad and wore his hair in something called a ‘beetle-cut’.” On his guitar he “picked out strange Western songs” and “wore bush-shirts on which musical notation and foreign street signs jostled against the half-clad bodies of pink-skinned girls” (321). He is “expert in the geography of European cities,” but is innocent in the native magical things in his father’s collection (323).

Mutasim’s father, the prince of Kif, has Western ideas of progress. He buys a brand-new Rolls-Royce car, the first ever seen in his mountain valley. He is grieved that “his subjects who had become used to using the roads of Kif for purposes of social intercourse, quarrels and games of hit-the-spittoon, refused to get out of its way” (320-21). Despite his proclamation that “the car represented the future, and must be allowed to pass,” the people ignore his notice. He issues a second notice ordering the citizens more peremptorily to clear the roads when they hear the horn of the car. Still, the people of Kif continue to smoke, spit and argue in the streets. The third notice, adorned with a gory drawing, declares that the car would henceforth run down anybody who failed to obey its horn. The Kifis added new, more scandalous pictures to the one on the poster, and continue to disregard the warning. The Nawab then actually carries out his threat.

And finally the car is able to move along the road without trouble, and the Nawab says with satisfaction, “No trouble; the car is respected now. Progress has occurred”(321). This is the kind of progress that many postcolonial nations achieve.

After invading the streets, the convoy of cars coming to Kif on the occasion of the Nawab’s daughter’s engagement ceremony ‘progress’ to invade the shops and houses on the road. When the convoy of cars bringing the Zulfikars, and their friends approach the Nawab’s palace, the wind from the hashish fields in the land makes the drivers of the cars doped to some extent. The intoxicated drivers overturn “a number of street-side barber-stalls and invaded at least one tea-shop, leaving the Kifis wondering whether the new horseless carriages, having stolen the streets, were now going to capture their homes as well” (323). The “progress” heralded by the cars thus endangers the very land, homes and lives of the population.

#### **2.4.4 Self-hatred**

The other side of the coin of the colonized people’s admiration for the allegedly superior race and culture of the colonizer is their feelings of inferiority and self-hatred. One of the effects of European colonization has been the brainwashing of the natives (especially the elite) in the colonies, to make them believe that Europeans and their culture are superior and the native’s own race and culture are inferior; this way of perception and belief often lead to the native elite’s low self-esteem, shame, and self-hatred; which in turn lead to the projection of their self-hatred and contempt towards other natives.

Zagallo, the geography teacher at Saleem’s school, is an example of the Indians who despise their own people. He claims to be Peruvian (Spaniard) and affects a Latin accent. He habitually calls the Indian children at school as “jungle-Indians, bead-lovers”

(230). As mentioned before, Zagallo points to a picture of a soldier with a sword and tells his students—whom he calls “savages”—that the soldier *is* civilization and his sword demands respect. The kind of civilization that Zagallo admires is one that uses the sword as the means to earn respect and depends on the sword for its implementation and extension. Zagallo asks the “savages” to believe that civilization means a sword in hand. For European colonizers it was literally true, since they spread their “civilization” on the point of sword, using violence, in ironical contrast to the Enlightenment ideas of civilization. Saleem suspects that despite his talk of llamas, conquistadores, and the Pacific Ocean, Zagallo was born in a tenement in Bombay and that his Goanese mother had been abandoned by an European shipping agent. In other words, Zagallo is believed to be an ‘Anglo’ and a bastard, ironically mirroring Saleem’s own origins and status. Though nobody knows of Saleem’s true origins, it seems apt that Zagallo’s (self) hatred is specially targeted towards one who is similar to him, in his illegitimacy and hybrid origin. Zagallo addresses his students with epithets such as “feelth from the jungle,” “sons of baboons,” “ugly ape,” etc., and mocks Saleem as a “primitive creature” with a “heedeous face” (231). He not only calls Saleem an “animal,” but also forces Saleem to make a self-declaration to the whole class that he is an animal, and makes Saleem repeat it many times (232). The epithets such as ‘savages,’ ‘primitive creatures,’ ‘animal,’ and the idea that they lack ‘civilization’ echo the standard, stereotypical, European perception of the non-West. Zagallo imagines himself as belonging to the race of European conquerors and colonizers, and parrots the European views about the Orientals. Ironically, it is Zagallo who fits the labels that he uses for his Indian students. As a graphic evidence and representation of this, Zagallo is shown with a clump of Saleem’s hair, in his fist, which he had pulled and left Saleem with a bleeding head. His violence leaves Saleem with a monkish tonsure for the rest of his life. The contempt and

hatred that Zagallo—who is part Indian—projects toward other Indians echo the self-hatred and sense of inferiority that many colonized people feel and project toward other natives.

Mary's contempt for Hindus and Muslims, the inability of Naseem to love her black-skinned daughter, and Zohra's contempt for black-skinned people as inferior are also examples of the contempt that Indians have for their compatriots, because of their own racial, religious and other prejudices.

## **2.5 Postcolonial History and the Divided Nation**

### **Discord and Conflicts Within the Colonized People**

Postcolonial history in *Midnight's Children* focuses on many problems within the communities of colonized people, due to their own internal conflicts, abuses and oppression. In what follows, I will deal, in particular, with internal conflicts related to religion, social class, and language. The divisions along the gender-line are also important, but I have not included a discussion of gender-divisions due to lack of space and time.

#### **2.5.1 Religious Conflicts**

Just before independence, violent conflicts erupt between the Hindus and Muslims in India as the country is to be subdivided by the British into two nations, one to be predominantly Hindu, and the other predominantly Muslim. This means the displacement of millions of Hindus and Muslims who happen to be living in the wrong parts of the subcontinent with respect to religion. The panic and rage caused by the displacement erupt in violence and mutual killings of Hindus and Muslims. Saddened and angered by this violence among the people of the subcontinent, Joseph D'Costa tells

Mary, “. . . the air comes from the north now, and it’s full of dying. This Independence is for the rich only; the poor are being made to kill each other like flies. In Punjab, in Bengal. Riots riots, poor against poor. It’s in the wind” (104). Mary, however, feeling that as a Christian, she has nothing to do with the quarrels between the Hindus and Muslims of her countrymen, argues, “But Joseph, even if it’s true about the killing, they’re Hindu and Muslim people only; why get good Christian folk mixed up in their fight? Those ones have killed each other for ever and ever” (105). Joseph thinks otherwise. He tells Mary: “You and your Christ. You can’t get it into your head that that’s the white people’s religion? Leave white gods for white men. Just now our own people are dying. We got to fight back; show the people who to fight instead of each other, you see?” (105). Joseph correctly observes that often the oppressed people fight among themselves, rather than against their oppressors. The British have the reputation of using the motto “Divide and rule.” Their colonial history reveals a strategy of setting one faction of the natives against another: Hindus and Muslim against each other in colonial India; Palestinians and Jews against each other in the Middle East; and Catholics against the Protestants in Ireland. Joseph points out that it is usually the poor who are set against each other and their rage gets directed towards one another, instead of against their real oppressors.

Ironically, Joseph who seems to understand this, himself seems to be the cause of the death of innocent members of his countrymen. Through Mary we learn the rumors that Joseph “helps to burn buses and blow up trams” (105). His revolutionary, terrorist methods for implementing “his patriotic cause of awakening the people” are likely to add to the sufferings of his people, ironically becoming another example of what he laments: poor Indians killing other poor Indians (105).

The man who teaches religion to the Azizs’ children in the 1930s is another example



of the religious intolerance that splits the colonized people. Aadam Aziz throws this teacher out for teaching the children “to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians” (42-43). Some fifteen years later, on the eve of the Partition of the country, the violence unleashed by the displaced and enraged Hindus and Muslims shows that these internal conflicts never die; they only subside to erupt again on the least provocation.

Just before Independence, thanks to the decree of the Partition of India into India and Pakistan by the colonizer Earl Mountbatten, the subcontinent witnesses the horrors provoked by displacement, panic, anger, and revenge. Saleem says, “I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress on the frontiers of the divided Punjab (where the partitioned nations are washing themselves in one another’s blood)” (112). In the midst of the agony and fury of displacements, Saleem’s uncle Major Zulfikar is taking advantage of the situation, buying refugee property at absurdly low prices, laying the foundations of a fortune in Pakistan “built on the miseries of fleeing Hindu families in 1947” (112, 336).

Saleem tells us about the abusive practices of Hindus against Muslims in the Indian subcontinent before its partition into India and Pakistan: In the days before the Partition, he says, anti-Muslim feelings were rampant; “pigs’ heads could be left with impunity in the courtyard of Friday mosques with impunity” (72). Pig is a taboo-animal for Muslims and so this act is seen as sacrilege and enrages the Muslims. Saleem describes a fanatical anti-Muslim group called the Ravana gang, which sent its men at dead of night, to paint slogans on the walls of the city of Delhi: NO PARTITION OR ELSE PERDITION! MUSLIMS ARE THE JEWS OF ASIA!” It burned down Muslim-owned factories, shops, and godowns (warehouses). Behind the façade of racial hatred, Saleem says, it was a brilliantly-conceived commercial enterprise. In other words, the gang

profited financially by using religious hatred to its own advantage. It made anonymous phone calls, and letters written with words cut out of newspapers to Muslim businessmen and offered them a choice: they could either pay a single, once-only cash sum or have their warehouses burned down. Saleem humorously adds:

Interestingly, the gang proved itself to be ethical. There were no second demands. And they meant business: in the absence of grey bags full of pay-off money, fire would lick at shopfronts factories warehouses. Most people paid, preferring that to the risky alternative of trusting to the police. The police, in 1947, were not to be relied upon by Muslims. And it is said (though I can't be sure of this) that when the blackmail letters arrived, they contained a list of 'satisfied customers' who had paid up and stayed in business. The Ravana gang—like all professionals—gave references. (72).

Lifafa Das, a Hindu, almost gets lynched by an angry Muslim crowd because a little Muslim girl wants to take revenge on him for making her wait in line instead of allowing her to break the queue and get her chance to see his peepshow, ahead of the other children waiting in line. The Muslim mob starts yelling that he is a rapist and wants to kill him. He is saved only because of Amina's brave and intelligent intervention.

In the neighborhood where Amina lives in Delhi, a Sindhi and Bengali, both Muslims, hate their Hindu neighbor, whose house is in between their houses. Religion unites the Sindhi and Bengali who had "very little in common—they didn't speak the same language or cook the same food; but they were both Muslims, and they both detested the interposed Hindu" (73). "They dropped garbage on his house from their rooftops. They hurled multilingual abuse at him from their windows. They flung scraps of meat at his door . . . while he, in turn, paid urchins to throw stones at their windows, stones with messages wrapped round them: 'Wait,' the messages said, 'Your turn will come' "(73).

Many years later, in 1971, in West Pakistan the young soldiers whet their fighting spirit by engaging in anti-Hindu talk. Ayooba Baloch proudly imagines himself as spy, and

adds: “Just let us at those Hindus—see what we don’t do! Ka-dang! Ka-pow! What weaklings, yara, those Hindus! Vegetarians all! Vegetables always lose to meat” (347).

In another example we see that the term referring to a person of the “other” religion, namely, “Hindu,” is used as an extreme insult. In Pakistan, General Zulfikar, enraged at the sight of his son Zafar wetting his pants in the presence of General Ayub Khan, throws Zafar out of the room, calling him “Hindu,” along with other demeaning terms: “Pimp! Woman! Coward! Homosexual! Hindu!” (290). Those who do not fit in the concept of “normality” are all marginalized and despised, by members of their own community, even by members of their own family. For Zulfikar, the norm means male sex, Muslim religion, heterosexuality, and bravery. He despises those who are outside this norm.

In 1948, when the news of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination is announced during the premiere of Hanif’s film in a theater, Saleem’s Muslim family becomes afraid that if the assassin happens to be a Muslim, there will be terrible retaliations from the Hindus against all Muslims. Hanif advises his sister Amina to get out of the theater, adding, “if a Muslim did this thing there will be hell to pay”; so when the radio finally gives the name of the assassin as Nathuram Godse, Amina bursts out, “Thank God. It’s not a Muslim name!” Her father replies, “This Godse is nothing to be grateful for.” But Amina explains, “Why not, after all? By being Godse he has saved our lives!” (143). It is ironical that even in the midst of the terrible news of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, the first reaction and concern of Saleem’s family, and by extension, of the whole Muslim population in India, is fear of retaliative violence and vengeance by Hindus. It is also ironic that amidst the sadness of Mahatma’s death the revelation of his killer’s name gives a feeling of relief to the Muslims, due to the conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims.

In postcolonial India, we see another example of something that is interpreted by Narlikar as a persecution of the Muslim minority by the Indian government. When Ahmed Sinai tries all kinds of methods to speed up his land reclamation project, including the offer of black money, the State Secretariat gets “the whiff of a Muslim who was throwing his rupees around like water” (134). Soon the government freezes Ahmed’s assets. Ahmed’s partner Narlikar, while blaming himself, also comments on the government’s policy towards Muslims: “I blame myself entirely; we made ourselves too public. These are bad times, Sinai bhai—freeze a Muslim’s assets, they say, and you make him run to Pakistan, leaving all his wealth behind him. Catch the lizard’s tail and he’ll snap it off! This so-called secular state gets some damn clever ideas” (135). However, eventually, Ahmed’s lawyer wins the case and gets back Ahmed’s frozen assets. But there is an irony in this, because Amina secretly provides the money for the lawyer to bribe the judges and jury, in order to win a verdict in favor of Ahmed. The episode points to both religious prejudice, and corruption in the government and the judicial system of postcolonial India.

### **2.5.2 Class Divisions**

In addition to religious prejudice, class prejudice is also prevalent among the colonized people. It cannot be wholly attributed to colonialism, but the divide between the classes is exacerbated by colonialism since it alienates the elite from the masses. When Aadam Aziz comes with red stains on his clothes, Naseem thinks that he has been to low-class neighborhoods and says, “. . . Allah what a man I’ve married, who goes into gullies to fight with goondas! . . . I don’t know why can’t you be a respectable doctor like ordinary people are just cure important illnesses and all?” (35).

Class-prejudice is linked to prejudice against some professions also. Naseem shows

her prejudice against those connected with the movie field. She “believes the cinema to be an extension of the brothel business” (57) and so her son’s dream of becoming a film director horrifies her. She tells her daughter-in-law Pia, who is a movie actress: “Listen daughter, don’t do this actressy thing. Why to do such shameless behavior? Work, yes, you girls have modern ideas, but to dance naked on the screen! When for a small sum you could acquire the concession on a good petrol pump . . . Sit in an office, hire attendants; that is proper work”(242). For Naseem, even being without purdah is equivalent to be naked; so she sees acting and dancing in the movie as dancing naked on the screen, and so despises Pia.

Even Nadir Khan, despite his lofty talk that art must be beyond categories, that his poetry and the game of hit-the-spittoons of the ordinary poor people must be seen as equals, seems unable to avoid hierarchies. He seems to be ashamed to be appearing as if he were in “a cheap thriller, of the sort hawkers sell on railway stations, or give away free,” when he flees the scene of his leader’s murder (49). Despite his Communist ideology, he cannot help associating cheapness with the poor hawkers in the railway station. However, to be fair to Nadhir Khan, when we see him later in Bombay under the name Qasim Khan-the-Communist, he is in touch with the poor and tries to help them, and even manages to get Amina involved in his “rounds, up and down the tenements” of the poor district, helping to “get water taps fixed” and to pester “landlords to initiate repairs and disinfections” (218).

In the previous generation, Aadam Aziz’s parents strongly disapprove of the boy’s friendship with Tai who is of a lower class. Their fear of germs, and fear of contamination from Tai seems to be an expression of their fear of association with the poor. Aadam’s mother washes the boy with boiling water, telling him, “We’ll kill that boatman’s germs if it kills you” (15); while the boy-Aadam sits at the boatman’s feet

listening to his stories and magical talk, “voices summoned him indoors to be lectured on Tai’s filthiness and warned about the pillaging armies of germs” that his mother imagines leaping from Tai’s body on to her son’s clean clothing (15). The elder Aziz’s antipathy toward Tai is a matter of class, though it takes the form of a fear of filth.

Saleem briefs us on a more brutal contrast of the rich and the poor in Karachi, Pakistan. He tells us of the “inalienable opposition existing between the after-shave of Sind Club Members and the poverty-reek of the street-sleeping beggars at the Club gates” (318).

The elite, in general, shut themselves off from the poor. Ahmed locks the door of his railway compartment and pulls down the shutters to keep out the fare-dodgers. Saleem admits that it was always frightening to hear the pleading voices and fist bangings of the fare-dodgers, until at last he “was the one on the outside, hanging on for dear life, and begging, ‘Hey maharaj! Let me in, great sir’ ” (67). In 1977, after being released from the Widows Hostel, he is penniless, and boards a train to Delhi as a fare-dodger: he leaps on to the step of a first-class compartment as the train pulls out of the station. He describes his feelings and the response of those inside the first-class compartment: “And now, at last, I knew how it felt to clutch on for dear life, while particles of soot dust ash gritted in your eyes, and you were obliged to bang on the door and yell, ‘Ohe, maharaj! Open up! Let me in, great sir, maharaj!’ While inside, a voice uttered familiar words: ‘On no account is anyone to open. Just fare-dodgers, that’s all.’ ” (442).

The poor become invisible to the elite. The “city eyes” do not and “cannot see” the poor, the sick, the beggars, the homeless, the cripples, and the deformed. The poor become “invisible people” for the rich (81). Amina, hit by the newness of seeing such things, and being surrounded by begging children, and heads everywhere staring at her, first thinks, “It’s like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads

and heads and heads” (81); then she corrects herself that it is not a monster, but “poor, poor people, . . . a power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used . . . No, these are not decayed people, despite everything” (81). Despite her compassion for the poor, Amina is not free from social prejudices. When her husband Ahmed, angry at Amina’s preoccupation with her child, starts to flirt with his Anglo-Indian secretaries, Amina gives the girls a collective name. “ ‘Those Anglos,’ she said to Mary, revealing a touch of snobbery, ‘with their funny names, Fernanda and Alonso and all, and surnames, my God! Sulaca and Colaca and I don’t know what. What should I care about them? Cheap type females. I call them all his Coca-Cola girls—that’s what they all sound like’ ” (133). Amina’s words exemplify the common prejudice against minority groups such as the Christians and the Anglo-Indians, in addition to class snobbery. Amina herself belongs to the minority group of Muslims, but she is contemptuous of the Christian and Anglo-Indian secretaries. Mary replies to Amina, “They aren’t so funny names, Madam; beg your pardon, but they are good Christian words” (133). Feeling guilty that she has offended Mary Pereira, Amina lamely says, “Oh, not *you*, Mary, how could you think I was making fun of you?” (133; Rushdie’s italics). Amina’s contempt and prejudice are directed against both the Anglo-Indians and the working-class women.

Saleem’s aunt Pia, the movie-actress is another character who manifests the class prejudices that persist in postcolonial India. She complains that her husband Hanif “wants to live in a two-room flat like a clerk.” She laments that she has to “live like a wife of the masses.” She is enraged that Hanif declines to write popular, melodramatic scripts, and wants to “write about ordinary people and social problems.” She cannot understand why he is writing about “the Ordinary Life of a Pickle factory” (242). When her mother-in-law Naseem advises her to quit her acting-career and buy a petrol gas

station, Pia wails, “Why that woman doesn’t ask me to be shorthand typist? Why not taxi-driver, or handloom weaver?” (242). In other words, all these people such as clerks, the masses, pickle-factory workers, typists, taxi-drivers, weavers, gas-station owners (let alone gas-station workers), get dumped in a group that she despises. While Pia is despised by Naseem for acting in cinema, Pia herself despises people of other professions, who are of lower classes.

The appearance of Saleem’s photo in the newspaper, the reward of a hundred rupees to his mother, the Prime Minister’s letter to baby Saleem—all these felicitations and recognition are absent for the birth of the slum baby Shiva, though he is also born at the same moment, and in fact, in the same clinic, though in a section called “ ‘charity ward’ (reserved for the babies of the poor)” (111). Here too, class difference seems to determine which baby gets the attention of nation-wide press, and the nation’s top leader. Before the birth of the babies (there are three expecting mothers in Methwold Estate—Amina, Vanita, and Nussie-the-duck), the street singer Wee Willie Winkie tells the residents of the Estate in an almost prophetic manner: “You’ve heard about the prize, ladies? Me, too. My Vanita will have her time soon, soon-soon; may be she and not you will have her picture in the paper!” (102). Vanita not only does not get the prize and recognition, but dies by hemorrhage. However, her son is mistaken as Amina’s son Saleem due to the changing of the babies’ name-tags by Mary, and does get all the recognition and adulation. Despite the effects of class differences, by a twist of irony, the slum boy is celebrated and congratulated by newspapers and the Prime Minister.

Wee Willie’s bold assertion that his wife will give birth to the baby who will claim the prize announced for the baby born at the moment of the nation’s independence provokes some irritation and anger among the elite residents of the Methwold Estate. Amina frowns; Ahmed declares that the “cheeky fellow . . . goes too far” (102).



Methwold shows signs of guilt and embarrassment, since he knows that he is probably the real father of Vanita's yet-to-be born baby. However, his comment to Ahmed, reproving Ahmed's put down of Wee Willie, is interesting for its philosophy of containment of discontent. He tells Ahmed: "Nonsense, old chap. The tradition of the fool, you know. Licensed to provoke and tease. Important social safety-valve" (102). Here the colonizer's strategy of allowing the underdog some freedom in order to contain greater revolt perhaps reflects the attitude of governing elite in general. The upper classes usually live in fear of the lower classes for possible revolt and are willing to concede to the poor some expression of their revolt in words, to prevent the revolt in the form of more violent action.

Perhaps the most striking instance of class-consciousness is seen in the Sinais' failure to look for Shiva, the street urchin who is their biological son. Having raised Saleem as their son in the elite household, it is practically unthinkable for them to accept a poor, slum boy as their son after eleven years. The Sinais hear Mary's revelation (which is, ironically, incorrect, since Saleem's father is not Wee Willie Winkie, but the Englishman William Methwold) that Saleem is the son of Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita, and Shiva is the Sinai baby. But the Sinais do not go looking for Shiva. "Never once," Saleem says, "to my knowledge, never once in all the time since Mary Pereira's revelations, did they set out to look for the true son of their blood" (301). Saleem first attributes the Sinais' continued acceptance of him to their lack of imagination, to their inability to think their way "out of the past" (118); he thinks that they accept him because "they could not imagine him out of the role" (301). However, later, Saleem dares to suggest that "there are worse interpretations possible, too—such as their reluctance to accept into their bosom an urchin who had spent eleven years in the gutter" (301). He tells us, "if you had asked my father (even him, despite all that

happened!) who his son was, nothing on earth would have induced him to point in the direction of the accordionist's knock-kneed, unwashed boy" (118). Ahmed and Amina had exiled Saleem from their home to Hanif's apartment before Mary's revelation, when his blood group showed that he could not be their son. But later they become reconciled to having him as their son, probably for the very reason Saleem suggests: that they could not accept a slum boy as their son all of a sudden. However, Saleem also suggests a nobler motive: that, may be, despite everything, despite all his defects and physical abnormalities, his parents loved him, that "their love was stronger than ugliness, stronger even than blood" (301). Saleem thus suggests different possible reasons for the Sinais' not going in search of Shiva, but the question of class is definitely one of them, perhaps one of the strongest motives.

We see class prejudice within Saleem's extended family too. Class differences give rise to differential treatment. When Amina leaves for Pakistan with her children to stay with her sister Emerald and her husband General Zulfikar, Saleem experiences this fact. While the General and his family travel in air-conditioned compartments, Saleem's family has to travel by "ordinary first-class tickets" (285). An irony that Saleem does not seem to be aware of is that he, who has been brought up as an elite child, thinks that "first-class" ticket is "ordinary," while he himself describes, at various points in his narrative, about the poor fare dodgers who hang on to moving trains, not having the money to buy even third-class tickets, and have to beg the passengers inside the first class compartments to open the door to let them in.

General Zulfikar uses his dog Bonzo—which, thanks to her mine-smelling ability becomes a member of the Pakistani armed forces—as "a stick with which to beat" Saleem's family and Pia. Zulfikar sees his dependent relatives as the non-productive members of his household, and does not want them to forget it: he mutters, "Even a

damn hundred-year-old beagle bitch can earn her damn living, but my house is full of people who can't get organized into one damn thing" (286). His son Zafar, who had previously wanted to marry Saleem's sister, now seems less anxious to marry her. In addition to the changed social status, Saleem and his sister now suffer from the additional prejudice against the "children of a broken home" (286). Since Ahmed Sinai stays in India, Saleem and his sister are seen as belonging to this despised group.

When Saleem's parents are killed in Pakistan during the 1965 war, and after about six years Saleem turns up penniless at his uncle Mustapha's door, his aunt Sonia refers to him as "that bhangi—that dirty-filthy fellow" and reminds her husband, "[Saleem is] not even your nephew" (394). Though first Mustapha shows some compassion to Saleem, later he also tells Saleem, "You were born from bhangis, you will remain a dirty type all your life" (396); they despise him as a "bhangi" because they have heard Mary's revelation that Saleem is not a Sinai, but the son of the poor street-entertainer Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita. So they use the very derogatory term 'bhangi' which refers to a Hindu scavenger who belongs to the lowest caste, namely, the Untouchables. It carries the stigma of class, caste, and the additional stigma that a Hindu has for the Muslim family.

Saleem starts his life in an elite home but later he also experiences the hardships of a poor slum-dweller. Perhaps this double experience enables him to see the "brutalizing effect of servant status, of a servants' room behind a black-stoved kitchen" when he remembers the servants of his infancy, Musa and Mary (144). Musing about different possible causes and explanations of the enmity between the newly hired Christian ayah Mary and the old, Muslim servant Musa, Saleem does not want to leave out "social factors." He thinks that Musa's antagonistic feelings toward Mary were probably aggravated by the fact that he had to sleep in the servants' room sharing it with

gardener, odd-job boy, and hamal, while Mary “slept in style on a rush mat beside a new-born child” (144). Musa’s bitterness toward his employers, whom he had served for many years, finally explodes when he leaves the Sinais’ house in disgrace, his theft of the valuables having been discovered. His face “twists into a mask of anger; words are spat out. ‘Begum sahiba, I only took your precious possessions, but you, and your sahib, and his father, have taken my whole life; and in my old age you have humiliated me with Christian ayahs’ “ (146). Here we see a combination of class conflicts and religious conflicts adding to the multiple causes of the enmity between Musa and Mary.

The contempt for certain groups of society has its mirror image in the respect given to other groups. Saleem admits to using an exhibition of his elite class origins in order to impress the working class Padma and Mary. He thereby succeeds in discouraging them from questioning the truth of his version. He shows off his erudition which is a mark of his upper-class origin. He comments on his own strategies: “Chutney and oratory, theology and curiosity: these are the things that saved me. And one more—call it education or class origins; Mary Pereira would have called it my ‘brought-up’. By my show of erudition and by the purity of my accents, I shamed them into feeling unworthy of judging me; not a very noble deed, . . .” (212). Values are inculcated in the society in such a manner that the lower classes are made to feel awe and respect toward the upper classes and their superior education and knowledge. So, it is quite rare for the poor to question and challenge the elite. Saleem’s strategy is very similar to that of the European colonizers who used the myth of their superior education, knowledge (and race) to “shame” the colonized people “into feeling unworthy of judging” the colonizers.

Saleem’s elite-class origin is guessed by even those who do not know anything about his history. Though the young West Pakistani soldiers, who form part of his unit in the

army see him as a quasi-idiot and abuse him verbally and physically, they nevertheless notice his pure Urdu accent when he speaks. Their admiration is also an admiration of the elite class, since accent is generally a product and sign of class. On hearing Saleem's Urdu, Farooq says admiringly, "Really classy Lucknow-type Urdu, *wah wah!*" (351). Even the Communist Picture Singh, despite the Communist ideal of a classless society, affected by "considerations of class," automatically thinks of Saleem "as 'too good' for Parvati," because of Saleem's "supposedly 'higher birth' " (403).

The internal conflicts, prejudices, and injustices within the colonized people are not all the results of colonization. Many of them were probably already in practice before colonization. Oppression of the weak by the strong, the poor by the rich, is not new and is possibly a universal phenomenon. However, it is likely that European colonization aggravated these practices and ideologies by introducing another factor, namely the myth of the superiority of the colonizer's race and culture; also by Westernizing the elite the colonizers widened the differences between the elite and the masses.

### **2.5.3 Conflicts of Languages**

In addition to the internal conflicts discussed above, postcolonial India faces a special problem because of the linguistic diversity of its peoples. If the numbers given by *Wikipedia* are correct, "The number of mother tongues in India is as high as 1,652. There are 24 languages which are spoken by a million or more people, in addition to thousands of smaller languages. . . . The Constitution of India recognizes 22 'national languages', spoken throughout the country" ("Languages of India"). Until 1967, the country recognized 14 official regional languages in the national Constitution. Later, four more languages were recognized, thereby increasing the number of official regional languages of India to 18. This bewildering number of languages has often created

separatist tendencies and regionalist loyalties. The map of India shows increasing number of new states with new names because of the splitting on the basis of language and other factors. Speakers of other Indian languages feel that the national Indian language Hindi has been forced upon them. Saleem, narrating the events of the year 1957, tells us that in 1956, “India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered ‘territories’. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us” (189). Ironically, language, which is a means of communication, also becomes a source of divisions and conflicts.

In the state of Bombay, in 1957, “the language marches grew longer and noisier and finally metamorphosed into political parties,” one party standing for the Marathi language and demanding the creation of a separate state for themselves, and the other party marching under the banner of the Gujarati language and also dreaming of a separate state for themselves. Saleem tells us that he is “warming over” the cold history, the “old dead struggles” between the two languages of Marathi and Gujarati” to explain the conflicts between the speakers of the two languages in the postcolonial India of February 1957. In the novel, an unexpected consequence of the language conflicts is the accidental death of Dr Narlikar during a confrontation with the language marchers. Saleem’s narrative gives us an idea of the language conflicts in the postcolonial India. Postcolonial India continued to split into more and more states on a linguistic basis, and other factors, indicating internal divisions.

What Saleem calls “old dead struggles” are not really dead. Even now, Indians of different languages oppose one another and manifest rivalry. Each state fights to give more importance to its regional language. But the global market makes English as the most-favored language for education in India. It is not unusual for Indian movies made

in the regional languages to have English titles, Western costumes, etc.

Saleem gives us some idea about the fact that the Indian nation is made up of different groups of people each speaking a different language. He describes the nation as a collective dream, a dream that all the Indians agreed to dream; a mass fantasy that was shared in varying degrees by the people of different languages, such as the “Bengali, Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat” (112). In addition to these that Saleem mentions, there are Indians who speak many other languages such as Telegu, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Sindhi, Assamese, and so on. Saleem describes his own confusion and bewilderment when he first hears the voices within his head: “In the beginning, when I was content to be an audience—before I began to *act*—there was a language problem. The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil. I understood only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my skull” (168). But when he begins to probe, he learns that “below the surface transmissions—the front-of-mind stuff which is what I’d originally been picking up—language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words” (168). This utopian state, beyond words and language, is something all the people who are divided by language would like to achieve, but it has not come into existence yet.

Rushdie makes a comical allusion to the profusion of languages in the Indian subcontinent. When Saleem and the two young soldiers reach the outskirts of Dacca, they see a peasant scavenging the possessions of dead soldiers. He speaks “bad, stilted Hindi” because that is not his mother tongue (371). He calls himself “a vendor of notions” (372). He offers for sale many items, such as “a magical belt which would enable the wearer to speak Hindi” and as proof of the power of the belt, he says, “I am wearing now, my sir, speak damn good, yes no? Many India soldiers are buy, they talk

so-many different tongues, the belt is a godsend from God!" (372).

### **Other Divisions**

We are also given a brief glimpse of the divisions among the Communists of India in the description of the Communist magicians in the ghetto. Saleem tells us that some of the Communist magicians aligned themselves behind Moscow-line official Communist Party of India, which supported Indira Gandhi throughout the Emergency; some others were slanting toward the Chinese-oriented wing; still others supported the guerilla tactics of the Naxalites; some deplored the violence of the Naxalites and applauded Namboodiripad's manifesto which was neither Muscovite nor Pekinese. Some followed Trotsky's ideas and some even supported Communism-through-the-ballot-box. Saleem points out the irony that Communism in India, while avoiding religious and regional prejudice, had its own conflicts. In his view, it is a milieu "in which, while religious and regionalist bigotry were wholly absent, our ancient national gift for fissiparousness had found new outlets" (399). He also reports an alleged fight between a Moscow-line Communist and a Ho chi Minh-supporter (who was a fire-eater), in the magicians' ghetto, in which the latter scorched his opponent in a burst of flame.

Describing the gradual disintegration of the Midnight Children's Conference, Saleem comments on the prejudices that divide Indians:

Children, however magical, are not immune to their parents; and as the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their minds, I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian 'blackies'; there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company; Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables; while, among the low-born, the pressures of poverty and Communism were becoming evident . . . (254-55)

The divisions such as political ideology, caste system, racial or color prejudice, and so on reveal that postcolonial India is torn by many social, cultural, political forces.



I have not discussed the divisions on the gender line, not because it is less important, but because it would need more space and time than I can have in this dissertation. It is a project worthy to be explored separately.

#### **2.5.4 Nation, Nationalism, and National Allegory**

The topic of nation cannot be left without mentioning Fredric Jameson's essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," published in 1986. Jameson saw third-world literature as national allegories that retained the (pre-industrial) unity of the individual (personal, psychological, sexual, etc.) and the public (collectivity, society, politics, etc.), a literary mode that has been lost or become outmoded in the West. He was aware that

none of these [third-world or non-Western] cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflection of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization. (68).

Jameson sees a mode of resistance to the global capitalism reflected in the Asian and African literature and argues that all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories, "even when, or perhaps . . . particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (69). Admitting oversimplification, he goes on to affirm that the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, which is one of the determinants of capitalist culture, "is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx" (69). For Jameson, the relations between the private (subjective)

and the public (political) in the third-world culture are “wholly different” from those in the contemporary first-world culture. While capitalist West (re)contains and transforms the political in literature into the private (sexual, psychological, etc.), and maintains the split between the private and the public. Jameson argues that in the third-world literature, the private (the libidinal and psychological) investment “is to be read in primarily political and social terms” (72).

*Midnight's Children* is a novel which corroborates Jameson's view of the third-world literature as national allegory. From the beginning, Saleem, the protagonist, insists on his connection with collectivity, multitudes, and the nation. He insists that he *is*, or represents India. His face is like the map of India; Prime Minister Nehru, sends a letter congratulating baby Saleem, and calls him the newest bearer of the ancient face of India; Saleem's “lifelong belief in the equation” between the State and himself is repeatedly asserted and corroborated by the various correspondences between his life and the nation's history (420). Echoing Jameson's observation that libidinal and political components of individual and social experience are closely related in third-world literature (national allegories), Saleem, near the end of the novel, sees his own libido and love for Jamila as his love for the nation:

. . . had I, by then, begun to see that my love for Jamila Singer had been, in a sense, a mistake? Had I already understood how I had simply transferred on to her shoulders the adoration which I now perceived to be a vaulting, all-encompassing love of country? When was it that I realized that my truly-incestuous feelings were for my true birth-sister, India herself, and not for that trollop of a crooner who had so callously shed me . . . (385)

Throughout the novel Saleem repeatedly uses the metaphor of “swallowing,” “acquiring,” “ingesting,” “drinking,” “feed[ing] on,” “taking in,” (9, 107-9, 127, 130, 383) everything around him—things, people, events, etc.—and sees them as constituting his “self.” He declares that he is the “sum total of everything” in the in the past, present, and future that has any connection with his life (383). The union between the individual

and the public that Jameson mentions is evident in these descriptions.

Kathleen Flanagan affirms that the identification of the individual self with society as a whole that we see in *Midnight's Children* reflects Rushdie's leftist view that history is not the product of ideas or actions of a few great men, but results from the acts of common individuals as agents "embedded in a larger economic and social systems as classes" (38). Flanagan also suggests that Saleem's initial belief that he is the single center for society changes to the perception that "that center is dispersed to many individuals in a collective" (38-39). She also affirms that Saleem comes to realize that "it is not his mind that controls the events of history, but instead the fragmented events of history that shape his mind and narrative" (39). The interrelation between the private and the public in *Midnight's Children* is hard to ignore. Also seen in the novel are the individual's two contradictory possible positions: the helpless person in a historical situation determined by economic and political forces beyond his or her control, and the agent who presumes the efficacy of radical social action and can act, and bring about social transformation. Through the device of Saleem's involvement (though many of them unintentional and inadvertent, proper to a comic-epic) in many important events of the nations in the Indian subcontinent, Rushdie hints that the acts of the private self have consequences for the public domain. The problems that characterize isolated, fragmented perceptions are highlighted in Aadam Aziz's "mistake of loving [Naseem] in fragments" (40), and in Amina's attempts to love Ahmed fragment by fragment (68). Flanagan reads these instances as the novel's demonstrations of the "dangers of centering man's existence in his solitary consciousness instead of taking into account the fragmented forces of society" (40). Saleem's writing his autobiography can be a private act but his reading it to Padma and communicating his life-story is "a public act" (Flanagan 41). Here again the private and public are combined. Saleem's telepathy and

his reading of the minds of the people all across India, including the minds of the political leaders and ministers of the nation, also reflect the joining of the private and the collective.

However, Jameson's simplification that all third-world literatures are national allegories has been effectively contested by Aijaz Ahmed in his long essay "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory' ." *Midnight's Children* intertwines the private and the public self-consciously and overtly, mixing history, realistic fiction, fantasy, parody and other modes in the narrative.

Jameson points out in his essay that allegory, which used to be traditionally seen as having some one-to-one equivalences between the figures or personifications and abstract concepts, and which was discredited as a literary mode for a while, has once again become congenial to us because "the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol" (73). In the national allegories of the third world literature, we see "the capacity of allegory to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change places" (74). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem stands for the nation. But so does Shiva. And even Parvati. We find parallels between the lives of not only Saleem and the nation, but also between the life of Shiva and the nation, and between the life of Parvati and the history of the nation. Similarly Jamila stands for Pakistan in a sense, since she becomes very patriotic and religious after going to Pakistan. But she is also India in a sense, because Saleem comes to see that his love for Jamila, in reality, is his love for India that somehow got transferred and misplaced on Jamila. There are many such polysemous allegorical themes and motifs in the novel, adding to the polyphony.

## 2.6 Postcolonial History and Forms of Resistance

Rushdie's narrative reveals not only the seductive nature of colonial power but also instances of resistance of the colonized. Tai is one such example. Tai is dead against Western concepts of modernity, progress, science, rationality, etc. He scornfully dismisses Aadam Aziz's Western medical knowledge: "A wet-head nakko child goes away before he's learned one damn thing and he comes back a big doctor sahib with a big bag full of foreign machines, and he's still as silly as an owl. I swear: a too bad business" (19). He is furious on seeing Aadam's "second-hand leather case" from Germany (19). Tai rages against this bag "from Abroad full of foreigners' tricks" (20). As Aadam Aziz diagnoses, to Tai, "the bag represents Abroad; it is the alien thing, the invader, progress" (21). The bag "has indeed taken possession of the young doctor's mind; and yes, it contains knives, and cures for cholera and malaria and smallpox; and yes, it sits between doctor and boatman, and has made them antagonists. Doctor Aziz begins to fight, against sadness, and against Tai's anger, which is beginning to infect him, to become his own . . ." (21). Modernity and Westernization create a barrier between the elite and the lower classes. In general, the elite succumb to the West's power, and willingly adopt Western culture and education, while the poor retain their local roots and look upon the Western culture and its products as anathema.

Tai is "the living antithesis" of the belief in the inevitability of change that Aadam's German friends cherish. He is a "quirky, enduring familiar spirit of the valley. A watery Caliban"(15). This Caliban also does not want to be dispossessed by Prospero-like European colonizers. After Aadam's return from Germany, Tai feels that his former acolyte has joined the enemies' camp. Enraged, he does his best to drive Aadam out of the valley. He brands Aadam as "that German Aziz," "an alien, and therefore a person not completely to be trusted" (28). In a strange but effective strategy of protest Tai stops

washing himself, shocks people with his stink, and continues this practice for three years. People hear a story that the foreign-returned doctor Aziz is to be blamed for Tai's sudden filthiness. This ruins the doctor's good relations and reputation among the lake-people. Aadam Aziz comes to be suspected, even ostracized, by them.

Paradoxically, Tai who is seen as the antithesis of progress and change is also described as the agent who "set[s] history in motion" by bringing an urgent summons to the doctor (13). His message starts Aadam's strange courtship of Naseem, and thus determines the path of Aadam's future life.

Tai's sense of time and history is unlike the Western concepts. For him there is no contradiction in claiming that he had conversed with Jesus Christ when he came to Kashmir, and at another time bragging that he had carried the litter of the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Jehangir, and at yet another instance affirm that that he had known an officer in the army of Alexander the Great, which must have been in the fourth century B.C., according to our reckoning of time. In other words, Tai's claims imply that his life spans a period from the fourth century B.C. up to the twentieth century, his present time. He tells the boy Aadam, "I have watched the mountains being born. I have seen Emperors die" (16).

Tai moves freely between the past, the present and the future. His sense of time encompasses the ancient past as well as the present: his talk is capable of "soaring up to the most remote Himalaya of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail" (15). He also knows how to look under the surface of the lake water and see the 'future' ice waiting underneath. Given this relationship of his with time, it is not surprising that when he gives Ghani's message to Aadam, he sends "time into a speeding, whirligig, blurry fluster of excitement" (18).

In Tai's version, Christ, when he came to Kashmir,

had beard down to his balls, [was] bald as an egg on his head. He was old, fagged-out, but he knew his manners . . . always [had] a respectful tongue . . . Polite. . . And what an appetite! Such a hunger, I would catch my ears in fright. Saint or devil, I swear he could eat a whole kid in one go . . . His work was finished. He just came up here to live it up a little. (16)

Tai's picture of Christ is totally opposed to the West's depiction of Christ. Instead of the West's version of a young, ascetic Christ with flowing hair, Tai gives a "portrait of a bald, gluttonous Christ" (16). Mesmerized by this unusual picture of Christ, Aadam repeats every word of this story "to the consternation of his parents" (16). Aadam's parents have accepted the West's depiction of Christ unquestioningly, but not Tai.

Tai belongs to the old world of orality. He tells Aadam "it is your history I am keeping in my head. Once it was set down in old lost books . . . Even my memory is going now; but I know, although I can't read" (16); he dismisses "illiteracy . . . with a flourish; literature crumbled beneath the rage of his sweeping hand" (16). Though he cannot read, he is confident of his knowledge that must have been transmitted to him orally and also gained by his own experiences and deductions.

Tai's relation with Westerners, as one might expect, is a troubled one. When he stops washing and starts stinking, he loses clients; "the English in particular were reluctant to be ferried by a human cesspit" (27). When Aadam's German friend Ilse is found missing, Tai claims that she hired his boat for a trip to the Mughal Gardens, and when he was not looking, she had drowned in the lake. Aadam's exasperated words to Tai hint that perhaps Tai had something to do with Ilse's suicide: " 'I know where she is,' Doctor Aziz stared at Tai. 'I don't know how you keep getting mixed up in my life; but you showed me the place once. You said: certain foreign women come here to drown.' " (30). But Tai turns the suspicions to Aadam himself when Ilse's body is dredged from the lake. He tells the group of boatmen who dredge up the body, "He [Aadam Aziz] blames me, only imagine! Brings his loose Europeans here and tells me it is my fault

when they jump into the lake! . . . I ask, how did he know just where to look? Yes, ask him that, ask that nakkoo Aziz!” (30). But it is Tai who had told Aadam-as-a-young-boy, many years ago, about this place in the lake where three English women had drowned: “There is a tribe of feringhee women who come to this water to drown. Sometimes they know it, sometimes they don’t, but I know the minute I smell them. They hide under water from God knows what or who—but they can’t hide from me, baba!” (17).

Tai’s hatred of foreign things, foreigners, ‘progress’ etc. seem irrational on the one hand, and a justified response on the other hand, since they invade his homeland and his way of life, and threaten to change them.

And this poor, illiterate, old boatman manages to chase the elite, young doctor trained in Germany out of the valley, using ingenious, unconventional and subversive strategies. In a way, Tai mirrors the resistance of the apparently powerless, poor, mostly illiterate Indian masses, who, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, used the weapon of non-violent resistance, and managed to drive away the powerful, rich, and literate British from their soil. By his subversive ways, Tai turns the local people against the Western trained doctor, so that Aadam admits, “I’ve decided to give Tai his victory” (28). It seems appropriate that it is Tai, and none of the elite, who is described as the one who “is about to set history in motion” (13).

We see other examples of the natives’ resistance to the seduction of colonial power in Naseem and Amina. When Aadam Aziz asks his wife Naseem to “move like a woman” during sex, she wails, “My God, what have I married? I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls be like them! Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any . . . bad word woman” (34; Rushdie’s ellipses). Naseem, like Tai, is averse to foreigners and their ways. When her



husband asks her to come out of purdah, she cries that he is asking her to “walk naked in front of strange men” (34). For Naseem, brought up in the Islamic tradition, to be without purdah is a mark of shame. It is not easy to dislodge deep-seated customs and beliefs despite the traffic between the East and the West. But the Germany-returned doctor loses his patience, and in a fit of anger, he burns all her purdahs, and tells her, “Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman” (34). Interestingly, he opposes “good” and “modern” (as he opposes “Kashmiri” and “Indian,” and “girl” and “woman”). Aadam seems to unconsciously equate modernity with something that is ‘not good’ despite his conscious endorsement of modernity. Aadam, who had seen his mother’s anguish on having to give up her purdah, and had even suggested to her that she wear purdah in her gemstone shop so that “no disrespectful eyes” could see her without purdah, is now impatient with his young wife for wanting to keep her purdah. But some things do not change radically from one generation to the next.

Though Naseem is forced to give up her purdah, she hardly becomes “modern.” Later, when she and Aadam have a family of many children, and Aadam Aziz commissions photographs of his family, she rebels against being photographed. When the photographer tries to catch her unawares, she seizes his camera and breaks it over his skull. Saleem tells us, “there are no photographs of my grandmother anywhere on earth. She was not one to be trapped in anyone’s little black box. It was enough for her that she must live in unveiled, barefaced shamelessness—there was no question of allowing the fact to be recorded” (40). What is technology and modernity for the Western eyes becomes some thing to be vehemently opposed in Naseem’s eyes. When Aadam takes control of the children’s education, Naseem tells the cook, “He fills their head with I don’t know what foreign languages . . . and other rubbish also, no doubt . . .

Do you wonder . . . that the little one calls herself Emerald? In English . . . That man will ruin my children for me” (42). She makes one educational stipulation, namely that her children get religious instruction. When Aadam finds out that the teacher is a religious bigot who teaches the children to hate people of other religions, he kicks the teacher out. For Naseem, kicking the religious teacher out is equivalent to breaking the laws of Islam, comparable to taboos such as eating pig-meat, spitting on the Quran and marrying their daughters to Germans. So she fights with Aadam, and pronounces, “I take this oath . . . I swear no food will come from my kitchen to your lips! No, not one chapatti, until you bring the maulwi sahib [the religious teacher] back and kiss his . . . feet” (43). Thus “a war of starvation” starts, and it very nearly becomes “a duel to death” (43). Aadam refuses to eat outside and becomes weak until the situation is remedied by some subterfuges.

Naseem and Amina, despite their elite class origins, are not seduced by white culture and power. Perhaps it is related to their gender. Among the colonized elite, it is usually the men who first adopt the colonizers’s ways. It is even possible that women, who are generally seen as the guardians of a culture, are sometimes discouraged from adopting foreign ways. However, in *Midnight’s Children*, neither Aadam Aziz nor Ahmed Sinai prevent their women from becoming modern. In fact, in Aadam’s case, it is the opposite. He forces his wife to give up her purdah and become a modern woman. But both women stick to many of their old ways. As Mentioned before, though the issue of gender is important, I have not discussed it with respect to *Midnight’s Children*, due to lack of space and time.

Amina Sinai, despite being the daughter of a Western-educated doctor and the wife of an Anglophile, escapes “the subtle magic of Methwold’s Estate, remaining unaffected by cock-tail hours, budgerigars, pianola and English accents” (100). In

contrast, her husband Ahmed Sinai affects Western mannerisms. He slips into “a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl” when he is in the presence of the Englishman Methwold (96). What keeps Amina from succumbing to the sorcery of the colonizer’s culture is her worry about her pregnancy and the imminent baby. She is obsessed with Ranram Seth’s weird prophecy about her son-to-be. Her superstitious belief in this prophecy prevents her from falling prey to another myth, namely, the cultural superiority of the English. Saleem tells us that Amina’s thoughts and behavior were beginning to be influenced by her mother’s supernatural conceits, such as her belief that aeroplanes are inventions of the devil; that cameras could steal one’s soul; that ghosts and paradise are obvious parts of reality; that it is a sin to throw out religious teachers, and so on. Amina begins to think, “Even if we’re sitting in the middle of all this English garbage, this is still India, and people like Ramram Seth know what they know” (100). Amina trashes the colonizer’s things and culture as “garbage” and elevates the Indian soothsayer’s prophecy as knowledge. Rushdie parodies both types of Indians, the ones who, like Ahmed, mimic the English, and those Indians, who, like Amina, are trapped in superstitions. Both become the butt of his ridicule. Characters like Amina, Naseem, and Tai debunk colonial superiority, but they also serve to exemplify and reinforce the stereotypical representation of the Orientals as superstitious and irrational.

As already discussed, Joseph D’Costa, Mary’s Communist lover, is another example of those colonized people who rebel against the myth of the superiority of the whites. When Mary observes that good Christians should not get involved in the mutual killings of the poor Hindus and poor Muslims on the eve of Partition of the subcontinent, Joseph chides her for being brainwashed into believing in “white people’s religion” and tells her to leave “white gods for white men” (105). He sees the importance of “fight[ing] back” and “show[ing] the people who to fight instead of each other” (105).

When conflicts divide the Magicians-Communists in the ghetto, due to their loyalties to different brands of Communism such as the Moscow type, the Chinese type, the Ho Chi Minh Type etc., Picture Singh finds a solution: He “spoke of a socialism which owed nothing to foreign influences. ‘Listen, captains,’ he told warring ventriloquists and puppeteers, ‘will you go to your villages and talk about Stalins and Maos? Will Bihari or Tamil peasants care about the killing of Trotsky?’ ” (399). Picture Singh’s words point to the need for social activists to talk to the Indian population in a manner that addresses their needs, and is relevant to their reality, instead of adhering to foreign models.

## **2.7 Understanding History**

The nature of our comprehension of history is complex. It would be naïve and reductive to believe that we can understand history is all its complex, multiple aspects. It is relevant to see what Rushdie himself says about our necessarily limited and fragmented knowledge:

. . . human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death . . . Writers are no longer sages, dispensing the wisdom of the centuries. And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us. We can’t lay claim to Olympus, and are thus released to describe our worlds in the way in which all of us, whether writers or not, perceive it from day to day. (“Imaginary Homelands” 12-13).

In addition to the fragmentary nature of all our comprehension and writings, Rushdie asserts that the narrative of history is ambiguous because “facts are hard to establish, and

capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudice, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge” (“ ‘Errata’ ” 25). As Rushdie has made it clear, *Midnight’s Children* is a novel, not history. It uses history, but it cannot be seen as history.

Saleem Sinai is not an oracle; he’s only adopting a kind of oracular language. His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes. Ironically, the book’s success—its Booker Prize, etc—initially distorted the way in which it was read. Many readers wanted it to be the history, even the guidebook, which it was never meant to be; others resented it for its incompleteness, pointing out, among other things, that I had failed to mention the glories of Urdu poetry, or the plight of the Harijans, or untouchables, or what some people think of as the new imperialism of the Hindi language in South India. These variously disappointed readers were judging the book not as a novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia. (“ ‘Errata’ ” 25).

Rushdie has been criticized for omitting or giving scant attention to many important historical events and movements, important to different readers. As already mentioned, it is impossible for an artist or a historian, in fact for any of us, to be all-inclusive in our attempts at representation. However, it might be interesting and even useful to study the nature of the important events omitted in the novel and explore why they had been ignored. But I cannot undertake this work due to lack of time and space (length of the dissertation).

Ali also reminds us, “Of course *Midnight’s Children* is a novel, not a history proper. But it is a novel that self-consciously explores the rich seam of sub-continental history, and its selectivity is not irrelevant. The second part of the novel is far more coherent. Its literary directness and political force confront the reader with a powerful vision” (90). The first part is a recreation of the past while the second part that Ali praises deals with contemporary history.

*Midnight’s Children* does not tell us the whole history of India during the period 1915-1978, but it sheds light on many important aspects, as I have tried to show in my

exploration and discussion in the above sections. I want to draw attention to Rushdie's reminder that our perception of reality is inevitably fragmented, and with his daring suggestion of an analogy between the reading of Saleem's narration and our understanding of the world: "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" (" 'Errata' " 25). Our reading of the world includes our reading of Rushdie. So, his suggestion is an invitation for us to read Rushdie's own comments with some scepticism. I have quoted Rushdie's self-commentaries about *Midnight's Children* as one of the voices that we should listen to in our efforts to understand the novel, but not the only voice, or as the final authority on the novel.

As Ali observes in his article, the fight against oppression and injustice practised by native neocolonizers "cannot simply be provided through literary onslaughts or poetic metaphors, yet one must not underestimate the power of the ideas. The poet, film-maker and the novelist could, I am convinced, play a much more crucial role than ever before" (95).

In my opinion, the different histories that Saleem and Rushdie give us in *Midnight's Children* constitute the different voices in a dialogue and we have to listen to all the voices and actively participate in that dialogue, exercising our own intelligence and critical faculties, in our search for meaning and truth.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE VOICE OF CARNIVAL

One of the Bakhtinian concepts linked to 'self/other' relation is 'carnival' as a literary term. For Bakhtin, carnival is a means for displaying otherness. Like the novel, the popular festival of carnival draws attention to the variety of relations in society and highlights the fact that social roles are culturally produced and are not given by 'nature.' The folk-carnival, like the Socratic dialogues, sets life and death, light and dark, high and low in a kind of debate. A one-sided seriousness is replaced by a playful relativity and interchangeability. It is an opposition to monologism, and to the official norms and values of the state and the church. Bakhtin explored the connections between the Socratic dialogues, carnival, and the polyphonic novel in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and in *Rabelais and his world*.

The carnivalesque literary mode subverts and liberates the assumptions of the traditional literary genres and canons, through humor and chaos. Like the activities that take place in the carnivals of popular culture, the carnivalesque in the novel lampoons and overturns traditional hierarchies and values. "High culture" mingles with "low culture," the sacred with the profane, among other such misalliances. Carnivalization allows dialogue between voices that do not come together under "normal" circumstances, and enables us to hear voices that are usually suppressed or marginalized in conventional narratives. It provides a space for alternative modes to contest and resist dominant cultural forms, and has the potential for encouraging resistance to oppressive monologism in other spheres, such as politics.

Socratic discovery of the dialogic nature of truth and thought presumes a carnivalistic familiarization of relations among people who have entered a dialogue. It presumes a familiarization of attitudes toward the object of thought, however lofty and important, and toward truth itself (*Problems* 132). For Bakhtin, carnival is the concept in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact together. In Bakhtin's theory, carnival describes the style of a polyphonic novel. Each individual character is strongly defined and the reader sees the critical influence of each character upon the other. Each character hears the voices of the other characters and each shapes the character of the other. Carnival is associated with collectivity; the people participating in carnival do not merely constitute a crowd, but they are seen as a whole, organized in a way that defies socioeconomic and political organization (Clark and Holquist 302). During carnival, people shed their ideas of social and class divisions, and other hierarchies. In a public place, a free and familiar contact becomes possible among people who are usually divided by barriers such as class, race, caste, profession, age, etc. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 10). At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space makes the individual feel that he is a part of the collectivity, at which point he ceases to be himself. Through mask and costume which refer to a different person (of different class, group, gender, etc) the individual, in a sense, exchanges bodies and is renewed (Clark and Holquist 302). When this spirit of metamorphosis is translated to the literary level, we have polyphony.

### **3.1 Grotesque Body and Grotesque Realism**

Bakhtin elaborates the concept of grotesque realism in his book *Rabelais and his World*, emphasizing the material bodily principle. The bodily element in grotesque



realism is not a private, egoistic form, but something universal, representing all people. It is contained in the people as a whole, who are continually growing and renewed. The exaggeration in grotesque realism has a positive, assertive character along with its aspect of canceling hierarchies. The leading themes of the images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of the bodily life refer, not to the isolated individual, but “to the collective ancestral body of all the people” (*Rabelais* 19). The descriptions of Saleem’s accelerated growth as an infant, Durga’s alleged two wombs, Shiva’s fathering of a multitude of children all over India, and the very form, style, and language of the novel which reflect an overflowing abundance—all these are elements of Bakhtin’s concept of grotesque realism.

The grotesque body is not separated from the world, not a closed, completed unit but is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (*Rabelais* 26)

The emphasis and striking description of the nose of Saleem, Aadam Aziz, and Methwold, the elephant ears of Aadam Sinai, Durga’s supernatural breasts that produce enormous amount of milk, Shiva’s formidable knees, the squashy belly of Ahmed, Ramram Seth, and Nadir Khan, Amina’s big belly during her pregnancy; Saleem’s mutilated finger, Amina’s feet with veruccas, Pia’s melon-like breasts, Amina’s black, mango-like buttocks—all these are part of the grotesque realism that Bakhtin describes in the above quote.

Echoing Bakhtin’s idea of the parts of the body through which the world enters the body and the body goes out to meet the world, Tai, the boatman, in *Midnight’s Children*

tells the boy Aadam Aziz that the nostril “is the place where the outside world meets the world inside you” (17). The recurrent motif of leaking also highlights the transgression in general. The leaking of bodily fluids such as Saleem’s chronically runny nose, Zafar’s incontinence of urine, the tears of Aadam Aziz, Padma, and other characters, and other such instances of bodily fluids leaking out of the body also imply transgression or breaking of the barrier that separates the body from the world.

The body, Bakhtin explains, discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation (*Rabelais* 26). He emphasizes that the body is never finished, but is always in the act of becoming. It is

continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world . . . Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and the new body. In all these events, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (*Rabelais and his world* 317).

*Midnight’s Children* alludes to this ‘grotesque body’ in its repeated references to swallowing, leaking, sneezing, Saleem and Aadam Sinai as infants nursing at the breast, Zafar’s uncontrollable urinating, Saleem’s runny nose, the references to copulation, the pregnancies and childbirths of Amina, Vanita, and Parvati, mutilation of Saleem’s finger, castration, defecation, and the like. Infant Saleem’s accelerated growth is described in terms that evoke Bakhtin’s concept of grotesque realism:

I must say that I had a healthy metabolism. Waste matter was evacuated copiously from the appropriate orifices; from my nose there flowed a shining cascade of goo. Armies of handkerchiefs, regiments of nappies found their way into the large washing-chest in my mother’s bathroom . . . shedding rubbish from various apertures, I kept my eyes quite dry. (124)

Bakhtin's notion of the 'grotesque body' is related to his concept of the novel and carnival. The novel is connected to other texts and to the world in the way the body is connected to other bodies and to the world. Bakhtin's emphasis on the body's continual process of building and creating (itself and other bodies) and the link between beginnings and ends, applies to the creation of meaning also. Meaning and truth are never finalized.

No condition or status is permanent, unchanging or finalized. Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. Saleem in *Midnight's Children* refers to this idea at various points. ". . .there are beginnings here, and all manner of ends" (223); "Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born" (382); "it may even have occurred to me to wonder what was beginning, what was ending" (415).

In addition to the descriptions of body's natural functions and eliminations, *Midnight's Children* describes various examples that oppose the traditional ideals of beautiful bodies, such as: Saleem's gargantuan nose; Padma's plumpness, hairy-arms, and strong muscles; the enormous moles on Naseem's face that look like witch's nipples; her obesity and "moustachioed" appearance (328); Saleem's premature bald head, and mutilated finger; Mumtaz's dark skin that is "black as midnight" (55); her late pregnancy, and her metamorphosis into a prematurely old woman with her face "shrivelled like a rotting mango," "lined and thick . . . with the inevitability of hair sprouting all over her face" (332); Alia's "hairiness of chin," her beard which she has to rip out by the roots every evening by the use of plasters (330); Tai's irreverent description of Jesus as an old, gluttonous man with "beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head" (16). These form part of the mode of grotesque realism that challenges the norms of acceptable appearance and behavior of characters. This is part of the

carnivalistic opposition to official norms, and the creation of an atmosphere in which 'other' views can be heard.

Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm compares Rushdie's method to Rabelais's:

In Rushdie's fiction, the natural functions of the body acquire again some of the importance they actually have in real life. His images of human body involved in eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, copulating, and so on, recall their far more grotesque Rabelaisian antecedents. To be specifically noted here is his emphasis on the body's apertures and appendages, such as the mouth, the nose, the belly, the genitals, and the breasts . . . one function of Rabelais's grotesque realism of the body is to unmask and dethrone the officially sanctioned and highly sanitized religious ideals of human appearance and propriety (remember the contrast between Don Quixote de la Mancha and Sancho Panza) (260).

Grotesque realism involves a degradation, concern with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs. But Bakhtin affirms that degradation "digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one . . . Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (*Rabelais* 21). Bakhtin studies the interaction between the social institution of carnival and the literary mode of grotesque realism, as well as the meaning of the body.

Grotesque realism, in Bakhtin's theory, is based on the principle of degradation, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract, etc., to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. In ancient cultures, this degradation found its communal expression during carnival, when people celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing beliefs and from the established order by engaging in feasts of becoming, change and renewal, using masks and costumes. However, the inversion of official hierarchies in rituals such as the uncrowning of kings and the elevation of fools to regal status is not to be taken as mere parody or subversive anarchy. Though carnival uses degradation to subvert authority temporarily, it also revives and renews at the same time. Carnival is associated with the collectivity; for

those attending a carnival do not merely constitute a crowd; rather the people are seen as a whole, organized in a way that defies socioeconomic and political organization (see Clark and Holquist 302).

Grotesque realism points to the view that the esthetic aspect, like the fantasy and myth aspects, explores not only the expected beautiful side but also the ugly and absurd, or what has been conventionally marginalized as ugly and absurd.

### **3.2 Polyphonic Novel and Carnival**

Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel is related to his concept of carnival as a literary term. The festive, daring spirit of freedom evident in the ancient carnivals such as the Saturnalia was extended to the language of literature, and many ancient genres such as the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire show a strong tie to the carnival spirit of freedom. The parodic and satiric forms derived from carnival folklore show a marked contrast to the pure, serious genres such as the ancient epic, tragedy, and lyric.

During carnival, the conventional distance between different groups of people is erased in an act of familiarization. Hierarchical structures and their attendant forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette are cancelled; all laws, prohibitions and restrictions that order 'normal' life are suspended during carnival, leading to the mingling of the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid, and so on. Out of this mixture arises a generalized profanation, including carnivalistic blasphemies, debasings, obscenities, and parodies of sacred texts and sayings (Engblom 296).

The playful rituals of carnival include the defining carnival act of mock-crowning and uncrowning of the carnival king. The images, acts, and rituals of carnival are ambivalent. The rituals celebrate "the very process of replaceability" (Bakhtin,

*Problems* 124-25). No status is permanent, nothing becomes absolute, everything exists in a state of joyful flux and relativity; opposites become one another. Self becomes other. Parody and laughter are the essence of carnival acts. The uncrowned king becomes the parody of his earlier self; his debasement does not provoke a sense of tragedy, but a sense of farce. The carnival becomes a liberation from official, hierarchical seriousness, and from all absolutized structures.

The carnival spirit is evident in the Menippean satire, which, Scholes and Kellogg point out, usually exhibits a comic and irreverent spirit (78). It combines the fantastic with the comic. The hero undergoes adventurous wanderings throughout the realms of the earth, heaven, and hell. He is tested in these wanderings which take him to the settings of the crudest slum naturalism. In Bakhtin's words,

The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults . . . The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of any of life's filth. The man of the idea—the wise man—collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression. (*Problems* 115).

*Midnight's Children* as a novel, and as a descendant of the Menippean satire, includes reality in an inclusive manner, not fearing or shying away from things that are, by convention, considered distasteful, inappropriate, vulgar, or what Julia Kristeva calls 'abject' in her essay *Powers of Horror*. Filth, waste, pus, bodily fluids, dead body, are all abject, as are the liar, the traitor, the lawbreaker, the rapist, the killer, the criminal and others who demonstrate the fragility of law. The abject does not respect borders, positions, or rules. We see in *Midnight's Children* many instances of such abject, both as the things that leak out of the body as well as the types of human beings described above. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Midnight's Children* includes what Bakhtin called grotesque body or grotesque realism, which is similar to Kristeva's "abject." Tai's filthiness, the dead bodies of Ilse, Cyrus, Narlikar, Ibrahim, Eyeslice, Sonny, and the

three Pakistani teen-age soldiers, the leprous rotting sores of Musa, and rotting figure of the ghost of Joseph and the rotting apparition of Jamila that haunt Mary and Saleem respectively, Zafar's loss of control of urine, blood that is spilled on various occasions, especially in the opening scene of Aadam Aziz's prayer, and during the various occasions in which Saleem is mutilated—all these attest to the aspects of both carnival grotesque realism and abject; *Midnight's Children* also shows us liars, traitors, lawbreakers, killers, and criminals who do not respect rules and borders. The abject, Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism, and carnivalesque spirit include what is generally excluded and marginalized. And *Midnight's Children* amply manifests this carnival spirit by including many marginalized entities. Even the minor character Lifafa Das, like Rushdie and Saleem does "not believe in shielding his audience from the not-always-pleasant features of the age" (76). He shows the picture of a fire at the industrial estate along with the pictures of famous architecture and famous people. Marginalized things and people come to have a voice in *Midnight's Children*.

The languages of market place, slums, of marginalized characters such as Tai, fare-dodgers in trains, beggars, criminals, prostitutes, servants, old men at the paan-shop (the betel-leaf shop which serves as a place of communal gathering for the masses), the town square in Delhi where Picture Singh earns his living as a snake-charmer—these also contribute to the carnival sense and heteroglossia.

Behavior, discourse and gesture are free to become eccentric and inappropriate during carnival. Engblom notes that insanity, suicide, and dreams constitute the Menippean version of the carnival's ritualistic eccentricities of behavior, gesture and discourse (297). As Bakhtin explains, dreams and insanity "destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed to him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he

ceases to coincide with himself" (*Problems* 116-17). In other words, a single person is split into different persons with different consciousnesses and voices, thereby adding to the polyphony. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie uses the devices of insanity, dreams, hallucinations, deliriums, insanity, etc., to contribute to the polyphony in the novel.

Bakhtin sees the culmination of the carnivalized literary tradition in what he called Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel." In the carnivalized world of such novels, dialogue is the pervasive mode, as

all people and all things must know one another and know about one another, must enter into contact, come together face to face and *begin to talk* with one another. Everything must be reflected in everything else, all things must illuminate one another dialogically. Therefore all things that are disunified and distant must be brought together at a single spatial and temporal "point." And what is necessary for this is carnival *freedom*. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 177; emphasis in the original)

In this atmosphere of freedom, many things become possible and come to the surface. The distant voices from the past come to be heard. An interesting example in *Midnight's Children*, which looks almost like a literalization of dialogism, is Saleem's description of a dialogue going on in an old photo. Saleem remembers an old photograph in which his grandfather Aadam Aziz, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, Mian Abdullah, and Nadir Khan are together. Saleem's memory enables him to describe not only the four people in the photo, but also the dialogue going on between them. Their voices, coming from the long-gone past of the 1930s and early 1940s in Agra, are resurrected and transcribed for us by Saleem in the late 1970s, who is writing (and reading) his story in the far away city of Bombay. Though Saleem was not even born at that time of the conversation, these voices from the past join the many other voices that we hear in the novel. Saleem describes Mian Abdullah's joking about his physical fitness as he shakes hand with Aadam Aziz; we hear the Rani explaining that her skin is becoming white in blotches because of her "cross-cultural concerns" and that her skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of her spirit. Mian Abdullah, and the



Rani tease Nadir Khan about his poetry, which is modern, and has “not one rhyme in page after page.” Thus, taking a static object like a photograph, which belongs to a past of almost four decades ago, Saleem enables a dialogue. The Rani “whispers through photographed lips that never move.” Saleem assures us: “yes, there is a conversation going on in this photograph, as like expert ventriloquists the optimists meet their leader [Mian Abdullah]” (45). He urges us to “listen carefully” to the words Nadir “mouths through his foolish, rigid smile.” He describes for us Mian Abdullah’s interruption, his voice “booming through his open mouth with glints of pointy teeth.” We are given a hint of the lively atmosphere of exchanges between the four people in the photograph: “What tensions there are now in the still, immobile scene! What edgy banter, as the Hummingbird [Mian Abdullah] speaks.” (45). Mian Abdullah declares that “art should uplift; it should remind us of our glorious literary heritage!” Nadir in a low voice insists that he does not believe in “high art.” For him, “art must be beyond categories.” He declares his democratic view, equating his poetry with a game of the masses: “my poetry and—oh—the game of hit-the-spittoon are equals” (45). The Rani jokes and offers to provide a silver spittoon for them to practise their hit-the-spittoon game skills. Finally, Saleem tells us, “And now the photograph has run out of words” (45). Saleem’s narrative brings before us the imagined dialogue between people who hold different views about art, and its position with respect to the masses.

The unusual thing about this dialogue is that it is revived, not from the sight of an old photograph, but from the memory of it. In other words, as Bakhtin’s theory describes, dialogue is a universal phenomenon, taking place in the most unlikely situations, and at many levels. Saleem enables us to hear the voices of Mian Abdullah, Nadir Khan, his narrative lets us see that the Rani’s “superb silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli” (45) “permitted intellectuals to practise the art-forms of the masses,”

namely, the game of hit-the-spittoon, spitting or expelling the blood-red betel-juice during their paan (betel leaf)-chewing (448). High art and low art are brought together in this carnival-like pastime of spitting the betel-juice, from a distance, in a jet, into a precious silver spittoon that is a specimen of high art.

*Midnight's Children*, in the manner of Menippean satire, manifest other carnival elements such as: reversals, misalliance, metamorphosis; free use of fantasy; adventurous wanderings of the hero in the realms of not only this world, but also of hell and heaven; slum naturalism; insanity, deliriums, and dreams. I discuss below some of these carnival elements in *Midnight's Children*.

### **3.3 Other Carnival Features in *Midnight's Children***

#### **3.3.1 Reversals**

Reversal involves a person in two different, opposing positions. Hence we hear two voices from the same person, one before the reversal and one after the reversal. For instance, we first hear the voice of Saleem as a boy and as a youth from an elite background; later, we hear his voice as an orphaned “man-dog” employed by the army, as a homeless person, as a slum dweller, and as a fare-dodger in trains begging the occupants of the first-class carriage to let him in. Thus, reversals become a means of polyphony, enabling us to hear different voices from the same person.

The mixing of the high and low, cases of misalliances, inappropriateness, and reversals of the norms abound in *Midnight's Children*. In the very first chapter, we see a reversal of roles in Aadam Aziz's home. Aadam's mother gives up her orthodox habit of wearing a purdah in order to run the gem-stones shop, after her husband is disabled by a stroke; while she gives up her veil, and goes out to work, like the man of the house, her husband “sat behind the veil which the stroke had dropped over his brain” (12); the

veil that is removed from the wife is dropped on the husband, metaphorically. Instead of the woman wearing the veil, the man is under the veil (of senility). The roles and the apparel that goes with the roles are reversed. Similarly, after Ahmed's assets are frozen by the government when he descends into a dejected mood, his wife Amina decides, "If nobody in this house is going to put things right, then it's just going to be up to me!" (139). Like a man, she fights "her husband's fight" (140). Like a man, she goes out, bets on race horses and comes home with huge sums of money to pay for the lawyer, though she keeps her activities secret. In the next generation, Padma, like a man, proposes marriage to Saleem, while he protests "like a blushing virgin" (443). These reversals reveal aspects of characters that do not meet conventional expectations and therefore contribute to the voices that oppose and challenge traditional views of the roles of men and women.

Illustrating the unfinazibility of things, and the state of flux—in which opposites become one another—that is characteristic of carnival, the Brass Monkey changes from an unruly, rebellious tomboy into a demure, obedient Jamila Singer behind a purdah. Another instance of double-voice or polyphony is heard in the views of the magician-communist Picture Singh. Despite his communism, he is affected by consideration of class, he automatically sees Saleem as too good a marital match for Parvati because of Saleem's "supposedly 'higher' birth" (403). Another irony (though it is to be expected) is that the ghetto-magicians disbelieve in the possibility of magic (386). They deny the supernatural; but they subscribe to another magic: they have "an implicit faith in luck, good-luck-and-bad-luck . . ." (387). Picture Singh, their leader, scolds them for believing Resham Bibi's prediction that Saleem will bring bad luck to the slum. Though the slum is the dwelling place of magicians he declares that it is "no place for fables" (387). Though magic implies the supernatural and the fabulous, Picture Singh's voice

denies this assumption. His position as the leader of the magicians in the ghetto and his disbelief in fables and magic exemplify the plurality of views or polyphony.

We see two reversals in Hanif's life and death. He starts his career as a cinema-director using melodrama, but later despises melodramatic Bombay movies as "rubbish" (242) and becomes the "only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry" (244). Despite his "fabulist beginnings," he dedicates himself "against everything which smacked of the unreal" (243); he rails against "princes and demons, gods and heroes, against, in fact, the entire iconography of the Bombay film; in the temple of illusions, he had become the high priest of reality" (244). However, this "arch-disciple of naturalism" becomes the unconscious prophet of his own family's fortunes, because his unfilmed script about a pickle factory run entirely by women, with scenes of pickling process, etc., becomes a prediction of the real pickle factory of Mary with her women workers. The indirect kiss in Hanif's first successful movie in 1948 also foretells the indirect kiss applied on drinking glasses during the real-life secret meetings of Amina and Nadir Khan in 1957. Thus the artistic efforts of this realist contribute to confirm supernatural and non-rational concepts such as prophecy. When the movie producer Homi Catrack is killed, Hanif's source of income dries up. So he commits suicide by falling from the roof of his apartment block. His falling frightens the beggars on the road below so much that they give up pretending to be blind and run away yelling. Saleem observes that "in death as in life, Hanif Aziz espoused the cause of truth and put illusion to flight" (271). But paradoxically, he also remarks that Hanif's death had imitated melodrama: "Deprived of a livelihood by spurning the cheap-thrill style of the Bombay cinema, my uncle strolled off the edge of a roof; melodrama inspired (and perhaps tainted) his final dive to earth" (273). Hanif's wife Pia also makes a somewhat similar comment upon his death: "Always melodrama. In his family

members, in his work. He died for his hate of melodrama; it is why I would not cry” (273). Realism and melodrama seem to exist side by side, in the same person, and in the same act, in Hanif’s death. And Pia, the movie-actress who had shed tears in melodramatic movies and wanted her husband to make commercially-successful melodramatic movies, refuses to shed tears in real life on her husband’s death. We hear a voice from her that endorses melodrama on the one hand, and another voice that refuses to play by the rules of melodrama. This is the polyphony of reality.

An example of bizarre reversal is the drafting of Zulfikar’s dog Bonzo into the armed forces of Pakistan “as a four-legged mine-detector with the courtesy rank of sergeant-major” in 1958 (286), while the human Saleem is enlisted in the Pakistani army as a two-legged “man-dog” in 1971 (347). We hear voices here that unsettle the common conceptions of man and dog.

Evie Burns, who boasts that she is the “new big chief” of the school children in the Methwold Estate (183) gets defeated by the Brass Monkey, and lies in the wet dirt in front of Saleem’s house, “her tooth-braces broken, her hair matted with dust and spittle, her spirit and her dominion over [the children] broken once and for all” (225). Such ups and downs in the lives of characters highlight the unfinalizability of meaning or truth, which is the defining feature of polyphonic novels.

Among other ironic reversals, the pout (of disappointment in love) of Parvati-the-witch who is a slum-dweller becomes the “height of facial fashion” among the chic ladies and the haughty fashion models of the cities, as they all pout in the same manner (402); Picture Singh’s umbrella which had been a “creator of harmony” becomes transmuted into a weapon when the ghetto is evacuated by force (429); Shiva’s glittering new life becomes a “daily humiliation” for him when his former lover Roshanara, out of her hatred and resentment on being dumped by him punctures “the

mighty balloon of his pride” whispers to him that the high-class women who sleep with him actually laugh behind his back, seeing him as one of the “animals peasants brutes,” as their “pet ape . . . very useful, but basically a clown” (409).

In Aadam Aziz’s household, the wife becomes bigger and wider while the husband shrinks; this pattern gets repeated in the other pair, Picture Singh and Durga. And in the pair of Saleem and Padma, Saleem is the weak male and Padma is the plump, strong-muscled female whose arm, Saleem declares, “could wrestle mine down in a trice” (270).

The “short, rat-faced” criminal slum boy Shiva’s fortune reverses in his adulthood. He becomes an attractive, swaggering national military hero bewitching hordes of rich women (220). The landowner Ghani professes his love of art and European paintings, though he is blind (21); the beautiful woman who ‘guides’ Picture Singh and Saleem through the Midnite-Confidential Club is blind (454). All these reversals are akin to the parodic, carnivalesque forms of metamorphoses by masks and costumes in which a person becomes a different, and often opposite “other.” And we hear the voices of the “self” and the “other” in these examples of polyphony.

Other examples of reversal and upsetting of normal hierarchies include: the growing up of the bastard son of Methwold and Vanita as the son of an affluent Muslim family while the son of the rich Muslim family grows up in the slums as the son of the Hindu street entertainer. The old-fashioned Naseem sets up a petrol station in Pakistan in her old age. All these carnivalesque upsetting of hierarchies and reversals of positions and attitudes challenge the normal expectations and serve as social satire. They also serve to make the voices of marginalized entities to be heard. Reversals, like the mock crowning and uncrowning of carnival, celebrate the “very process of replaceability” and indicate that no status is permanent, no meaning is absolutized; in the playful flux and relativity

of carnival, opposites become one another and we see the unfinazibility of meaning and truth.

### 3.3.2 Misalliances

Misalliances bring people together who, under “normal” or non-carnival circumstances are unlikely to come together. Such misalliances are formed because the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that order normal life are suspended during carnival, and the distance and differences between the levels of hierarchies (of society, state, and religion) are also cancelled. In other words, misalliances promote dialogues that would have been impossible without them. Hence they promote polyphony in a novel.

*Midnight's Children* incorporates many examples of misalliances: the friendship of the middle class boy Aadam Aziz with the poor, old boatman Tai is an example. In this misalliance, Tai reverses the expected hierarchy of power when he, despite being a poor, old ‘crazy’ boatman, manages to drive the young, rich, Germany-educated doctor from Kashmir by using subversive methods.

Another example of misalliance is the secret, illegitimate relationship of the Englishman William Methwold with the poor, married Hindu woman Vanita. Yet another bizarre misalliance is seen in the military planning of the top-most Pakistan’s army General when he enlists the help of a mere eleven-year-old boy. The cozy relation between the former street urchin Shiva (who is suspected to be a criminal by Saleem) and the nation’s top leaders in the government is another uncommon alliance. The Muslim Amina’s standing up against the mob to save the Hindu Lifafa Das and her subsequent visit to his cousin the soothsayer is also a strange alliance. The Muslim Saleem marries the Hindu Parvati and later agrees to marry another Hindu woman Padma. All these misalliances bring people of different backgrounds of race, religion,

class, language, age, gender, etc., together and we hear polyphony in their interactions.

### 3.3.3 Insanity, Dreams, Deliriums, Suicide

The carnival eccentricities of behavior, gesture and discourse take the form of themes such as madness, dreams, deliriums, hallucinations, and suicide in Menippean satire. As has been noted earlier, in phenomena such as madness, and dreams, a person ceases to mean only one thing and ceases to coincide with himself or herself. This leads to polyphony in the narrative.

We see many instances of actual or alleged madness in *Midnight's Children*. The boatman Tai is an example early in the novel. Aadam Aziz's father voices the general opinion about Tai: "His brain fell out with his teeth" [he has only two teeth left] (14). Ironically, Aadam Aziz's father who pronounces Tai as a brainless madman himself becomes crazy after a stroke. Aadam Aziz, Saleem, and Hanif are called mad by various characters at various points in the novel. Amina wonders whether Methwold's "brain [has] gone raw" and whether he is "loony" (96). Saleem's father Ahmed Sinai also has a stroke that restores him to his infancy, leaving him mouthing nonsense-words (337); Dr Schaapsteker, who saves the infant Saleem by giving him diluted snake venom is another "mad old man" (257); Saleem's aunt Sonia is certifiably mad and has to be "locked away" (392). Most importantly, Saleem, the narrator himself, is called a madman at various points by different characters such as his mother Amina, Parvati, and Padma (122, 165, 423-24); when Saleem is amnesiac and numb, the boy soldiers in his unit speculate that he is the idiot son of an important family who had put him in the Army to make a man of him (349). The novel abounds with the idea of madness.

Toxy Catrack is an idiot and perhaps it is not for nothing that she is the one who first nudges the door in Saleem's mind which is later fully opened during two accidents; it is



through the initiation by the idiot Toxy that a full scale telepathy, and radio-like communication with all the midnight-children becomes possible for Saleem (130, 163);

Saleem describes the adult Toxy as

a gibbering half-wit, . . .but inside my head she was beautiful because she had not lost the gifts with which every baby is born and which life proceeds to erode. I can't remember anything Toxy said when she sent her thoughts to whisper to me; probably nothing except gurgles and spittings; but she gave a door in my mind a little nudge, so that when an accident took place in a washing-chest it was probably Toxy who made it possible. (130).

Madness is presented in a rather unusual and positive light in the above passage. For Saleem, Toxy is "beautiful" because of her madness, because she had not lost the "gifts" with which "every baby is born". Saleem's language suggests that the gifts include the baby's untrammelled imagination, and its self-centered, undifferentiated identification of itself with the world, gifts which have not yet been curtailed by society. Since Saleem's telepathy is associated with this idiot-and-baby-like feature of Toxy, it is possible to see Saleem's gift as something akin to it, something that is bound to be seen as madness. This is why, when he announces his hearing of Archangels' voices, his mother scolds him: "... has your brain gone raw? . . . are you growing into a madman . . ." (165). Padma also calls him a madman (122). Saleem's identification of his life with the nation's, and assuming responsibility for the events in the national history are akin to a child's self-absorption and its identification of the world with itself.

It is even possible that Saleem's narrative is in fact what he vehemently denies it is: "the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind," the "mere delirium," or "the insanely exaggerated fantasies of a lonely, ugly child" (200). He senses that Padma and Mary think that he is crazy or delirious, and insists on the truth of his story, and adds: "and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own' Yes: I said 'sane'. I knew what they were thinking: 'Plenty of children invent imaginary friends; but one thousand and one! That's just crazy!' The midnight children shook

even Padma's faith in my narrative; but I brought her round, . . ." (211). Such vehement insistence on his sanity and the truth of his narrative bespeaks anxiety and insecurity; Rushdie seems to hint at the very thing that Saleem does not want us to contemplate, namely, that his story is the product of a crazy, over-imaginative mind.

As for dreams, there are many in *Midnight's Children*. Some are dreams in the common or literal sense, some are dreams in the figurative sense of ambition or desire. Amina Sinai has a dream in which she is glued to sticky brown paper like a helpless fly, some thirty-five hours before the birth of her son (110); this dream is replaced by another dream on the night after Saleem is born: "a dream of such overwhelming reality that it stayed with her throughout her waking hours. In it, Nadir Khan, her first husband, [who was impotent and who later released her by giving her a divorce] came to her bed and impregnated her; such was the mischievous perversity of the dream that it confused her about the parentage of her child . . ." (127). Here we see that a dream creates another "reality," in fact, such an overwhelming reality that it confuses Amina about a vital matter in her life, namely the paternity of her son. The two realities, the conventional one and the dream reality con-fuse in Amina's mind and create a new reality. The various instances of deliriums and hallucinations in *Midnight's Children* are examples of altered states, leading to polyphony.

The novel also has some instances where one character enters the dream of another person. At one point, Saleem awakes at the stroke of midnight to find his grandfather's dream inside his head, and sees his grandfather "as he saw himself—as a crumbling old man in whose centre, if the light was right, it was possible to discern a gigantic shadow . . . an old hole was reappearing in the middle of his body"(188; italics mine). Saleem sees his grandfather's self-image, as if he had temporarily become his grandfather. Saleem's double consciousness forms part of the multiple consciousnesses that

characterize a polyphonic novel. In this incident (and in many other instances in *Midnight's Children*) we find an illustration of Bakhtin's argument that dreams and insanity reveal "the possibilities of another person and another life," that a person "loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; that he ceases to coincide with himself" (*Problems* 116-117).

The old men at the paan-shop talk about the rumors that Saleem's grandmother Naseem "could even dream her daughters' dreams, just to know what they were getting up to" (44); "Asleep in her bed at night, Reverend Mother visited Emerald's dreams, and found another dream within them—Major Zulfikar's private fantasy" (55); we see dreams within dreams, Zulikar's dream inside Emerald's dream and Emerald's dream inside Naseem's. Naseem also enters her husband's dreams, and sees him walking mournfully up a hill in Kashmir, with a hole in his stomach; she also enters the dreams of her second daughter Mumtaz and finds that she is falling in love with Nadir Khan; this dream-invading mother is horrified by her son Hanif's dream (ambition) of becoming a film director, because, in her mind, cinema is an extension of the brothel business (56-57). The consciousnesses of different people are penetrated and felt by Naseem. In other words, she hears the polyphony of the different people whose dreams she dreams. And in Saleem's narrative of Naseem's consciousness, we also hear those different voices.

Mary has nightmares of Joseph D'Costa; she tries to stay awake in order to escape from the nightmares so that "gradually the blurriness of her perceptions merged waking and dreaming into something very like each other . . . a very dangerous condition to get into" (204-5). Saleem does not explain why it is dangerous to merge waking and dreaming into something very like each other. But Bakhtin's argument perhaps explains the reason: dreams, like insanity, destroy the wholeness of a person and reveal

possibilities of another person (or other persons) within that person. Such polyphony within a person in waking hours is seen either lack of consistency and/or morality, or as symptom of insanity; in other words, such carnivalized voices are marginalized and not common in conventional narratives. But they are heard in truly polyphonic novels.

Another ritual of carnival is the uncrowning of the king and crowning of his opposite, a fool or a slave. Bakhtin saw in this ritual not merely the reversal of hierarchies, not merely parody, but the potential for change, and renewal. *Midnight's Children* has many symbolic crownings and uncrownings, often manifested in the life of the same character, which can be seen as part of the carnival sense in the novel.

### **3.3.4 Crowning and Uncrowning**

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the history of grotesque realism. In his reading, the central to grotesque realism is the principle of degradation or lowering of all that is high, ideal, spiritual, abstract, etc., to the level of the material world, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. In ancient cultures such degradation found its communal expression in times of carnival, when the people celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order by engaging in feasts of becoming, change, and renewal. In such carnival festivals the inversion of official hierarchies took the form of uncrowning of kings and the elevation of fools to regal status. But Bakhtin alerts us that carnival should not be confused with mere parody or subversive anarchy; while carnival does use degradation to subvert authority temporarily, "it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture" (*Rabelais* 11).

*Midnight's Children*, like carnival and Menippean satire, has symbolic crownings and uncrownings. We see upliftings and debasements, especially of the protagonist and

other characters. In the beginning of his life, Saleem is celebrated because of the fortunate coincidence of his birth with the birth of the new nation. On the streets crowds cheer and celebrate the moment with fireworks; the residents of the four houses in Methwold Estate go from house to house “bearing sweetmeats, embracing and kissing one another” to celebrate this happy moment. The new Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru delivers his historic speech on the birth of the new independent India. A reporter and a photographer of the newspaper, *Times of India*, visit Saleem and his mother in the clinic the day after his birth. They take photos of Saleem and interview his mother. The next day, a large photograph of the baby Saleem appears in the newspaper with a headline: MIDNIGHT’S CHILD. And the text that goes with the photo says: “A charming pose of Baby Saleem Sinai, who was born last night at the exact moment of our Nation’s independence—the happy Child of that glorious Hour!” (119). The Prime Minister writes a letter to Baby Saleem congratulating him on the happy accident of his moment of birth; Saleem is greeted as “the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young” (122). This is why Saleem boasts, “Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position” (122).

As he passes through his infancy, Saleem is adored and fussed over by his “two mothers,” Amina and Mary, who, he boasts, “couldn’t get enough of me” (127). The street-singer Wee Willie Winkie had told the residents of Methwold Estate: “Ladies and Gentlemen, how can you feel comfortable here, in the middle of Mr Methwold sahib’s long past? I tell you, it must be strange; not real; but now it is a new place here . . . and no new place is real until it has seen a birth. The first birth will make you feel at home” (102). Amina’s baby is considered to be the first baby, and because of Wee Willie’s words about the first birth, Saleem comes to be seen as the baby who will make the houses of Methwold Estate seem real to their owners. They all want to know him.

Saleem describes his triumphant visits during his infancy:

As a direct result of Winkie's clue, I was, in my early days, highly in demand. Amina and Mary vied for my attention; but in every house on the Estate, there were people who wanted to know me; and eventually Amina, allowing her pride in my popularity to overcome her reluctance to let me out of her sight, agreed to lend me, on a kind of rota basis, to the various families on the hill. Pushed by Mary Pereira in a sky-blue pram, I began a triumphal progress around the red-tiled palaces, gracing each in turn with my presence, and making them seem real to their owners. (129)

Saleem is called "the Mubarak—the Blessed One" by the sadhu Purushottam (126, 113). When he is eleven years old, by an unexpected turn of events, he is chosen by his uncle General Zulfikar as a helper in mapping out of the procedures for a military coup. He gets to play this role in the presence of the highest military leader and Commander-in-Chief Ayub Khan, Pakistan's future military ruler. Zulfikar chooses Saleem instead of his own son Zafar because Zafar, on hearing Ayub Khan's announcement of his plan to impose Martial Law, suddenly loses control and wets his pants. Overcome by shame and fury at his son's incontinence, Zulfikar sends his son out of the room, and uses Saleem to save "the honour of the family" and to redeem him from the shameful conduct of his son (290). Saleem gets the tacit praise and approval of the Commander-in-Chief. On the night of the coup, Zulfikar wakes Saleem at midnight calling him "sonny," and takes him along when the army goes to take the President as prisoner. Thus Saleem is raised to a status higher than Zulfikar's own son, and is able to say, "I helped change the fate of the Land of the Pure [Pakistan]" at the tender age of eleven (287).

Saleem is also 'uncrowned' on various occasions. When he innocently tells his family that he hears Archangels' voices in his head, he is rebuked, and punished. Another uncrowning follows when the midnight-children lose faith in him as their leader and the Midnight Children's Conference disintegrates. On one occasion, he is literally 'uncrowned,' when his teacher pulls out the hair on the 'crown' or top of his

head, leaving his head bleeding. In the beginning, his sister the Brass Monkey stands up for him, defends him against Evie Burns, but later, as Jamila Singer, she punishes him by giving him up to the army when he is amnesiac. These events evoke the crowning-like acceptance and recognition as well as the uncrowning-like rejection and betrayal. The military force in Pakistan also first raises him and then dumps him. As described above, he is praised for helping his uncle to lay out the plan for military coup in 1958. But in 1971 he is turned into a 'man-dog,' and 'old man' ('the buddha') in the West-Pakistani army. He is abused with electric shock and verbally insulted. His marriage with Parvati is a symbolic crowning, but it is followed by a horrible uncrowning: his castration.

Shiva, Saleem's rival, is raised from poverty and slum life to the status of a war-hero and becomes a major in the army. He gets to hobnob with the elite. This symbolic crowning of Shiva coincides with the uncrowning of Saleem. But Shiva in his new position of prestige and privilege also experiences a symbolic uncrowning, as already mentioned, when a former lover of his poisons his mind that the rich women with whom he has affairs see him only as an animal, a crude, low class "pet ape" (409). These reversals in *Midnight's Children* are not simple inversions, as the crownings and uncrownings are shown to be not permanent or absolute. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is not mere parody or subversive anarchy. Though carnival uses crowning-uncrownings, misalliances, degradation, grotesque realism, etc., to subvert authority, the folk culture of carnival does not indulge in mere negation, but revives and renews at the same time.

### **3.4 Metamorphosis, Multiplicity, Heterogeneity**

There are quite a few striking passages in *Midnight's Children* that expound the heterogeneity and the splitting of a whole person into many, recalling Bakhtin's idea

that the wholeness of a person is often threatened or destroyed by phenomena such as dreams and insanity. Saleem, even without the recourse to dreams, hallucinations, or insanity, feels that he, even as a fetus, is constituted by all the things in the world around him. He muses, “How many things people notions we bring with us into the world, how many possibilities and restrictions of possibility!”(108). After the discovery that he is not the son of Ahmed Sinai and Amina, he comments:

O eternal opposition of inside and outside! Because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichting are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next. The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, . . . it is important to preserve this wholeness. . . . Uncork the body, and God knows what you permit to come tumbling out. Suddenly you are forever other than what you were; and . . . parents can cease to be parents, and love can turn to hate. (237)

Persons, identities, love, hate, everything becomes mutable. The wholeness of a person that we take for granted is challenged in madness, hallucinations, and dreams. In Saleem’s case, it is also challenged by events that follow a physical mutilation. Even earlier, describing his popularity as a baby, Saleem describes how he is (or means) various things to different people. His comments indicate the multiple personalities that are potentially present in one self:

Even a baby is faced with the problem of defining itself; . . . I was bombarded with a confusing multiplicity of views on the subject. Being a Blessed One to a guru . . . a voyeur to Lila Sabarmati; in the eyes of Nussie-the-duck I was a rival . . . to her son Sonny . . . to my two-headed mother [Amina and the ayah Mary] I was all kinds of babyish things—they called me joonoo-moonoo, and putch-putch, and little-piece-of-the-moon. (130)

Saleem also hints at the splitting of one person into many by his various nicknames. An extreme example of multiple consciousness is seen in Saleem’s psychic travels across India after he acquires telepathy. He sees and feels through the eyes and minds of numerous, diverse people: for instance, he sees the Taj Mahal through the eyes of a tourist-Englishwoman; then he visits a famous temple in the south of the nation, through the perceptions of a chanting priest in the temple; he becomes in turn the



consciousnesses of a poor auto-rickshaw driver in Delhi, a homeless person sleeping inside a section of drainpipe in Calcutta, a fisher-woman in the southern tip of the country, a tribal person in a hut at the foot of the Himalayas, a woman in Jaisalmer earning a living by making mirrorwork dresses, an adolescent boy in Khajraho, a fat unscrupulous landlord in Orissa, a baby of a poor woman, a peasant leaning toward Communism, a Congress party (the ruling party) worker, and so on. Then he enters the minds of famous people like film-stars, cricket-players, playback singers of Bombay movies; and then the consciousness of high-level politicians such as the Prime Minister of the nation, the Chief Minister of the state, and so on (173-74). Seeing and perceiving through the eyes and consciousnesses of various people create the different voices of a polyphony, or dialogue.

Another instance of the heterogeneity or multiplicity of a person is seen when Saleem becomes amnesiac and cannot remember even his name or anything of his past. In the chapters dealing with his amnesiac phase, he refers to himself in the third person, as “the buddha” or “he” (345-379). At various other points in the novel, when Saleem distinguishes his present self narrating in 1978, from an earlier self of his, he refers to himself as “Saleem” or “he” (166, 167, 172, 236-37, 316-17, 319-20, 323-25, 360, 434). Saleem describes and lists, with irony, his various transformations:

. . . as we all know by now, our hero is greatly affected by being shut up in confined spaces. Transformations spring upon him in the enclosed dark. As a mere embryo in the secrecy of a womb (not his mother’s), did he not grow into the incarnation of the new myth of August 15<sup>th</sup>, the child of ticktock—did he not emerge as the Mubarak, the Blessed Child? In a cramped wash-room, were name-tags not switched around? Alone in a washing-chest with a drawstring up one nostril, did he not glimpse a Black mango and sniff too hard, turning himself and his upper cucumber into a kind of supernatural ham radio? Hemmed in by doctors, nurses and anaesthetic masks, did he not succumb to numbers and, having suffered drainage-above, move into a second phase, that of nasal philosopher and (later) tracker supreme? Squashed, in a small abandoned hut, beneath the body of Ayooba Baloch, did he not learn the meaning of fair-and-unfair? Well, then—trapped in the occult peril of the basket of invisibility, I was saved, not only by the glints of a spittoon, but also by another transformation: in the grip of that awful disembodied loneliness, whose smell was the smell of grave-

yards, I discovered anger. (382).

In the wicker basket, after being transformed into “thin air,” Saleem learns “what it was like, will be like, to be dead” (380; 381). “Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born.” The old pride about his birth at a great moment in the nation’s history, of recognition from the Prime Minister, prophecies of greatness, ambition of a playing a great role in the nation’s history, realizing a heroic purpose, etc., fade. So does his acceptance of all the wrongs and injustices heaped on him by others, and the acceptance of a predetermined, “prophesised historical role” (382). In their place is born a blind fury. From “vanishment,” Saleem emerges with a new-born sense of anger which makes him determined “to begin, from that moment forth, to choose [his] own, undestined future” (383).

Mumtaz also becomes another person when Ahmed re-names her as Amina Sinai. She, in turn, transforms Ahmed so that he comes to resemble her first husband and true love, Nadir Khan. Like Mumtaz, in the next generation, Parvati also becomes another person when Saleem renames her as Laylah. Padma becomes Naseem by Saleem’s renaming of her. Picture Singh says he got his name because an Eastman-Kodak photographer took his picture which later appeared on the Kodak advertisements, and ever since the snake-charmer had adopted his present cognomen. He tells Saleem, “. . . what to do, I can’t even remember what name I used to have, from before, the name my mother-father gave me!” (380). These instances of new names for people, including Saleem, in a sense, change them into other persons, and indicate a kind of metamorphosis. Saleem also acquires various surrogate fathers and mothers, and this also, in a sense, means that he is not one person, but many persons, with different origins. Metaphorically, Saleem is reborn not once, but many times in the novel. He becomes a radio-like communication channel, and later a buddha; he vanishes into thin

air and is brought back to his bodily form by the magic of Parvati which causes Picture Singh to call Saleem a “baby,” highlighting his rebirth.

### **3.5 Slum Naturalism, Picaresque Wanderings, Symbolic Hell and Heaven**

Matching the large number of characters in the novel, the spatial element in the novel is also extensive. The adventurous journeys of Saleem in the Indian subcontinent are preceded and complemented by his ancestors’ travel from Kashmir, to Amritsar, Agra, Delhi, and Bombay (not to mention Aadam Aziz’s travel to Germany). The narrative moves from its beginning in the city of Srinagar in the principedom of Kashmir, to the city of Amritsar in colonial India, then to Agra, to Delhi, Bombay, to Karachi, Rawalpindi, the principedom of Kif in Pakistan, to Dacca (in the former East Pakistan via Ceylon), to Sundarban jungles, back to Dacca, to Delhi, Benares, back to Delhi, and finally to Saleem’s birth place Bombay, and Saleem is able to go to the very plot of land where once his childhood house stood. In addition, the novel describes Saleem’s telepathic touring all over India. These features suggest the novel’s affinity with the tradition of the picaresque novel, which, is generally seen as a modern form of the Menippean satire. In the classical picaresque novel, a rogue tells the story of his own experiences in the contemporary world, usually involving his travels from place to place, and through a wide spectrum of society; the main interests of picaresque fiction are social and satirical. In their satirical aspect, picaresque narratives are anti-romances. *Midnight’s Children* manifests these features of the picaresque/carnival tradition. In the picaresque novel the protagonist is usually a person of low origin and does not change much or evolve in a moral sense, during the travels and adventures. Shiva, the slum boy who remains a rascal and who is Saleem’s alter-ego, fits this description. He also travels from Bombay to Bangladesh, to Delhi, and travels across India, “strewing bastards

across the map of India” (409). .

In Menippean satire the carnival sense of the world is combined with a pronounced use of the fantastic, and the hero “undergoes adventurous wanderings throughout the realms not only of earth but also of heaven and hell. These wanderings constitute a test of the hero’s truth, taking him in the process to settings of the crudest slum naturalism” (Engblom 297).

In *Midnight’s Children* the use of the fantastic is so extensive as to be taken as its normative mode by critics like David Lipscomb. The eponymous ‘midnight’s children’ all have fantastic gifts which are elaborated in the novel (196-200). Mian Abdullah, the “Hummingbird,” has a magical hum that can produce, among the people in his vicinity, toothache when it is at a very low pitch and induce erections when it is at the highest pitch. The “six thousand four hundred and twenty” pie-dogs in Agra that attack and take revenge on the killers of Mian Abdullah are other examples of the fantastic. There are other characters in whom fantastic features are suggested, such as the soothsayer Ramram Seth, the old prostitute Tai Bibi, and the slum-dweller Resham Bibi. The chapter on Sundarban jungles is full of phantasmagoric elements. These fantasy elements contribute to the satire and parody in the novel.

Though the protagonist grows up in an elite family, the novel depicts many scenes where the poor sections of many cities in the Indian subcontinent are displayed. People from lower classes, such as beggars, vendors, street-entertainers, prostitutes, snake-charmers, ghetto-magicians, slum dwellers, fare-dodgers (in trains), poor peasants, as well as places such as the slums, brothels, marketplaces, railway stations, ports, prisons, latrines, etc., contribute to the sense of naturalism in the novel. Bakhtin tells us that the search for truth should take us to all places and not fear slums and other places of low life.

The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults . . . The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of any of life's filth. The man of the idea—the wise man—collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression. (*Problems* 115).

Scholes and Kelloggs' description of the picaresque as the comic anti-type of the romance is useful to understand some aspects of *Midnight's Children*: the picaresque “approaches the mimetic, but for comic and satiric purposes mainly. It sets the contemporary world and a first-person narrator up against the never-never world and impalpable narrator of romance, employing a loose and episodic structure indicative of its relative indifference to plot, relying on wit and variety rather than empathy and suspense to maintain the interest of its audience” (75). *Midnight's Children* has many of the features of the picaresque novel, but it also has the features of many other types of narratives, as mentioned in the first chapter. It uses the mimetic mode and history ambivalently. It uses them but also undermines them, not exclusively for comic and satire purposes. It *does* use suspense to maintain the interest of its audience, often in a self-conscious manner by providing many foreshadowings, though Scholes and Kellogg do not consider suspense as a characteristic of the picaresque. *Midnight's Children* combines the elements of many genres and modes, and does not restrict itself to one mode.

Myths and the epic use the motif of a descent into hell. Menippean satire (which arose as a parody of the serious forms such as the epic and tragedy), also includes the wanderings of the hero in the realms of hell and heaven, in addition to his wanderings on earth. In keeping with this feature of Menippean parody, and also of the epic, *Midnight's Children* includes the hero's wanderings in the realms of hell. Rushdie comments in an interview that even though he cast *Midnight's Children* in the comic-epic mode, it required the epic's “descent into hell” (see interview by Haffenden 37).

The chapter “In the Sundarbans” represents that descent, where Saleem and the three young West Pakistani soldiers suffer physically and psychologically, first regressing into infantile states and then slowly coming out of them. They get lost in the jungle, see apparitions, and suffer various forms of punishments.

During his wandering in the Sundarbans-hell, Saleem is, in a sense, reborn, since he recovers his memory and gets connected to his past, after being bitten by a snake. Saleem refers to his amnesiac phase as a purgation (343) and a rebirth (350). After this purgatorial experience, and the descent into the hell in the Sundarbans, when he regains his memory he emerges as a new Saleem. He now possesses a new sense that distinguishes what is “not fair” (370). In contrast to his previous meek acceptance of all the wrongs done to him by others, he now feels anger and rage toward injustice and unfairness.

But the jungle also gives Saleem and the soldiers some experience of heaven: “when the four wanderers were near the point of panic, the jungle brought them through a curtain of tree-beards and showed them a sight so lovely that it brought lumps to their throats” (366). The four men fall asleep at the feet of a statue of Kali in the ruins of an old temple and awake simultaneously “to find themselves being smiled upon by four young girls of a beauty which was beyond speech. Shaheed, who recalled the four houris awaiting him in the camphor garden [of the martyr’s heaven], thought at first that he had died in the night” (366). The four men experience the delight of sex with the four imaginary women for many nights. It is a parody of the Islamic belief in a heaven reserved for martyrs, with perfumed gardens where “men would be given four beautiful houris, untouched by man or djinn; and the women, four equally virile males” (340).

The Sundarban episode uses the descent-into-hell motif to depict the eventual

growing up of the child-soldiers, first describing their regression into infantile state and then waking to adult and more responsible selves.

Saleem describes another hell when he visits the underground, secret Midnite-Confidential Club in Bombay, managed by a businessman-playboy, in the Bombay of late 1970s. "In that underground of licentiousness," the manager had created "a world of Stygian darkness, black as hell; in the secrecy of midnight darkness, the city's lovers met, drank imported liquor, and romanced; cocooned in the isolating, artificial night, they canoodled with impunity. Hell is other people's fantasies: every saga requires at least one descent into Jahannum [Hell]" (453). The city's sophisticated, cosmopolitan rich youth thus solve the twin problems of how to consume alcohol in a dry state, and how to romance girls in the best Western tradition. They take the girls out "to paint the town red, while at the same time preserving total secrecy, to avoid the very Oriental shame of a scandal" (453). The woman attendant who takes Saleem and Picture Singh down a black carpet into the darkness is of ravishing sexual charms, but her eyes are closed, with "unearthly luminous eyes painted on her lids" (453-54). The woman tells that she is blind, and adds, "and besides, nobody who comes here wants to be seen. Here you are in a world without faces or names; here people have no memories, families or past; here is for *now*, for nothing except right *now*" (454; Rushdie's emphasis). In the "nightmare pit" of the club, "light is kept in shackles and bar-fetters" and it is a "place outside time," a place of "negation of history" (454). This break with memory, past, families, names, and faces mirrors Saleem's own amnesia and break with the past and history. This "infernal Club" (455) of "Stygian darkness, black as hell" (453) where Saleem has to be guided through a nightmare pit, is a man-made hell while the Sundarbans is Nature's hell. In this modern hell in Bombay, the elite Indian youth try other people's fantasies and forsake their past for the 'now'. Saleem gains

something precious after descent into this hell also. He gets reconnected with Mary, his childhood ayah. And he settles in Bombay with his son, working in Mary's pickle factory. Mary looks after his son just as she had cared for Saleem many years ago.

Using the epic convention of the 'descent into hell,' Rushdie satirizes the modern Bombay in the above episode. The mythic, epic convention serves as a "pre-text" to deal with contemporary history.

### **3.6 The Grotesque and the Macabre as Comical Treatment of Sex and Death**

Bakhtin's ideas of the grotesque body and grotesque realism find expression in *Midnight's Children* and this aspect has been noted in the first chapter and elsewhere. The grotesque, in its other sense, as the making fun of sex is also evident in the novel. The employment of the grotesque and the macabre in *Midnight's Children* seems to follow some ancient literary traditions. Scholes and Kellogg point out that Menippean satires and the Roman tales such as Petronius's *Satiricon* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)* exploit sex and death in a comic manner, as grotesque (that which makes fun of sex), and macabre (that which makes fun of death), respectively (75). The ancient satires provide a sense of the comic, anti-romance. While romance uses sex and death seriously for the sake of suspense and terror, the satires use sex and death for comic purposes. In its use of the grotesque and macabre, *Midnight Children* traces a literary lineage to the picaresque and the Menippean satire.

Many scenes connected with sex become comic and/or horrific in *Midnight's Children*. Aadam Aziz's falling in love through the glimpses of Naseem seen through a hole in a sheet, his unsuccessful attempts to make his wife more cooperative in sex, Amina's unsatisfactory sexual experience with Nadir Khan and Ahmed Sinai, Ahmed's frozen balls, Saleem's precocious adventure with his aunt Pia, his looking at his



mother's rump from a hidden position in a washing-chest, his comical and disastrous attempts at his declaration of love to Evie Burns and later to Jamila Singer, his encounter with the oldest whore in Pakistan in a filthy room, Zafar's bed-wetting on his nuptial bed in the dream of his bride, the sexual romance of Ahmed Sinai and Amina in a late-blooming love, Mary's lover ending as a rotting figure with holes in his body in her nightmares, the forced sterilization of the 420 midnight-children, and the frying of their private parts with onion and the feeding of the same to dogs, Saleem's guilty obsession which haunts him in the form of Jamila's rotting face, his inability to have sex with Parvati, his impotence contrasted with Padma's love for him—all these provide instances of the grotesque, in the sense of making fun of sex. The war atrocities committed by the West Pakistani soldiers in East Pakistan also exemplify the grotesque. During the Bangladesh War, Saleem and his unit see "soldiers entering women's hostels without knocking; women dragged into the street, were also entered, and again, nobody troubled to knock" (356).

As for the macabre, which makes fun of death, there are plenty of such instances in *Midnight's Children*. Ilse tells Aadam Aziz that their German friend Oskar the anarchist "died like a comedian. He went to talk to the army and tell them not to be pawns. The fool really thought the troops would fling down their guns and walk away . . . [Instead] As he reached the street corner across from the parade ground he tripped over his own shoelace and fell into the street. A staff car hit him and he died' (29). Amidst the tears that come to her eyes as she remembers Oskar's death, Ilse tells Aadam: "He could never keep his laces tied, that ninny' . . .He was the type that gives anarchists a bad name" (29). Tai the Kashmiri boatman has a similar tragi-comic death. In 1947, on the independence of the Indian subcontinent, Tai, who had survived and recovered from his scrofulous infection, meets his death in an Oskar-like gesture. Saleem describes Tai's

death with the qualifier “(the story goes)”: “he [Tai] was infuriated by India and Pakistan’s struggle over his valley, and walked to Chhamb with the express purpose of standing between the opposing forces and giving them a piece of his mind. Kashmir for the Kashmiris: that was his line. Naturally, they shot him. Oskar Lubin would probably have approved of his rhetorical gesture” (37). There is no pathos or touching tragic sense here but a quasi-comical treatment of death, in the spirit of the macabre.

In the description of the Bangladesh war of 1971, we are told about “roadside ditches filling up with people who were not merely asleep—bare chests were seen, and the hollow pimples of bullet-holes” (356). Another gruesome, macabre scene ensues when Saleem and the boy soldiers enter a field outside Dacca. The crops of the field are the dead soldiers; while Saleem sees a man who is scavenging the material possessions of the corpses, one of the boy soldiers, Farooq, is shot dead. But the field’s greatest secret is a small pyramid in it.

Ants were crawling over it, but it was not an anthill. The pyramid had six feet and three heads and, in between, a jumbled area composed of bits of torso, scraps of uniforms, lengths of intestines and glimpses of shattered bones. The pyramid was still alive. One of its three heads had a blind left eye, the legacy of a childhood argument. Another had hair that was thickly plastered down with hair oil. The third head was the oddest: it had deep hollows where the temples should have been, . . . it was this head which spoke to the buddha. (373)

The head of Sonny Ibrahim, Saleem’s childhood friend in Bombay, speaks to Saleem for the last time before “the pyramid was no longer capable of speech” (373). This macabre description of the death of Saleem’s childhood companions Sonny, Eyeslice and Hairoil, is a bitter satire on the cruelty and horrific nature of war. Another macabre scene shocks us when Saleem, as the amnesiac and numb buddha, goes after a local woman in the rice paddies. The boy-soldiers desperately look for Saleem, and they see a

bizarre slow-motion chase: first the buddha with that cucumber-nose, . . . and following him, splashing through paddies, a gesticulating peasant with a scythe, Father Time enraged, while running along a dyke a woman with her sari caught up between her legs, hair loose, voice pleading screaming, while the scythed avenger

stumbles through drowned rice, covered from head to foot in water and mud. (359)

The comical image of the mud-covered, stumbling peasant with the scythe as Death-the-reaper with the sickle, strikes the note of the macabre, making fun of death. In this scene, the peasant symbolizing Death is himself is shot dead by Ayooba. Both sex and death are comically treated. It is Saleem's sexual escapade with the peasant woman that brings in the agent of death.

In one of the various correspondences between Saleem's private life and Pakistan's political and military history, we see another grotesque scene. The young girl who cleans the latrines in the soldiers' camp prefers to have sex with the ugly, amnesiac, numb, old-looking Saleem instead of with Ayooba, provoking the latter to take revenge on Saleem by electrocuting him in the urinal. Rushdie makes the cruel application of electric shock to Saleem's genitals by the soldiers coincide with the breakdown of "high-level talks" between the West Pakistani leaders (Yahya and Bhutto) and the East Pakistani leader Mujib. This grotesque and macabre scene provides not only a satire on the cruel practices of soldiers in their camps, but also hints at the equally shocking political murders committed by many of the Pakistani leaders by juxtaposing the gruesome acts of the soldiers and the political intrigues and betrayals at the highest level of the Pakistani government.

The midnight-children offer more examples of the grotesque and the macabre: such as the pair of twin sisters, who, despite their impressive plainness possessed the ability "of making every man who saw them fall hopelessly and often suicidally in love with them." A stream of young and old men pester the parents for the hand of one or both of the girls in marriage, and there is another "more disturbing procession of bereaved families cursing the twin girls for having bewitched their sons into committing acts of violence against themselves, fatal mutilations and scourgings and even (in one case)

self-immolation” (196).

The ten-year-old American girl Evie Burns is another bizarre figure. She is extremely autocratic and declares herself as the “new big chief” of the children in Methwold Estate (183). But her bizarre appearance, with her scarecrow straw hair, freckles, teeth that “grew wild, in malicious crazy-paving overlaps,” and were enclosed in the metal cage of braces, and her bizarre temperament do not deter the nine-year-old Saleem from falling in love with her (181). But Evie has only scorn and insults for Saleem. She is attracted to Sonny Ibrahim with the irresistible dents in his temples. Evie Burns’ arrival results in a “grotesque mimicry” of Cyrano’s tale in the young Saleem’s love-life (185). Saleem asks his friend Sonny to plead his case with Evie, in a kind of imitation of the story of Cyrano. Ibrahim, who is in love with Saleem’s sister the Brass Monkey, asks for reciprocal help. Neither of the boys succeeds in his mission as a messenger of love. Both girls insult and abuse their respective lovers. The Brass Monkey punishes Sonny by making him suffer for his love, by “telling tales to his mother; pushing him into mud-puddles accidentally-on-purpose; once even assaulting him physically, leaving him with long raking claw-marks down his face and an expression of sad-dog injury in his eyes” (183). Still, Ibrahim persists, and the Brass Monkey inflicts a grotesque punishment upon him for his love-letters. With the help of three older, strong-muscled European girl friends, she rips every scrap of clothing off his body when they are all waiting for the school bus, and leaves Sonny naked on the road. Saleem’s love is also treated with scorn and punished with violence. Saleem presents Evie with a flower necklace bought with his own pocket-money; but she scornfully tosses it in the air and shoots at it with her air-pistol. She abuses him verbally with derogatory names. She pushes him while he is on the bicycle twice. The first time Saleem collides with Sonny and the shock triggers his radio-like communication with

the other midnight-children scattered all over India. The second time he lands among the language-marchers, which luckily does not provoke the violence of the marchers against him, but results in a national disaster, provoking violence among the two opposing groups of language-marchers.

A hint of the macabre is also seen in Evie's reaction when a swarm of cats invade Methwold Estate in search of water during a period of water shortage. She offers to get rid of the cats by shooting them with her air-pistol in exchange for money from the residents. Later Saleem hears about her knifing of an old woman when she goes back to America. In these episodes *Midnight's Children* brings down the lofty themes of love, sex, and death, in the manner of Menippean satire, in contrast to the serious and lofty manner in which they are treated in serious genres such as the epic and tragedy. In such opposition of the values of canonical literature, *Midnight's Children* speaks in the voice of carnival and carnivalesque literature.

### **3.7. Dialogue and Polyphony in *Midnight's Children***

#### **3.7.1 Voice of "Other"**

The dialogic relations in a polyphonic novel, as mentioned Chapter 1, are extensive, and dynamic. For Bakhtin, the author's relation to the characters that he has created distinguishes a polyphonic novel from a monologic novel. The author of a polyphonic novel, in the tradition of carnival laughter and freedom, forsakes any authoritative, dogmatic view. Such views are left to the characters, and the different voices of different characters engage in an interaction in the great dialogue of the novel and the dialogue is left open.

Dialogism does not mean merely the dialogues between the characters rendered in the novel with quotation marks or otherwise. In the polyphonic novel the author gives

up the conventional, privileged position that is occupied by the author of a monologic novel, and becomes one among the many consciousnesses participating in the dialogue of the novel. The dialogue goes on between the author, his characters, the world, and the reader. The multiplicity of consciousnesses, and voices that one hears in a polyphonic novel is described by Bakhtin as an opposition of many consciousnesses “which is never cancelled out dialectically.” The various consciousnesses “do not merge in the unity of an evolving spirit” (*Problems* 26). The multivoiced polyphonic novel resists ideological synthesis or closure. Engblom summarizes the situation thus: “The entire point of [the world of the polyphonic novel] is not any finalized “Truth” we may seek dialectically to extract from it, but the unfinalized dialogue itself” (298).

It has been already noted that, like a picaresque novel, the narrative in *Midnight's Children* covers a vast space stretching over the Indian subcontinent. Matching this vast canvas, it also employs a large number of characters. The unusually large number of characters in *Midnight's Children* has already been noted. This device provides an ideal opportunity for many voices to be heard. However, as Engblom argues, the main evidence of multivoicedness of the novel “is the voice of none other than the narrator Saleem Sinai” (300). The dialogicality, Engblom points out, is “internal or hidden, *within* the voice of the narrator” (300). Saleem, despite his quasi-omniscience and telepathy, does not settle for one, absolutely certain meaning, motive, or truth. Instead, he repeatedly explores various possibilities for motives and meanings. He habitually engages in self-questioning. Engblom sees this self-questioning as “a habitual, harried anticipation of some other, usually unspecified person’s outraged objection to” Saleem’s narration (300). From the very first chapter, Saleem adopts a tone as if he is addressing his narration to somebody, actually talking to somebody, though he does not indicate that anybody is listening to him. Only in the second chapter does Padma appear

and only in the middle of this chapter does she ask Saleem to read his narrative to her since she cannot read. But even when Padma is not there with Saleem, he adopts a manner that is like talking to someone. The “someone” is usually silent and not present in body, but “is simply anticipated by the speaking voice” (Engblom 300). Sometimes this “other” takes the body and voice of Padma.

But even when Padma leaves him for some days, this unspecified, anticipated ‘other’ is still present for Saleem to address. As already noted, Engblom counts over 115 characters that have names, in addition to the numerous characters that are not named. All these various characters, as Engblom explains, speak through the voice of the ‘other.’ They constantly challenge Saleem’s version. “Saleem splinters, in other words, into each one of the characters of his narrative. Each is invested with a vigorous, often feisty voice of his or her own. Saleem does not have the last word” (Engblom 300-301).

Saleem has the magical gift of entering into the minds of people. This is also equivalent to his splitting into different people.

Engblom affirms that *Midnight’s Children* “engages in every conceivable strategy to deny [an] authoritarian single-voicedness” (301); and he adds that despite the polyphony of the novel, many readers see the novel as a dark, pessimistic novel, because of the conditioning of the readers “always to find a central hero, a central voice, as the ultimate, authoritative reference for the closure of meaning in a novel” (301). Commending the novel’s refusal to provide a neat synthesis, and its resistance to reduce meaning to one grand clarifying “Truth,” Engblom explains: “In the carnivalesque world of *Midnight’s Children* . . . it is riotous plurality (not order), variety and difference (not clarity) that are valued and celebrated” (303). Seeing the narrative strategies of Rushdie as a challenge to the conventional, monologic Western novel, Engblom concludes: “It is in the fluidity, the unfinalizable openness of carnivalization

and dialogicality that Rushdie himself finds the means to break out of the imperial containments of official, metropolitan, monologic versions of the Western novel” (303).

### 3.7.2 The Voice of Radical Questioning

As the self-questioning mode of Saleem constitutes a major strategy of dialogism in *Midnight's Children*, it is relevant to explore some examples of this questioning below.

Saleem asks innumerable questions during the narrative, which are possibly his own self-questioning, or the articulations of the actual or anticipated questions from Padma (who is his audience within the novel), or the anticipated questions from the general readers outside the novel. He thus sets up a dialogue, sometimes providing the answers, sometimes leaving the question undecided (see 52, 68, 86-87, 88, 122,123, 134, 135, 144-45, 147, 159, 179, 181, 218, 225, 256, 277, 278, 308, 309, 319, 320, 339, 388, 408, 412, 428, 430, 448. There are possibly similar examples of questioning in many other pages). In the beginning of the fourth chapter, after whetting Padma's curiosity by hinting that soon she will find out who is his father, he suddenly goes into a description of his grandfather who is sitting on the toilet, suffering from constipation. Anticipating the exasperated question of Padma (and the reader), Saleem asks himself, “Why, when I might have described [he mentions a myriad other things], . . . do I choose to wallow in excrement?” (52). And then he proceeds to give the answer. Similarly, he raises the question of Amina's reasons for marrying Ahmed. He gives two answers. Then, he describes some obstacles standing in the way of Amina's achieving the two goals that he had just mentioned. At this point, he says: “You ask: what did she do about it? I answer: . . .” He then describes Amina self-questioning. Thus Saleem articulates questions from three sources—himself, the reader, and Amina. He ends this dialogue with: “To avoid fruitless controversy about the correct answer to these questions, let me



say that, in my mother's opinion, a husband deserved unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love" (68). The attempt to find the "correct answer" can only lead to "fruitless controversy." So, as Engblom says, the point is not any finalized "Truth" but the "unfinalized dialogue itself," the exploration of truth through different voices (298).

Often Saleem asks a barrage of rhetorical questions mainly to prepare the ground for his argument. He asks eleven questions in the section describing Amina's visit to the soothsayer Ramram Seth, casting doubt on Ramram Seth's authenticity and Amina's state of mind (86-87). Saleem admits that he is hampered by a "filmy curtain of ambiguities" (87). Though his miraculous memory answers many questions about a time before his birth, he laments: ". . . but the curtain descends again, so I cannot be sure" about the behavior of Ramram Seth, Amina, Seth's cousins, and about all the other things in the room. Because of this "curtain of ambiguities," his narration is repeatedly interrupted by self-questioning, such as: "And Lifafa Das: did he see, in my mother, a woman" who could be satisfied by a cheap fake-soothsayer, "or did he see deeper, into . . . her weakness?" (86). Again, "And was it true that my mother . . .," "And there is another, more horrible possibility, too" (86). And ". . . I cannot be sure—did he begin . . . and then, did he change?—did Ramram become stiff . . . did he . . . ask . . . and did my mother . . . reply . . . was it then . . . a brief sharp jolt of electricity passed between pudgy fingers and maternal skin?" "(Was that how?)" (87). All these self-questionings, doubts, on the one hand, and the simultaneous desire to convince the audience with minute details plucked from his imaginary memory, contribute to the polyphonic nature of the novel, as we hear these different voices expressing different viewpoints and beliefs. The author/narrator does not have a definite reply for all questions. He himself engages in self-questioning and doubting. Thus, the characters

and the reader are given the incentive and freedom to participate in the dialogue, in the search for truth and meaning in the novel.

Continuing on the theme of his suspicion about his mother, Saleem reverts to his questioning mode after describing Ramram Seth's prophecy. Prefacing his questions, he says: "But now, because there are yet more questions and ambiguities, I am obliged to voice certain suspicions. Suspicion, too, is a monster with too many heads" (88). Then he voices three questions. And his memory, his "new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of mother father grandfather grandmother and everyone else—answers" these questions (88). This miraculous memory of Saleem gives answers that confirm his suspicions about his mother, namely that she had a weakness for men such as the soothsayer Ramram Seth who resemble her first husband Nadir Khan. Then Saleem voices the questions that his suspicions ask, in halting phrases: "And now my unreasonable suspicions ask the ultimate question . . . did Amina, pure-as-pure, actually . . . because of her weakness for men who resembled Nadir Khan, could she have . . . in her odd frame of mind, and moved by the seer's illness, might she not . . ." (88; Rushdie's ellipses). Even before he can finish his hesitant question, he is interrupted by Padma who scolds him for suspecting his own mother, for saying things that he does not really know.

But Saleem gives the readers a hint of a secret meeting of Amina with Nadir Khan, which he will describe only some 130 pages later. Saleem makes it clear that he reasons backwards. His memory of Amina's secret meeting with Nadir Khan in 1957 provides the seed for his suspicion, which grows "illogically backwards in time and arrive[s] fully mature" at the earlier, almost certainly innocent adventure of Amina in going to see Ramram Seth in 1947. However, Saleem's monster of suspicion does not lie down. It continues arguing, asking why Amina threw a tantrum to oppose moving to Bombay.

And it mimics Amina's arguing that Ahmed always took decisions without considering her, and that she does not want to move to another city just when she had got her house in Delhi in order. Saleem joins the side of his suspicions and asks Padma, "So, Padma: was that housewifely zeal—or a masquerade?" (89). Saleem voices another question of the monster, asking why Amina did not tell her husband about her visit to the soothsayer Ramram Seth. Now Padma joins the dialogue again, and voices Amina's reply. Thus there are many voices in this debate. We hear the voice of Saleem, the voice of the monster with many heads (his suspicions), Padma's voice, and the voice of Amina (mimicked by the monster and by Padma). Saleem uses two voices, his own and his suspicion's. His suspicion uses another voice, namely Amina's, in mimicry. Padma also uses two voices, her own and Amina's. In this example, Saleem's narration starts as an expression of his own inner dialogue, but evolves into a dialogue with Padma, when she angrily intervenes to contradict his suspicion. We hear a dialogue between Saleem and Padma, in which both of them take on the voice of Amina. They argue, taking opposite positions, about Amina's inner motives, even unconscious ones. They do not take the past for granted, but probe, question, argue, and discuss in a dialogue, presenting different viewpoints in different voices.

In Padma's angry intervention and role-playing of Amina, we see an opposition to and questioning of the narrator's version, as in a dialogue. Saleem's narration is not taken or given as an absolute. This is the essence of dialogism. Conflicting views are given a chance to express themselves in the manner of dialogue to avoid the monologism of a conventional novel. In *Midnight's Children* even the narrator has multiple voices, because of his suspicion which has "too many heads" (88).

Debating the reasons for the enmity between the old Muslim servant Musa and the new ayah Mary, Saleem asks nine questions, and explores the possible answer for each

one. He considers Mary's "guilt, fear, shame" due to her crime of switching the name-tags of babies in the clinic, her privileged status in the household with the title "mausi, little mother," her familiarity with the mistress Amina, her Christian religious prayers in the face of the Muslim Musa, Musa's old-age infirmity, his consequent fear of losing his job, his bitterness at the privilege of Mary to sleep on a mat beside the baby in the house while he has to sleep, along with the gardener and other servants, in the servants' room behind the kitchen—all these Saleem considers as possible contributors to the bitter enmity that breaks out between Mary and Musa. He even looks "beyond psychology," for philosophical explanations, and looks for answers in "the Hand of Fate" (145). He does not leave out even "ridiculous" possibilities such as Ahmed's drunken "excesses of rudeness" towards Musa which might have injured Musa's pride and provoked him to steal his master's valuables (145). Thus, voicing questions, opinions, and deductions from different angles, Saleem gives us a genuine polyphony. He does not give one definitive reason or explanation, but a dialogue between many possibilities. Such a stance is closer to the reality of our lived experience which always points to multiple causes and consequences, and not to a single cause or result.

Saleem emphasizes the ambiguity of reality. Commenting on Evie Burns' effect on his life, Saleem asks, ". . . (was she a snake or a ladder? The answer's obvious: *both*)" (181; Rushdie's emphasis). Evie Burns enables Saleem "not only to discover the midnight children, but also to ensure the partition of the state of Bombay" (181). The first effect of Evie on Saleem's life is like a ladder while the second is like a snake.

Wondering why Ahmed Sinai agreed to provide the capital for Dr Narlikar's land-reclamation project, Saleem provides three possible answers, each beginning with cautious phrases such as "Perhaps because," "perhaps for . . .," and "or may be" (134). Then he offers another reason: "But, in my view, there is a simpler explanation . . ."

(134). He places his own preferred view as one among the many voices or consciousnesses that probe the motive behind Ahmed's imprudent investment, and not *the* explanation.

At another point, Saleem engages in an actual dialogue with the audience:

You ask: these are ten-year-olds? I reply: Yes, but. You say: did ten-year-olds, or even almost-elevens, discuss the role of the individual in society? And the rivalry of capital and labour? Were the internal stresses of agrarian and industrialized zones made explicit? And conflicts in socio-cultural heritages? Did children of less than four thousand days discuss identity, and the inherent conflicts of capitalism? Having got through fewer than one hundred thousand hours, did they contrast Gandhi and Marxlenin, power and impotence? Was collectivity opposed to singularity? Was God killed by children? Even allowing for the truth of the supposed miracles, can we now believe that urchins spoke like old men with beards?

I say: maybe not in these words; maybe not in words at all, but in the purer language of thought . . . because children are the vessels into which adults pour their poison, . . . (256)

The use of "You ask," and "I say," highlights the dialogue between the narrator and the audience (which can be either Padma or readers like us). In the above passage, Saleem/Rushdie articulate the anticipated disbelief and questions of the audience who would find it difficult to swallow the idea that ten-year-olds discuss mighty questions of political, economic, social, and cultural domains. Saleem gives a kind of plausible explanation that though children may not express such ideas in the sophisticated language of adult intellectuals, they absorb the values, beliefs, and ideas from the adults with whom they grow up and have significant contact.

Saleem leaves some questions unanswered, leaving it to the reader to decide. He suggests that Aadam Aziz stole the holy hair of the prophet Muhammad from the mosque in Kashmir. But he does not confirm it. Instead he sets up a dialogue, arguing from different sides.

Did he? Didn't he? If it was him, why did he not enter the Mosque, stick in hand, to belabour the faithful as he had become accustomed to doing? If not him, then why? There were rumours of a Central Government plot to 'demoralize the Kashmiri Muslims', by stealing their sacred hair; and counter-rumours about Pakistani *agents provocateurs*, who supposedly stole the relic to foment unrest . . . did they? Or not?

Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son? (277; Rushdie's italics and ellipses)

Similarly, Saleem leaves it undecided as to whose umbilical cord Ahmed carries home from the clinic and later to Karachi: “ (But was it mine or the Other's? That's something I can't tell you.)” (123); “. . . an umbilical cord—was it mine? Or Shiva's?” (309).

He voices the opposing, and often exaggerated accounts of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 from the Indian and Pakistani sides, and helps us to see the mockery of truth in the newspapers, national radio, and government sources. We cannot help develop a skeptical attitude toward media and government announcements after reading the novel.

Saleem speculates about the reason for Shiva's becoming the “warlord of tyranny” and his later betrayal of the midnight-children. As usual, he gives different possible answers, and then adds his own preferred one: “For love of violence, and the legitimizing glitter of buttons on uniforms? For the sake of his ancient antipathy towards me? Or—I find this most plausible—in exchange for immunity from the penalties imposed on the rest of us . . . yes, that must be it” (430).

The dialogic nature of *Midnight's Children* is somewhat more obviously seen in the various instances where Saleem addresses Padma directly (48, 68, 211, 269, 281, 319, 320, etc.), which heighten the effect of dialogue in his narration. There are many such instances throughout the novel. When Saleem describes his memory of an old photograph, Padma interrupts Saleem's narration: “What nonsense,” she says, “How can a picture talk? Stop now; you must be too tired to think” (45). Other occasions when Padma is incredulous of Saleem's account are not wanting (269, 291). Padma's challenging of Saleem's narration mirrors Saleem's own self-questioning and uncertainties. The dialogism implicit in Saleem's self-questioning is made explicit by Padma's interruptions and challenges.

Saleem's self-questioning exposes the convoluted processes through which our search for 'truth' often passes. While describing Mary's questioning of a young priest about the color of Jesus (at a time before Saleem's birth), Saleem starts wondering about the dilemma of the priest on hearing Mary's unintentional revelations of Joseph D'Costa's terrorist activities. Wondering about the priest's conflict between his duty to his religious vows and his duty to the government and police, Saleem muses:

. . . and now, is there a new dilemma for the young father? Is he, despite the agonies of an unsettled stomach, weighing in invisible scales the sanctity of the confessional against the danger to civilized society of a man like Joseph D'Costa? Will he, in fact, ask Mary for her Joseph's address, and then reveal . . . In short, would this bishop-ridden, stomach-churned young father have behaved like, or unlike, Montgomery Clift in *I Confess*? (Watching it some years ago at the New Empire cinema, I couldn't decide.). (105; Rushdie's ellipses)

Saleem's self-questioning about the priest's inner conflicts is the result of his seeing the film *I Confess* many years after the incident of Mary's conversation with the priest. He starts speculating about the priest's intentions and moral dilemma because in the movie *I Confess*, a priest is faced with a similar dilemma about the confession of a crime. Saleem does not give us any definite answer to his own question, and leaves us in the region of probability, rather than certainty. He gives up trying to arrive at an answer: “. . . no: once again, I must stifle my baseless suspicions. What happened to Joseph would probably have happened anyway” (105-106). Since it is not possible for Saleem to find out “*the truth*,” the only reasonable reaction is to accept probability rather than certainty. Saleem's attitude invites us to take up a similar position with respect to truth in general since we are not in a position to find out what it is, with absolute certainty.

Sometimes Saleem asks questions where he gives clues for the answer, simulating a dialogue with a live audience (172-73). But he often leaves the audience with multiple possibilities (122-23, 144-45, 179, 339, 388); sometimes he admits that he cannot answer his own questions (123, 225, 278, 428); at times, he takes on the role of the

audience, and asks their anticipated questions and answers them (159, 218, 309, 320).

About to launch into a description of his retreat into the clock tower for his telepathic voyage, Saleem indulges in a conversation with the audience, asking questions as if to test and refresh their memory of what had already been narrated. He addresses the audience with a direct “you” and asks many encouraging questions embedded with clues. He even asks the audience: “Perhaps you’d like clues” and he gives two unbeatably helpful clues in the form of two questions, and finally he himself gives the answer, which is, “the clocktower” (172-73).

But there are times when he confronts Padma’s incredulity, not with logical, rational explanations or evidence, but with an unreasonable demand that she find out for herself, knowing fully well that it is practically an impossible task for Padma, given her temporal and spatial distance from the events that he describes. We, the readers, however, can learn a lesson from this habit of Saleem: we have to find out for ourselves, taking into account the different input from different voices, when we look for meaning.

Mark Edmundson sees in Rushdie’s art the attempt to

take account of as many different realities as possible, which means recording a lot of languages . . . Every language counts, each has its moment, but none is ultimate, none bears imperial weight . . . We’re pressed as readers to make room for . . . multiple realities, to speak the new languages we’re encountering, or at least to begin to comprehend them” (70).

Rushdie’s narrative opens space for a multitude of voices, and creates the opportunity for dialogue between innumerable claims, visions, ideologies, and versions of history and reality; but no final authority is established beforehand, or held in reserve by any one of them to guarantee the outcome of the dialogue and interaction. As Engblom remarks,

In Rushdie’s work the most vividly contradictory, conflicting viewpoints are juxtaposed—forced together and made to respond to each other. Not, however, in



order to attain some dialectical resolution of their differences, some ideal static synthesis. The dialogue *itself* is the point. Nothing is resolved, rounded off, excluded. The operant principle is massively inclusive; it resists closure or containment of any kind. (295)

*Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's most famous novel, exhibits the dialogism that Bakhtin discusses in his theory of the polyphonic novel in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

There are many instances in *Midnight Children* to support Engblom's analysis. In the very beginning of the novel we see the conflicting attitudes of Aadam Aziz and the old boatman Tai with respect to foreigners and Western medicine, warring with each other. They speak, each in his distinctive voice and style, but neither manages to convert the other to his own camp. Similarly, Aadam Aziz and his wife Naseem voice their different attitudes to modernity, the purdah, sexual behavior, openness to other cultures, and so on. Here also, neither wins, though, over time, Naseem seems to contribute to the wearing down of Aadam's spirit of skepticism and adventure. There are many such examples of dialogism between contesting voices throughout the novel.

In the polyphonic novel with its carnivalized world, as already noted, Bakhtin felt that all things must illuminate one another dialogically. Not only the characters are related dialogically, but also and more importantly, the author is dialogically related to his own creations, the characters. The author of such a polyphonic novel, in the tradition of carnival laughter, does not permit any single point of view. The author, who causes all the characters, situations, and meanings to collide in the great dialogue of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and leaves no finalizing point. In the case of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie is the author behind the narrator Saleem. Rushdie uses both the singular point of view of Saleem *and* the various possibilities and doubts that Saleem entertains, in addition to the various viewpoints of the other characters. .

Rushdie sometimes presents the insistent singular point of view of Saleem, sometimes the various possibilities and doubts that invade his consciousness, and

sometimes the other voices and viewpoints of other characters. But he does not work out a synthesis of all the viewpoints to give a final authoritative voice.

The carnivalized literary tradition and the Menippean satire, according to Bakhtin, culminate in a “polyphonic” novel. Rushdie gives us a sample of a literal polyphony in the description of the voices that invade Saleem’s mind. The voices that Saleem hears, contrary to his original belief, “far from being sacred, turned out to be as profane and as multitudinous, as dust”; “the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike” jostle for space within his head (168). Saleem hears literally multi-linguaged voices speaking in all the Indian languages, from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from Urdu to Tamil, a “polyglot frenzy,” a “fish-market cacophony” of many voices (168). There is a strong hint of the polyphony, polyglot, and multivoices of Bakhtin’s dialogism in this carnivalesque world within Saleem’s head. And to match this state of affairs within Saleem’s head, Rushdie gives us another polyphony outside Saleem’s head.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE VOICE OF EPIC

Another genre of narrative that is used as well as parodied in *Midnight's Children* is the epic. I attempt below an exploratory—not an exhaustive—study of *Midnight's Children*, from this perspective. The different genres used in the novel are not contained in water-tight compartments that keep them isolated from one another, but they all “leak” into one another, to use a favorite theme in *Midnight's Children*.

#### 4.1 Comic Epic

Rushdie uses the ancient epic form and its features in *Midnight's Children*, but in a comic form. In his conversation with interviewers such as Michael T. Kaufman, and Salil Tripathi, Rushdie explains why he chose a comic epic form for telling his story of India: “It seemed to me that if you had to choose a form for that part of the world, the form you would choose would be the comic epic.” For Rushdie, the previous literature that had been produced about India, mostly by colonials, look “dated and delicate,” “dainty, delicate books” written about “this massive, elephantine place” (interview by Kaufman, 22). Rushdie reiterates in another interview the same view: the “Comic Epic is the natural form for India” (Interview by Salil Tripathi 25). Since in the contemporary world the heroic is not appropriate any longer, Rushdie deems that “ironic deflection” is necessary. Seeing the epic form as the “inescapable” form for writing about India, Rushdie casts his novel in a mock-heroic, comic epic form (Interview by Kumkum Sangari 63).

The choice of the epic form is appropriate for another reason. Like the novel, the ancient epic is also an amalgam of different types of narratives. Scholes and Kellogg

point out in *The Nature of Narrative* that the epic combines the elements of the oral narrative, sacred myth, quasi-historical legend, and fictional folktales. It is a fusion of mythic, mimetic, and historical materials in a fictional form, though its mythic-traditional heritage dominates the epic.

The novel also, like the epic, is a hybrid. This should not be surprising if we see the novel as the parodic descendant of the epic, as Bakhtin does in his essay “Epic and Novel.” Though dominated by realism, and by the concept of the individual in an actual society, especially since the nineteenth century, the novel has nevertheless drawn upon mythic, historical, and romance patterns for its narrative effectiveness. In fact, all forms of narratives partake of other forms of narratives, though the fusion of various genres is more pronounced in the epic and the novel. As already seen in Chapter 1, powerful narratives usually employ a mix of various types or genres of narratives. Scholes and Kellogg, in their book *The Nature of Narrative*, point out that narratives do not come in pure forms but always as a mix:

The great historical narratives and the great allegorical romances also have combined many of the strands of narrative in their rich fabrics. Romance turns to didactic allegory or mimetic characterization in order to enrich itself. History turns to mythic plotting or romantic adventure in order to captivate and move its audience. (232-33)

In their remarkable capacity to absorb and blend many different narratives, the epic and the novel display an affinity behind their superficial differences. Bakhtin sees the two types of narratives as precursor and descendant, and traces the novel’s origins in the parodies of the classical epic. Rushdie has thus gone to the ancient form of the novel to narrate his story.

As already noted in Chapter 1, the narratives which men have admired most are those which have combined most powerfully and most copiously the various strands of narrative (see Scholes and Kellogg 232-33). The epic and the novel are such narratives. Any pure form, such as pure fantasy, unrelieved by some grounding in realism, can

easily become boring and hard to empathize with. Perhaps the huge success of *Midnight's Children* is due to this mixing and interweaving of different types of narratives. To borrow a culinary metaphor from *Midnight's Children* itself, its secret appeal lies in its blending of different ingredients, flavors, and spices, in its pickling and chutnification of comic epic, myth, realism, history, and fantasy, and its use of different voices.

Primitive epic, according to Scholes and Kellogg, is poised between the world of myth, rituals and legends on the one hand, and the world of history and fiction, on the other; hence it shows plot characteristics of both worlds. The early epics such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for instance, show plots that are episodic, and present the deeds of the hero in a chronological sequence, beginning with the birth of the hero and ending with his death. *Midnight's Children* shows this primitive plot, beginning with the birth of Saleem and ending with his death. This feature is incompatible with the mode of autobiography since a person cannot narrate his own birth and death, because birth occurs before memory is formed and death occurs after memory is destroyed. Yet, Saleem begins and ends his autobiography in the primitive epic mode, using the device of Saleem's magical ability to fill in the gaps in his knowledge about the past before his birth. Saleem starts his autobiography in the year 1915, thirty-two years before his own birth. Unlike an autobiography, he ends his story with his death. Thus *Midnight's Children* follows certain features of the old narratives, and autobiography, but it also transgresses the conventions of these modes.

Like Homer who starts his narrative with a plunge in the middle (*in medias res*, which came to be thought of as a typical epic device in Western literature), Saleem starts his story with his birth in 1947, and then fills in both ends of the narrative. First he narrates the story of the events from 1915 to 1947 and then from 1947 to 1978.

Like Homeric epic, Saleem's work is both an oral and written narrative. He writes it at night in the pickle factory and reads it to Padma every night. To quote Scholes and Kellogg, "Homer is at once the culmination of oral narrative art and the inauguration of written" in Western literature, and Saleem seems to follow him in being a narrator in both the oral and written mode (57).

#### **4.2 Parodic-Epic: The Man-God and Man-Dog**

The epic usually gives us the actions of a heroic figure. However, Scholes and Kellogg differentiate between a true epic and a synthetic epic which is a romance in epic clothing (70); the true epic depicts a "man-god" (such as Achilles) and a romance-epic depicts a "king-hero" (70). Rushdie seems to parody both of these types of epic heroes in *Midnight's Children*. Instead of a god-like, quasi-divine hero (man-god), he gives us a "man-dog" for the protagonist (347). Saleem, after being hit on his head by a spittoon during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, becomes amnesiac and numb; in this state, he is delivered to the West Pakistani army by his sister. Because of his incredible sniffing ability, the army uses him as a tracker and he is employed in an army unit called Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities. The acronym for this unit "CUTIA" means 'bitch' in Urdu, and "She-dog badges" are sewn to lapels of the uniform of the soldiers serving in the unit. Each unit has three soldiers and a dog. Saleem is assigned to one of the units in the place of a dog, as a tracker, because of his amazing smelling ability. The Brigadier's batman teases the three young soldiers who are given Saleem: "*So you're the poor suckers who get the man-dog!*" (347; Rushdie's italics). Ayooba, one of the soldiers in Saleem's unit pleads with the camp's officers, "Sir sir can't we just have a real dog, sir?" (351). The three teen-age soldiers in Saleem's CUTIA unit talk about Saleem's dog-like existence: "No memory, not

interested in people, lives like a dog!” (349). Thus, Rushdie ironically offers us a man-dog, instead of the epic man-god, in his comic-epic. And Saleem is despised, for his unattractive appearance with his huge nose, bald head with a monk’s tonsure, his mutilated finger, his apparent lack of manliness, and idiot-like behavior. They give him “the nickname of buddha, ‘old man’ ” (349).

### 4.3 Epic and the Comic Hero

*Midnight’s Children’s* hero is hardly a hero; and he seems to be the opposite of the epic hero. Instead of the handsome, gallant, virile, and god-like hero of the epics, we have Saleem, who, by his own admission, is ugly—with his cucumber-like nose, face stained with birth marks, a bald head even as a young boy due to a teacher’s violence, a mutilated finger, and premature aging; he is often unheroic, unmanly, and as noted above, he is compared to a dog rather than to a god, and is impotent, first psychologically, and later, physically also as he is rendered sterile and impotent by forced sterilization.

In the Hindu epics, the heroes and gods have innumerable names. Each name is associated with a particular attribute, act, or avatar of the god. Saleem also, in a mocking imitation of this feature of epic heroes and gods, has many names, each referring to one of his characteristic features, physical or mental. Saleem is known by many names, mostly derogatory. He is called Cucumber-nose, Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, “the buddha”— with a lower-case ‘b’ which in Urdu means “old man” (9, 349), Pinocchio (154), fat nose (186), Snothead (187), and the like. Saleem’s irascible geography teacher Zagallo refers to Saleem as the “primitive creature,” “ugly ape,” “animal,” etc., and makes fun of Saleem’s “heedeous face” (231, 232). These are

not exactly the epithets fit for an epic hero, but as *Midnight's Children* is intended to be a comic epic, these epithets fit the mode.

Though Saleem is often the antithesis of a conventional, glamorous hero, Rushdie associates him with many heroes in tragi-comic ways. While making it clear that Saleem is not a hero, Rushdie links him ironically with a hero of early British colonialism, Sir Walter Raleigh (122). An added irony is that Saleem is really the biological son of a twentieth-century British colonial, William Methwold (though nobody knows this), and so he is the descendant of the first Methwold, the colonial-hero who dreamed of a "British Bombay" in the seventeenth century (92). Without knowing this connection of Saleem to a British hero, Amina Sinai and the ayah Mary proudly dress the seven-year-old Saleem for his birthday as a replica of an Elizabethan boy.

The Sinais have a painting depicting the boyhood of Sir Walter Raleigh in Saleem's bedroom, directly above his crib. It is possible that this picture, like the whisky cabinet, is left by Methwold when he sells his house intact with all the things in it. The painting shows the boy Raleigh, and another boy, sitting near the sea and listening to the tales of an old fisherman who points to the sea's horizon. We see the Sinais' anglophilia in their employment of a "tailor [who] sat . . . beneath the pointing finger [of the fisherman], and copied the attire of the English milords" (122). Thus, for his seventh birthday, Saleem is dressed in a frilly collar and button-down tunic just like the boy sitting cross-legged, in the center, next to another boy, in the painting. This attempt to cast Saleem in the mold of a hero is so successful that Lila Sabarmati exclaims: "It's like he's just stepped out of the *picture!*" (122; Rushdie's emphasis). The adult Saleem describes himself:

On my seventh birthday, dutifully, I permitted myself to be dressed up like the boys in the fisherman's picture; hot and constricted in the outlandish garb, I smiled and smiled . . . Sandbagging down the floods of tears lurking just beneath my eyes, the



tears of heat discomfort and the absence of *One Yard of Chocolates* in my pile of presents . . . (156).

This image of Saleem is both comic and tragic. Forced into an image of an Elizabethan hero and colonizer, the boy is actually in tears, but obligingly smiles.

But there is a hitch in this comparison: because, there are two boys in the painting. And Saleem is dressed not like Raleigh, but the other boy, who is in the center. Neil Ten Kortenaar points out in his essay “Postcolonial ekphrasis: Salman Rushdie gives the finger back to the empire,” that the description of the painting and the details suggest that it is based on a real painting by Sir John Everett Millais, titled “The Boyhood of Raleigh” (232). Saleem’s narrative makes it clear that the frilly collar and the button-down tunic that he is made to wear are a copy of the attire of the boy in the center, not that of Raleigh. Thus, Saleem seems to miss the opportunity of being in a hero’s shoe. Instead, he identifies with the other boy in the picture: “In a picture hanging on a bedroom wall, I sat beside Walter Raleigh and followed a fisherman’s pointing finger with my eyes . . .” (122).

The pointing finger of the fisherman in the painting seems to point to another frame on the wall, the one containing Prime Minister Nehru’s letter (with the official seal of the nation) congratulating Saleem on his birth at the moment of the nation’s independence, and the newspaper cutting with a “jumbo-sized baby-snap” of Saleem. These attestations of his importance and potential greatness, and Ramram Seth’s prophecies, he says, “created around me a glowing and inescapable mist of expectancy.” His father Ahmed Sinai pulls Saleem close to him and says, “Great things! My son: what is not in store for you? Great deeds, a great life!” (152). The ayah sings to him, “Anything you want to be, you can be” (127), the sadhu Purushttam calls Saleem “the Blessed One” (113, 126), and Saleem’s grandmother Reverend Mother announces his power of genius, “a gift from God” (157). All these urgings put enormous pressure

on Saleem to become great, and perform great deeds, like an epic hero. The adult Saleem reflects retrospectively that even parents are impelled by a profit motive: in return for all their attention, love and care, “they expected, from me, the immense dividend of greatness” (156). His problem is that he has no idea of how to achieve that greatness: “I longed to give them what they wanted, what soothsayers and framed letters had promised them; I simply did not know how. Where did greatness come from? How did you get some? *When?*” (156; Rushdie’s emphasis). By the end of the novel, Saleem loses his obsession to become a great hero, to find a great purpose and meaning for his life, and to play a central role in the nation’s history.

While many of his schoolmates confidently boast of their dream in life, about what they want to accomplish, nine-year-old Saleem cannot think of a suitable purpose for his life. He keeps quiet, as if keeping his purpose secret, but in reality he has no idea of his purpose: “I was mild-mannered Clark Kent protecting my secret identity; but what on earth was that?” (154). As befitting the hero of the modern, comic epic, Saleem goes for a comic book hero, the Superman. But he does not imagine himself in the heroic form of Superman, but as Superman’s alter ego, the mild-mannered, clumsy, and unheroic Clark Kent. The irony is that Saleem *does* have a secret identity as the bastard son of Methwold and Vanita, but at this time he does not know it. When he does find out that Shiva is the biological son of the Sinais, Saleem makes the heroic resolve: “. . . I would guard my secret . . . with my very life” (282). But this brave decision to fight something with his very life is made not for a heroic purpose but for a very selfish reason: he is desperate to keep his privileged place in the rich Sinai household. He wants to guard his secret with his very life in order to avoid being forced to take the street urchin Shiva’s place amidst poverty and violence, and to keep Shiva from claiming his birthright.

Saleem describes himself as the antithesis of the epic hero: an ugly, mutilated, bald-headed, grey-haired, impotent man who is weaker than Padma, his strong-muscled audience-servant-cook-mistress. He appears as a “nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk’s-tonsured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber-nosed, castrated and now prematurely-aged” man at the end of his story, though he is only thirty-one years old (447).

He does not willfully accomplish any heroic deed or rescue any damsel in distress. On the contrary, a damsel rescues him. Parvati-the-witch rescues him from being taken as a prisoner-of war by the Indian army and from being court-marshaled as a deserter by the Pakistani army. In fact, his life is dominated by women. He tells Padma: “Women have made me; and also unmade. From Reverend Mother to the Widow, and even beyond, I have been at the mercy of the so-called (erroneously, in my opinion!) gentler sex. It is perhaps, a matter of connection: is not Mother India, Bharat Mata, commonly thought of as female? And, as you know, there’s no escape from her” (404). Mary, and Padma, like Parvati, take care of him, though they also, sometimes inadvertently, cause dangers in his life.

In contrast to the heroic acts expected of an epic hero, he admits to doing shameful things: such as, sending a secret, anonymous note to Sabarmati out of his “lust for revenge” (251, 260) which results in the murder of Catrack by Sabarmati; betraying the other midnight children; keeping Shiva’s identity and birthright from him; harboring incest-like-love for his sister (who is not his sister); lying about his virility in order to escape marriage with Parvati, and so on. By his own account (which is exaggerated, far-fetched, and sometimes ridiculous), he is the direct or indirect cause of various catastrophes in the nation’s history such as the triggering of violence during the language riots in Bombay, the death of Nehru, the downfall of the naval hero Commander Sabarmati, the deposing of Pakistani and Bangladesh Presidents, the Indo-

Pakistani Wars of 1965 and 1971, and even the Emergency decreed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. The comedy in many of these incidents is tinged with the tragic and horrible. As Engblom observes, although pervasive, the comedy in *Midnight's Children* "is, in the manner of carnival laughter, profoundly ambivalent, always teetering on the brink of the horrific" (300).

Saleem also blames himself as the cause, again through far fetched arguments, of various disasters in his family life, such as his father's alcoholism and imprudent investment in land reclamation project, his uncle Hanif's suicide, the death of his schoolmate Jimmy Kapadia, the moving away of all the families from Methwold Estate, and Mary's growing guilt about her switching of the babies, and many other unfortunate and violent events.

In other words, he aids and causes disasters, crimes, violence, etc., throughout the narrative. It is difficult to accept Saleem as an epic hero and it is equally difficult to dismiss him as not-a-hero. In many ways he seems to be the very opposite of an epic hero, but he would be a fitting hero for a comic epic. But Rushdie's comic epic is not purely comic. *Midnight's Children* is tinged with pathos and tragic touches: innocent Saleem being reviled by his family and even the ayah for saying that he hears voices of Archangels; his being rejected and exiled from his home after his blood group is found incompatible with his parents'; his suffering at the hands of his classmates, teacher, Evie Burns, the boy-soldiers, and Shiva; his impossible love for Jamila; his inability to love Parvati because of Jamila; his castration by the Widow—all these are examples of the tragic elements in this comic epic. Rushdie's interest in uniting comedy and tragedy, in the manner of Kafka, is acknowledged by himself in an interview by John Haffenden (38).

Saleem is tempted to act like a hero on some occasions, but his attempts usually end in disasters for himself. Among his acts of heroism, the one he performs as a ten-year-old to save a classmate from the wrath of a bad-tempered geography teacher results in his own mutilation. The teacher grabs him by his hair and pulls him up with such violence that Saleem's hair is pulled out by its roots, leaving his head bloody. Saleem loses the hair at the top of his head, and eventually gets a monkish tonsure because the hair never again grows on that part of his head (232). Saleem's head is bandaged, but in a few days' time we see Saleem acting heroic again, and the result is another mutilation. Saleem comes late for the school Social and his bandaged head attracts the attention and curiosity of the coveted girl Masha Miovic. Saleem lies to her that the bandage is the result of a "sporting accident" (233). But his envious classmates reveal the truth to Masha and make fun of him as "baldie," "map-face," "Sniffer" and "Snotnose"; they joke about his "war wound" (234). Masha incites Saleem to take revenge on the offenders. Her eyes say, "*What are you? A man or a mouse?*" (234; Rushdie's italics). Saleem, under the spell of Masha's goading, remembers the formidable knees of his rival Shiva, and acts like Shiva on a sudden impulse. He attacks the boys with his knee with remarkable effect. However, when the boys get up from the floor and come after him, Saleem abandons "all pretence of manhood" and runs, despite Masha's calling out to him, "Where are you running, little hero?" (234). In the heat of the pursuit and struggle, Saleem's hand is caught in the slamming door which he is trying to open and his chasers are trying to shut to imprison him. The top third of his middle finger is sliced by the closing door and falls on the floor (234-35). More disasters follow. When he is taken to the hospital for stitching his finger, blood tests reveal that he is not the son of the Sinais. With a bandaged finger to match his bandaged head, Saleem is sent on his first exile, while his parents become estranged from one another because of the

discovery that Saleem is not their son. Ahmed Sinai suspects his wife of infidelity. Saleem suddenly finds out that he is forever other than what he was, and that “parents can cease to be parents, and love can turn to hate” (237). Heroism certainly does not suit Saleem. It does not bring glory to him, but only sufferings, disgrace, and loss.

Earlier we see another example of his attempt at heroism. As a ten-year-old, Saleem tries to show off his bicycling skill in front of Evie Burns, and piqued by her indifference, rides faster and faster, sniffing with tears of “unrequited love” (190). Suddenly it occurs to him that he can use his telepathy to find out what is inside Evie’s mind. Evie becomes enraged by his invasion into the depths of her mind, and pushes him hard. Saleem loses control on his bicycle and crashes into the middle of a group of protesting Marathi-language-marchers. Though he is not harmed by any violent reaction from the marchers, they sneer at him, calling him the “little princeling” from the rich house on the hill; they taunt him to speak some Gujarati, the language of their rivals. Saleem recites the only thing he knows in Gujarati, and it happens to be a “rhyme designed to make fun of the speech rhythms of the language” (191). The Marathi language marchers are only too pleased by this mockery of their enemies’ language and burst into hilarious laughter. They take up the mocking chant and it becomes, as the marchers proceed, “a song of war” (191). When the two opposing language-marchers’ processions collide on one of the streets, Saleem’s rhyme provokes anger and violence. He describes the consequences: “. . . to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded”(192). In this way Saleem becomes responsible “for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay,” as a result of which the city became the capital of the new state of Maharashtra. Inadvertently Saleem had triggered the creation of two new

states in the multilingual nation. This is one among many of his inadvertent, tragi-comic acts that cast him as a comic-epic-hero.

Musing on his part in the eventual assassination of Homi Catrack, Saleem writes: “I confess: what I did was no act of heroism. I did not battle Homi on horseback, with fiery eyes and flaming sword; instead, imitating the action of the snake, I began to cut pieces out of newspapers” (259). The mention of grand epic images such as a hero battling on horseback, with fiery eyes and flaming sword, seem to parody the epic. It hints at the incongruity of the epic hero in the twentieth-century. But his cunning and cleverness, seen in his method of taking revenge on his enemies without revealing himself, are also attributes of epic heroes such as Odysseus.

Another unheroic act of Saleem is his use of telepathy to cheat in school to get better grades as a nine-year-old. Writing about this former self of his in the third person, the adult Saleem sums up his unheroic behavior:

. . . at a crucial point in the history of our child nation [Independent India was only nine-year old, like Saleem], at a time when Five Year Plans were being drawn up and elections were approaching and language marchers were fighting over Bombay, a nine-year-old boy named Saleem Sinai acquired a miraculous gift. 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. This behaviour—not, I confess, the behaviour of a hero—was the direct result of a confusion in his mind, which invariably muddled up morality—the desire to do what is right—and popularity—the rather more dubious desire to do what is approved of. (172)

Interestingly, Saleem refers to himself in the third person *and* first person in this passage. It seems to be a device to distance the adult narrator in 1978 from the nine-year-old Saleem in 1956 in terms of point of view, and to give the impression of objectivity. In a mock-serious manner he discusses his nine-year-old self’s opposing desires, one urging him to follow ethics and the other, to attain popularity. He indulges in a self-examination and self-evaluation and comes up with an explanation: “Fearing parental ostracism, he suppressed the news of his transformation [his telepathy];

seeking parental congratulations, he abused his talents at school. This flaw in his character can partially be excused on the grounds of his tender years; but only partially. Confused thinking was to bedevil much of his career” (172). The adult Saleem thus discovers “a flaw in his character.” This phrase evokes the pattern of pride, tragic flaw, downfall, etc. that characterize classical tragedy. Like the epic heroes of Greek tragedy, Saleem shows both pride (*hubris*) and tragic flaw (*hamartia*). Saleem’s tendency to claim centrality, which is akin to the tragic hero’s pride, results in his final recognition that he is not central to his nation’s history.

Like an epic hero, Saleem feels bound by an acute sense of mission, namely, that of saving his country from her fate. But nothing comes out of it. His magical gift of telepathy, and ability to communicate with all the other midnight-children are not used in any heroic manner. He does not unite the magically gifted midnight children to accomplish anything praiseworthy. Thus Saleem’s narrative becomes a kind of mock epic, in which the hero does not accomplish anything heroic.

#### **4.4 Epic Fate and *Midnight’s Children***

Another difference between the true epic and the synthetic romance-epic, as Scholes and Kellogg point out, lies in their different philosophical attitudes.

The world of [the true] epic is a problematic world of questions about life for which there are no easy answers. The ways of God to man may be accepted in epic but they are not justified. They remain inscrutable and capricious. As the synthetic epic turns toward romance it begins to provide answers for the questions and problems which make for dramatic tension in the primitive form, substituting an intellectual and philosophical interest for the interest in character gripped by fate which is typical of the epic. (71)

Saleem’s world seems to be closer to the problematic ancient epic world. Saleem sees himself as a character chained by fate. In the very first page he evokes the destiny-ridden hero of the old epic: “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my



destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (9). Because of this tenacious belief that his fate and the destiny of his nation are inextricably linked, he sees practically every incident in the nation’s history as connected to him and his family. The connections often seem far-fetched and even ridiculous. As Saleem himself observes on various occasions, one can find a reason if one looks for it: “everything is for a reason, it seems . . .” (187); “Nothing is without meaning . . .” (216). “Everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form” (226).

He is fatalistic and seems to believe that even his name seals his fate:

Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than sounds, we are also the victims of our titles. *Sinai* contains Ibn Sina, master magician, Sufi adept; and also Sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadhramaut, with his own mode of connections, his powers of action-at-a-distance upon the tides of the world. But Sin is also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake; serpents lie coiled within the name. (304-5)

He adds that the name *Sinai*, which is the version of ‘Sina’ in Roman script, also refers to the desert and to Mount Sinai. So, his name has connotations of the desert, and of the revelations on the Biblical Mount Sinai as well.

Saleem’s narrative proves that he is indeed each one of the things contained in his name. Though he often presents the loser-side of him, he is really the master magician implied by his name. His telepathy, radio-like communicative abilities, and magical power of smelling that detects emotions, ideas, and hidden motives, attest to this. He is also like ‘Sin’ the moon who controls the tides from a distance. He does not confront his enemy Homi Catrack directly, but from a distance. He composes an anonymous note to the husband of the woman Homi Catrack has been seeing secretly, and this leads to the murder of Homi Catrack by the cuckolded husband. On the morning when Homi Catrack is killed, Saleem is watching children’s movies at the Metro Cub Club. And he boasts with confidence: “You see, I had my alibi; I was nowhere near the scene of the

crime. Like Sin, the crescent moon, I acted from a distance upon the tides of the world” (261). Saleem points to the possibility that even as a baby he exercised power from a distance. He attributes the amazing luck of his mother Amina in winning money in the racecourse to his own power of controlling events from a distance. Amina wins “fortunes on the horses, day after racing day, month after month” at the racecourse, though she has been until then just a housewife unacquainted with betting. Her religious beliefs even forbid betting and gambling. Saleem dismisses the possibility that her neighbor Homi Catrack, the owner of some racehorses, might have given her some tips. Instead, he gives another explanation that cites him as the cause that acts from a distance:

. . . here, whenever his mother goes away clutching a purse full of secrets, is Baby Saleem, who has acquired an expression of the most intense concentration, whose eyes have been seized by a singleness of purpose of such enormous power . . . and whose nose is twitching strangely while he appears to be watching some distant event, to be guiding it from a distance, just as the moon controls the tides. (140-41)

Later, when as a nine-year-old Saleem discovers his magical telepathy, he compares himself to Sin again. He retires to the top of the broken-down clock tower near his house and from that height, like a god, he lets his newly-awakened inner ear “rove freely around the city—and further, north, south, east and west—listening in to all manner of things” (173). He sees the famous landmarks all over India through the eyes and perceptions of many different people; he enters the inner life of many persons in different corners of India; he leaps into the minds of famous film stars, sportsmen, State Chief Minister, Prime Minister, and also into the minds of the ordinary and poor people. This dizzying experience makes him feel like a god or an artist who creates a world, and think of the “multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material” of his gift (174). He feels omniscient. He compares himself again to ‘Sin’ the moon which controls the tides from a distance: “. . . in my clock tower, filled with the cockiness of

my glee, I became Sin, the ancient moon-god (no, not Indian: I've imported him from Hadhramaut of old), capable of acting-at-a-distance and shifting the tides of the world" (175).

The third association that is contained in the name 'Sinai' is that of a snake, because 'Sin' is "also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake; serpents lie coiled within the name" (305). In the beginning of Book Two, Saleem indulges in a boast, which shows him as a snake paralyzing its victim. He describes himself as the "master" and Padma as the victim, because, in his opinion, Padma is under the spell of her love for him. He compares himself to a snake: "I vouchsafe daily glimpses of myself—while she, my squatting glimpser, is captivated, helpless as a mongoose frozen into immobility by the swaying, blinkless eyes of a hooded snake, paralysed—yes!— by love" (121). The infant Saleem was also "blinkless" like a snake for some time, making his mother and ayah exclaim: ". . . The little chap never blinks!" (125).

Saleem compares himself to a snake again when he plots the downfall of Homi Catrack. His growing friendship with the snake expert Dr Schaapsteker aids this metamorphosis. Saleem declares that Schaapsteker "revealed to me the cobra which lay coiled within myself" (257). Along with the legends about snakes, and information about the enemies of snakes, Saleem learns from Schaapsteker the importance of studying one's enemies; he learns that he should act in the manner of a snake. Schaapsteker advises Saleem: "Be wise, child. Imitate the action of the snake. Be secret; strike from the cover of a bush" (258). Saleem follows the doctor's advice and secretly spies on his enemy Homi Catrack, and Catrack's lover Lila Sabarmati, before striking at them. He describes his preparation: "imitating the action of the snake, I began to cut pieces out of newspapers" (259). He assembles an anonymous note to Sabarmati from pieces cut out of newspapers to ask cryptically, "COMMANDER

SABARMATI WHY DOES YOUR WIFE GO TO COLABA CAUSEWAY ON EVERY SUNDAY MORNING?” hinting at the infidelity of the Commander’s wife (260). While narrating this part, Saleem repeatedly uses the simile of snake to describe himself: “snake-like, I inserted the document in my pocket, like a poison in a sac . . . I slipped inside Commander Sabarmati’s almirah and inserted my lethal missive into the inside pocket of his spare uniform. At that moment . . . I felt the delight of the snake who hits its target, and feels its fangs pierce its victim’s heel” (260). By unmasking Lila Sabarmati, Saleem hopes to teach his mother Amina also a lesson. He had spied on his mother and found her meeting with Nadir Khan secretly at the Pioneer café, and he hopes to administer a salutary shock to his mother. The two women “were to be two punished women, one impaled on each fang” of his “forked snake’s tongue” (261). Commenting on the anonymous note that he smuggles into the Commander’s uniform, Saleem continues with the snake theme: “Mine was a slow poison; but three weeks later, it had its effect” (261).

Saleem has connections with the snake from his infancy. Two weeks after his first birthday, when he falls ill with typhoid, he is given diluted cobra venom as a last resort, and it cures him miraculously. Later, in the Sundarbans jungle the amnesiac Saleem is bit by a blind, translucent serpent which pours venom into his heel. But Saleem does not die. He says, “I was stronger than the snake-poison” (364); though he becomes rigid for two days and his eyes become crossed, when he emerges out of this state he is rejoined to his past, to his memory, “jolted into unity by snake-poison” (364). The snakebite cures him of his amnesia and numbness, just as snake-venom cured his typhoid. In other words, he seems to belong to the snake species. To any future commentators and venom-quilled critics who may take advantage of his confessions, he has this to say: “twice before, I’ve been subjected to snake-poison; on both occasions, I proved stronger

than venenes” (360). By all these associations, Saleem convinces us that the snake implied in his name affects his destiny to a remarkable extent.

Another association implied in his name is Mount Sinai, the name of a place-of-revelation, associated with the prophet Moses, and the Ten Commandments. Saleem also, like Moses on Sinai, and Muhammad on Mount Hira, hears voices. As an added correspondence, he also, like these prophets, hears the voices on a hill, the hill on top of which stands his house.

Mirroring the connotation of ‘revelations’ implied in the name ‘Sinai,’ there are many revelations in Saleem’s story. There is even a chapter called “Revelations” in which Mary makes a public announcement in front of all the family members gathered for the mourning of Hanif’s death, that she switched the babies eleven years ago. Ironically, her revelation is still not the complete revelation since she does not know about Methwold’s seduction of Vanita; so there is another revelation hidden behind her revelation, which Saleem reveals to us after keeping us in the dark for more than 100 pages of his narrative. Padma and the reader come to know that Saleem is the bastard son of the Englishman Methwold. There are many other revelations in the narrative: Nadir Khan is revealed to be impotent; Amina’s secret meeting with Nadir Khan is revealed; Homi Catrack’s affairs with Pia and Lila Sabarmati are revealed; the theft of the Sinais’ things by the old servant Musa is revealed; Methwold’s devastating hair-piece is revealed to be false; his gentlemanly honor is also revealed to be false. There are many other revelations, such as the smuggling activities of Zulfikar. Even the self-discovery of Saleem of his lust for revenge is seen as a revelation: Schaapsteker “revealed” to him the “cobra which lay coiled within” himself (257). And the list can go on.

The last meaning contained in his name is the desert. In the latter part of the

narrative, Saleem comes to believe that the desert implied in his name governs his fate more than anything else. When his parents drain his nasal passage, not only his sinuses are drained, but also his magical power to communicate with the midnight's children and his telepathy. The doubly-drained Saleem is like a desert drained of its life-giving water. Saleem dejectedly concludes that in the end, it is the desert implied in his name that is reserved for him as his fate: "it is the name of the desert—of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end" (305). Later, when almost all his family in Pakistan have died, and his only surviving uncle Mustapha in India throws him out of his house, Saleem again feels that the desert in his name has taken over his fate: "At every turn I am thwarted; a prophet in the wilderness, like Maslama, like Ibn Sinan! No matter how I try, the desert is my lot" (394). He is drained again later, during the forced sterilization operation, and made barren like the desert. Thus, Saleem manages to show that his name is his fate: that all the meanings implied in his name determine his fate. He considers only his last name 'Sinai,' and not his first name or given name 'Saleem' in exploring all these fatalistic connections. The irony is that he is not really a Sinai.

Saleem's insistence on the connections between his life and the meanings contained in his name evokes the epic character who is gripped by fate. Saleem believes in the power of fate, even in the form of a person's name. We see this belief of his again in his remark about the unexpected meeting of the two midnight-children Parvati and Shiva. These two were born and raised in the slums of the Indian cities (Delhi and Bombay respectively) that are thousands of miles apart and hence their meeting in Bangladesh strains the calculations of probability. In Indian mythology the goddess Parvati is the consort of the god Shiva. So, Saleem concludes that it is the fate dictated by their names that brings them together: "Parvati and Shiva, Shiva and Parvati, fated to meet by the divine destiny of their names, were united in the moment of victory" (389).

Like Saleem, the fifteen-year old soldier Shaheed is also plagued by the idea that his name contains his fate. His name means ‘martyr’. The “overwhelming power of names and the resulting approach of martyrdom” begin to prey on Shaheed’s mind and his dreams (352). If we remember that it is Saleem who narrates the story, it is possible to see his description of Shaheed’s belief in the power of names as a projection of his own belief.

Saleem expresses his belief in a pre-determined fate at various other points in his narrative. For instance, he thinks that the pointing finger of the fisherman in the painting in his childhood bedroom perhaps points to his “future,” his “special doom” (122). This finger in the painting, he thinks, points to another frame in which his “inescapable destiny” hung “forever fixed under glass” (122). This second frame contains a large photo of Baby-Saleem that appeared in the newspaper with “its prophetic captions”; the frame also contains the Prime Minister’s letter to Baby-Saleem (122). Mary, with her guilty conscience about her crime of baby-switching, reads danger in the Prime Minister’s words in the letter, “We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention”. In panic, she asks Amina: “The Government, Madam? It will be keeping one eye on the boy? But why, Madam? What’s wrong with him?” (123). Mary’s fear and suspicions leak into Saleem so that later when he narrates his story as an adult he wonders whether the pointing finger in the painting was “a finger of warning”; whether it was “a prophecy of another finger,” his own finger that was mutilated in a school incident (123). He wonders, “How much of my future hung above my crib, just waiting for me to understand?” (123). Saleem’s belief in prophecy is evident when he tells Padma about Ramram Seth’s prophecy about Amina’s as-yet-unborn baby. With perceptible admiration for the fortune-teller, Saleem tells Padma: “the fellow got nothing wrong” (87).

Saleem's tendency to believe in occult powers leads him to see the misfortunes that befall his family as "a terrible, occult series of reprisals for tearing up" their Bombay roots (338). Similarly, denying human agency, he sees the would-be-assassin of Pakistan's President Ayub Khan in 1964 simply as some one who had been "simply carried away by a tide of history" (334). When his "conjugal fate was sealed" by his marriage with Parvati on the Republic Day of India, he thinks, "once again destiny, inevitability, the antithesis of choice had come to rule my life" (415).

When Parvati gives birth to a son with ears that "flapped like sails," ears so "colossally huge" that the women assisting his birth thought for a moment that the head emerging out of the mother "was the head of a tiny elephant," Saleem takes it as destiny's joke (419). He describes his own reaction to the sight of this baby with ears like that of an elephant, using the third-person for himself: ". . . when . . . Saleem Sinai saw his son for the first time, he began to laugh helplessly, his brain ravaged by hunger, yes, but also by the knowledge that his relentless destiny had played yet another of its grotesque little jokes" (419). Near the end of his narrative, Saleem again asserts that there is no choice, only inevitability or fate: "No choice?— None; when was there ever? There are imperatives, and logical-consequences, and inevitabilities, and recurrence; there are things-done-to, and accidents, and bludgeonings-of-fate; when was there ever a choice? When options? When a decision freely-made, to be this or that or the other? No choice" (422).

He believes that a bad luck looms over all those that come into the life of his family. He believes that Parvati's death happened because "she fell victim to the curse of violent death that hangs over" over all his family and over every one that gets linked to his life (431, 444).

He also believes that Ramram Seth's prophecy foretold his fate. When Major Shiva



captures him and brings him to the city of Benares, “the shrine to Shiva-the-god,” “the home of the Prophetic Book, the horoscope of horoscopes, in which every life, past present future, is already recorded,” Saleem affirms that he was brought to face his fate: “in the home of horoscopes, I reached the moment prophesised . . . by Ramram Seth” (432).

#### **4.5 Paradoxical Epic: Fate and Choice**

Despite his belief in fate, Saleem often inserts ambiguity as to how much he is under the power of destiny and how much he can affect destiny. For instance, if Saleem is handcuffed to history, and his destinies are indissolubly chained to those of his country, the reverse is also true. The nation’s history and destiny are also chained to him and therefore determined to some extent by his history and destiny. When the two histories are indissolubly chained, and reflect each other, it is hard to know with certainty which affects which, which controls which, and to what extent.

We are inclined to conclude that both affect each other, rather than one determining and controlling the other. Saleem points out such a mutual dependency on many occasions. Dr Schaapsteker saves the one-year-old baby Saleem from typhoid by providing diluted cobra venom as a cure. Nine years later, when the ten-year-old Saleem wanders into Schaapsteker’s room, the doctor reminds Saleem of his recovery from typhoid years ago, and adds, “You must think of me as another father. Did I not give you your life when it was lost?” (257). Saleem shows the reverse side of this argument, thereby suggesting a mutual dependency: “With this statement he proved that he was as much under my spell as I under his; he had accepted that he, too, was one of that endless series of parents to whom *I alone had the power* of giving birth” (emphasis mine. 258). Here, Saleem is asserting his power, not helplessness.

Occasionally, Saleem engages in questioning the belief in fate:

. . . we should either—optimistically—get up and cheer, because if everything is planned in advance, then we all have a meaning, and are spared the terror of knowing ourselves to be random, without a why; or else, . . . we might—as pessimists—give up right here and now, understanding the futility of thought decision action, since nothing we think makes any difference anyway; things will be as they will. Where then is optimism? In fate or in chaos? (78-79).

In a similar fashion, Saleem, despite his own habitual fatalism, makes fun of Commander Sabarmati's fatalism. When the Commander tells his lawyer, "I feel as though destiny is no longer in my control; as though something has taken over . . . let us call it Fate," Saleem adds his own sarcastic comment: "I say: 'Call it Saleem, or Snotnose, or Sniffer, or Stainface; call it little-piece of-the moon'," because only he knows that he is the cause of Sabarmati's predicament, and not Fate (264). [Snotface, Sniffer, etc., are all his nicknames.]

In Rushdie's comic epic, both the helpless victim status of the hero who is a captive of his fate and the agent-like power of the hero are paradoxically combined. It is not the one or the other, but both. Saleem's own words corroborate this view. Using both the first-person pronoun 'I' and the third-person 'Saleem Sinai' for himself, he says: "From ayah to Widow, I've been the sort of person *to whom things have been done*; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist" (237, Rushdie's emphasis). He lists all the things other people have done to him that affect his life gravely, but adds defiantly, "setting my face against all indications to the contrary, I shall now amplify, in the manner and with the proper solemnity of a man of science, my claim to a place at the centre of things" (237-38). This movement in two directions, away from the center and towards the center, has been the characteristic of his narrative from the beginning. Though he only lists the things done to him by others in this passage, he also describes, on various occasions, the *things he does to others, things done by him*. He is both an agent and a victim, as all of us are. Though the relative

predominance of the victim aspect or the agent aspect will be visible at different times and to different extents in each one's life, history is made up of both what things are done to us and what things we do to ourselves and to others.

The last sentence of the novel asserts this 'and/both' stance rather than the 'either/or' position: ". . . it is the privilege *and* the curse of midnight's children to be *both* masters *and* victims of their times" (emphasis mine. 463). The new face of the epic fate is the "times"; it is "history" which handcuffs the hero to itself and chains his destiny to those of his country (9). Words such as "privilege" and "master" denote power and optimism. But the last part of the long, last sentence of the novel somewhat diminishes the sense of the power of the protagonist and the midnight's children implied by these words. The midnight's children have no choice, though Saleem declares it both as a privilege and curse, except "to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace" (463). Words such as "annihilating," "unable" emphasize the victim-status of the hero who is in the grip of fate, like the ancient epic heroes.

This mixing of the victim- and master-status is also reflected in his opposition to other binaries. Against a fixed duality or binarism, he posits ambiguity. He indicates the need to go beyond the binary oppositions by expanding the example of the game of Snakes and Ladders. The game, he says, implies

the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions . . . but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity . . . because it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake. (141)

Rushdie illustrates the metaphor that one can "climb to triumph on the venom of a snake" in the incident of Saleem's recovery from typhoid by the use of snake venom. Saleem gives many examples of metaphorical snakes and ladders alternating in the

events of his story. One example of metaphorical snake is the man who announces the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi interrupting the premiere of Hanif's first movie. The stars on the screen "faded and died" by the venom released by this snake. But for every snake there is a ladder, asserts Saleem. The ladder in this case is the later radio announcement that the killer of Mahatma Gandhi is not a Muslim. This news provides "the long ladder of relief" to Saleem's Muslim family members who fear retaliative violence by Hindus on Muslims, if the killer happens to be a Muslim.

Saleem emphasizes the importance of ambiguity, using the Snakes-and-Ladders concept. He sees Evie Burn's role in his life as both snake-like and ladder-like. In Saleem's case, snake itself acts like a ladder as seen in his recovery from typhoid by ingesting snake-poison, and in his recovery from amnesia after being bitten by a snake in the Sundarban jungles.

However, despite his exploration into ambiguity, and even while asserting its existence, Saleem cannot help a fatalistic pessimism. He describes the old servant Musa, who leaves the Sinais' house in disgrace after his stealing of the valuables of his employer is found out, in language that affirms his tendency to believe in fate and curse.

But he also adds a reminder that everything has an element of ambiguity:

[Musa] descends a spiral iron staircase [the shape of the staircase is sinuous and spiral like a snake, while it is also like a ladder in its use], discovering that ladders can go down as well as up; he walks away down hillock, leaving a curse upon the house.

And (was it the curse that did it?) Mary Pereira is about to discover that even when you win a battle; even when staircases operate in your favour, you can't avoid a snake. (146)

There are some rare moments when Saleem rebels against his sense of fate. After the Sundarbans experience, his resignation is replaced by an awakening sense of unfairness, and he rebels against his former passive acceptance of injustice. It is a rebellion against a fatalistic attitude. Similarly, after being transported in Parvati's basket of invisibility

from Bangladesh to Delhi, he feels anger against atrocities, injustice and unfairness, rather than submission to fate. Saleem temporarily tries to escape from his fatalism: “anger made me determined . . . to begin, from that moment forth, to choose my own, undetermined future.” But his hope to escape from Fate and to choose his future is short-lived. Seven years later, writing his story, he reflects on his previous “rebellion against inevitability” as simply an example of “Boys will be boys.” He declares that in the Widows’ Hostel, he was taught harshly, once-and-for-all, the lesson of “No Escape” (383).

However, this rather pessimistic or powerless outlook is that of Saleem, and not necessarily that of his creator Rushdie. Rushdie has asserted in many interviews that it is only Saleem’s view, and that he himself has an optimistic view of India’s future (see Reder 19; 41). The change from an optimistic Saleem in the beginning, to a pessimist at the end of the novel, Rushdie explains, is a reflection of the change from India’s independence in 1947, full of hope, to the Rule of Emergency in 1975, a very dark period; but it is not the end of all hope, because nothing lasts forever. A new, tougher generation is on the way while Saleem’s generation ends in the disintegration of its hopes and dreams.

#### **4.6 The Epic of Formulaic Epithets**

Another feature of the epic that *Midnight’s Children* exploits is the repetitive use of some characteristic epithets for persons and things. This “formulaic use,” as Walter J. Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, (citing Albert B. Lord and Milman Parry), is a feature derived from the oral narrative technique. Rushdie uses this device extensively. Tai, for instance, is almost always presented as the “boatman” (12, 15, 27, 28, 30, 31, and 319).

For some characters, nicknames function like formulaic epithets. Naseem, for instance, except for the second chapter where she is first introduced by her name, is always called Reverend Mother in all the later chapters. Saleem's neighbor (Sabarmati's son) is always called "Eyeslice"—because when as a young boy, his right eye is sliced by a stone thrown by the slum boy Shiva (129); Eyeslice's brother is known only as "Hairoil" because his hair is thickly plastered down with hair oil (373). We never learn the real names of these boys. Similarly we never learn the real names of Wee Willie Winkie and Picture Singh. Sonny Ibrahim is often presented as Sonny of the forcep-hollows, because the forceps used during his birth have left deep hollows on his temples; Sonny's mother is called Nussie-the-duck on account of her waddling gait (97); Saleem's sister becomes "the Brass Monkey (so called because of her thick thatch of red-gold hair)" (149); Saleem's neighbor and schoolmate Cyrus is usually called "Cyrus-the-great" (98). Nadir is referred to as a fat, poet-like man with his lank long-hair hanging over his ears (45, 57, 216); Methwold's trade mark is his too-good-to-be-true black, brilliantined hair with its centre-parting; Shiva's signature-features are his formidable, deadly, "irresistible" knees and the association of him with the Hindu god Shiva, the god of destruction and procreation. Parvati is usually referred to as Parvati-the-witch; Saleem is often evoked with his enormous, runny nose and other deformities such as his "monk's tonsure," and mutilated finger.

These epithets and cluster of words describing some notable attributes that recur in *Midnight's Children* are similar to the Homeric epithets, such as "son of Atreus" and "king of men," to refer to Agamemnon and "clever Odysseus" for Odysseus. However, in *Midnight's Children*, befitting a comic-epic, the formulaic epithets are comical, humorous and ironical.

The repeated formulaic use of epithets and clusters of words for characters generally

imply static or flat characters, since they imply that characters do not change or evolve during the narrative. But formulaic epithets and phrases serve to establish connectivity, refreshing the audience's memory of what went before.

We also see such formulaic epithets in the recurring images of the perforated sheet, the silver spittoon, the shadow of the mosque, the pointing finger, and many other motifs and themes. But Rushdie has said in an interview that he uses these things that recur at various moments in the book in quite different contexts as *leitmotif*:

these things have very little meaning in themselves. The meaning of the *leitmotif* is the sum total of the incidents in which it occurs. So it accumulates meaning the more it is used. And what one is able to do by using the *leitmotif* is to orchestrate what is otherwise a huge mass of material, which doesn't always have rational connections, but the *leitmotif* can provide this other network of connections. ("Midnight's" 2-3)

Thus, the repeated use of a cluster of words for an object in *Midnight's Children* reminds us of the epic device, yet at the same time it is different from the epic use.

#### **4.7 Epic-like Invocations**

The epic poet invoked a goddess-Muse so that he could compose as an inspired bard. Scholes and Kellogg explain that the epic poet narrates events that are well back in the past and he follows tradition. And tradition itself carries its own authority. But it also limits the poet's flexibility. As the epic poet fulfils the functions of a historian and an entertainer simultaneously, tradition limits his creative tendencies to some extent. The epic poet's invocation to the Muse (though it is not an indispensable feature of epic poetry) can be seen as a device to shift the authority from tradition to inspiration which is freer, more personal and creative. It manifests the creative impulse toward a more fictional kind of narrative.

This feature of the epic appears in the very beginning of *Midnight's Children*. Like the epic poet who invokes the Muse so that he can use not only tradition but also his

imagination and creative gifts, Saleem invokes the memory of some objects from his past life to guide him in his narration. In Rushdie's comic-epic-like novel, Saleem-the-narrator invokes the memory of a large white bedsheet with a hole in its center to serve as his guide in the very beginning of his composition. Like an epic poet he begins to narrate events that happened long ago, and declares: "guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life" (9-10). Near the end of his narrative, Saleem again invokes his memory as his guide. This time the muse is the memory of a file, and some other fragments of the past: "I must be guided by the memory of a once-glimpsed file with tell-tale initials; and by the other, remaining shards of the past" (427). The tangible objects of the sheet and the file are both absent; only their memories serve as guides at the beginning and end, respectively, of his narrative. And memory is Mneme or Mnemosyne, one of the sister goddesses, the Muses, who preside over various arts. The three faculties of memory, imagination and understanding are described by Francis Bacon as the rulers of the three great realms of history, poetry and philosophy (see Collingwood 58). As already mentioned, Derek Walcott also describes memory as the ("fitful") Muse that controlled history in the ancient times when history was fiction (2). Saleem also refers to memory as a "wild god," who, along with the "lotus-goddess of the present [Padma]," keep him balanced and "hovering over present and past" (150, 194). Padma keeps him connected to the present and keeps him on the ground with her earthiness while the god of memory keeps Saleem connected to the past to enable the narration of the past. Thus Saleem has not one Muse but two gods, the "wild god" of memory (or the fitful Muse of memory, according to Walcott), as well as the goddess of the present, Padma (whose name means



the 'lotus-goddess'). Saleem's oblique invocation to the Muse of memory in the beginning of his narrative gives him, as it did for the epic-poet, omniscience. Saleem describes his "new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of mother father grandfather grandmother and everyone else" (88). His nose gets the miraculous gift of sniffing out practically everything, in the present and the past, like omniscience (52). Saleem finds "from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps" of his knowledge about the long-gone past before his birth, "down to the last detail," which is just another way of saying that he is omniscient, like the inspired bard of the epic (19).

Saleem's epic-like invocation of memory, which is traditionally seen as the Muse of history, is appropriate for his narrative which is allegedly history, not only his personal history, but also that of his nation, since he sees himself mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies "indissolubly chained" to those of his country (9). His narrative, like the epic, straddles across history and fiction (as well as myth, legends, folk tales, etc.). Saleem plays the role of a *histor* (an inquiring, investigating historian) seeking truth from different versions, and, at the same time, he takes on the role of an imaginative writer. He takes on the semblance of the epic poet, who was at once a historian, an inspired bard, and a maker or creator of fiction.

The invocation of the memory of mundane objects such as a perforated sheet and a secret file (which possibly exists only in Saleem's mind, since he cannot give any proof for its existence), instead of the goddess-Muse of the Homeric epic, is appropriate for the comic-epic of our unheroic contemporary age.

#### **4.8 Romance-Epic, Heroic Romance and Romance**

Scholes and Kellogg see in the evolution of the ancient epic the influence of romance. Both the heroic-romance and the epic employ the motifs of journey to a

distant goal, a quest, and the return home. Rushdie employs the motif of journeys, and the return of the hero in *Midnight's Children*. The journeys of Saleem, his parents, and his grandparents mirror the journeys of epic heroes. Temporally, the novel covers a period of sixty-three years from 1915 to 1978. Saleem returns to his home city, and visits the exact place where years ago his childhood house stood. We cannot say that he fulfills his quest or mission. Rather, he seems to be disillusioned and cured of his previous obsession about purpose and meaning in his life. Nevertheless, *Midnight's Children* incorporates the features of romance and romance-epic. Saleem's quest is to find his purpose and role in the destiny and history of his nation. The return and reunion motifs are also prominent in the novel. Thus, Rushdie's novel follows some conventions of romance-epic, but it also parodies it by contrasting itself to that genre.

The hero of the romance-epic is a king-hero. Mirroring this, Saleem is called often as "princeling"(191, 320), "sahibzada"(320) "laad-sahib"(191), and "rich boy" (220); these terms point to the modern equivalents of the king-hero of the epic. Saleem himself evokes the association to a king, when he starts to describe his childhood home: "we are entering my kingdom now, coming into the heart of my childhood" (94).

#### **4.9 Epic Memory of Eternal Truth and Fallible Memory of *Midnight's Children***

Bakhtin points out in his essay "Epic and Novel" that for ancient literature like the epic, it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power of the creative impulse. In *Midnight's Children*, echoing this concept, Saleem repeatedly affirms that his is a narrative created from memory. The epic tells us, that is how it was, and it is impossible to change it. Saleem also often insists in a similar manner: "So—believe me, don't believe, but this is what it was like!" (356). "Do not think that . . . the things I told you were not completely true. Everything happened just as I

described” (209).

The narrative in the epic cannot be changed because the tradition of the past is sacred. In the epic there is as yet no consciousness of the possible relativity of any past. Saleem also finds it impossible to change even when he discovers some chronological errors in his narrative. When he finds that he has made a mistake about the date of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, he is unable to change his version, and says, “in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time . . . for me there can be no going back” (166). Similarly, when he finds out his error about the date of the 1957 election in India, he admits, “although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events” (222). The difference between the epic author and Saleem is that, unlike the epic author, Saleem reveals the fallibility, weaknesses, and unexplainable quirks of memory. He is anxious to finish his narrative “before memory cracks beyond hope of re-assembly” (384); trying to remember some things, he admits, “I am forced to record that I cannot remember for sure” (385-86). Recalling Shiva’s entry into his life in 1974, Saleem is unsure of his memory: “. . . one morning in May 1974—is it just my cracking memory, or am I right in thinking it was the 18<sup>th</sup>” (406). While describing the demolition of the magicians’ ghetto, Saleem is again beset by doubt: “It was—or am I wrong? I must rush on; things are slipping from me all the time—a day of horrors. It was then—unless it was another day—that we found . . .” (413); “and there was one more curious fact . . . unless I have forgotten, unless it was on another day . . .” (414). Saleem admits that he has to make do with “scraps of memory” even as he prepares to write the climax of his narrative (426-27). All these admissions are the opposite of the epic author’s confidence and belief in the certainty of memory. Since *Midnight’s Children* is not a straightforward epic but only incorporates some elements of the epic, and constructs itself as a comic-epic, it is only fitting that memory

and its role are destabilized, and at the same time Saleem comically and paradoxically insists on the truth of his version which is based on memory. He describes the special characteristics of memory, such as its inevitable tendency to alter, distort, and select: “I told you the truth. Memory’s truth, because 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; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own” (211). The difference between the epic author and Saleem is that the former takes for granted the belief in memory’s truth, while the latter acknowledges the quirky nature of memory and often raises doubts about the infallibility of memory and its truth.

#### **4.10 The Self-conscious Epic**

Saleem refers to actual epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in his narrative. He compares himself to the ancient authors of the Hindu epic in the chapter called “Accident in a washing-chest”. Lamenting over the fact that his audience, Padma, to whom he reads his autobiography every night, has not returned after two whole days, he compares himself with Valmiki, the author of the great Indian epic *Ramayana*, and compares Padma to the scribe, the god Ganesh. Actually, in Hindu mythology, the god Ganesh is described as the scribe of the other great Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Saleem confuses the details about the two Hindu epics. Unaware of his mistake, he tries to show off his knowledge of Hindu epics and mythology. His blunder is aggravated by the boastful aside which highlights his error:

When Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana*, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him halfway? He certainly did not. (Note that, despite my Muslim background, I’m enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu stories, and actually I’m very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh solemnly taking dictation!) (149-50)

In the Hindu mythology, it is not Valmiki (who wrote the *Ramayana*) who asks the god Ganesh to be his scribe, but the author Vyasa of the *Mahabharata*. Saleem's blunder gives the impression that he and his narrative do not take the epics seriously; the blunder shows Saleem as an unreliable narrator who does not check his data for accuracy.

Saleem's confusion and mistake about the epics and their authors is likely to provoke contradictory responses among the vast Hindu audience, with respect to the novel and its author. On the one hand, they are likely to feel flattered that Rushdie, although a Muslim, is enough of an Indian and Bombayite, to know and write about the Hindu epics and gods in his novel, despite his moving to London and becoming a British citizen. On the other hand, they might also be a little piqued by Saleem's (if not Rushdie's) inaccuracy and confusion over the two great Hindu epics. But Saleem's blunder is in keeping with the 'comic' epic form that Rushdie chose for his novel.

Rushdie juxtaposes the epic values with the values of 20<sup>th</sup> century modern nation of India, showing the incompatibility of the two, in describing the trial of Commander Sabarmati. This naval hero's killing of his wife's lover raises the question, "is India to give her approval to the rule of law, or to the ancient principle of the overriding primacy of heroes?" People debate: "If Rama [the man-god hero of the epic *Ramayana*] were alive, would we send him to prison for slaying the abductor of Sita [Rama's wife]?" (264). In the *Ramayana*, Rama kills the demon-king Ravana who abducts Sita, in a battle. But Rama is not considered guilty of murder because the values of what is right and wrong, the codes of honor and war, the difference in the evaluation of the acts of men and gods (Rama is the human avatar of the god Vishnu), the perceived justification of a wronged husband's right to kill the offender, etc., that ruled the epic-world clash with the values and codes of the modern India. However, Rushdie's description shows

that old values and sexist attitudes still persist in modern India in traces: Saleem's neighbor Ishmail Ibrahim, the lawyer, offers to defend Commander Sabarmati in the court, free of charge. "Commander Sabarmati was the most popular murderer in the history of Indian jurisprudence. Husbands acclaimed his punishment of an errant wife; faithful women felt justified in their fidelity" (260). With his telepathy, Saleem finds these thoughts inside the minds of Lila Sabarmati's own sons: "We knew she was like that. We knew a Navy man wouldn't stand for it" (262). However, the final verdict of the Supreme Court of India, and the answer of the nation's President to the appeal for pardon prove to be examples in which law and reason prevail over epic values and attitudes in modern India.

Rushdie talks about the various errors in *Midnight's Children* with respect to facts in his essay "Errata: or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*". He admits, "the novel contains a few mistakes that are mine as well as Saleem's" (23), but goes on to say that he introduced some errors deliberately. Saleem's mistake about the god Ganesha as the scribe of the *Ramayana*, was "a way of deflating that narratorial pomposity" seen in Saleem's boasting about his erudition; "but it was also . . . a way of telling the reader to maintain a healthy distrust" (25).

Another inconsistency in Saleem's blunder is his comparison of Padma to a scribe. He had mentioned some 125 pages earlier that Padma is illiterate (24, 31). So, she is not really his scribe, but only an audience, unlike the god Ganesh who is both the audience and scribe of the epic *Mahabharata*. Like Ganesh, she listens and understands what she hears, but the writing part is left to Saleem himself, who is also the oral narrator who reads to Padma what he writes every night. Though this is a small detail, it seems to elide the class difference.

The device of illiterate Padma and Saleem's reciting to her every night evokes the ancient epics which were orally recited to an audience. But there is no collective audience within Rushdie's novel. We see only Padma as the regular audience, and Mary occasionally, and at another point three young soldiers listen to Saleem's narration of his previous history. However, the fact that Saleem is not merely writing his story in isolation, but reading it and telling it to others, highlights dialogism.

Another difference between Saleem and the epic author is that in the narration of ancient epic stories, the composer/writer is not always the same as the singer/performer, and the two groups of people may belong to different times and places. In oral narration of written epics, the performers become co-authors in a sense, since they could add to, improvise, and shape the story according to their needs and situations. In the case of Saleem's narrative, he is both the composer and performer of his narrative. But he expresses a willingness to let the audience be part of the narrative process: he sees the audience as "capable of joining in," of "imagining for themselves" what he is unable to re-imagine, and so he tells them: "so that my story becomes yours as well" (293). Similarly, his acknowledgement of Padma's vital role in his narration is an acknowledgement of dialogism.

Saleem's slip about Ganesh is probably a reflection of his admitted fondness for the elephant-faced god. This god's big trunk-nose is reflected in the gargantuan nose of Aadam Aziz, Saleem, and even in William Methwold (and his French grandmother from Bergerac). In the next generation, the elephant-faced god's flapping ears become Aadam Sinai's distinguishing features. The mythical elements of Ganesh's nose and ears are invoked in the description of the main characters in four generations—Aadam Aziz, Methwold, Saleem and Aadam Sinai.

Rushdie achieves many things by making Saleem commit a blunder about the scribe of the epic *Ramayana*. Perhaps the most important is to hint that Saleem is an unreliable, inaccurate narrator. Another is the implied religious heterogeneity of India. Saleem's mention of his Muslim background while addressing Padma from the Hindu background hints at the multi-religious population of India. In this comic epic, the protagonist Saleem Sinai is from an upper class Muslim family background, while his audience Padma is from a working class, lower caste, Hindu background; and, in addition, there are other characters from other religious backgrounds such as the Christian Ayah Mary, the Muslim bearer Musa, the Parsee film magnate Homi Catrack, and so on. We learn that Saleem is actually the illegitimate son of a British man and the wife of a poor Hindu street entertainer, and so he provides an example of the hybrid Anglo-Indian. Rushdie provides in his comic epic a kaleidoscopic view of the different religions, classes, castes and races of India in general, and Bombay in particular.



## CHAPTER 5

### VOICES OF FANTASY AND MYTH

#### 5.1. Voice of Fantasy Against Realism

*Midnight's Children* uses a predominantly non-mimetic mode that is often called as magic realism or marvelous realism. Rushdie has declared that he does not believe in using fantasy as an end in itself, but rather as a superstructure that is built upon the base of naturalism; he sees it as an alternative way of seeing and telling the truth. In *Midnight's Children*, he describes his childhood Bombay in a very naturalistic manner. Over this foundation he builds the superstructure of fantasy. In his opinion, fantasy is “a method of producing intensified images of reality—images which have their roots in observable, verifiable fact” (Interview by John Haffenden 43).

What he says about the use of fantasy in the movie *Brazil* can help us to understand Rushdie's concept of fantasy.

This idea—the opposition of imagination to reality, which is also of course the opposition of art to politics—is of great importance, because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power. And I suggest that the true location of Brazil [the movie] is the other tradition in art, the one in which the techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be. Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed. (“The Location” 122)

Fantasy, along with other modes, is seen as a tool or device for the reconstruction of reality, first in the mind, as the first step to the eventual reconstruction in the external world. This is how fantasy can become political, and not a mere escape. Rushdie explains his view that literature and writing can affect reality, in an interview by Rani Dharker: “. . . I refuse to see literature as a purely aesthetic enterprise and the use of

form is not purely technical. It has meaning. You change the way in which you write and you change the things it's possible for you to say and therefore what is possible to think and therefore what is possible to do. So to shift forms is to act in all those ways" (49)

For Rushdie, fantasy has to be enlisted for telling the story because the mode of realism is inadequate to deal with our contemporary world. Also, realism has to be mixed with other modes to represent the non-West since the basic concepts of life such as time, space, what is miraculous, what is ordinary, etc., are different from those of the realist, rational mode of perception cultivated in the West since Enlightenment. David Lipscomb deduces from Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands" (in which he describes *Midnight's Children* as a novel of memory inspired by his need to reclaim his homeland) and "Writing for a Future" (in which he describes the Indian people's way of looking at the divine and the mundane as intermixed), that for Rushdie, "imagination (fantasy) is central to the mode of memory; to the art of the storyteller; to the representation of a people who perceive the interpenetration of the divine in everyday life; and most importantly, to that which is perhaps a combination of all of these, the reclamation of one's homeland from beyond its borders" (170).

Lipscomb shows a mirror-image like relation between Rushdie's technique of blending realism with fantasy and Tvetzan Todorov's concept of the genre of "the fantastic." In the "fantastic" narrative, the normative mode is realism and suddenly it is disrupted by supernatural element. The reader is surprised and thrown into a hesitation as to how to take the new element, whether as some uncanny part of the natural or as supernatural. In Rushdie's narrative, Lipscomb argues, the normative mode is fantasy and suddenly we find some interruptions by realism. This technique also throws the reader into a doubt, to hesitate whether the fantasy parts are also, like realism, telling a

kind of truth. Or, I would argue, to wonder whether the documentary-like parts also belong to the domain of fantasy. Such hesitation is a common reaction to both “the fantastic” and Rushdie’s mode of fantasy mixed with realism. Both kinds of narratives “contest the boundary between the real and the imaginary” (Lipscomb 173). Realism and the mode of fantasy exemplify two contesting epistemologies. Realism is based on Western rationality. The mode of fantasy incorporates the non-West’s concepts of the supernatural. This difference is reflected in the reception of the novel in the West and in India. Western readers saw *Midnight’s Children* mostly as a fantasy novel, while Indians saw it as a novel of history, politics and memory.

Fantasy is not always used as an escape from reality. Sometimes what looks like fantasy can either be an alternative way to describe things, or, it can be the reality experienced under strong emotions such as fear and terror. Zafar’s description of the events in the Rann of Kutch border posts in 1965 seem to be a reality that is somewhat transformed through the eyes of a frightened person. Zafar’s story is filled with ghost ships, ghost soldiers, shrieks of witches, great blubbery things which slithered around the border posts at night, and the floating-in-air spirits of drowned men with seaweed wreaths and seashells in their navels, and so on. But the ghost-ships, and ghost-army carrying moss-covered chests and other strange shrouded things are possibly not imaginary, but the frightened boy’s vision of reality—the reality of Zulfikar’s henchmen unloading smuggled goods from ships at night. Even if we take Zafar’s images as fantasy, they serve a purpose, as Lipscomb shows. Lipscomb sees Saleem’s account of Zafar’s personal, unofficial, unwritten testimony as a metaphoric representation of reality that also serves to mock the official untruth. In Lipscomb’s reading, Zafar’s “unofficial version of soldierly fear seems to mock the official Pakistani reports of glory and bravery on the battlefield and to provide, perhaps, a metaphoric way of getting at

what war felt like in the marshes of the Rann of Kutch” (Lipscomb 180). Saleem’s descriptions of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, the Bangladesh War of 1971, and Indira Gandhi’s Emergency rule in 1975, the sterilization program of the government, and so on, also use the mode of fantasy. Rushdie’s use of fantasy in *Midnight’s Children* shows that fantasy not only answers to our need for wonderment, but it can also present harsh and unpalatable facts; that it expresses not only our dreams but also our fears and terrors; that it can serve to hint at undocumented realities.

Gunter Grass, in his conversation with Rushdie, expresses his thoughts about the use of fantasy: “I think that all our dreams, the unspoken things and the fantastic ideas people have, they all belong to reality, and in one sentence I jump from the flat reality that you see, you can touch, to inside things” (Rushdie, *Conversations* 74). In other words, what is perceptible through our senses is not all. What Grass calls the “inside [of] things” can perhaps be reached only through fantasy.

Rational, logical things constitute only part of our reality, not the whole. Our dreams, for instance, do not follow the rules of our outer real life or rationality. But because of that they do not stop being part of our life and reality. They still make an important part of our life, however intermittent they may be. Many of us, like Freud, believe that the fantastic images and irrational narratives of dreams attempt to tell us some truths, but in a very strange, non-mimetic, non-rational manner. Fantasy also tries to perform a similar function.

Reflecting on his growing up immersed in fantastic stories such as the *Arabian Nights* since the time of his childhood, Rushdie explains how it affected his philosophy of fiction:

But beyond that, the kind of context in which I began to think was one in which it was accepted that stories should be untrue. You know, the idea that fiction should be a lie, that it should be a wonderful story. That horses and also carpets should fly was expected. And the belief was that by telling stories in that way, in that marvelous way, you could actually tell a kind of truth which you couldn't tell in other ways. ("Conversations" 75).

But Rushdie also emphasizes that fantasy will not work unless it is rooted in the real, and that it should not be an end in itself.

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, realism, in Rushdie's opinion, has become inadequate for our age. It served the early nineteenth-century depiction of reality when science and psychology had not yet dislodged the certainties of human beings. But in our contemporary age, multiplicity has displaced unity, and to deal with this state of affairs fantasy has to complement realism.

Fantasy can serve social and political transformation. In his essay "Imaginary Homelands" Rushdie expresses the belief that "Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with" social problems such as racism and the disparate views of the Whites and the Blacks (19). The blending of fantasy and naturalism "offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new, 'modern' world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture" which migrants like him have brought into the heart of a newer one (19). Use of fantasy seems to be related to Rushdie's position as an expatriate migrant in the West. As Lipscomb points out, fantasy (imagination) is central to Rushdie's reclamation of his homeland, from beyond its borders. For Rushdie, as he explains in his 1984 essay on Gunter Grass, the migrant experiences a triple displacement: of place, language, and social customs. So the migrant has to root his intellect "in its own capacity for imagining and reimagining the world" (*Imaginary Homelands* 280). In order to complement the

realities that have been destabilized by his triple displacement, the migrant uses the inventions of imagination.

Rushdie's valorization of fantasy is based on his belief in the "power of the playful imagination to change for ever our perceptions of how things are" ("The Location" 123). He gives the example of Laurence Sterne's fantasy-fiction *Tristram Shandy*, among others. In his essay "Is Nothing Sacred?" Rushdie explains the motives behind his use of fantasy: ". . . one reason for my attempt to develop a form of fiction in which the miraculous might coexist with the mundane was precisely my acceptance that notions of the sacred and the profane both needed to be explored, as far as possible without pre-judgement, in any honest literary portrait of the way we are" (417). Even if the writer does not believe in the miraculous or in superstitions, he or she should be capable of "presenting a sympathetic portrait of a devout believer" (417). In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie gives us various characters, including the narrator Saleem, who believe in prophecy, omens, fate, curses, supernatural things, power of names, bad luck, and other things that are considered superstitions.

In its use of the fantastic, *Midnight's Children* resembles the old Roman tales such as *Golden Ass* in which the setting is realistic, but the action is fantastic. Rushdie exploits a naturalistic, detailed background of the city of Bombay and other cities such as Delhi, Srinagar, Karachi, etc., to build a fantastic superstructure. *Midnight's Children* combines the fantastic element of the old picaresque and satire, with the naturalism of modern narratives. Combination of fantasy with the slum naturalism in the descriptions of the poor areas of cities, of market places, brothels, and multitudes on the streets, and the variety of characters from different classes and cultures evoke the mongrelization of carnival. And carnival features, as mentioned before, enable voices that are suppressed or marginalized at other times, to be heard.

## 5.2 Voice of Myth

Scholes and Kellogg observe that despite their predominant trends of realism and empiricism, the nineteenth-century realistic novels often turn to the tragic plot formula leading to violent death and/or expulsion from society, which are elements derived from mythic fertility rituals. They add that the “great realistic novels [such as *Anna Karenina*, *The Red and the Black*, *Madame Bovary*] generate their power by the tension they exploit between their mimetic and mythic characteristics” (234). The protagonists in these novels are individuals in the modern world, but they look like “individuals in a mimetic world acting out the pattern of their mythic destinies” (Scholes and Kellogg 230). In addition to creating powerful, haunting characters that remind us of the old mythic-epic characters, the authors of these novels “often achieved rich and complex effects because of the incongruity of the mythic pattern in the world of the nineteenth-century” (230).

The word ‘myth’ is derived from *mythos* in Greek, and it means a traditional plot which can be transmitted (Scholes and Kellogg, 12, 219). Discussing the plots of empirical narratives, epics, and fictional narratives of the ancient world, Scholes and Kellogg see a gradation in them with regard to the extent of artful plotting. Empirical, historical plotting is less artful than the plotting of traditional epic, while fictional narratives manifest more artful plotting. “But the line between fictional and traditional or mythic plotting is not always easy to draw; and because narrative art never wholly loses its traditional characteristics, fictional plots have a way of establishing themselves as myths just as myths have a way of becoming fictionalized” (218). These authors distinguish at least three distinct kinds of primitive traditional narrative which arise in most cultures. Citing Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, Scholes and Kellogg describe three kinds of tales: the imaginative folktale, which is designed to

amuse an audience; the legend, a quasi-historical tale of ordinary or fantastic events, regarded as true history by the audience; and the sacred myth, which is an expression of and justification for primitive theology, manners, and morality (219). In the epic, all these three types of tales were combined, while later they separated into two opposing narratives: the empirical and the fictional. Of the three types of traditional tales, sacred myth is the most-tradition bound. It is preoccupied with the supernatural, and because of its connection with religion it is rigid. However, with the onslaught by rationalism in the later periods, sacred myth becomes gradually humanized and rationalized. Though it gives up some of its earlier rigid structures, probably sacred myth “dies only to be reborn” (Scholes and Kellogg 220). As mythic narratives express the deep-seated human concerns, fears, and aspirations, despite the attack by rationalism, myths move us deeply, possibly even at the unconscious level. In the primitive societies, sacred myth must have been at the service of theology. They are rooted in ritual celebration of the most vital concerns of the human race, such as food, harvest, rain, and barren winter when vegetation seemingly dies annually, and its renewal in the spring. The rituals evolved out of the worship of natural phenomena and developed as imitative enactment of the cyclical processes of nature. They provide magical encouragement to these processes. The most important kind of sacred myth is that which is associated with rituals celebrating the annual cycle of vegetative life. James Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough*, and later anthropologists and literary critics have shown that these rituals and myths play an important part in narratives. The annual cycle of seasons connected with the equinoxes and solstices were seen by the primitive societies as the yearly combat between fertility and sterility, between life and death, between good and evil. Hence the rituals express these major elements of the seasons in the pattern of mortification, purgation, invigoration and jubilation, according to Theodore H. Gaster.



The first two elements express fears while the last two express aspirations and joy. These four elements, according to F. M. Cornford, appear in the Greek drama as: The Carrying Out of Death, The Battle of Summer and Winter, The Young and the Old King, Death and Resurrection (see Scholes and Kellogg, 222). The tragedy uses traditional plots, and focuses on the fearful elements of the seasonal pattern. Tragic plots use the fairly rigid pattern of pride, tragic flaw, downfall, and recognition, and the sequence of events lead to death or expulsion from society. The comedy focuses on the joyful aspects and uses plots leading to motifs such as marriage, celebration, reunion, and reconciliation with society. The novel draws upon both the tragic and comic ritual elements in its plot.

### **5.2.1. Mythical Rituals in *Midnight's Children***

We see the combination of the elements of tragedy and comedy that were derived from mythical rituals in *Midnight's Children*. Like tragedy, it incorporates the pattern of the rituals such as mortification, purgation, death, and expulsion from society. It also incorporates themes of pride, flaw, downfall, and recognition. It also shows the aspects of comedy in the motifs of intrigues, marriage, reconciliation, etc.

The most tradition-bound of all forms of narrative in any culture is the sacred myth in which we find the most profound revelations of cultural conditions and ancient human attitudes and beliefs. Prayer of supplication to a God, asking His help, guidance and favors, and remembering His wrath, etc., have their origins in the mythic rituals performed for the assurance of a good season of plenty. The scene of Aadam Aziz's prayer in the first chapter of *Midnight's Children* connects us to the ancient sacred myth and rituals.

### 5.2.2 Voice of Sacred Myth in Prayer

In the beginning chapter of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie gives us a glimpse of the Islamic sacred myth with its rituals of prayer, supplicating God as the supreme help and guide. Aadam Aziz, as a twenty-five year old young doctor, recently returned from his medical training in Germany, tries to reconnect himself to the sacred myth on which he had been raised. He had risen in the bitter cold of early morning before sunrise, “washed himself in the prescribed fashion,” dressed, and put on his cap, and carried the prayer mat to the garden, and unrolled it over the ground, as the prescribed preparation for his ritual of prayer. He does not yet know that he is in for a shock that will change his life. The prayer mat covers the ground which “felt deceptively soft under his feet and made him simultaneously uncertain and unwary” (11). With hands joined before him like a book, he starts saying the words of the Islamic prayer, but the words, while they “comforted a part of him, made another, larger part, feel uneasy” (11). The mythic world is invaded by the modern world. His head is invaded by his German friend Ingrid, “her face scorning him for this Mecca-turned parroting; here, their friends Oskar and Ilse Lubin the anarchists, mocking his prayer with their anti-ideologies” (11). The words of prayer uttered out of habit do not reconnect Aadam to his previous faith and innocence. “But it was no good, he was caught in a strange middle ground trapped between belief and disbelief, and this was only a charade after all” (12). Scholes and Kellogg observe that “[O]nce a culture loses its innocence with respect to myth, it can never recapture it” (220). This is what has happened to Aadam Aziz.

However, despite the rationalistic attacks on it, myth retains its psychological power. Ritual also, despite a scepticism that it is only a “charade,” exercises a power over the psyche. Aadam continues his prayer, bends his forehead toward the earth, and a frost-hardened tussock hiding beneath the prayer-mat hits his nose (he has an enormous

nose). Three drops of blood fall from his nose on the mat, and tears of pain rise in his eyes. This makes Aadam Aziz to resolve that he will never again kiss the earth, for god or man. “This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history” (10).

Aadam Aziz tries to fill this hole by other things such as love for his wife-to-be, and nationalism. But the hole reappears later. It seems that ancient sacred myth and rituals cannot be easily replaced by rationalism or other later ideologies such as nationalism. The novelty of his falling in love with the young Naseem under the peculiar conditions of seeing fragments of her through a hole in a sheet make him forget the hole for a while, but the later disharmony in his married life brings back the hole to his consciousness. The description of the vacuum in Aadam Aziz shows that the loss of sacred myth can have profound psychological effects. Aadam Aziz’s decision in 1915 to give up the practice of the ritual of sacred myth knocks him forever into a middle place where he is “unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve” (12). It creates a permanent alteration in him, a hole.

The words of Aadam’s prayer from the Quran are in the spirit of submission and religious exclusivity that characterize many orthodox religious texts. He utters the words of the prayer, such as, “In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, King of the last Judgement, You alone we pray for help, Guide us to the straight path, The path of those whom You have favoured, Not of those who have incurred Your wrath, Nor of those who have gone astray” (11-12).

But Aadam’s spirit does not accept the narrow exclusiveness of orthodox religion. When he becomes a family man, he throws out his children’s religious teacher for teaching the children to “hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians” (42-43). Aadam Aziz does not want his children to hate

other religions; his wife Naseem does not her children to be godless (43). Naseem seems to equate god with religious exclusivity and godlessness with religious tolerance.

Forty-three years after he renounces belief in God and rituals, when Aadam's son Hanif commits suicide, Aadam is struck by grief and seems to regress back to his mythical belief in God. When he comes to Bombay to mourn Hanif's death, one night he senses somebody else in the room at midnight and asks the figure whether it is Tai. That 'someone' or 'something,' startled by this question, cries "Jesus Christ Almighty!" Aadam takes this exclamation to be the figure's answer for his question about its identity, and so believes that it is Jesus Christ. But it is the ghost of Joseph D'Costa. Aadam, with a pain in his chest at the loss of his son, asks this 'God': "Why? Why did that happen?" To which, Joseph's ghost answers, "God has his reasons, old man; life's like that, right?" (276). Taking the casual words of Joseph's ghost to be God's, Aadam comes to believe that "God, by his off-hand attitude to Hanif's suicide, had proved his own culpability in the affair." He tells his son-in-law, "Because I never believed, he [God] stole my son!" (276). Thus it is that Aadam announces "three weeks after he had heard of the death of a son whom he had believed to be alive and well, he had seen with his own eyes the God in whose death he had tried all his life to believe" (275). Taking his words to be nonsense and the expression of senility, his wife tells the family that he has "become like a child again" (275). Aadam, in a sense, regains his child-like innocence and belief with respect to sacred myths. But, in an adult, a return to childhood implies the onset of senility and insanity.

The mythical God of Aadam's childhood returns to him in his old age, but with a difference. The God whom the young Aadam addresses as "the Compassionate, the Merciful" in his prayer in 1915 returns to the old Aadam in 1958 as a spiteful God who punishes the disbeliever by taking away his son. This turns Aadam also into a vengeful

man. Though he believes he saw the Christian god Jesus Christ, the “details of the particular deity he had seen grew blurred” in Aadam’s mind, “leaving behind only a passionate . . . desire for revenge” against God of all religions (276-77). So he refuses to go to Pakistan since it is a “country built especially for God” (277). He goes back to Kashmir, stumbles into mosques and temples, brandishing his stick, mouthing imprecations and lashing out at any worshipper or holy man within range.

There is a suggestion that Aadam Aziz even steals the holy relic of the hair of the Prophet Muhammad from a mosque in Kashmir. Saleem does not confirm it, but leaves the question hanging in the air: “Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son?” (277). A father’s grief, and anger at God seem to have the same effects as politicians’ scheming.

Padma, the illiterate Hindu woman is another character in the novel who invokes the power of prayer and supplicates to the gods of Hindu mythology in her desperate efforts to awake Saleem’s manhood (193). Unfortunately, the allegedly magical herbal potion—that she has prepared, invoking the gods of Varuna and Indra—only makes Saleem sick with deliriums, fever, shivers, stomach-cramps and frothings at the mouth (194, 208). Rushdie gives a sense of the power of myths on the minds of the Indian people in the above episodes.

### **5.2.3 Fertility Ritual**

Aadam Aziz wanders among temples and mosques to take revenge upon a God who took revenge upon him for not believing in Him. Aadam finally visits the Hindu temple of Sankara Acharya in Kashmir, brandishing his stick against the women “performing the rite of puja [prayer] at the Shiva-lingam” (278). Then his bone-eating disease claims him, his legs give way under him, he collapses and dies. Thus, it is during his disruption

of a fertility ritual, a ritualistic prayer offered by the women to Shiva, the Hindu god of procreation (and destruction) that Aadam meets his death.

There is another scene of fertility ritual worship in the episode of Dr Narlikar's death. Here also some Hindu women are engaged in performing the ritualistic prayer for fertility. There is again the phallic symbol of the Shiva-lingam, but it is not actually a Shiva-lingam, but one of Dr Narlikar's tetrapods. It is mistaken for a Shiva-lingam by some beggar women on the street. Dr Narlikar has dreams of becoming rich by reclaiming land from the sea. To achieve this "myth of conquering the waves," he wants to use tetrapods, which have four legs, three legs standing on the ground and the fourth "rearing lingam-fashion" into the air (134). The lingam is a phallus-like stone image symbolizing the Hindu god of procreation and destruction, Shiva. It is worshipped all over India by Shivites, the devotees of the god Shiva. It is ironical that Narlikar, who is against procreation and population growth, chooses, for realizing his dream, a device that resembles the symbol of procreation; it is also ironical that he meets his death clinging to it and getting crushed by it when falling into the sea. Mythical elements and satire fuse, giving at the same time some glimpses of the religious, cultural, social and economic beliefs of different sections of the population.

Dr Narlikar sees the tetrapod as "an icon pointing to the way to the future," and arranges to place a single, symbolic tetrapod upon the sea wall to highlight its futuristic mission. But, a group of beggar-women mistake the tetrapod for a Shiva-lingam (the symbol of Shiva, the god of procreation), and start performing the ritual of worship.

What follows is a comical, bizarre and macabre scene. The women

had lighted oil-lamps at the base of the object; one of them had painted the OM-symbol on its upraised tip; they were chanting prayers as they gave the tetrapod a thorough and worshipful wash. Technological miracle had been transformed into Shiva-lingam. Dr Narlikar, the opponent of fertility, was driven wild at this vision, in which it seemed to him that all the old dark priapic forces of ancient, procreative

India had been unleashed upon the beauty of sterile twentieth-century concrete . . .  
(176)

Rushdie comically unites the ancient mythical procreative symbol with modern, sterile concrete. Sacred myths and fertility rituals are presented in an ironical light. But this is followed by the macabre death of Narlikar by the very tetrapod that he cherished as the means to achieve his dream. To manufacture tens of thousands of tetrapods needed for land-reclamation, Narlikar appeals to Saleem's father Ahmed Sinai to provide the capital. The adult Saleem, writing some thirty years later, wonders why his father agreed to finance such a scheme: "Why, in the following years, did Ahmed dedicate himself to the fantasy of every island-dweller—the myth of conquering the waves?" (134). Saleem gives an explanation: "My father, deprived of wifely attention, supplanted by his son, blurred by whisky and djinn, was trying to restore his position in the world; and the dream of tetrapods offered him the chance" (134). Ahmed wants to believe in the myth of conquering the waves, to achieve another myth, the myth of rising from his fallen position.

There are other ironies in this story of tetrapods. Dr Narlikar dislikes babies despite being an expert gynecologist. "In his spare time he lectures writes pamphlets berates the nation on the subject of contraception" (115). For him, birth control is "Public Priority Number One" (115). Given his antipathy to fertility, it is not surprising that he becomes enraged at the worship of his tetrapod as Shiva-lingam, the symbol of the god of procreation. He shouts at the worshipping women, kicks away their lamps, and even tries to push the women. The language marchers on the road see Narlikar's rough behavior toward the women and rebuke him. He insults them in anger and the language marchers try to pull Narlikar. He clings to the tetrapod like a limpet, and the language marchers begin to rock the tetrapod, and in the struggle the tetrapod tilts, and falls into

the sea. Narlikar, falling with the tetrapod, is crushed into death by the weight of his beloved obsession.

The poor women's mistaking of the technological "miracle" for the symbol of the fertility god Shiva, the comical antagonistic position of the beggar women and Narlikar toward procreation, and Narlikar's prize object becoming the instrument of his death—these provide the elements of irony, satire and parody, incorporating the bizarre and the macabre. Narlikar's clinging to the lingam-like tetrapod is also an allusion and parody of a story in the Hindu mythology about a boy called Markandeya. He was destined to live only up to the age of sixteen. But when Yama, the god of death comes to take his life, he is worshipping the Shiva-lingam. When Yama throws his noose around the neck of Markandeya and pulls him, the boy clings to the Shiva-lingam. And Shiva saves Markandeya from his predestined death. Narlikar's clinging to the lingam-like tetrapod is a parody of Markandeya's clinging to the Shiva-lingam in the mythology. While in the myth the boy is saved because of his clinging to the Shiva-lingam, in Rushdie's comic-narrative Narlikar dies as a result of clinging to the tetrapod. Narlikar is not a worshipper of the fertility god, but the opposite, since he champions birth control and dislikes babies. It is interesting that both Aadam Aziz and Narlikar are doctors, trained in Western medicine, and the deaths of both happen after they attack the women worshipping the Shiva-lingam. Aadam Aziz dies when he goes to attack the women worshipping the Shiva-lingam in the Sankara Acharya temple (278).

Reminding us of Aadam Aziz's prayers from Quran in the beginning of the novel, we see another character reciting the Quran in an entirely different context almost at the end of Book Two in the novel. Pakistan's military General and Commander-in-Chief Ayub Khan quotes the sacred myth of Quran to argue that the politicians and civil



leaders of the country have been deceived by Satan and so have to be punished. The “Commander-in-Chief quoted the Quran . . . ‘It is written, *Aad and Thamoud we also destroyed. Satan had made their foul deeds seem fair to them, keen-sighted though they were.*’ ” (289; Rushdie’s italics). Rushdie is satirizing and parodying the use of sacred myth by autocratic leaders in non-secular countries like Pakistan.

Other motifs and themes derived from sacred myth rituals such as mortification, purgation, invigoration, jubilation, expulsion from society, death, return, reunion, recognition, etc., abound in *Midnight’s Children*. I discuss briefly some of the mythic motifs and themes in the following sections.

#### **5.2.4 Mortification**

In the pattern of mythical rituals, first comes the rite of *Mortification*, symbolizing the state of suspended animation which ensues at the end of the year, when one lease of life has drawn to a close and the next is not yet assured. In *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem is literally drained above and below, of his sinuses and his reproductive powers, and is rendered literally barren, like the unproductive, barren land of winter.

The many difficulties that Saleem and his family members suffer form a kind of descent pattern that is part of the seasonal ritual myths. Aadam Aziz’s deterioration, Mumtaz’s unconsummated marriage due to Nadir’s impotency, the freezing of Ahmed Sinai’s assets by the government, Saleem’s various trials and tribulations, Hanif’s suicide, the exile into Pakistan, Ahmed’s heart attack, his later senility, etc., contribute to the winter-like period in this family’s life. Saleem’s loss of the leadership of the Midnight Children’s Conference, the disintegration of the group, and Saleem’s inability to communicate with the midnight-children during his stay in Pakistan, etc., are also the low points in his life, corresponding to the mortification stage in the mythic ritual

pattern. There are signs of this mortification in the nation's life also. The defeat in the war with China, and the difficult period of war with Pakistan in 1965 are also dark periods. The country's problems with poverty, illiteracy, religious, linguistic, and political conflicts that divide the nation, and Saleem's "representation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight" (443) connote the difficult and barren period of mortification.

### 5.2.5 Purgation

Second come rites of Purgation, whereby the community seeks to rid itself of all noxiousness and contagion, both physical and moral, and of all evil influences which might impair the prosperity of the coming year and thereby threaten the desired renewal of vitality.

We see an allusion to the "purgation" element of the ritual pattern in *Midnight's Children*. When he is hit on the head during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War by the spittoon, Saleem is "purified." He describes the silver spittoon, his mother's marriage-gift from the Rani of Cooch Naheen as "what-purifies-and-sets-me-free" (343). He continues his description of his purification:

. . . I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love . . . I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me, from the baby who appeared in jumbo-sized front-page baby-snaps to the eighteen-year-old with his filthy dirty love, pouring out goes shame and guilt and wanting-to-please and needing-to-be-loved and determined-to-find-a-historical-role and growing-too-fast, I am free of Snotnose and Stainface and Baldy and language marches, liberated from Kolynos Kid and the breasts of Pia mumani and Alpha-and-Omega, absolved of the multiple murders of Homi Catrack and Hanif and Aadam Aziz and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, I have shaken off five-hundred-year-old whores and confessions of love at dead of night, free now, beyond caring . . . *restored to innocence and purity . . . wiped clean as a wooden writing-chest . . .* (343. Emphasis mine).

This long description fits the mythical-ritual purification of all "noxiousness and contagion, both physical and moral, and of all evil influences." His feelings of guilt

about real and imagined sins, and all negative physical and psychic elements are erased from his mind. This is similar to the mythic rituals in which moral purgation is seen as a means of securing a new lease of life. Saleem also loses his memory. He forgets his name and his past, and also loses all feelings, becoming numb. This is analogous to the preparation for the next stages of invigoration and jubilation in the mythic rituals.

The reference to innocence and purity alludes to another theme in Western literature, the regaining of a lost Eden, but with a satiric bite, since Saleem's restoration to innocence and purity results in his becoming a numb, idiot-like, robot-like, and even animal-like existence. The reference of purity has another ironic resonance since the word "Pakistan" means the "Land of the Pure" (287); Pakistan alludes to "Purity—that highest of ideals!—that angelic virtue for which Pakistan was named" (329).

### **5.2.6 Invigoration**

In the mythic rite of Invigoration, there is emphasis on the new lease of life, after the death-like winter. Saleem indicates at various points that when some things end, other things begin, which is similar to the anticipation of the new in the ritual of invigoration. Saleem's parents and even extended family die in the 1965 War bombings. But he declares, "a chapter ends when one's parents die, but a new kind of chapter also begins" (346). At another point, when his meek acceptance of the unfairness of others gives way to a sense of anger, he says, "Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born" (382). Wondering about the child that will be born to Parvati, Saleem again comments about the connection between endings and beginnings: ". . . it may even have occurred to me to wonder what was beginning, what was ending, and whether another secret count-down was in progress, and what would be born with my child"

(415). In this last comment there is a certain ambiguity and anxiety, not merely joyous anticipation.

Saleem undergoes death-like experiences twice and feels re-born twice. The first time after his amnesia, when he starts his work in the Pakistani army as a man-dog, he starts a new life with no memory of his past, he “had begun again” (350). He is later rejoined to his past, but he still does not remember his name and does not recover from the numbness, so he does not feel anything, not even sex or electrocution in the genitals. But he is given back his name when Parvati calls out to him. When he is made invisible in Parvati’s wicker basket he learns “what it was like, will be like, to be dead” (381). Picture Singh swears that Saleem was so light inside the basket, “like a baby” (386). After reaching Delhi, he tumbles out of the basket like a baby. He recovers from his numbness “and had begun, once again, to feel” (383). This is his second re-birth. Because of this, Picture Singh calls Saleem “baby sahib” and “baby-captain” (386).

Rites of Invigoration take various forms, the most common and the most important being the Ritual Combat, or mimetic battle between Life and Death, Summer and Winter, Old Year and New Year. In *Midnight’s Children* there is a constant battle between Saleem and Shiva. Saleem refers to Shiva as his “rival” and his “destructive, violent alter-ego” (282). The constant opposition between the two is like the mimetic battle between Life and Death, the combat between the Summer and Winter (282). After coming to know that Shiva is the real son of the Sinais, Saleem declares his resolve to guard this secret: “. . . I resolved . . . that I would guard my secret . . . with my very life” (282). Shiva claims equal importance since he was also “born at exactly midnight” like Saleem, at the moment of India’s birth as a free country. He claims that this makes him and Saleem “joint bosses” of the Midnight Children’s Conference (220). Shiva taunts Saleem as the “rich kid,” “little rich boy,” “little boy,” and mocks Saleem’s ideas

as “rubbish” and “*wind*,” and “crazy stuff” (220, 221; Rushdie’s italics). Shiva makes a “declaration of war”: “Listen, little boy—you’re so full of crazy stuff, I can see I’m going to have to take this thing over. You tell that to all these other freak kids!” (221). Confirming the declaration of war, he challenges Saleem, “you just try and stop me!” (221). And Saleem accepts the challenge with, “Yes, I’ll try” (221). The combat between the two is seen as the war of the age: “Shiva and Saleem, victor and victim; understand our rivalry, and you will gain an understanding of the age in which you live. (The reverse of this statement is also true.)” (432).

The battle between Saleem and Shiva is also one of philosophy and belief. Saleem pleads passionately in the Midnight Children’s Conference: “Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma; for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfil the promise of our birth!” (255). Shiva laughs with amusement and replies with scorn:

No, little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is only money and poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world! The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world, little Snotnose, is things. Things and their makers rule the world; look at Birla, and Tata, and all the powerful: they make things. For things, the country is run. Not for people. For things, America and Russia send aid; but five hundred million stay hungry. When you have things, then there is time to dream; when you don’t, you fight. (255)

The war is between “ideas” and “things;” between “people” and “things;” between duality and multiplicity. Saleem tries to oppose this duality: “But people are not things; if we come together, if we love each other, if we show that this, just this, this people-together, this Conference, this children-sticking-together-through-thick-and-thin, can be that third way” (255). Shiva snorts and dismisses Saleem’s ideas of “the importance-of-the individual” and “possibility-of-humanity” as “just wind.” He insists that in the contemporary age “what people are is just another kind of thing.” Saleem’s lofty ideas

of free will, hope, the soul of mankind, poetry, art etc., are impatiently and disgustedly dismissed by Shiva as “Mushy . . . Sentimental . . . rubbish” (255-56).

The irony of this war motif is that the protagonist Saleem does not come out as the victor but as the victim. Nevertheless, *Midnight's Children* includes the motifs of the next stage in the mythic rituals, namely, jubilation.

### 5.2.7 Jubilation

Saleem's marriage with Parvati, coinciding with the celebration of the nation's Republic Day symbolizes the ritual of jubilation. Saleem's marriage is not consummated but he becomes the father of Shiva's son by marrying Parvati. The new infant Aadam Sinai becomes the symbol of the new lease of life. In many primitive cultures, the new fertile period was symbolized by the introduction upon the scene of a young child thought to represent the personified New Year or, as the “Corn Baby.” We see a reflection of this in the introduction of Aadam Sinai near the end of the novel.

In keeping with the concept of time as cyclical in many primitive societies, which is reflected in the rituals, in Saleem's narrative the phases of mortification, purgation, invigoration and jubilation repeat in cycles, in each generation. Aadam Aziz has his ups and downs, and so does Ahmed Sinai, and finally Saleem also.

There are marriages, loss in the form of death or other means, and symbolic battles, victories and defeats in each generation. In a cycle, jubilation cannot be a final stage, since mortification, purgation, etc. will follow it again. Reflecting this, after the introduction of Aadam Sinai and Saleem's happy reunion with his ayah Mary, and even a hint of marriage with Padma, we see a death scene at the end of the novel. Saleem disintegrates, but the last paragraph speaks of generations after generation, a never-

ending cycle: “Yes, they will trample me underfoot. . . just as all in good time, they will trample my son . . . and his son . . . and his [son] . . . ” (463).

There are other elements such as the taunts which characterized primitive seasonal performances. Tai, the man in the Ravana mask, Saleem’s schoolmates, Naseem, Padma, Shiva, the betel-chewing old men, the teenage Pakistani soldiers and their like in the army, and others engage in cursing, mocking, and name-calling. The exchange of banter and raillery (floiting), is generally considered as a survival of the two opposing teams in the primitive Ritual Combat.

### **5.2.8 Mythical Motifs of Death, Expulsion, Return, and Reunion**

The fearful side of the seasonal rituals, transformed into themes such as expulsion from society and violent death in the Greek tragedies, find expression in *Midnight’s Children*. Many characters have violent deaths instead of natural death. Saleem’s parents, and his extended family, Parvati, Saleem’s classmates, the three teenage Pakistani soldiers, Dr Narlikar, Tai, Cyrus and many others meet not natural death but some kind of violent death, some during wars, some during other violent events. Saleem himself suffers symbolic deaths on different occasions, as already mentioned.

#### **Expulsion/Exile**

The motif of expulsion is prominent in this novel. Saleem, as a ten-year-old boy is first exiled from his parents’ home when they discover that he is not their son; then comes his second exile: his mother moves with her children to Pakistan in 1958; he returns to India in 1962 and another exile to Pakistan follows, with the whole family, as his father also agrees to move permanently to Pakistan. In 1971 Saleem is taken to East Pakistan in another exile during the Bangladesh War.

Saleem himself exiles his rival, Shiva, from the Midnight Children's Conference (282). Other instances of exiles are seen in Aadam Aziz's leaving Kashmir because of Tai's antagonism, and Ahmed Sinai's leaving Delhi because of the Ravana gang. The magicians' ghetto is forced by the henchmen of the ruling party's government to flee. Mary also goes on an exile to Goa, but later she returns to Bombay.

### **Rituals of Return and Reunion**

The motifs of return and reunion of comedies are also prominent in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem comes back to Bombay where he was born, to the very plot of land where his childhood house once stood. He is reunited with his childhood ayah Mary. Aadam Aziz also returns to his native Kashmir and dies there. The novel mixes the conventions of both tragedy and comedy, as it shows, along with the death-expulsion motifs, the other phases of the fertility ritual displaced as marriage, reunion, and return motifs. Saleem's reunion with Parvati, and his marriage to her are part of the comedy motifs of return, reunion, and reconciliation with society.

### **5.3 Myths from Different Cultures and Religions**

In addition to the ritual patterns of myth, *Midnight's Children* makes many allusions to Indian, Roman, Greek, Islamic and Middle Eastern myths and mythologies. It weaves into the narrative the gods in the Hindu mythology such as Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, Padma, Vishnu, Brahma, Rama, Sita, Varuna, Indra, Arjuna, Bhima, Shakti, Kali, Durga, Chandi, Chamunda, Maya, Sati, Uma and others (24, 74, 193-35, 200, 221, 406); there are allusions to the cosmology that is part of the Hindu myths (194, 200). We see allusions to Olympus, the abode of the Roman gods, to Kailasa, the abode of the Hindu gods, and to Leander and Hero of the Greek mythology (94, 411, 259), to Islamic myths



of prophets (163, 304-5), and the camphor-garden-filled Heaven reserved for the Islamic martyrs. In all these and other such allusions, Rushdie makes use of the myths and mythologies of different cultures and religions, drawing from them the power to evoke associations.

The names of the protagonist and other characters are from Islamic and Hindu myths. Saleem dwells at length on the significance of his last name 'Sinai,' according to the different myth systems (304-5). The names 'Padma' and 'Shiva' refer to a Hindu goddess and god respectively. In India, it is a common practice to name children after the gods. Saleem takes the trouble to explain that Padma is the name of the lotus goddess and lists her attributes (24, 194); similarly, he explains that Shiva is the god of destruction as well as procreation, and lists many attributes of the god Shiva as given in the mythology (221, 440-41).

Shiva, literalizing the connotations in his mythical name, acts as the agent of destruction as well as procreation. He is rumored to have killed whores, and he is also described as having fathered many illegitimate children. (In a democratic and equalizing gesture, he fathers children among the rich as well as among the whores). Saleem often associates Shiva and Parvati with their mythical namesakes. Describing the unexpected meeting of Parvati and Shiva in Dacca in Bangladesh, Saleem remarks, "Parvati and Shiva. . . fated to meet by the divine destiny of their names, were united at the moment of victory" of the Indian forces (389). Similarly, describing Parvati's brief stay with Shiva, Saleem again refers to mythology, and the mountain-abode of Shiva and Parvati: "Parvati-the-witch turned those simple Army quarters into a palace, a Kailasa fit for Shiva-the-god" (411); when Shiva and Parvati break up, again the myths are invoked: "The liaison of Shiva and Parvati now became a tempestuous business, filled with blows and broken plates, an earthly echo of that eternal marital battle-of-the-gods which their

namesakes are said to perform atop Mount Kailasa in the great Himalayas” (411). When Shiva comes after Saleem in the magicians’ ghetto to lock him up, Saleem sees his rival as “a mythological figure, an incarnation of destiny and destruction” (430). The child of the mortals Shiva and Parvati in the twentieth-century, like the son of the gods Shiva and Parvati in the mythology, namely, the elephant-headed god Ganesh, has the flapping ears of an elephant.

Padma, after getting an allegedly magical herb to awaken Saleem’s manhood, recites words invoking the mythical Hindu gods such as Varuna and Indra, before mixing it with Saleem’s food (193). The herb only makes Saleem sick, with “stomach-cramps and fever and frothings at the mouth” (194). But Saleem declares that Padma’s excursion in search of love-potions connected him “briefly with the world of ancient learning and sorcerers’ lore so despised by most of us nowadays” (194). But Saleem himself, unlike “most of us,” does not despise the myths. He is glad of its irruption into his last days, because “to contemplate it is to regain a little, lost sense of proportion” (194). Saleem launches into a description of the Hindu cosmology, explaining that in the Hindu mythical system, our present age is called Kali Yuga (or the Age of Darkness), and it started in on 3102 B.C. and will last 432,000 years, and it is only the fourth phase of the Maha Yuga which is, in total, ten times as long; and that it takes a thousand such Maha Yugas to make just one day of the god Brahma. Brought up in the twentieth-century concept of linear, progressive time counted in human days and years, Saleem feels “dwarfed” by the cyclical Yugas and Brahma’s one day of millions of human years.

Saleem observes that in his version, Indian history entered a new phase on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947, since on that date India emerged free from centuries of British colonization. But in the mythical version, this date is only a fleeting instant, in the incredibly long cycles of the Yugas. Saleem thus relativizes his version, pointing that it is one among

the many possible versions. Also, in the cyclical concept of time, ups and downs follow each other repeatedly, and thus the uniqueness of the event is erased to some extent.

In Saleem's fabulous tale of 1001 midnight-children with magical gifts, he alludes to the mythic heroes such as Rama, Arjuna, Bhima, and the warriors of the families of the Pandavas and Kurus (the heroes of the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) while describing the magical strength of his rival and alter ego, Shiva:

So among the midnight children were infants with powers of transmutation, flight, prophecy and wizardry . . . but two of us were born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem and Shiva, Shiva and Saleem, nose and knees, and knees and nose . . . to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war (of Rama, who could draw the undrawable bow, of Arjuna and Bhima; the ancient prowess of Kurus and Pandavas united, unstoppably in him!) . . . and to me the greatest talent of all—the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men. (200)

Saleem's gift, the ability to look into the thoughts and feelings of people is also the attribute of the gods in the myths.

To strike a note of ambiguity in the description of the midnight-children Saleem again seeks recourse to the myths. In Hindu mythology, the last Yuga in the cycle of Yugas is the Kali-Yuga, which, as Saleem explains, is

the Age of Darkness . . . in which the cow of morality has been reduced to standing, teeteringly, on a single leg! Kali-Yuga—the losing throw in our national dice game; the worst of everything; the age when property gives a man rank, when wealth is equated with virtue, when passion becomes the sole bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success (is it any wonder, in such a time, that I too have been confused about good and evil?) . . . (194)

At another point, he refers to the Kali Yuga again: “. . . it is the Kali-Yuga; the children of the hour of darkness were born, I'm afraid, in the midst of the age of darkness; so that although we found it easy to be brilliant, we were always confused about being good” (200).

In the Hindu mythology Kali Yuga is one of the four stages of development that the world goes through as part of the cycle of Yugas, each of which, as already mentioned,

comprise hundreds of thousands of years. The present age is believed to be the Kali Yuga. Hindus believe that human civilization degenerates spiritually throughout the Kali Yuga, which is referred to as the Dark Age, mainly because people are the furthest possible from God. Morality is compared to a bull. In Satya Yuga, the first stage of development, the bull had four legs, and in each age morality is reduced by a quarter. By the age of Kali Yuga, morality will be reduced to only a quarter of that of the golden age. Thus, the bull will only have one leg. It is believed that sin will increase exponentially, whilst virtue will fade and cease to flourish. People will take vows only to break them soon. In the references to the Kali Yuga, Saleem finds an excuse for his own moral defects, and those of the midnight-children in general. Kali-Yuga is to be blamed for the fact that the midnight-children did not use their gifts for the general good of their country. Saleem attributes the ‘confusion’ about what is good to the spirit of the age.

Saleem makes use of this excursion into myths to sing the praise of the goddess Padma, possibly to please Padma. Then he speculates about his own significance in this Hindu-mythic scheme of things, and decides that since he resembles the elephant with his big nose, the symbolic significance attached to the elephant in Hindu myths applies to him as well (195). In a similar gesture, he introduces a parodic “paean to Dung” when Padma angrily tells him, “What do you know, city boy? In my village there is no shame in being named for the Dung Goddess. Write at once that you are wrong, completely” (32). Her angry demand is caused by Saleem’s earlier remark that the name Padma refers to the “lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst the village folk is ‘The One Who Possesses Dung’ ” (32, 24).

Saleem describes an episode in which businesspeople use myth. The setting is shortly before the Independence and Partition of India, in Delhi. An anti-Partition, anti-

Muslim gang known as the Ravana gang targets Muslim-owned shops, factories and warehouses to extract extortion money. It threatens to burn down the goods if the owners do not pay the money. In order to escape from this gang's tactics, a Muslim-owned business calls itself by a Hindu name, as Arjuna Indiabike, using the name of the mythical hero in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. But this ruse does not work. In an irony, the anti-Muslim gang's name, as Ravana gang, is also taken from the Hindu myths, Ravana being the ten-headed demon-villain in the other Hindu epic *Ramayana*. The recourse to myths by both the criminals and their victims is satirical. When the money it demands is not paid by the Arjuna Indiabike, the Ravana gang sets fire to the warehouse of Arjuna Indiabike, and nails a crude cardboard mask of Ravana with many heads in front of the burning Arjuna warehouse. When this gang makes a deal with Ahmed, it sends a man with the Ravana mask to collect money from him. Though this gang poses as a fanatical anti-Muslim, anti-Partition movement, it is also a brilliantly-conceived commercial enterprise, as Saleem observes with irony. He also adds a hearsay comment that the gang proves 'ethical' since it keeps its promise of demanding cash only once.

There are many other references to the gods and goddesses of the Hindu mythology (193-95, 406) in the novel. The mythical bird paramahansa which symbolizes the ability to live in the physical and the spiritual worlds appears in Saleem's erudite narrative (223). These fragments of Hindu mythology are inserted into the novel, though they are not essential for the narrative. However, since they form a part of the daily cultural life of a huge part of the Indian population, they form a part of the nation's cultural history.

In a similar manner, Rushdie introduces Islamic myths into the narrative. The stories about Muhammad, the Archangel Jibreel, Islamic prophets and intellectuals are such examples (163, 304-5). Myths, legends, and history are blended in the narrative (394-

95). The figure of the legendary Caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, is evoked to describe Saleem's telepathic tours. Musing on his "unlikely incognito" enabled by his telepathy, Saleem observes: "The legendary Caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, is said to have enjoyed moving incognito amongst the people of Baghdad; I, Saleem Sinai, have also traveled in secret through the byways of my city, but I can't say I had much fun" (218). Saleem recalls the Caliph again, while narrating his return to India from Bangladesh, without passport, without being detected and retained by any border patrol. Parvati-the-witch's magic makes him invisible inside a wicker basket. Saleem again compares his magical travel to the Caliph's: "Did not the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid (in an earlier set of fabulous tales) also wander, unseen invisible anonymous, cloaked through the streets of Baghdad? What Haroun achieved in Baghdad streets, Parvati-the-witch made possible for me, as we flew through the air-lanes of the subcontinent" (381).

The Islamic myths about the rewards that await martyrs are invoked for satire and parody. Describing the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Saleem gives the conflicting accounts of the war from the Indian side and the Pakistani side. The national radio of India announces the capture of the Pakistani city of Lahore, while the national radio of Pakistan gives another version. Pakistan's national radio boasts that old men, young boys, irate grandmothers, lame men, toothless old ladies—all fought the Indian army. Saleem describes the Pakistani-propaganda-version to Padma:

Down to the last man and child, they died; but they saved the city, holding off the Indians until air support arrived! Martyrs, Padma! Heroes, bound for the perfumed garden! Where the men would be given four beauteous houris, untouched by man or djinn; and the women, four equally virile males! *Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?* What a thing this holy war is, in which with one supreme sacrifice men may atone for all their evils! No wonder Lahore was defended; what did the Indians have to look forward to? Only reincarnation—as cockroaches, maybe, or scorpions, or green-medicine-wallahs—there's really no comparison. (340)

While the passage mocks the myth of a sexual paradise rewarded to martyrs irrespective of all the evils they may have done in the past, it also shows the Pakistanis' mocking of an alternative Indian myth, the Hindu myth of reincarnation.

During the war, muezzins preach from the minarets of Pakistan's mosques such sacred myths as "that anyone who died in battle went straight to the camphor garden" (339). They invite the Pakistani people to make sacrifices "as never before" (339). The poor believe in such myths. Shaheed's poor, debt-ridden sharecropper father feels happy that his not-yet-sixteen year old son Shaheed may perhaps enter the perfumed garden by becoming a martyr in the holy war.

When Padma sheds tears for the members of Saleem's family who died by the bombings during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, Saleem tells her in half-mockery: "Mourn for the living. The dead have their camphor gardens" (345). Since he did not die during the war, he sees himself as one who is "barred from celestial lawns . . . for whom there were no houris, untouched by man or djinn, to provide the promised consolations of eternity" (345). The various references to "djinn" in the novel are allusions to "the class of spirits, lower than the angels, capable of appearing in human and animal forms and influencing humankind for either good or evil" (The Random House Dictionary of the English language, Unabridged). Sometimes Saleem puns the "djinn" with the gin or alcohol that Ahmed becomes addicted to (145, 155, 204).

Rushdie imports myths from other cultures also. We learn about Sin, the moon-god from Hadhramaut, who controls the waters from a distance (175, 261). Similarly, Saleem informs us about the origin and meaning of the word "Abracadabra." This first word emanating from the child Aadam Sinai, who has not spoken until he is a three-year-old, leads Saleem to talk about the origin of this word. He tells that it is "not an Indian word at all, a cabbalistic formula derived from the name of the supreme god of

the Basilidian gnostics, containing the number of 365, the number of the days of the year, and of the heavens, and of the spirits emanating from the god Abraxas” (459).

Fawzia Afzal Khan suggests that Rushdie uses the genre of myth, both as a strategy of liberation and as an ideological form that avoids historical petrification. Rushdie uses, along with myth other genres such as the comic epic, oral tradition, autobiography, picaresque, allegory, fantasy, realism, etc. In Khan’s reading, the aim of such mixing is not to strive for a wholeness born of a commingling of genres, but to mirror the state of postcolonial societies and individuals. As with the epic form which Rushdie uses as well as parodies, he also debunks myth.

The inclusion of mythic and comic epic elements could be seen as a retreat from reality and realism. But such a retreat is not a solution. Rushdie’s use of mythic elements, as Afzal Khan observes, often seems to undermine myth itself. Saleem often tries to escape from the pain of facing his schoolmates’ ridicule (about his big nose, his runny goo, the facial birthmarks etc.), his parents’ expectations, and other torments by retreating into hidden, restricted places such as the washing chest of dirty clothes, the clocktower, etc. But Saleem’s hiding in the washing chest leads to a triggering of his telepathic powers and he gets to know and communicate with more people (the other midnight children all over India) than before. Thus retreats are shown to be ineffective as permanent solutions for the problems from which one wants to run away.

In a general sense, myths take time to develop. Rushdie has said, in an interview by John Haffenden, that myth is a cultural accumulation, a collective experience, not an individual achievement; that one can learn from and use its shapes, since they provide strength to the work, but one cannot sit down to write one intentionally. The fact that many Indians expressed their feeling that Rushdie had written down in *Midnight’s Children* their own shared experience, signifies that the novel became a collective



experience, like a myth; it meant for Rushdie that the novel had a mythic content, a shared experience of his generation (Interview by Haffenden, 44-45). In Rushdie's view, society picks certain things out of experience and those are its myths. But one cannot sit down and write a myth (see Interview by Una Chaudhuri 26).

Near the end of the novel, Saleem refers to the creation of myths for each age. Thirty-one year old, and resigned about his impending death, and the thirty-one-year old free nation, he says, “. . . the nearly thirty-one-year-old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. New myths are needed; but that's none of my business” (457-58). Each new generation has to create its own myths, myths in the sense of a collective experience.

#### **5. 4 Legends and Folktales**

Legends are quasi-historical narratives and are popularly accepted as historical. Rushdie's allusions to historical figures such as the Islamic prophets such as Muhammad, Ibn Sina, Maslama and others, and his allusions to the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid exemplify his inclusion of legends in the narrative. In the very first chapter he alludes to Scheherazade and the 1001 nights of *Arabian Nights*.

We see references to some folktales and fairy-tales also in *Midnight's Children*. The nine-year-old Saleem buries himself in the tales of the heroes of popular myths from various traditions, such as “Hatim Tai and Batman, Superman and Sinbad . . . [and] Aladdin,” (153). He imagines himself as Aladdin, and the genie of the lamp. They help to fend Saleem from the pain of facing the ridicule of his classmates, the disapproval of his family, etc. They help him to forget these torments by escaping into an imaginary world.

We see an example of Saleem's eclectic choice of myths, epics, folk tales, and modern Hollywood movies in his description of the lovers Homi Catrack and Lila Sabarmati. Describing their heading towards a rendezvous, he compares Homi Catrack and Lila with an eclectic list of lovers from various myths: Radha and Krishna, Rama and Sita (from Hindu mythology), Laila and Majnu (from the Middle East), Romeo and Juliet (from the West), and even the myths of Hollywood—Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn (lovers in Hollywood movies and in real life) (259). Saleem mixes the story of Romeo and Juliet with the Greek myth of Leander. He describes Lila Sabarmati as “Juliet coming out on her balcony” and her secret lover Homi Catrack as “Leander swimming the Hellespont towards Hero's burning candle” (259). Similarly, Saleem combines Hindu mythology and Greek mythology in the same sentence to describe Methwold's palaces: “Methwold's Estate: four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents (conquerors' houses! Roman mansions; three-storey homes of gods standing on a two-storey Olympus, a stunted Kailash!) “ (94). Olympus, the mountain of the Greek gods, and Kailash, the mountain of the Hindu god Shiva are combined in the same sentence to describe the hill on which stand the houses of British colonials. While the hill on which the houses of Methwold Estate stand is lower (two-storeyed) like the “stunted” mountains of Greek and Hindu myths, the abodes of the conquerors/colonizers, the Romans and the English, are not only higher, but are three-storeyed.

Rushdie uses an eclectic combination of different mythologies. In an essay, he describes Saleem in terms that remind us of Rushdie's own tendency and preferred method: “Saleem Sinai makes use, eclectically, of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses” (*Imaginary Homelands*, 16).

Rushdie has remarked in various interviews about his love of fairy tales and fantasy, such as the *Arabian Nights*. The importance of this mode of narration to Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass is seen in one of their conversations. Grass refers to the impact of German fairytales on his childhood imagination and his use of the archetypal figures of those tales. He sees fairytales as a mode which show us another kind of truth: “I think using these fairytales is bringing us to another kind of truth: to a much, much richer truth than you get by collecting facts of this flat realism” (“Fictions” 76). Grass believes that there are many realities and the problem is that we do not accept that there are many realities. Each group or side wants only its own particular reality and not a multiple reality. Rushdie also, in various interviews and essays, has remarked that he finds realism inadequate for the purpose of representing our contemporary world, and that the mode of fantasy used in fairy tales serves to represent a different kind of reality than the reductive representation of realism.

*Midnight's Children* repeatedly evokes the fairy-tale mode by the recurrent use of the phrase “once upon a time,” which is the characteristic beginning of fairy tales and folk-tales (9, 213, 216, 259, 280, 320, 419, etc.). At one point Saleem parodies even the ending of fairy tales. After describing the Nawab of Kif’s hindering of free election in the principedom of Kif in Pakistan, Saleem comments: “*And we all lived happily . . . at any rate, even without traditional last-sentence fiction of fairy-tales, my story does indeed end in fantasy*” (326; Rushdie’s italics). The Nawab prevents members of the opposition party who are his guests for the engagement ceremony of his daughter, from voting. This ensures the winning of the ruling government headed by the military-General-and-President Ayub Khan. The Pakistani newspapers announce “a crushing victory” for the President’s party, while in reality that “victory” is concocted by tactics such as the use of force and manipulations by the Nawab. Compared to such glaring fictions in the news-reports, Saleem feels that he has been only the humblest of “jugglers-with-facts” (326). Saleem here ironically compares the fictive nature of

the media and compares them to the fairy tales. This puts fairy tales in a bad light. Unlike his creator Rushdie, Saleem seems to think of modes such as fairy tales, folk tales, folklore, and popular comics more as an escape world than as an alternative and useful way of seeing reality.

Another reference to fairy tales, and modern comic-strip-heroes comes when the nearly-nine-year-old Saleem is beset by anxiety due to the pressure of the expectations of his immediate and extended family, soothsayers, newspapers, Prime Minister, and ayah. He compares this anxiety to a beast that champs and scratches inside his stomach. In order to escape from this beast and also from the people around him “who seemed to possess a devastating sense of purpose,” he buries himself in fairy-tales. The fabulous stories of Hatim Tai, Superman, Batman, Sinbad, Ali Baba, Aladdin, etc. help Saleem to get through the difficult age of “nearlynine” (153). During mundane activities he imagines that he is “Aladdin, voyaging in a fabulous cave.” When he sees servants dusting vases, he imagines “Ali Baba’s forty thieves hiding in the dusted urns.” He imagines himself turning into the genie of the lamp, and thus avoids, for the most part, the “terrible notion” that he alone in the universe had no idea of what he should be, or how he should behave. Obsessed and haunted by the idea of purpose and greatness, he yelps aloud, “Where do you get it?” (153). His schoolmates boast of their ambitions and goals, their “certitudes about the future,” but Saleem sits quiet as if he is the “mild-mannered Clark Kent protecting his secret identity” of the Superman (154). His schoolmates, however, mock him that he will grow up to be “Pinocchio” (154). The gap between the images of fairy-tales and modern myths that Saleem has about himself and those that his friends have, indicates the double-edge of these fictive tales. They can be heroic and pleasing or the opposite.

Saleem’s father Ahmed also is susceptible to legends and fantasies. When he is under the influence of whisky’s djinns, he goes out and buys a bird. Explaining to his secretary Alice

Pereira about the shrouded birdcage, he tells her that his new acquisition is a bulbul, an Indian nightingale. Alice reports the outcome of Ahmed's journey into the fairy-tale world: "For God knows how long, he tells me all about bulbuls; all fairy stories of its singing and what-all; how this Calipha was captivated by its song, how the singing could make longer the beauty of the night" (203). Ahmed babbles to Alice, quoting Persian and Arabic, about the magical bird in the legends and folk-tales. But when he takes off the cover of the cage, Alice sees "nothing but a talking budgie" whose feathers some crook in the market "must have painted" to fool the buyer. Alice does not have the heart to tell poor Ahmed that he has been fooled. Ahmed commands the bird, "Sing, little bulbul! Sing!". But the bird, instead of singing, merely repeats Ahmed's words in his own voice (not in its own voice, the squawky voice of a bird), and dies because of the paint (203).

Another instance of Ahmed's excursion into fairy-tales comes when he hears Methwold's boast of his illustrious ancestor, the first Methwold, who dreamed of a scheme to have a British Bombay by joining the seven isles, by reclaiming land from the sea, and by building a British fort. The day before his departure from India, the second Methwold regales his company with tales of "the first Methwold who had dreamed the city into existence". And Ahmed, apeing Oxford drawl, anxious to impress the departing Englishman, responds: "Actually, old chap, ours is a pretty distinguished family, too" (110). He elaborates this story, "lubricated by whisky and driven on by self-importance," telling Methwold that he has royal Mughal blood. When Methwold exclaims in disbelief that Ahmed is merely trying to pull his leg, Ahmed, "beyond the point of return, is obliged to press on, and declare: 'Wrong side of the blanket, of course; but Mughal, certainly' " (110). In order to insist on his fairy-tale pedigree, Ahmed is willing to accept even an out-of-wedlock ancestry. Ahmed continues, caught in the chain-reaction of his own invention, "Oh yes, many old families possessed such curses. In our line, it is handed down from eldest son to eldest son—in writing only, because

merely to speak it is to unleash its power, you know” (110). When Methwold expresses his amazement and asks Ahmed if he remembers the words of the curse, Ahmed is inspired to mix some real historical figures in his fairy-tale. He taps his forehead and says, “All in here; all memorized. Hasn’t been used since an ancestor quarreled with the Emperor Babar and put the curse on his son Humayun . . . terrible story, that—every schoolboy knows” (110). The historical Mughal emperors Babar and Humayun thus get woven into Ahmed’s fairy-tale about himself. Ahmed uses a legend about these royal figures that is said to be familiar to schoolboys in India, but we are not told that story. Thus fairy-tale, history and legend all become blended. The eventual result of this creative mixture of imagination and history is not really happy. Because, in his later years, Ahmed, “in the throes of his utter retreat from reality,” would lock himself in a room and try to remember “a curse which he had dreamed up one evening” to impress the Englishman Methwold (110). Trying to make his invented curse real, Ahmed makes the mongrel bitch Sherri “the guinea-pig for his experiments with the family curse” (203). The effect of whisky makes him think that the curse “was no fiction” but that he had just forgotten the words of the magical curse. So he spends long hours in his solitary office room experimenting with formulae for the curse. He curses the dog to test the magical power of the alleged family curse. Despite Ahmed’s curses, the dog simply refuses to “turn purple or break into boils” (204). So he takes revenge on the bitch for refusing to succumb to his sorceries. One day he takes the whole family and the dog for an outing in the car and then leaves the dog out in the street, and then drives away, accelerating his car. The dog chases the car for miles and finally bursts an artery because of the running and dies on the street, spouting blood. This gruesome result of Ahmed’s tampering with fairy-tales reminds us that fairy-tales are not always happy and joyous. Often they incorporate horrific elements. They are the expression of our aspiring dreams as well as our deepest fears.

Another time when Ahmed is associated with fairy tales, it is to evoke his deterioration and withdrawal from family life. Saleem's tenth birthday is approaching and Saleem describes his home-atmosphere. His father Ahmed stays away from the breakfast table. "But a more depressing indication of his withdrawal from family life," Saleem tells us, "was that he rarely told us bedtime stories any more, and when he did we didn't enjoy them, because they had become ill-imagined and unconvincing. Their subject-matter was still the same, princes goblins flying horses and adventures in magic lands, but in his perfunctory voice we could hear the creaks and groans of a rustling, decayed imagination" (201-02). Thus, fantasy alone does not make a good fairy-tale. Fantasy, like anything else, has to be transmuted by art to be effective.

Fairy tales, folk tales etc., do not give us what can be seen as a purely imaginary world, completely cut off from reality. In fact, it is debatable whether imagination can be completely free from reality; what imagination constructs is possibly based on what we already know as reality, to enhance our wishes and fears. This enhancement can be enabling in our perception of the world, especially when our senses are dulled due to various reasons.

If the imaginative tales such as folk tales and fairy tales were completely separated from our reality, we would not find them interesting and we would not be able to empathize with them, even at an unconscious level. Rushdie values fantasy as a needed addition to realism and therefore values the modes of myths, fairy tales, folk tales and fantasy for their contribution to depict reality in a more inclusive manner.

## CONCLUSION

*Midnight's Children* invites us to see it as a novel that is pervaded by a multiplicity of voices, meanings, allusions, and genres. It persuades us, not to look for a final and single meaning or truth, but rather to give up our desire and need for singularity in perspective, interpretation and evaluation. Its eclectic combinations challenge our tendency to classify it in one category and approach it in a manner appropriate to that particular genre.

We are therefore encouraged to approach the novel more in the spirit of a reader than in the spirit of an interpreter who is in search of one dominant interpretation or meaning. My approach to the study of the novel initially involved an interpretive selection of topics to be explored such as history, epic, myth, etc., which appeared to be recurrent throughout the novel. However, this selection was explored as many coexistent possibilities of meanings rather than as leading to a choice of one dominant trend or hegemonic sense. As my title for this work suggests, it is an effort to listen to the polyphony of *Midnight's Children*, the polyphony which is, by definition, made up of many voices. As the novel delights in exploring plurality and resisting final closure of meaning, my exploration also came to reflect this aspect.

As many critics have observed, the novel attempts to take into account as many different realities as possible, and uses different voices and languages for this. Even contradictory and conflicting viewpoints are presented, as they are asserted by different voices, but none is given the privilege of being the dominant one. It is the dialogue between the different viewpoints that opens the space for the genuine exploration of meaning and truth. Since any single point of view cannot be very inclusive but selective, and necessarily has blind spots, the dialogue between different viewpoints brings more hidden aspects in each one of the viewpoints to our attention, by the other voices.



In an ironical contrast to the first-person, autobiographical mode of the novel, *Midnight's Children* enables us to hear many voices and versions. As the plural noun "Children" in the title of the novel suggests, what we hear in the novel is not that of a single midnight "child" Saleem, the first-person voice of the narrator alone, but a plurality of voices. The voices are not really restricted to the midnight-children; they include the multiplicity of the voices of a large number of characters, even the multiple voices of the same character at different times and spaces, the voices of different classes, religions, nations, races, and so on. The narrator's voice is sometimes the voice of a participant of the actions and events he describes, sometimes that of an eye-witness, sometimes that of a commentator who is sometimes omniscient, sometimes partly omniscient, and sometimes ignorant. In addition to the narrator's version, we hear other versions and voices filtered through his narration.

The variety of perspectives, which Scholes and Kellogg call "multifariousness" is not resolved into a single authoritative vision in *Midnight's Children* (273). As has been noted by various writers, art is conditioned by social and cultural factors which vary with time and place. In the twentieth-century world, absolutism in most areas has been replaced by a kind of relativism and ambiguity. Hence the novel as a genre also reflects this attitude and manifests multiplicity rather than monologism. In the words of Scholes and Kellogg, the very movement of mind which spawned the novel and elevated it to the position of the dominant literary form has been "a movement away from dogma, certainty, fixity, and all absolutes in metaphysics, in ethics, and in epistemology" (276). Concepts such as Truth, Beauty, and Goodness are not anymore seen in absolute terms. Bakhtin emphasized the same view when he discussed polyphony as a way of seeking truth and meaning in dialogism and multiplicity, instead of in monologism and closure. As Scholes and Kellogg observe, the novel, as a major literary source that promotes

understanding, has played a vital role in this movement, particularly “in calling into question categorical imperatives which society seeks to impose on the ethical behavior of individuals” (276).

Rushdie’s metaphor of pickle for narratives which highlights the various ingredients and the process of slow transformation by the interaction of the different components is apt for describing the process of interpretation also. The different meanings and interpretations obtained by the study of the novel are all important. They all contribute to the total meaning. But none of them, by itself, can be isolated as the final meaning, separated from the other possibilities. No one meaning or interpretation can give us the desirable product—just as no single ingredient by itself, separated from the other ingredients that go into a pickle, can give us the taste of the pickle which has been formed by all the ingredients mixed and subjected to a transformative process. The final product has something of all the ingredients and but each component has been transformed by the process of mixing and leaking into one another. In the literary work also the components get mixed, and they enter into a dialogue with one another, and in the final text they have become different. No single component can represent the whole product. The novel cannot be reduced to the essence of one single genre or meaning. The same holds good for genres also. The sense of comic epic, the features of epic, myths, history, family saga, the picaresque, the political and social satire, fantasy, self-conscious fiction—all these, among still other modes, have to be taken into account in order not to reduce the meaning of the novel to a single approach or interpretation. Our tendency to study the different aspects such as history, epic, myth, etc., of *Midnight’s Children* individually is our attempt to break the whole into parts in order to facilitate our study and analysis. But we do not have to take one part as the whole.

The narrator in *Midnight's Children* reveals himself to be somewhat unreliable, occasionally by his own admission. Rushdie enhances this impression by other oblique methods, such as Saleem's apparent unawareness of other errors and his hard-to-believe arguments and insistence that he had been the cause, in some way or other, of most of the important incidents in the national history. Saleem's imperfect omniscience and unreliability reflect the universal limitations of human perception and understanding. This device also serves another important function: it gives the readers the responsibility of seeking the truth and meaning. The sophisticated use of an unreliable or semi-reliable eye-witness narrator, as Scholes and Kellogg point out (265), and as Saleem/Rushdie themselves point out in the novel (293), is an aspect of the modern author's desire to make the reader participate in the act of creation. We, the readers, are pushed to participate in the investigation of what really happened inside and outside the characters and situations presented by the narrator. For this we have to listen to the plurality of voices in the narrative. Saleem's posture as eye-witness, participant of the events, *histor* or inquirer, and his thinly disguised role of rhetorician-and-artist—all these devices contribute to the polyphony and we the readers have to listen to the different voices both for our understanding of reality and for our aesthetic pleasure.

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