

CHAINED AND SUPERNATURALLY ENDOWED BY HISTORY: AUGUST 15TH, 1947, SALMAN RUSHDIE AND THE ONE THOUSAND AND ONE CHILDREN OF MIDNIGHT

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Abstract

This study deals with Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* and the dialectic created between subject and landscape there. The premise for this novel by its acclaimed writer is quite amazing: At the stroke of midnight on August 15th, 1947, India achieved independence and became an independent country, free from the shackles of Britain. One thousand and one children were born in the hour of independence, born together with their "new" country, brought into light from midnight to 1 AM, all one thousand and one children, the novel's narrator included, being born with magical powers, the potency of which increases the closer the child was born to midnight. In one way, *Midnight's Children* can be seen as a blueprint of the way a subject—particularly one who leans on history to place itself in the world—both attempts to construct, and is forced to dissolve its sense of self. The characters in the novel have seemed to have their fates written into them by the symbolic realm, the cultural process of signification; they seem to be victims of their socio-cultural backgrounds. However, *Midnight's Children* does not entirely follow the Lacanian notion that the symbolic realm entirely constitutes an individual. Subjects are not entirely constructed by their circumstances. History, it could be said, provides the landscape for the novels' main character, Saleem. And it is the peculiar nature of Indian history that this landscape is prone to create numerous, multiple realities. In *Midnight's Children*, both reality and the subject are invalidated by each other, then—they are both shown to be fictions. The subject is not whole or stable. And the landscape—and by landscape I mean the cultural context, the history, the sociological outlook—of India can be changed, re-ordered, reconstituted. In short, it is viewed as imaginary, it is imaginary.

Keywords: *Exile, Landscape, Subject, Memory, History, Reality, Fiction, Homeland*—including *Imaginary, Identity, Nationality*.

Midnight's Children brings into contact the operation of exile on the individual and the operation of exile on the exile's world. Woven into its very telling is how the fictions of identity and nationality, the mythical worlds of the past and the present can be deformed and displaced and made to work against any authoritarian

view of history. It refuses, explicitly and voraciously, to countenance any of the grand narratives that have governed Eastern or Western civilization, taking the stance that Jean-François Lyotard has identified as focal to the postmodern condition.¹

Midnight's Children is, ostensibly, the story of Saleem Sinai's life (Saleem is both the central character of the novel and its narrator). And, though the narrative ranges across a number of years either side of that date, the moment of central importance to the novel is the very second of Indian independence, midnight on August 15th, 1947. Precisely at this moment Saleem is born. For the rest of his life Saleem, living contemporaneously with the new state, finds that the fate of the country and his personal fate are inextricably interlinked and that, just as the letter written to him by the prime minister on the occasion of his birth suggests, he cannot escape from the hand of history that has been laid upon him. Through this twinning of individual to his homeland, Rushdie, rather paradoxically, explores the notion of exile and the impossibility of an individual ever fully being at home in the country to which he was born.

Although Saleem goes into exile in *Midnight's Children*, it is not the physical process of exile. Rather, Rushdie seems to suggest that the experience of exile—being trapped between a number of homelands, never really feeling whole or solid—begins in Saleem Sinai from the moment of his birth. This is not to say that Rushdie takes an ahistorical view of subjectivity, but rather that the strange historical circumstances of the new Indian state give rise to this strange ungrounded sense of the self. To

understand this we must understand the strange movements in Indian history – the long period of colonialism and unrest that culminated in independence and Saleem’s birth. Even in the homeland of India, the colonized were considered to be exiles, ruled as they were by an outside hand. For example, Saleem’s father was secretly pleased to be turning white, for it made him feel more at home in his businessman persona: “ş...ţ he was secretly rather pleased when they failed to explain the problem or prescribe a cure, because he had long envied the Europeans their pigmentation” (*Midnight’s Children* 178).

India at the time of Saleem’s birth was a new country in many ways. It lacked the sense of national identity that had grown up in other lands; it even was getting used to a new shape after the partitioning of Pakistan. In many ways, it was a country that had been completely constructed, created again – being formed by an outside hand. The novel often calls the country a “dream,” and it is under these conditions that the subject has to negotiate his or her identity. It seems completely understandable that the response to such a country should be to believe that “you are forever other than you were” (237).

Saleem has to construct himself in relation to an imaginary edifice – the notion of “India.” His life is interlinked with the history of his nation, and he must construct himself in relation to ideas regarding that nation. As Saleem says, “Even a baby is faced with the problem of defining itself... I was bombarded with a confusing multiplicity of views on the subject...” (130). What this confusing “multiplicity of views” points towards is a construction of the self that is negotiated against a number of linguistic and discursive factors. In one way, *Midnight’s Children* can be seen as a blueprint of the way a subject – particularly one who leans on history to place itself in the world – both attempts to construct, and is forced to dissolve its sense of self.

Jacques Lacan, in his groundbreaking psychological work, states that the ideal existence of the subject, the Ideal-I, was actually a determination and construction of the big O,

“the Other,” as the sum of cultural and sociological systems, what he called “the symbolic realm.” This realm’s structure was primarily linguistic in nature, as it rested on the process of signification. In this way, the subject is determined both literally and metaphorically by the “letter.”² In *Midnight’s Children*, this notion is emphasized and given a specifically post-colonial light with the adherence of fate to the notion of naming. For example, the soldier Shaheed – whose name is translated by Rushdie as “martyr” – is destroyed by a flying pomegranate (in actuality a grenade), just as he had foretold. He had “finally earned his name” (377). Equally, Shiva (the destroyer) is finally the one who destroys *Midnight’s Children* and robs them of their powers. In the words of Saleem himself: “Our names contain our fate, living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also the victims of our titles” (304).

The characters in the novel have seemed to have their fates written into them by the symbolic realm, the cultural process of signification; they seem to be victims of their socio-cultural backgrounds. However, *Midnight’s Children* does not entirely follow the Lacanian notion that the symbolic realm entirely constitutes an individual. Subjects are not entirely constructed by their circumstances.

Memory plays a large part in this process of creating subjectivity, but not as it normally might in a narration of this kind. In the classical fictional memoir, memory is utilized to create and understand the subjectivity of the person remembering – the person is as he is because certain factors have shaped his past. However, in *Midnight’s Children*, memory is a more active process. It does not only simply reveal past shaping influences on Saleem’s life, but it also actively shapes his present subjectivity by creating a changed past. More than once, Saleem admits that he has changed the date of Ghandi’s death, to suit his own narrative purposes. In other matters he realizes that the chronology or precise factual information of what he says cannot be true – indeed, at one point he suggests

that his nemesis Shiva has died, then admits moments later that he did so through nothing more than wishful thinking.

However, the effect of these misremembering flights of fancy and inaccuracies is not to invalidate the story that Saleem is telling. Rather, they are to claim a new truth-value for myth and memory. The unreliability of Saleem as narrator is an attempt to wrestle truth from its natural factual home and to create a new validity for the kind of reconstruction in which Saleem is partaking. He says,

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)

The subject, then, through the process of memory, changes his past in an attempt to create his present—to form what he is. And this, as Stuart Hall has pointed out in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" is precisely what the immigrant is forced to do by the distance created between himself and the lands of which he can never truly be a part. Because he is not of dry land, he or she must find elsewhere to create a solid basis for his or her identity—and create a self—"through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth."³

History, it could be said, provides Saleem's landscape. And it is the peculiar nature of Indian history that this landscape is prone to create numerous, multiple realities, that the confusion of the exile's groundlessness can occur in a country in which Saleem has always lived. What is more, Rushdie gives his central character a peculiar gift (the most important of all the gifts given to those children who were born during the hour of midnight on the day of Indian independence). Saleem is a telepath and therefore can read minds—he can even hear all the thoughts of his nation. This gift places Saleem in the center of the active and passive motions of history, locating him in an uncertain place in which he is not sure whether he is creating or simply receiving history:

[T]he feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts

I jumped inside were mine [. . .] I was somehow making them happen . . . which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unsharpened material of my gift." (174).

Here Saleem pours scorn on his belief that he is creating the things that he sees, that the other times, he is quite sure that he is the creator and prime mover of history.

This, I feel, sets the terms of the particular historical dialectic that is operating in the text of *Midnight's Children*. The subject both creates and is created by the world and history in which he lives. He cannot see himself as merely the object of history, his fate laid out for him, as the soldier-martyr was tied fatefully to his name. Nor should he enter into "the illusion of the artist" that he is creating history and that, at its root, the world is within his power. Rather—and again, we see the inbetweenness associated with the exile—these two poles, the world and the subject, are in a continuous interplay of construction and deformation, constantly changing and remaking the other.

This dialectic, this shuttling to and fro, means one thing in terms of the stability and certainty of both subject and the world. They must both be considered fictions, because their dialectical relationship to each other means that neither can fully be considered whole. This is precisely why both India and Saleem's body start to crack under the pressure of their twin relationship—the problems of India's history mirror the slow falling apart of Saleem's body. The cracks are caused by each pole's relationship with the other: because Saleem creates history and history creates Saleem, neither can be considered real, or, at least, anchored in factual reality. They are, instead, self-creating fictions. Saleem presents an excellent metaphor to explain the form that these fictions take:

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 up against the screen . . . illusion dissolves, or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality. (106)

The structure that Saleem is describing is that of the gaze—the interplay between he who looks and that which he looks at. This particular gaze is the gaze of the exile, that is the gaze of the moving subject who can see the world from far away (“in the back row”) and close-up (“until your nose is almost pressed up against the screen”).

Both reality and the subject are invalidated by each other, then—they are both shown to be fictions. The subject is not whole or stable. And the landscape—and by landscape I mean the cultural context, the history, the sociological outlook—of India can be changed, re-ordered, reconstituted. In short, it is imaginary. However, this is not to say that these notions—of subject and landscape—do not have any worth. In fact, *Midnight's Children* suggests that there are intensely important uses to which the dialectic of twin fictions (subject and landscape) can be put. As Rushdie points out, “Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real” (200). What is more, this metaphorical content can have real and important political results. A space that invalidates and places into question authoritative forms of truth can enable a freer way of seeing, a “rebellious discourse” that challenges “God, authority, and social law.”⁴ It can open up a space, a location, which is not reliant on national borders or a concept of the self, “a space beyond existing political, social, and cultural binaries.”⁵

It is clear from *Midnight's Children* that the dialectic created between subject and landscape is enormously important to resistance and change. To understand its importance to Rushdie, one need only look at what occurs to Saleem when he absents himself from the difficult negotiation between history and self, when he becomes certain of (or, perhaps better, apathetic to) who he is and where he has come from. When Saleem and his family move to Pakistan, they, like many migrants, try to become one with their new country. “Saleem’s parents said, ‘We must all become new people’; in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal” (310). They attempt—like Saladin—to wipe away their pasts, to purify themselves of their

history and identify with their new home. Saleem does not achieve this aim until the night that a bombing raid kills almost all his family and his mind is wiped clean when he is struck by flying debris: “I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me... wiped clean as a wooden writing chest, brained (just as prophesized) by my mother’s silver spittoon” (343).

This “purity,” which in actuality is amnesia, not only purges Saleem of all his memories but also of the multiplicity of selves that were held in suspension by his remembering (“all the Saleems go pouring out of me...”). By cutting himself off from the dialectical interplay between himself and his historical landscape, Saleem becomes for a time the single, unitary classical ideal of the self. He is one, singular and stable. He also becomes, however, the perfect soldier—fighting without reasoning over the morality or rectitude of his actions. He becomes the Buddha (the name recollecting the Buddhist ideal of kamma-niradha, an unbecoming), who does what he is told: “emptied of history, the buddha learned the art of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan.” The statement is less a broadside against the state of Pakistan—though Rushdie certainly does not shy away from the horrors inflicted on the soon-to-be Bangladesh—than a statement of distaste at the necessary violence of nationalism. The subject who enters into the painful and difficult dialectic with his landscape and his past as an exile cannot become a submissive citizen of any country; he is freed of the singularity that nationalism thrives upon. To forget history, to put a stop to the constant shuttling between an open subjectivity and an imaginary history is to allow the efficacy of power to succeed. “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”⁶

While Saleem’s forays into the connections between himself and Indian history may seem a-historical (that is, replete with fictions and inaccuracies, determined by subjective viewpoint), they are, in fact, actually making an extremely important intervention into the

authoritative account of Indian history. For, by stating that he, Saleem, a historically unimportant person (at least in the classical perspective) is actually the central driving force behind history, is to free history from its materialistic bounds. For materialism, just like nationalism and religious fundamentalism, is a discourse that is singular, that will not allow a multiplicity of viewpoints and realities. Saleem's intervention states that any exile has a claim to state the truth of history, that anybody is central to the world and can claim reality for himself. Rushdie's narrator frees people to be like the magicians who "were people whose hold on reality was absolute, they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was" (399).

Saleem's writing of history—and his acceptance of history's writing of him—overturns the usual place of the book as the means of authority and oppression. Homi Bhabha has pointed out that the book is the "measure of mimesis and mode of civil authority and order."⁷ However, by making an intervention into language—through his use of puns, linguistic tricks, literary connections, and purely phonetic connections—Saleem and, behind him, Salman Rushdie, claim the medium of writing for the forces of multiplicity, openness and the freedom of play. In this way, his intervention can be considered particularly post-modern, in the sense that Lyotard used the word. But, unlike the dominant part of post-modernism, there is a politics central to *Midnight's Children*, despite the fact that it is not a politics in the usual mode, nor is its primary aim the freedom of peoples from physical tyranny. Rather, its attempt is textual, following the understanding (one that has been current in theoretical accounts ever since Foucault expounded his theory of discursive power) that the mode of the production of tyranny, the very basis that makes tyranny possibly, is an authoritarianism of the sign and not of the sword.

What, precisely, is the distinction between a politics of the sign and one of the sword? And

how can we face criticisms such as those made by Aijaz Ahmad that Rushdie's prose is "occupied so entirely by Power that there is no space left for either resistance or its representation"?⁸ The answer to this question can be found in the figure of Shiva, the child with whom Saleem was swapped at birth and who fulfills the role of his nemesis throughout the novel. If Saleem is interested in creating a discussion, a free interchange of ideas by setting up the conferences of *Midnight's Children* using his telepathic powers, then Shiva is interested only in the material "realities" as he sees them: "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 no place for dreamers or their dreams" (255). In a way, Shiva's statement could easily be a representation of the Marxist position as critics such as Ahmad have put forward: the world can be separated between the oppressors and the oppressed, monied and poor, colonizer and colonized; the textual answer is just a dream. Yet, by the end of the novel,

Shiva has become a tool of the state and brings about the destruction of *Midnight's Children*, as well as the state of emergency that is tantamount to a dictatorship.

Shiva's turn to oppression, *Midnight's Children* seems to suggest, is based upon his initial system of belief, which itself was based wholly on the binaries that were present in his speech as a child. Likewise, the materialist base of Marxist criticism that relies on the separation of victimizer and victim, rich and poor, colonized and colonizer, etc.—is actually built upon the possibility of that power that it tries to defeat. Ahmad's criticism of Rushdie could well be the criticism that Shiva put forward: his novels are just dreams and "the world is no place for dreamers and their dreams." But Rushdie's "dreams" can only be opposed to a world that does not accept mutability, multiplicity, and openness. Passed through the filter of dreams the world becomes a space in which not only oppression, but also the means of oppression can be combated. Rushdie's dream worlds present a

space in which history can be put to the ends of those who need it—in which it can be used strategically and where it can overflow the boundaries put on it by authoritarianism of all colours. It is a place however, as Marlene Nourbese Philip remarks in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*: “the historical realities are not erased or obliterated.”⁹

The importance of Rushdie’s fiction then is its openness, its multi-vocal quality that refrains from positing one set vision of the world and, in fact, erodes all possible viewpoints. “There have always been many voices in Rushdie’s novels, a multitude of spoken perspectives,”¹⁰ Jacqueline Bardolph writes in her essay on Rushdie, “Language is Courage.” The narrator of *Midnight’s Children* is not one voice, but thousands of voices “as many voices as flowed through him in his midnight meetings in which the Children of Midnight all spoke together”¹¹. Discursive singularity is impossible. Each subject is, like those meetings, “a sort of many-headed monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel...the very essence of multiplicity” (229). Like Saleem, the exile can be seen as arising out of an uncertain relationship to history and the country of one’s birth—to question the singularity of the subject and certainty in the world. As the cracks start to spread over Saleem’s body at the end of *Midnight’s Children*, he says: “I have been so—many too—many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release” (462). The multiplicity of Saleem’s life has tired his soul and cracked his body, but is a condition that is presented as necessary, and even politically positive. As Stuart Hall has said, “Identity is at the end, not the beginning, of the paradigm.”¹¹

However, even at the end of *Midnight’s Children*, there is not the notion that there has been reconciliation or a resolution. The ending is like a suspended cadence, closing the work but suggesting a continuation beyond it. For it is a life story that seemed as though it would never have an ending, circling back as it did, looking over known facts in a different way, changing dates and realigning happenings. And, in a way,

the novel suggests the story never will be done. For, through the extreme power of his smell, Saleem managed to distill his story into thirty jars of pickle that he will send out to be eaten across the sub-continent. His tales will be masticated, swallowed, digested, regurgitated; they will go on changing and re-aligning in a truly visceral manner. This is very much in keeping with Saleem’s notion of the openness and multiplicity of telling his story. He says late on in the novel, realizing his impending death, “The process of revision should be constant and endless; don’t think I’m satisfied with what I’ve done!” (460).

Saleem’s approach to history is that it should never be allowed to settle into forms that might become reified. Following the necessary course of the exile, history should be gone over, revised, changed and re-ordered, freeing all the possibilities it contains.

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