THE INTERTWINING OF SELF AND HISTORY IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract: Midnight's Children (1981) can be construed as an allegory of India's independence- a dramatization at fictional level of the insufficiency of nation to provide unity and community for different ethnic and religious groups in India. Born into a Muslim Indian family on the midnight of August 15th, 1947- the moment India was declared officially independent- Saleem Sinai grows up thinking, as Nehru's letter to him suggested, that his life will be the mirror of the nation. His fissured skin and speedy disintegration reflect India's crumbling hopes for democracy as the euphoria of early post-independence gives way to the iron fist rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Saleem's attempt at a meaningful life fails first because he is unable to make a clean break with the past. On the other hand, his final attempt to devise a meaningful narrative which would make sense of his life is also doomed to fail-due to an Indian over-reliance on magic thinking. What Rushdie stages in Midnight's Children is the failure to construct identity, when identifications are to a large extent understood as identifications with supra-individual constructions like the nation, history, etc.

Key words: post-colonial India, nation, history, post-colonial/postmodern subjectivity

Midnight's Children (1981), Rushdie's first major success as a novelist, is generally construed (Timothy Brennan[1], Sara Suleri, Katherine Flanagan, Jacqueline Bandolph, Ashutosh Banerjee, Neil ten Kortenaar, Aamir Mufti) as an allegory of India's independence- a dramatization at fictional level of the insufficiency of nation to provide unity and community for different ethnic and religious groups in India. Born into a Muslim Indian family on the midnight of August 15th, 1947- the moment India was declared officially independent- Salleem Sinai grows up thinking, as Nehru's letter to him suggested, that his life will be the mirror of the nation. As Gorra writes "What happens to him happens to his country; what happens to his country happens to him" (111) Saleem's fissured skin and his speedy disintegration mirror India's crumbling hopes for democracy as the euphoria of early post-independence gives way to the gloom of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule. However, the complex structure of the novel evades narrow interpretations, and the allegory of postcolonial nationhood is just one of many possible readings:

> The novel is in many ways supremely complex, offering three different levels or frameworks of possible meaning: that of the family (the story begins with Saleem's grandfather and traces the development of Saleem's family), that of history (Saleem's life in a way mirrors his nation's life), and that of the psychology of the individual (Saleem's personality, his perception and understanding of reality, is what is presented in the narrative). (Mossman 66)

Mossman further argues, on the basis of Rushdie's in-between position as a writer straddling two cultures (Indian and British) that the national allegory identified by Jameson as the

[1] Brennan considers that all Rushdie's fiction reflects political and social issues: "Narrative never follows the emotional logic of the characters' lives, but the brittle, externally determined contours of 'current events' " (84-5)

typical characteristic of all Thirld World Literature is doubled by a Western concern with subjectivity and individuality:

> The novel is, as shown, in one sense an allegory, a book about social India, a book where the individual subjectivities of the characters are merged with and representational of the various societal issues of the national culture; at the exact same time, the novel is an argument for individuality, a book about a character who "feels the split between the public and the private" (Jameson 69), a book about a characters who has a definable, individual interiority as demonstrated, again, by his confusion of dates, events, and times, and by his own eccentric personality. (74-5)

The question of the novel's postmodernism was often brought to bear on its interpretation. As a "cloven writer produced by migration, inhabiting and addressing both worlds, the East and the West, the world of his mother country and that of his adopted country, belonging wholly to neither one nor the other" (Goonetilleke 6) Rushdie moves on ambiguous and shifting ground, challenging authority in the name of the frontier-crossing migrant. He acknowledges that the migrant's "sense of self is fundamentally shaken by his insertion into radically new relations with land, family, community, and nation" (Gupta 7) and consequently his account of selfhood is a highly complex one which takes into consideration that the multiple identities which a person holds are not without frictions and contradictions. This account of postcolonial selfhood, which challenges traditional understandings of the self as a coherent and continuous unity can easily overlap with the postmodernist rejection of absolute truth- which affirms the existence of multiple realities that "may coexist, collide and interpenetrate" (Harvey 41). The overdetermination of Rushdie's fiction, the infinite proliferation of meanings and perspectives can also be attributable to the postmodernist rejection of single truths and the ensuing deferral of meaning.

Saleem Sinai exhibits all the characteristic of the heterogeneous postmodern self: fragmented (his body is literally cracking up, like India), multiple (his mind is where the MCC- Midnight's Children Conference takes place, with different voices telling their stories), ambiguous, unreliable (it is only at the end of the novel, after the reader has been told the intricate stories of Sinai's parents that he/ she finds out that they were not his real progenitors), fluid and uncertain (at the end of his narrative Saleem offers the reader the possibility to choose among alternative endings, between happiness, questions and dreams). But how are we to interpret this fragmentation? I think that the most relevant fact about Saleem is that he is **not** a migrant. He does not leave his past behind, as migrants do, and he is not creatively engaged in the reconstruction of identity. On the contrary, Saleem identifies with his country's past and history, and it is this identification which is regarded as questionable and eventually becomes destructive. Saleem cherishes the dream of becoming part of India, leaving his trace in history just as history will inevitably leave its trace on him. In what can be seen as a postmodernist epistemological mode, Saleem explains that:

> How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term "modes of connection" composed of "dualistically-combined configurations" of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally,

> passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world.
> […] By the combination of "active" and "literal" I mean, of course, all actions of mine which directly—literally—affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events . . . . The union of "passive" and "metaphorical" encompasses all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected me metaphorically—for example, . . . the unavoidable connection between the infant state's attempts at rushing towards full-sized adulthood and my own early, explosive efforts at growth . . . Next, "passive" and "literal," when hyphenated, cover all moments at which national events had a direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family . […] And finally there is the "mode" of the "active-metaphorical," which groups together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history. (285-86)

This inextricable entwining with history is what migrants like Saladin Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses* reject, choosing instead the path of exile and of the reconstruction of self through metamorphosis and hybridity. Saleem's fascination with History (the Hegelian concept) cannot help but remain tributary to a colonial past of mimicry and bondage. First and foremost, the idea of History as a "mode of connection" between the individual and supra-individual machines like the state and nation is specifically Western, not Indian. The Indian perspective on time is less understood in terms of a linear progression towards a meaningful end (History) than an "eternal recurrence" of events. Secondly, any fascination with History in the context of post-independence India is necessarily a fascination with its colonial past. Though in his letter to the midnight's children Jawaharlal Nehru celebrates their birth as the symbolic birth of a new, independent India "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends" (134) Saleem's identification with the past reveals both that a new India is difficult to forge and that the "colonial background proves inescapable" (Gorra 191). A further ironic twist is that Saleem and the midnight's children, as symbols of the new India, are born at a highly inauspicious[2] hour: midnight. Saleem's final revelation that his real progenitors were the Englishman William Methwold and a woman from the low castes sheds some light on issues of continuity/discontinuity between the colonial past and the postcolonial present moment. A hybrid descendant of both colonizer and colonized, Saleem is unwilling to assume this condition, and while trying to identify himself with the effort of a new India striving to be born, he remains to a large extent a product of the colonial encounter/enterprise. The relation between the unacknowledged biological father and the illegitimate child symbolizes the lingering effects of colonialism, pointing to the nation's illegitimate past. That is why Saleem's attempt at identifying with the new India will prove to be self-defeating as long as the illegitimacy of the past remains hidden.

The lingering effects of colonization will finally undermine the decolonization moment epitomized by the birth of Saleem and the other midnight's children. The young

[2] The British mediator of the Independence, Lord Mountbatten took the decision to announce the date of Independence on his own initiative. The most powerful occult community in India, the jyotishis (the astrologers) proclaimed 15 August a date so inauspicious that India "would be better advised to tolerate the British one day longer rather than risk eternal damnation." A famous astrologer of Calcutta wrote to Lord Mountbatten, begging him "For the love of God, do not give India her independence on 15 August. If floods, drought, famine and massacres follow, it will be because free India was born on a day cursed by the stars." (Lapierre 210-11) The midnight is also an inauspicious time in Western culture: Shakespeare and Washington Irving call it "the witching time" or "the witching hour", a time when ghosts appear and black magic is more potent.

Saleem is raised on Methwold's estate, in one of the villas formerly belonging to the colonizer. The architecture and the names of the buildings are reminiscent of British colonization as well as European domination: "four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents […] houses which their owner, William Methwold, had named majestically after the palaces of Europe: Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci" (94-5). Before agreeing to sign the contract with the Indian buyers, Methwold has them promise to keep everything intact and not throw any of his possessions away [3]- a bizarre request that may be construed as the stubbornness of the past refusing to die: "Methwold's estate was sold on two conditions: that the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents might be retained by the new owners; and that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15th." (95) Besides, the Indians are instructed to retain the old cocktail parties given on the estate on occasions, so that it might be concluded that Methwold "Anglicizes the Indians, who find themselves adopting a cocktail hour in a Muslim-Hindu land." (Fletcher 178)

Among the contents of the Buckingham villa there is a painting that leaves a profound impression on young Saleem. Neil ten Kortenaar claims that the picture described by Saleem is *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, painted by John Everett Millais (242). The painting shows young Raleigh and his brother sitting enraptured at the feet of an old sailor, listening to his adventures at sea. The sailor is pointing his index finger at the expanse of sea and sky while relating his exploits. Saleem remembers how he envisaged his future as a child by following the sailor's (in his story a fisherman) finger:

> In a picture hanging on a bedroom wall, I sat beside Walter Raleigh and followed a fisherman's pointing finger with my eyes; eyes straining at the horizon, beyond which lay-what?- my future, perhaps; my special doom, of which I was aware from the beginning […] because the finger pointed even further than that shimmering horizon, it pointed beyond teak frame, across a brief expanse of sky-blue wall, driving my eyes towards another frame, in which my inescapable destiny hung, forever fixed under glass: […] the Prime Minister's missive, which arrived […] one week after my photograph appeared on the front page of the Times of India. […]
>
> Perhaps the fisherman's finger was not pointing at the letter in the frame; because if one followed it even further, it led one out through the window, down the two-storey hillock, across Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy Pools, and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; a sea on which the sails of Kholi dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun…an accusing finger, then, which obliged us to look at the city's dispossessed. (167-8)

Walter Raleigh is one of the emblematic figures of early English imperialism and colonialism. V.S. Naipaul dedicates one of the stories in *A Way in the World* to his failed quest for gold in South America. Raleigh's fascination with the tales of far away places and exotic lands recounted by the old sailor stands for the primary colonial impulse. This primary drive for expedition and adventure, for crossing the borders of the known world was only later transformed into an economic exploitative enterprise. It is an ambiguous, unreadable impulse, as it signifies both the transgressing of limits (valued for its creative potential) and the mercantile ideology behind colonial conquest. The fisherman points his finger at the horizon-

[3] Cundy calls this "the symbolic takeover of intact Englishness ". (59)

where the vast expanse of sea meets the infinite sky. If Saleem reads this picture as his future destiny, then he is certainly mis-reading it, for the fisherman's finger guides him towards traveling, adventure, border-crossing and migrancy. In Saleem's bedroom that finger is juxtaposed, unfortunately, next to Nehru's celebratory letter. Instead of choosing the liberating path of exile, the boy is driven to an inescapable destiny: that of being tied to the fate of his country. On the other hand, his identification with the boy Raleigh (his mother and ayah attire him in Raleigh's Elizabethan dress) is profoundly disturbing- "It's like he's just stepped out of the *picture*!" (167) exclaims a neighbour- as it places the burden of colonial history on Saleem's shoulders. Similarly, Kuchta sees the Raleigh painting as an indication of India's pseudo-independent status:

> The finger serves as an allegorical object whose meaning evolves within the dialectic of Saleem's present memory of the past. Initially a celebration of Saleem's status as midnight's child and thus of India's independence, it implicitly reminds Saleem of his homeland's colonization and its infusion by European domination and culture, and indicates India's inability to sustain its poor. The finger thus undermines the notion of India's complete independence from imperialism and from the problems associated with imperial rule (217).

Yet, while it may be true that the novel goes to some length to explore the relation between the individual and history, Saleem's failure to "build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell" (116) is not exclusively due to the burden of colonial history. Saleem's attempt at narrating the events in his life reveals a deeply rifted personality, unable to integrate ambiguities and all the different versions of himself, as well as an unreliable narrator inclined to overestimation of his own powers. A slight megalomania surfaces from Saleem's acknowledgement that "From my very first days I embarked upon a heroic programme of self-enlargement." (124). Saleem is destroyed by the burden of history because he chooses to identify himself with the fate of his nation. He chooses to define his identity through History:" Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything done to me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. […] to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world." (383) Even though we cannot escape a similar structuring by external events and circumstances, personal identity makes sense only when we accept responsibility for our acts and resist supra-individual machines like history, culture, nation, state, etc. The intertwining of Saleem's personal history and that of India can be regarded as a gesture of surrendering personal freedom to the shaping power of external historical forces. In a Lacanian sense, his subjectivity is entirely constructed by the discourse of the Other. Saleem's early dream (shattered by adverse circumstances epitomized in the evil figure of the Widow[4]) is to leave an important trace in the history of his country- and his attempt to assume leadership of the MCC and coalesce its 581 members into a powerful political community testifies to his desire to get involved in the history which he afterwards accuses of having transformed his life into grotesquery. (57

The space of subjectivity becomes inhabited by millions of "others", discordant voices that claim the attention of the self- identity is a multiple space where heterogeneity reigns supreme in the absence of any hierarchy. Following a domestic accident Saleem acquires

[4] The Widow is a sobriquet for Indira Gandhi.

telepathic powers that render him capable of hearing the voices of all the children born, like himself, on the day India gains its independence:

> Telepathy, then: the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head. […] The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurring of Tamil. […] I heard, beneath the polyglot frenzy in my head […] secret nocturnal calls, like calling out to like […] the unconscious beacons of the children of midnight, signalling nothing more than their existence, transmitting simply: T, From far to the North, 'I'. And the South East West: T.'I'. 'And I.' (168)

The midnight's children are "endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous." (195) Saleem imagines himself to possess the greatest gift- the ability to see into their minds- which he assumes to confer a right and a responsibility on him: that of establishing MCC as a viable community of interests dedicated to the progress of India. His assumption works to disguise his early desire to shape the course of history in order to give his life complexity and meaning. The group, in the absence of a pragmatic and well-defined project is given to dissensions and finally splits: "The gradual disintegration of the Midnight's Children Conference […] and on top of all this, there were clashes of personality, and the hundred squalling rows which are unavoidable in a parliament of half-grown brats." (254-5) The main problem that leads to the disintegration of the MCC, is, Saleem confesses, a lack of common purpose: "At this point I introduced the Conference to the notions which plagued me all this time: the notions of purpose, and meaning. 'We must think what we are for.' "(228)

At another level, the discord between the midnight's children can be interpreted as Saleem's inability to integrate the many facets of his selfhood: after all, the children exist only as disembodied voices in his own mind. As each one possesses a unique ability, they can stand for Saleem's beliefs, thoughts and emotions. The disintegration of MCC points to Saleem's difficulty in dealing with the different parts of his personality. The inability to come to terms with his own multiplicity and heterogeneity will lead to a split personality and will be reflected in the literal "cracking up" of his body. As a "parliament of half-grown brats", the MCC stands for the narrator's own immaturity, ironically pitted against his grandiose dreams of shaping the course of Indian history. The construal of history-in postmodernist fashion- proceeds from an anti-Hegelian vision. History is no longer regarded as the adventure of a transcendent Spirit heading towards some great fulfillment at its end; on the contrary, it is malleable, split into multiple small histories, and a site for continuous power struggles.

Saleem's unreliability as a narrator partly stems from his involvement in the events he is chronicling. His impossibility to come up with a coherent version of what happened to him and his reliance on literary tropes and narrative to make sense of events does away with the idea of objective history. Myths, personal history, supernatural and fantastic explanations layered on top of each other are employed by Saleem in an attempt to justify not only his failure with India, but also India's failure to establish a viable community of interests after decolonization.

A central feature of any autobiographical account is its subjectivity, and that makes Saleem's enterprise ambiguous. This is because his narrative purports to be, simultaneously, a subjective autobiography and an objective historical account. The subjectivity of a personal account often leaks into the ideal objectivity of a historical account in an obvious manner. Rushdie is eager to point out the incompatibilities between a personal viewpoint and objectivity. He shows by implication that the subjectivity of writing is not limited to the instance of autobiography, but is a feature of all historical reports. This is clearly shown in Saleem's comments about the news reports given in India and Pakistan about the ongoing Kashmir war:

> Who to believe? Did Pakistani fighter-bombers truly make that 'daring raid' which caught one third of the Indian Force helplessly grounded on tarmac? Did they didn't they? […] Did bombs fall? Were explosions true? Could even a death be said to be the case? (341)

Newspapers, radio stations, the media in general are anything but objective. How then can anyone expect an autobiography to produce an objective version of Saleem's life? The unreliability of Saleem the narrator is a consequence of both the impossibility of historical truth and of the shortcomings of the human mind. The multiple story-lines, the flashbacks and endless digressions that complicate Saleem's account, making it unintelligible at times are a reflection of the heterogeneous constitution of the human mind: "Because a human being, inside itself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichthing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next" (236-7) The fact that there is no such thing as a homogeneous human self leads to discontinuities in narrative.

Personal memory as the repository of the past is rather a peculiar instrument for forging an objective and truthful account:

> Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, 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 narrator himself acknowledges his bias in presenting the events:

> Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. (166)

Saleem's reinterpretation and re-writing of official history is a consequence of his failed dream of being one with the history of India. Although his attempt to influence history by the establishment of MCC has failed, he has not learnt his lesson. His autobiography is "infected" by the problematic identification that he has not managed to shake off. Major political events and characters in India's post-independence period are made to correspond to personal events and circumstances. This correspondence is purely a matter of Saleem's imagination[5] and does not rest on anything solid. It is an aesthetic stratagem, and as Terry

[5] In writing about "my India" Saleem comes closest to acknowledging the fictional and personal construction of history. In the same fashion Rushdie will claim that expatriate writers do not concern themselves with the real

Eagleton has shown, implicitly an ideological one. (19-20) The ideology behind this aesthetic stance is described by Saleem as the "national longing for form":

> As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form- or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens…when the Indian flag was first raised, for instance, a rainbow appeared above that Delhi field, a rainbow of saffron and green; and we felt blessed. (417)

What Saleem describes in the excerpt above is an instance of magic thinking. As Frazer has shown in *The Golden Bough* magic thinking relies on the principles of similarity and contagion. For all his postmodernist epistemology and philosophizing, Saleem incarnates the average superstitious Hindu. Actually, Saleem's whole autobiographic enterprise rests on the magic principle of thinking, more Indian in substance than European – as the characteristic Western mode of thought is (scientific) rationality. Rushdie's fiction has repeatedly used this aesthetic of similarities and coincidences to build up its mythic world. Yet in *Midnight's Children* this aesthetic is closely associated with the destructive effects of establishing correspondences between a subjective (personal) body and a supra-individual one. Saleem's history is incompatible with that of his nation, and his refusal to acknowledge that his destiny, as pointed out by the fisherman's finger, lay in exile and migrancy, leads to his final "cracking up" under the burden of history.

And here is Rushdie's oft quoted statement about *Midnight's Children*:

> What I tried to do was to set up a tension […], 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 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. (Imaginary 16)

To me this opposition between the content and form of *Midnight's Children* seems rather doubtful, or at least only apparent. If Rushdie is truly modern, then the distinction/divide[6] between content and form is meaningless. The content is the form and the form is the content. The multitudinous form of the narrative and Saleem's tragedy are two facets of the same reality. Saleem's personal failure cannot be conceived out of the context of his Indian heritage- his tragedy is as much a result of the burden of colonial history as his incoherent narrative is a consequence of the Indian practice of thinking in correspondences. Saleem's attempt at a meaningful life fails first because he is unable to make a clean break with the past (and he is too dependent on Western notions of history). On the other hand, his final attempt to devise a meaningful narrative which would make sense of his life is also doomed to fail-due to an Indian over-reliance on magic thinking. What Rushdie stages in *Midnight's Children* is the failure to construct identity, when identifications are to a large

homelands: "we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." (*Imaginary* 10)

[6] This division stems from a concept of *res* (thought and ideas) as ontologically different from *verba* (language). It was a distinction instituted by rhetoricians on the basis of Platonic ideas.

extent understood as identifications with supra-individual constructions like the nation, history, etc. The negativity of *Midnight's Children* anticipates later novels, in which the construction of subjectivity from a migrant position, (although fraught with obstacles of its own) may prove a somewhat more successful task, like in the case of Saladin Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses*.

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