II

Problematising History, Politics and Identity: Re-reading

Midnight's Children and Shame.

We see that we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics.

- Salman Rushdie (Imaginary Homelands 100)

Rushdie's oeuvre explores numerous concerns, but it has consistently grappled with historical and political representation. The interplay between history and the individual, features among the key ideas taking shape in his insistently political work. Midnight's Children and Shame in particular, engage with the political crises that plague the newly emergent nation states of India and Pakistan. Aruna Shrivastava believes that a vital aspect of these two works is the manner in which Saleem Sinai in Midnight's Children and Omar Khayyam in Shame “try to come to terms with their personal and national histories as colonized people.”

Most accounts of the Western approach towards history in the nineteenth century are characterised by reliance upon the origin, meaning and teleology of history. Traditionally, history has been considered a self-contained, objective, unbiased corpus of knowledge. However, much of the present epistemological questioning of historical representation and knowledge has been sparked-off by the questioning of the authority of historical sources and documents. The recording of historical events necessitates a prior process of interpretation and analysis, and these obviously imply a degree of subjectivity. For, as Linda Hutcheon has it: “facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events”. Human subjectivity is largely shaped by culture and its dominant ideology. Consequently, history viewed as a human construct bears the impress of cultural and ideological
discourse. The difficulty does not arise from the ideological, arbitrary and subjectively determined nature of history; but from the fact that it is a construct that lays claim to totality, closure and objectivity.

Fiction as a literary artefact is shaped by history as a cultural force. The long established dichotomy between history and fiction was constructed upon the supposition that the former was concerned with reality and objectivity, while the latter with the imaginative and the subjective. The frontiers that demarcate history and fiction are increasingly blurring. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, “it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art”. Recent critiques of history and fiction concentrate upon the sites of convergence of the two modes rather than their differences.

In the wake of Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, Poststructural theory and Postmodern historiography propose a relativist view of the possibility of either objectivity or material referentiality in historical discourse. Twentieth-century considerations of history espouse that history and fiction merit treatment along a similar basis as linguistically and ideologically determined constructs. They both draw from verisimilitude rather than objective truth, are both regarded as “linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure,” they are both “intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality”. Fiction and history are not regarded as mutually exclusive, but interdependent. Much contemporary fiction attempts a telling of the stories ignored by history.

An attempt “to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical” in terms of form as well as theme, is made by what Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction”. She privileges historiographic metafiction as a
quintessentially postmodern art form. According to her the term refers to:

those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages...Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.  

In considering historiographic metafictions "in which the fictively personal becomes the historically - and thus politically - public in a kind of synecdochic fashion", Linda Hutcheon points to Midnight's Children wherein the representation of the protagonist Saleem Sinai is intimately tied with that of his country. This results in the "politicization of public and private experience, of nationality and subjectivity". Both Midnight's Children and Shame can be deemed historiographic metafiction in that they re-write the twentieth-century history of India and Pakistan. In the view of Hutcheon:

The premise of postmodern fiction is the same as that articulated by Hayden White regarding history: 'every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications'. But the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional. But this does not mean it has no critical clout....

Historiographic metafiction is associated with textual play, parody and re-formulation of history. It does not regard history as a definable totality but regards engagements with history as digressive, circumstantial and textual. Historiographic metafiction lays stress on the textuality of history as it "shows fiction to be
historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured".9 Admittedly political, these re-presentations of history enable new perspectives and identities to rise out of culturally marginalised positions.

History is the fulcrum of the narrative in *Midnight's Children*. Important public events in Indian socio-politics are allied with those in the lives of Saleem and his family. Several critics have identified Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* as Rushdie's source text for the novel, or an example of the kind of historical version that lends itself to Rushdie's parody. In the view of Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Midnight's Children* is a contemplation of "the textuality of history and, in particular, of that official history that constitutes the nation".10

Rather than contend for a reorganisation of what may qualify as history, it is a reinterpretation of what has always constituted history that is Rushdie's main concern. Hence, the novel does incorporate monumental historical events, but they lead to an interpretation that is at variance from much of traditional history. Jago Morrison argues that unlike writers like Toni Morrison or Maxine Hong Kingston who attempt to reclaim the silences in history of the dispossessed, for Rushdie "History is conceived as an overwhelming superabundance of experience, a tumult of competing voices".11 For Rushdie, the problem of history resides in "its omnipresence and bewildering multiplicity". Rather than representing the past as a "knowable totality", his work is "magnificently cacophonous".12 *Midnight's Children* offers a counterbalance to the totalising discourse of history by foregrounding the private and eccentric narrative of the protagonist. This middle-class youth of mixed parentage is India in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem comes to embody India as Rushdie's answer to the political dictum "Indira is India and India is Indira" (*MC* 427).13 He defines himself by his association with India's history. He is the instigator of events, and what
transpires with him and his family is inextricably interwoven with that of the nation. History literally becomes his story.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie reminisces how the germ of *Midnight's Children* was born in the course of a family joke that the departure of the British was induced by the arrival of Salman who was born eight weeks prior to Indian independence.\(^{14}\) Subsequently, *Midnight's Children* chronicles the birth of 1001 children born within the midnight hour of India's independence with phenomenal gifts. The most potent endowments are related to the hour closest to midnight. Saleem and Shiva who are both born at the very stroke of midnight have the most powerful abilities.

The children of midnight are thus mysteriously "handcuffed to history" (*MC* 9), their destinies being inextricably interwoven with that of the newly independent nation. Saleem Sinai announces that he was born at the very stroke of midnight: "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came ... at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world" (*MC* 9).

Personal identity is thus linked with national identity. For his portentous birth Saleem not only bags the coveted *Times of India* prize offered to those mothers who give birth at the exact moment of India's Independence; but also receives a letter from the reigning Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru congratulating baby Saleem. Nehru assured the neonate: " 'We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own’ " (*MC* 122). The letter binds the destiny and potential of the neonate Saleem with that of the embryonic polity that is at the same time an ancient civilisation.

With epic sweep, the novel attempts to chart the lives of three generations of the Sinai family. Various major political events between 1947 and 1978 are
incorporated into the text and interwoven with the story of Saleem. The plot moves from their home in Kashmir, to Amritsar, Agra, Bombay and Karachi; finally halting in Bombay. Divided into three parts, the first part of the book chronicles the period from 1915-1947. Saleem traces the story of his grandfather Aadam Aziz, a young German-return doctor, his marriage to Naseem, his leaving Srinagar for Agra with his wife, and the marriage of his daughter Amina to Ahmed Sinai, followed by the birth of the narrator. The second part of the novel deals with the childhood of Saleem and the migration of the family to Karachi on account of the financial crisis they face. All this occurs against the backdrop of Indian democracy in the wake of numerous challenges. Part three is intensely political. It ingeniously recreates contemporary historical events with a focus on the Emergency of the seventies.

One of the early coincidences of the plot with world history extends way before Saleem’s birth, with his alleged grandparents’ strange courtship in 1915. The young German-educated doctor Aadam Aziz, had seen and examined various parts of Naseem Ghani, the landlord’s daughter’s body through a seven inch perforation in a white bedsheets serving as the purdah. He was not allowed to see his intriguing patient as a whole. Aadam’s desperate hopes to see her face were realised when Naseem complained of a longed-for headache on the day the World War ended. The narrator is convinced that, “Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family’s existence in the world” (MC 27).

Rushdie acknowledges the influence of the Dickensian novel in shaping Midnight’s Children, wherein “details of place and social mores are skewered by a pitiless realism, a naturalistic exactitude”. This inspires him to situate his narrative against the meticulously observed background of ‘real’ India.
The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is a significant historical event featured in the novel. When the Sinais are delayed in Amritsar en route to Agra, Aadam Sinai saunters into the protest meet at Jallianwala Bagh. It is his sensitive nose that saves his life, throwing him to the ground with the force of a timely sneeze just as Brigadier Dyer issues his fifty men the command to open fire. The narrator’s description of the scene provides a sense of the “real” history of the massacre in opposition to the “official” one propagated by the coloniser: “They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. ‘Good shooting,’ Dyer tells his men, ‘We have done a jolly good thing’” (MC 36).

In the mode of postmodern readings that privilege the possibility of multiple interpretations, Rushdie is clearly projecting the Amritsar massacre as a denunciation of the coloniser’s act. Sabrina Hassumani notes that Rushdie considers the diametrically opposite versions of the massacre wherein “the colonizers viewed this as putting order to chaos; the colonized viewed it as a cold-blooded massacre of innocent victims”.16 Eric Berlatsky is convinced that Rushdie consistently distinguishes between subjective interpretations and deception in ideological terms for political dominance”, and exhibits a preference for the truth of one type of interpretation over another.17 As Hutcheon clarifies, postmodern fiction “does not ‘aspire to tell the truth’ as much as to question whose truth gets told”.18 Rushdie thus plays upon “point of view” in historical narrations and suggests the multiplicity of historical accounts. In an essay, Rushdie indicts the film Gandhi for its distorted portrayal of the Amritsar massacre, pointing out that the film depicts Dyer as a zealous individual whose act was condemned by the empire; but in reality he was a hero to the colonialists who had taught “the wogs” a lesson.19
Landmark dates in Indian history form the crux of the plot of the novel to impart an air of historical verifiability. Vanita, an Indian woman married to a street singer, who is pregnant with the departing Englishman William Methwold’s child, goes into labour at the moment of the birth of Pakistan on 14th August 1947. Exactly a day later, she delivers a baby boy at the magical hour of midnight on 15th August when India attains independence. As it turns out, Amina Sinai also gives birth to a baby boy at precisely the stroke of midnight in Dr. Narlikar’s Nursing Home itself.

To render the plot more complex, the destinies of these two children of midnight -Shiva and Saleem - are curiously linked. The child of Amina Sinai is switched with the child of Vanita at birth. The act is committed by Mary Pereira the servant of the Sinai’s, in a desperate bid to earn the affection of an aristocrat-hating communist called Joe D’Costa. She believes that this revolutionary act of exchanging the babies as an attempt to raze the class distinctions would help her find favour with him. The plot thus deftly swivels. The illegitimate son of a departing Englishman and a poor Hindu street-singer’s wife is raised as Saleem Sinai the child of a well-off Muslim couple. Their actual biological child is called Shiva and brought up by the homeless Hindu street-singer who has been widowed in childbirth. Thus the recipient of Nehru’s letter is not the child to whom it is intended.

By virtue of the fact that Saleem and Shiva are both born at the very stroke of midnight the most powerful gifts of the magical hour are theirs. Saleem’s talent is “the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men”, while Shiva is blessed with “the gifts of war” (MC 200). In the rivalry between Saleem and Shiva, Timothy Brennan recalls the legendary rivalry between Brahma and Shiva - creator and destroyer - in traditional mythology. “Saleem, like Brahma, imagines the whole of Indian history and contains it within him”. 20 The conflict between Saleem and Shiva
is set up as one of irresolvable dualities.

The lines between historical fact and fiction blur constantly. The protagonist claims direct responsibility for sparking off the language riots which led to the linguistic restructuring of states in 1956. Saleem, who is trying to impress a neighbour Evie Burns with his almost non-existent cycling skills, crashes into the procession of the Marathi language supporters. The marchers jocularly goad him to speak some Gujarati and he replies with the only rhyme he knows which happens to ridicule Gujarati speech rhythms: “Soo che? Saru che! / Danda le ke maru che!” (MC 191). This becomes the slogan of the mob. As they encounter the rival Maha Gujarat Parishad demonstrators, violence erupts:

…the two parties fell upon one another with no little zeal, and to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded.

In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay, as a result of which the state became the capital of Maharashtra. (MC 192)

In 1957, a year later, the Communist Party won a large number of seats. The connection of the event with Saleem’s life is via his mother. Saleem follows and spies on Amina’s clandestine meetings with her first husband Nadir who re-enters her life as an active communist called Quasim the red. She contributes her time and resources towards the impoverished, canvassing for him and the party. It is this electorate in turn that votes for the Communist Party, enabling their victory.

In 1959 the famous Nanavati case riveted the nation. To this day it is considered the archetypal crime of passion. Commander K. Manekshaw Nanavati was tried for the homicide of his wife Sylvia’s paramour - Prem Ahuja. On his return
home from one of his assignments, his wife confessed that she was having an affair. Nanavati dropped his family at the 'Metro Cinema' for a movie, excused himself and proceeded to deal with his wife's lover. In the course of events that followed, Nanavati shot him dead. He then presented himself to the Deputy Commissioner of Police. The case enthralled the nation. Since the jury had been influenced by media and public support for Nanavati and was open to being misled, the Indian Government abolished jury trials after this case.

In *Midnight's Children* the character of Commander Sabarmati is modelled on that of Nanavati. Saleem becomes the engineer of the whole episode as the person who alerts Commander Sabarmati to his wife’s illicit relationship with Homi Catrack via an anonymous note. His purpose in doing this is basically to caution his perfidious mother whose rendezvous with Nadir Khan he disapproves of. However, matters take their own turn and wind up with disastrous consequences. Saleem admits that it was he who set in motion the chain of events that transpired:

...Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play – only I hadn't meant it! I didn't think he'd ... I only wanted to... a scandal, yes, a scare, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never, no. (*MC* 262; original ellipses)

The riots instigated in India with the disappearance of the relic of the holy hair of Prophet Mohammed, are dexterously woven into the events of the Sinai family. Incensed by the death of his son Hanif, Aadam Aziz leaves his Agra abode never to return. The narrator states that a man answering to his grandfather's description was seen at the Hazratbal Mosque where the concerned relic was housed. He wonders if his grandfather was behind the theft of the relic: "Was this bizarre incident truly
political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son?” (MC 277). Aadam Aziz suffers a fall and dies in the valley of his birth. The narrator goes on to associate the death of his grandfather with the death of Jawaharlal Nehru on 27th May 1964: “Nehru’s death; can I avoid the conclusion that that, too, was all my fault?” (MC 279).

In typical postmodern fashion, events from history are installed only to be subverted. Saleem is unable to escape his association with historical events even when he goes to Pakistan along with his mother and sister. Incidentally, he learns that the presence of the Pakistani frontier deprives him of his telepathic transmission to the children of midnight. While in Pakistan, Saleem finds favour with his uncle General Zulfikar. His uncle prefers Saleem over his own son who is an embarrassment on account of his enuresis. Consequently, Saleem is allowed to witness the surreptitious meetings leading to the military coup by Ayub Khan. He claims “not only did I overthrow a government – I also consigned a president to exile” (MC 291).

Saleem makes a mention of, but abjures responsibility for certain other key historical events like the deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan, the conquer of Goa by the Indian army, American aid to Pakistan, the Sino-Indian border conflict, the census of 1961 and the victory of the All India Congress in the 1962 elections.

The Indo-Chinese conflict of 1962 finds the Sinais returning to India for a short while. Saleem realises that he is unable to convene the 'Midnight's Children's Conference' which then collapses. In 1963 the Sinai family immigrates to Pakistan permanently. It is during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 that Saleem loses most of his family. He is convinced that the hidden agenda of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 "was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face
of the earth" (MC 338). Saleem fuses factual media coverage with incidents in his own family as he traces the course of the Indo-Chinese war. His family members ultimately die in the air raids and he is rendered amnesiac.

During the partial erasure of his memory Saleem becomes a tracker in the Pakistani army with his acute olfactory powers to aid him apprehend enemies of the state. He literally becomes a "man-dog" sleeping in a kennel beside the stalls of the dogs of the unit. As part of this Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities — CUTIA, Saleem is sent on a mission as part of a team, to lead sixty thousand Pakistani soldiers to East-Pakistan which was planning secession.

After Sheikh Mujibur-Rehman proclaims the state of Bangladesh on 25th March 1971, he is sniffed out by Saleem, arrested, and repatriated to West-Pakistan. While on this mission, Saleem escapes from the war into the Sunderbans with three young soldiers and they ultimately emerge in Dacca following a series of misadventures. It is here that one of the children of midnight - Parvati the witch - who is part of the entertainment troupe flown in from Delhi to celebrate the victory of the Indian soldiers, recognises Saleem. During the time when Saleem is part of the invading army, he is called the 'Buddha'. Parvati greets Saleem by name and restores to him his identity. She enables him to escape in her wicker basket and they are flown to Delhi. "Sometimes mountains must move before old comrades can be reunited" (MC 374). Saleem is certain that the purpose of the entire Bangladesh war had been to reunite him with his old life and friends.

India’s first nuclear test explosion is the historical event that corresponds with the re-entry of Major Shiva on the scene. He has returned from Bangladesh as a war hero, and his reappearance shakes Saleem’s world. Major Shiva is notorious for his affairs with women of various stations and classes. Once they are impregnated
however, he loses interest and forsakes them. Parvati is not spared this fate. Shiva abandons her after she gets pregnant.

Parvati’s pregnancy correlates to the gestation of the Janata party. Her thirteen-day labour commences on the day the Allahabad High Court finds Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of malpractice in the election of 1971, and the thirteen days when Indira Gandhi refused to resign. Her son is born at midnight on 25th June 1975, the day Indira Gandhi declared Emergency rule in India. Saleem is in no doubt that the motive behind the declaration of the Emergency was “the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight” (MC 427). The silence of the masses in response to this autocracy finds an analogy in baby Aadam’s peculiar silence the entire first year of his birth, as well as his strange tuberculosis that refuses to respond to treatment. It is only post the Emergency that his affliction vanishes. Saleem is convinced that his son will have to be a magician to cope with the world he is leaving behind. The narrator hopes that the second generation of magical children will “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” (MC 447). This prospect however, comes to naught. The child Aadam re-enters *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as a young man only to belie all the initial promise.

History finds yet another link with autobiography. Saleem is among those who are victimised in the course of the mass sterilisation operation instigated by Sanjay Gandhi. He is also directly affected by the razing of the slums in Delhi in 1976.

The elections of 1977 find mention in the novel as Indira Gandhi’s Congress party suffers a defeat, conceding leadership to the Janata Party. Saleem however, is not very optimistic about the new government given the existing leadership of the party. The book seems to end on an austere and dismal note of the future.
Saleem Sinai "fathered by history" (MC 118), defined in terms of his affiliation with post-independent India, finds himself rendered impotent towards the close of the story, due to the vasectomy drive under Sanjay Gandhi’s leadership. The 581 surviving midnight’s children meet the same fate. Saleem leaves Delhi, making his way to Bombay with his foster son Aadam. Aadam, evocative of the elephant God Ganesh with his large ears and nose, is in reality the child born of Saleem’s wife Parvati and his arch-rival Shiva. Parvati recalls Saleem’s biological mother Vanita, who also dies while giving birth. Saleem claims Shiva’s offspring as his own. He “is well aware identity does not reside in the blood; it is the claim and its recognition by the one claimed that matter”. The Sinai lineage ultimately has its rightful heir restored to the family line in the act of Saleem adopting Aadam the biological son of Shiva.

The end of the text has been viewed as a cynical and scathing comment on the fragmentation the nation has been reduced to, inspite of its youthful potential and promise. Anuradha Dingwaney is among those who feel that the trajectory of Saleem’s life seems deeply pessimistic. The 1001 children that are a metaphor for the new vibrant India are reduced to a hopeless horde of "scapegraces".

Saleem represents the post independence generation born into a realm of possibilities. The realisation of this potential is all but thwarted in the course of events. The children of midnight seem apathetic and powerless to respond to historical events. As the omniscient protagonist narrator of Midnight’s Children, Saleem is far from a ‘type’. He is a poor excuse for a protagonist with his mutilated finger, tonsured head, and disintegrating self. His prodigious telepathic ability is frittered away in inconsequential acts like cheating in school, travelling around India, and petty voyeuristic exploits like spying on the thoughts of others.
The ‘Midnight’s Children’s Conference’ is unable to instigate political action of any kind. Their empowerment is thwarted by Saleem’s fear that Shiva will stake a claim to his birthright. Thus, Saleem desists from marshalling the conference, until his relocation to Pakistan deprives him of any such contact. He realises that his thoughts could not permeate geographical boundaries. During a visit to India, Saleem’s operation to drain his nose results in the endowment of an acute sense of smell at the cost of the permanent loss of his telepathic prowess. Even his olfactory abilities are only used to sniff out Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to his Pakistani foes. Saleem ends up revealing the children of midnight to their assassins. Uma Parameshwaran regards his physical impotence an extension of his internal impotence. She goes on to argue that the Widow is not the real reason for the fate of the children of midnight, but rather a catalyst in their self-betrayal. This sentiment finds an echo in the final lines of the novel: “it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times” (MC 463). The protagonist himself is nearing his unusual end. He has begun to crack quite literally. His body, “buffeted by too much history... has started coming apart at the seams” (MC 37). He will eventually disintegrate and crumble into dust.

Mujeebuddin Syed is among those who focus on the cautious optimism of the final scene. He regards the ultimate focus on the child Aadam and the empty pickle jar as one indicative of hope. For him, these seem like signifiers of the future and mark a new beginning. Rushdie admits that though the tale of Saleem leads him to despair, the story is far from nihilistic in its echoes of “the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration”. The writer feels that the very form of the novel hints at the innumerable possibilities for the country. This provides the cautious optimism that counter-balances the negativity. In an interview Rushdie maintains that the book
seems to him “very affirmative”. India is an interesting exemplar of a unit without a centre. Prior to independence it was basically a collection of states - rather distinct from one another - that were ruled by the British. Nevertheless, India exists as an entity and Rushdie wants to see this multicultural, multi-ethnic experiment succeed. Readings of Midnight’s Children have drawn attention to Rushdie’s commitment to nationalism. Josna Rege states, “Despite its conceptual freshness and vitality, Midnight’s Children remains very emotionally committed to the narrative of the nation.”

As an allegory for newly independent secular India, Saleem Sinai’s physical disintegration is a reflection of the fragmentation within the country and of the Indian subcontinent as well. The cracks and fissures that plague Saleem’s body are a comment on the national corpus afflicted by communal and other divisions. The hope of the new nation is lauded in the birth of Saleem. Rushdie laments the damage to that initial hope by the various historical and political processes that culminate with the Emergency. In aiding the sterilisation of the children of midnight, Shiva fulfils the powers of destruction of his mythological namesake. Saleem views the sterilisation as sperectomy “the draining-out of hope” for the country as a whole (MC 437).

In writing the novel, Saleem succumbs to the Indian tendency to embrace multitudes:

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. (MC 383)

The image of the perforated sheet invoked at the onset of the novel becomes a
symbolic trope in the course of the text with Saleem realising that it is via such
fragmentary forms that he will have to seek wholeness, filling those gaps that he can.
A vacillation between form and fragmentation occurs throughout the novel.

Numerous characters exemplify this impulse for formal unity through
fragments. For instance, Lifafa Das, the peepshow owner bids people to view the
whole world in his postcards: “Dunya dekho” (MC 75). Saleem is convinced that
India has a widespread “national longing for form” (MC 300). Nadir Khan, Amina’s
first husband, had a painter for a roommate who attempted to capture the whole of life
in his art, his paintings getting increasingly larger before he ultimately killed himself.
Still in love with Nadir Khan, Amina resolved to fall in love with her second husband
Ahmed Sinai, “bit by bit” (MC 68). Saleem’s uncle Hanif was a script writer insistent
on making a comprehensive documentary film about the ‘Ordinary Life of a Pickle
Factory’. In the film industry dominated by fantasy, his script is rejected and the work
is shelved. His uncompromising stance is reflected in another obsession related to his
playing of cards. In the game of rummy “he was determined never to lay down a hand
until he completed a thirteen-card sequence in hearts. Always hearts; all the hearts,
and nothing but the hearts would do” (MC 246).

As Keith Wilson points out, a basic tenet of the conception of Midnight’s
Children is an acceptance of the fractional nature of the final product. For, “the
realities of public history or private experience are never reducible to the
encompassing forms that the absolutist artist may want to impose upon them”. The
dominant images of fragmentation include Saleem’s mutilated body that seems a
caricature of the map of the nation, the disintegration of the ‘Midnight’s Children’s Conference’, and the eventual fragmentation of Saleem’s body into 400,000,506 parts. As a metaphor for the nation, Saleem fragments into as many parts as the number of people in India at the time of writing the novel. His own disbanding, as also the dispersal of the ‘Midnight’s Children’s Conference’ reflects the demolition of the national ideal of ‘unity-in-diversity’.

Though the dominant image is that of fragments, Saleem attempts to make sense of the parts and view the whole picture even as he admits its limited nature. An illusion of totality and wholeness is suggested through the employment of leitmotifs that organise the text in terms of a design. The silver spittoon, the green tin trunk, the buried tin globe encasing the curios dear to Saleem, the perforated sheet, have resonances all through the text. The novel closes with an emphasis on the abortive nature of closure itself. Among the thirty pickle jars on the shelf, each representative of the “chutnification of history” the narrator attempts to pickle his past in literal terms. He claims: “I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods” (MC 459). He concedes that “the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty...” (MC 462). In contrast with the monolithic grand narrative of history, the personal narrative is qualified by fragmentation, indeterminacy, polyphonic voices and the lack of closure.

The author seems to expose the secure cohesive self as yet another fiction. The very beginning of the novel finds the narrator’s grandfather Aadam Aziz basking in Kashmir early one morning. While he attempted to pray, Aadam hit his nose against the earth. As he bled “he resolved never to kiss earth for any god or man.” The decision left a hole in him: “a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history” (MC 10). The narrator concedes that his changed
vision may have been accelerated by the incident, but he reckons it is really the five years Aadam spent studying to be a medical practitioner in Germany that made the landscape seem provincial and stifling. His medical leather bag with the Heidelberg imprint becomes a symbol of his European acculturation and scientific temper. He whistles “O Tannenbaum” on his bicycle rides. In contrast with his western leanings, his wife Naseem and the boatman Tai are citadels of tradition and convention. Naseem is offended by her husband’s wish that she discard the purdah. She stubbornly refuses to pose for the photographer commissioned by her husband, for she “was not one to be trapped in anyone’s little black box” (MC 40).

Rushdie underscores the intricacies of identity in Saleem’s concern with tracing origins. Cynthia Carey Abrioux observes that he seems intent on exposing the “farce of origins” as he engages in a parody of nation and name. Just as Saleem’s mother has her name changed from Mumtaz to Amina Sinai with her marriage to Ahmed Sinai, Saleem chooses the name Laylah for Parvati who changes her religion and becomes his wife (MC 415). Nadir Khan changes his name to Qasim Khan when he becomes a communist, and is known as Lal Qasim, i.e. Qasim the Red. Saleem’s sister is dubbed the Brass Monkey until she becomes famous in Pakistan as Jamila Singer for her melodious voice.

The text is an exploration of complex questions about cultural identity. Like Oscar Matzerath from Günter Grass’ *The Tin Drum*, Saleem Sinai is motivated by the artistic impulse to seek his identity through a “self begetting novel’, one which will, synecdochally, also account for the history of their time and place”. *Midnight’s Children* is predominantly concerned with a new postcolonial nation attempting to forge an identity and assert itself. The critique of the imperial powers on the other hand, is subtle rather than overt. Brennan notes the manner in which the novel
sardonically reflects orientalist precursors like E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. The character of Saleem's grandfather Dr. Aziz harks back to Forster's Dr. Aziz, while the MCC 'Midnight's Children's Conference', comprising the magical children is evocative of the 'Mayapore Chatterjee Club' that the anglicised Hari Kumar is part of, in Scott's novel.\(^{31}\)

Michael Gorra makes an interesting observation that apart from the near mandatory scene at Jallianwala Bagh, an engagement with colonialism seems extraneous to the plot. However, he says the colonial backdrop proves unavoidable in that Saleem's family represents the very model of the "native bourgeoisie," happy to occupy the posts vacated by the coloniser.\(^{32}\) He notes that Saleem is schooled in English. His folks reside in a house built by the British on a hilltop. The Englishman, William Methwold names the villas - Versailles, Buckingham, Escorial, and Sans Souci - in the fashion of European palaces. He sells them at a pittance on a proviso that the new owners retain the contents of the home in its entirety. Manipulation is cloaked in what Methwold terms a mere quirk — a "game" (*MC* 95).

This hegemonic stratagem to make mimic men of the Indians may be regarded as an instance of the discourse of mimicry that Homi K. Bhabha considers "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge".\(^{33}\) The ambivalence of the discourse of mimicry implies that, inspite of the initial remonstration to the conditions, the residents succumb to imitation. They fail to realise how they were gradually being changed by the estate:

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. Listen carefully: what's he saying? Yes, that's it. 'Sabkuch ticktock hai,' mumbles William Methwold. All is well. (MC 99)

Mimicry attempts an appropriation of the Other as it envisages power. Thus, the residents begin to imbibe the ethos of the coloniser in the course of the mime. They are unable to discern the ploy of the Englishmen to exert control in this form, even in their act of departure. Conversely, mimicry has a deep and disturbing impact on the power of colonial discourse in that the agenda to reform is imperiled by the "excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite)". Thereby mimicry is rendered "resemblance" as well as "menace". 34 It is menacing in terms of the partial representation of the colonial object thereby upsetting its authority.

The issue of identity also assumes significance in the matter of an affliction that leaked into history and broke out on an enormous scale shortly after Independence. The Rani of Cooch Naheen is among the first to suffer from of this disease of going white in "blotches." She regards it as a symbolic manifestation of anglicisation, of "cross-cultural concerns," an expression of the "internationalism" of her spirit (MC 45). Subsequently, even the businessmen of the country and Aadam Sinai himself will come to be afflicted by this condition.

Identity is problematised most emphatically in the context of Saleem's multiple and uncertain parentage. He represents the plural identities of India. This hybrid self springs from the imagination of a writer shaped by his own experience of plurality and migrancy, in which purity has no place. Saleem is actually the son of an illicit union between an Englishman and a poor Hindu woman. He is brought up by a
Kashmiri Muslim couple who are ignorant of the fact that he has been exchanged at birth with their own son.

The multifaceted origins of the nation are thus taken into account. Through the complex ancestry of Saleem Sinai the novel represents the different social classes and religious backgrounds. All these play a part in the formation of the new nation via Saleem’s complex ancestry.

If Ahmed and Amina are his parents, Saleem is Muslim. If Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita are regarded as his parents, he is lower caste Hindu. If Methwold is his father, he is Anglo-Indian. Schaapsteker considers himself a father to Saleem. He feels that he gave Saleem a fresh lease of life curing him by curing him with krait poison when doctors had given up on him. Amina Sinai’s dream that she was impregnated by Nadir Khan, provides yet another name to the catalogue of his paternal figures. Further, Saleem’s uncle Hanif and aunt Pia act as his surrogate parents for the period when his parents discover he is not their biological offspring. With Saleem considering Zulfikar as a father figure while in Pakistan, he becomes Pakistani Muslim. With Picture Singh earning his paternal affections he is rendered a poor Communist. Mary Pereira the woman responsible for exchanging the children in the first place provides the Christian angle. She takes care of Saleem in the role of his ayah throughout his childhood and finally grants him succour in the form of employment and shelter when he has no place left to turn to at the end of the novel. Saleem finds employment in a pickle factory run by his old ayah and a consort in Padma Mangroli, his co-worker. Through these multiple identities Saleem has to discover his true self.

Saleem’s numerous father figures — Methwold, Wee Willie Winkie, Schaapsteker, Nadir Khan, Hanif, Ahmed Sinai, Picture Singh “make him an identity-
defying compound of Moslem, Hindu and British, with a mythological frame of reference that draws on all the components of an Indian melting-pot.\textsuperscript{35} Plurality is also represented in terms of Saleem's ability to function as a medium for communication with the other children of midnight. The discovery that he can telepathically commune with all of the other children enables him to witness India's complex diversity and heterogeneity first hand. His origins and identity are dubious right from the outset. In addition, in the course of the novel he goes through an amnesiac phase forgetting even his name, and being reduced to a man-dog, while in Pakistan. He is disintegrating at the time of writing his story. This fragmentation is a metaphor for the loss of identity. Saleem has to deal with a mottled history, a decentred country, uncertain parentage and fragmentation of his very being. He is literally the epitome an unstable identity. For, he is not who he thinks he is, his parents are not his parents, and to bring the irony full circle, even his son is not his son.

The narrative technique of Midnight's Children corroborates and foregrounds notions of memory and fragmentation. According to Rushdie, the experience of displacement is accompanied by the fragmentation of memory and identity. He speaks of how the diasporic writer who attempts to capture the world is compelled to do so in "broken mirrors", some fragments of which can never be retrieved.\textsuperscript{36} Keith Wilson regards Midnight's Children as a novel centrally concerned with the limitations of the narrative act: "It "deliberately invites a questioning of the credentials of the novelist and of the illusory surface objectivity of the novel form".\textsuperscript{37} The novel is indeed intensely self-reflexive, inserting the condition of the writing process into the text. This will be discussed in chapter five. Through such metafictive asides Rushdie
penetrates the illusion of the real. He foregrounds fictional truth. He uses a cinematic metaphor to explicate the association between reality and illusion:

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. (MC 165-6)

The narrator acknowledges and even embraces the errors in his novels - both intentional as well as unintentional. The many silences, absences and inconsistencies of the micro narratives are legitimate since the past cannot be completely accounted for. Saleem concedes the difficulty of furnishing an accurate account of event. He feels that "it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (MC 443). In Midnight's Children the first person narrator Saleem draws attention to the error he makes regarding the elections of 1957 and the assassination of Gandhi, but significantly adds "in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (MC 166).

Rushdie's justification of fantasy is that India itself was: "quite imaginary", a "mass fantasy", "the new myth - a collective fiction in which anything was possible...." (MC 112). The narrator even confesses to the reader that he had concocted the section on Shiva's death:

To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death. My first out-and-out lie - although my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-
hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data. *(MC 443)*

Truth becomes a construct in the view of the postmodern writer's suspicion of grand narratives. The narrator candidly admits errors, omissions and even lies. Paradoxically, his candour rather than weaken the text, seems to render him more trustworthy as a narrator. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, "this provisionality and uncertainty do not 'cast doubt upon their seriousness', but rather define the new postmodern seriousness that acknowledges the limits and powers of 'reporting' or writing of the past, recent or remote".\(^{38}\) M. Keith Booker is of the opinion that "this Nietzschean-Whitmanesque mode of acceptance of contradiction" is a crucial premise of almost all Rushdie's fiction. He adds that Rushdie's fiction "consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic".\(^{39}\) All of Rushdie's narrators seem unfazed by contradictions.

The lack of the subject knowing the past with any certainty "is not a transcending of history, but a problematised inscribing of subjectivity into history".\(^{40}\) Rushdie explicitly states in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" that the mistakes of his narrator Saleem "are the mistakes of a fallible memory". He admits that he made his narrator suspect his narration because his attempt in *Midnight's Children* was primarily a novel of memory, and his India was mainly a version, "and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions".\(^{41}\) History, in the view of Rushdie, is characterised by ambiguity. He states:

Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings.

Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. 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. 42

Rushdie’s wry statement of clarification in his latest novel *The Enchantress of Florence* to the effect that “A few liberties have been taken with the historical record in the interests of the truth”, is a proposition that has implications for his entire corpus of work.43 It is the creative writer’s view of history that he presents. In doing this he takes various liberties with conventional history. Nancy E Batty suggests that the most significant message of *Midnight’s Children* is the proposition that “if history is composed of fictions, then fiction can be composed of history”.44

Uma Parameshwaran opines, “At an overt level, Rushdie parodies the traditional form of histories.” He does this in several ways. In his portrayal, some of history’s significant and violent episodes originate in trivial accidents. For example there is the Nanavati case, the language demonstrations, and the theft of the hair of the Prophet. Parameshwaran feels that Rushdie takes liberties with dates with little regard for “chronometric exactitude that is one of the corner-stones of traditional historical writing”.45 From a reading of his work is seems like Rushdie is convinced that history and historical events, even reality, are accessible only through ones perception and interpretation.

Rushdie resists “grand narratives” like purity and wholeness. He transcends the precincts imposed by conventional history telling and narrative. He questions historical givens, opposes totalising postulates, and reveals how history is a construct that is available through interpretation. Srivastava feels that by introducing the historical, Rushdie compels the reader to confront ideas of history and fiction. She avers that his stories “displace more politically acceptable ones”, thereby providing a voice for the subaltern individual.46
The plot of *Midnight's Children* thus anchors itself within a historical context, subverting history in the process. The narrator states that he is far from satisfied with his attempts at pickling his story. He is haunted by the urge to “revise and revise, improve and improve” (*MC* 460). However, he is obliged to stop at some point. What he says of his own tale can well be said for the author’s creative attempt:

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth ... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (*MC* 461)

"*I, too, am a translated man. I have been borne across.*"

- Salman Rushdie (*Shame* 29)

In an article on Pakistan Rushdie avers that it is a place in which “democratic institutions”, indeed “democratic instincts” have never been allowed to germinate. “Instead, the country’s elites - military, political, industrial, aristocratic, feudal - take it in turns to loot the nation’s wealth”.47 If *Midnight’s Children* was Rushdie’s strenuous attack on the powerful political regime of Indira Gandhi, *Shame* consolidated Rushdie’s position as a dissenting, anti-establishment writer.

Unlike the epic scale of *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame* adopts a focus concentrated on the tyrannical and repressive nature of the regimes of the Pakistani elite, wherein democracy has no place and violence reigns. As an act of remonstration against the autocratic establishment of a postcolonial nation it is a significant
postcolonial text. In the words of Cynthia Carey Abrioux: “The predominant discourse of Shame is that of an incendiary and denunciatory evocation of a post-colonial nation in a state of moral chaos and murderous repression”. This novel is the author’s stringent appraisal of the social and political situation in Pakistan despite the textual disclaimer:

The country is this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality.... My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan. (S 29)  

The narrator claims that this “off-centering” (S 29) is necessitated by the fact that if he had been writing a realistic novel it would prove futile to argue that he was writing not only about Pakistan but also in universal terms. In that case, he is certain “the book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned”(S 70). In order to avoid public indignation he purports to narrate “a sort of modern fairy tale” (S 70). However, the correlation between certain peculiar happenings in the fairy tale and other equally strange political events in a certain nation is obvious. The narrator’s exposition of the crimes committed in the name of the nation is undertaken via partially reconstructing the regimes of Zia-ul-Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the country.

Locating the narrative in the fourteenth century enabled by the writer’s use of the Islamic Hegiran calendar, underlines the coexistence of medieval as well as modern forces in the country. From its very inception - in terms of geography and topography - the Pakistani landmass is associated with an arbitrary and slapdash origin. The narrator draws attention to its “insufficiently imagined” beginnings (S 87).
The country was formed as a political arrangement with the British exiting from India.

The narrator deliberates upon “the famous moth-eaten partition”:

that chopped up the old country and handed Al-Lah a few insect-nibbled slices of it, some dusty western acres and jungly eastern swamps that the ungodly were happy to do without. (Al-Lah’s new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable that it could almost exist). (S 61; original parenthesis)

Pakistan owes its existence to the act of migration. The nation had to will its being. In addition to its migratory nature, the narrator provides an account of the manner in which the country got its name. It was a process distant from the intentions of the people at large:

Pakistan is an acronym originally thought up in England by a group of Muslim intellectuals. P for the Punjabis, A for the Afgans, K for the Kashmiris, S for Sind and the ‘tan’, they say for Baluchistan . . . .it was a word born in exile which then went East, was borne across or translated, and imposed itself on history; a returning migrant, settling down on partitioned land, forming a palimpsest on the past. (S 87)

Bangladesh, as a part of East-Pakistan, had no part to play in this scheme of naming. The narrator wryly comments that it subsequently took the hint and triggered off its own secession:

The palimpsestic nature of the country erected over the Indian layer, is underscored. The metaphor of the palimpsest recurs throughout Rushdie’s work. Competing accounts vie for acceptance, and space is reinscribed while the previous inscription remains incompletely erased:
A palimpsest obscures what lies beneath. To build Pakistan it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lay just beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was rewritten; there was nothing else to be done. (S 87)

Pakistan would rather deny its Indian past. The new nation state had no authoritative past of its own and had to grapple with a complex identity crisis. The seeds of discord were thus inherent. Cynthia Carey Abrioux argues that this lack of stability rendered the nation an easy target for exploitation by ruthless power brokers who were able to "consecutively re-inscribe and recuperate the space".50

Interestingly, the narrative is manipulated by recurring self-reflexive intrusions from the narrator who posits himself as a migrant akin to the Pakistani nation. He self-consciously foregrounds the hybrid status of the work and his status as a postcolonial migrant. Whereas Midnight's Children had the protagonist Saleem Sinai in the role of the first person narrator, it is the novelist himself who seems to assume the role of the raconteur of Shame in the persona of Rushdie. Migration is an enduring theme in Rushdie's writing. His experience of translation is bound with his conception of Pakistan as a second home. The narrator's self-representation in Shame is that of a migrant. He explicitly alludes to his own translation: "I, too know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will)" (S 85; original parentheses).

He reflects upon his expatriate status at length:

Although I have known Pakistan for a long time, I have never lived there for longer than six months at a stretch....I have learned Pakistan in slices....
... however I choose to write about over-there, I am forced to reflect that in fragments of broken mirrors ...(S 69).

And yet again, "As for me: I, too like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist" (S 87). Catherine Cundy posits that the novel articulates "a coherent and positive image of the migrant post-colonial subject". The distinct sensibility of the migrant writer is articulated. The narrator of *Shame* muses:

I have a theory that the resentments we *mohajirs* engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men ancienly dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown. (S 85)

The experience of migration may be accompanied by an irreplaceable loss, but it can also be an enabling experience. As the narrator puts it, "It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion — and use, in evidence, the success of Fitzgerald-Khayyam — that something can also be gained" (S 29). The reference to the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* points to Rushdie's view of the hybrid experience being one filled with possibilities. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt notes that even the name Omar bears is that of an Eastern poet unrecognised in his own clime and famous only in translation.

The book opens in the fabulist mode but history begins to assume centre stage. Arbitrary selections of facts from official history find their way into the text. Gen. Raza Hyder who ultimately becomes president-dictator of his country, is a commentary on Gen. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq. The character of the rich landlord and playboy, Iskander Harappa is a caricature of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He enjoys a successful reign as Prime Minister until he is overthrown by Raza Hyder and
eventually executed after a mock trial for the murder of a relative. The narrative focuses on the careers, contentions and corruption of these two rivals in the political arena.

Timothy Brennan feels that the history in *Shame* “is a history filtered through the ambitious self-images of its protagonists - the history they in effect ‘try on’ to inflate their importance”. ²⁵⁳ He opines that while Saleem Sinai endeavours to encompass multitudes, the likes of Bhutto and Zia only downgrade events to their own dimension.

The novel opens in the remote town of Q with the death of old Mr. Shakil, a widower who has raised his three daughters - Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny - in captivity. After the death of their father the three girls realise that he has left them bankrupt. In defiance against the inflexible strictures with which they have been raised, they host a party. Their invitees are primarily the imperialists. That single night of hedonism results in one of them getting pregnant. The pregnancy in turn, leads to their self-imposed confinement which extends for over half a century. Their captivity cements such strong bonds of intimacy and solidarity between them, that in their attempt to spare the illegitimate child public shame, each of the three sisters displays symptoms of pregnancy.

The paternity and maternity of Omar and his brother Babar is disclosed neither to the children of this strange triune motherhood, nor the reader. This motif of confused parentage whereby Rushdie problematises identity is prefigured in *Midnight's Children* via Saleem’s complicated ancestry. Like Saleem, Omar has an imperialist for a father, and inherits the colonial legacy as well. He is conceived as a result of a union between the departing imperialists and the Muslims. This echoes the formation of Pakistan. Omar later conceives of his tutor Eduardo Rodrigues as a
father figure. This uncertain parentage splits the consciousness of the character who is then deprived of a fixed core and identity. Ignorance of parentage subverts the attempt to build an integrated sense of self or nationality. In the face of their complicated and ambiguous origins, the characters have to grapple with issues of identity and history.

Despite the numerous references to Omar as the hero, he is in actuality, an object of parody. He is quickly relegated to the margin of events. The narratorial voice wonders: "Dizzy, peripheral, inverted, infatuated, insomniac, stargazing, fat: what manner of hero is this?" (S 25). Saleem enjoyed a centrality of status in Midnight's Children despite his fragmentation. Omar, on the other hand, is well aware of his liminal position. His peripheral nature is in accordance with the peripheral status of the country. In the first few pages of the text he confides in Iskander that he isn't even "the hero of his own life; a man born and raised in the condition of being out of things" (S 24). Omar is born in his grandfather's death-bed which also forms the site for the end that overtakes him. As he is held upside down after his birth, he is afflicted by "a sense of inversion, of a world turned upside-down" (S 21), and "that improbable vertigo ... the sense of being a creature of the edge: a peripheral man" (S 24), continues to plague him all his life. He is paranoid that he will fall off the edge of the world into oblivion. Giddy spells afflict him at geographical borders.

Omar devours his grandfather's books. Unlike his namesake the Persian poet Omar Khayyam however, he has no gift for poetry. Like Adam Aziz in Midnight's Children, he follows the path of western education to become a medical doctor. Even when he is physically distanced from his home, he is driven by the injunction of his mothers' ban on shame. He accordingly acts upon the instructions of his mothers in his relationships with Farah Zoroaster, the maid Shahbanou, and his cronies. He is later afflicted by insomnia.
His mothers’ refusal to have him circumcised, have his head tonsured or introduce to him religion leaves Omar a potentially secular slate. However, he is unable to rise above degeneracy. Like Saleem in Midnight’s Children, he disregards his historical potential and gets embroiled in the cancerous political scenario in his nation. The enabling possibilities that can arise from his situation are thwarted by his lack of critical discernment. According to Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, Omar’s re-inscription of the forbidden emotion of shame relates to the fact that he “unreflectingly and uncritically reacts to his mother-country’s ideological codes”.

On his twelfth birthday Omar’s wish for freedom is grudgingly granted by his mothers. As he steps out of the fortress that is his home, the book opens up to the wider arena of politics in the nation. Scorned by society for his shameful birth, he adopts a defiant attitude. He finds a fitting crony in Iskander Harappa. This nominal hero of the book - Omar - is sidelined when the narrator turns the spotlight on the private and political fortunes of the two contenders for power in the nation, General Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa.

It is from the purview of a familial structure that the story of the nation unfolds. A family tree marks the opening of the novel. It delineates the various family connections, simultaneously and conspicuously calling attention to Omar’s and Babar’s anonymous paternity. The real and the fictive are co-opted. In reality, the political families were not related. In the text however, Iskander marries Rani Humayun the cousin of Raza Hyder. Aijaz Ahmed commends the wonderful technical mechanism of converting all the adversaries into kin for the purpose of “reflecting the monopolistic structure of dictatorial power and the very narrow social spectrum within which this power in Pakistan circulates”.

Raza Hyder’s marriage to Bilquis leads to the birth of Sufiya Zinobia, thwarting her parents’ ardent desire and expectation of a male child. To make things worse, while still an infant, a brain fever leaves her mentally retarded. She is trapped in a mind that refuses to keep pace with the development of her body. The brew distilled by a local hatim leads to the side effect of the deceleration of the progress of time in her body. This is a recurrent motif in Rushdie’s work. Saleem’s hastened initial growth in *Midnight’s Children* decelerates as an after effect of the krait poison administered to cure him from a fatal illness. Moraes Zogoiby in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* suffers from a condition wherein his physical ageing process is accelerated double-time. Sufiya Zinobia’s condition is such that at the age of twelve she has the mind of a three year old.

The story of Omar Khayyam intersects that of the power politics in the form of Sufiya finding a husband in Omar Khayyam her physician. By then, he is an immunologist of international renown. In *Midnight’s Children*, Nadir Khan and Mumtaz have a discreet wedding celebration. There are only a few guests present, and no tents, singers or sweetmeats. Similarly, in *Shame*, the idiotic Sufiya “smiled and ate a plate of laddoos decorated with silver paper” (S 199), at her private wedding to Omar – a man thirty-one years her senior. Sufiya who represents shame is blissfully unaware that Omar, a prodigy of sorts has degenerated into the embodiment of shamelessness. The depraved Omar ends up marrying into the family that killed his step-brother. He ultimately impregnates Shahbanou - his wife’s ayah - under the roof of his own father-in-law. If, in *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie worked the duality between liberal secularism and communal forces via Saleem and Shiva; in *Shame* it is Sufiya and Omar who play out the duality between shame and shamelessness.
Sufiya absorbs the rejection and shame of her parents and also the ignominy of a whole people around her to become shame incarnate. In the course of the novel she becomes almost literally the conscience of a world bereft of shame. She comes to stand for the shame and violence that resulted in the doom of the dictatorship in Pakistan. Sufiya's repressed feelings find an outlet in violence. She decapitates two hundred and eighteen turkeys from the compound of a neighbour at the age of twelve. She goes on to brutally attack her brother-in-law on his wedding day. The discovery that Omar who is not allowed to consummate the marriage with her, sleeps with her servant in her stead, is the final straw. It triggers her evolution into legend. She allegedly turns into a bestial creature - a white panther.

Marriage doesn't ensure the happily-ever-after ending of the conventional fairy story. In this case the beast does not undergo a positive renewal as is the case in the original "Beauty and the Beast" tale. Instead, Sufiya's metamorphosis into the beast is accelerated. Sufiya becomes a symbol of the author's endeavour to fictionalise the emotion of shame.

In the admission of the narrator, the character of Sufiya is partly built upon the incident of a British-Pakistani girl in the East End of London. This girl was killed by her own father in an act of honour killing because he suspected she had copulated with a white boy. Sufiya represents such a notion of shame. The narrator adds that her character is based on yet another British-Asian girl who feels shame rather than indignation at being tormented and beaten by a group of white boys in a late-night train. The narrator imagines this pent up humiliation finding a vent in an awesome violence. This is what happens in the case of Sufiya. Yet another inspiration for the character of Sufiya is a boy from a news item who simply ignited of his own accord and burned to death.
Ayelet Ben-Yishai observes that “The dialectic of shame in this novel is not with its opposite - honour, but with its lack - shamelessness”\(^5\). It is about shame and shamelessness, the violence they prompt, and their manifestation. Sufiya is a kind of ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ persona as is subtly indicated by the phonetic congruence of her two surnames Shakil and Hyder.\(^5\) Under Sufiya’s naive self-effacing exterior lurks the violence that resurfaces at significant points in the tale. She mutilates her own hair at the onset, and moves on to decapitating turkeys as well as men, and ravaging property. Sufiya may be regarded as symbol of the Islamic nation in its utopian aspiration as the land of the pure. In this case her character hints at forces of retribution as a retort to the loss of shame.

The dialectic of shame and shamelessness is symbolically entwined with the power struggles of Bhutto and Zia via Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder. Arjumand Harappa the daughter of Iskander, described famously as “virgin Ironpants” (S 107), is loosely modelled on Benazir Bhutto. General Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujib the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh are models for the character of President Shaggy Dog and Sheikh Bismillah respectively.

Raza Hyder’s career enjoys a meteoric rise. As a Colonel he is appointed to guard the gas fields against the local tribes. He engineers a military conquest as a result of which martial law is imposed. He becomes the administrator after the arrest of the Chief Minister. Raza ruthlessly sends arrested tribals to the gallows. These deeds ultimately lead to his downfall. He is demoted from his position as minister and relegated to commanding the military training unit.

The success of Raza Hyder -his wife’s cousin - and his own cousin Little Mir Harappa instigate Iskander Harappa. He is goaded into abandoning his debauched lifestyle. Subsequently, he parts ways with his dissolute crony Omar and his mistress
Pinkie Aurangzeb, recognising them as hindrances to his political agenda. He thus enters the political field with a Machiavellian brilliance. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke observes that

Isky, like Bhutto, is a self-contradictory man, the scion of an enormously wealthy landowning family (the surname Harappa is doubly appropriate because the site of the Harappan civilisation borders Bhutto’s family estate in the Sind province), patrician, Westernized, yet he adopts a populist manner to succeed as a politician—rhetorical speeches, bad language, histrionics. 58

As Prime Minister, Iskander’s error that leads to his downfall is the restitution of Raza. Discounting other worthy candidates, he raises Raza from the doldrums and makes him Commander-in-Chief of the army The narrator interjects: “this single error proved to be the undoing of the ablest statesman who ever ruled that country which had been so tragically misfortunate, so accursed in its heads of state” (§ 181). Raza ejects Iskander through a military coup and has him executed. Iskander Harappa - the man who had ushered a new century ahead of time, whose name “was etched on history in letters of burning gold” (§ 183) – could not overpower Time with his greatness. “Time’s revenge: it hung him out to dry” (§ 186).

After ousting Iskander, Raza assured the people via national television, swearing on the Koran, that the army was only acting as an umpire and elections would be held. The elections were deferred repeatedly and ultimately cancelled. It was at this time that the initials CMLA standing for “Chief Martial Law Administrator” acquired new import. “People began to say what they really stood for was Cancel My Last Announcement” (§ 227). This act prefigured a reign marked by Islamic punishments such as flogging and cutting-off hands, banning alcohol and
imported movies, regulating television programmes, making the veil mandatory, replacing the legal system with religious courts, incarceration of beggars and members of the Popular Front party on grounds that "God and socialism were incompatible" (S 247). "God was in charge" and those who doubted that were given proof of the power of the divine. Anti-faith elements were just simply made to vanish, "poof, like so" (S 248).

The imposition of Islamic fundamentalism in the name of religion could gain currency because of the regard of people for the rhetoric of faith and their susceptibility to manipulation thereof. Even Midnight's Children makes a reference to the feeble grasp of the "Karachiites" on reality, which disposed them to "turn to their leader for advice on what was real and what was not" and exude the "odours of acquiescence" (MC 308). But, the narrator states that ultimately one tires of the situation. In that case the available options include "disintegration, or a new dictatorship" or, what is termed the "myth" of "liberty; equality; fraternity" (S 251).

Raza's is a military regime while Iskander who propagated the notion of 'Islamic socialism' (S 150) is an elected representative. Both reigns however, are marked by grave political delinquencies for they are both despots. Goonetilleke notes that Isky and Raza are portrayed as buffoons but what they inflict on Pakistan is not in the nature of farce, but tragedy.59

Rushdie's work, Shame in particular persistently signals what Samir Dayal terms "the problematic imbrication of gender with nation".60 Women are central to Rushdie's development of his theme in the text. Political oppression is connected with sexual suppression. The narrator explicitly avows:

I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale .... But the women seem to have
taken over; they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies .... It occurs to me that the women knew precisely what they were up to – that their stories explain, and even subsume, the men’s .... So it turns out that my ‘male’ and ‘female’ plots are the same story, after all. (S 173)

The masculine account is balanced by the feminine. Rushdie’s interrogation of gender is a key to the larger context of discourse of the nation. In keeping with the declared aim of giving voice to the subaltern female, a good part of narrative space is devoted to women. History unfolds through the stories of the numerous women: Rani, the silent suffering wife of Iskander Harappa who is evocative of Penelope from Greek myth, her daughter Arjumand Harappa, Bilquis, the wife of Raza Hyder, Bilquis’ daughters Naveed and Sufiya Zinobia. Sufiya Zinobia brings together the various narrative strands. She is simultaneously an embodiment of the shame of the family and of the nation. She can be regarded as the rebellion of the woman against patriarchal codes, and a people against tyranny at large. The narrative asserts:

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well. (S 173)

Correspondingly, much of the response to Shame has focused on its portrayal of women. Opinions have varied with critics like Timothy Brennan, Ben Yishai and Anuradha Needham praising Rushdie’s strong women characters, to those like Aijaz Ahmed and Inderpal Grewal charging him with misogyny. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke and Catherine Cundy are among those who criticise Rushdie’s representation of women.
Cundy for instance, considers the manner in which the declared project of the text is a "formal manoeuvre" destabilised by the very representation of the women within the text in extreme terms.\(^{61}\)

A sense of entrapment looms large over the novel. At the onset one witnesses the confinement of the three girls. They, in turn, sequester their son Omar Khayyam Shakil. In the climax of the novel, the dictator Raza meets his end in a cage-like contraption at Omar's ancestral home. This 'dumb-waiter' was constructed by the three sisters to transport things from the outside world. Each of the characters - the women in particular - is ensnared in a situation that defies escape or real agency. Needham feels that Rushdie tries to "expose the particular and horrifying condition of their oppression through his searing indictment of a culture that closes women off from the whole range of social, cultural, and political networks" that are accessible to the men.\(^{62}\)

The three Shakil sisters turn their backs on society and live on their own terms. However, in their assertion and rebellion they take things to an extreme. Naveed Hyder is trapped in her procreative role. Talvar Ulhaq uses his clairvoyant abilities to impregnate her annually and she bears children that increase each year in arithmetic progression. So, in the year of Iskander's fall, her children numbered twenty seven. Driven to despair "by the pressure of the children who were so numerous that she forgot their names, she hired an army of ayahs and abandoned her offspring to their fate" (S 207). She seeks a release from her role as child bearer by committing suicide.

Arjumand Harappa rues her sexuality and makes every attempt to deny it. Her father had warned her that since it was a man's world, she would have to surmount her gender if she wanted to participate in power structures. Arjumand takes her
father's caveat to an extreme. She underplays her femininity in order to empower herself in political terms. She deals with her unrequited love for Haroun Harappa by directing her energies into politics.

Bilquis Hyder and Rani Harappa are relegated to their exilic locales for large parts of the action. Bilquis is complicit with patriarchal standards in her self-dissatisfaction for not providing her husband a male heir. Rani Harappa turns a blind eye to her husband's infidelities. However, she is the only female in the novel who is able to act positively via her legacy of "an epitaph of wool" (S 191). Through her embroidery of eighteen shawls she illustrates the personal and political transgressions committed by her husband. She titles the collection "The Shamelessness of Iskander the Great", and dispatches it to her daughter Arjumand, whose adoration for her father Iskander had blinded her to his misdemeanours.

"No two sets of memories ever match, even when their subject is the same", claims the narrator. In pictorial detail the shawls tell their tale: "Isky groveling at primrose Chinese feet, Isky conspiring with Pahlevi, embracing Dada Amin", "Iskander and the Death of Democracy, his hands around her throat, squeezing Democracy's gullet", "Iskander pointing at the future, only there was nothing on the horizon". She puts her maiden signature - Rani Humayun - to the work, which marks her attempt to retrieve her selfhood. This "act of accusation on the grandest conceivable scale" goes beyond the defiance of a single individual, to function as a subversion of history (S 191-96). It is the act of the artisan exposing an alternate version of official history. Although Rani's needlework does not occupy much narrative space, it assumes significance beyond the passive attempt of one individual. In Needham's observation, the events depicted by the shawls have a factual base and are therefore an indictment on a grand scale. She states that the shawls: "do describe
‘unspeakable things’ that actual history has covered up”.63 They thereby go beyond the boundaries of the book into the real world.

As an attempt to salvage what lies beneath the palimpsestic present, Rani’s artistic act is comparable with that of Saleem’s literal as well as metaphorical attempt at pickling his account of history. It also recalls Moraes Zogoiby in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, writing his story in a bid to continue living.

Sufiya Zinobia becomes a “human guillotine” a monstrous creature akin to a kind of nemesis (S 244). According to Syed Mujeebuddin, “the severest indictment of the insularity of Pakistani society is emblematized in Sufiya Zinobia”.64 Blushing in shame from birth, she is unable to react in any other manner beside violence. Rushdie has repeatedly highlighted that the coming together of shame and shamelessness can only engender violence. The single collective attempt in the book wherein “the women of the country began marching against God” (S 249), is quelled by Raza Hyder.

Aijaz Ahmed concedes that an appraisal of Rushdie’s representation of women in *Shame* is a complex undertaking given the fact that he is astute and capable of narrating oppression of women, and is not a “misogynist plain and simple”65. Ahmed finds the novel populated by women who are “frigid and desexualized”, “demented and moronic”, “driven to despair”, or embodiments of “sheer surreal incoherence and loss of individual identity” (S 144). He argues that in spite of the author’s patina of concern with women who are undoubtedly portrayed more sympathetically than the men, the novel is flawed if “virtually every woman is to be pitied, most are to be laughed at, some are to be feared, at least some of the time, but none may be understood in relation to those fundamental projects of survival and overcoming.”66
While the validity of Ahmed’s claim has to be admitted, Justyna Deszcz argues that Sufiya may be inarticulate but she is also an autonomous individual who rebels against patriarchy. Deszcz is of the view that Shame cannot be regarded as anti-feminist. She interprets the text in terms of Rushdie’s appropriation of the fairy-tale ‘Beauty and the Beast’, to make it an “anti-paternalist narrative” that goes beyond the archetype. She feels that Rushdie provides an exposition of how authorial strictures may be destabilised. As a contribution to the interrogation of patriarchal repression, she regards Shame as a testament to the “feminist poetics” in his work. She maintains that what is most significant, “is not whether one’s allegiances can be clearly defined as feminist or not, but whether one engages in the act of exposing women’s stories”.67

Ambreen Hai draws attention to the ambivalence of Rushdie’s feminism. She notes a dual inclination in Rushdie’s work from Midnight’s Children to The Moor’s Last Sigh, wherein Rushdie seems to be employing feminist approaches to further his own postcolonial narration. She submits that his declared feminism becomes increasingly complex and “ambivalent” in the course of his corpus of work. The feminist bent in Rushdie seems to be offset by its lapse “into reifications of stereotypes of gender and sexuality…and into replaying surprisingly parochial and patriarchal discourses of gender and sexuality.”68 She goes on to view this incongruity as an indication of “contradictory efforts to conjoin discourses of colonialism and gender”. She concludes with the assertion that it is imperative to appreciate the extent “of agency and self-consciousness” with which writing such as Rushdie’s makes an attempt to rectify such inconsistency.69

The text stands charged in the matter of Rushdie’s characterisations being subordinated to his political concerns. However, it may be argued that this extends to the portrayal of almost all the other characters as well. While it is true that the women
who populate Rushdie's novels often seem to accept the conventional role of the male as the ultimate authority it must be noted that they are strong willed and assertive, varied and powerfully drawn.

Omar's end, like that of Saleem's is an unusual one. He is decapitated by his wife in his mother's house at Nishapur and obliterated in the explosion that overtakes the end. The conclusion is shrouded in ambiguity. In all likelihood, Sufiya literally explodes in fulfilment of the portent of the boy who self ignited. "Humiliate people for long enough and a wildness bursts out of them" (S 117), the narrator had warned. The carnage at the close of the novel wipes out the entire cast.

Ahmed considers it an elemental conceptual flaw that the writer is not able to "include integral regenerative possibilities" within the world he creates. However, such regenerative possibilities could well prove simplistic given the complex and highly volatile nature of the socio-political situation in the subcontinent. Indeed, as Ahmed aptly notes, the predominant concern in Shame is that of "a space occupied so entirely by power that there is no space left for either resistance or its representation; whoever claims to resist is already enmeshed in relation of power and the logic of all-embracing violences". Even while he concedes the relevance of Ahmed's diagnosis of Rushdie's fiction lacking optimism, Samir Dayal wonders whether such optimism would in fact be warranted. Indeed, history seems to be repeating itself in present day politics in the subcontinent and with specific reference to the situation in Pakistan. With the military holding sway lately, and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the message of Shame not only seems presaged, but so very pertinent.

In Midnight's Children as well as Shame, Rushdie interweaves history and politics as he deliberates upon the identity of the nation states of India and Pakistan.
He is disappointed with the postcolonial nation because those who came to lead it were, as Timothy Brennan puts it, “sell-outs and power brokers”.72

The writer’s disenchantment with a disoriented, aimless generation is encapsulated in *Midnight’s Children*. The aspirations of the new nation are at variance from its frustrating realities. Even so, India emerges from the book as a land of possibilities in the form of its voluminous meandering narrative. *Shame* shares stylistic techniques with *Midnight’s Children* but as its scope demands, it is tightly crafted. The exhilaration that greeted Independence in the young postcolonial nation of Pakistan has jaded. The country is thereby floundering in the midst of lost ideals, rampant corruption and repressive governments. Iskander had once told his daughter that as a nation the people had an outstanding talent for “self-destruction”. He continued: “‘we nibble away at ourselves, we eat our children, we pull down anyone who climbs up. But I insist that we shall survive’” (S 184). Despite its staying power, the world portrayed in *Shame* is a grim one.

Rushdie regards himself as a writer of political fiction. *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* condemn acquiescence and quiescence in the face of tyranny. They insist upon political engagement and social accountability. Rushdie emphasises the need for “books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world”. His best work manages to accomplish just this.
Notes


3 Hutcheon, Poetics 105.

4 Hutcheon, Poetics 105.

5 Hutcheon, Poetics 108.

6 Hutcheon, Poetics 5.


8 Hutcheon, Poetics 120.

9 Hutcheon, Poetics 120.


12 Morrison 141.


Henceforth referenced parenthetically in the text as MC with page number.


17 Eric L. Berlatsky 276.

18 Hutcheon, *Poetics* 123.


21 Kortenaar 44.


30 Patricia Merivale, “Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies in Midnight’s Children and The Tin Drum,” Mukherjee, Rushdie’s Midnight’s 117.

31 Brennan 82.


34 Bhabha 86.

35 Wilson 29.

36 Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands” 11.

37 Wilson 30.

38 Hutcheon, Poetics 117.


40 Hutcheon, Poetics 118.


42 Rushdie, “‘Errata’: Or, Unreliable Narration in Midnight’s Children,” Imaginary Homelands 25.


45 Parameshwaran 7.

46 Srisvastava 77.


48 Abrioux 48.


50 Abrioux 50.


53 Brennan 119.


57 Morrison 148.

59 Goonetilleke 62.


61 Cundy 55.

62 Needham, 153.

63 Needham 156.


65 Ahmed 143.

66 Ahmed 151.


69 Hai 47.

70 Ahmed 151.

71 Ahmed 127.

72 Brennan 27.