Chapter IV
Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is unique - cast in a mythic, supernatural and magical realism mode, form and overall die - in its highly individual and individualized “postmodernist/postcolonial” exploration-cum-indictment of the individual protagonist Saleem Sinai and the macro historico-political reality that impinges heavily upon him and all connected. Thus, with respect to its narratology, the work greatly differs from *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi*. In this light and vein, the major point of departure is its time-travelling narration - as opposed to traditional sequential narrative - drenched in highly pungent surrealism, all an inextricable mesh of magical realism a la Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

*Midnight’s Children’s* rendering of historical events of the subcontinent as well as their deft interweaving with the rising and falling fortunes of generations from Aadam Aziz to Saleem Sinai, is done within the duel framework and subjectified perspective with its often surreal, yet tangible link to reality of Indian progression. Simultaneously *Midnight’s Children* is a personal history of the progression with his innately driven quest for identity - impelled and compelled by a sense of being tossed by the inexorable tides of time for a mysterious unfathomable reason amidst the deeply felt rootlessness - purpose being elusive, and at best, ill defined. This is all due to two legacies: the “inherited” segmentation - oriented perforated sheet of his grandparents and the large empirical legacy of the accident of birth - on the very stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. The last is inflicted familially, socially and nationally in the
sense of great expectations, the last in the form of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s letter to the new born.

With respect to narrative form, *Midnight's Children* unwinds as a fantasy - sinister and dark in its colonial/postcolonial context and content - beginning in Kashmir (a telepathic flashback) with grandfather Aadam Aziz in his prime, though psychologically displaced due to education in Germany as a doctor (more on this later). As such the novel is highly subjective honouring and yet demolishing surrealistic vagaries and bonds of time - a time-shipping narrative par excellence much in the sense of Bergson’s indistinct and unenclosable continuum. So the rickety circularity of time with all its uncertainties is emphasised. However, where necessary, linear progression, but not strict historical accuracy, is maintained - enabling a subjectified yet distanced view of narration, which, according to Vinay Kirpal, is as follows:

The reader is deliberately distanced from the characters though an overall development of the diegestic mode so that the characters are commented on, judged, ridiculed and “presented” through the voice – an ironical, funny, intimate and disillusioned voice – of narrator. We are never allowed to forget pastness of events, and we are constantly invited to “understand” history rather than to “identify” with individual characters.¹

*Midnight's Children* spans the time period from 1915 to 1978, taking the reader from pre-Independence to Independence and Partition and lastly to the postcolonial era till the emergency - the novelist using the first person for narration but sometimes straying into the third person (both largely due to supernatural power) form. The novel’s sweep is epic in dimension and is replete with mythic inversions and individual foibles whereby the protagonist, Saleem
Sinai, relates grippingly and fascinatingly the freedom struggle, Independence and Partition and the frenetic changes thereafter till the emergency, its lifting, and the brief rule of the Janata Party. Saleem Sinai is by virtue of birth on the stroke of the midnight of August 15th, 1947, the acknowledged first child of Midnight with all its ominous, symbolic meaning and consolations. In this light Saleem’s quest for identity assumes great significance as there are various recessed factors – the most important, at the risk of reiterating the point, being switching of him with another baby in the Narlikar Nursing Home. This particular fact contains an even darker truth which is revealed much later in the course of the narrative - his actually Anglo illegitimacy (the biological father being Briton Methwold) makes him twice bastardized with all its colonial and postcolonial ramifications (due to the compounding factor of the switch, especially in the socio-economic and politico-historical context in terms of both the larger subcontinental sense and the individual sense as well). In brief, he is thus - by his own later recognition - wandering in almost eternal rootlessness of the soul and psyche in which personal/family history is intertwined and submerged inextricably like a gigantic spider within his own as well as the subcontinent’s destiny. It is strikingly evident in the course of the narrative that fracturing at all levels - historical, geographical, personal, familial and societal - dominates both the foreground and background of the work, all disgorged, often surreally, in Saleem’s impassioned account. Taking into account all of the preceding, *Midnight’s Children* cannot be confined to a single literary genre - postcolonial, postmodern, fantasy or even that of magical realism - but in fact encompasses all four and even transcends them. To illustrate this we may mention the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s letter to
Saleem, the first official child of the first Midnight – and the beginning of Independence. To quote the text:

‘Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own’.  

However, the ominous aspect of this first twilight hour in all its portentousness draws U.M. Nanavati and Prafulla C. Kar to comment:

Saleem is born in the midst of the partition riots. August in Bombay: a month of festival, the mouth of Krishna’s birthday and coconut day: and birth of nation which was “a mass fantasy” was shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat and would periodically need the satisfaction and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood.

Saleem himself views it thus: “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (p.9).

Within the course of the narrative, time’s fluid form and aspect is of prime essence, events - historico-political and personal intertwined in juxtaposition - unwinding in magical realism mode from Saleem’s rambling consciousness. Before proceeding further, suffice it to say that the novel decidedly makes a political statement-cum-indictment of both colonialism and postcolonialism with its detailed rending of the veil of the freedom struggle, Partition and Independence and the postcolonial era till the re-emergence of Indira Gandhi. At the risk of repetition, these details will be fleshed out during side-by-side analysis.
Before the analysis a brief bare-boned, largely linear summary - despite the novel's time-skipping mode - would be in order. The exegesis will follow during the course of the analysis proper. *Midnight's Children* opens with a brief reference to Saleem Sinai's birth - even though he has not been born chronologically at this time. Rushdie then transports the reader to Kashmir of August 15, 1915, briefly focusing on Dr. Aadam Aziz's agnosticism and out-of-place feeling due to his educational training in Germany.

Aadam Aziz (Saleem Sinai's paternal grandfather) falls into the carefully engineered love-trap of landowner Ghani - the object being his daughter Naseem (perpetually apparently ill), he allowed to examine her only through a perforated sheet, engendering sexual fantasy. Eventually, Aziz and Naseem marry; move to Agra, briefly halting at Amritsar - where Aadam Aziz witnesses the horrific, ghastly carnage at Jallianwala Bagh, himself narrowly escaping certain death unscathed. Relations between Naseem and Aziz soon sour - due to the former's orthodox religiosity and the latter's scientific approach and agnosticism. (In due course they have five children - Alia, Emerald, Mumtaz, Hanif and Mustafa).

Saleem Sinai, the narrator-hero (who possesses the gift of practically complete omniscience), subsequently refers to the Quit India Movement, secular Muslim/politician Mian Abdullah's (Hummingbird) dramatic assassination and martyrdom, along with the death of all assassins, and the escape of poet-aide Nadir Khan. Nadir Khan shelters in Aadam Aziz's cell where love blossoms between him and Mumtaz, they secretly marrying (in most of the family's presence). Mumtaz thereafter leads a double life - apparently single. But tension prevails between Naseem and Aadam, Emerald and Mumtaz - when it erupts
Emerald informs her beau major Zulfikar, who rushes to arrest him. Yet he escapes after writing a “TALAAQ” thrice (he is impotent). Mumtaz remarried businessman Ahmed Sinai, is rechristened Amina. The couple moves to Delhi.

Danger for Muslims is in the air. Pregnant Amina saves traveling peepshow man Lifafa Das’s life at great risk by shouting down a Muslim mob. This leads to Amina’s separate yet simultaneous visit with Lifafa Das to a fortune teller and Ahmed Sinai’s ill fated extortion payment to the Ravana gang - a group targeting Muslims. The extortionists do not get the money due to monkeys and thus a major part of Ahmed Sinai’s assets go up literally in smoke. Amina’s visit is of a highly hallucinatory nature - the prophecy being two-headed son with “nose and knees”.

Disaster-struck, the couple move to Bombay amidst announcement of Partition and Independence, where Ahmed Sinai purchases a building of Methwold’s estate - contrary to Amina’s wishes as the deed does not go into effect till midnight of August 15, 1947, there being a strange stipulation.

The scene shifts to the anguished Mary Pereira - Joseph D’Costa and the former sister’s Alice love triangle. Independence comes with Saleem Sinai’s birth on the stroke of midnight - the first official “Midnight’s Child”. But has switched Saleem and Shiva due to misguided love for revolutionary Joseph. Saleem is actually Briton Methwold and Vanita’s (Wee Willie Winkle’s wife) son. To atone, she takes up employment at the Sinai’s as ayah, where jealous competition of love between Amina and Mary with respect to the baby is ongoing. Subsequently, Ahmed Sinai’s assets are frozen legally and he retreats into alcohol and the mighty battle with the “djinns”. Amina keeps the wolves at bay by secret,
successful gambling. Soon afterwards, Gandhi is assassinated but relief is welcome when the assassin is revealed to be a Hindu.

Saleem’s sister, the Brass Monkey, is born on September 1, 1948 but she has to play second fiddle to favoured Saleem. Saleem reveals his telepathic power to the family, for which his father slaps him on the left ear, effecting deafness. The Sinai’s sexual life is now absolutely crippled. There is a reference to Saleem and Evie Burns, and friend Sonny and Brass Monkey love triangle. References are made to the Jan Sangh, Anna DMK and the Hindu Succession Act as well as the Marathi and Gujrati language riots.

The existence of other *Midnight’s Children* is revealed, 581 surviving out of 1001, with differing supernatural powers, by the narrator-hero. Saleem spies on Amina, discovers the Nadir (now Qasim) and Amina impotent relationship. The 1957 election—a battle between the communists and the Congress – is described.

Saleem is brutalized by teacher Zogallo, losing a patch of hair and subsequently the right hand finger in a fight with schoolmates Fat Peree and Glandy Keith at Masha Miovic’s urging. Due to an accident, in which Ahmed Sinai’s lack of paternity becomes evident, Saleem is exiled with children, Uncle Hanif and Pia, she being sexually involved with movie mogul Homi Catrack.

*Midnight’s Children* has by now summarily abandoned Pia in favour of Commander Sabarmati’s wife Lila. Saleem sends Commander Sabarmati an anonymous message about Lila’s illicit affair which has the following results: Lila Homi Catrack’s murder, Commander Sabarmati’s conviction, Amina’s severing her relations with Nadir Qasim, and Hanif’s suicide.
Hanif’s death is not mourned initially by Pia - causing acrimony between Reverend Mother (Naseem) and her, but she is forced to relent and display tears copiously. Aadam Aziz dies - his scientific approach and agnosticism crumbling is favour of religion - on Christmas day 1963 in Kashmir (Nehru on 27th May, 1964 (the two are related).

Mary confesses the crime of baby switch and reveals Saleem’s real parentage dethroning Saleem and Brass Monkey elevated. This is followed by Saleem’s second exile in Pakistan with uncle Zulfikar, Aunt Emerald, and their son Zafar amidst a reference to Pakistani President Iskandar Mirza. There is a military coup and Ayub Khan assumes power. The Brass Monkey metamorphoses into Jamila Singer. Ahmed Sinai’s severe illness effects the family’s return to Bombay and Amina and Ahmed’s love revives.

There is a reference to the Indo-China 1962 war and Saleem forcibly undergoes a nasal operation, followed by the entire family immigration to Pakistan. Saleem can now literally smell truth. Ahmed Sinai goes into towel manufacture with the “Amina” label. Jamila Singer begin her career as a singer - behind a veil: the legacy of the late Aadam Aziz’s and Naseem’s (Reverend Mother) initially flowing love - eventually to be the “voice of Pakistan”, Ahmed’s pride.

Saleem transforms himself into a creature of sensations - morally somewhat debauched - able to unerringly sniff out the “sacred and profane”, preferring the latter. He, therefore, explores and experiences sex with prostitutes, concentrating mostly on 512 years old Tai Bibi. However, this ends abruptly when the consummate sex worker confronts him about his incestuous sexual
desire and longing for sister Jamila Singer. Jamila Singer is the love of Mutasim, which, however, she spurns completely and for all time.

The novel then chronicles Nehru’s death, the political manoeuvres of Morarji Desai, Indira, and Shastri becoming the Prime Ministers. On the domestic front, Reverend Mother and Pia now have their own petrol pump-cum-eatery in Pakistan - the former’s dream. Pia avails of this opportunity to make and engage in sexual liaison but her heart is not in it - a decadent refuge.

Amina reveals to Alia that she is pregnant after 17 years and her spinster sister - Ahmed’s original choice and thus bitter - exacts her revenge through culinary preparations imbued with negativity, making Amina worry frantically about the life inside her. Concurrently, Ahmed’s business - after prospering for some time - has largely gone down the drain as, relatedly, has his peace of mind. A reference to the misuse of indirect nepotistic power is made - Sanjay Gandhi, Kanti Desai and Gauhar Khan.

The eighty-two day Rann of Kutch conflict is focused on along with cross border smuggling and Zafar’s jail sentence due to his own father’s murder. Soon, thereafter, the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war erupts, followed by a ceasefire, and both combatants withdrawing to pre-war position, despite India having captured a large chunk of Pakistan territory.

The 1970 Pakistan Elections underscoring the geographical divide between East and West - ensue with the newly born Awami League against the Peoples Party of Pakistan. Amidst this the CUTIA (Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities) is formed, and Saleem’s induction in it takes place as the “man-dog” due to his extraordinary olfactory abilities. West Pakistan’s ruthless
elimination of dissent in the East is one in which Saleem - in an amoral daze - detects a major proportion of "undesirables", his unit handing them over or simply executing them. But the refugee problem forces India to support the Mukti Bahini and soon afterwards step in directly, Bangladesh with General Niazi’s surrender to Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw. Saleem having recovered from the daze but under threat as a Pakistan soldier rescued magically by Parvati the witch and smuggled across the border.

A portrait of Indira or Madam or the insatiable, politically, of the Widow in her ominously evil aspect is hinted at. Saleem apprehensive of Shiva turning up - now a celebrated war hero and confirmed capitalist - leaves Parvati and the magician’s basti to take refuge with Mustafa uncle and Sonia Aunty, much to their displeasure. By this time, Jamila Singer has exiled herself with nuns, all the remaining family dead (due to the war), she assumed dead – all of which Saleem knows through his supernatural powers. Subsequently, Saleem’s uncle and aunt kick him out and he begins the journey back to the magician. Before he reaches, Parvati has magically summoned sexually degenerate Shiva, becomes pregnant, and is then brutally spurned, he walking out. It is now 1974 and India’s first nuclear test is referred to, followed by riots, led by Jayaprakash Narayan and Desai, against Indira Gandhi’s autocracy, which in 1975 effects the imposition of the emergency, by which time, Saleem, under pressure, has already married Parvati. On August 15, 1978 Saleem’s son (actually Shiva’s), Aadam Sinai is born, soon to be assailed by severe illness, refusing to speak a word - a cause of concern. The arbitrary excesses of the emergency - slum clearance, sterilization
are sharply brought into focus. Soon afterwards the 1977 General Elections follow.

At the close of *Midnight's Children*, Durga, a washerwoman, nurses Aadam Sinai, by now magician Picture Singh's wife (a father-figure of Saleem). Shortly afterwards, Saleem, son, and Picture Singh (a snake charmer by profession) depart for Bombay to contest against a famed rival and successfully defeat him, after which they part.

Saleem returns to Bombay and traces Mary Pereira, now officially Mrs. Braganza of Braganza Pickles, from whom he has learnt the trade, imbibing in his own way the pickling of history - political and individual in juxtaposition. Suddenly the entire past of Saleem till the close cinematographically pervades and dominates his consciousness - ending on the ominous note of Shiva coming for him as unavoidable fate - to effect vengeance for being denied his capitalist birthright of riches. Saleem accepts this fatalistically, ruminating over the future of his son. Thus does the work come full circle and so do Saleem, family and all connected, including the Midnight's Children; the enlivened rising and plummeting politically of a subcontinent, end on a foreboding note - effectively making a scathing anti-colonial/anti-postcolonial indictment of the powers that be. The note is distinctly one of innocence irreparably lost and possible paradise within human limits, eternally doomed.

*As Midnight's Children* is too greatly an epic with a vast epical time traveling sweep in which strict linear progression is not the narrative mode, it is not possible to analyze it extensively incident-wise in the scope of this chapter. Thus, instead the focus and emphasis shall be on a select few major incidents -
leaning towards the subjectified personal view of Saleem but of course not ignoring the politico-historical aspect (this, too, though textually subjectified). It is hoped that this somewhat "limited analysis" will still bring out the power of Rushdie's narrative, especially in its postcolonial/postmodern facets, the last being primarily spotlighted towards the chapter's end.

The tale underscoring in its opening the circularity time vision the hero-narrator is blessed with, opens unremarkably, but directly, with the description of Saleem Sinai's birth, the hero, by the hero-narrator himself:

I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date. I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more.... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greetings as I came. (p.9)

But suddenly then the narrator performs a backward timeskip, transporting the reader to the vista of the Kashmir valley's natural beauty and peace in the year 1915 – with the introduction to the character of confirm agnostic Aadam Aziz and the old boatman Tai, the latter being a living embodiment of the stuff of legend. His connection with the past, with primitivism shows that he is a surviving vestige of pre-colonialism in his psyche and weltanschauung – largely unmarked by the steam-rolling influence which hammers in its largely inescapable British and overall Anglo-Centric manner of looking at things with its soul-sapping Macaulayan impress in which different race and ethnicity is justification enough for colonialism and its more barbarous successor.
But more important to our purpose is Aadam Aziz, the grandfather of Saleem Sinai, who, recently returned from abroad, cannot embrace beauteous nature but instead “saw through travelled eyes …,” missing the mountain and valley vistas, but perceiving “the sorrowness, the proximity of the horizon; and felt sad, to be at home and feel so utterly enclosed”(p.11). This is a direct result of his personality change in Germany and thus he can, literally and metaphorically never go home again, to borrow an old time-tested truism. So, right at the beginning, Rushdie introduces in a remarkably fluid way the expatriate’s uprooting even when he is voluntary repatriate. So, the colonial/postcolonial schism foundation is laid, thereby introducing the twin themes and motifs of the novel. Even if we put the expatriate/repatriate issue aside, the novel is a platform for the author to decry Partition and question even postcolonial functioning. In this light the importance of the following observation is relevant:

In case of Salman Rushdie, for example, the examples of India and Pakistan are, above all, an opportunity to explore postcolonial responsibility. The story he tells is of an entire region slowly coming to think of itself as one, but a corollary of this story is disappointment.4

It has been further amplified thus:

In fact, the central irony of his [Rushdie’s] novel is that independence has damaged Indian spirits by proving that ‘India’ can act as abominably as the British did. In a kind of metafictional extravaganza, he treats the heroism of nationalism bitterly and comically because it always seems to him to evolve into the nationalist demagogy of a caste of domestic sell-outs and power-brokers.5
Aadam Aziz’s attempts at fitting in play themselves out at remembered instances of attempted observance of religious custom in Germany amidst the memories of his German love, Ingrid and the scoffing anti-ideologies of friends Oskar and Ilse Lubin and thus fail, mechanical memory’s power too weak in the light of his solid material experience with its embedded Eurocentric vision, at least in its mind-forming (as apposed to brainwashing) aspect. This can be viewed widely with respect to colonial/postcolonial education as a molding apparatus thus:

Colonial education [as well as its postcolonial successor mostly] comes in two basic forms: missionary or religious schooling (which was often residential) followed later by public and secular schooling. Numerous accounts across nations now attest to the critical role played by schools in assimilating colonized peoples, and in the systematic, frequently brutal, forms of denial of indigenous languages, knowledge and cultures.  

However, Aadam Aziz is, of course, influenced, possibly somewhat moulded – but largely positively. He is certainly not brainwashed – a testament to his individuality. But there is, still, a definite schism native place and out of placeless with it. In Rushdie’s context as postcolonial writer – he, of course, speaking through his characters, it can be seen in the larger context of nationhood and exile. This need not be geographical but can simply be psychological, a legacy Saleem Sinai of the third generation, inherits in the form of identity crisis engendering an identity quest. This aspect may be seen in the total context of the novel thus:

Saleem’s quest for identity is a matter of his evolving consciousness in an Indian ethos. It is at various levels,
geographical, historical, psychological, a rational and intuitive and finally culminates itself in finding the ultimate spiritual identification with the Indian consciousness.

Thereby Rushdie foreshadows the ruptures and rifts of an individual and nation – all unwinding through supernaturally omniscient Saleem Sinai, Aziz’s grandson. This crucial point finds a more sustained mention and explication later in this research work.

For the time being, let us stay focused on Aadam Aziz within the confines of “The Perforated Sheet” and its resultant effect. Let us therefore, and only in an introductory manner now briefly assess and analyze Aadam Aziz’s character (its importance at this point being centripetal). A confirmed agnostic and thereby necessarily secular, this aspect accentuated by his foreign training as a medical doctor, he is drawn reluctantly, but not publicly, into the turbulent politics of Kashmir and the subcontinent. The perforated sheet episode – setting the schism tone psychologically and politically – is in the nature of an aberration, the trick entrapment soon deteriorating into its true form of perennial opposition as seen in Naseem’s (later on Reverend Mother) orthodox religiosity in perpetual opposition to husband Aziz’s skepticism. The perforated sheet episode fuels fantasies of an obsessional nature due to his patient – love’s hidden body parts – signifying fragmented reality – especially the most important face – the good doctor only allowed to examine her unwhole, bringing to mind in a noble sense Salvador Dale’s painting of the virgin outo-sodinised by her own chastity trickery of love in patches is necessarily pre-doomed to die a premature death because of its unreal character and nature-farcically etched to the point of unerring literary reality corruption. Therefore, this corruption, calculated on Abdul Ghani’s part
due to peculiarly Islamic Puritanism, of course, claims two victims – idealistic Aadam Aziz and devoutly religious, to the point of zealotry, Naseem Aziz. Her constant, unending treatment and wooing is thus a moral perversion, a moral dilemma for Dr. Aziz. Therein is embedded direct and clear victimisation of woman in a male chauvinistic society. The tragedy as well as shock of the situation is reflected before the lust surfaces in the following dialogue between Doctor Aziz and Ghani, beginning with Aziz thus:

‘Ghani Sahib, tell me how I am to examine her without looking at her?’ Ghani smiled on. ‘You will kindly specify which portion of my daughter it is necessary to inspect. I will then issue her with my instructions to place the required segment against that hole which you see there. And so, in this fashion the thing may be achieved.’

‘But what, in my event, does the lady complain of?’ – my grandfather, despairingly. To which Mr. Ghani, his eyes rising upwards in their sockets, his smile twisting into a grimace of grief, replied: ‘The poor child! She has a terrible, a too dreadful stomachache.’

‘In that case,’ Doctor Aziz said with some restraint, ‘Will she show me her stomach, please’. (p.23)

Thus does Aadam Aziz, true to his calling and conscience as a doctor, reconcile himself to this morbidly strange situation wherein the very basis of the doctor-patient relationship is undermined. The chapter ends on this curiously disturbing note – but the perforated sheet leaves an indelible mark on the entire novel, particularly as reflected and embodied in the consciousness and actions of the hero-narrator, affecting his mother Amina’s world view before him. So, from the outset is a legacy laid, affecting both history and individuals.
The elusive sex object is rendered more desirable as forbidden fruit — literally and metaphorically, to reiterate, symbolic of segmented or fragmented reality. Aadam Aziz’s frenetic efforts to piece the sexual jigsaw puzzle together — sometimes imagining rare beauty, sometimes envisioning ugliness — finally reveals Naseem’s extraordinary, delicate beauty (the doctor instantly falling head over heels, she complaining of his long nose and bringing the drama to the foregone conclusion), shows impactfully that reality is only apparently whole. The drama begun with the perforated sheet is handed down to the succeeding generations — especially Mumtaz in her reincarnation as Amina and, most of all, Saleem Sinai, the grandson, the fractured child of the midnight of August 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1947 with all his surrealist impressions and related actions, including modes of being of special significance with respect to his identity crisis and thereby necessitated quest. As such, memory is the tool, the shaper for creating and supporting Saleem’s reality and truth. So, in Saleem’s own words,

"Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no same human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own" (p.211).

Relatedly, with respect to as the identity quest within personal and historical terms, M. Madhusudhana Rao comments:

Historical sense is the root cause for the narrative exploration of the identity of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, “the Snotnose, Stainface, Baby Sniffer”, and so on. He seeks to “discover” his own consciousness in a moment of national history ... \textsuperscript{8}
Saleem’s subjectified view of her central importance to history—within the identity quest parameters—can be illustrated by the text thus:

... 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. (p.238)

Aadam Aziz is of vital significance to the narrative for the following reasons: his siring of the family which continues for three generations and ends with his namesake Aadam Sinai (the fourth generation, his great grandson); his agnostic world-view and related secular ideals; his resultant skepticism and private inner rebellion; his tumultuous marriage which somehow marks Saleem, and, lastly, his keen olfactory sense which resurfaces in Saleem Sinai. With respect to Saleem, the first and fifth are of primarily vital significance to the point of being pivotal.

Now it would be pertinent and relevant to shift the focus to the omniscient narrator hero’s primary perspective in its generality to begin with insofar as Salman Rushdie’s literary rendition is concerned. *Midnight’s Children*, though encompassing and striding over major historic – political events, displays quite often the circularity of time in its surreal aspect. Though linear progression is at times used in its major form; Saleem’s subjective perception of history and his personal life in both its wide and narrow orbits is largely segmented. So the ghost of the perforated sheet proves a powerful symbol of reality viewed and felt in the form of separate shards. This is evident on numerous occasions and is directly tied in with his fantastic telepathic abilities – including mind-reading, paranormal
olfactory sensitivity and the potent power to mythologise both personal and great
events and great lives. As he is the omniscient narrator-protagonist, he can see
through the veil of time, though physically unable to flit backwards and forwards
through it. Let us paraphrase a few important examples of his subjectified
political vision which he begins through his grandfather Aadam Aziz’s
perception.

Besides the importance of Gandhi’s hartals during the Civil Disobedience
Movement, the resultant suppressive British Rowlatt Act and the atrocious
savagery of 13th April, 1919, the day of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the
incident which stands out most dramatically in the politico-historical context is
the assassination of Mian Abdullah during the Quit India Movement. To quote
the text, “Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the
facts”(p.47). The legend here is the inauspicious purchase of a peacock feather
fan in the face of poet-aide Nadir Khan’s warning about bad luck and their
subsequent sighting of the moon through a glass pane just before a convocation of
secular Muslim forces at Agra – notably a Muslim League bastion. Mian
Abdullah is dubbed the “Hummingbird” and is notably against the very idea of a
separate Muslim state. The fact is that he has many enemies and the British too
are rather apparently ambiguous towards him, possibly even inimical. To cut to
the heart of the matter, the “clairvoyant” betel chewers view the two incidents as
ominous. What ensues is the certain presence of six assassins. Thus “Six new
moons came into the room, six crescent knives held by men dressed all in black,
with covered faces. Two men held Nadir while the others moved towards the
Hummingbird” (p.47).
This description of them as moons along with their crescent knives immediately makes the Hummingbird hum at higher and higher pitch in which their very weapons are animated in the nature of a dreams to "sing". Mian Abdullah hums for his life, his greatest hums ever, some knives breaking on impact, some reaching their mark and drawing blood till the humming rises out of human auditory range till 6420 curs reach the spot and attack the assassins. Meanwhile Mian Abdullah's humming continues relentlessly and unabated. The sudden calling of the dogs, merged as it is with the humming, is worth describing here.

"They went noisily, like an army, and afterwards their trail was littered with bones and dung and bits of hair ... and all the time Abdullahi was humming, humming-humming, and the knives were singing. And know this: suddenly one of the killers' eyes cracked and fell out of its socket. Afterwards the pieces of glass were found, ground into the carpet!' (p.48)

Of course the Hummingbird achieves martyrdom but takes the assassins with him, though their sponsors are never revealed to face justice. The fact that the inquiry is not vigorously pursued by the colonials – except for the sudden disappearance of aide Nadir Khan – provides ample scope for the narrator to comment on the vested interests of the British with their firmly entrenched divide and rule policy. The story is swept under the carpet and Nadir Khan manages shelter under the carpet of Aadam Aziz's home in a damp basement. Thereby Rushdie glosses over the inexactitudes of reported history with witty sarcasms. Saleem Sinai later castigates it and calls into question objectified history with his own personal historical narrative, at times even questioning the very concept of truth philosophically in conversation with Padma thus:
[‘What is truth?] adding, I waxed rhetorical, ‘What is sanity? Did Jesus rise up from the grave? Do Hindus not accept – Padma – that the world is a kind of dream; that Brahma dreamed, is dreaming the universe; that we only see dimly through that dream-web, which is Maya. Maya... ‘may be defined as all that is illusory; as trickery, artifice and deceit. Apparitions, phantasms, mirages, sleight-of-hand, the seeming from of things: all these are parts of Maya. If I say that certain things took place which you, lost in Brahma’s dream, find hard to believe, then which of us is right? (p.211)

As such, the Orwellian Big Brother domination of the political landscape is introduced in the narrative. This assumes much greater significance after Partition and Independence, Pakistan’s reported truth to the public at large, and in India, especially in the case of Indira Gandhi’s tenure. This brings forth and emphasizes the power of propaganda since the “[history] the past exists only in one’s memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred”(p.443). With respect to Rushdie’s view of Indira Gandhi specifically, K. Puroshotham states:

Rushdie does not seem to be happy with Indira Gandhi’s political leadership. This is explicit in the novel. In one of his interviews Rushdie confirms what he had suggested in the novel: that the ultimate “Villainess” of the Midnight’s Children was no less than Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’. Relating the predicament of Midnight’s Children to the contemporary history of India. Rushdie holds Indira Gandhi responsible for the present state of India.9

Underlying all the political incidents, including the most tragic ones, in the novel, which grips mostly all, even the sceptic Aadam Aziz initially and resurfaces later in Ahmed Sinai’s lifetime. Aadam Aziz’s greatly sensitive nose,
along with his scientific training, strangely, do not mitigate it. In the cases of both Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai the sharp sense of smell is pivotal. Of course, Saleem possesses it to a much finer degree, in fact to a supernatural degree through which he can identify and classify not only the physical world but also the intangible world of morals – he concentrating in Pakistan on the sacred and the profane. His keen olfactory ability comes to the fore after his nasal operation and exile in Pakistan, which is illustrated by the following quote:

A nose will give you knowledge, but not power-over-events; my invasion of Pakistan, armed (if that’s the right word) only with a new manifestation of my nasal inheritance, gave me the powers of sniffing-out-the-truth, of smelling-what-was-in-the-air, of following trails; but not the only power an invader needs – the strength to conquer my foes.(p.307)

Now to list the important politico-historical incidents beginning just before Independence and Partition and continuing till the end of the novel, emphasising their inextricable connection to Saleem, his family, friends and subcontinent’s history. It start with confusion among Muslims and Hindus before Partition is on the top of their hearts and minds. This of course is linked to Saleem's rendition of events within the specific personal context. Amina Sinai, with her inherited legacy of the perforated sheet, segmented husband Ahmed Sinai – his “good points” being exaggeratedly highlighted – as an antidote to the dreamy vision of the “last poet” (Nadir Khan). She is determined to love Ahmed despite the ‘Nadir’ of her deep dark past – its depth and darkness being literal, metaphorical and figurative. To do so she exercises firm will. To illustrate:

And so, bringing her gift of assiduity to bear, she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into
every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioural, compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal tics and prejudices and likes ... in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit.

Each day she selected one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and concentrated her entire being upon it until it became wholly familiar; until she felt fondness rising up within her and becoming affection and, finally, love. (p.68)

Her effort does have the effect of assuming a subjectively twisted credible reality and she finds herself — fulfillingly — pregnant. But due to the seething communal animosity in some quarters, catastrophe is just around the corner propelled by divisive pre-Partition elements in line with the insidious divide-and-rule policy of the British, but exploited as well by “ethical” criminal extortionists — the Ravana Gang — targeting Muslim businessman. Now the traditional homebound Muslim wife, she, nevertheless, is still yet her father’s daughter: the reason she rescues the peep-show man Lifafa Das (with his “Delhi-Dekho” machine) from an irate Muslim mob, challenging the horde to murder her and her unborn child (Saleem apparently) first. This dramatic incident speaks volumes of Partition and the colonial/postcolonial envisionment. To quote the operative part of the text:

‘I know this man. He is a decent type. Go, get out, none of you have anything to do? In a Muslim muhalla you would tear a man to pieces? Go, remove yourselves.’ But the mob has stopped being surprised, and is moving forward again ... and now. Now it comes.

‘Listen’, my mother shouted,’ Listen well. I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter.
Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!' (p.77).

The mob, stupefied, withdraws. As such, she does not – in the core of her being – have a premoulded and rabid communal outlook. But this is something which husband Ahmed is prey to in his intense materialism, thereby a convenient tool for the colonial masters in which he views his own community as the aggrieved party – a victim of the divide and rule policy and later legacy. However, as briefly referred to in the summary, Amina’s subsequent secret meeting with an astrologer upon Lifafa Das’s urging is in the nature of an omen as is the prophecy – of a two-headed son with “nose and knees” (p.87). The dismal poverty-stricken surrounding with its sea of suffering faces, along with the claustrophobic environ, lead to Amina becoming delirious – an instance of Rushdie’s unique and dramatic creativity and fine craftsmanship.

The malevolent hand of fate is present simultaneously in Ahmed Sinai’s ill-fated extortion payment to the Ravana Gang – a criminal organization targeting Muslim businessman – monkeys throw down the money from the building’s balcony. The abuse of the supposedly duped gangster is a good illustration of native dialogue and Rushdie’s “chutneyfying” of English: To quote the text: ‘Mother-sleepers! Eunuchs from somewhere! ... Sodomizers of asses! Sons of pigs! Eaters of their own excrement”(p.85).

In the context of the colonial/postcolonial brainwashing apparatus and in the overall novel’s context, Saleem prophetically – with recurrent implication – remarks, “we are a nation of forgetters” (p.37). This pithy sentence is of extremely pregnant aspect and connotation. Not only does it indict
Yes they will trample me underfoot, the umbers marching one, two, three, four hundred million five hundred six reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not any son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (p.463)

Now, to briefly comment on the significance of Alia, Mumtaz, and Emerold. Among the youth of Srinagar...the three sisters are known as ‘Tenn Batti’ the three bright lights.(p.53), in the case of Nadir Khan. The “teen batti” are decidedly of explosive impact, jointly at least, especially insofar as Reverend Mother’s wrath over Nadir Khan’s refuge in the Aziz home. ‘You are out of your mind, husband; that death has hurt your brain’ (p.53).

Later, Emerald, under pressure, despite an oath to the contrary, runs off suddenly to inform Beau Zulfikar – a spectacle:

Nobody was used to seeing a young lady, much less one of the Teen Batti, running alone and distraught through the rain-soaked streets with her fingers in her ears and no dupatta round her shoulders. Nowadays, the cities are full of modern, fashionable, dupatta-less misses; but back then the old men clicked their
tongues in sorrow, because a woman without a dupatta was a
woman without honour, and why had Emerald Bibi chosen to leave
her honour at home? (p.61)

The narrator hero states rather concisely Major Zulfikar’s nature:
“Zulfikar is a famous name amongst Muslims. It was the name of the two-
pronged sword carried by Ali, the nephew of the prophet Mohammad). It was a
weapon such as the world had never seen” (p.61). Zulfikar is partly of an
authoritarian mould effected by adherence to the colonial/postcolonial legacy,
mixed with later convenient self-serving religiosity. His failed attempt to
apprehend suspect Nadir Khan has a comically gory result – collision with a
public spittoon, taking the full impact on the foot which is highly parodic. To
quote the text:

He went to the spittoon and kicked it over, into the dust. He
jumped on it – once! twice! again! – flattening it, and refusing to
show that it had hurt his foot. Then, with some dignity, he limped
away, back to the car parked outside my grandfather’s house
(p.63).

Saleem’s turbulent time of birth is of vital personal and intermeshed
historico-political importance which can even be cast within and against a
religious backdrop. Therefore, Saleem as a character and major player, due to his
extraordinary supernatural powers, is illustrious only in the sense of notoriety at
the climax and sudden fall, certainly not in the elusive sense of purpose he
pursues idealistically in the formation and attempted direction of the Midnight’s
Children’s Conference. The critical observation above is of great depth and truth
in its application to Shiva, Saleem’s amoral alter ego bred from the mire of “have-
notism” which spawns lust for wealth and power – originally of a personally favouring leftist ideology. This will be spotlighted at the appropriate place. From hereon, we shall largely remain within the orbit of Saleem’s focus and character, his family, friends and others connected, being confined to his personal history and the entwisted political historiography of the subcontinent – linked to its animistic socio-econo-political content and context. Such animism, a hallmark of Rushdie’s, mostly unwinds in a surreal form and format, somewhat reminiscent of Bergson’s continuum reality. Directly connected to this in the highlighted political sense is Asha Kaushik’s view: “Midnight’s Children thus portrays Indian politics as dramatically elusive and India’s tryst with destiny as perennial”. Yet, she grounds Rushdie’s political leanings as born of an almost futile sense of rootlessness – the expatriate’s eternal dilemma, reflected and embodied in Saleem Sinai – adding: “However, Rushdie as an indologist, belonging and yet not belonging to India, indulges in a disproportional mix of flavours of fantasy and facts and too often elevates the trifle to the climax.” Nevertheless, the moot point is that the “disproportional mix” and the combined great usage of triviality is deliberate (as close reading shows), to highlight Midnight’s Children’s epical parodic sweep, which disturbs the reader, the positive fallout being that he/she, as an individual, may begin to open his eyes amidst the mass blindness of brutal colonial/postcolonial brainwashing.

So, the trials and travails of Saleem, the rise and fall of Aadam Aziz and Reverend Mother and clan, along with those relatively on their periphery, impinge upon and effect the omniscient narrator hero, often catastrophically, shattering by bits and shards (very much in the haunting legacy of the perforated sheet) the
illusion of being “the chosen one” – the object of quest being a desperate attempt at finding identity. But this is a doomed quest in an ever-changing world: as rootless as the tempestuous sea. Naturally, this defines Rushdie’s own “out of placeness” and also underscores the existential but yet fated attempt to plant the sapling of his fractured, schism-ridden consciousness, and can be relevantly applied to his identity quest in the form of narrator-hero Saleem thus:

Saleem’s quest for identity is a matter of his evolving consciousness in an Indian ethos. It is at various levels, geographical, historical psychological, arational and intuitive and finally culminates itself in finding the ultimate spiritual identification with the Indian consciousness. The quest operating within the larger confines of the sub-continent, vacillates primarily between India and Pakistan at the level of religion and history.\(^{12}\)

But, even, at this point, under the apparently concrete layers of Saleem’s existence (some would say somewhat loosely derived from and inspired by the author’s own life), the perforated sheet – reality in patches, an “inherited legacy”- is a pervasive generational theme and motif, emblematic of fractured souls/psyches and lives of individual and nations (the subcontinent). This point has been commented on by Khushwant Singh in a general sense in *The Empire Writes Back*, questioning the very fibre and fabric of colonialism and its legacy, in the context of the formerly colonized people finding a distinct and effective voice in the “English” tongue.

To refocus on the perforated sheet legacy, besides Saleem, it claims two more major victims: Amina (formerly Mumtaz) in her suppressed ghostly longing for Nadir Khan, and Saleem’s sister, the Brass Monkey – a nameless name or tag – in her reincarnation as Jamila Singer, the “voice of Pakistan” (p.314). After her
first disastrous sexless subterranean marriage, and truncated divorce (illusorily parodic of the Taj and its symbolism of the power of love) of the nature of agony, she still clings sub-consciously to the wraiths of memory. Yet, as a recent convert of domesticity (in its derogatory aspect of female subservience), she is determined to love Ahmed. However, she actually goes against her ingrained nature as Aadam Aziz’s daughter in her coquettish manner of licentiously extracting money from Ahmed. The second example is of the Brass Monkey in her fanatical reincarnation as Jamila Singer – highly contrary to her original personality as a troublemaker (to the point of being an arsonist in her tender years and perennially suspicious and spurning of affection). Quite strangely her transformation is all the more amazing in her literal kind of the infamous perforated sheet in the form of purdah stage performances – antithetical to her earlier latent Christian inclinations engendered, perhaps in and by the company of amazonian characters like Evie Burns. Her retreat into the apparent nature of a true Muslim in its most patriotic aspect, despite displacement, is thereby of a somewhat upsetting form.

With reference to her transformation it would be relevant to quote the text:

Monkey, ... under the insidious spell of that God-ridden country; the Monkey, once so rebellious and wild, adopting expressions of demureness and submission which must, at first, have seemed false even to her; the Monkey, learning how to cook and keep house, how to buy spices in the market; the Monkey, making the final break with the legacy of her grandfather, by learning prayers in Arabic and saying them at all prescribed times; the Monkey, revealing the streak of puritan fanaticism which she had hinted at when she asked for a nun’s outfit; she, who spurned all offers of worldly love, was seduced by the love of that God who had been named after a carved idol in a pagan shrine built around a giant
Saleem's perforated sheet is of a mythic mould and sweep in its more ambiguous yet literal aspect as well as figurative and metaphoric – emphasised by its restless rootedness in his paranormal powers: telepathic mind reaching supernatural olfactory sensitivity (in Pakistan where he even sniffs out the abstract distinctions between the sacred and profane) and overall philosophical power to mythologize and trivialize. As already stated, he prefers the profane as evidenced in visits to prostitutes, particularly Tai Bibi. Rushdie thus in the true nature of amorality deftly brings this fact of his personality to the fore. The question, which however, surfaces, is that is this not all part and parcel of his perennial search for purpose and roots?

The gradual disintegration of the Midnight Children's Conference ... on the day of Chinese armies came down over the Himalayas to humiliate the Indian fauj – was already well under way. When novelty wears off, boredom, and then dissension, must inevitably ensue. Or (to put it another way) when a finger is mutilated, and fountains of blood flow out, all manner of vilenesses become possible ... whether or not the cracks in the Conference were the (active-metaphorical) result of my finger-loss, they were certainly widening.(p.254)

Eunice immediately follows, he being rather fatalistically philosophical. This finds sufficient amplification politically with cynical references to the "urine drinking dotard"... learned and Pakistan...ultimate "split take an amoeba in "the spidery labyrinths of time" (p254).
In its larger implication the perforated sheet is symbolic of the splintering geographically as well as psychologically of the subcontinent – ungluable shards due to colonial/postcolonial divide and rule, especially evident in the latter part of Indira Gandhi’s unquestioned dominance – she first being the nameless Widow who spins her entrapping web for all, especially towards and at the end for the Midnight’s Children. The Midnight’s Children’s torturous sterilization and the overall political deterioration of India in Saleem’s context is viewed by M. Madhusuddana Rao as follows:

... post-Independent India is a source of disillusionment for him. Saleem and his “magical children” are cut off from the post-emergency era. In any case, his quest acquires the dimension of spiritual fulfillment. His total identification with the vast Indian multitudes, in its every single particularity and endless generality is the willing narrative destiny of the protagonist.13

With respect to its putting colonialism/postcolonialism in the dock Midnight’s Children encompasses a large number of related issues, its extreme subjectivity notwithstanding. With respect to its form within such content the following words of Ron Shephard’s are valid:

It is a novel which is at once experimental, interrogative, confessional, polemical and irrationally subjective. Although at one level one can discern obvious chronological continuities (in the autobiographical) and socio-historical dimensions of the narrative) the book’s narrative manner deliberately blurs clear chronological outline.14

Though this comment is specifically more on the form, it is grounded in the search for roots in an alien world, Saleem himself being a “twice-born” and
“twin-damned” bastard by blood, ethnicity, and Mary Pereira’s switching of him with Shiva at birth. Saleem is thus India’s apparently blessed child from whom great things are expected – conferring automatic greatness in the eyes of his family. Shiva on the other hand, is a product of abysmal poverty, giving rise to a violent temperament and nature. His emotional and physical violence is so intense, buttressed by his extraordinary amazing strength – most evident in his immensely powerful knees. He even uses these to brutally murder prostitutes – a fact telepathically known to Saleem, which greatly disturbs him. Physically, even Saleem is a freak with derogatory nicknames – Snotnose, Stainface, and Snifferdog. At the same time, his rambling consciousness makes him a mental freak as well, a factor increased by his telepathic sojourn with the other 581 Midnight’s Children. Shiva’s leftism is typically of the “because-you-don’t-have-it” kind. The number of dead Midnight’s Children – 420 – signifies fraud in the Indian context, especially legal. Perhaps, Saleem sees personal betrayal in their failure to survive.

With Saleem as the materially (not corporeally initially) insulated, though psychologically barraged narrator-hero in search of the elusive self, influencing indirectly and directly, whether by accident or design – and the sinister counterweight character of Shiva serve to highlight the novel’s decidedly, militant political content and tone. This is made all the more effective in the latter’s power to shut off thoughts completely as opposed to Saleem’s somewhat colonial ivory-tower meanderings “between his eyebrows” and later his nose as a CUTIA man-dog (sniffer), the “Buddha” (old man, not venerated one) who tracks the targeted East Pakistnis in a stupor, the haze in his head melting finally, only in the
Simderbans jungle, where he and his unit experience not only the ravages wrought by nature, not only the restirrings of conscience due to fear of the “ghosts” of their victims, but even magical houris who may even take away their souls. This is rendered impactfully by the fantasy mode of narration, “mixing” horrifically like “blood with water” in its gory aspect, Rushdie can be seen to draw a parallel of the nature of this insidious phrase – where he proclaims the futility of statistics and the “factuality” of reported truth – bringing to the forefront Orwell’s Big Brother in the highly sinister aspect of Indira Gandhi and her lieutenant Shiva.

Shiva even castigates Saleem unreservedly as “little boy, we meet again” (p.430). But Shiva is a normal freak with an abnormal will and hate-driven desire to survive. He has an identity, however materialistic, and does not view the world through the “blinders” of social justice, preferring to take what he can. This attitude pays off and pays dividends in the 1971 war where he distinguishes himself as a famed killer-hero of the enemy – no longer a violent criminal but an acclaimed war hero. So, Shiva also is ever-present in the hidden recesses, emerging into his own as the narrator’s alter ego [the second of midnight’s one thousand and one Children, Shiva the principle of violence and destruction, the true son of Saleem’s father and the father of his son]. Viney Kirpal comments further on the fantasy mould rendition, taking in his scope Indira Gandhi’s sterilized “castration” of the Midnight’s Children as well thus:

Here the balance of nature reaches its finest paradox, for the children, whose magic consists in their oneness with reality, contain in heir own circle, one who is inimical to magic: One whose reality is the same as Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s and who in fact is the immediate instrument of Saleem’s capture and of the final disbanding, indeed the annihilation of the magic circle itself. 15
One point which needs to be highlighted is Rushdie’s absence of restraint in the sense of prudery. Besides Saleem’s numerous encounters with prostitutes in Pakistan during his second exile there, which continues especially for a long period with the 512 year old Tai Bibi, his incestuous feelings towards Jamila Singer, his sister, are of crucial importance. Rebellious in her previous true-to-self incarnation as the Brass Monkey, she now is a puritan with all the baggage that Puritanism holds. Denying Saleem can be justified at many levels – cultural, social, familial and, most importantly, personal with respect to morality – but denying a man-woman relationship altogether is Puritanism carried to inordinate heights. It is the outcome of influence of her public role as Pakistan’s national singer. It finds a mirror in aunt Alia’s spinsterhood – psychologically speaking – and Reverend Mother’s shadow perhaps as well as the overall shadow of the family, accentuated by her persona. So, the work is not only an expression of Puritanism and incest but larger exploration of sexuality – in Jamila Singer’s case, and in Saleem’s case drenched in a reaction to, possibly, his exile and his overall newness to sensation, now that he has an extremely sensitive nose. Through Saleem’s eyes Rushdie portrays Pakistan and its military rulers quite parodically. But to get back to Jamila Singer and Saleem. Saleem’s incestuous feelings have the effect of making both uncomfortable:

So, from the earliest days of my Pakistani adolescence, I began to learn the secret aromas of the world, the heady but quick-fading perfume of new love, and also the deeper, longer lasting pungency of hate (p. 307)

As a character, Methwold, the only one making a brief appearance, is still important as an embodiment of the typical colonizer in his apparently cheerful
aspect. As Saleem’s real father he is of prime significance with respect to postcolonial grafting. The immaculate centerparting of his hair is a farcical symbol of the divide and rule policy. His ancestral link to the founder Methwold of the British Created Bombay is a source of pride for him. Therefore, in an attempt to carry on this legacy and make the natives aware of it, he imposes the ridiculous conditions of the transfer-of-deed becoming effective on the stroke of midnight. Of course the psychological aspect of the colonial/postcolonial graft is one of fractured psyches and freak personalities, most evident in Saleem – the reason why, perhaps Methwold makes such distinct impress on his consciousness. The fact that the family live in Buckingham Villa of Methwold estate may also possibly be a shaping, accentuating factor as is Saleem’s privileged socio-economic birth. Methwold, before the fated day, is extraordinarily sociable, particularly with Ahmed Sinai where he basks in the glory of the one of the colonizers. But on the last day just before Independence, strangely he is not at all social but in a flurry of activity. Outside of all buildings but within the estate, five hours and two minutes before Independence, he acts quite comically dramatic to make his last point. To quote the text:

William Methwold raised a long white arm above his head. White hand dangled above brilliantined black hair; long tapering white fingers twitched towards centre-parting, and the second and final secret was revealed, because fingers curled, and seized hair; drawing away from his head, they failed to release their prey; and in the moment after the disappearance of the sun Mr. Methwold stood in the afterglow of his Estate with his hairpiece in his hand (p.114).
Thus does he manage to make a dramatic point just before Independence perhaps trying to exit with the honour of the Raj. Even though his power of magnetic salesmanship lay within his wig.

Now to briefly chronologise Ahmed Sinai’s life: His initial prosperity as a business man; the fall due to the extortionist Ravana gang; his property speculation in Bombay with friend Dr. Narlikar anonymously and Narlikar’s sudden death rendering his investment void; his complete fall and consequent refuge in liquor and djinns and (Coca Cola girls) despite impotence, re-rise as Amina Brand towel manufacturer in Pakistan; and the last subsequent final plummet and death in idiocy during the 1971 Indo-Pak war. Even during his initial prosperity in Agra, Ahmed Sinai carries “the stink of future failure” (p.73) and his lack of a sense of direction makes children dub him as “the man who can’t follow his nose” (p.73). As the chronology of his life makes clear this failure happens often and reaches final culmination at the end in his state of complete idiocy during the 1971 Indo-Pak war due to Indian Air Force bombing. For the major part of his marital life he is failure sexually as a husband due to his impotence. But Ahmed is still loved for the most part by Saleem and even the Brass Monkey.

Ahmed generally does not rise to the circumstances but instead is most of his life an escapist. His encounter with Methwold causes him to have pretensions; he genuinely believing his own myth that he is descended from the Mughals initially an attempt to compete with Methwold’s great and important origins. In addition, Ahmed has a tendency to view himself and his community as the victims, particularly in Independent India – a colonial hangover which hangs
heavy on his body and mind and gives rise to a dazed, disabled state of functioning. So, clearly, the stench of failure – destined as it is – naturally fully blooms in idiocy and death at the end of his life. Despite all his faults, however, except during the final period of idiocy, he is arrogant to menials and employees throughout. Considering all, when he finally exits, it is not in any way in the manner of the glory he proclaims while lucid and strong, but in the true nature of the vegetable that he has reduced himself to. So, his life at the end proves insignificant in the wider socio-historical context – a mere insect in the vein of King Lear’s “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.” 16

Mary Pereira is a major character in importance, her role accentuated by her baby-switch crime for the spurned love of leftist revolutionary Joseph D’Costa. But her troubled conscience on this account compels her to quit her job as hospital nurse and immediately find employment as baby Saleem’s ayah in the Sinai household – a balm and atonement method, especially significant as she can no longer go to confession. She thus loves Saleem as much as possible, but her crime does haunt her, a secret she secretly lives with in perpetual fear of discovery. However, this is manageable – till Joseph D’Costa’s violent death at the hands of the police and his subsequent haunting of her, magnifying the terror. As time passes, the ghost takes on an atrophied and continually atrophying appearance, explaining that he is condemned to such progressive decay until she confesses – but she, though anguished, still keeps the secret buried deep within her breast. But breaking point finally comes about when Mary also sees the ghost. Soon after she confesses to the family, avoids prison upon imploration, but
exits the Sinai household. She resurfaces much later towards the end as "Mrs. Braganza" of Braganza Pickles when Saleem tracks her down. The reunion – briefly described – is affectionate and it is revealed that Saleem has learnt the art of pickling from her, later assuming ownership of the picklery. The art of pickling is quintessential in that it is directly connected with Saleem’s pickling of history. Its significance is, therefore, immense:

“One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be 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 every thing, acts of love.” (p.461)

So, history should be, according to Saleem’s subjectified vision, able to serve as a plate of pickles to preserve the slender subjective thread of individual and political history – perhaps a palatable spicy device to connect with present and succeeding generations. Rushdie, indeed, is a master pickler of a subjectified pickling of history who yet does see Truth – after all, what is Truth, if not mutable as per different beings and peoples.

Now to briefly gloss over Saleem’s important role as a shaper of history – directly and indirectly. His accidental collision with Gujarati language marchers – agitating for their own language specific state – effects violence because the only Gujarati rhyme he knows (forced out of him) upsets them. In his puritanical aspect, Saleem abhors infidelity, spying on his mother. Pia Auntie’s infidelity to Hanif uncle and adultery with Homi Catrack and Lila Sabarmati’s adultery with the same later (after Pia has been forsaken), compel him to anonymously inform the husband, Commander Sabarmati, Admiral of the Indian Navy. What follows
is the murder of Lila and Homi at the Commander’s hands – much to Saleem’s horror and regret. At the same time, Amina cuts short her vicarious liaison – sexless – with Qasim, formally Nadir Khan, her former subterranean husband for a brief period. But Saleem’s puritanism vanishes soon after his first exile in Pakistan, with his newly endowed nose and “nasal ethics”, able to smell religion and truth even in abstraction. Nasal insight apart, the author hints at how Pakistan manages to survive as a nation, “which can be interpreted thus: religion is the glue that holds Pakistan together.” This observation shows the power and hold of organized religion and underscores the authority the keepers of the key of religion exercise for avowed purposes of maintaining the social failure – which they perceive as necessary in its unevolved and rigidified aspect for the good of the community and nation.

But Saleem’s most crucial role in Pakistan’s history – insofar as shaping it on the fringes at least - is in the “Movement of Pepperpots”, signifying General Ayub Khan’s coup.

‘General Zulfikar described troop movements; I made pepperpots symbolically while he spoke. In the clutches of the active metaphorical mode of connection, I shifted salt cellars and bowls of chutney: This mustard-jar is company A occupying Head Post office; there are two pepperpots surrounding a serving spoon, which means company B has seized the airport. With a fate of nation in my hands, I shifted condiments and cutlery, capturing empty biriani-dishes with water glasses, stationing salt-cellars, on guard, around water-jugs. And when General Zulfikar stopped talking, the march of the table-service also come to an end. Ayub Khan seemed to settle down in the chair; was the wink he gave me
just my imagination? – at any rate, the Commander-in-Chief said,
‘Very good, Zulfikar; good show.’ (p.290)

Saleem’s role as the Pakistani army tracker of the CUTIA Unit, the
zombied Buddha – anaesthetized to his actual innate being and link to India – is a
sign of regression. It questions the very essence of his existence and actual
beliefs. Purification and redemption comes in the Sunderban forest of East
Pakistan, liberated as Bangladesh, at the point of certain death. Memory returns
except for his name, a gap which is filled in by the meeting with Parvati the witch.
She rescues him magically with invisibility and transportation across the border
into India in a wicker basket.

The Saleem–Parvati–Shiva triangle is major. Parvati desires Saleem but
he cannot commit – for reasons of the search for purpose and also due to Shiva’s
possible appearance at the magician’s ghetto. Thus he moves on to stay unwanted
at Sonia Aunty’s house in Delhi. His entire family is already dead – due to the
bombing of Rawalpindi during the 1971 war – except for Jamila Singer who has
disappeared, presumed dead. But Saleem knows that she is actually self-exiled
with nuns – the extinct pivot and anchor of her new found religion and purity
having vaporized in the death of family and separation from Saleem.

Saleem mourns for his family and is eventually kicked out by his relatives,
thereafter returning to the magician’s ghetto to find a dishonoured, abandoned,
ostracised Parvati – impregnated as she is now by Shiva. After much delay, even
lying about his manhood, Saleem finally marries Parvati at Picture Singh’s urging
and thus restores her to social grace. They have no physical relationship, Saleem
later viewing it by hindsight in its predoomed aspect when the emergency excesses finally reach the basti (Parvati being killed) in the following manner.

The vans and bulldozers came first rumbling along the main road; they stopped opposite the ghetto of the musicians. A loudspeaker began to blare: ‘Civic beautification programme ... authorized operation of Sanjay Youth Central Committee ... prepare instantly for evacuation to new site... this slum is a public eyesore, can no longer be tolerated ... all persons will follow orders without descent’ (p.429).

But Aadam Sinai, Saleem’s son – though sired and rejected by Major Shiva- is a re-inversion of justice. He becomes Aadam Aziz’s heir but yet is born amidst incredible, miserable poverty and thus must suffer. Saleem’s subsequent expected death at Shiva’s hands – revenge against being denied his birthright – is taken fatalistically by the central character (Saleem, of course). Finally, in a certain ambiguous sense, thereby and therefore, he comes to reconciliation with his identity, even finding an “Indian-ness” in and within it in its timelessness. Thus the novel comes full circle.

*Midnight’s Children*, as a postcolonial genre work, falls into the look-back-in-anger or protest mould effected by alienation due to exile on expatriation which is haunted by “an upsurge to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt, ... [to] create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind”. Of course this is the expatriate’s – and Saleem Rushdie’s – dilemma. According to William Walsh, Rushdie’s “huge purpose” thus is “the [attempted] personification and realization of Indian life...”, making it a postcolonial/postmodern work. In the vein of rediscovering lost roots, Rushdie himself remarks suggestively:
One such suspicious generalisation may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.19

Thus, in the words of O.P. Mathur

Saleem Sinai ... is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history, a crystallization of an evolving mood, a distillation of a vision nostalgic, critical and fragmented, with, as the novelist remarks, some of its fragments missing. But in spite of it, or perhaps because of it, he is able to project, what may be called, a sort of prismatic vision of reality, partial, fissured and fragmented, but highly absorbing and deeply meaningful. Afraid of absurdity, he is frantically engaged in a quest for meaning, thus personifying what he calls “a very Indian lust for allegory.”20

Viewed against this, Rushdie’s chutneyfied vision of the subcontinent is naturally an attempt to understand what has been rendered incomprehensible due to the dilemma and pain of identity effected by exile. Through Saleem’s timelessness he ventures into a tempora-spatiality which may give him the temporary sense, or possible illusion, of belonging, for however ephemeral a period—an instant, a day, or whatever—an existential foray, its success or failure not antithetical to existentialism. The last is to be applauded for its postcolonial rendering and condemnation of the postcolonial apparatus and its operation in no uncertain terms. The political statement made is thus forceful with freshness of perspective,
which, even twenty-two years later (today) holds great weight and cannot be lightly dismissed. Therefore, it is a protest narrative, a postcolonial indictment par excellence which in its cynicism yet shows signs of hope amidst the ocean of cynicism. As of the postcolonial genre, it diverts from ground rules of earlier writers in casting aside beauty and related sequentiality of events and characters, choosing instead a time-skipping, circular, free-rambling mode. Ron Shepherd observes in more detail:

*Midnight's children* differs from ... earlier [Anglo-Indian] fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with older form of fiction are broken: the unities of time and place and character are, at best, unstable: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person; ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straightforward sense religious or metaphysical; the novel is full of cryptic clues, arcane utterances, and seems always on the point of offering some important explanation, of arriving at some goal or conclusion, but what this conclusion is we can never be quite sure. It is a novel of the signs and gestures and sleight-of-hand, narrated with a passion for narrating rather than for clarifying meaning.²¹

But this lack of clear meaning is only a new meaning seen in a new light shown by a gifted hand. The meaning, however unstable with respect to clarity, does not eclipse Rushdie's differing vision of India and the subcontinent – which is violent and vibrant, serene and tempest-tossed, despite the intertwined play of subjectified and supposedly objectified history. Therefore, it is a meaning, which holds a different species of truth – no matter if viewed through a highly individualized prism – and thus needs to be examined and pondered over,
especially in its individually unique postcolonial content and context. So, *Midnight’s Children* should not be—at least not in entirety—overlooked or ignored.

So, by now it is amply evident that Rushdie in his stream-of-consciousness exploration of tightly enmeshed individual and political history—true to the nature, form and format (though the trio are formless) of Bergson’s continuum—is firmly rooted in the circularity of time as it unwinds from and in the consciousness of Saleem Sinai. However, this is not of the sense and form of the circadian rhythms of the agricultural seasons of agrarian peoples where each weather cycle repeated itself in a loop-like, predictable regularly—thereby providing an anchor. Saleem Sinai’s circularity of time is rather troubled and disjointed due to his relentless identity quest—perennially elusive and in the end proven to be pre-doomed. Rushdie’s rendering of time’s circularity is surrealistic, with nightmarish connotations and consequences—underscoring the tempestuous state of mind and the connected whirlpool waters of his personal-subcontinental historiography in its highly subjectified form. Though the loop does manage to carry on in the fourth generation of the second Aadam, Aadam Sinai, its further progress is a moot question—steeped as it is in the violent backdrop of the emergency and Saleem’s fatalistic resignation to Saleem’s vengeance-driven expected appearance—a foregone conclusion to which the narrator-hero is resigned.

Though already dealt with in the main body of this chapter, the exploration of extremely contrary states—puritanism and incest, religious zealotry and agnosticism are crucial to the narrative’s pivot. Related to these is the
colonial/postcolonial grafting on the natives with all its ramifications and actualities of fractured psyches and freak personalites (both physical and psychological) in its most insidious brain-washing aspects which mark Saleem, Amina and the Brass Monkey as Jamila Singer. Shiva is a freak initially because of the brutality of poverty and resultant brutalized psyche, engendering an unsettling predilection for mindless violence - the senseless murder of prostitutes due to immersion in sensation.

Methwold and the entire Methwold Estate with all its ridiculous transfer-of-deed conditions is marked irreversibly by the colonial superiority complex as illustrated in the comical revelation of the Britons' removal of his wing just before the stroke of midnight of August 15, 1947. Saleem shares an invisible bond with biological father - Methwold - that of not belonging and therefore the agonized quest for identity, a recurrent theme and motif, the largely inescapable malaise of expatriate writers who can search the ends of the earth and perhaps even beyond to plant pre doomed roots. But this quest, or rather attempt must still be affirmed because of its existentialism.

To briefly re-emphasise the important symbols of the novel. Rani of Cooch Nahee gift of the lapis-lazuli encrusted silver spittoon signifies womb, mother and father and for Saleem, in particular, an overall security blanket - his concrete anchor of elusive identity in a rootless world. But insofar as the silver spittoon's hidden subterranean secret in Amina's longing for poet Nadir Khan is concerned, the silver spittoon is a curse. So it has a duel aspect - curse and boons.
Rushdie, in his time slipping narrative wherein linear progression is dumped into the waste-bin, decidedly makes a distinctly different political comment – his political outrage painted and reflected in the seething, suffering mass of humanity amidst infrequent violent unrest, but largely futuristic acceptance of the existing socio-econo-political state of affairs. He portrays the marginalized as amputated and castrated by the juggernaut of postcolonial autocracy, particularly with reference to Indira Gandhi and Shiva. So the novel’s tone and content are decidedly political to the point of militancy, challenging the very basis of democracy. The portrait he paints of Shiva at the end – initially a leftist driven by poverty – as the new convenient reborn convert to authoritarian capitalist is starkly vivid. By this time a war hero, Shiva has the legitimacy of the war-driven and necessitated violence for which he cannot be punished, he in fact now defying it himself as a war hero of 1971 war.

The novelist skillfully intervenes myth and fantasy to the point of concrete abstractions and abstract concreteness wherein history and personalities merge to the point of suspension-of-disbelief.

There is one other important symbol which needs to be listed: the stopped clock tower, questioning the very linearity of time – perhaps the reason it offers a refuge to Saleem when he telepathically sojourns with the other *Midnight's Children*.

The significance of numerous women as Saleem’s mother figures and to a lesser extent men as father figures is important, he, at one point commenting, “I have had more mothers than most mothers have had children”. (p.243). Naturally this is panacea to his identity-less-ness, underscored by complete restless
rootlessness in which various states of consciousness occur at different times. Perhaps the most illustrative of this is when he is the zombied Buddha (signifying old man and not a Yogi) as a CUTIA tracker – the man-dog.

The secret of Rushdie’s charm is his total lack of prudery and parodic descriptions of implicit debauchery frequently. There are multiple strands linking the otherwise unlinkable which can be viewed separately or jointly in four genres – fantasy, postcolonial, postmodernist, and that of magical realism.

*Midnight’s Children* stands out in its desperate need for meaning. To finally conclude, the novelist’s Hinglish Curry or “chutneyfication” of the English language in a peculiarly individual and non-British manner is of a high order which takes a jibe at the phenomenon of colonialism and its child, postcolonialism, politically speaking.

As a postcolonial novel in the nature of a firm protest, *Midnight’s Children* cannot be lightly dismissed as one of clever topicality – a charge levied by some critics when the book first saw the light of day. Rather, as till now, it will continue to stand the test of time.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is definitely a postmodern novel cast in a highly novel manner and mode as it uses the form of fantasy within the flexibility of magical realism. Naturally it is a postcolonial work, as amply evident, but cannot be confined within the parameter of generally representative and thereby typical postcolonial work. One of the main features which stands out in *Midnight’s Children* is its unique method and form of narration in which, to reiterate, the colonial/postcolonial indictment is effected in an individualised, unique way. Insofar as it is a counter narrative which questions the bases of
reported history and official propaganda (the latter especially true with respect to totalitarian regimes of Pakistan – Ayub Khan’s tenure), it breaks till then hitherto unexplored new ground. There are two traditional opposing political philosophies at work within the narrative of the text: democratic capitalism as handed down by the colonial erstwhile empire and a radical leftism – the latter being most clearly visible in the brutal personification of materially deprived Shiva. But at the same time there is another ideology – extremely personal, yet connected to the larger historico-political events and reality – of Saleem’s idealism, he believing that all the midnight’s children together with the benefit of their supernatural powers can act as agents of efficacious socio-econo-political change. But Shiva a perennial individual barb for Saleem – states categorically that there is only money and power which has to be grabbed, launching into a disparaging discourse on the haves: the Birlas and Tatas and America, but as proven later he turns out to be just a radical leftist of convenience due to harsh socio-economic conditions and later as Major Shiva recasts himself as a complete and staunch capitalist as authoritarian as Indira Gandhi. His conversion is so complete that when all the other midnight’s children, Saleem included, are either castrated or sterilized or both, he undergoes voluntary vasectomy – a strikingly impactful comment on the inversion of political philosophy.

Salman Rushdie cannot be viewed either as a staunch capitalist or a staunch leftist to the point of the extreme, but instead should be viewed as a genuine socialist with a left-of-center political philosophy, if one is compelled to give him a label at all. Indubitably, Midnight’s Children is a postcolonial counter text which rejects both the Eurocentric as well as after-the-empire version of
political history. However, his felicity and fluency with the language is rooted and steeped in, for the most part, the Anglo-mode but its Indian flavour is also significantly not lost with respect to dialogue. As such numerous examples of Padma's native expressions - in which she is speaking, quite obviously an Indian language comes to the fore. As an expatriate some may question the very basis of Rushdie's postcolonialism since, relatively speaking, he can be categorized as an elite. In addition the counter narratives being a vehicle of search for identity - which some may view as to be too Western - may also underscore this mistaken viewpoint. But the state of being an expatriate does not disqualify the author as a postcolonial writer. For one thing it is a politically strong protest narrative with a highly unique method of questioning and condemning the powers that be in the form of his character Saleem Sinai. Even indigenous postcolonial writers do suffer from a marked degree of hybridization, it being unnecessarily corollary of the attempt to forge identity as a counter agent to the imperial legacy. Saleem's highly subjectified personal-historical view does not militate against this and, in fact underscores the historico-political view of the counter narrative in which the legacy of the colonial culture is opposed to create a new Weltanschauung more appropriate to the native people and their related grassroots situation and ground reality as well. In this context it is important to remember that both democracy and Marxism are Western imports and, therefore, in their major aspects if indigenous like Maoism, do not carry genuine relevance to the native content, especially in its cultural application. Through Saleem, Rushdie, as a postcolonial/postmodern writer with all the pungency of vivid protest makes a solid statement against the politicians and their administrative tools in all their
hypocrisy of ostensibly looking after the common men but actually only bleeding the country to extract blood from stone for their own vested ends – material self-enrichment and hanging on to power at all costs. So Rushdie’s credentials as a postcolonial writer with postmodernist overlappings cannot be questioned.

Insofar as *Midnight’s Children*’s focus and rendition of the partition is concerned this is not major with respect to spotlighting. The related politico-historical events as well are not vividly depicted directly but only drawn insofar as Saleem’s supernatural perception of them is concerned. But the trauma is existent, of course, though within Saleem’s time-skipping and rambling consciousness. However, this is still impactful, its fantasy mode notwithstanding, and certainly not contrary to the quintessence of the legacy of postcolonialism. Therefore, by now it should be amply clear that Rushdie’s postcolonialism, though differing and different, is still of the genuine kind – albeit with its own unique flavour.
References:


5. Ibid p.42


8. Ibid. p.31


11. Ibid. p.111.


13. Ibid. p.41


20. Ibid. pp. 69-70