Chapter 4

History, Myth and Folklore

The historical approach of Magical Realism is that of ‘the new historicism’; For the New Historicist, literature is historical and attempts to solve certain formal problems and fulfill the need to find something to say; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. It is designed to methodize the political interpretation of literature. Within the ranks of the New Historicism, literature is considered to be one of the social controls. The central task of such New Historicism is the same as that of Marxist criticism: first to call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, activities, and then to dissolve the literary text into the social and political context from which it issued. Literature, then, is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history. Man himself is a social construct, a flexible composition of social and political forces; so there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. The nature of literature and its key assumptions are derived from the institutional milieu in which it arose. The doctrine of historicity is a Heideggerian motif that came to the movement via the writings of the German hermeneutical philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer.

New Historicism draws inspiration from Michel Foucault. It permeates the New Historicist conception of history as a succession of epistemes or structures of thought that shape everyone and
everything within a culture. In Magical Realism, the relationship between history and the work is seen as dialectic: the literary text is interpreted as product and producer, end and source, of history; it is no longer conceived but exists already. In Magical Realist fictions, there is an idiosyncratic recreation of historical events. History is seen in renewed light, unmindful of recorded history based on ‘new’ understanding and exidness.

Myths are stories that explain how the world and humanity reached their present form. They are considered to be true among the people who develop them. Mythopoetic fiction is created either through using ancient myths as subject matter or through an attempt to create new stories that have the same ambitions as the old myths did—to give order to life and show the reasons for the seemingly illogical ways of nature.

Folklore is any of the beliefs, customs, and traditions that people pass on from generation to generation. Much folklore consists of folk stories, such as ballads, fairy tales, folktales, legends, and myths. But folklore also includes arts and crafts, dances, games, nursery rhymes, proverbs, riddles, songs, superstitions, and holiday and religious celebrations. This aspect adds to the social consciousness of Magical Realism.

Magical Realism favours a return to historical scholarship in the academic study of literature and advocates a move beyond the narrowly “formalistic” or “text-centered” approach to literature.

The “New Historicism” is unified by its disdain for literary
formalism. It is unhappy with the exclusion of social and political circumstances (commonly known as the “context”) from the interpretation of literary works.

The larger purpose of New Historicist inquiry is the reconstruction of the actual (as opposed of the “represented”) relations in which people lived during a particular time. The New Historicist sees facts that the people of the time did not, and this special insight is what enables him to grasp the “discursive practices” that produced the facts that the people did see.

New Historicists like to picture themselves as challenging the institution of criticism--breaking loose from the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within formalistic criticism. The movement is not an effort to discover what it means for a literary work to be historical; it is really little more than an attempt to get literary works to conform to a particular vision of history.

Revolution reveals the weaknesses in the entire concept of rightful hegemony. But revolution is not a necessary factor in the hypothesis; the phenomenon can occur in any situation that involves a shift in the power relationship between any two (or among any several) cultures. And it is not only law and government which may be doubted, but also the authority of the powerful tool called History. Many post-colonial works of literature call into question the very nature of history. They serve as testament to the inadequacies of historical absolutism. History is, according to many post-colonial works, "a yarn" told by the ones who have the power to be heard.
Truth is nothing more than a cultural definition or acceptance, and, while all cultures define themselves in relation to others, the important question in constructing History becomes one of identifying which culture has the military, political and economic power to spread its own definition most effectively.

Independent nations that were once colonized find themselves in a unique position: though the piece of land may remain constant before and after an independence movement, natives and imperialists perceive the significance of that land and the nature of the events that have taken place there simultaneously but not identically. Like revolutionaries who now must redefine an acceptable form of authority while questioning the workability of any form of government, the formerly colonized must enter a process of re-evaluating History—the History of the nation as the colonizer has told it and the feasibility of the existence of History as any sort of absolute entity at all.

Of the legends and myths that contribute to the history of a post-colonial nation, it sometimes seems that all are true or none is reliable. The post-colonial author must convey this paradox effectively within what is, essentially, just another legend. Magical Realism often results since fantasy becomes a virtual necessity when representing the meshing of two cultures, because at least two separate realities, both of which are relevant and neither of which is completely accurate, work simultaneously. One may argue that facts are facts and that they remain uncontestable; but the choices a storyteller makes in presenting data are all-important to their interpretation. In
the long run, it seems there is no such thing as complete accuracy, and perception outweighs so-called reality in importance. Sometimes by juxtaposing local history with world events, and sometimes by juxtaposing two or more versions of the same events or locales, a post-colonial author presents a story with so many facts that it necessarily becomes unclear.

In Midnight’s Children, Ganesh, one of the Gods in Hindu mythology, plays a central role. He is the scribe of the sage Valmiki who recited the Ramayana. Saleem, the narrator of Midnight’s Children, has many things in common with Ganesh. Ganesh’s trunk is reflected in the nose of Dr.Adam Aziz, Saleem Sinai and his son Ahmed Sinai. As the fruit of the union of Parvati and Hinduism’s ‘great god’ Shiva, Ganesh is perhaps the most central of all—a God of good fortune and a sign of fecundity in a novel full of impotence and illegitimacy. His influence envelops the entire novel, from the opening pages where Aadam Aziz is said to have a nose that resembles the trunk of the elephant-headed Ganesh to the other elephantine features had given the most important midnight’s children their special powers: Saleem’s telepathy and insight derived from his large nose; Shiva’s talent for war from his bulbous knees. Spanning in this way all the generations of Midnight’s Children—a novel that expresses national destiny in the form of family lineages—Ganesh is central as a symbol of the continuity of the generations; for it is only Aadam Sinai who carries the lineage of the midnight’s children into the second generation. He is the only second-generation baby of Indian
Independence, since all the surviving midnight’s children—now of parenting age—had been sterilized during the Indian Emergency.

By offsetting this general lack of procreation, Aadam displays the propitious side of Ganesh, his proverbial ability to overcome difficulties. Traditionally, Ganesh is the typical embodiment of success in life and its accompaniments of good living, prosperity and peace. But in this very reference to procreation and good-tidings, Rushdie introduces another version of the Ganesh myth. According to this version, when Parvati attempts to seduce Shiva, he refuses to engender a son because he wishes to divorce himself from the chain of rebirth. In this sense, Ganesh becomes acceptable to him only because he is not truly a child but a monster; a son but of some unnatural mixture. Ganesh is therefore at once a promise for the future and an end of the line, and Rushdie is implying that both qualities potentially apply to the first and the last generations of midnight’s children—to ‘Aadam’ Aziz, the patriarch of the Westernised Indian, and to ‘Aadam’ Sinai, the only offspring of the first generation of independence, the beginning of the end.

Like Ganesh, Shiva plays a dual role. However, his contradictions are even more elaborate. On the one hand, he is a ‘Lord of Beasts’, and on the other, a ‘Lord of the Hunt’; he is at once the planter of seed, who gives life, and the destroyer, whose wrathful power can strip the skin from a tiger with the flick of his smallest finger. Although a symbol of masculine sexual potency, he is closely associated with female power, and he contains simultaneously within
him the qualities of tapas (asceticism) and Kama (sexual desire). His place in a novel driven by castration and impotence is plain; most of his permutations concern sexuality. In effect, Shiva unites within himself the dangerous and the beneficent aspects of the fertility process.

Rushdie’s use of the Shiva myth is much more fully realized than that of Ganesh, because Shiva is a character within the novel. For the most part, Rushdie’s Shiva varies only slightly from myth and recites the more common epithets. For example, Rushdie tells about Shiva’s ‘gifts of war’: “[Shiva is] the god of destruction, who rides on a bull; whom no force can resist” (MC 264). But in the novel Midnight’s Children, Shiva is also portrayed as a lower-class bully, whose ideas are crude, his tongue rough, his intentions criminal; a thug, in fact, who participates in election fraud, relies on “terrifying, nonchalant violence” (MC 262), and conceives of the MCC as a ‘gang’ that he must control. He is socially Saleem’s opposite: a working-class tough, born of wealthy parents, whereas Saleem’s is the ‘rich kid’ born of beggars. When, late Midnight’s Children, Shiva becomes a famous major and socialite at the very moment Saleem is stuffing envelopes in the tawdry meeting halls of the magicians’ ghetto, it becomes clear that the significance of their relationship depends on the interchangeability of their roles. Their world-views clash as they vie for control over the MCC in a conflict of complementary opposites.

This two-dimensional ruffian nevertheless represents well the complexities of his prototype in Hindu myth-- a destroyer and a
propagator, a stud who reviles the begetting of children. Thus, as a returning war hero (‘Major Shiva’), he is portrayed as a tall mustachioed ladies’ man and a ‘cuckolder of the rich’ who “strew[s] bastards across the map of India” (MC 487-88), but also as one who goes into a rage upon learning that exploits have led to a pregnancy. Enormously fertile, he also makes possible the mass sterilization of the midnight’s children when he turns informer and betrays them to the authorities. The contradictions of Ganesh and Shiva are suggested also in the rivalry of Saleem and Shiva, who, together, represent the essential polarities in the conflicting forces of the nation. Socially, the conflict is between what Rushdie calls ‘masses and classes’. But politically--and the MCC is primarily a political body--their rivalry represents a conflict between belligerence and diplomacy, election fraud and democracy, thuggery and persuasion, material interest and ‘humanism’, treason and loyalty.

Inclusion of real historical events, using them as backdrops for personal incidents, is typical of Magical Realism. This helps to view history and the occurrences from a new light.

The Jallian Wallabagh massacre is inscribed thus:

A group of Sikhs has spread a cloth on the ground and is eating, seated around it […]. Brigadier R.E. Dyer arrives at the entrance to the alleyway, followed fifty crack troops. He is the Martial Law Commander of Amristar […]. The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty-five to Dyer’s right and twenty five to his left; […].
Dyer issues a command. The sneeze hits my grandfather in the face. ‘Yaaaakh-thoooo’ he sneezes and false forward. [...] there is a noise like teeth chattering in winter [...] There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues [...] ‘Good shooting’, Dyer tells his men. (MC 35-36)

Dr. Adam Aziz is in the midst of the crowd with his medical attaché in his hand. This is a good instance of felt history where history is felt bodily. Dyer’s command hits Aziz on his face and he falls down with a sneeze. This fall saves his life. But the ‘burise’ remains--the scar on his chest--for ever.

Mumtaz’ illness is linked to the dropping of atom bombs. “On August 6th the illness broke. On the morning of the 9th Mumtaz was well enough to take a little solid food” (MC, 60). On these two days atom bombs are dropped by U.S. on two Japanese targets, Nagasaki and Hiroshima. As the war comes to an end, in the novel, the courtship also comes to an end and culminates in a pact, marriage.

Historical tidings coincide with Amina’s pregnancy. The birth of the nations coincides with the birth of the baby:

While astrologers make frantic representations to Congress Party bosses, my mother lies down for her afternoon nap. While Earl Mountbatten deplores the lack of trained occultists on his General Staff, the slowly turning shadows of a ceiling fan caress Amina into sleep. While M.A. Jinnah, secure in the knowledge that his
Pakistan will be born in just eleven hours, a full day before independent India, for which there are still thirty-five hours to go, is scoffing at the protestations of horoscope-mongers, shaking his head in amusement, Amina’s head, too, is moving from side to side. (MC 109)

Independence is taking shape to be born soon as Amina’s baby. Saleem is growing in her womb.

Jawaharlal writes to baby Saleem congratulating him on being born at the stroke of the Independent Midnight.

‘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’. (MC 122)

It is true that Saleem’s experience mirrors that of India. But unfortunately, as history reveals, neither the baby nor Independence has been taken care of and nurtured. Both are let to suffer.

The 1957 elections is talked about in detail. There is unscrupulous wooing of voters with unrealistic and false promises as every party is keen on winning the confidence of the voters. This corresponds to Saleem adopting all possible gimmics to woo Evie to gain her confidence and love.

Meanwhile, early in 1957, election campaigns had begun: the Jan Sangh was campaigning for rest homes for aged
sacred cows; in Kerala, E.M.S.Namboodiripad was promising that Communism would give everyone food and jobs; in Madras, the Anna [sic]-D.M.K. party of C.N.Annadurai fanned the flames of regionalism; the Congress fought back with reforms such as the Hindu Succession Act, which gave Hindu women equal rights of inheritance... in short, everybody was busy pleading his own cause. (MC 185-86)

While flying to East Wing-Pakistan via Ceylon, Saleem and his CUTIA unit feel sad for having missed the victory of the Congress party in 1971 election.

the celebrations of Indira Gandhi’s New Congress Party, which had won a landslide victory-350 out of a possible 515 seats in the Lok Sabha – in another recent election. Indira-ignorant, unable to see her campaign slogan, GARIBI HATAO, Get Rid of Poverty, blazoned on walls and banners across the great diamond of India. (MC 354)

While India and Indira are busy celebrating, war clouds descend on East Pakistan.
The birth of Bangladesh in 1971, after Pakistan’s invasion and India’s intervention, is inscribed. This brings an end to the work of the man dog Saleem. “It was on March 25th, after the breakdown of the talks between Bhutto and Yahya Khan, that Sheikh Mugib-ur-Rahman proclaimed the state of Bangladesh” (MC, 355). The War of 1971 results in the emergence of Bangladesh.

Between 1947 and 1971, Pakistan consisted of two parts, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. During the 1960s, there was a rise in Bengali nationalism, and allegations that economic development and government jobs favoured West Pakistan. An independence movement began to gather ground in East Pakistan.

In the general elections of 1970, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman wins the majority in the National Assembly. Khan and Bhutto refuse to hand over power to Mujib. Meanwhile, Mujib initiates a civil disobedience movement, strongly supported by the general population of East Pakistan and most of its government workers. The Pakistani Army starts Operation Searchlight, an organized and brutal crackdown on the East Pakistani army, police, politicians, innocent civilians and students in Dhaka. Mujib and many other Awami League leaders are arrested, while others flee to India.

Although the killing of Bengalis is mostly unsupported by the people of West Pakistan, it continues for nine months. India supplies the Bengali rebels with arms and training, and also hosts more than ten million Bengali refugees who flee the turmoil. The Indian Army officially joins the war [Indo-Pakistani War of 1971], and launches a
massive assault into East Pakistan, where, by that time, the Pakistani Army led by General A. A. K. Niazi, has been weakened and exhausted. Being outflanked by the Indian Army and overwhelmed, it surrenders to the Indian Army-Mukti Bahini joint command on December 16, 1971, in one of the largest surrenders since World War II--as nearly ninety thousand soldiers become ‘Princes of War’; and Saleem is one of these. Discredited by the defeat, President General, Yahya Khan resigns. Civilian rule returns after the war when Yahya Khan hands over power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Elections are held in 1977, with Bhutto winning. Bhutto’s victory is challenged by the opposition, which accuses him of rigging the vote. General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq takes over power in a bloodless coup. Bhutto is later executed.

The Independence War of Bangaladesh and its aftermath occupy a major portion of the later part of *Midnight’s Children*. Saleem gets back from Bangladesh after the war and seeks refuge in the magician’s slum and the chaya of the Friday Mosque. He is highly critical of the happenings in the country.

The date was February 23rd, 1973; coal-mines and the wheat market were being nationalized, the price of oil had begun to spiral up up up, would quadruple in a year, and in the Communist Party of India, the split between Dange’s Moscow faction and Namboodiripad’s C.P.I.(M.) had become unbridgeable; and I, Saleem Sinai, like India,
was twenty-five years, six months and eight days old. (MC 397)

The nation, very much like Saleem, is feeling utterly hopeless and confused.

Dark clouds are brought into Delhi’s slums by Major Shiva, who has sired around the capital an army of street urchins, the regiment of bastards he has fathered. The consequent turmoil is reflected in the national scene:

Dark clouds were gathering in political skies as well: in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roost, Jaya-Prakash Narayan led a coalition of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress; in Gujarat, there were riots, railway trains were burned, and Moraji Desai went on a fast-untoldeath to bring down the corrupt government of the Congress (under Chimanbhai Patel) in that drought-ridden state. (MC, 411)

As the Janata Party is getting formed, baby Aadam grows in Parvati’s belly. Indira Congress reeling for support from one party to the other is associated with Shiva reeling from whore to whore.

Historical incidents are made to coincide with personal happenings:

on the day of Parvati’s return, an Indian Cabinet Minister was in his railway carriage, at Samastipur, when an explosion blew him into the history books; that Parvati,
who had departed amid the explosions of atom bombs, returned to us when Mr. L.N. Mishra, minister for railways and bribery, departed this world for good. Omens and more omens. [...]. Perhaps, in Bombay, dead pomfrets were floating belly-side-up to shore. (MC 414)

History is interwoven with the happenings in Midnight’s Children. Parvati’s return corresponds to Mishra’s departure. Dead pomfrets floating indicate ill tidings like slum clearance, which uproots many a poor family. The Emergency declared by Indira brings with it many dangers and unpleasantness.

Indira’s government faces major problems after 1971. Indira, using her parliamentary majority, amends the Constitution and stripse the states of powers granted under the federal system. The Congress Party government repeatedly imposes President's Rule after declaring states ruled by opposition parties to have become as "lawless and chaotic," thus winning administrative control of those states.

In June 1975 the High Court of Allahabad finds Indira’s involvement in election fraud, and the court orders her to be removed from her seat in Parliament and banned from running in elections for six years. The opposition parties rally en masse, calling for her resignation. Strikes by unions, and protest rallies paralyze life in many states.

Indira then calls out the police and the Army to break up the strikes and protests, ordering the arrest of all opposition leaders.
Curfews are imposed indiscriminate charges are levelled and unlimited powers of detention are granted to the police.

There are arrests and torture of thousands of political activists, the ruthless clearing of slums around Delhi’s Jama Masjid, ordered by Sanjay Gandhi which leaves hundreds of thousands of people homeless and thousands killed, and the family planning program which forcibly imposes vasectomy on thousands of fathers, often poorly administered, nurturing a public anger against family planning that persists even now. ‘Slum Clearance’ and ‘forced family planning’ are two key issues dealt with in detail in *Midnight’s Children*.

In 1977, greatly misjudging her own popularity, Indira calls elections and is roundly defeated and steps down. The unwieldy Janata Party coalition comes to power with Morarji Desai as its head.

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

There is pain and confusion both at the personal and at the national level. Both Parvati and Indira struggle to be free.

Mian Abdullah and Nadir Khan face unfortunate ends as a result of certain omens.
According to legend, then – according to the polished gossip of the ancients at the paan-shop – Mian Abdullah owed his downfall to his purchase, at Agra railway station, of peacock-feather fan, despite Nadir Khan’s warning about bad luck. What is more, on that night of crescent moons, Abdullah had been working with Nadir, so that when the new moon rose they both saw it through glass. ‘These things matter,’ the betel-chewers say. ‘We have been alive too long, and we know.’ (MC 47)

The betel-cheweres who represent the commonfolk see such happenings as the result of breaking certain ‘taboos’.

Saleem is unhappy about Padma absconding. He finds her indispensable, a necessary impetus for the progress of the story. “When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him halfway? He certainly did not” [MC 149]. Ganesh, with patience and perseverance, wrote down the entire epic as the scribe of Valmiki.

Padma tries to rejuvenate Saleem’s virility with herbs. But Saleem, symbolizing the nation, fails to respond.

At the feet of the Western Ghats, she searched for the herbs of virility, *mucuna pruritus* and the root of *feronia elephantum*; who knows what she found? Who knows what, mashed with milk and mingled with my food, flung my innards into that state of ‘churning’ from which, as all students of Hindu cosmology will know, Indra created
matter, by stirring the primal soup in his own great milk-churn? (MC 193)

As Saleem rightly observes, it can only be a noble attempt. But regeneration is impossible as the widow has finished him off totally. Rushdie seems to indicate that Indira Gandhi has ruined the country beyond redemption.

Folk belief and their superstition echo the status of the county and its current situation.

in Kurukshetra an old Sikh woman woke up in her hut and saw the old-time war of the Kurus and Pandavas happening right outside! It was in the papers and all, she pointed to the place where she saw the chariots of Arjun and Karna, and there were truly wheel-marks in the mud! Baap-re-baap, such so-bad things: at Gwalior they have seen the ghost of the Rani of Jhansi; rakshasas have been seen many-headed like Ravana, doing things to women and pulling down trees with one finger. I am good Christian woman, baba; but it gives me fright when they tell that the tomb of Lord Jesus is found in Kashmir. On the tombstones are carved two pierced feet and a local fisherwoman has sworn she saw them bleeding – real blood, God save us!--On Good Friday. (MC 245)

Unfortunate and testing times are ahead and it is indicated that the country has to face many hardships.
The Rama-Sita myth of the Ramayana is brought in for discussion. The law of mythology and the actual one, judicial law, seem to be at contradiction.

Commander Sabarmati was the most popular murderer in the history of Indian jurisprudence. Husbands acclaimed his punishment of an errant wife; faithful women felt justified in their fidelity. [...] In the Sabarmati Case, the noble sentiments of the Ramayana combine with the cheap melodrama of the Bombay talkie; but as for the chief protagonist, all agree on his upstandingness; and he is undeniably an attractive chap. (MC 262)

Godmen and women are popular in India. Every region boasts of one or the other. Many new ones keep coming up as the days pass by.

Mrs. Dubash applied herself to the task of erasing her late husband from the personality of her son – of remaking Cyrus in her own strange image, *Cyrus-the great*; [...] there emerged the overblown, almost bovinely placid figure of Lord Khusro Khusrovand. At the age of ten, Cyrus vanished from the Cathedral School and the meteoric rise of India’s richest guru began. (MC 268-69)

Here is a very systematic way of creating Gurus--grooming some one for a profession.

Parvati and Shiva are destained to meet as they are the legendry, divine couple “Parvati and Shiva, Shiva and Parvati, fated to meet by the divine destiny of their names, were united in the moment
of victory” (MC 389). New life is to comeforth out of this union in the form of Aadam Sinai, who symbolizes hope, the new India.

This is a typical instance of myth-making: “For the masses, our Lady is a manifestation of the OM” (MC 438). Indira is projected as mother Kali, the hope for the masses. Her name is seen as synonymous with India.

In *Shame*, the tribals, being illiterates with no knowledge of western science, believe every extraordinary event to be a curse or a boon of devils or gods. “the tribals believed that the tremors were caused by the emergence of angels through fissures in the rocks” (23). They create and sustain their own beliefs that in due course turn out to be myths.

When Zoraster, the Customs Officer, falls sick, he “addressed the sun, begging it to come down to earth and engulf the planet in its brilliant cleansing fire” (S 54). The tribals believe that this will surely happen and get ready to face the end of the world.

Raza and Omar go to a stream in the Bagheeragali Hills to chat and fish. Everyone who goes there for fishing is sure to get Mahaseer trout hooked, for

the beauty of the surrounding ‘wooded’ slopes and for the legend that its waters were haunted by a fish hating ghost of such ferocity that the many plump mahaseer trout who passed that way preferred to leap on to the hooks of any anglers who fished there, no matter how incompetent they were. (S 233)
History plays a big role in *Shame*. This family saga is centered round the rivalry between Bhutto [Iskander Harappa] and Zia Ul Haq [Raza Hyder]. The novel has ample political coups, hangings and assassinations—the take over of power by Bhutto (S 168); his fall (S 170 onwards)—his relationship with foreign ambassadors—Zia hanging him (S 186)—and Benazir (Zufiya) wreaking her vengeance.

Ganesh figures in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* also. Aurora, to show her resistance, opens the window during nights and “threw out small valuable ornaments, carved wooden trunk-nosed figures” (8) into the lagoon. This symbolizes the kind of life that Aurora envisages for her future—a godless life.

The arrival of Jews in Cochin is mentioned.

many centuries had passed since Jews started setting up shop in Cranganore and then in Cochin Town (a certain Joseph Azaar and his family moved there in 1344 as everybody knew), and even from Spain the Jews started arriving after their expulsion in 1492, including, in the first batch, the family of Solomon Castile […]. (MLS 72)

The History of the Jews of Granada, especially of Boabdil, is crucial to *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. Sultan Boabdil of Granada had surrendered to the all-conquering Catholic Kings Fernando and Isabella, he departed into exile with his mother and retainers, bringing to a close the centuries of Moorish Spain; and reining in his horse upon the Hill of Tears, he turned to look for one last time upon his loss, upon the palace and the fertile plains and all the concluded glory
of al Andlus... at which sight the Sultan sighed. Here is an example of history and imagination blended finely to create Magical Realism. The Bobadil myth is recreated in a cinematic manner.

Because of secret pride in the royal link, the crown was kept; because of secret shame, it was concealed. Mother, who is worse? My Aurora who does not hide the Vasco connection, but takes delight; or myself, born of the fat old Moor of Granda’s last sighs in the arms of his thieving mistress – Boabdil’s bastard Jew?” (MLS 82-83)

History is well integrated into the plot and Abraham is placed well in the lineology of the Moor.

The word ‘Moor’ is derived from the Latin ‘mauri’, a name for the Berber tribes living in Roman Mauretania (modern day Algeria and Morocco). It has no ethnographic meaning but can be used to refer to all Muslims, Berber or Arab, who conquered the Iberian Peninsula. These Moors, who were religious fanatics, arrived in Spain in the year 711.

The outbreak of World War II affects Abraham Zogoiby’s spice trade. His loads sent to England by the Marco Polo are sunk into the sea by the German cruiser the Medea (MLS 108). Thus the war is shown to reach out to affect the lives of all.

Vasco Miranda does not appreciate Independence. He is highly critical of its benefits to the poor people of India. He considers it thus:

Panditji sold you that stuff like a cheap watch salesman and you all bought one and now you wonder why it
doesn’t work [...] Only one power in this damn country is strong enough to stand up [...] I’ll tell you what it is. Corruption. You get me? Bribery. (MLS 166)

This idea has been proved to be true. Corruption can get one anywhere in India.

Rushdie portrays the Indian way of forgetting things soon and, especially on the political scene, the large scale corruption and fraud fading away:

Mrs. Gandhi returned to power, with Sanjay at her right hand, so it turned out that there was no final morality in affairs of state, only Relativity. I remembered Vasco Miranda’s ‘Indian variation’ upon the term of Einstein’s General Theory: Everything is for relative. Not only light bends, but everything. For relative we can bend a point, bend the truth, bend employment criteria, bend the law. D equals \( mc^2 \), where D is for Dynasty, m is for mass of relatives, and c of course is for corruption, which is the only constant in the universe – because in India even speed of light is dependent on load shedding and vagaries of power supply. (MLS 272)

Mrs. Gandhi, proved guilty of electoral fraud, imposes Emergency and is voted back to power.

Sanjay, the future of the Congress Party after Indira, is involved in an air crash and is eliminated. “On 23rd June 1980 Sanjay Gandhi tried to loop the loop over New Delhi and nose dived to his death”
(MLS 274). This coincides with the death of Jamshed Cashondeliveri’s death in a car accident.

There is a re-enactment of the Bhopal gas leak. There is a chemical factory in the north of the town where many women from the slums work.

when there was a small explosion in her near vicinity.
The ‘integrity’ of a sealed vat of dangerous chemicals was, to use the official report’s anaesthetised language, ‘compromised’. The practical consequence of this loss of chemical integrity was the release into the atmosphere of a substantial quantity of the gas methyl isocyante.

Mynah, who had been knocked unconscious by the explosion, inhaled a lethal dose of the gas. The official report failed to account for the delay in summoning medical assistance, though it did list forty-seven separate counts on which the factory had failed to observe prescribed safety norms. (MLS 275–76)

Safety norms are not strictly adhered to in India. They can be flouted for some petty consideration.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid is inscribed. On December 6th, 1992, the most gruesome event in the history of India happens. This creates a dent in the secular image of India.

The mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed. Alphabet-soupists ‘fanatics’, or, alternatively, ‘devout liberators of the sacred site’ (delete according to taste) swarmed over
the seventeenth-century Babri Masjid and tore it apart with their bare hands, with their teeth, with the elemental power of what Sir V. Naipaul has approvingly called their ‘awakening to history’. The police, as the press photographs showed, stood by and watched the forces of history do their history – obliterating work. Saffron flags were raised [...] It opened doors and shut them. It was an end and a beginning. It was what Camoens da Gama had prophesied long ago: the coming of the Battering Ram.

(MLS 363)

It was a Muslim worshipper at the old Babri mosque who first claimed to have seen a vision of Lord Ram there, and this started the ball rolling. This is an instance of religious tolerance and plurality. After the vision, Muslims and Hindus had, for a time, shared the contested site without fuss. But religious harmony is anathema to politicians. They can thrive only on chaos--only on religious clashes they can cash in on.

There is a reference to Dr. Datta Samant, his Kamgar Aghadi political party and his Maharashtra Girni Kamgar union of textile workers. This strike is broken by MA’s crack team (MLS 306). The Shiv Sena and the Communists can never get along well.

In May 1991, an all too visible explosion in Tamilnadu adds Mr. Rajiv Gandhi to the list of his families’ murdered dead. An LTTE human bomb finishes off his life. This corresponds to Abraham Zogoiby’s briefing of his secret H-bomb project (MLS 335) to his son
the Moor and its aftermath. This is based on the Bombay blast in 1993. At least 200 people died and eight hundred were injured after 13 bombs exploded in Bombay.

Witnesses said glass, furniture and bodies had been flung into the road by the force of the explosion at the Air India building, one of Bombay’s high-rise landmarks. This corresponds to the devastation of the Siodicorp building. It is reported that at least two hundred and fifty people have died in fifteen bombings, one thousand one hundred injured and the attacks have caused damage to the tune of $10m. The bombings are seen as retaliation for anti-Muslim riots.

When Aoi Ue pleads for her life, Vasco refers to Boabdil’s contemplation. “‘The lady Chimene is pleading for her life, Moor’, ‘Will you not ride to her rescue? Will you not defend her to your last breath?’ ”(MLS 431). The comparison between the Moor and Boabdil becomes clear here. Aoi Ue is seen as Chimene, Boabdil’s girl.

As Rushdie progresses as a novelist, his engagement with history and myth vanes. He seems to dis-engage himself from the entanglement of history. Historical setting /inscription is there, but it is not well integrated into the main stream in the later novels as in *Midnight’s Children* or *Shame*. Rushdie does not rely much on history nowadays. Instead, he has moved to focus on myth.

The “Orpheus–Aristaeus–Eurydice” myth forms the basis of *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. The novel also revolves round the trio ‘Ormus Cama–Rai–Vian Apsara’. The Orpheus–Eurydice story, with its long history of reverberation across western culture, seems then,
ironically, to have appeared in its now-familiar form almost by chance. Orpheus is of key importance to the ancients as the archetype of the artist as initiate, a human in intimate contact with the forces of death and darkness.

What assured Orpheus his glory and eternity in Greece (and later in the west) was the power he was believed to have of exorcising death by his song, the power that allowed him to descend alive into Hades and then return. Having been able to confront and conquer the darkness, he came to symbolize the initiate, the master of ‘the beyond’ the messenger of immortality. The poems, the music and the message of Orpheus played the role of awakening humans, revealing their true selves by opening up before them the path to immortality.

Across Rushdie’s novel, *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, the references to the Orpheus myth come thick and fast, starting with the novel’s very title.

Orpheus is the archetypal poet and musician of the Greco-Roman world, begotten by the god Apollo, himself famed for his prowess on the lyre, on Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. Orpheus’ hunting voice and plangent lyre had the power to subjugate nature. Soon after the poet’s marriage to Eurydice, his young bride died from a snake-bite, as she was fleeing the unwanted advances of Aristaeus, a bee-keeper. The inconsolable Orpheus went down into Hades to get her back, and charmed the powers of the underworld into accepting his outrageous demand, subject to one condition that he must walk out of Hades ahead of her, and must not look back till both of them
were safely under the sunlight. But the episode has “The unhappy conclusion of the Orheus story, Eurydice lost forever because of Orpheus’ backwards look” (GHF 12).

Inconsolably mourning his twice-lost bride, he vowed never to touch a woman again. This incurred the wrath of the Maenads, the crazed women devotees of the god Dionysus, and one day, feeling provoked beyond endurance, a band of them seized on the recalcitrant poet and tore him to pieces. They cast his limbs and head into the river, and yet the severed head went on singing. The Muses gathered his remains and buried him. The Gods placed his lyre among the stars as a constellation. This myth is brought to give the essence of Rushdie’s novel The Ground beneath Her Feet.

Aristaeus, was the first beekeeper in world literature, whose unwelcome advances to the dryad Eurydice led her to step on a snake, whereupon the wood nymph perished and the mountains wept. The real hero of Virgil’s poem where he narrates the story of Orpheus is Aristaeus, the keeper of bees, the “Arcadian master,” the maker of a miracle is far greater than the wretched Thracian singer Orpheus who could not even raise his lover from the dead. This is what Aristaeus could do: he could spontaneously generate new bees from the rotting carcass of a cow. His was “the heavenly gift of honey from the air” (GHF 21-22).

Sir Darius and Methwold feel happy to spend their time in the library to bring out the intricacies of Indo-Aryan mythology,
the relationships between the Homeric and Indian
mythological traditions. The abduction of Helen of Troy by
Paris and that of Sita of Ayodhya by the demon king
Ravana; the relationship between Hanuman, the wily
monkey god, and the devious Odysseus; the parallels
between the tragedy of the House of Atreus and that of
Rama’s clan: (GHF 43)

Rushdie explores, through Darius, the
parallels between the Viewing from the Walls in the Iliad
[when the Trojans survey the besieging army while, for
their benefit, Helen identifies Agamemnon, Odysseus,
Idomeneus and the greater Ajax] and the similar scene in
the Ramayana [in which a pair of spies, standing with the
abductor Ravana on the ramparts of his fortress, identify
the heroes Rama, Lakshmana, Vibhishana and
Hanuman]. (GHF 46)

After the death by spearing of the mortal Castor Polydeuces, the
son of Zeus spent alternate days below the earth with his dead
brother, at a place named Therapne; and in return the dead twin was
allowed to spend alternate days with his brother on the surface, with
the ground beneath his feet instead of over his head. Gayomart Cama,
however, does not return. But he manages all the same to live through
his brother Ormus Cama on the earth. Gayomart vicariously surfaces
and exhibits his musical genius.
The myth that elaborates and celebrates the birth of music is explained thus:

Once upon a time the winged serpent Quetzalcoatl ruled the air and the waters, while the god of war ruled the land. Theirs were rich days, full of battles and the exercise of power, but there was no music, and they both longed for a decent tune. The god of war was powerless to change the situation, but the winged serpent was not. He flew away towards the house of the sun, which was the home of music. He passed a number of planets, and from each of them he heard musical sounds, but there were no musicians to be found. At last he came to the house of the sun, where the musicians lived. The anger of the sun at the serpent’s invasion was a terrible thing to witness, but Quetzalcoatl was not afraid, and unleashed the mighty storms that were his personal specialty. The storms were so fearsome that even the house of the sun began to shake, and the musicians were scared and fled in all directions. And some of them fell to earth, and so, thanks to the winged serpent, we have music. (GHF 101-02)

The following comparison brings out the parallel between ‘Kama – Rati’ and ‘Ormus–Vina’. As shown here, the novel is based more on the Indian mythology than on the Greek one.

(It is said that when Kama, the love god, committed the crime of trying to shoot mighty Shiva with a dart of love,
the great god burned him to ashes with a thunderbolt. Kama's wife, the goddess Rati, pleaded for his life, and softened Shiva's heart. In an inversion of the Orpheus myth, it was the woman who interceded with the deity and brought Love – Love itself! – back from the dead.... So also Ormus Cama, exiled from love by the parents whom he had failed to transfix with love's arrow, shriveled by their lack of affection, is restored to the world of love by Vina.) (GHF 161)

Vina dies and is gone, into that immense underworld made up of all the things and places and people we do not know. “I'm going to find her,” Ormus repeatedly swears. “No limit to where I'll go, to the ends of the earth, Rai. And even beyond” (GHF 194). This is the resolve of Orpheus, to descend into Hades, to bring back the dead Euridyce alive to the earth again.

Darius Cama, towards the end of his life spends more of his time on mythology and booze:

He had become obsessed by the notion that the Greek figures of the Titans Prometheus, “forethought,” and his brother Epimetheus, “afterthought,” the sons of the “First Father,” Uranus, might have been derived from the Puranic heroes Pramanthu and Manthu, and that the swastika, that ancient Indian fire symbol, could also be connected to Prometheus's symbolic role as the thief of
Olympic fire for the benefit of his creation, mankind. (GHF 213)

This is a good comparison – ‘Prometheus-Epimetheus’ correspond to ‘Paramanthu–Manthu.’

Cyrus Cama broke out of jail that Christmas Eve, disguised as a Syriac Priest, having convinced a guard that he was a great seer whose murdering days were behind him and who would be of far greater value to the nation as a free man, spreading his unique message around the land. He emerged into a nation in dire need of guidance. Jawaharlal Nehru was dead. His successor, Indira Gandhi, was little more than a pawn in the hands of the Congress kingmakers, Shastri, Moraji Desai and Kamaraj. A fanatical gang of political bully boys, Mumbai’s Axis, was on the verge of seizing control of Bombay, and Hindu nationalism was sweeping the country. (GHF 210)

The above lines bring out the turmoiled political history of the post-Nehru era when Godmen like Chandraswami thrive.

The fall of the Orpheum Cinema and the corresponding earthquake in Bombay coincide with Indira Gandhi’s declaration of Emergency and its aftermath.

Mrs. Gandhi’s dictatorial of Emergency tightened its grip, the national mood grew somber and fearful. But the worst excesses of the Emergency occurred elsewhere; in
Bombay it was the earthquake that people remembered, 
the earthquake that gave us the shock that shook our 
confidence in who we were and how we had chosen to live. 
(GHF 238-39) 
A meeting with leading Indian feminists has also been arranged. 
These impressive women tell Vina about the rumoured plans of Mr. 
Sanjay Gandhi to force sterilization upon an unwilling population. 
Vina launches a pre-emptive strike against this atrocity in the making. 
“Once again Western technology and medicine go hand in 
hand with tyranny and oppression,” she said in a 
celebrated press conference. “We must not let this man 
conquer Indian women’s wombs.” In those days the West’s 
love affair with Indian mysticism was at its height, so her 
statements gained widespread support. (GHF 250) 
Vina is for ‘the natural methods’ of birth control, not for any of the 
“ectomies”.

The following is a clear Bindiranwale episode and its after math 
in Indian history. During Indira’s regime the army broke into the 
Golden Temple to flush out the ‘Khalistan’ terrorists. But it is sad that 
this cost the life of Mrs.Gandhi too.

Delhi is hot. It is blazing with discontents in the aftermath 
of the assault on the Sikh extremists who were cornered, 
and made their last stand, in Amristar’s Golden Temple. 
(This was so-called Waghawale gang of terrorists, named 
after the egg-bald Man Singh Waghwale, a small bearded
man deformed by the memory of the slaughter of his family during the Partition massacres and now fatally in love, like so many small, bald, bearded men around the world, with the fantasy of a micro-state to call his own, a little stockade in which to wall himself up and call it freedom.) The terrorists are dead now, but the sacrilege of the Indian Army’s assault on Sikhism’s holy of holies still reverberates. Reprisals are feared, and then counter-reprisals, and so on, the familiar sorry spiral. This is not the India Vina and Standish want. They make haste for the Himalayan foothills. (GHF 445)

History, with evidence, clearly explains the concepts of freedom and patriotism. Rushdie criticizes ‘religious fanaticism’ of all religions and their leaders unsparingly.

In this chapter, historical events of national and international importance, both ancient and contemporary, like world wars, independence, five year plans, Gandhi’s death, the rise and fall of the Congress Party, the Emergency, Indo-Pak wars, creation of Bangladesh, hanging of Bhutto and other allied events of Pakistan, Vietnam and the Watergate scandal are analysed.