CHAPTER -III

MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN: MYTHICIZING HOME, HISTORY AND IDENTITY,
CHAPTER: III

Midnight's Children: Mythicizing Home, History and Identity

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

(Midnight's Children 457)

If Grimus ushers in the enduring need of the migrant for an integrated racial memory—"the most profound thoughts of the race"—through conscious mixing of personal story and national history, it is a real aesthetic pleasure to find Rushdie building not only a 'coherent' but, even more importantly, a 'popular' narrative in his next novel Midnight's Children. By carrying out the protagonist's imaginative exploration of the 'self' amidst a welter of sociopolitical and cultural history of the Indian subcontinent, Rushdie has been able to weave a myth of
history around these craved moments, give them an intense moment of emotion and magic, and preserve these moments “from the corruption of the clock” (38). Not for nothing, therefore, William Walsh praises the novel in glowing terms saying it combines the elements of magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism, extravagant farce, multimirrored analogy and a potent symbolic structure, the author has captured the astonishing energy of the novel unprecedented in scope, manner and achievement in the hundred and fifty year old tradition of the Indian novel in English.

The matter— magic India as a fascinating image to the Western readers— certainly remains one of Rushdie’s predilections in writing *Midnight’s Children*. The inescapable fascination for the exotic where fiction and reality merge and; where the lures of India—the land of adventure, magic, strangeness, wisdom and eroticism —remain an ever pleasurable enterprise for the reader to discover the magic-realist’s fictional world in the novel. The tremendous success of the novel in the English-speaking West lies in the deliberate presentation of the whole tradition to a naïve reading public. Moreover, the book’s acclaim in India has a lot to do with its putting the Indo-English imagination on the map. Just even a casual reading of the novel will point out to the fact that the novel is by one born in India but settled abroad who tries to identify himself by recreating his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy, time and timeless. The huge purpose of his observation about the novel is the personification and realization of Indian life.

*Midnight’s Children* has incorporated the stupendous Indian past with its pantheon, its epics, and its wealth of folklore and fairy tales, while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present. Rushdie’s aim is to relate private lives to public events and to explore the limits of individuality in a country as big, as populous and culturally variegated as India. He presents
realities of public history influencing, and getting influenced by, individual's actions and aspirations, with exceptional honesty. Alongside Saleem's personal history one has the collective experience of a people and the history of a nation: the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, Quit India movement, Cabinet Mission, freedom movement, five-year plans, language riots, Chinese aggression, Bangladesh war, Emergency and an array of national events commingle with such personal episodes as Nanavati case which are all 'preserved' to evoke the truth of India, making the novel an extraordinary saga of epic dimensions and resonance.

In *Midnight's Children* the narrator-author seeks to embrace the sights, sounds, and smells of the India of his dreams and memories in all their multiplicity, and seems determined not to leave anything thing out. Had the author been living in middle class Indian society, he might have been more circumspect. But then, surely, the novel would have lost much of its dynamism. The narrator seems to be excavating his family stories lying in the archives under piles of national history and racial memory and, building up a myth of history. It is an astonishingly ambitious novel that attempts nothing less than to create a fantastic fictional counterpart to the convulsive, often tragic events that have rocked the Indian subcontinent during the past sixty years. "History was old and rusted," in *Shame* he declares, "it was a machine nobody had plugged in for thousands of years, and here all of a sudden it was being asked for maximum output" (82).

The unmistakably picturesque tradition which enables the author to lead his protagonist through a world full of innumerable reappearances, reincarnations, monstrosities — all the bewildering 'chaos' of events, occasions and figures give us the picture of an Indian temple, seething in life. The presentation of these matters in abundance, the excess fullness of his world, is a constitutive condition of creativity. It is through the perspective of grotesque
distortion that a basically philosophical consciousness probes into diverse problems: such as making sense out of an absurd reality, a seemingly senseless history and, above all, out of an ambiguous and constantly jeopardized identity; perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes one must make oneself grotesque.

Rushdie projects the central conceit of *Midnight's Children*—the fusion of an individual body with the subcontinent and a personal biography with its political history. In depicting the nation as a corpus, the novel allegorizes national history through the metaphor of the body politic. Thus the novel transforms the imperial topos of the colony by placing the once silent apparently ‘timeless’ subject body in a syntax of history. Rather than using this image conventionally to represent organic unity, Rushdie has employed it to dramatize conflict and division. By representing the national body as fragmented or ill, he undermines not only the colonialist paradigm of the silent, atemporal, and natural primitive, but also the nationalist conception of the new country as an essential totality.

Indian history since independence has a grotesque way of getting involved with the personal life of Saleem Sinai. Notwithstanding his wish to be centrally involved in the national history, the peripheral hero denies centrality of action to him as well as to other midnight children:

...all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time; fathered, you understand, by history. (118)
It appears that history at scandalous points such as the language riots in Bombay, the Nanavati case, has a way of getting entangled with the personal and family history, where the narrator-hero tries to “rearrange history” (260). Thus the interlinking of the family story of the Sinais with the history of India and Pakistan seems to have been jettisoned with grotesque characters and episodes.

*Midnight's Children* ends with the recognition that Saleem is at the end of a line. Nehru's promise has been drained of all possibility for him personally and perhaps even India itself has come to the end of that particular road in its history. Saleem recognizes that the country will have to fashion new ideals to inspire its people and move forward, but that will have to be the task of a new generation: “New mythos are needed”, he acknowledges later on in the novel, “but that's none of my business” (361). In Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, one finds the same tragic interplay of memory and desire, hope and despair, with its orphan protagonist’s return to India. The discourse of secular rationalism that reared him has finally been discredited and consigned to the flames. He has been forced to live a life on the run from his own native land, and now he is free to return and make a new beginning. But it is clear that he will not be able to make it anew; he will have to work with the fragments he has. He finally recognizes that nothing is whole anymore. If one waits for everything to be right again, one will wait forever while the world falls apart. The only hope is to make do with what one has got to do.

One of the novel’s main narrative structures is the Saleem – Padma conversations, holding together the thread of the story as well as creating the paradox of distance and proximity, past and present, male and female, objective and subjective involvement. In the first few chapters, for instance, Padma’s parenthetical interruptions share the reader’s suspense about Saleem’s parentage. When Saleem mentions Emerald, her reaction is "Her? ... That
hussy is your mother?" A little later when Saleem refers to Alia’s “jowly pessimistic quality” of the face she reproves him: “Now then ... That’s no way to describe your motherji” (244); and finally when the real mother turns up, she shows a surprising lack of interest. Thus Padma not only acts as the very necessary audience with all its idiosyncrasies of belief, she also represents the marginal, the peripheries, and borders, in postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon avers:

Padma, the listening textualized female Narratee of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, pushes the narration in directions its male narrator has no intention of taking.

Padma adds to the multiplicity of ‘voices’ in the novel, sometimes performing the choric function of an epic. As when at the end of Part One, Saleem says that the photographer offered his mother a hundred rupees for celebrating his birth, Padma grumpily tells him not to be vain, for birth is after all a commonplace occurrence. It could be a female point of view of a choric interpretation, or just stressing the other side of the coin of Saleem’s unusual and mystical birth. At another level, Padma fixes the novel to present time, while Saleem’s narrations shift to past time as he ‘unswallows’ life after life.

The ironic mixture of the sociohistorical context and biography is established at the very outset by Rushdie, who records history—his version of it at least, for it is a clear departure from other history texts—serving to give authenticity to his symbolic narrative. Still early on in the novel Rushdie evokes a number of realities tested against myths and legends, creating a sense of time and timelessness, at the same time of realism and fantasy, of unity and fragmentation of a certain fluidity of style and stagnation, problematising the very vision of Saleem’s India, which he creates and then contests. As
postmodern historiographic metafiction, *Midnight's Children* does not reflect reality in terms of simplistic mimeses: indeed, in a paradoxical and historically complex form, the self-conscious artist moves beyond self-reflexivity to situate discourse in a broader context.

The sociopolitical scenario raised before one's mind's eye is a veritable collage which, although fixed by historical time, might dissolve any moment with the waving of the magician's wand. Thus, Saleem specifies that he would soon be thirty one year old and at the same breath refers to a thousand nights and a night suggestive of the *Arabian Nights*. Then, there are fragments afloat – the boatman Tai's loyalty to Kashmir, Ghani the landowner's clever ruse to get his daughter married to the German-returned doctor, the grand nose of Aziz on which dynasties could be established, the German woman drowning herself in Dal Lake, and the drifting memory of the nine-year old Saleem being unghosted by grandfather Aziz on New Year's day. In this way, the novel shares in common with postmodernistic self-reflexivity, and fragmentation.

The subjectivity and creativity of Rushdie's narratology becomes clear with an analysis of the chapter entitled 'Snake and Ladders'. It captures in a nutshell the concept on subjective consciousness. The chapter begins with omens of exploding comets and rumours of a Bengali snake charmer, a Tubriwallah, charming snakes all over the country. In the first paragraph itself, Rushdie evokes the names of divergent characters suggestive of crossing borders: Pied Piper of the literary scene, Schaapsteker, the European snake doctor of the realistic historic world and crossing religious borders with blue-skinned Krishna and sky-hued Jesus. The juxtaposing of narrative with history entails an encounter and challenge by the art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning. Rushdie underlines this movement form history to biography.
Experimentation has become the byword in all art forms, especially after the 1960s. Rushdie experiments with the form, with words, with ideas, and questions the conventional concepts of society, history, psychoanalysis even as he installs them in the novel. So has been the case of the fluidity of his unusual literary genre. The novel and history are played off against each other interposed with a 'mixing' of other genres like the epic, rendering it a typically complex postmodernist art. One finds A.R. Rahman doing as much in the field of music in his 'Vande Matharam', crossing borders to create new forms in this musical composition. And why not, for postmodernism accepts ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic.

A Marxist reading of *Midnight's Children* has emphasized Padma's symbolical value as a plebeian commentator next to Saleem, illustrative of the local elitism. This interpretation has therefore focused on the hegemonic prevalence of the central, bourgeois, male agents over the peripheral, plebeian, female identity. What is particularly engaging and original about this reading is that this theory avoids acknowledging in Saleem alone the emblem of India, but it demonstrates that a complete national identification is to be searched for in the combination of Saleem and Padma. Yet, in *Midnight's Children* the reader can detect that Rushdie deliberately focuses his attention on Saleem's story only, totally overlooking Padma's background. The reader's conclusions about Padma's plebeian lineage, although manifest, cannot be supported by the evidence of her story in the text because that has been totally abrogated.

Gender criticism has not generally been extremely soft with Rushdie, to use a delicate euphemism. Outside the code of reference to the *Arabian Nights*, and the parallel with king Shahriyar-Sheherazade, Padma seems to be modeled on the traditional Indian wife. Her world is the domestic sphere, she is totally dedicated to her husband and it is assumed that patience is her most
characterizing trait. She is supposed to live in the shadow of her husband and, like most of Rushdie's women, she is not a construer of events but an adjunct to her male counterpart. Furthermore, the huge gap between the narrator's high-level education and her illiteracy, which induces Saleem to tag her as "my one disciple" (149) has become an unhappy caricature of a sad social reality. What has justifiably most irritated gender criticism is that Padma has been clearly sketched out as a stereotype, as a character representative of a whole gender. This is the context in which the reader could place the criticism to Rushdie's alleged misogyny. The fact that this interpretation of Padma's figure may radically contrast with the one illustrated should not surprise any one too much, because they pertain of two different registers of discourse. Apart from evaluating such contradictions within the set of norms generally accepted by the postmodern cliche, the reader is much inclined to view paradoxical ideological ambiguity as a trademark of Rushdie's writing.

An analysis of Padma's role in terms of narratological discourse is not likely to lead the reader towards a more straightforward result. This is doubtless one of the fields in which Rushdie reveals himself as a master of shuffling cards. One can get the glimpse of the anarchic construction as the narrative moves on. For in stance, the evident dichotomy between the implied orality of Saleem's speech and his being at his table writing his tales, a strategy perceptively known as "written orality", consequently introduces the first ambiguity of role for Padma. Is she a listener or a reader? Apparently, she must paradoxically cover both the functions at the same time, implying in such a contradiction in terms also that she is a "primitively illiterate" (82) "reader's surrogate" (64). One may then explain the strident haziness about her role in two different ways: firstly, since Rushdie imagines a reader completely different from her, Padma's function as a narratee is simply allegorical. Secondly, her role is limited to that of the listener only in that the implied reader is a figure.
different from her. Saleem's narration, in fact, is not necessarily directed at her only, but to a much more educated kind of readership, if not to other subjects still.

Padma, in addition, is strategical to Rushdie's deconstruction of a narration responding to a set of pre-established norms. Once more, contradiction is the privileged medium of resistance to conventional narration. Padma's widely acknowledged passivity as a traditional Indian wife turns out to be extremely productive to the text, in that her presence is essential to the economy of the novel. The reader is explicitly made aware that Saleem has only a short-lived independence in the brief interval when she is missing. Various theories credit her with different strategical roles which are always of primary importance and, significantly at odd with her status of an illiterate: Batty maintains that "Padma's role as Saleem's 'necessary ear' should not obscure her status as co-creator of the narrative. Cundy affirms that "Padma is a vital spur and judge of Saleem's autobiography", while Brennan argues that Padma is not only a passive receptor, or disembodied voice of the national conscience, but a literary critic". However, one can choose to classify her since her identity is almost to be defined in terms of opposition to Saleem's.

A variety of different interpretations have divided critics on Padma's alleged identifications within the Hindu pantheon, too. Whereas Saleem is quite clearly associated with the figure of Ganesha for a number of reasons, Padma's reference to the Hindu mythology seems more flexible. Her traditional role of patient Indian wife, just one step behind her husband, would indicate in Sita a possible prototype for her character. This parallel would then probably apply to those engaged in gender criticism, being the figure of Sita among the privileged banners for women emancipation in India today. Significantly, Uma Parameswaran, who is more inclined to favour her prevailing identity on Saleem,
prefers to associate her to Durga, the archetypal Mother Earth. Goonetilleke, on the other hand, considers Padma a sort of Saleem’s Muse and he equates her to Saraswati, the goddess of creative arts. The mythical association of Padma with a deity, anyway, is much more the effect of Saleem’s jokes with the significance of her name: “her mother told her, when she was only small, that she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is ‘The One Who Possesses Dung’”(24).

The Lotus Goddess in Hindu mythology is Lakshmi, the goddess of Beauty and the equivalent of Aphrodite in Greek mythology. She is commonly associated with desire and fertility, attributes which Rushdie would deform into a grotesque. In addition, Lakshmi’s notorious appellative of ‘Shri’ suggests general well-being, material prosperity and ruling majesty, all features which are completely reversed in Padma. This may further prove how pertinent is Brennan’s Marxist interpretation of the character.

A psychological analysis may reveal further interesting aspects of Padma’s character. Contrary to what her traditional role of Indian wife may suggest at first, she is quite unusual if compared to other characters in *Midnight’s Children* and not necessarily subject to its internal code. The fragmented experience – Saleem resisting his own fragmentation and the ‘perforated sheet’ are the most evident metaphors of this process – seems to be one of the constants which regulate the aesthetic principles at the base of the novel’s creative thrust. Significantly, Padma escapes this norm. Similarly, she evades the principle assigning various names to each character as the plot unfolds; in that respect, her identity remains undisturbed by the events. This notwithstanding, as much of the previous discussion has shown, her identity or function is to be defined only in strict relationship to that of Saleem. Since she is involved as an opponent / accomplice in all his tasks, she becomes a sort of
“alter ego” for him in the whole course of narration. Regardless of the critical perspective employed to analyze her connection with Saleem, it remains indisputable that her relationship with him is founded on a strictly complementary code. Substantially, *Midnight’s Children* is the final result of the sum: Saleem plus Padma; it is their union, rather than their being associated as different identities, which leads to a fruitful and fertile combination. Considering the vast amount of cross references to autobiographical elements that spice the pages of the novel and the discounted association Rushdie/Saleem, one should not be surprised to discover that Padma bares significant symbolical similarities to a real woman, although one would hasten to add that this may hardly be a flattering parallel.

*Midnight’s Children* offers, from another angle, a self-conscious fictional alternative to the lies that form the myth of the ruling Nehru-Indira-Sanjay Gandhi dynasty. No doubt, Rushdie admires Nehru but not the political dynasty he unintentionally established. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is “a collective dream”, but a dream from which India must wake up. Like all dynasties, Rushdie believes, it can appear to be an organic process of the body politic, but it is anything but natural. Rushdie’s alternative genealogy based on a Nehru-like figure and also descending through daughter to grandson, has as one of its virtues, a self-consciousness about its own fictive status. What Indians must do is reject the literal Nehru-Gandhi bloodline—which is really a metaphorical bloodline—and accept that Nehru as a father only in metaphor. In this way they might avoid confusions such as that propagated by the election slogan—“Indira is India and India is Indira.”

Rushdie offers a counter-myth to the myth of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, a counter-myth that exposes the naturalized metaphor on which the dynasty is built. But myth and counter-myth are not alternative versions between which
the reader is free to choose. The reader may accept or reject the counter-myth, but the dynasty's myth must be rejected as a lie. Elsewhere Rushdie has argued that sometimes it's better to counter myths with facts; in other words, the postmodern fantasist believes that there exists a reality external to all myths against which their adequacy can be measured. The fact is that family rule has damaged Indian democracy, that dynasty is a threat to the nation.

For all the self-conscious questioning of the epistemological worth of historical narration in *Midnight's Children*, some things are not left in doubt. The reader has no trouble judging Rushdie's Pakistan. Saleem is an impure soul in the 'Land of the Pure', and it is clear that he and Rushdie value impurity. The liberal novel is an apparent cry for freedom against tyranny. The forces of tyranny include not only fundamentalist religious forces, but also death-dealing and coup-plotting military generals, and Indira Gandhi herself when she declares the Emergency. Rushdie's novel engages in the subversion of every form of convention and authority. It very nearly falls apart, but not quite. It must resist chaos even as it resists tyranny. Liberal freedom is also under threat from the forces of anarchy, in the guise of language marchers, religious rioters, and the many-headed mob. The forces of chaos are embodied in Shiva, the genetic son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, who has been raised in extreme poverty and is now filled with a violent resentment. The two enemies, tyranny and chaos, are linked: Shiva becomes Indira Gandhi's henchman.

Liberal freedom is a perilous balance between the need for Freedom from tyranny and the need for a centre that can withstand the threat of disintegration. Only a liberal secular state can permit the self both freedom and security. Timothy Brennan is right to argue that *Midnight's Children* is a plea for the liberal values of human rights and civil freedoms. It is also a plea for a secular state as the only political home for the individual self. The reader
can express the insight in a negative fashion: there is no self without the secular and democratic nation. An oppressive tyranny or a murderous anarchy both threatens the self. Indira Gandhi, Saleem, and Shiva are three figures of India, and their relations are those of superego, ego, and id. The ego must escape the tyranny of the superego, which threatens it with castration, but must not collapse into the id. Shiva is Saleem’s dark shadow: he cannot be denied but cannot be fully acknowledged either.

Saleem offers the reader a choice between faith in the nation and doubt. It is because it is a real choice that critics have read the novel in such utterly different ways, as both a celebration of India and a withering satire on the very possibility of the nation-state. One should note, however, that the freedom to decide for oneself is a liberal value, not itself free of ideology. Because the choice is posed in terms of faith and doubt and not in terms of competing faiths; it is actually weighted in favour of history and the nation.

Rushdie goes on to show that the opportunities for self-fulfillment that give a citizen a stake in the nation are a question not of merit out of the class into which one is born. Saleem does not deserve his central position because of anything he has done or anything that he is. Saleem’s concern with order and meaning are a luxury that he owes to the circumstances surrounding his birth, and therefore a mere emblem of class privilege. There is not just explanation for why one person is born to wealth and another doomed to poverty and misery, and the reader is free to prefer Shiva to Saleem as a mirror of India. But the concern for ‘order’ is valuable in and of itself, and the reader cannot but opt for order over chaos. There is no absolute reason to choose Saleem, but no reader will choose Shiva. The historian offers order and narrative. His enemy is the one who seeks only chaos. The only alternative readers are shown to the nation, that admittedly self-serving invention of a wealthy ‘chamcha’
class is a lawless and unfathomable violence. The nation is revealed to be arbitrary but useful, an inevitably compromised wager against the darkness. Saleem acknowledges the possibility that Shiva is the true generator of human affairs, as it is Shiva who is the only one of the *Midnight's Children* to father another generation. But if there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the novel, it is that Saleem is able to claim one of Shiva's offspring as his own son. He is writing his autobiography for his son. As Saleem is well aware, identity does not reside in the blood; it is the claim and its recognition by the one claimed that matter.

But why should the alternative to Saleem be a figure of irrational destructiveness? If readers were to reject the secular nation and its history, would the inevitable result be chaos? Shiva represents the dispossessed without a stake in the nation, the political threat to Saleem's India. However, he is made to represent chaos and unmeaning, the existential threat to the vulnerable self.

Saleem says he has borrowed his narrative technique—"matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday"—from Shiva, his rival (26). However, in Shiva's case these techniques are applied without conscious thought, and their effect was to create a picture of the world of startling uniformity. Saleem's narrative is different and presumably more valuable precisely because it is self-conscious and because it does invite judgment. But where might one look for an example of Shiva's own narration?

A narration "without conscious thought" and "a picture of the world of startling uniformity" seem remarkably like the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It has become a critical commonplace to assume that magic realism
is its own genre and one particularly well suited to handling the Third World and
oral materials. Rushdie has repeatedly acknowledged that he patterns his own
storytelling on oral narration and deploys fantasy in order to be faithful to the
reality of India, where millions believe in the world of the spirits. However, Rushdie
is only nodding in the direction of orality and religion. The majority of the magical
elements in *Midnight's Children* derive from allegory and the literalization of
metaphor. Rushdie's novel is an allegory of Indian history, and allegory is not
an oral but a literary mode presuming a world of texts and readers. Garcia
Marquez's narration, on the other hand, certainly is based on oral narration, the
stories the author had heard from his grandmother. His *One Hundred Years of
Solitude* is exasperatingly indifferent to national history and resistant to
allegorical interpretation. It may be argued that Rushdie's own technique, closer
to that of Gunter Grass and Pynchon, is best called allegory in order to distinguish
it from Marquez's magic realism.

In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie makes India's choice not one between
Nehru and Gandhi but one between Saleem and Shiva. The significance of
Gandhi's absence from Rushdie's novel is that the author prefers the nation as
imagined by Nehru the secular nationalist to the India for which Gandhi stood.
To substitute Shiva for Gandhi is as scandalous as to draw equivalence between
the Mahatma and his assassin. But that is precisely what Rushdie does. The
only episode of Gandhi's life that figures in Rushdie's allegory of Indian history
is the news of his assassination. It is as though the assassination reveals the
truth about Gandhi — perhaps that he aroused instinctive and irrational forces
that he was not able to control? The choice Rushdie offers his readers — between
a leap of faith and an abyss of doubt — is a real choice, but not the only one
possible. There are other leaps that can be made. Rushdie seems to ask his
readers to put faith in a secular modern nation, not because the nation is true,
but because faith can make it true, and secular tolerance and liberal freedom

— 88 —
deserve to be made true. A reader may well decide to choose Saleem and the project of national history.

*In Midnight’s Children,* Rushdie makes Indian history a co-ordinate in his fictional art; his presentation of historical facts covers a vast span, from the pre-Independence Jalianwala Bagh incident of 1919 to the period of Emergency in 1977, and adopts a variant mode of portrayal. The facts themselves are of little interest as they have been repeatedly given to the reader by several novelists as well as historians. What is significant is how Rushdie has fantasized his depiction of historical reality. The introduction of the element of the magical and the supernatural has lent the work a dimension that makes it characteristically Rushdie’s own, for he has his typical way of concocting a blend of art and life. Art does have a way of imitating life and writers have always been skeptical or incapable of unilaterally separating the two. In an article in defence of his novel, *The Satanic Verses,* Rushdie has made his aesthetic predilections very clear when he suggests not asking the writers to create ‘typical’ or ‘representative’ fictions. Such books are almost invariably dead books. The novels that he really cares for are those which attempt radical reformulation of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the ‘novel’ seems to insist upon: to see the world new. And, this novel worldview, if it provides implications that are worth thinking about, fulfils one of the important functions of literature.

*Midnight’s Children’s* literary response comprise of a series of real life situations that have been cleverly fictionalized through allusions disguised as well as direct, to the country’s recent as well as not so recent past. The novel has an epic sweep covering about six decades in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Book One covers the time from the Jallianwala Bagh incident in April 1919 to the birth of the protagonist, Saleem, on August 15, 1947; Book
Two extends up to the end of the Indo-Pakistan war in September 1965, and Book Three envelops the period up to the end of the Emergency in March, 1977, and includes the Bangladesh war as well. At the fictional level, the novel depicts the events and experiences in the lives of three generations of the Sinai family. The account begins with their days in Srinagar and follows their passage through Amritsar, Agra and Bombay to Karachi from where Saleem alone returns hidden in the basket of Parvati, the witch, only to experience the tremors of the Emergency that had been clamped in India. At the semantic level, it is far more complex and has intriguing social and political connotations.

A careful analysis of Midnight's Children reveals three major aspects of Rushdie's use of history in his novel that deserve study: (i) the commingling of autobiography and narrative, (ii) the striking breach of chronology and (iii) the search for identity and the meaning of life. The opening page of the novel gives us a decipherable clue to them. Characteristically, Rushdie begins:

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 Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15, 1947. And the time? . . . On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. . . . at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.
. . . . I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape.
. . . . I, Saleem Sinai, had become heavily embroiled in Fate-at the best of times, a dangerous sort of involvement. Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years

— 90 —
old... I must work fast... if I am to end up meaning-
-yes, meaning-something. And there are so many stories
to too many, such an excess of intertwined lives, 
events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a 
commingling of the improbable and the mundane. I
must commence the business of remaking my life from
the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years
before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-
ridden, crime-stained birth. (1-2)

The very first sentence of the work is illustrative of the hybrid art of the
novelist. The tale is meant to be at once an autobiography. And a narrative, an
account of facts and a yarn spun out of imagination, a blend of truth and fiction.
"I was born in the city of Bombay" clearly sets the tone for an autobiography but
the latter half of the sentence shifts the reader's attention and focus, and leaves
him baffled as he makes a futile attempt to approximate fiction while facts call
for their share of attention. He is mystified as to how "once upon a time" can be
a natural sequel to what goes before. And yet, the two are confidently set against
each other as a revelatory beginning to "so dense a commingling of the
improbable and the mundane".

That the novelist is not punctilious regarding the observance of chronology
is also evident on the very first page of the book. There is a frequent forward or
backward shift in time that makes it to trace the proper sequence of events in
the life of the protagonist. What the publisher's blurb says of Rushdie's The
Satanic Verses, one can say of his Midnight's Children too. The past and the
future chase each other furiously. At the very outset, after having given the
date of his birth, the narrator somersaults to his thirty-first birthday. He then
dives deep into the past only to return to the present, and then to embark upon
the future. He feels that it is incumbent upon him "to write the future as I have written the past"(462).

This marked break of chronology in the novel reveals the author's intention of giving not a record of events in the order of their occurrence but of projecting the basic historical truth as interacting with and affecting the life of the individual, that is, chiefly, the author himself as represented by the protagonist. On the one side the reader has Saleem's personal life, and, on the other, corresponding to this there is the life and history of the nation. The story traces the various events in the life of the central character that synchronize with major happenings in the recent history of India. The parallel that is worked out, though strained at times, is designed to allow an understanding of the individual's life in terms of historical forces.

One cannot but note that all through the novel Rushdie is preoccupied with a quest for identity and is impatient to gain an insight into the "meaning" of life. He has definitely launched out to search for the purpose of existence: "I must work faster," his protagonist tells," if I am to end up meaning-yes, meaning-something." (9). And again, "Am I so far gone in my desperate need for meaning, that I am prepared to distort every thing?" (166). Later in the novel, there is a reference to Saleem, with his "desperation for meaning." (356). Such indicators in the narrative leave the reader in no doubt as to what the writer, consciously or unconsciously, has set out to accomplish in his work.

Returning, then, to the first of the significant aspects of the novel, there is no gainsaying the fact that Rushdie has ingeniously coupled the autobiographical with the fictional narrative. The narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, prepares his readers at the very outset for just such a fusion when he
writes of this “excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours” (9). The element of fantasy in the novel is introduced in such a matter-of-fact way that the reader swallows it almost unquestioningly though he knows quite well that this is one of those extra-historical factors in the novel that lend it interest rather than authenticity. In fact, the juxtaposition of the two contrastive elements of fantasy and reality has been so skillfully effected in the narrative that one is left not with a sense of incongruity but with the consciousness of a comprehensive general design in which the magical and real shade off into each other very naturally, the former bringing into relief the historical truth the writer sets out to explore and fix.

Rushdie’s protagonist talks about the mind’s divisions, between fantasy and reality, but in the novel itself no such divisions seem to exist for both these constituents jointly contribute towards the aesthetic realization of the author’s as well as his narrator’s “urge to encapsulate the whole of reality” (75). This has been done, for instance, through the symbolic Lifafa Das, the peep showman, who tries to capture “the whole of reality” in his box. Thus, the fantastic here is not merely the occult, the inexplicable telepathy, people disappearing in baskets, and so on, it is essentially strategic in nature in the sense that it becomes a fictional mode of projecting reality and offers the real in terms of the fanciful and the bizarre.

Certain observations made in the course of the novel reveal Rushdie’s attitude to reality, and bring home the message that the novelist’s truth is different from that of the historian. “Some-times legends make reality and become more useful than the facts” (47), says Rushdie’s narrator in trying to bring out the nature of fictional reality. And, again: “Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real” (200). It is clear that Rushdie’s treatment of history is in conformity with his idea of “illusory fictional reality,” which while recording historical truth does not insist upon a total transcription of reality.
The midnight's children themselves are metaphorically conceived in that they can be made to represent many things. The author himself suggests this:

They can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling diseased mind. (200)

It is this quality of visionary insight created by Rushdie's use of metaphors and symbols that lends distinction to his work. Apart from the metaphorical value that the midnight's children have, each one of them has also been endowed with certain magical traits:

What made the events noteworthy was the nature of these children every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment or just conceivably by sheer coincidence, endowed with features, talents and faculties which can only be described as miraculous. (195)

The supernatural qualities ascribed to these children are the author's means of lending validity to his protagonist's omniscience. Saleem's power of telepathy and the voices speaking inside his head enable him to provide the missing links in the narrative and to maintain the continuity of the story for "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence" (19). Besides, even "memory cracks beyond hope of reassembly" (384). There are "fadings"
and "gaps" and hence it is "necessary to improvise on occasion" (384); "the trick is to fill in the gaps" (427).

The providing of miraculous powers to the children born on the midnight of Independence also enables the novelist to expatiate upon the superhuman traits of the mythic Hindu heroes by comparing his midnight's children with these prodigies:

So among the Midnight's Children were infants with powers of transmutation, flight, prophecy and wizardry. . . but two of us were born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem and Shiva . . . to Shiva the hour had given the gifts of war (of Ram who could draw the undrawable bow; of Arjuna and Shiva, the ancient prowess of Kurus and Pandava united unstoppably in him!). (200)

Rushdie's sense of fantasy seen in his prolific inventiveness and comic approach pervades his entire art of novel writing but it is never allowed to exist without the surer base of realism which lends the world of the book a truth of its own. It is his division of fact and fantasy, then, that strikes the balance. The author's defence of his use of fantasy in *The Satanic Verses* is equally applicable to *Midnight's Children*. Elsewhere in an article, Rushdie explains that fiction uses facts as the starting place and then spirals away to explore its concerns, which are only tangentially historical.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie has ingeniously demonstrated his ability to historicize myth and fictionalize history. His most potent message in the novel seems to say that if history is composed of fictions, then fiction can be composed of history. In this regard it is noteworthy that in the novel the degree of fantasy
introduced varies with the extent of his acquaintance with facts. He indulges in fantasy when he is ignorant or unsure of facts to fill in the “gaps,” as the narrator tells his readers. The narrator-author’s Pakistani experience is more of a fantasy than reality and he himself admits it with characteristic casualness: “Anyway, it was not ‘my’ country” (291). It is, however, not true that he did not know enough about Pakistan for he does give in a nutshell a fairly authentic history of that nation and he also tries to establish “connections” with that country; for example, one hears Saleem say, “I helped to change the fate of the land of the Pure” (287) and “with the fate of the nation in my hand” (290). But, he certainly knows much more about India, the country of his birth, and, at certain unguarded moments, his emotional ties clearly reveal themselves. In many of his interviews about Midnight’s Children Rushdie tells that the original motivation was to write about his childhood home of Bombay at the time when he was growing up there.

This original motivation, however, took on larger implications and the work came to be a literary exploration of the memory of a society in political and social decline. In Rushdie’s blending of fiction and fact one sees the artful way in which he portrays imaginary people, though some of his characters are clearly identifiable, reacting to real events. The result again is the desired one: a kind of mythicizing of history, a work that conveys more the feeling than the facts of the period, though the basic limits imposed by history are never entirely violated. The “real” events that Rushdie depicts are not mere concrete incidents tracing the political history of India from the pre-independence days to the present times; they comprise the complex of events and situations, which is certainly not quantifiable.

Midnight’s Children does not reveal the movement of history in vividly realized concrete occurrences given in their chronological order, nor does it
depend on meticulous details. In fact, as the reader finds, there is a marked break in chronology and this is significant in revealing the novelist's intention and design. The novel is not meant to be a bold chronological account of the period portrayed. It concentrates on projecting the kind of fuller historical truth that incorporates the social and historical reality of the times as interacting with, and affecting, the life of the individual, that is chiefly the protagonist himself who undoubtedly represents the author.

On the other hand, the imaginary characters portrayed are indicative of the novelist's indulgence in fantasy and imagination. All the midnight's children have been endowed with certain magical powers and it is through them that one learns to accept the fantastic in the novel. The other characters, too, range from the absolutely human to the strikingly superhuman, from man in general to witches and wizards. Interestingly, while Rushdie's men are not without the power to crystallize the drops of blood coming out of their nostrils into rubies, the inmates of the magicians' ghetto are not devoid of human feelings and sentiments.

Rushdie is frequently of the opinion that it is only in dreams that we may remould and remake the world. Therefore, the dictator or fascists' first task is to destroy dreams and imaginative bodies. In Haroun and the Sea of Stories, it is Khattam Shud, the Prince of Silence, who is the arch-enemy of dreams and expressions. In Midnight's Children, the Widow is the arch-enemy of the magical and the fantastic. Hence, she attacks the magicians' colony in Delhi, bulldozes them and puts them to flight. She also arrests most of the midnight's children because they symbolize hope for change, literally castrates them and figuratively makes them impotent. The entire novel is ultimately placed in a space, which is advertised as a city of dreams. Bombay, India's premier Film City, abounding in dream-merchants, aggressively sells the nation's secret
desires and fantasies (215); and Bombay's popular dream-merchandise, the popular Bombay cinema, forms the subtext of Midnight's Children. The novel consciously simulates the Bombay talkies' fantastic and melodramatic mode, incorporating conventions like mistaken identities, changes at birth, doubles, fantastic coincidences, melodramatic cloak and dagger affairs, proliferation of semi-magical beasts like snakes, monkey's and elephants invading the human world. Thus, Saleem rightly notes that world of Midnight's Children has "melodrama, piling upon melodrama: life acquiring the coloring of a Bombay talkie" (148). In the novel, fantastic and the real ultimately cannot be distinguished as they erase each other's boundaries. Rapid transformation of identity, space and time makes change which has been the only constant in the novel.

Midnight's Children embodies the land mass and the history of the subcontinent in narrator and protagonist Saleem Sinai, Aziz's putative grandson. Saleem, who begins his chronicle with the injury to the doctor's nose, rates two generations of family history before he reaches the events of his own life. This saga recounts a modern colonial history that culminates in Saleem's birth, at the moment when India achieves legal independence. The narrator acts as the vehicle of Indian nationality because of this miraculous conjunction of biological and political nativity: he is the most exemplary amidst the midnight's children. Yet the author quickly undercuts this sacral presentation by revealing that Saleem was secretly switched with another baby in the hospital. Shiva, also born at the stroke of midnight, is the Sinais' biological offspring (116). The genealogy that Saleem has exhaustively related is his own through adoption and experience, but not through heredity. The protagonist's birth thus starkly dramatizes the illusion of coherence upon which postcolonial nationality rests, even as this genesis debunks conceptions of blood and race as the unifying constituents of national identity.
Because it depicts the unitary subject as fictional and relates political history through fabulous chronicle, *Midnight’s Children* seems to display a postmodern aesthetic in the tradition of magical realism. Yet many critics have observed that such metropolitan descriptions of postcolonial art have often foreclosed on the specific context of its representations. Rushdie’s novel, while influenced by Western theories of linguistic flux and psychological splitting, in fact grounds the mobile subjectivity and metaphorical reality of the Indian subaltern in the Hindu Ayurveda, the predominant traditional medicine of the subcontinent. Rushdie’s collapse of nation and citizen centrally depends on a cultural understanding of the subject as corporeal, recapitulative, and porous. Like many traditional medicines, Ayurvedic theory is embedded in a somatic psychology, in which sentiment is understood primarily as physical sensation rather than as rationalized mental affect, and in a religious and social philosophy that understands the body-self as highly interactive with its large and small environments. In this sense, Ayurvedic philosophy interprets the person as a microcosm.

Saleem Sinai exemplifies this collective and somatic subject. Portraying his very existence as miraculous and unsustainable, he continually asserts that he is physically decomposing as he relates his tale. His condition underscores the impossibility of the novel’s imaginative and political project to fashion a nation from the diverse subcontinent. Saleem’s fatalistic contention is finally realized when he disintegrates as a result of this disease. His chronicle alone remains as the material container of national meaning, for the nation dies with Saleem’s body. Rushdie’s concluding metafictional gesture, therefore, separates the novel’s enabling fusion of nation, narrative, and subject. In divorcing the textual idea of India from its political actuality as a body, *Midnight’s Children* revives the mute native subject who is suspended outside the syntax of history.
The narrative, in finally abandoning its allegiance to an Ayurvedic conception of a corporate subject, thus points to the postcolonial author as an additional and crucial determinant of the metaphoric of embodiment. The shadow of the migrant metropolitan writer constantly falls over the “imaginary” political body of *Midnight’s Children*. “Writing my book in North London, looking out through my window on to a city scene totally unlike the ones I was imagining on to paper, I was constantly plagued by this problem, until I felt obliged to face it in the text, to make clear that what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory,” Rushdie writes elsewhere in his *Imaginary Homelands*, which illuminates the importance of migrancy to his depiction of Indian history where his experience cannot find the merging of nation, voice, and body, of personal memory and cultural distance; the author assumes a romantic relationship to the body of the subcontinent. Saleem’s political ineffectiveness as an adult takes the form of emotional and physical impotence, as he cannot overcome incestuous attachments to figures that represent a united India. It is in this context that the narrator pits textual production against biological procreation as a superior method of national formation even as he portrays his own writing as phallic. This analogy departs from and competes with his primary Vedic mode of polymorphous somatic creation, which fuses textual and physical production. Ultimately, the masculine, sexual body acts as the nexus of exchange between the assimilative Vedic subject and the remote, disembodied imagination of the migrant author, covertly bridging the distance between the nation and the Western metropolis as the sites of the post colony’s production. In *Midnight’s Children*, the instabilities of the embodied subject reveal the fusion of voice and nation as an articulation of the authorial wish-fulfillment and anxiety, as well as a requisite of history.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


