Midnight's Children:
A Metaphor
William Walsh rightly points out that the "huge purpose" of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is the personification and realisation of Indian life. The novel is a piece of 'fiction-faction', by one born in India but settled abroad who tries to recreate his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy, reality and vision, time and timelessness. Rushdie suggestively remarks:

"And one such suspicious generalisation may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.(3)"

91
In *Midnight's Children* this imaginary truth is conveyed through a complex strategy, the centre of which is the narrator-protagonist Saleem Sinai who is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history, a crystallisation of an evolving mood, a distillation of a vision nostalgic, critical and philosophical. He is a camera eye, which is itself cracked and fragmented, with, as the novelist remarks, some of its fragments missing. But in spite of it, or perhaps because of it, he is able to project, what may be called, a sort of prismatic vision of reality, partial, fissured and fragmented, but highly absorbing and deeply meaningful. Afraid of absurdity, he is frantically engaged in a quest for meaning, thus personifying what he calls a very Indian lust for allegory.

Saleem Sinai is one of the *midnight's children*, born between 12 midnight and 1 A.M. in the night of August 14-15, 1947, the hour of the nascence of free India. Out of a total of such 1001 children, 420 die and 581 survive upto 1957. All these imaginary beings meet and discuss and quarrel in the parliament of Saleem's mind, forming a Midnight's Children's Conference. These children, a sort of multiheaded monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel, are a metaphor of Indian society, the very essence of multiplicity, one thousand
and one ways of looking at things:

"I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian Blackies; there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company, the Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables; while, among the low-born, the pressured of poverty and communism were becoming evident (206).

They represent the nation's psyche:

"Midnight's Children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view, 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 (240).

All these children have special gifts or powers or physical peculiarities. Two of them, Saleem and Shiva, born exactly on the stroke of midnight, have remarkably complementary gifts - nose and knees. The destructive Shiva blessed with powerful knees has the gifts of war while Saleem has the greatest talent of all - the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men. His long beaked nose is a symbol of this power to observe reality, the smell of it as it were - which a denizen of the old world thinks performs the function of a stethoscope. The confusion is appropriate, for is it not with his nose, with his nasal ethics that Saleem explores the state of the nation. But this is to anticipate.

Having been born at a crucial moment of history, Saleem claims a place at the centre of things, and, on the authority of Prime Minister Nehru's letter to him, the role of the mirror-of-the-nation more than the sloganized centrality of Indira Gandhi. In surprisingly numerous ways, India is Saleem Sinai and Saleem Sinai is India. The very time of his clock-ridden,
crime-stained birth, handcuffs him to Indian history. Geography too is not less important. Sinai is a small triangular peninsula with associations of the-place-of-revelation, of put-off-thy shoes, of commandments and golden calves, in short, something like India in miniature. Saleem Sinai's map face also represents the map of India, her vastness reflected in its largeness. The disfiguring birth-marks (144) on the face seem to be a creation of the holocast of the partition. The bulbous Byzantine domes of the temples may be suggestive of the Himalayas just as the ice-like eccentricity of his sky-blue eyes seems to point to the azure skies of Kashmir. The dark stains spread down the western hairline and the dark patch colouring the eastern ear clearly stand for the two wings of Pakistan and something lacking in the chain might be a hint at the thinnest of the southern part of the Indian peninsula.

Saleem's long nose, the most marked feature of his physiognomy, appears to be indicative of India's pride and self-glorification which make Indians so valuable that Saleem's nose ran. At the time of Chinese aggression, while the nation puffed itself up. Saleem's sinuses also puffed up and when Indians attacked the Chinese, his nasal passages too were in a state of acute crisis. His highly sensitive olfactory powers have both
physical and moral dimensions, for he classifies smells by colour, weight, geometric system and morality, the science of nasal ethics:

"Sacred: purdah-veils, halal meat, muezzin's towers, prayer-mats; profane: Western records, pig meat, alcohol (p.380)."

Again in Bangladesh:

"In the midst of the rubble of war, I discovered fair-and-unfair. Unfairness smelled like onions, the sharpness of its perfume brought tears to my eyes. Seized by the bitter aroma of injustice,... I smelled her traitress's smile. (pp. 442-43)."

Certain other physical features of Saleem are also quite significant. For some time after his birth he does not blink. The immobility of his eyelids seems to suggest a steady gaze at the fleeting phenomena of this material world, the timeliness of the vision of Indian seers. Saleem's literally disintegrating and fissured body from which history pours out is a possible reference to the underlying political fragmentation and divisive tendencies of Indian politics, past and present,
which have contributed to the making of its history. In fact, fragmentation, the bone of Indian society and politics, runs through the theme and technique of this novel. Moreover, his white father (having lost the pigment of his skin on account of disease) and his ebony mother may be indicative of the East-West confluence in the society and culture of resurgent India. In another respect too Saleem acquires a multiple representative role. By the revengeful baby-swapping of the nurse Mary Pareira, Saleem, really the son of a poor man, is transferred to a rich family and Shiva takes his place. But then how did he acquire the famous family nose? There seems to be a merger of identities in a shared Indian dream:

"In fact, all over the new 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. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream (137)."

Saleem's representative quality thus transcends the historical and
the geographical into the cultural and the philosophical.

Saleem's growth also mirrors the development of free India. His launching upon an heroic program of self-enlargement soon after his birth and huge appetite seem to be pointers to India's ambitious five-year plans and the large amounts of foreign aid, especially American (mark the American spelling of program), swallowed by them. Saleem bears the burden of history throughout his life. The events leading to the imposition of emergency also find a mirror in his life. The labour pains of his wife Parvati-Laylah begin on June 12, 1975, when Justice Jag Mohan Lal Sihna delivers his famous judgement against Indira Gandhi, who also is in the process of giving birth to a child of her own. Parvati's son arrives at the precise moment of the birth of the Emergency which, indeed, the new-born child personifies. He has large ears but is dumb and does not even whimper, and his eyes also soon grow to be as large as saucers and his face as serious as the grave - in brief, an image of the censorship-ridden, sad and reflective, but inquisitive, mood of the Emergency:

"We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future, he. Emer-
gency-born, will be, is already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I: when he sleeps, his eyeballs are immobile beneath their lids. Aadam Sinai, child of knees-and-nose, does not (as far as I can tell) surrender to dreams (507)."

Saleem's life covers the period from Independence to the lifting of the Emergency, but charming spots of bygone time are also visible through the open sesame of the perforated bedsheets. The gamut of events covered by the novel include the agitation against the Rowlatt Bill, the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre, the formation of the Indian National Army, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, communal riots, the dawn of independence, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu Succession Act, the closing of the Suez Canal, the submission of the report of the States Reorganization Commission, language riots, the elections of 1957 and 1962, the Chinese aggression, the Nanavati case, the theft of Hazrat Bal, the liberation of Goa, the death of Nehru, the Kutch war and Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the Bangladesh war, and the impo-
situation and the lifting of Emergency. On account of Saleem's stay in Pakistan, some events of that country have also been brought into focus - the rise of Ayub to power, the formation of a Combined Opposition Party, the force of the elections, the assumption of Presidency by Yahya Khan, the elections of 1970, and the repression let loose upon the eastern wing and its struggle for independence. The novelist has not only narrated, commented upon or referred to these events and their varied real or imaginary relationship with the narrator, his family and the midnight's children, but he has also portrayed the feel of those times through the fertile but rambling imagination and the fractured and fragmented but meaningful vision of an ironical narrator with a representatively multiple identity.

Saleem is linked to history by different modes of connection-actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, which he goes on to analyse and illustrate. Saleem stands in manifold relationship to history - as its twin-companion, its creator and its victim, in addition to being a chronicler, a participant, an ironic overviewer and an inspired visionary. The date of his birth itself is a dividing line between the old world and the new. The vignettes of the past, especially the personality of Tai and boatman and
the episode of love arising through the medium of a perforated bedsheets articulate the author's nostalgia for the past which embodied sterling qualities like simplicity, sincerity, love, attachment to the soil and a cosmopolitan code of values which are timeless like the boatman Tai who not only claims to have seen Jesus Christ on his supposed visit to Kashmir but also to have transcended time and history: I have watched the mountains being born: I have seen emperors die. He himself is shot, standing between the Indian and the Pakistan armies fighting over Kashmir. The personality of Tai provides a symbol, an ethical framework for the subsequent periods of strife, bloodshed and fragmentation. Saleem is a humanist at heart who dislikes the walls that divide mankind into fragments and hates everything that suffocates the free spirit of man. His ideal appears to be Tai the boatman, the timeless being, who embodies a triple idyllic charm of the old world, of the beautiful nature of Kashmir and of the freedom and essential unity of mankind. Another such character is Mian Abdullah "the Hummingbird," an active opponent of partition, whose joyful ecstasy in work in symbolised by his constant humming and who also falls a victim to the knives of Muslim fanatics. With Tai-Abdullah as his model, the narrator views the scenario of
history with pungent irony at the stupidity of man. He seems to join the Boatman and the Hummingbird into a trinity of Tai-Abdullah-Saleem.

The narrator's moral stance is noticeable in the large number of descriptions or even passing references to historical men and events. He is an inveterate hater of fanaticism and communalism. In fact, his mother announces her pregnancy to save the life of one Lifafa Das from Muslim communalists. He dislikes the partition, presents his father as having a distrust for Jinnah, and impatiently condemns the language riots in Bombay. Many of such references are witty and light-hearted, but the targets at which laughter is directed reveals the teller. The narrator's ire is really aroused by the Emergency which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again. His son Aadam Aziz, who was born at the precise moment of the declaration of Emergency, falls ill of a "darkly metaphorical" illness which Saleem feels will be cured only when the Emergency is over. He imagines the children of the midnight of Emergency being "Test-and hysteractomized," denied the possibility of reproducing themselves. With this, the hope that was generated at the moment of independence was also drained. The narrator has a word for it - "Sperectomy :
the draining out of hope" (521).

An important facet of the narrator's comments on the Emergency is his dislike of "cocksure men and women" (p. 254). In spite of his large flapping ears, like those of the elephant-headed god Ganesh, with which is presumably gathers much information, Aadam Aziz determinedly refuses to utter a sound, and even when a green medicinal powder is given to him his cheeks become puffed up with his resolution not to let any sound escape. This disease vanishes with the lifting of the Emergency.

The traumatic experiences seem to have brought about a profound change in the narrator. The lifting of the Emergency leaves him dazed but unenthusiastic:

"The Janata Party..... did not seem to me (when I heard about it) to represent a new dawn; but may be I'd managed to cure myself of the optimism virus at last - may be others, with the disease still in their blood, felt otherwise. At any rate, I have had - I had on that March day - enough, more than enough, of politics. (525)
One who began his life with the hands of the clock joining in respectful greeting, full of gusto and optimism, has now reached a stage of desperation, "cracking now, fission of Sallem..., only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street" (552). This change is the most telling commentary on the period of the first thirty years or so of independent India and the frustrations and disillusionments created by it.

Though Rushdie has in another novel fantasised about Pakistan, it would not be out of place to point to his portrait of that land of the pure, that God-ridden country given in the present novel. Even as a boy of eleven, he is suspicious of the army and has only one word for the seizure of power by Ayub-treason. He plays at making revolutions on the dinner table, shifting saltcellars and bowls of chutney. Though he is in Pakistan, his personality is attuned to the stable India: "the status quo was preserved in India; in my life, nothing charged either" (351). The conditions in Pakistan stir his very being and he is forced to pronounce a direct value judgement, something very unusual for the narrator:

"In a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases
to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and may be this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence - that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities; while in the second I was adrift, disorientated, amid an equally infinite number of falseness, unrealities and lies (389).

In fact, there is something lostness in the personality and career of the picaresque hero Saleem Sinai - Saleem, the straightforward, lost in the desert of Sinai: "but when all that is said and done; it is the name of the desert - of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end" (365). He does not seem to lack an identity: It is only that multiple identities press upon him - a mirror of the fragmentation and multiplicity of Indian society and the confusion of social, religious, regional and parochial identities under which Indians suffer. Sometimes they even forget that they are Indians, just as Saleem forgets his name and is reminded of it only after the victory in Bangladesh. Saleem also represents the intellectual, imaginative Indian who can think, feel and communicate with others, whose mind
is a parliament of various viewpoints. In addition to being a
keen observer, he is also gifted with the rare quality of irony
even at his own expense. The novel is full of fantastic ironies
and ironical fantasies. But Saleem is no cynic. He is deeply
interested in life and in the men and women around him. He
loves life and freedom and ridicules whatever is outdated, nar­row
and constricting. Though a Muslim, he mocks at the para­
phernalia of prayer and sympathises with his grandfather's de­cision
not to pray, unable to worship a God in whose existence
he could not wholly disbelieve. He makes fun of the institution
of purdah in the episode of the perforated bedsheets and has an
appreciation for the courage of his grandmother's unorthodox
decision to take up gemstone business while his grandfather sits
hidden behind the veil which the stroke had dropped over his
brain (7). The hatred of narrow communalism is in his family,
for his grandfather threw out a tutor who taught bigotry and
hatred to his children. The grandfather stood by his decision
even to the point of starving. The sacrifice of Taithe boatman
and Abdullah the Humming bird of communal harmony and
brotherhood have already been discussed. In fact, the superfi­
cial objectivity of narrative perspective and the sharp radiant
ironics are woven of the threads of sincerity and love which
encompasses the whole of mankind. The protagonist emerges as an Indian at the crossroads of history, gifted with a fertile imagination, having no illusions and mental cobwebs, and cherishing truth, sincerity, love and tolerance even amidst a barren and hostile world. Disenchanted, he can laugh at himself as well as at others. There are not many direct value-judgements, but the highest values underlie the whole narration which may be said to be an examination of the contemporary against the perspective of the eternal and the embodied in the wisdoms and mythologies of various lands.

Not even a single event which was of some importance, is left by Rushdie. Midnight's children is purely a metaphor. It is, in another words, indicates that each and every event, incident is itself a metaphor. But no doubt, Salman Rushdie's expression of this metaphorical aspect of the novel is beyond comparison and appraisal.

History, in particular of scandalous points had a way of getting entangled with the personal and family history of this midnight's child, our narrator-hero: things like the language riots in Bombay that caused the partition of the Bombay state, or the Nanavati case that shook the nation, which Rushdie has paro-
died in the episode of Commander Sabarmati, where he makes his hero attempt to "rearrange history", (260) or the Turkman Gate tragedy that brought about the fall of Indira Gandhi in the general election 1977, stand out in the reader's memory. Sinai's childhood contribution to the language riots in Bombay, when the rioter's ran into the eleven-year old Salemm on his bicycle out of control, pushed hard by Evie Burns, and he crashed into history!

Matching the Indian scene, one can mention some instances of Rushdie's grotesqueness in people and episodes in his treatment of the history of Pakistan. Which he cynically describes as the hand of pure, - non chalantly translating the Urdu, Pharsee into English and exploiting all its irony in the hindsight or history. Rushdie has created the vehicle for interlinking the family-tale with the history of Pakistan in his fictional alter ego's blood relation, Pakistani General Zulfikar, husband to one of the sisters of Saleem Sinai's mother and the source of the migration of the Sinai family to Pakistan - a grotesque figure surrounded by still more grotesque connections whose ignominious only son, Zafar, was given to wetting his pants even and throughout all his adult life. The worst ignominy perhaps, originating in the vengeful imagination of Rushdie is
that he ends up with a career in the Pakistan army and as a Pakistani martyr in the ridiculous war with India in the Rann of Kutch in 1965! Rushdie has reduced the 1958 coup which made General Ayub the fish Dictator of Pak, into a travesty of military campaign by grotesquely describing its inner fictional story into an after dinner exercise made out of moments performed by pepperpots. As Saleem Sinai Puts it:

"How we made the revolution: General Zulfikar described troop movements; I moved pepperpots symbolically while he spoke. In the clutches of the active-metaphorical mode of connection, I shifted saltcellars and bowls of chutney; this Mustard - jar is company A occupying head post office; there are two pepperpots surrounding a serving-spoon, which means company B has seized the airport. With the fate of nation in my hands, I shifted condiments and cutlery capturing empty Biriani - dishes with water glasses, stationing salt-callers, on guard, around waterfigs, and when General Zulfikar stopped talking, the march of the table-service also
came to an end. Ayub Khan seemed to settle down in his chair; was the wink he gave me just my imagination? - at any rate, the commander-in-chief said, 'very good, Zulfikar, good show.'" (290)

He caps it all by giving General Ayub the nickname of 'commander of pepperpots.' (315)

General Zulfikar is the vehicle for conducting another unforgettable instance of rejective travesty of military exercise for Pakistan in that his bitch, bonzo, is credited with being drafted as a 'four-legged mindetector with courts rank of ser­geant-major'. (286) in Pak army for the General's accidently discovering her 'marvellous' gift of smelling the mines in a training camp with a team of mine-detectors at work in specially-prepared minefield on the western. Indo-Pak border, beating the mine-detecting soldiers to it. This ridiculous technical detail is described in the novel as a 'trailer' for the 'revolu­tion of the pepperpots', (285) and leads to the immortalization of the General as the progenitor of the infamous cutia unit-22 of the 1971 was. The narrator-hero Saleem, who served with distinction is grotesqueness in the unit later, duly explains: "The
acronym cutia, of course means bitch." (348). Its member in the Pakistani forces have she-dog badges sewn to their opals!

Thus Midnight's Children can be well said a supremely grotesque vehicle for linking fanciful family-tale and murky political history. Irrigated by the their fountains of fantansy and periphery, the greater flowering of Rushdies genius is witnessed in winding purely magical episoded of the from which even malice is snuffed off in refinement-products of absurd, existential vision shorn of all Philosophy. Midnight's children, built on a grander epic scale offers more of these; it is built almost entirely of such episodes from the fall of the British Empire to that of shreemati Indira Gandhi. Some outstanding gems are summed up as follows, mostly in the order they appear in the book. There is the death of mian Abdullah the Humming bird (47-49), a nationalist Muslim in the heyday of pre-independence communal riots in the full blossoming of the divide-and-rule policy of the departing British rulers at the hands of Six hired assassin holding crescent kinves while humming at a range that rose above Agra who came running to surround the scene and sing his dirge ! Then there is Dr. Narlikar's death of mode violentedying under the weight of his own beloved obsession, his brain child for backbay
reclamation in Bombay, the cement tetrapod planted on the chowpatty beach for advertisement that he climbed in self-defence, fleeing from the mob of irate language marchers, the farce of its numbers over coming its weights and the poor fugitive of its tip was crushed to death under its weight as it crashed: "nobody had any trouble locating the body because in sent light glowing upwards through the waters like fire." (177). Or take this marvellous description of humanitarian scientist Dr. Schaapstaker in his old age, the brilliant director of the Institute in which he carried out his invaluable researches on snake poison for medical purpose:

"Age, failing to draw his teeth and poison-sacs, had turned him into the incarnation of snakehook, like other Europeans who stay too long, the ancient insanities of India had picked his brains, so that he had come to believe the superstitions of the Institute orderlies, according to whom he was the last of a line which began when a king cobra mated with a woman who gave birth to a human (but serpentive) child...." (257)
Or the eerie old age of the narrator's maternal grandmother, mischievously called revered mother in mock awe:

"Moustachised, matriarchal proud. Naseem Aziz' had found her own way of coping with tragedy: but in finding it had become the first fiction of that spirit of detached fatigue, which made the end the possible Solution ... She grew with alarming rapidity, wider and wider; until builders were summoned to expand her glassed-in booth. 'Make it big, big,' she instructed them, with a rare flash of humour 'may be, I'll still be here after a century, what's its name and Allah Knows, how big I'll have become: I don't want to trouble you every ten-twelve years.'

(328)

Or, to cap it all, the bizarre shooting of Homi Catrack by the cuckolded Commander Sabarmati: given his clue by the narrators 'first attempt at rearranging history' by making out of newspaper cuttings the following questionnaire:

"COMMANDER SABARMATI (MY NOTE
"Midnight's children is altogether a flashback story. Inspire of being a flashback story. It is excellently picturised and story all the time seems to be lively. All the characters have been made to play their roles so artistically that each of them seems to be the most important part of the story. Rushdie has beautifully described all the important personalities of India in his seventy years of historical drama; whether it is finance Minister Morarji Desai (1964) or the mastermind among untouchable Babu Jagjivan Ram. The then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri is also a part of his historical novel. Delineation of character is skilfully done.

The author describes the battle of 1965; he has directly or indirectly brought the war into historical scenario.

"My father was heading steadily towards his stroke; but before the bomb went off in his brain, another fuse lit. In April 1965, we heard about the peculiar incidents in the Rann of Kutch." (398)
Rushdie is undoubtedly among the immortals of the art of parody. In fact his most applauded work so far, *Midnight's Children*, is essentially built on it. Parody is at the structural centre of this sparkling novel. At the very start, the narrator hero throws the hint while making a policy statement of his narravite strategy when he declared with alarm:

"I have no hope of sawing my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than scheherzade, if I am to end up meaning-yes, meaning-something." (9)

This mock-epic of post-independent India is punctuated with parodies of many scandals that shook the nation. In fact, these form most of the points of intersection between the fantastic family-tea and vituperative political invective. The Nanavati case of seduction and murder, cutting short one of the most promising naval officer careers of the country is parodied in the story of the narrator's Buckingham villa (Which is itself a parody of Buckingham palace, echoing the seat of British royalty) neighbour Homi Catrack, the seducer of his other neighbour, Lila Sabarmati being shot by the injured husband
commander Sabarmati. The neighbour boy, Cyrus Dubhash, turned into a fake God, Lord Khusro, as his physicist father died, chocked on an orange his mother had forgotten to peel off the rips of, and thus parodied the Bal Yogeshwar scandal of the nineteen sixties.

So does Rushdie parody the political history making itself a huge scandal from the chronicles of short lived Prime Ministers followed by the pepperpots coup at General Ayub in 1958 and of the other end the exploits of CUTIA unit in Bangladesh culminating in the loss of East Pak told in sweeping picaresque strain in Midnight's Children. Thus in Midnight's children is a fine blend of fantasy and reality parodied beautifully.