Midnight Children:
An Allegory
The story of *Midnight's Children* is narrated in the style of the Panchatantra, a story leading to another story. Saleem is a child prodigy having telepathic powers. It is strange that he uses it for nothing. He is totally a wasted youth. He is exhausted to such an extent that he is never sorry for what he has told. He may die but he never misses to have the best of his narrative.

*Midnight's Children* is as good as a classical Indian allegory. It is about India and everything Indian. Bombay, Srinagar, Amritsar, Delhi are the places which are basis of his narrative. This novel is the novelist recollection of past memories. He gives historical and geographical account of these places. The birth of Saleem Sinai is a unique event. He has powers to enter into the minds of others and to understand their secrets, thoughts and feelings. He is born with 1001 children of India's hopes and expectations, its prosperity and glory. But like the dreams of swaraj they wither away into meaningless creatures. Inspite of promised protection by Nehru, Saleem is under watch of the government and he is one of the most wanted men. He later deceives his friends in vasectomy drive under the leadership of Sanjay Gandhi.
There is allegorical description of the elections of 1957. "Boss" Patil his rival (a fictional equivalent of S.K. Patil) is the congress leader threatening the masses. There is commander Sabarmati equivalent to commander Nanavati of the Indian Navy which describes the infamous Nanavati Case. On allegorical pattern Rushdie narrates descent of Dr. Aadam Aziz from the paradise of Kashmir to Amritsar in 1919. From Amritsar to Agra and from Agra to Delhi are the journeys of his maternal grand father Dr. Aadam Aziz. With the allegorical progress of the story of that journey, we see the progress of Indian freedom movement. Dr. Aadam Aziz goes through difficult situations in this period. He is associated with every events of India's history.

The allegorical pattern becomes stronger when Saleem associates with Mian Abdulla (Sheikh Abdulla) He describes how Nadir Khan (Mirza Afzal Beig) want to stay in his house when chased by his rivals. Not only protection but the beautiful daughter Mumtaz is given to him in marriage. This relation is short lived because Mumtaz fails to concieve and she is declared barren. She is later on married to Ahmed Sinai after changing her name as Amina. Amina and Ahmed Sinai witness a troublesome Delhi mob. India is partitioned. The
cruelty, destruction hatred and jealousy among people forces them to seek fortune in Bombay when their friend Dr. Narlikar invites them to purchase estate of British officers selling at a low price. On the midnight of 15 August 1947 they give birth to a child in Narlikar's hospital. This child is handed over to Mrs. Vanita, the wife of a street singer. Mrs. Vanita's child is given to her by the same nurse. The story develops itself and acquires classical Indian allegorical pattern in Book I.

Book II narrates the steady progress of Saleem, the bastard child of a Hindu mother and a Christian father (British). This book speaks of Indian history, politics, economics and society in general. There are other events-language riots, rise of communism against congress party, trials elections, films etc. Then the narrator takes us to Karachi in Pakistan with the members of his family. There he shows Field Martial Ayyub Khan planning his coup and asking Saleem Sinai to use the utensils in the Kitchen which are the symbols of the movements of the Army units. The story comes to an end with the end of Indo-Pak war and his family completely eliminated.

Book third is totally a different book. This part of the book describes the ugly growth of the Indian democracy.
Now Nehru and Shastri are no longer to keep India in peace. The change is the symbol of the working of Indira Gandhi. During this period the Bangladesh war is fought. Saleem Sinai has acquired by now a form of such human creature. He is a leader of a canine unit. His telepathic powers have taken over as of factory powers. Pakistani government uses Saleem Sinai's talents to find out Mujibur Rahman. The allegory is enlarged when Saleem forgets his past even his name. He is called the 'Buddha' because of his old age and facial expression of a man cool, calm and quiet. Like pure classical Indian allegory Parvati, the witch and one of the Midnight's Children recognizes him and takes him back to Delhi in her magic box. Saleem is again back to India.

The scene is of Delhi's slums. The people are poor. Picture Singh is the most charming man. Dhoban (his beloved) Parvati (the witch) and Saleem (one of the members of magicians group) are among them. Parvati gets married to Saleem Sinai. Saleem is arrested by the goondas of Sanjay Gandhi. All of them are arrested. They gave out the names and addresses of five hundred and eighty children out of 1001 children. Four hundred and twenty had already died of diseases, famines, strikes and other man made and natural disasters. Parvati visits
Shiva, the war hero and conceives a child during emergency. The allegorical pattern is not complete here. Saleem Sinai starts his journey to Bombay. Picture Singh is with him. He gets a job in a pickle factory. Padma is his co-worker. She is fat, healthy and looking sexy. She needs Saleem hoping for her sexual desires. He tells her that he is foreseeing a total disintegration of his body before his thirty-first birthday.

**Rushdie** handled the amorphous and messy reality of the subcontinent with a casual assurance and took linguistic risks with such abandon - getting away with the use of the mongrel street language of cities, daring to translate idioms and metaphors with audacious literalness and perpetrating bilingual puns mediated by no apology, no footnote no glossary - that the old debate about the ability of English to convey the nuances of Indian experience that had kept the Indian academic busy for a couple of decades, seemed irrelevant for the time being. *Midnight’s Children* demonstrated how epic, fable national events, family saga, advertisements, films, popular songs, newspaper clippings, parody, pastiche and gossip could all be gathered up in one comprehensive sweep that is comic, historic and mythic at the same time. Rushdie’s energy was infectious, and his example seemed to galvanise in
the next few years the Indian English literary scene which had been stagnant for a while, unleashing a flood of new novels that has not yet abated.

1980 marked a particulary low point in the history of Indian novel in English. The grandmasters who had started writing in the nineteen thirties continued sixth unflagging regularity but they had ceased to surprise. Many of those who emerged in the subsequent years had already fallen by the wayside after sopradic creativity. No new name had caught the readers attention after Anita Desai and Arun Joshi. And non of the novels were perfectly alegonica as Rushdie's. It was as if the burden of English was too heavy and the entire enterprise was grinding to a galt. Unlike novels in the other Indian languages which had lively constituencies comprising of people from different walks of life, the novel in English seemed to be a walled-in entity, constructed and sustained by the academics of the English departments in an attempt to give some local relevance to their own profession which was otherwise largely dependent on foreign sources. There was a vaguely musty aura about the phenomenon called the Indian novel in English. Very few, whether in India or abroad read these novels for enjoyment or entertainment.
Yet there was a generation of young urban Indians of a certain class born after 1947 for whom English was very often an everyday peer-group language and therefore capable of being used in playful creative and impure ways mixed with other Indian languages. Such mixing was constantly being done on college campuses, coffee houses playgrounds and other places where young people meet. Certain film magazines tried to employ this idiom in their gossip columns but this vitality did not find its way to the novels that appeared in English which with a few exceptions tended to be rather more solemn earnest and self-consciously nationalistic than their Indian language counterparts. The English writers tended to take a little too seriously the imagined polarity between an essentialised East and Similarly constructed West and use their novels to work out their resolutions. This might have been a way of countering the standard accusations of elitism and estrangement from India's own culture that writers who chose to write in English were routinely subjected to.

Suddenly all this changed in the nineteen eighties and Midnight's Children might well have been a catalyst. Many other changes were going to overtake the world in this decade - political (collapse of the Soviet Bloc rise of many sub-nation-
alisms), economic (in the name of liberalisation, a larger-than-ever part of the globe came under a single market whose language was mainly English) electronic (instant communication networks that eliminated the time gap among countries and global T.V. channels that attempted to erode regional differences at a certain level) - all of which had far-reaching impact on cultural productions. Therefore one has to be cautious about attributing too much to the influence of a single book. However we may also recall in this context a comment by Rajendra Yadav made in a different context: "When we look back at the point where history takes a turn we usually find an event, a movement, or a person who/which embodies the pressures generated by the impact of time and the forces of society... Sometimes if we look carefully, we might even find a book." He cites the example of Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther as such a seminal book for late eighteenth century Europe and Bankimchandra's Anandamath for late nineteenth century India. It may be too early to claim that status for Midnight's Children for the end of our century, but it could easily be considered as one of the contenders for that positions at least as far as English fiction in India is concerned.

Rushdie is obliged to invest his narrator-protagonist
with superhuman vision and extraordinary powers of thought-reading in order to make his omniscient accounts of a dozen different lives as well as the life of the nation credible as coming from a single witness. If read carefully, each and every line of the novel seems allegorical. Saleem is intensely conscious about the impact of his narrative on listeners: "these events which have tumbled from my lips any old how garbled by haste and emotion, are for others to judge." (28) But he can rationalize the multiplicity of strands that he weaves into his narrative of which he is the centre: "If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance.... perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes one must make oneself grotesque." (126) Saleem gives earnest of his prodigious powers from his cradle: he has unblinking eyes that can receive an incredibly large number of impressions: in his ninth year "after a curious accident in a washing-chest, I became a sort of radio." He is able to hear unspoken words to choose individual voices and to turn the volume up or down. Rushdie dexterously weaves India's language problem into this prodigious capability of Saleem Sinai: "The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern
From the beginning Rushdie maintains a continuous effort at synchronizing national and domestic life, eventually allegorical, so that the odyssey of the Azizes and the Sinais also becomes the odyssey of the nation from the year 1915 up to about the year 1977; this convergence of the national and the domestic is underscored repeatedly in the course of the novel: "On the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed-for head-ache. Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world." (25) And again on a more personal level, "thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been my steriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country." (3) Many years later Saleem is to father that imperilled child who cannot speak - the sick Emergency with its claustrophobic lack of the freedom of speech. This convergence is often artificially imposed upon the narrative: "One last fact: after the death of my grandfather, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fell ill and never recovered his health. This fatal sickness finally killed him on May 27th, 1964." This connection seems rather gratuitous.
Half way through the novel Saleem indulges in a playfully learned explication of the sense in which his life might be said to mirror the nation's.

"Your life, which will be, in a sense, the Prime Minister wrote, obliging me scientifically to face the question. In what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to imping on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term "modes of connection" composed of "dualistically-combined configurations" of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world.
Sensing Padma's unscientific bewilderment, I revert to the inexactitudes of common speech. By the combination of "active" and "literal" I mean, of course, all actions of mine which directly - literally - affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events, for instance the manner in which I provided the language-marchers with their battle-cry. The union of "passive" and "metaphorical" encompasses all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected me metaphorically - for example by reading between the infant state's attempts at rushing towards full-sized adulthood and my own early, explosive efforts at growth... Next, "passive" and "literal", when hyphenated, cover all moments at which national events had a direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family - under this heading you should file the freezing of my father's
assets, and also the explosion at Walkeshwar Reservoir, which unleashed the great cat invasion. And finally there is the "mode" of the "active-metaphorical", which groups together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history. The mutilation of my middle finger was a case in point, because when I was detached from my fingertip and blood (neither Alpha nor Omega) rushed out in fountains, a similar thing happened to history, and all sorts of everywhich-thing began pouring out all over us; but because history operates on a grander scale than any individual, it took a great deal longer to stich it back together and mop up the mess. (285-86)

The clear rational analysis of the interaction between the personal and the national can be detected under the facade...
of a whimsical exhibition of grammatical learning. As opposed to these deliberately demonstrated parallelisms between national and personal life, there are throughout the novel, passages of straightforward journalistic account of national events. Thus in Book Two the chapter entitled "Love in Bombay" contains a description of the Bombay Language riots of 1957 beginning "It is a matter of record that the States Reorganization Committee had submitted its report to Mr. Nehru as long ago as October 1955; a year later its recommendations had been implemented. India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered 'territories'. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words." (225)

And (without any assistance from me) relations between India and Pakistan grew worse; entirely without my help, India conquered Goa - "the Portuguese pimple on the face of Mother India." I sat on the sidelines and played no part in the acquisition of large-scale U.S. aid for Pakistan, nor was I to blame for Sino-Indian border-skirmishes in the
Aksai Chin region of Ladakh: the Indian census of 1961 revealed a literacy level of 23.7 percent, but I was not entered in its records. The untouchable problem remained acute; I did nothing to alleviate it; and in the elections of 1962, the all India Congress won 361 out of 494 seats in the Lok Sabha, and over 61 percent of all State Assembly seats. Not even in this could my unseen hand be said to have moved; except, perhaps, metaphorically: the status quo was preserved in India. (351)

Such passages relate the novel to the modern phenomenon of the Non-fiction Novel. The dominant mood of much of *Midnight's Children* is comparable to the exactly allegorical work. The political leaders of the three countries of the subcontinent as well as their military leaders have acquired the quality of figures of allegory in Rushdie's hands. A small representative passage will suffice to illustrate my point: "He (the imaginary Indian Major Shiva) grew a luxuriant moustache to which his personal batman applied a daily pomade of lin-
seed-oil spiced with coriander; always elegantly turned out in the drawing-rooms of the mighty, he engaged in political chitchat, and declared himself a firm admirer of Mrs. Gandhi, largely because of his hatred for her opponent Morarji Desai, who was intolerably ancient, drank his own urine, had once been responsible for the banning of alcohol and the persecution of young goondas." (487)

The special decorum that the Non-fiction Novel imposes upon the author renders much of the grotesquerie of *Midnight's Children* - Its frequent Rabelaisian or Swiftian excursions into the bawdy or the merely revolting as satirical weapons - not only understandable but wholly acceptable.

This vast sprawling narrative of a nation's history over a period of some sixty-two years—indeed, it is proper to call it the history of three nations over various lengths of time—has been given a certain integrity by means of special devices. The centrifugal movement of international relations has been partially undercut by the centripetal devices of strictly chronological progression, repetitive imagery and fortuitous parallelisms. There are also frequent summaries of previous events to refresh the reader's memory. The stained and perforated bridalsheet of
Naseem Aziz, itself symbolizing the Purdah, the hole in the vital inner chamber of Dr. Aziz created by his renegation of Islamic faith, the image of the rubies and diamonds (literally, the items of trade in the Aziz family business and figuratively, applied, among other things, to the congealed blood on Dr. Aziz's nose when he injures himself praying), saffron and green (of the tricolour and "Amina Sanai in a room with saffron walls and green woodwork." 132) Prime Minister Jawaharlal's letter, to Saleem, Saleem's umbilical cord preserved in brine ("And when, years later, our family entered its exile in the Land of the Pure when I was struggling towards purity, umbilical cords would briefly have their day," 144) the spittoon and the washing chest are only a few among innumerable objects which Rushdie uses repeatedly and obsessively, sometimes literally as objects, yet others, as symbols binding together people and situations otherwise widely apart in time and space. The following passage, sparked off by the Brass-Monkey's (Saleem's name for his sister) fight with Evie Burns will demonstrate Rushdie's method:

Blood, then, was spilled in the circus-ring. Another rejected title for these pages - you may as well know - was "Thicker Than Water." In those days
of water shortages, something thicker than water ran down the face of Evie Burns; the loyalties of blood motivated the Brass Monkey; and in the streets of the city, rioters spilled each other's blood. There were bloody murders, and perhaps it is not appropriate to end this sanguinary catalogue by mentioning, once again, the rushes of blood to my mother's cheeks. Twelve million votes were coloured red that year, and red is the colour of blood. More blood will flow soon: the types of blood, A and O, Alpha and Omega - and another a third possibility - must be kept in mind. Also other factors: zygosity, and Kell antibodies and that most mysterious of sanguinary attributes, known as rhesus, which is also a type of monkey.

Everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form.(270-71)
This demented violence of emphasis and this gratuitous accumulation of parallelisms are very much the staple of Rushdie's technique of imposing integrity on desparate material. Sometimes he anticipates certain events through a kind of foreshortening achieved by tantalizing bunching of past, present and future events through riddle-like references - the element in common being just such a fortuitous image or object. Here is an example: "In the brandy bottle of th boatman Tai I see, foretold, my own father's possession by djinns - and there will be anothr bald foreigner.... and Tai's gas prophesies another kind, which was the consolation of my grandmother's old age, taught her stories, too.... and pie-dogs aren't far away... Enough. I'm frighteening myself." (12)

This bunching of episodes is partly playful, often half-demented. It is also calculated to maintain the suspense, to arouse curiosity and to give the impression that the story is all of one piece. A playful aspect of Rushdie's allegorical writing is his deliberate presentation of scenes in terms of the film: "Close-up of my grandfather's right hand: nails knuckles fingers all somehow bigger than you'd expect. Clumps of red hair on the outside edges. thumb and forefinger pressed together,
separated only by a thickness of paper. In short: my grandfather was holding a pamphlet. It had been inserted into his hand (we cut to a long-shot - nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary) as he entered the hotel foyer."

(31)

The interaction between fiction and the film would seem to deserve a volume to itself. But it may not be long before some talented director, taking the cue from Rushdie, discovers the filmic possibilities of Midnight's Children and sets about filming it. One way of describing this new highly subjective fiction is to consider it as allegory. Allegory may be thought of as a kind of realistic indulgence into the scenario.

Postmodernist allegory writing contains most of the same features which have characterized the mode in the past. It is a kind of writing which is centred on uncertainty of perception and of meaning; it is a literature which seeks solutions knowing that solutions are not possible, and it is therefore a literature of frustrated desires; it is a polemical literature which engages a king of underground resistance, though remaining fearful of the brutality of the enemy with a fear that almost amounts to paranoia: it is a confessional kind of literature in
which the dimly discerned goal seems to be self-revelation; it is a literature which sets out to deliberately subvert any easy notion of objective reality, and is intent on holding reality up to constant and unremitting interrogation.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* fits perfectly into the mode of postmodernist allegory. It is a novel which is at once experimental, interrogative, confessional, polemical and irrationally subjective. Although at one level one can discern obvious chronological continuities (in the autobiographical and socio-historical dimensions of the narrative), the book's narrative manner deliberately blurs clear chronological outlines. The narrator, though wildly eccentric is no doing in narrating his story, even admitting at one point to "destroying the unities and conventions of fine writing." (236) A desultory style which leaps from one matter to another, constant shifts of perspective, frequent eruptions into the narrative of marginally-related incidents, symbols and anecdotes, and ubiquitous drift of the narrative into dream and nightmare etc. tend to blur the realities of time and place. And because the characters within the novel are constantly splitting into doubles and multiples (Saleem's multiple mothers and fathers, his alter-ego Shiva, the Jamila Singer/Parvati-the-Witch split, etc.), and because Saleem the narrator
tends to see himself schizophrenically in both the first and third person, the reality of character as a separate discrete entity is also, along with the unities of time and place, called into question.

And, thus with reference to all the above events, incidences, instances it can be whole-heartedly said an appropriate allegorical novel of eighties which stunned the minds of readers.