MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie's Magnum opus is a novel on India that deals with Indian independence, partition and social problems. It is remarkably a political novel covering three generations of Adam Aziz, Saleem Sinai and Adam Sinai from 1910 to 1977.

Midnight's Children runs into three parts. Part I concerns itself with the events that took place in India from 1915 to 1947. Part II deals with the childhood of Ahmed Sinai the protagonist. Part III is primarily on emergency operations and brutalities in India during the seventies. Surprisingly the fortunes of the protagonist are similar to those of the post-Independence India. Rushdie weaves contemporary events - political and historical - into the main spectrum of the novel to produce the singleness of effect. As the narrator in the novel observes:

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade,
if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—some—

These lines of the protagonist throw light on Rushdie's view of a novel.

Saleem the protagonist, was born in the city of Bombay ... "once upon a time ... on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then ... at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence.\(^3\)

Saleem narrates the story of his grand father, Adam Asis, a young doctor who returned from Germany with a good medical degree. Adam was in search of his moorings like other Muslims of the times. On one fine morning he was taken to the house of Ghani Sahib, an affluent landlord, in Kashmir. He was asked to examine Naseema, the ailing daughter of the landlord. He bent his body and examined the patient thoroughly. Ironically, he married her later with 'A-I fine dowry.'

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 4.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 3.
Soon Adam got the job of a doctor at Agra University. While he was shifting his family to Agra, he witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in Amritsar.

The authorial voice runs thus: "I confess ... I have noticed thin crack, like a hair, appearing in my wrist, beneath the skin ... No matter. We all owe death a life." The narrative account here is in the shape of a selective recalling of the past from the vantage point of the present.

In Agra, Adam Asis witnessed many events like the formation of 'Free Islam Convocation' and the emergence of Muslim league. One fine morning Nadir Khan, the Secretary of Mian Abdullah fled from his assasins and took refuge in the basement of Adam Asis's house. He soon courted Mumtas, the eldest daughter of Asis. Meanwhile, Major Zulfikar was engaged in capturing Nadir Khan. But the Khan managed to skip him. Ahmed Sinai, a business magnet in Delhi, went to Agra to woo Mumtas's sister, but he was offered to marry Mumtaz who became Amina for Ahmed.

After the communal riots in Delhi, Ahmed decided to invest his resources in 'real estates' in Bombay where

^Midnight's Children, p. 36.
Saleem was born on the midnight stroke of August 15, 1947 at the time when India became independent. Saleem, the midnight child, bagged the most coveted prize from 'The Times of India' besides a letter of 'intense' appreciation from the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Ahmed and Amina lost their real child by the baby swap done by the nurse Mary Pereira.

Part two of the novel begins with the financial crisis faced by the family of Ahmed Sinai. After a few trials and tribulations, the members of Ahmed Sinai's family migrate to Pakistan with a view to settling in Karachi permanently. They become victims to 1965 war.

Part three of the book, which runs like a fantasy, dwells upon politics directly exaggerating the Emergency operations. Saleem grows along with India with all her excesses of emergency, her inner turbulence and the political suppression. Thus, Rushdie's Midnight's Children exhibits ironically, the contemporary events that took place in India.

Saleem, the protagonist, unfolds two major historical events of the pre-independence era each associated
with his grandfather and father. The Amritsar massacre of April 7: 1919 is closeted together with the happening in the life of Asiz. On his way to Agra, Asiz lodges in a hotel near the Golden Temple. He sees the spire of the Golden Temple gleaming in the sun. He gives a few historical details of the massacre:

Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machine-guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. 'Good shooting,' Dyer tells his men, 'We have done a jolly good thing.'

Similarly one gets numerous historical details being passed on to us during Ahmed's living in Delhi:

It is the beginning of 1947. "The Cabinet Mission - Clever Cripps, military A.V. Alexander - saw their scheme for the transfer of power fail. In which the viceroy-Wavell, understood that he was finished, washed-up, or in our own expressive word, funtoosh."

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5 *Midnight's Children*, p. 35.

6 Ibid., p. 71.
Soon the civil war between Hindus and Muslims breaks out:

And chick-blinds are flying up, and from his window the girl's father leans out and joins in, hurling abuse at a new target, and the Bengali joins in Bengali ... "Mother raper! Violator of our daughters" and remember the papers have been talking about assaults on Muslim children, so suddenly a voice screams out.  

This passage reveals to us the novel's fidelity to the details of a historical event.

In the presentation of the antagonism between Gujarathi and Marathi-speaking people in the State of Bombay, *Midnight's Children* reveals to us Rushdie's attention to factual accuracy. Dr. Narlikar, a doctor, is busy in the reclamation of land from the sea. Then the angry Language-Marchers push him into the sea. This event is soon linked to the linguistic division of the country. One day the irate Marathi demonstrators taunt Saleem to speak Gujarathi.  

7*Midnight's Children*, pp. 84-85.
He repeats the only rhyme he learnt from his Keith Colaco a Goanese classmate:

   How are you? - I am well! I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell.  

Saleem, thus, becomes the originator of a popular slogan of the time. The ironic authorial voice is significant:

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. Language divided us.

As Uma Parameswaran rightly observes, "though at the literary level the narrative is funny, its ironic interest is clear."  

The next public event that occurs in the novel is the murder of Homi Catrack-Leela, by Commander Sabarmathi of the Indian Navy. The battles between the navy and the Law as to whether Commander Nanavathi should

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8 Midnight's Children, p. 228.

9 Ibid., p. 225.

be in civil jail or in Naval custody, are described grippingly. This particular incident was in the headlines of Indian magazines and newspapers during the late fifties. The names of the characters who aligned themselves with the case were familiar to 'Saleem's contemporaries. The manslaughter of Homi Catrack was premeditated and this personal problem precipitated into political scandal. It is pertinent to note the authorial voice here:

But Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play-only I hadn't meant it. I didn't think he'd .... I only wanted to ... a scandal, yes, a scare, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never.  

These lines add density to the main texture of the novel.

In this novel, the novelist ingeniously weaves the personal story of Saleem and his growth into the story of India and her development. Owing to the forces of circumstances, the parents of Saleem leave for Karachi with a view to settling down there permanently. Soon Saleem records

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11 *Midnight's Children*, p. 314.
the important events that led to the escalation in the
relations between India and Pakistan:

Entirely without my help, India conquered
Goa—"... I played no part in the acquisition
of large-scale US aid for Pakistan, nor
was I to blame for Singh-India border skirmishes
in the Aksai-Chin region of Ladakh; the Indian
census of 1961 revealed a literacy level of
23.7 per cent, ..... and in the elections of
1962, the All-India Congress won 361 out of
494 seats in the Lok Sabha, and over 61 per
cent of all State Assembly seats.12

Besides the deterioration of relations between
India and Pakistan one notices excesses of the emergency
operation. In a way the disintegration of the midnight's
children's conference goes together with the lack of the
spirit of nationalism in India. The toils and moils
confronted by the members of family of Salem are similar
to those of the brutalities and traumas faced by the
post-independence Indian psyche. In the words of William
Walsh, "astonishing staple is composed of elements of

12 *Midnight's Children*, p. 351.
magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism.\textsuperscript{13}

The narrative technique is one element that can draw considerable critical attention. One notices a continuous oscillation between the fictitious and the factual. In the very opening of the novel, the narrator makes a statement about his mode of narration.

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well.\textsuperscript{14}

From this passage one observes the interest of the narrator in intertwining the improbable and the mundane, thereby preparing us for the extremely fanciful and the extremely factitious. In fact, the novelist fuses these two extremes and "opposing ends of the fictional spectrum into another kind of symbiosis."\textsuperscript{15} One also notices the


\textsuperscript{14}Midnight's Children, p. 4.

novelist freeing himself from the rigours of the plot of a well-made novel. The narrator is very particular that history should add up to something .... and some meaning to his novel.

The narrative in the novel is in the shape of a selective recalling of the past from the vantage point of the present. The reader finds innumerable episodes of the past that are tied together by the person of the narrator. These episodes go together with the chronology of the development of the narrator. This technique rightly accommodates the chronological progression of the socio-cultural and the politico-cultural scene of the country.

The personal account is clothed in heavy trappings of fantasy and the public part is properly seasoned to produce, 'the chutnification of history.' To the social and political details are added various mixtures of spicy stuff - anecdotes, mythological lore, diverting comedy - all with the effective use of language.

The novel is not just a record of the contemporary historical and political events. It is an artistic recreation
of these events. Naturally one observes the novelist dealing with not merely the story of Salaam but particularly a human story. Thus, the novel transcends the confines of the particular and acquires a universality of appeal.

There is something remarkable in the experiments with language of the contemporary events of the day in their politico-social novel, Midnight's Children. In the words of M.L. Raina "No Indian novelist has had the courage to handle English language with gaiety and joyousness of Rushdie." Rushdie's mastery of language is total and more effective than most of the Indian novelists in English. In his own words, "English, no longer an English language, grows from many roots, and those whom it once colonised are carving out large territories within the language for themselves."

To make his language more effective, Rushdie employs certain linguistic devices which make the novel more appealing.

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ling and powerful. It is pertinent to dwell upon the element of rhetoric in the novel. Rushdie's account of the city-rot of Amritsar is quite graphic:

Amritsar dung was fresh and (worse) redundant. Nor was it all bovine. It issued from the rumps of the horses between the shafts of the city's many tongas, ikkas and gharries, and mules and men and dogs attended nature's calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit.18

This juxtaposition of mules, men, and dogs into one brotherhood of shit is "suggestive of the author's disgust with the city."19

Similar descriptions are found with regard to the city of Karachi. Through such juxtapositions, Rushdie ventilates his disgust with the cities in India as well as those in Pakistan.

Rushdie is dexterous in employing the technique of irony in the description of the post-independence India.

18 *Midnight's Children*, p. 31.

I remain, today, half-convinced than in that
time of accelerated events and diseased hours
the past of India rose up to confound her
present; the new-born, secular state was
being given an awesome reminder of its
fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and
votes for women were irrelevant ... so that
people were seized by atavistic longings,
and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted
to their old ways, their old regionalist
loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic
began to crack.20

The passage ironically comments on the 'angst
ridden mind' of the novelist. The novelist's account of
the declaration of emergency is again a record of awful
situation prevailing in India. Ironically the growth of
Saleem Sinai is akin to the post-independence psyche. The
novelist subtly fuses the birth of Parvathi's bastard child
with the bastardly excesses of the emergency:

Dark clouds were gathering in political skies
as well in Bihar, where corruption inflation
hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the
roost, Jayaprakash Narayan led a coalition

of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress, in Gujarat, there were riots. .... and what was being born while something grew in Parvati's belly? 21

The passage records graphically the brutalities and excesses that obtained during the emergency in India.

A charge levelled against Rushdie's use of language is that he is neither capturing "the Indian English class of the middle class Indians or the English mixed with Hindi which Anand claims, is spoken in the British lines anywhere in India, nor recreating characters conditioned by another language." 22 The truth is that Rushdie has captured the Indian ethos because he has succeeded in using the language in keeping with the right situations and characters. When the situation is alarming and when it needs to be set right, he attempts to convey in a language that is purely Indian. Doctor Adam Azis's

21 *Midnight's Children*, p. 491.

encounter with Taiji the Boat man, and his appreciation of the use of language by the boatman are truly in consonance with the language of an Indian. For example Tai says: "Nakkoo! ... listen. listen. I have seen plenty, Yara, you should've seen that Isa when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head."23

This is the type of language an uneducated native would use in India.

Rushdie truly captures the rhythms of English as spoken by the Indians. Naturally in the upper middle class society, one comes across bilingual forms of a fairly hybridized English. For example, there is a reference to the college students of India who speak a hybridized English. There are literates who use hybridized English. Clark Raising comments on this aspect of the matter thus:

The pioneer cafe was not much ... a real reputty joint, with painted boards proclaiming Lovely Lassi and Funtabulous Falooda' and

23 Midnight's Children, p. 11.
'Bhelpuri Bombay Fashion' with film playback music ... a forbidding world in which broken-toothed men sat at reccine-covered tables ...' very Indian.24

From this it is clear that Rushdie has succeeded in using the language in keeping with the local situations and the characters.

Rushdie expresses Indianness at times by attempting to Indianise the English language. He has indulged in a few syntactic violations which reflect the authentic voice of the Indians.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a sort of comic epic genre, a form which is a fusion of Homeric, mythic and tragic connotations. This novel spreads through six decades and almost three generations of India's pre-and post-independence history. It is an epic in the sense that "it tries to describe or" contain "an India whose stories are too innumerable to be "contained."25 Throughout


the book one finds the novelist stepping towards "that involvement with mighty events and public lives from which I would never again be free... never, until the widow." 26

Surprisingly in this novel ends are contained in beginnings, beginnings in ends. As each end is the beginning of a new story, the narrative is circular and never ending. Moreover, this is an epic that cannot contain all the untold stories that are waiting to be told. One finds the epic form becoming a strategy of liberation and the comic becoming too painful to be expressed. There is the tragedy of Adam Aziz depicted in comic, mythic and surreal terms.

The tragedy of Adam is his identity crisis. Having received training as a physician in Germany for five years, he comes back to the Kashmir valley and follows the traditional customs. As he offers prayer of his ancestral religion he becomes reminiscent of Heidelberg days when

26 *Midnight's Children*, p. 205.
he learns along with medicine and politics that India like radium has been discovered by the Europeans. He recalls his friends mocking his prayer with their anti-ideologies.

The description of Adam Asia runs in the comic epic tradition: "Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer-mat-covered, curved up towards him. And now it was the tussock's time ... it smote him upon the point of the nose." This tragic situation is expressed in mythic and surreal terms.

Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds. And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a whole.

This is a pain of some one cut off from an authentic indigenous past, a past that he senses exists only as a property of its colonial masters. A whole identity is

27 *Midnight's Children*, p. 6.
28 Ibid., p. 6.
replaced by a literal hole which is later transformed into a perforated sheet by peeping through which Adam Asia falls in love with Naseema. But the hole is so insidious that it devours everyone it touches. So Naseem can only internalize the hole and become an agonized person like her husband. No wholesome relationships can emerge.

When Dr. Asia becomes an adult, he remembers the question put by him as a young boy to Tai the boatman, for his question about the age. Tai gives a mythical response:

I have watched the mountains being born;
I have seen Emperors die ... I saw
that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir."29

The reference to Christ here alerts the mind of the reader towards the Christian missionaries in India. The reference to the first wave of colonizers is confirmed in the descriptions of Tai.

The magical powers possessed by the midnight's children give mythical retreat to them from the reality

29Midnight's Children, p. 11.
and history. The details pertaining to midnight's children's conference convened by Saleem Sinai acquire mythical dimension. The children have miraculous powers which can read even the future. The time Traveller, a midnight's child foresees the future in which the country would be governed by urine drinking dotard who refused to die and people would forget anything they had ever heard.

The narrator, a midnight's child, receives an inkling of magical powers in a washing chest. In a way, this is a mythic retreat. "A washing-chest is a whole in the world, a place which civilization had put outside itself, beyond the pale; this makes it the finest of hiding-places. In the washing-chest, I was safe from all pressures, concealed from the demands of parents and history." One finds a fine fusion of myth, magic and realism in this novel.

Similarly Parvati, a midnight's child with magical powers, helps the soldiers by providing them with entertainment. She draws the volunteers into her basket and

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30 *Midnight's Children*, p. 184.
makes them disappear. In her taking of the wicker basket in which Saleem is hidden can be taken as an instant of mythical retreat which in turn, passes from reality to history. This in turn, signifies Saleem's returning to his mother land.

Saleem's character is very ably delineated in this novel. Saleem serves as a choric commentator, because he narrates the events of the past, describes the present episodes, and does not hesitate to make oracular statements with regard to future. He promises a story but puts forth his confusions which transcend the confines of the particular. He weaves contemporary historical scenes into his narration with a view to making it more authentic. He does not hesitate to choose the extremely fanciful and thoroughly realistic situations. In the narration one may not find any well-made plot, but one finds a unity of action because the narrator works fast in passing on his meaning. His midnight birth is linked with the future history of India.

Saleem's birth, babyhood, boyhood and adulthood are associated with the phases of the Indian political arena.
He is a born grotesque who goes on adding to his deformities as he develops, and is constantly changing. In his own words he has embarked upon an "heroic programme of self-enlargement... armies of handkerchiefs, regiments of nappies found their way into the large washing-chest in mother's bathroom ... shedding rubbish from various apertures."31 This is symbolic of the muddled and chaotic condition that obtained during the emergence of independence.

Though Salaam narrates the story and participates in the events he becomes for some days invisible while he transported from Bangladesh to India. In a way he is 'angstridden youngmen' representing everyone in the world. He is alienated and gives a vent to his anger. He says of himself:

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 REPEAT FOR

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31*Midnight's Children*, p. 145.
the last time to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.\textsuperscript{32}

This passage throws light on the fact that Saleem is "one and the many a man and monster participant and voice - all rolled into one."\textsuperscript{33}

Thus, Rushdie's \textit{Midnight's Children} is an ironic commentary on the major political events that took place between 1947 and 1978. Like a historian, Rushdie records major historical events and like an artist he recreates history. The narrative and the theme go together presenting the personal as well as the untold story of the Indian subcontinent. It has to be admitted that it "gives a fairly authentic history of contemporary India in the matter of facts."\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32}\textit{Midnight's Children}, pp 457-58.
\item \textsuperscript{33}T.N. Dhar, "Macro-Micro Symbiosis." p. 20.
\item \textsuperscript{34}Use Parameswaran, 'Autobiography as History: The Toronto South Asian Review, Summer 1982, Vol.1, No.2. p. 80.
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