

History as Myth in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Midnight's Children, with its massive interweaving of private lives and public events and of the mythic and the historical, is part of an international literary development in which both elements are equally illuminated. Each is seen in the light of the other: history as myth, myth as history. This novel was groundbreaking in its treatment of history, memory, and fantasy. Rushdie used all three avenues in a compendious effort to grapple with the history of India just before and thirty years after it gained independence from the British.

In Saleem's narrative, history, memory, and fantasy are represented by three powerful metaphors: pickling, a perforated sheet, and a silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli. These metaphors permeate the story. Rushdie highlights, both literally and metaphorically, the fallibility of perception and memory in Saleem's attempt to recount historical events. The narrative incorporates several verifiable historical dates, times, and places, but it also incorporates elements of Magical Realism that test a reader's sense of believability, emphasize Saleem's subjectivity, and question the production and authority of history. Magical Realism also functions within both postcolonial and postmodern endeavors to produce alternative versions of reality as opposed to one authoritative version of history.

The theme of *Midnight's Children* is clear. Born at the hour of the creation of India and Pakistan from colonial British India, the children are the masters and victims of their time. Born to be destroyed by the weight of history, their lives reflect the destiny of their society. Cardinal political events in India's modern history are directly echoed in momentous happenings in their lives, while the cultural history of past millennia forms the backdrop of the action. History and myth painfully merge. Speaking for all the children, Saleem cries out, "Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history?" (*MC*

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78). The midnight-born Saleem, Shiva, and Parvati embody the major forces of Indian cultural and political history: the Muslim-reared Saleem, actually the son of a Hindu street singer's seduced wife and a departing British colonial Sahib (a descendant of a founder of the British East India Company); Shiva, the son of a wealthy Muslim Kashmir merchant family, who becomes a penniless Hindu street urchin and a lecherous man of violence; and Parvati, a Hindu street magician. They are modern India, reflecting its cultural richness and diversity and, no less, the forces that tear it apart.

Thirty-year-old Saleem divides his memoir into thirty chapters, each named for an important artifact or event which becomes a motif, a touchstone, throughout the long narrative. Each chapter is framed by a short account of Saleem's daily life with his mistress Padma during the composition of the memoir, which is to end (perhaps along with Saleem's life) on his and India's thirty-first birthday. Each chapter is likened to a jar of pickles, its title to the jar label. Yet-to-be-written chapters are empty jars, and the writing itself is compared to the delicate blending of spices necessary to creating fine pickles. Saleem's narrative is chatty, digressive, full of asides to the reader and comments on narrative strategies.

Midnight's Children is a formidable achievement, for it successfully blends the interrelated stories of a large cast of characters with the turbulent history of two exotic countries. Their histories, religions, and mythologies are unfamiliar to most Western readers. Rushdie succeeds in making them not only comprehensible but also fascinating, while maintaining a complex story line. The programmatic prophecy and an elaborate pattern of frequent foreshadowings and recapitulations keep the reader oriented. The technical devices of literary modernism, such as stream-of-consciousness passages, motifs and motif systems, symbols, and wordplay, which often impede understanding, are so skillfully utilized that they actually facilitate the reader's grasp of this exotic, tragicomic epic. *Midnight's Children* is an unusual hybrid creation that succeeds on its own terms.

The fact that Saleem Sinai's life begins just as the era of Britain's colonial control of India ends links the life of the novel's protagonist to

India's post-colonial growth. As the novel's narrator, looking back over the events of his life, Saleem proclaims himself to be dying of the same problem that can be seen of any country that has been thrust abruptly from immaturity to maturity: he is, he says, "falling apart." At first, newly independent India is strong and thrives, enjoying inherited wealth the way that a child like Saleem, born into a prosperous family, might enjoy a secure sense of privilege. Like Saleem's Midnight Children's Conference, though, there are always underground organizations, and these alliances produce someone like Shiva who competes for control and pushes a violent agenda. Saleem's fortunes totter back and forth, just as the nation's do, depending at times on chance, coincidence, and the willingness of those around him to ignore his illegitimacy, as the people of India prove willing to accept the illegitimate military rule that imposes martial law. When India invades Pakistan, Saleem's life is changed forever by the loss of his family, and India's identity is changed by its brutal suppression of the county that was its twin. In the end, Saleem reaches a state of peace but only by accepting his own lingering frailty, a sign that Rushdie finds India to be continuously vulnerable.

Fantastic, disorderly, nonlinear, and digressive though it may appear to be, *Midnight's Children* yields up an elaborate plot to readers patient enough to follow the different patterns Rushdie weaves into a complex whole. One way of re-creating the plot is to focus on the novel's division into three books. Book one evokes the past and takes us to the moment in Indian history when Western beliefs intermingled with Indian values in people like Saleem's grandfather. Book two deals with the India of Saleem's childhood, a land in which Saleem delights until he is thrust out into the adult world. Book three deals with Saleem's loss of innocence, with the proliferation of chaos, and with the entry into a darker world.

What Rushdie pursues is the disintegration of traditional familial, cultural, and political structures in present-day India. In addition, Rushdie is bent on depicting India as a land where anything is possible, a land where the serious and the absurd, the fantastic and the earthy, the tragic and the comic complement each other. It is part of Rushdie's novelistic strategy to give his readers the feel of a mixed-up, fragmenting world.

For Rushdie, India is a country where national history and individual progress are so intertwined that every national event is reflected in the lives of individuals.

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