

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a Novel of Independence

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1. Introduction

Midnight's Children is a 1980 book by Salman Rushdie that deals with India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. It is considered an example of postcolonial literature and magical realism. The story is told by its chief protagonist, Saleem Sinai, and is set in the context of actual historical events as with historical fiction.

Midnight's Children won both the Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1981 (although it was first published in late 1980, a series of delays, including a strike by dock-workers, delayed distribution of the novel). It was awarded the "Booker of Bookers" Prize and the best all-time prize winners in 1993 and 2008 to celebrate the Booker Prize 25th and 40th anniversary. In 2003, the novel was listed on the BBC's survey The Big Read. It was also added to the list of Great Books of the 20th Century, published by Penguin Books.

2. Importance of the Study

Saleem has interrupted his story in order to defend its accuracy to Padma. Throughout his story, Saleem has appeared anxious about his historical inconsistencies. He is also acutely aware of how fantastic and far-fetched his narrative sounds to the skeptical, pragmatic Padma. After he emerges from his fever-induced dream, it becomes especially important for Saleem to assert the veracity of his story. For Saleem everything he says is true - not necessarily because it happened that way, but because he remembers it that way. An event from a person's past gains meaning for that person's present existence only when it becomes filtered through memory and becomes part of the overall story of that person's life. Only then can connections be made and conclusions drawn, and events and instances accrue significance. Saleem has rearranged history not only because he has forgotten the proper order of events, but also because by doing so his story gains greater depth and meaning. Saleem's rearrangement of facts serves a greater truth as he creates a new pattern through which to interpret both his own history and that of India itself.

In a nation defined by one official perspective, with a government that violently rejects any threat to its singularity, reality cannot exist, since reality is inherently composed of multiple perspectives. Reality is not just composed of a single truth, as the repressive rulers of Pakistan would have the people believe. Lies become necessary to live in a place like Pakistan, in order to maintain the fiction of singularity.

3. Plot Construction of the Work

'Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15,

1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. Now nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing that his death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell his life story.

Mumtaz changes her name to Amina and moves to Delhi with her new husband. Pregnant, she goes to a fortune-teller who delivers a cryptic prophecy about her unborn son, declaring that the boy will never be older or younger than his country and claiming that he sees two heads, knees and a nose. After a terrorist organization burns down Ahmed's factory, Ahmed and Amina move to Bombay. They buy a house from a departing Englishman, William Methwold, who owns an estate at the top of a hill.

Four years later, after Ahmed suffers a heart failure, Amina and the children move back to Bombay. India goes to war with China, while Saleem's perpetually congested nose undergoes a medical operation. As a result, he loses his telepathic powers but in return, gains an incredible sense of smell, with which he can detect emotions.

Saleem's entire family moves to Pakistan after India's military loss to China. His younger sister, now known as Jamila Singer, becomes the most famous singer in Pakistan. Already on the brink of ruin, Saleem's entire family save Jamila and himself - dies in the span of a single day during the war between India and Pakistan. During the air raids, Saleem gets hit in the head by his grandfather's silver spittoon, which erases his memory entirely. Relieved of his memory, Saleem is reduced to an animalistic state. He finds himself conscripted into military service, as his keen sense of smell makes him an excellent tracker. Though he doesn't know exactly how he came to join the army, he suspects that Jamila sent him there as a punishment for having fallen in love with her. Disappointed that Saleem will not marry her, Parvati - the witch has an affair with Shiva, now a famous war hero. Things between Parvati and Shiva quickly sour, and she returns to the magicians' ghetto, pregnant and still unmarried. There, Saleem divulges the names of the other midnight's children. One by one, the *midnight's children* are rounded up and sterilized, effectively destroying the powers that so threaten the prime minister. Later, however, Indra Gandhi loses the first election she holds.

The *Midnight's Children*, including Saleem, are all set free. Saleem goes in search of Parvati's son, Aadam, who has been living with Picture Singh. The three take a trip to Bombay, so Picture Singh can challenge a man who claims to be the world's greatest snake charmer. While in Bombay, Saleem eats some chutney that tastes exactly like the ones his ayah, Mary, used to

make. He finds the chutney factory that Mary now owns, at which Padma stands guarding the gate. With this meeting, Saleem's story comes full circle. His historical account finally complete, Saleem decides to marry Padma, his steadfast lover and listener, on his thirty-first birthday, which falls on the thirty-first anniversary of India's independence. Saleem prophesies that he will die on that day, disintegrating into millions of specks of dust.

4. Style and Language of the Work

At the first glance, the most inviting feature of Salman Rushdie's language is the bounteous sprinkling of English with Hindi and Urdu words throughout *Midnight's Children*, and this colorful sprinkling provides a certain amount of oriental flavor to the novel. This is probably done for two specific reasons: firstly, to situate the novel in its geographical location in the various cities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; and secondly, to subvert a language associated with colonial powers. Evidently, the English of *Midnight's Children* is not the Queen's English (or Standard English); it is the English best suited to express the sensibility of South Asian readers, even if they are living abroad.

Though the novel abounds in Hindi and Urdu words, Rushdie has added no notes or glossary to explain them fully to Western readers, as Raja Rao has done at the end of his monumental novel, *Kanthapura* (1938).

5. Conclusion

Like many, I initially read this at University and didn't really enjoy it, but there is a huge gulf between reading and studying and when I came across it again on a forgotten book shelf I thought, "Well, it won the Booker of Bookers, I must've missed something." With this in mind, I read it again and oh, my goodness, I'm glad I did. I certainly missed something. Actually, I missed rather a lot (and not just lectures). *Midnight's Children* deserves a place alongside *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as one of the finest examples of Magic Realism. It is allegorical, reflecting India's development as a country and more loosely Rushdie's own childhood, but the book stands up as a piece of writing in its own merit. The writing is vibrant; the (many) characters are well-observed; the humour is delightful; and the story is melancholy and touching in places but is stuffed with examples of Rushdie's elegant style.

Works Cited

1. Rushdie Salman. *Midnight's Children*, 1981.