

4-30-1998

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**The Novel and the Transformation of History:
Midnight's Children, Allegory, and the Dialogical**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Bachelor of Arts Degree in English with College Honors

Written under the direction of Dr. J. Bainard Cowan

April 30, 1998

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Introduction

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay on June 19, 1947 to Anis and Negin Rushdie. His father, a businessman with a law degree from Cambridge, and his mother, a teacher, provided Rushdie with a “protected middle-class life” (Harrison 1). Salman attended the Cathedral and John Connoll, and grew up speaking both Urdu and English. His parents were both devout Muslims and decide to stay in Bombay when independence came, but they did eventually move to Pakistan in 1964. By this time, Salman was attending the Rugby School in England and went on to follow in his father footsteps at Cambridge where he studied history from 1965-68.

His first novel, *Grimus*, was published in 1975 while Salman was working as an advertising copywriter in London, and received little attention. *Midnight's Children* was first in 1980 in England and was welcomed by a flood of praise and a slew of awards that included the Booker McConnell Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and the English Speaking Union Literary Award. In 1993, the novel was named the “Booker of Bookers,” the best novel to win the Booker Prize in its first twenty-five years. One can scarcely imagine a novel attracting more attention, but Rushdie would manage to set a new standard with his fourth novel.

The Satanic Verses was published in 1988. It won a few prizes of its own, but really grabbed the world's attention by the controversy that it caused. The novel was banned in India, Pakistan, South Africa, and Saudia Arabia. On February 14, 1989, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa*, or religious edict, that imposed the penalty of death on Rushdie and anyone involved in the publication of the novel who was aware of its content. Rushdie went into hiding and under the protection of Scotland Yard, but he did

continue to write. On September 25, 1998, the *New York Times* reported that the Iranian government “divorced [itself] from the death threat imposed on British author Salman Rushdie in 1989” and that it “dissociate[d] itself from any reward that has been offered in this regard.”

Since the *fatwa*, nearly all of the work done by academics on Rushdie has been on *The Satanic Verses* and the issues of free speech that surround the *fatwa*. Only in the past few years have works begun to emerge on Rushdie’s other works. This thesis will henceforth make no mention of the *fatwa*, but will instead focus on the work that Rushdie did with the history of India and not to make history as an Indian.

Midnight’s Children is an allegory of the history of India since it gained independence from British colonial rule on August 15, 1947. The protagonist is named Saleem Sinai and his fate is to be inseparably linked to the fate of his nation. To use Saleem’s own words, he is “handcuffed to history” (3). From the beginning, Saleem is both aware of this linkage and daunted by its meaning. He seeks alternately to help his young motherland along the road of progress, and to retreat from the burdens of public service into a normal life. *Midnight’s Children* is Saleem’s autobiographical effort on this extraordinary life before he dies.

In order to understand this novel, we must first understand the importance of allegory to history. For this, an examination of Walter Benjamin’s work on history and allegory is required. Benjamin believes that allegory is the literary method that allows history to be redeemed. Through allegory, what Benjamin calls the “fullness of the past” can be recovered (254). This fullness enables what he calls “time filled [with] the presence of the now” (261). In this scheme, the past is constantly redefined according to the effects that it has on the present. The effects of history change with each new day,

and Benjamin believes that this requires of us a continual re-examination of the past. *Midnight's Children* is a novel that hopes to redeem the history of India by examining the struggles that one of its citizens, Saleem Sinai, has endured.

In order to appreciate the way *Midnight's Children* functions as a part of the discourse on the history of India, a look at the work of Mikhail Bakhtin is required. Through Bakhtin, we are able to see the ways in which this text functions as but one attempt to give meaning to the history of India among many. We are also able to see how Saleem's quest for meaning is the central struggle in his life. The story of this struggle is the true story of this novel, and Bakhtin allows us to examine the way in which that struggle works.

Salman Rushdie's own essays are also valuable in attempting to understand this novel. His collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands* tells of the ways in which he reshaped history in order to tell the story of the India of his lifetime. He makes it clear that *Midnight's Children* is not to be used as a reference work on history, but as a work on the impressions and effects that this history has had on him. The novel is Rushdie's opportunity to point out what he sees as India's successes and failures, joys and disappointments have been in the first four decades after independence.

Midnight's Children is an allegorical retelling of the recent history of India. Saleem examines his life as it is coming to a close, taking stock of the possibilities that have been used well and have been squandered. In doing this, he also us to see how the possibilities that were born in 1947 have been used well and poorly. The novel ultimately determines that India has not realized her full potential, but that there is still plenty of possibility to allow history to show us how to realize it.

Walter Benjamin and Allegories of History

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin offers ideas on the shape of a new historical method which he calls “historical materialism.” This new method of historical study calls for viewing the past not as a sequence of events like so many “beads of a rosary,” but as a “constellation” from which the possible sources of meaning for the present are as diverse as the stars in the sky (263). Instead of viewing the past as “homogeneous, empty time” in which events happen in a linear chronology with only simple connections (A causes B causes C), he seeks to locate the meaning of the past in the various interpretations that the present makes possible. In this scheme, the present is crucial in understanding the past because each new event deepens the possible meanings of the events that he preceded and framed it. He calls this idea “time filled with the presence of now” (261).

For Benjamin, the study of history should aim at grasping the “fullness of [the] past” (254) and not just those portions which are endowed with meaning by those currently in power. To settle for the version of the current regime is to be content with a version that excludes the struggles of the oppressed. The danger inherent in history told by the victors is that those who have lost and are oppressed now are in danger of losing their past as well as the future. The future is endangered because the loss of the past means the loss of the memory of the struggle that is the past. To rob people of the past is to rob them of a will to a better future.

Allegory is the method that Benjamin offers as the key to grasping the “fullness of the past” (254). It is an observation point from which we can look out on our experiences and attempt to translate them into something greater. Bainard Cowan, in “Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” provides a very useful examination which I would like to examine and then expand upon.

Cowan states that Benjamin “achieves the first really significant definition of allegory since Dante by casting it in cultural and ontological terms” (110). For Benjamin, allegory is “pre-eminently a kind of experience” which we acquire through the recognition of the world as transitory and elusive. Allegory is both the text that manifests this experience for others, and the intuition itself of the world as transitory, as an “aggregation of signs” that we seek to comprehend (110). Transforming the world into signs is both the technique of allegory (how it makes itself manifest), and the content of allegory (the latent ideas that are brought forth by the technique).

The use of the terms latent and manifest of course calls to mind Freud and the processes of dreaming. While allegory does not work in precisely the same way, both do involve an element of re-writing of what is unmanageable in raw form. Like the raw desire of the id, raw experience is something that the mind finds “unwieldy” and in need of signification. Jacques Derrida’s term “archi-écriture” works well as a description of this “allegorical view of the world as a kind of writing” (Cowan 112). This “archi-écriture” represents the first efforts of the intellect to understand the sensory information it receives. It is the first effort of the mind at superimposing meaning on experience. Indeed, Cowan calls allegory “experience *par excellence*” (112).

Another key element of Benjamin’s theory of allegory is his conception of the distinction between truth and factual knowledge. Factual knowledge is presentable and is something which humanity can possess. We can know facts and can demonstrate them to others. This accessibility and availability for presentation are not elements of the human experience of truth for Benjamin. Truth resides elsewhere in Benjamin’s conception of it: it is “a transcendent reality in which objects may only partake” (113). As in Platonic philosophy, truth is not present to use, it only informs earthly manifestations. Truth is

very real, but it is not present in our reality. And since truth resides elsewhere, we cannot possess it and present it to others as we can factual knowledge. This impossibility of presentation leaves only the option of representation, which Benjamin calls “truth’s proper mode” (Cowan 114).

Benjamin sets up two precondition for allegory. The first is an affirmation of the existence of truth discussed above. The second is the recognition that truth is absent from humanity. Because we know that truth exists and yet are unable to grasp hold of it, the only remaining option is representation. This representation is, in fact, a kind of re-creation. Since we cannot have the real truth, we must fashion our own version of it as best we can. This re-creation or representation is as close as we are able to come to truth. In fact, for Benjamin it becomes its own truth.

For Benjamin, truth is in the form in which we present it. It is the best method that we have of presenting our reality. For factual knowledge, we use a method to acquire the facts. For truth, the method is the way in which we manifest our truth. Since we cannot really possess truth itself, our attempts at grasping at it with our best understanding are the closest we get to truth. Cowan calls representation the “dwelling place of truth,” the only location where truth is truly present. Humanity’s exile from truth forces it to accept the likeness for the thing itself.

The inability to bring truth directly into this world creates the problem of determination of what exactly is represented by the representation. Here the “concept” comes to the rescue. The concept claims neither a direct connection with the truth nor utter isolation from it. The representation of the concept is the best understanding of the truth that we can manage in our exile. Through the concept, we are able to understand how representation can be seen as more than a pale shadow of the truth. Representation of the

concept can be imaged as a kind of reflected sunlight; it is not the direct light of the sun, but it does owe its existence to the sun and does take part in its brilliance. This idea of the reflected light of representation divests the image of any pretension to actual truth while still allowing it a lesser, but still crucial form of participation in truth.

The image divested of pretensions to truth is critical to allegory. Benjamin imagines allegory performing a similar divestiture on the experiences of humanity. The individual experience is stripped of its self-importance as a single act in favor of a greater existence as part of an image of truth. We no longer see a single action as merely the event of a single moment, but instead as part of a chain that points the way toward truth.

Doubleness permeates Benjamin's understanding of allegory and its also permeates his understanding of history. He sees history as both "the source of all suffering and misunderstanding, and the medium through which significance and, indeed, salvation are attained" (Cowan 116). Allegory, with its understanding of the dual nature of experience, is the literary form most capable of reconciling these opposing actions of history. It would, in fact, seem that allegory is the method by which history is redeemed.

The final element of Benjamin's theory of allegory that I would like to examine is the miracle in allegory. The dual nature of nature is unified through the miracle. It is a "blatantly extrinsic rescue" of the play's agents, who "cannot bring about their own rescue" (Cowan 118). Unlike the dialectical mode of classical tragedy, in which methodical advancement is made on the remains of discredited theses, allegory is motivated by immotivation because, "it is precisely the 'immotivation' of the world that causes the allegorical 'way of looking at the world'" (Cowan 118). Allegory builds upon what Cowan calls the deadness of its devices, their intrinsic unconvincingness.

The “triumph of allegory” is that it is able to use the miracle as a form of *deus ex machina*, bringing about a satisfying conclusion when it most seems that none is possible (Cowan 118). The deadness of allegorical devices provides the basis for the greater life they assume once the miracle occurs. The miracle is the means by which the devices assume the meaning that they have previously been deprived. They are redeemed by the miracle because it is through the miracle that they cease to be an incongruous chain of meaningless events and become markers leading the way to the meaning.

At the same time, the falseness of the miracle, its lack of motivation, also serves to point to the lack of a real miracle. In real life, this final moment which elucidates the entirety of the past is “continually deferred to a point beyond life, or beyond history” (Cowan 119). The signification that miracle accomplishes in the text signifies to the reader the lack of significance in reality. Just as we can feel the need for a sentence at the end of a difficult paragraph that clarifies what has come before, allegory serves to show us that reality lacks a final statement of meaning.

One of the most notable elements of *Midnight's Children* is that there is no miracle ending to it. Saleem is not saved from the disease that causes the deadly cracks in him by some new-found cure. We are not shown the way in which all of his suffering has served some greater purpose. This lack of a final signifying event at the end of *Midnight's Children* functions in its own allegorical sense. The lack shows that the history of India is yet to be redeemed. The final chapter of both the novel and Indian history are yet to be written. This is what the end of the novel points to and how it reminds us that the allegorical reading of India still awaits its conclusion.

The work of Benjamin is useful in examining the depth of the importance of history in *Midnight's Children*. Through him one is able to

understand the ways in which this novel operates on levels beyond the literal. One is able to grasp the ways in which literature can extend beyond the page and make statements about the realities that we live with each day. In order to appreciate the breadth of the history's importance in *Midnight's Children* it is necessary to examine the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Through him one is able to understand the ways in which this novel shows the variety of experience that history offers from person to person.

Mikhail Bakhtin and the Dialogic

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin presents his theories on the nature of the idea in the novel. He posits two methods for presenting ideas in fiction. The first is the monologic form, in which ideas are put forth by characters. These ideas, however, "[belong] to no one" (*PDP* 79). The character is simply the means through which the idea is represented. The idea could just as easily be placed in one character as the next because the idea is not an integral part of the character. In the monologic form, ideas are either repudiated, which has the effect of negating their existence; or they are affirmed, in which case they are incorporated into the consciousness of the hero.

The monological conception of truth is that it is a single tenable position that refutes all others completely, and thus suppresses all manner of dissent. There is no room in this scheme for a plurality of truths and consciousnesses. The monologic bears a strong resemblance to the "authoritative discourse" as Bakhtin describes it in "Discourse in the Novel" (*DI* 343). Authoritative discourse "demands our unconditional allegiance," we must "either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority" (*DI* 343). Ultimately, "[a]uthoritative discourse can not be

represented - it is only transmitted" (*DI* 343). This is why Bakhtin finds the monologic so unsatisfactory. The idea is thrust upon us. The author decides its validity and we must accept or reject the work as we accept or reject the idea. Bakhtin prefers a more dynamic mode of representing ideas in the novel.

Bakhtin believes the dialogic is this more flexible and dynamic mode of representation. It is this form in which the idea becomes a "subject of artistic representation" (*PDP* 85). This is possible because in the dialogic form consciousness becomes a battleground where ideas compete as equals for status as truth. This battle, however, is not a fight to the death. There can be more than one victor. There may be one overriding idea which the protagonist takes as his worldview, but this does not result in the destruction of all other idea-possibilities. Instead, ideas and worldviews are the result of consideration and incorporation of the valuable parts of competing views. The idea in the dialogic is constantly in process, always open to change and improvement and thus moving towards a more accurate representation of truth. The model of idea creation in the dialogic is one of cooperation. Cooperative idea formation does not destroy ideas, but instead results in the fusing of ideas into more cohesive and tenable positions.

Bakhtin outlines methods or conditions for the dialogic representation of ideas in the novel. The first is that the idea and the character cannot be separated. For Dostoevsky, neither the person nor the idea is the hero of the novel, but "the person born of [the] idea" (*PDP* 85). The story of a given novel is not the story of a complete or "finalized" character *acting* in the world, but the story of an "unfinalized" character *interacting* with the world. The purpose of this interaction with the world is defined by the hero's quest to get an unresolved thought straight. In this sense, the novel is a *bildungsroman*; it is a novel of education. Getting this one thought straight enables the completion

of the character because he now possesses a fully valid idea (which is not to say the “whole truth”). He is now a “man of the idea” (*PDP* 86).

The second method for representing ideas involves an understanding of the ways in which human thought is dialogic. In order for an idea to truly exist, it cannot just live inside one person’s consciousness, because there it remains unchallenged, degenerates, and dies. “Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living in contact with . . . alien thought,” against which it must defend itself and modify itself to survive. The true idea must be “inter-individual and inter-subjective,” and live in “dialogic communion *between* consciousnesses” (*PDP* 88). The idea lives in this dialogic communion to the extent that it asserts itself and seeks responses to which it must respond in turn. The idea becomes an organism, a thing that must be able to change in order to survive. The idea, like all other living things, must be able to adapt in order to survive. It also must risk itself in order to survive because it cannot exist in isolation. Interaction is the most basic requisite of life for the idea.

Bakhtin believed that it is the worldview, not the individual idea, that is the crucial element of human thought that must be represented in literature. The worldview must represent the entire person because it is indivisible from the whole person, the “man of the idea.” In order for the man to be complete, he must contain a “fully valid idea” and that idea must contain the whole of him. The novel is the representation of a protagonist’s struggle to find that one fully valid and self-defining thought. It is the representation of a character’s effort to seek wholeness.

Saleem Sinai is a character in search of a world view. “Above all things, [Saleem fears] absurdity” which is why he engages in his quest for meaning. Saleem searches throughout the novel for his meaning, the world view that will

enable him to understand his life. His birth at the moment of India's independence and the resulting "handcuffing to history" leaves him with the feeling that his life is bound up with that of his country's and that he must struggle to define himself. He wishes for this self-definition so that he will be able to understand how he can help to shape India.

An important part of Saleem's efforts at discovering at his meaning is the Midnight's Children Conference (MCC). The MCC is a congregation of the surviving children born within the first hour of India's independence and able through mental telepathy to join in the forum of Saleem's mind. The Conference is established so that the children can learn about one and other, and, Saleem hopes, learn how they can work together to help their common homeland. The Conference is Saleem's opportunity to validate his ideas on himself particularly and all of the children generally. It is where he is able to put his ideas in "dialogic communion" with the ideas of others. His ideas are offered up and contested. Saleem has to reconsider his ideas and defend and/or amend them. The Conference is the proving field for Saleem as a person and his ideas on the meaning of himself and the children.

Saleem most damages his own dialogical efforts when he excludes the only other Midnight Child born precisely at the stroke of midnight, his rival for control of the Conference, Shiva. This exclusion is damaging to Saleem (though he certainly does not know at the time certainly, and arguably never does) because he never properly deals with the problems that Shiva poses to him. Shiva is everything that Saleem is not: poor, homeless, completely self-interested, and violent. Instead of confronting these ideas so that he may understand them and thus have a sound basis for opposing them, Saleem rejects them out-of-hand. Though these ideas may not seem worthy of consideration, to fail to deal with them is to fail to deal with a part of himself

and of India. Saleem foils his own efforts by refusing to deal with this part of himself. Dialogic attempts at resolution fails because Saleem adopts an authoritarian, monologic position with respect to the ideas of India.

Saleem is clearly a man of ideas. His search for meaning puts him in a constant quest for the possible ideas on what he and India mean and what they can be. He believes that his fate is linked to that of his country's and that is why he must do all he can to direct the nation on what he sees as the right path. Saleem's failure to deal with all idea-possibilities means that his worldview is never a complete picture. He is always haunted by the specter of what he has excluded.

Bakhtin enables an understanding the ways in which the variety of experience and ideas are depicted in literature. No single perspective has an absolute claim on truth, and it is necessary to recognize this in order to understand *Midnight's Children*. Bakhtin illustrates the ways in which ideas are reconciled in the novel. In order to understand the method that Rushdie used in creating his image of India, an examination of some of his essays is required. An understanding of Rushdie's thought on writing about history and the methods that it necessitates will be of great importance in understanding what *Midnight's Children* has to say about the past as well as the future of India.

Salman Rushdie and "Errata"

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* plays with what Rushdie calls "historical shapes" in order to fashion a tale of both the disappointments and the possibilities of India's recent history (IH 25). *Midnight's Children* is Saleem Sinai's recounting of the history of post-independence India. Saleem makes no claims at total objectivity. He writes his memories, his life, his India, as he remembers them. He narrates his own truth. This means that despite

his efforts at trying to be faithful to the way things really happened, his memory is quite capable of changing things to suit its purposes.

Imaginary Homelands, a collection of Salman Rushdie's essays from 1981-1991, offers valuable insights into the narrative methods of he used in writing *Midnight's Children*. In an essay titled "'Errata': Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*" Rushdie acknowledges that in the process of writing the novel, he discovered that discrepancies were arising between his India and the India of the history books. The principal example of this is that the Mahatma Gandhi dies on the wrong day in *Midnight's Children*. At first, Rushdie sought to correct the discrepancies, but soon the "wrongness felt *right*" (IH 23). The discrepancies became key to his intentions in writing the novel.

Rushdie states that his original mission was "somewhat Proustian" (IH 23). As he discovered the continuing emergence of "errors" in his text, however, he became more interested in the "process of filtration" that history went through in order to become fiction (IH 24). He became less interested in "time lost" and more interested in "the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool" (IH 24). He found that the errors offered insight into a personal truth because through them one sees how has history affects people. By examining the way in which we reshape history in our minds, we are able to see how history has affected us. The errors are part of memory's version of truth, and "only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own" (IH 25).

Rushdie's ideas on the figure of the immigrant are also useful in examining the importance of metaphor to assessing lived experience. In an essay on Günter Grass in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie explains why he believes that migration across national borders is "by no means the only form of the phenomenon" (278). He believes that migration through time is also

an important kind of migration. Rushdie imagines the past as a foreign land. People do things differently in the past, and since we all come from there, we must learn to deal with the changes. This necessitates constant change and, in fact, re-invention of oneself. To survive one must be able to adapt to the changes in the tools necessary for survival. One must constantly be able to adjust to the changes in language, culture, and other elements of society as well as learning how to program a VCR. Otherwise, one becomes like the old tools that you hang on to though they have outlived their usefulness: artifacts from a bygone era.

Rushdie believes that migration “offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age.” He describes metaphor (from the Greek for bearing across), as a form of migration, the bearing across of ideas into images (*IH* 278). In this sense, metaphor is the migration of experience from the simple fact of existence into the signs that point towards the meaning of history. I believe that the “errata” in *Midnight’s Children* are Rushdie’s effort at the allegorization of history. The India seen in *Midnight’s Children* is a metaphor because it has been remade to suit the purpose of fiction. Rushdie is proposing another view of what has happened in India in the twentieth century. It is his version, which he has created by examining his memories a finding “a version . . . one of the hundreds of millions of possible versions” (*IH* 10). The use of errata creates an allegorical version of India, a version translated into fiction for the purpose of deepening the meaning of the history of India.

Saleem Sinai tells us that “reality can have metaphorical content . . . that does not make it less real” (*IH* 240). Saleem’s India is filled with metaphor, and I propose that is part of what makes it so real. The history that Saleem tells is his truth. It is his interpretation of the history of India as he has lived it. It is his way of understanding his life and the recent life of his

nation. Rushdie does not claim that this is the only possible interpretation. In fact, he is the first to acknowledge that it is only one among millions. He wants to make sure that no part of the part is forgotten. At heart, part of Rushdie's project is to make sure that Benjamin advice is followed, that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (254), that nothing "disappear[s] irretrievably" (255). Like Benjamin, he wishes to make sure that the entire constellation of historical events remains accessible.

Through the use of allegory, Rushdie is able to examine the possibilities that were born with India in August 1947. The dialogic enables us to understand how Saleem works towards his goal of meaning for himself and the rest of the children of midnight. "Errata" enables the creation of an allegorical that is not bound strictly to traditional definitions of history, but allows personal perceptions to enter an understanding of India's national struggle. This essay will now move on to a closer examination of the elements of that struggle by exploring the novel in a more in-depth manner.

Reading for Elements

Midnight's Children is the story of a child, Saleem Sinai, born at the precise instant of India's independence. This leaves him "handcuffed to history" in the sense that his fate and the fate of his nation become parallels. Saleem's ups and downs are mirrored in the course of events of his nation. He tells us that he has been "a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (4). It takes a lot of people to make a nation, and Saleem's story shows that it takes a lot of people to make just one individual.

Since it takes so many people to make him, Saleem cannot begin the story of his life with his birth. Instead it begins with the rebirth of his

grandfather, thirty-two years before, in Kashmir. His grandfather, Aadam Aziz, has just returned from medical school in Germany. He has returned to his birthplace to begin a practice, and quickly finds that the person he was before Germany and the person he is now are quite different. Aadam Aziz is unwilling and unable to be the person that history says he should be.

Midnight's Children begins with the story of the formation of a hole. Aadam Aziz goes out in the morning to pray towards Mecca as is dictated by the tenets of his Muslim faith. He has the proper prayer mat, the astrakhan cap, and the memory of how the prayers should be said. He is “attempting to re-unite himself with an earlier self” (6). Saleem calls this an absurd attempt at pretending that nothing has changed when, in fact, a great deal had changed. Due to his European experience, Aadam was “caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief, and [the attempt at prayer] was only a charade” (6).

Aadam Aziz is no longer at home with the faith of his ancestors. He then receives what might be called a sign. As he bends towards the ground in prayer, Aadam is punched in the nose by the earth. He leans forward in prayer and strikes his nose on the hard Kashmiri earth. Aadam is forever knocked into “into that middle place, unable to worship a God whose existence he [can] not wholly disbelieve” (6). He rises from his attempt at prayer with a “[p]ermanent alteration: a hole” (6).

Aadam attempts to fill this hole with what fills another hole. One of his patients in Kashmir is the daughter of a wealthy landowner named Ghani. In order to protect the honor of his daughter Ghani requires that Dr. Aziz examine his daughter Naseem through a perforated sheet. She becomes his “partitioned woman” and his thoughts begin to extend beyond the purely medical (23). After three years of visits to cure a new ailment each time,

Aadam Aziz falls in love with his patient. The perforated sheet and the hole in it through which Aadam sees his love become the sacred elements in his life. They fill “the hole inside him which had been created when he had been hit on the nose by a tussock” and knocked out of the realm of faith (24). Dr. Aziz loses the Islamic faith of his parents and replaces with love for his patient.

Aadam and Naseem are married and the problems of partition become clear very quickly. He has fallen in love with the parts of his “partitioned woman;” the problem is that he is never able to unify the parts into a whole woman that he can love.

The newlyweds arrive in Amritsar shortly after their wedding. Specifically, they are in Amritsar on April 13, 1919 and Dr. Aziz finds himself at the Amritsar massacre. His life is saved by anatomy, specifically his large nose. Dr. Aziz sneezes at the precise instant that the shooting begins and is thrown forward, out of the path of the bullets. The Kashmiri doctor survives the massacre and becomes a staunch advocate of Indian independence. He lives and history keeps moving towards the birth of India, and of Saleem.

To use the vocabulary of the film world that Saleem adores, we will now fast-forward to the meeting of his parents and their subsequent marriage. Saleem’s father, Ahmed Sinai, and his mother, Amina Sinai (née Mumtaz Aziz), are married in 1946. Amina Sinai is blessed with the gift of what Saleem calls “inexhaustible assuidity,” and she requires every bit of it in order to complete her most daunting task. Amina Sinai has to train herself to love her husband. She “[falls] under the spell of the perforated sheet” and “[resolves] to fall in love with her husband bit by bit” (75). Amina “[selects] one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and [concentrates] her entire being upon it until it [becomes] wholly familiar” (75). She works her way through all of his attributes in order to learn to love her husband.

Twice in the first one hundred pages of *Midnight's Children* we find stories of partitioning in the name of love, and these stories are followed by the partition of India. Like the partitioning of lovers, the partitioning of the subcontinent is done not because of an overabundance of love, but because of failures in compatibility. Aadam Aziz and Amina Sinai must both learn to love the parts of those with whom they have chosen to spend their lives because they are not able to accept the entire person.

Saleem calls India "the new myth - a collective fiction in which anything [is] possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God" (130). The great myth of India, however, gets off to a tumultuous start. The myth of India is driven apart by different myths of god, and instead of one India, there will be India and Pakistan. Hindus and Muslims cannot agree on how to live together so they agree to live apart. Like the love of Aadam and Amina, love of India must come in the form of divide-and-conquer, because there is too much to take in all at once. It proves to be an odd way of loving because when love of the whole is constituted from the sum of its parts, then if one part disappoints, the disappointment spreads to infect the whole.

The failure was not complete, of course, and India is born at the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947. Baby Saleem is born at precisely the same instant. There is, however, a catch. Saleem's history both is and is not his own. His birth and parentage are the products of a collective imagination of their own sort.

Ahmed and Amina Sinai had a child at the stroke of midnight at Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home. Another child was also born at that same instant and in the same place to a beggar named Wee Willie Winkie and his wife, Vanita. Wee Willie Winkie's son, however, is not his own, but the child of William Methwold, the departing colonial from whom the Sinais bought their

home in Bombay. So two boys came into the world at the Narlikar Nursing Home at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. A remarkable act of fate follows these remarkable twin births. A woman named Mary Pereira switches the name tags on the two babies and thus switches their fates, “giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to . . . poverty” (135). The child with the nose of Aadam Aziz, though he is not biologically of that line, goes home with the Sinais, receives their love, and thus truly is a Sinai. His role is preordained because it is his special gifts that will flourish under the love of the Sinais. The other child, though he is deprived of his “birthright,” is not deprived of the fate that is naturally his. Because of the switch in the nursing home, he is also set on the course that will make the most out of his special abilities. The life of Saleem owes just as much to history as it does to biology because both have been crucial in creating and both will be crucial in shaping him.

This connection to history is the crucial fact of Saleem’s life. It is a relationship that will complicate his life in ways that could not be imagined, but in fact they are imagined before he is even born. Saleem is from the beginning a heralded child. In return for saving the life of a Hindu street peddler from an angry Islamic mob, his mother receives a free prophecy on the life of her child; and as Saleem advises, it pays to listen carefully because “the fellow got nothing wrong” (99). To synopsise:

“A son . . . such a son . . . who will ever be older than his motherland - neither older nor younger . . . There will be two heads - but you shall see only one - there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees . . . Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him - but, crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep . . .

Washing will hide him - voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him - blood will betray him! . . . Spittoons will brain him - doctors will drain him - jungle will claim him - wizards will reclaim him! Soldiers will try him - tyrants will fry him . . . He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! *And he will die . . . before he is dead*" (99).

The fellow got nothing wrong, parts of which we have seen already. All of the things described happen to the child of the Sinais, and not the one in Amina's womb, but the one who will truly become hers through time and love.

Saleem's place with the Sinais is assured before it is created. Mary Pereira becomes Saleem's ayah, or nanny, and thus Saleem gets a second mother to go along with his many fathers. As the prediction said, he was raised by two mothers and heralded by newspapers. The *Times of India* offered a reward to the mother of the first child born in India, and Saleem claims that prize and an "A-1 top-quality front-page jumbo-sized babysnap" with the headline "MIDNIGHT'S CHILD" that runs in the newspaper.

Saleem's position in history is ratified in one more crucial way. Jawaharlal Nehru sends midnight's child a letter congratulating him "on the happy accident of [his] moment of birth," proclaiming that he is "the newest bearer of [the] ancient face of India which is also eternally young" and that India "shall be watching over [his] life with the closest attention; *it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own*" (143, emphasis added). Saleem's life turns to be just that, a mirror of the events that shape India for the next three decades. His birth becomes a major event by a happy coincidence. His life attains allegorical significance through the Benjaminian criterion of participation in a greater event, the birth of India. Michael Gorra calls this Saleem's "emblematic value" (120). His birth at the same time as India means that Saleem always means something beyond himself. He always means India.

Also true to Benjamin's description of allegory, it is an unmotivated occurrence in the sense that Saleem did not ask for his place in history. It is thrust upon him by an unknown motivating force, and he has no part or control over it. He is handcuffed to history by forces other than his own actions.

Prophesied before his birth and heralded as a mirror of his nation just after, Saleem from the beginning gains a sense that great things are expected of him. He gains this sense not only from the Prime Minister's letter, but from his parents as well. Saleem knows that his family, especially his father, believes deeply in good business principles. He realizes that all of the love and sheltering that children receive do not come "free gratis," but that "a handsome return" is expected "for [his parents'] investment" (184). "Parents are impelled by the profit motive," Saleem tells us. This does not make them evil. They are only share in what has already been described as one of the great driving fantasies of India: money. Saleem does not believe that his parents are any better or worse than any other parents. He sees that there are strings attached to the gifts of love and nurturing that he receives. This belief also reveals to Saleem that he must believe in good business principles: nothing comes without a price. Saleem's greatest challenge is figuring out how to repay the debts he owes.

This debt repayment, if you will, is what motivates Saleem's quest for greatness. He, being "a dutiful child," yearns to "give [his parents] what they wanted, what soothsayers and framed letters had promised" (185). Figuring out how to repay his parents is a difficult question, and by the time Saleem is "nearly eight," and "afraid that [his] much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without a shred of a purpose," he has taken to hiding out from the world in a washing chest. There he finds freedom from the demands that have been placed upon him (and that he places on himself). It is

also the place where he discovers his first potential key to that greatness. He is certainly not looking for it there, but is once again lead down history's path by chance.

This discovery of this key to greatness is enabled by biology. Saleem was born with a face that is a map of India. He has two birthmarks; one on his western hairline, and on the eastern side which are the separate wings of Pakistan, and his nose forms the Deccan peninsula. It is clear from the start that Saleem's link to his homeland extend beyond the chronological to the anatomical.

The nose of Saleem, prophesied by Ramram Seth, is his most important physical feature. With such an impressive nose, one would figure that Saleem's olfactory powers would be similarly impressive. They are not; his nose is simply too congested to be of any use. It takes an accident in his washing-chest hiding place for his nose to become useful; not as a sniffer, but as an antenna.

One day while hiding out in the washing chest, Saleem is confronted with the "Black Mango," the moniker he adopts for his mother's rear end (190). His mother comes into the restroom for the usual purposes, and unaware of her son's presence, she goes about her normal business. Saleem is horrified with this vision, but his nose has the most violent reaction. Less than a sneeze, more than a sniff: he is unable to control "a cataclysmic - a world-altering - an irreversible *sniff*" (191). This sends pajama cords shooting up his nose, which in turn causes the violent reaction of a sneeze. He is discovered and punished by his mother, but more importantly Saleem is suddenly able to hear voices. The life of Aadam Aziz was saved by a sneeze, and now Saleem life acquires new meaning by the abilities that begin with a sneeze. "[B]etter than All-India Radio," he is suddenly able to hear within

himself the thoughts of others. The first voices to come in are unsolicited, but he eventually learns to select, amplify, and turn off the voices at will. Saleem has discovered “his reason for having been born” (193).

Saleem believes that this is the “first dividend” he will be able to pay towards the debt of greatness he owes his parents. The product of a Muslim household, his first belief is that he, like the prophet Muhammad, is hearing the voices of the archangels. His family is decidedly not pleased when he announces this to him. They accuse him of blasphemy and his father delivers a blow to his left ear that partially deafens it for the rest of Saleem’s life. Instead of moving him closer to his parents, this revelation and the blow that it elicits knocks him into a world in which he can no longer tell those closest to him what “mattered most about the goings-on in [his] head” (195). It propels him into a land of uncertainty, “plagued by constant doubts about what I was *for*” (195). Like his grandfather before him, Saleem knocked into a realm of doubts. Aadam Aziz was exile from faith in God, Saleem is exiled from faith in his purpose, his “reason for having been born” (193).

Saleem soon gratefully recognizes that the Archangels are not speaking to him. “The Recitation was completed in Arabia long ago; the last prophet will come only to announce the End,” Saleem tells us (200). Much to his relief, he is not to preside over the end of the world. He is, on the other hand, definitely hearing voices. Saleem eventually begins to discover within the teeming masses in his head a certain group of people with whom he has an essential connection. He discovers that there were “no less than one thousand and one children” born with the frontiers of India in the first hour of the nation’s independence (234). Of those, five hundred and eighty-one (266 boys and 315 girls) survive to the time around their tenth birthday when Saleem discovers them. It is through this mental network that Saleem first

meet the other child of the stroke of midnight, Shiva, the child with whom he was switched in the nursery.

Saleem also discovers that all of “midnight’s children” as he dubs them have certain “miraculous” powers (234). These powers become more potent the closer the child was born to midnight. One boy was born with a working set of gills. Another is able to speak every language found on the subcontinent. There is the girl whose beauty was so intense at birth that she blinded her mother, and nearly blinded her father; and the child whose original sex is undetermined because it can be changed by immersion in water. Saleem’s best friend among the children is Parvati-the-witch, who lives in a magician slum in Delhi and dares to tell no one that her powers are real (because magicians more than anyone do not believe in magic). Saleem’s stroke of midnight counterpart was given “the gifts of war,” which will enable him to make full use of the tremendous powers that were prophesied to him. In Hindu mythology, Shiva is one of a trinity of gods who are the forces behind life. Brahma is the creator of all that is. Vishnu is the preserver of life. Shiva is the destroyer, and he will preside over the end of the world. He is the “most potent of all deities” (264). Saleem’s talk of purpose is answered with the fact that Shiva faces starvation daily. According to Shiva, “you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die . . . Everything else is just mother-sleeping *wind*” (264). Saleem, despite his basic willingness to listen to all of the children’s ideas on purpose, is not at all interested in Shiva’s ideas. He has ideas of his own which included the Children banding together not to help themselves, but to help India realize its thousand and one possibilities.

Saleem’s gift of being able to see into the hearts and minds of others is the most spectacular among the children. It is his gift that enables them to discover each other. On his tenth birthday, Saleem decides to form the

Midnight Children's Conference (MCC) to bring together the children. They are the remains of the "thousand and one possibilities" born with their nation. The formation of the MCC is the most important foray thus far by Saleem towards realizing the great potential with which he and the others were born. He hopes it is also the first step towards realizing the thousand and one possibilities that were created when India gained independence.

Saleem intends the conference to be a discussion group on "what we are for" (273). The conference is founded so that Saleem has the means to determine his purpose. This is thought that Saleem has been searching for in the Bakhtinian fashion. As a character, Saleem has been searching since birth for the one thought, his purpose, that will grant him the meaning that he longs for. He believes all of the children share in this purpose, and invites them to offer suggest on what their meaning is. The responses he gets vary greatly: collectivism, individualism, filial duty, infant revolution, capitalism, altruism, science, religion, courage and cowardice. Saleem admits that he finds himself disappointed. He also has to admit that the exception of unity on the part of the children was rather naive because "there was nothing unusual about the children except for their gifts" (273). The responses that they come up with are the same one that all of India is struggling with at the time.

Saleem admits that from the beginning he did not like Shiva. He suspects Shiva of murder, and finds him poorly spoken, and crude in his ideas. Shiva is, for all intents and purposes, the opposite of Saleem. This is what leads to their conflict in the Conference. There is a final reason why Saleem does not like Shiva. It is the reason that he cannot confirm his suspicions of murder. Shiva is alone among the children in being able to shut off whatever parts of his mind that he likes from Saleem. There is a basic mistrust between

the two of them because each knows that they are hiding things from one another.

With the Midnight Children's Conference as with all other things, "[w]hen novelty wears off, boredom, and then dissension, must inevitably ensue" (305). Saleem wants the conference to come together to solve the problems of India. The chief obstacle to Saleem's plan is that the children of midnight are Indians. The Conference is plagued by all of the differences in class, caste, and religion that plague India. The children of midnight, "however magical, are not immune to their parents," and so their parents' "prejudices and world-views" seep into their minds and seep into the conference. Saleem finds the conference to be "a parliament composed entirely of half-grown brats," not high-minded public servants (306). Prime Minister Nehru's prophecy comes true: the Midnight Children's Conference is, in fact, "a mirror of the nation," complete with all of its problems as well as its promise.

Saleem is loathe to admit it, but he more than anyone else is responsible for the end of the Midnight Children's Conference. It was not his original purpose to do take control in the MCC. He tells the rest of the children not to think of him as the leader, but as more of a "big brother" (273). Saleem is the founder of the Conference, the person who makes it a possibility, and his interest in its success is tied to his personal compulsion for meaning. When he begins to see that it is not achieving the aims that he wished for, he loses interest and ultimately makes the mistake that proves fatal to the Conference.

As stated before, Saleem and Shiva do not see eye to eye on what the midnight children should do with their special talents. This does not make them special among the Children. It seems that no two of the children can agree on their purpose. What sets Saleem and Shiva apart is their special linkage by birth. When Saleem first met Shiva, neither of them knew the

secret of their switched lives. An accident at school reveals the truth that Saleem cannot possibly be the son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai because the blood types are impossibly different. The revelation of the truth of his birth causes Saleem to commit the acts of mistrust that end the Conference. First, he closes off the part of his mind that contains the secret of his birth. The other children can sense this and they lose faith in Saleem. They cease to see him as a benevolent big brother, and begin to doubt that he is acting in their best interests.

Saleem also bars Shiva from the conference. The first reason for this is that Saleem does not want Shiva to find out the truth of their births. Saleem also excludes Shiva because he is the antithesis of every goal that Saleem has for the Conference. To Saleem, Shiva is “a sort of principle; he came to represent . . . all the vengefulness and violence and simultaneous-love-and-hate-of-Things in the world ” (358). Saleem excludes Shiva because he is not prepared to deal with the concepts that he represents. He is not able to refute the principles of Shiva, so he excludes him. He makes the ideas of Shiva impossible in the Conference. Saleem loses the trust of the children because he cuts off a part of the discourse. The Conference was supposed to be a dialogic community in which all of the children could share their ideas. By excluding the ideas of Shiva, Saleem betrays his own purposes for establishing the Conference; he betrays his own goal of determining his meaning and that of the Children.

In bringing together the children of midnight, Saleem was trying to connect them with history on a level that they were not aware of before. Saleem, on the other hand, is deeply aware of his connection to history. In fact, he develops a four-tiered description of his involvement with history which calls the “modes of connection” (285). They are Saleem’s response to

the question of in what sense is his life a mirror of India, as Nehru said to him. The most direct mode of connection is the active-literal mode. This is exemplified by the time that Saleem, having fallen off of his bicycle into the streets where language protesters marched, provided the marchers with the mantra that precipitated a riot. The active-metaphorical mode is that in which Saleem's life is a microcosm of the life of India. An example of this is provided by the tenth birthdays of Saleem and India: Saleem's home life was in a state of upheaval while India was going through the growing pains of the failure of its Second Five Year Plan for economic growth. Occasions of passive-literal connection are those when the life of India had a direct impact upon the life of Saleem and his family. The freezing of Ahmed Sinai's assets (both economic and sexual) falls under this category. Passive-metaphorical connections "encompasses all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected [Saleem] metaphorically." Saleem includes in this mode the example of "the infant state [of India]'s attempts at rushing towards full-sized adulthood and [his] own early, explosive growth" (286).

James Harrison calls this system "Polonius-like in its absurdity" (53). It is certainly true that one would not wish to push this system to far, but I believe that it has to be taken seriously to the extent that it is how Saleem evaluates his historical presence and effectiveness. He sees the Conference as a partial failure because it never attains the level of active-literal connection to the history of India. Trying to scrutinize every event in Saleem's life to see how it measures up in this structure would be a futile exercises because both the system and the effects of any given act are hard to fully comprehend. Life does not fit into neat little structures. It is, however, important to remember that Saleem develops this structure in order further his goal of understanding his purpose. The system is not valuable as a measuring stick of Saleem's

achievements, but an indicator of the seriousness of his desire to affect real change for the better in the course of India.

Saleem's betrayal of the principles of the Conference is closely followed by the event that ends the possibility of mental telepathic connection with the other Children. Under the pretext of a picnic to celebrate the family's reunion, Saleem is taken to an ear, nose, and throat clinic and "what began in a washing-chest ended on an operating table" (363). The operation is entirely successful and brutally destructive:

"the operation whose ostensible purpose was the draining of [Saleem's] inflamed sinuses and the once-and-for-all clearing of [his] nasal passages had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing-chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight children" (364).

The operation at once clears up his nasal congestion and deprives him of his birthright. He has been exiled from both the rest of the midnight children and from the chance to fulfill his potential. Deprived of the greatest gift of midnight, Saleem now fears that he will be relegated to absurdity. The operation, however, is just another step towards the final end of the Children.

After he has been medically drained of the possibility of uniting with the midnight children, it is made a geographical impossibility because his family moves to Pakistan in February 1963. Saleem was only able to use his telepathic powers within the borders of India, so the move to Pakistan adds the insult of geography to the injury that medical science caused.

After the defeat of India by the Chinese in November 1962 and just before the death of Nehru in May 1964, Saleem's family gives up hope in India and joins most of the Aziz family in Pakistan. The move to Pakistan provides a temporary heyday for the Sinais. Ahmed starts a successful towel

business, and Saleem's sister becomes a famous singer and takes a new name, Jamila Singer. Ultimately, however, the Sinais are only moving closer to history's final judgment.

In the chapter titled "How Saleem Achieved Purity," Saleem claims that "it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth" (403). This is, of course, a rather remarkable claim, but he takes the view that the purification of his family required something of this scale. Whether or not it was the war's purposes, most of the family (that is, the maternal side with which we became acquainted with earlier in the novel) is wiped out. Saleem loses his mother and father, the rest of his aunts, and his grandmother. His sister survives by going into hiding in a convent. Saleem firmly believes this though he has no proof. To put it succinctly, at the stroke of midnight just after his eighteenth birthday, Saleem's life is wiped clean as the proverbial slate. His family's house is bombed into oblivion and he suffers an injury that deprives him of his memory for the next several years. Catherine Cundy states that "[f]or Saleem to lose his memory is to lose his identity; his link with the past which places him in the social and historical context that outlines his individuality" (35). On his eighteenth birthday, in the midst of a great amount of death, Saleem is given a new life. Saleem knows that his tale is starting to sound more improbable, but tells his readers, "[o]n my eighteenth birthday, reality took another terrible beating" (405).

The chapter on how Saleem achieved purity also begins the second countdown of the novel. The first countdown was to the birth of Saleem and India. The second countdown is to an end-the end of possibility for Saleem and for all of the midnight's children. they have lost the possibility of connection through the forum of Saleem's mind, and now they will lose the

gifts with which midnight endowed them. India will lose the one thousand and one possibilities that were born at that fateful midnight.

Saleem returns to India after having participated in and then deserted from the Pakistani civil war. Saleem has begun to remember who his identity by that point, and Parvati-the-witch helps him to remember the conference. She also helps him to return to the land of the midnight children. Parvati has to make Saleem literally disappear so that he can get back into India. It is a sign of things to come that the child who has embodied India must sneak back into it; and things will get worse for Saleem before they get better. The possibilities of Saleem are coming to a close, but there will soon be a birth that will mean the rebirth of possibility for India.

In the time that Saleem has spent in exile in the Land of the Pure (Pakistan), Shiva has been ascending the social ladder. By the time Saleem first encounters his nemesis after regaining his identity, Shiva is a major in the Indian army and a personal favorite of Indira Gandhi. While Saleem is sneaking back into India after deserting from the Pakistani army, Shiva is coming into his own as a triumphant war hero. In short, Shiva has found his purpose. “There is nothing like a War for the re-invention of lives,” Saleem remarks, and the end of the Pakistani Civil War finds the roles of Saleem and Shiva reversed from what they were throughout their childhoods.

Despite the prophesy and birth that links them as the twin faces of India, Saleem continues to be reluctant to share the spotlight with Shiva. He admits that throughout the novel he has “been pushing him, the other, into the background (just as once, I banned him from the councils of the children)” (486). The time has come, however, for Major Shiva. Though he might like to, Saleem will now find it completely impossible to ignore him because Shiva

“has made us who we are” (358). In fact, the lives of Saleem and Shiva are soon to become even more intertwined.

While he is staying at the home of his Uncle Mustapha, Saleem notices a file marked “Top Secret” and “Project MCC.” Mustapha is a middle-level public servant who makes a hobby of genealogy. Saleem’s welcomeness in the house of his uncle is at best always tenuous. One evening someone who bears a remarkable resemblance to the Sanjay Gandhi, the son of the prime minister, comes for dinner. Afterwards, Uncle Mustapha and the dinner guest retire to the study where the mysterious file is located. The next morning Saleem notices that his uncle is eyeing him “with that special look of loathing which Civil Servants reserve for those who fall into official disfavour” (472). Saleem is soon back on the street. He returns to the magicians’ ghetto that he first came to with Parvati upon their return to India, but he cannot forget that file which he saw in his uncle’s study.

Though she is there for him when he is abandoned by his uncle, Saleem spurns the romantic attention of Parvati-the-witch. This is not because of anything wrong with her. The problem lies with him. He says that he is unable to perform sexually, but that is not the truth either. Saleem has been unable to love a woman since he was rejected by his sister (who is not his sister). Parvati turns to Saleem’s rival in all things, Shiva. She lures him with magic and they live together for a short period. (A note on Hindu mythology: Parvati is the goddess-wife of Shiva.) Eventually, though, Parvati tires of Shiva’s abuses and leaves him, but not without a token of his affection. Parvati is with child, and Saleem is finally persuaded to marry her. He has loved her all along, but would not be with her because of his own problems. Now she is “in trouble” and Saleem is there to help her, just as she helped him escape from a life he no longer found desirable in Pakistan. Parvati and Saleem

are married, and once again, “a child [is] to be born to a father was [is] not his father, although by a terrible irony the child would be the true grandchild of his father’s parents” (495).

It becomes clear from the beginning that this child of three of midnight’s children will also be special. Once again, there is a connection to the course of Indian history:

“the Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi] was giving birth to a child of her own . . . at exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time . . . and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my son, the child of the renewed ticktock, came into the world” (499-500).

Aadam Sinai, whose biological parents are Parvati and Shiva, and who will be raised by Saleem, comes into the world at the same time as the beginning of the period when Indira Gandhi declared a national state of emergency after her conviction on charges of election corruption. He is born into a time which “damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again” (500). Like his parents, he is permanently connected to his nation and its history; and like them, he was given no say in the matter.

Saleem and Aadam are both connected to history, but there are important differences between the two of them. Saleem has always been ambitious, but he has lacked the constancy necessary to begin about change. His son makes it clear from the first that he possesses “one of the world’s most implacable wills” (505). Saleem could not wait to jump into history. Aadam Sinai was born with tremendous, “omniaudient” ears that he uses to take everything in (507). Aadam Sinai is more cautious, but when he acts he will

be impossible to resist. Saleem rushed forward without understanding of actions or effects. Aadam will not repeat his father's mistakes.

During the Emergency, the battle for centrality between Saleem and Shiva takes on its most destructive form. Shiva has gained a powerful ally in Indira Gandhi, or the Prime Minister has gained a powerful ally in Shiva. Saleem has lived his life trying to fulfill the prophecy of Prime Minister Nehru that he will be "a mirror of the nation." Nehru's daughter has created a slogan for herself: "Indira is India and India is Indira" (509). Saleem is taken into custody by Major Shiva after a raid on the magician's ghetto in which Parvati is killed.

Saleem is taken to a mysterious prison in Benares, the mythological city of Shiva the god, after he is captured. He is interrogated on only one topic. He is compelled to reveal the "names addresses physical descriptions" of each of the children of midnight (517). Saleem admits that he talked. He admits that he "betrayed the children of midnight" and that he, the founder of the Midnight Children's Conference "presided over its end" (517). In the end, Saleem is responsible for the beginning and the end of the Midnight Children Conference, and for the destruction of the potential of the children's to change India.

Hindu mythology contains a principle called *shakti*, which dictates that for a Hindu god to fully realize the potential of his powers he must find a female counterpart. It is necessary for the male to join with the female because it is she who possess *shakti*. *Shakti* is the active force, the power, in Hindu mythology. The male gods must join with women so that they can receive the power of *shakti*. They also must do so because an unmarried goddess is viewed as dangerous-her *shakti* is uncontrolled and uncontained.

Indira Gandhi is usually referred to in the pages of *Midnight's Children* as the Widow. She was married at one time, but now she is uncontrolled and her *shakti* is loose. As the child of Jawaharlal Nehru, she was born into political power. In Indira Gandhi, Saleem finds political power and *shakti* united and facing no impediments besides the children of midnight. She is exercising a control over India unseen since the days of empire, and she is using that control to assert her centrality over the life of India, "Indira is India and India is Indira." In this novel, Indira unites (politically, not romantically) to destroy the children of midnight and their possibility.

It is Saleem's contention that the darker purpose of the Emergency is the elimination of midnight's children. Shiva and Indira unite to end what began at that special midnight hour. Like the hair of Indira Gandhi, the Emergency has a white side and a black side. The black side of the Emergency is "the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight . . . the mere possibility of re-unification [is] enough to trigger off the red alert" (510). With the help of Saleem and his descriptions, all of the surviving children are rounded up and taken to Benares. There they are deprived of the possibility of having children. Vasectomies and hysterectomies are performed, but also a more important ectomy. The children are drained of hope and midnight is drained of possibility. Saleem leaves Benares destroyed by the combination of Shiva and Indira. He no longer feels that there is any possibility for him to lead India towards its promise.

Midnight's Children concludes with the story of how Saleem is reunited with his old ayah, or nanny, Mary Pereira. He finds himself back in Bombay and eats some chutney that is filled with the same tastes that came out of the kitchen of Mary during his childhood. He seeks out the company that makes it and finds Mary Pereira managing the factory. Saleem takes over her job, and

she becomes ayah to Aadam Sinai. While he is not pickling, Saleem writes his history, the story of India and one of its most special children. He is pickling the past into words that form the novel *Midnight's Children*. The conclusion of this thesis will examine the method and significance of this metaphor.

Conclusion

Saleem finishes his novel as manager of Braganza Pickles (Private) Ltd. During the day, Saleem uses “fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices” to create his own special recipe chutneys (548). At night, his project is “the chutnification of history . . . the pickling of time,” he recreates the past through language (548). While he admits that “distortions are inevitable,” his purpose is not an encyclopedic chronicle of post-colonial India, but the telling of his story to his son. Saleem’s wish is to inspire his son to take up where he is leaving off. Saleem is dying, but before he goes he wishes to give his son the will to struggle to make a better India. Saleem is preserving the past so that its flavors will inspire others to cook up a better future.

In “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1947,” Rushdie says that he remembers that “the most common India criticism of [*Midnight's Children*] was that it was too pessimistic about the future” (IH 33). This is a surprising criticism because the novel ends on such an optimistic note. Saleem, though he no longer believes that he will be the one to lead India to a glorious future, does believe that it is coming. He has faith that his son will learn from his experiences and use them as the foundation for a better future. It is often said that there is no such thing as a truly pessimistic piece of literature. I believe that *Midnight's Children* embodies this sentiment profoundly. The novel is full of the disappointments that have come out of the first three decades of Indian independence, but it does not suppose that will continue on in that way.

Saleem is writing his story down for his son so that his son may see what work needs to be done. He is writing because in spite of all of the disappointments that he has lived through, Saleem still believes in the potential of India. The potential may not have been fulfilled by him and his fellow midnight's children, but India still survives and so does her potential. *Midnight's Children* is written with the hope of realizing that potential.

Dissatisfaction seems to be one of the motivating factors for writing the novel. By re-telling the past the way he saw it, Rushdie is able to show where he thinks things went wrong. This is also how he expresses what he believes to be right. Indira Gandhi has said that there were no forced sterilizations during the Emergency, but Rushdie contends that there were. Writing provides the opportunity to challenge these denials of distasteful parts of history. The point of showing the failures of the past is not to revel in them, but to make sure that they are remembered and thus remain accessible as part of a society's memory.

Saleem states that India exists only because of an effort of tremendous "collective will . . . a dream we all agreed to dream" (130). In other words, India has to be imagined by its citizens in order for it to truly exist. As partition and the division of India based on language have proven, the dream has been rather turbulent, but it is not dead. Benedict Anderson has called the nation as an imagined community of people coming together around common bonds. Saleem is as acutely aware of the differences that divide India as anyone, but the dream of India survives in him because he chooses to be more interested in the common bonds as the basis for the state.

The continuation of the dream of India also requires that it be constantly re-imagined. Every citizen of India must re-imagine India in spite of her differences each day in order for the dream to continue. Everyone must

do their part in continuing the dream, and for Rushdie that means retelling of the past with all of the warts included. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin called for a historical method that grasps “the fullness of [the] past.” The reason that Saleem undertakes the “chutnification of time” is so that the fullness of the past is not lost to those who would preferred to smooth over the bumps. He is afraid that the version of India that is available officially is not a complete foundation for the future. An incomplete record is a distorted one, and Saleem in his writing works to counter this incompleteness. The rough spots and disappointments in Indian history are what most needs to be told because they show us where improvements need to be made. The fullness of the past can only truly be grasped when the picture is complete. Benjamin also tells us that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). Saleem recognizes the disappointments as well as the failures so that they do not disappear, but remain part of society’s memory. Saleem’s project is a battle of memory against forgetting because, as he says about India, “we are a nation of forgetters” (37). Saleem recognizes that to forget the suffering of the past is to lose the will for a better future, and he refuses to let that occur.

The retelling of history based on memory is not an unproblematic undertaking. Saleem tells his companion and audience Padma:

“memory has its own special kind [of truth]. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own” (253).

Memory as the guide for narration is problematic because it is imperfect. As pointed out before, the Mahatma Gandhi dies on the wrong day in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem does not, however, go back and correct the error. He leaves it as is because it is his memory's special truth. He is telling the story of India the way he remembers it. It both corrects the error of other version and introduces errors of its own, but it indisputably add something to the picture. The discrepancies can be sorted out later, but the complete story has to be told in order for the truth to come out.

Rushdie consciously decided to use memory's truth in the creation of this novel. Faced with the task of migrating the past into the present, he discovered that errors were inevitable. In the title essay of *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie tells us that though it is traditionally thought that something is always lost in translation, he "cling[s], obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained" (17). What is lost in the recollection of the past is some of the accuracy in the details that history books aim for, and that memory cannot possibly provide. What is gained, however, is our own perception of how the events that make up history affect us and those around us. What is gained is the perception of how history has shaped us.

Bombay is the home of a very large film industry, and both Rushdie and Saleem are big fans of the cinema. It is therefore not surprising to find that one of the most important metaphors of *Midnight's Children* is taken from the cinema. Saleem tells us that "[r]eality is a question of perspective" and offers the example of the picture on the screen at a movie theater as an example (197). When we are seated in the audience, we see the big picture; we are able to take in the whole scene and understand things more completely. As we move closer to the screen we are able to see the individual pieces that make up the complete image, but the totality is lost. Rushdie's effort at historicizing

India must be seen in this light. By not focusing on the minute details of any of those times (the work of rigorous history), the novel is able to present its own perspective more clearly. History and memory do not match up perfectly, and it is by seeing where the discrepancies occur that we are able to see history's effect on us. We also see how our perspective on events has shaped our memory of them. One reason that we misremember is because we find reality unsatisfactory. The "errata" in *Midnight's Children* are signs of Rushdie's dissatisfaction with history. This dissatisfaction is the motivation for his writing; it is his motivation for attempting to change the present. The "historical shapes" (IH 25) that Rushdie plays with in creating this novel are the product of his memory of history, and by displaying them he hopes to inspire within others who care about India the will to improve upon the past.

In the "Errata" essay, Rushdie points out one of Saleem's most glaring errors. Saleem claims that the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh sits at the feet of the poet Valmiki and takes down the entire text of the *Ramayana*, one of the epic poems of Hinduism. In fact, the legend holds that Ganesh sat at the feet of Vyasa, and took down the *Mahabharata*. All of this comes just after Saleem has declared that he is well versed in Hindu mythology. The point of this error, Rushdie tells us, is that the audience should remember to maintain a "healthy distrust" of "narratorial pomposity" (IH 25). Rushdie is pointing out to those who want *Midnight's Children* to be some kind of historical reference book that it is not, though "many readers wanted it to be . . . history" (25).

In the same essay we are reminded that "[h]istory is always ambiguous" and "[r]eality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions, and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge" (IH 25). We should distrust Saleem just as we should distrust anything that claims to be the whole story of history. History is made up of a thousand different perspectives, and they must all be

considered and accounted for. This is the point at which Bakhtin is most useful because Saleem's version of India is *not* the whole truth. It is incomplete in some places, and just plain wrong in others. Like all versions of Indian history, it needs to interact with other versions and be challenged by them. It needs to compete in the arena of ideas. This is how its value will be sorted out. Saleem destroyed the Midnight Children Conference by excluding Shiva. He destroys the Midnight Children's Conference as a forum for ideas on the future of India by excluding the ideas of Shiva.

Midnight Children is an entry into the forum of ideas on the history of India, but it does not contend that it is the sole truth. The "errata" serve as proof of that fact. They also serve as a call to other ideas to challenge its errors. Saleem acknowledges that it is "a dangerous business to try and impose one's view of things on others" (254). *Midnight's Children* as a text does not seek to impose its view. It creates suspicion of the views presented by including errata. In doing this it acknowledges that it is an incomplete record. The incompleteness of the text challenges other to fill in the gaps so that the Benjaminian "fullness of the past" can be recovered. The text acknowledges its incompleteness in order to provoke other to complete the picture, to augment "the fullness of the past."

In his "Theses," Benjamin argues that the purpose of historical study is to offer the prospect of redemption to mankind. He sees each new generation as has "a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (254). Each new generation offers the hope that with it the past will be redeemed. We continue to look for redemption because it is "indissolubly bound up" with our image of happiness (254). This redemption is only possible through a more complete understanding of the past. Understanding requires that the stories of all sides be told. It is only by including all perspectives on history in

our examination of it that we can hope to redeem history because “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (254).

As an allegory of India, *Midnight's Children* does not include a miracle ending of the sort that Benjamin spoke about. There is no messiah entering or god swooping down to set everything right. The completion of the story of India will have to be the work of Aadam Sinai, his generation, and successive generations. The end of the novel does not include this miracle ending is because it would mean the end of possibility. The gods sweeping down to set the world right provides the happy ending that we wish for, but it also closes the book. The happy ending concludes the story. Rushdie does not wish for the end of this novel to be the end of the Indian story. D. C. R. A.

Goonetilleke writes that “[*Midnight's Children*] ends on a note literally and metaphorically against closure” (44). The lack of closure at the end of this novel is a signal that the story is not really over. Saleem does not get into the business of predictions because predictions are expectations of what will come. He was burdened by the prophecies of Nehru and Ramram Seth, and he does not wish to burden the future with his expectations. *Midnight's Children* offers one version of India, and invites its readers to come up with the best version that they can so that India may benefit from them all.

Saleem Sinai believes he will die soon as *Midnight's Children* comes to a close. In fact, he has known this for some time. He will crack apart into a number of pieces equivalent to the population of India. This causes the tone of the narrator to be rather despairing towards the end. However, in “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie makes clear that the perspective of the narrator “is not entirely that of the author” (16). Despite the fact that Saleem is coming to his end, the story that he tells seems to always “throw up new” possibilities (16). The novel refuses to come to an end because it is filled

with “the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration” (16). What the novel makes clear is that the death of Saleem is not the death of the dream of India. Others will continue to dream in spite of the fact that Saleem has died. Saleem recognizes this, and it is why he writes. His son will continue the dream long after he is gone. Saleem writes so that Aadam Sinai will be aware of the history of the dream of India. He writes so that it is clear why the dream must go on. He writes so that it is clear that there is still much to accomplish.

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