The Context: Journal of English Studies
Volume 12, Issue 5, August 2025
ISSN: 2349-4948 | Impact Factor 4.67
Available at: www.thecontext.in

Article

The Fabric of Myth and Magic in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Dr. Rekha Tiwari

Professor, Department of Basic Science, Techno India NJR, Institute of Technology, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India;
satyajitpatil76@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5th August 2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16745059

Abstract: This study addresses Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a foundational postcolonial narrative that disrupts conventional chronological historiography by weaving ancient myth, fantastical elements, and oral modes of transmission. I examine Rushdie's elaboration of a counter-historicist metafiction, observing how he transfigures Indian history and collective identity through Saleem Sinai, whose individual biography continuously reflects and refracts the trajectories of the subcontinent. I argue that the interpenetration of wonder and oral form serves not as a retreat from reality, but as a genuinely representational tactic that captures the splintered, syncretic, and contradictory conditions of post-independence India. Attention is given to Rushdie's cinematic sensibility, his deployment of mythic reference, and his elaboration of political allegory—most notably concerning the 1975-1977 Emergency—demonstrating that *Midnight's Children* simultaneously critiques the reductionist claims of unitary nationalism and affirms the fractal plurality of the polity. I further investigate the novel's intertextual layering, its invocation of magic-realist aesthetics, and its cosmopolitan urban scenes as deliberate instruments of narrative opposition to both imperial and majoritarian logics.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie; *Midnight's Children*; myth; fantasy; postcolonial fiction; orality

ISSN 2349-4948

Introduction

'To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world' (109), observes the narrator Saleem in Salman Rushdie's epic novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). In this text, the narrator hero is philosophically obsessed with a desire, rather than an Indian desire, for the whole. He attempts to swallow all India. This desire for the whole, the multitude, may be understood as a veritable Indian disease. Noted critic Srivastava sees this desire as a specifically Indian urge to encapsulate the whole of reality (Srivastava 62). Therein lies Saleem's ambition and downfall.

Salman Rushdie's second novel, Midnight's Children, published in 1981, was hailed as a 'Post-colonial meta-fiction, a novel about third world novels' (Brennan 85). Since 80s, a wave of novels by Indian English writers appeared that were influenced by this seminal Rushdie text and its conception of national literature. Rushdie's examination of the relationship between the self and the nation, and his advocacy of the concept that there are as many equally valid versions of the truth as there are Indians, proved liberating for the Indian English writers. *Midnight's Children* has been the major post-colonial novel in English which fictionalizes the events of Indian history from the moment of the birth of nation state in 1947 till the declaration of the emergency by the Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976 which did a death knell to the monolithic dream of a secular-democratic nation-state, perhaps insufficiently imagined, and expressed in the midnight speech by the first Prime Minister. Dreams of the founding fathers since the '60s turned into a veritable myth, and writers expressed disillusionment with the corruption and failure of the nation-state. In opposition to the monolithic concept of the nation, of the history, *Midnight's Children* advocates plurality of our fractured selves. The narrative is determined from the outside, by a pretext of the epic myths, orality, and religion.

Notwithstanding their absolute involvement in history, their individuality, the narrator in a Rushdie text is, more often than not, fantastic and yet is real. Rushdie returned to India in the late '70s as a young man of 30 in the aftermath of the emergency, when many Indians expressed outrage at the Congress party's betrayal of the secular-democratic ideals on which the early post-independence generation had been raised. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie re-affirms and seeks to re-create, in a postmodernist way, the lost nationalistic democratic ideals for the underdog and the underprivileged. Post-colonial history, thus reproduced, is fictionalized and mythicized.

Saleem, the principal narrator, the most gifted of 1001 Midnight's children, has been endowed with a magical power and a vision. His physical impotence and deformed shape may be read as a caricature of the political map of India. All the midnight's children are born with extraordinary power, with a hundred thousand possibilities, but all these possibilities are simply wasted. Saleem and Shiva are born with contrasting qualities. They are leaders of the group, but they have their double, one in reality and another in the realms of myth. Saleem stands for the whole, abundance. He contains within him the mythical creator Brahma. Shiva is the god of destruction and hence, is a rival to Saleem. The novel remains an allegory of Indian history and may be read as a literature of subversion of every form of convention and

ISSN 2349-4948

authority. The narrator patterns his storytelling on oral narration and deploys fantasy in order to be faithful to the reality of India, a country and a nation where millions believe in the world of Spirits. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie presents an ideological post-colonial critique of the linear, imperialist discourse of meta-history, which represses rather than distorts India's account of history.

India is a vast and ancient land teeming with millions of people of different races and colours. Ancient epics, myths, and oral tradition inform the lives of the people even today. The elephant-headed Ganesh is the great storyteller in the ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. He is the patron deity of arts and literature. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem, the powerful narrator, is portrayed as a storyteller of Ganesh-like skill. He is born with an elephantine nose while his alter ego, Shiva, is all knees. Saleem is a reporter of the events of history; he creates alternative history by creating things out of memory and imagines truth as opposed to the truth of history. He preserves his materials in the chutney of fantasy and myth (pickling process). During the day, he works in the chutney factory, and at night, he writes his stories for the imagined listener Padma (Lotus). Lotus has an association with mud. Padma likes listening to stories of sensation and thrill. She has no power of intellection and thought. She believes in stories and more stories. The Indian subaltern multitude is gullible and is swayed by the rhetoric of the politicians and vote catchers easily. Saleem has the potential of an omniscient and omnipotent narrator, creator as well as preserver. He is modern Vishnu. Empowering himself in mythology, the all-knowing narrator chutnifies his version of history and truth. It is "memory's truth, because memory has its special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also: but in the end, it creates its reality" (*MC* 253).

The entire narrative is clothed in fantasy. Myth and reality overlap boundaries. Fantasy may be seen as seriously narrating political reality when the readers and the author share certain views. In this novel, numerical exactitude is a feature which relates fact to fantasy. In his 1983 interview, Rushdie states his fascination for figures when he said, 'It seemed to me that the period between 1947 and 1977, the period from independence to emergency, had a kind of shape to it. It represented a sort of close period in the history of the country. That shape became part of the architecture of the work' (Interview with Salman Rushdie by C. Pattanayak 1983).

Saleem's narrative is valuable precisely because it is self-conscious and invites judgment and criticism. He claims omnipotence and omniscience as a narrator, but more often than not, he laments his inability, his lack, his impotence. There is a kind of post-modern playfulness and trivialization that informs Saleem's narrative and instills in the mind faith, doubt, or questioning. Why and how should the alternative to Saleem be Shiva, a figure of violence? What is the lesson of the emergency? If the idea of a secular nation-state and history is rejected, would the rule of anarchy and lawlessness descend on the life of the nation? Shiva represents the dispossessed without a stake in the dream of the nation and constitutes a political threat to Saleem's plural India. Shiva, very like his mythical origin, is made to signify chaos and meaninglessness. He, in the text, becomes Indira Gandhi's henchman during the emergency when the sterilization

ISSN 2349-4948

of Midnight's Children metaphorically nullifies the hope and possibilities with which they were born. Only he, Shiva, escapes the bulldozer and thus fathers the next generation. There is a glimmer of hope in the end that Saleem can claim one of Shiva's offspring as his son. He thus becomes able to write his autobiography for his son, the elephant-eared son born of Shiva and Parvati, Saleem's wife. Thus, Saleem is not the biological father of his son, just as he is not the biological son of Amina Sinai and Ahmed Sinai, his foster parents. However, then the theme of illegitimate birth can be traced back to the grand epic, the *Mahabharata.* Is it not the fact that the mythical god of Ganesh, the god of fortune, Karna, and many other mythical figures are bastards? In *Midnight's Children*, the theme of illegitimacy perhaps constitutes a critique of the concept of the purity of race, class, and nation. It may be seen as an item of criticism of the concept of Hindutwa vis-a-vis the concept of multiculturalism, which may adequately explain Indian nationalism. Narrator Saleem is born to Vanita, a Hindu nourished by Muslim parents, because of a magical act of the exchange of children at birth in the hospital. Thus, he is allowed to be bathed in the confluence of world religions, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Metaphorically, the narrator is endowed with plural identities and stands for post-colonial India.

In his heritage, the identity of the country emerges. His birth coincides with the birth of a modern nation, nay two nations, and subsequently three (Bangladesh). Birth of the narrator and the birth of the nation take place precisely at the same hour; thus, at birth, Saleem is 'handcuffed to History.' He is the child of history, as other Midnight's children are. He grows, develops, and finally goes into cracks and fragments in the same way as the nation grows and develops and experiences fissures in the body politic. This interplay of the personal and national histories gives the novel its shape and a sense of unity. This metaphoric consciousness of history, awareness of oneself as a blend of past and present, makes the narrator Saleem realize that history operates on a grander scale than any individual.

> "Who, what am I? My answer: I am the total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen and been done, of everything done to me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I have gone, which would not have happened if I had not come. " (*MC* 457).

Rushdie once referred to Indian English writing as 'Empire's bastard child' (Rushdie talk 4-4-1997). Is it not Saleem, the principal narrator of the same status? In *Midnight's Children, the chief protagonist, Saleem, can be seen as an indication of Indian writing in English* claiming centrality of position. However, by now, the English language has achieved centrality because, among other things, Rushdie, as a technician, has made it the fit medium for conveying indigenous consciousness. Rushdie's position as a man and as a writer needs to be understood in this context. He lays claim to India, a kind of centrality, and also a sense of engagement with the history of the subcontinent. He, like his hero Saleem Sinai, has been 'handcuffed to history' in a special sense. He was born in June 1947, and two months later, the British left India.

Midnight's Children portrays the delirious joy of the people which accompanies the formal dissolution of the empire and birth of the Indian nation-state at the precise hour of midnight in 1947, when Mountbatten hands over power to Nehru, the first Prime Minister. Nehru's famous midnight speech, coined in the finest English language, sounds metaphoric and ironic. '...years ago we made a tryst with destiny .... A moment comes, which comes but rarely when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance...' The sub-text of this metaphoric speech turns out to be a text of collaboration with the English-educated nationalist elite. The leaders of the new state will, no doubt, reproduce the colonial method of control and exploitation. It becomes the story of a new nation, 'insufficiently imagined.' Chances of forging a new nationalist discourse are simply lost sight of, as the subsequent happenings will prove. The Raj leaves behind hollow men like Ahmed Sinai. Methwold's transfer of property to indigenous elite like Ahmed Sinai, who ape an Oxford drawl, land who are secretly pleased when they lose pigmentation due to skin disease, because it makes them resemble the Europeans, is an eloquent testimony to the nature of independence. This tendency persists with our academicians and professionals. Colonial institutions still have a surprising spell over our minds. It is resolved that Methwold Estate is to be preserved and retained. Saleem describes the estate thus, 'Methwold's Estate: four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents- large, durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats...houses which their owner, William Methwold, has named majestically after the palaces of?Europe' (*MC* 94).

This allegorical statement by the narrator suggests the passing on of the colonial mantle to the Indian nationalist elite, which not only inherited power from the colonial masters but also love for the exotic as opposed to the indigenous. In the new dispensation, progress means back-pedaling, the rise of fanaticism, and the cracking up of Indian independence. India had been divided anew. However, the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers or mountains or any natural features of the terrain: they were instead walls of words. language divided us' (*MC* 189). In the same process, the subcontinent was divided. The departing imperialist did a parting kick by dividing the subcontinent on religious lines and installing a class of people who would carry Macaulay's legacy, brown in skin and English in character. Eloquent Nehru and Ahmed Sinai belong to this class. *Midnight's Children* thus constitutes a critique of nationalist rhetoric which makes a linear downward journey from 1947 to 77, the year of the declaration of national Emergency, which means the curtailment of democratic rights of the people. The episode of the emergency and Mrs. Gandhi is described as an allegory which is an indictment of the state-controlled media. The media projects the dictator as god and Mrs. Gandhi as Devi, the mother Goddess in her terrible aspect with a centre-parting hair. The fascist slogan 'Indira is India' (*MC* 427) is relayed over the media. The Nehruvian dream of a secular democratic nation comes full circle, and the post-emergency period sees the dethronement of the fascist god, the end of one-party rule, and the installation of a Janata Coalition government, which, henceforth, becomes the shape of Indian politics. Democracy demands a plural society as opposed to a unitary one.

ISSN 2349-4948

However, despite the sense of despair, the journey from wholeness to fragments, the novel ends on a note of hope, rather a political one; that is the intensification of the struggle of polarized political forces in opposition in the Congress model of nationalism. As the narrative progresses, the disintegration becomes increasingly rapid. Saleem mentions cracks in his body. 'My poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am disintegrating slowly for the moment.... I shall eventually crumble into six hundred and thirty million particles of anonytmous and oblivious dust' (*MC* 37). With his final words, the disintegrating Saleem prophesies his fate and articulates the post-colonial condition of the generation of midnight's children.

'Yes, they will trample me underfoot.... Reducing me to specks of voiceless dust....because it is the privilege and curse of the midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times' (63). At the end, Saleem's body breaks into as many parts as there are Indians, and there are as many stories to tell. Saleem has told his story, may be imperfect and unreliable, but his own.'Stubbornly and against all odds, the victim transforms himself into a protagonist, simply through the telling of his own story (Rege 200).

The crisis of the Unitary nation state opens up space for a thousand contending claims, and it seems that the 'Crisis of the once dominant nationalism opened up space for new discursive models' (Rege 201). Thus, there is a tension between the narrator and the narrative. Saleem, the narrator, may sound pessimistic, but the feeling of the book remains affirmative in its abundance, multiplicity, and urbanism. At the impressionable age, Rushdie felt a deep attachment for the urban city of his birth, the metropolitan city of Bombay, for its spirit of abundance, secularism, cosmopolitanism, and urban culture.

This epic novel was conceived in a dream about the large Indian city of Bombay, an industrial city, a city of film, and also of a young man's dream. For a long time, the author had cherished a desire to write a big and voluminous book about Bombay, where he was born in June 1947. The city was in his dream because of its uniqueness, its films, cosmopolitanism, and urbanity. He left Bombay for England in his teens for higher education, as James Joyce left Dublin for Paris. Bombay was to Rushdie as Dublin was to Joyce. In both cases, the relationship of the artist with the city of his birth remains problematised. For a migrant writer, the concepts of home and nation are imaginary constructs. The city as a metaphor defines the authorial self and, in a way, informs the novel. In his collection of Essays, Imaginary Homelands, Rushdie observes, 'to be a Bombayite and afterwards a Londoner was also to fall in love with the metropolis' (IH 404). The metropolis embodies hybridity, impurity, intermingling...culture, ideas, politics, movies, songs' (IH 394). Post-colonial subject can find no better paradigm than the city to define his self. In the colonial times, the culture of the city was considered alien and impure. In the novels of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, and others, an ideal village was considered a true signifier of Indianness and Indian values. In Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), the hero rejects the metropolitan Indian as un-Indian.

ISSN 2349-4948

Bombay, being an industrial city, had no meaning for a Brahmin like Raja Rao. Indian fiction has travelled a long way from the 1960s, and in Rushdie's 1980s novel, the metropolitan and industrial city of Bombay appears to be a true signifier of Indianness. Politically, the Indian nation state prefers the Nehruvian dream of secular and democratic modern Industrial India to "the rural handicraft-loving, sometimes medieval figure of Gandhi" (Attenborough's Gandhi 104). If the villages are considered to be the site for Indian values and if true Indianness is supposed to be constituted by Brahminical hierarchy and the purity of race and caste, the modern nation has no future. Modern cities are the sites for plurality and multiplicity, and hence, the modern Indian villages must adopt a more urban culture, which is not unitary and plural. In its cosmopolitan nature, the city of Bombay represents an India which, through the ages, has been the confluence of many nations and races, East and West. In the post-colonial situation, terms like 'pure country' and 'corrupt city' do not exist. Post-coloniality and hybridity go together. Reading *Midnight's Children*, a post-colonial text, in the context of other cultural production may be meaningful. We know Rushdie's focus is not the realistic portrayal of the events of post-colonial history but rather a third world consciousness of history, truth, and nation shaped through myth, fantasy, dream, and orality. These tools constitute an umbrella term 'magic realism.' Bombay cinema has all along remained a site for fantasy, hallucination, dream, and wish-fulfilment for the Indians irrespective of class affiliations.

The narrative of *Midnight's Children* parodies Bombay cinema's fantasy operations. Stock narrative situations like mistaken exchange at birth and stock cinema figures like good 'ayah' Mary Pereira recall Bombay film. The most frequently discussed cinematic element of *Midnight's Children* is the exchange of the infants Shiva and Saleem at birth. Rushdie himself, in his essay "Midnight's Children and Shame," makes a significant comment on this particular cinematic convention.

'... This melodramatic device... was a genuine kind of Bombay Talkie, B-movie notion, and I thought that a book which grew out of the movie city ought to contain such notions. These are children not so much of their parents but children of time, children of history' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* 4). Other cinematic operations are those of natural mothers who are perfect and evil stepmothers. Vituous male protagonists are contrasted with evil counterparts and so on. Shiva, Saleem's alter-ego, combines the role of rebel-hero with the villain of a Bombay film. In the 1970s and 1980s, the reach of Bombay cinema and its influence on the Indian mind can easily be imagined. By sheer volume of production and star charisma, Bombay film dominates the dreams of the millions even in the anti-Hindi southern states. Thus, the Bombay film industry becomes 'an important agency for Hindi-speaking cultural hegemony in post-independence India' (Natarajan 167). Benedict Anderson's thesis about the fictional component of nation, the role of print in helping people imagine themselves as nationals along with others they have not seen, is powerfully pertinent to a consideration of cinema (with imagined communities). Thus, the Bombay film, with its apparatus of myth and fantasy, provides a site for mythic unity in the fact of fragmentation of the body politic in contemporary India.

ISSN 2349-4948

On the realistic level, such conventions suggest the plurality of post-colonial identities. Saleem represents the multiple and complex identities of the post-colonial Indian because he is born of a British father and a Hindu mother, exchanged at birth by a Christian nurse and brought up by a Muslim businessman as his son. This comic-epic novel is a blend of literary genres and is coined in a mood of irony, satire, and fantasy, but the author has a serious purpose in mind. The narrative is devised in a mood of playfulness, non-seriousness, and trivialization, as post-modern fiction mostly is. Rushdie's act of juxtaposing myth and contemporary post-colonial Indian history serves as a model of intertextuality which informs, among other texts, Sashi Tharoor's work *The Great Indian Novel*. However, in the case of Rushdie, the classic myth only explains the contemporary situation. Tharoor trivializes the epic heroes in a mood of hilarity. Juxtaposition of trivial and profound, elitism and mass culture of Bombay film, centrality and marginality of positions and vice versa, purity and hybridity of racial and national identities, and post-coloniality of history are the major themes and issues which the epic novel *Midnight's Children* successfully addresses.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Works cited

Ahmad, Aizaz. *In Theory*. London: Verso, 1992.

Ali, Tariq. "Review of *Midnight's Children*," *New Left Review*: 136 1982: 87-95.

Flanagan, Kathleen. "The Fragmented Self in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," *Commonwealth Novel in English*: 5 (1) 1992: 38–45.

Parameshwaran, Uma. "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art," *Ariel*: 14 (1983): 34-45.

Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight's Children*. 1981, Londres: Picador, 1982.

Sanga, Jaina C. *Salman Rushdie's Post-Colonial Metaphors*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001