

In Search of Self: the Pangs of Identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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“How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place – and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past.”

Edward Said (*After the Last Sky*, 1986)

Though the contemporary world is being looked at as a post-racial, post-national, and post-colonial world, there are moments from the history of the Indian subcontinent that are coming back to haunt us. Memory is no more an individual's psychic visit to the past; rather, it is from a collective memory that the nation is made out of a geographical space. In India, as in many other countries of the world, the rise of the fascist, fundamentalist, and rightist forces are creating major upheavals in the contemporary society. On the contrary, the advocates of globalization and multiculturalism are hailing the contemporary world as the best human history has witnessed yet. In such a bi-polar world, the “self” is suffering from a continuous pang of identity or the lack of it. Identities, like maps of the day, are becoming more and more elastic and lucid. How does such a perspective impact the literature of the age, especially literature that deals with a collective trauma from the past and is yet burdened with revealing the contemporary self's dilemma of belonging?

Salman Rushdie, brought up with the memories of a fractured nation, deals with this search of the self in his fictional art. This paper is an attempt to look at Rushdie's fiction in general and his masterpiece *Midnight's Children* in particular to analyze the pangs of identity in a post-partition scenario. Towards the said purpose, this paper would make use of a postcolonial, postmodernist approach.

As the all-pervading postcolonial narrator of the text, Saleem the “swallow of lives” (MNC 9) warns us that “Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view:” (MNC 200). The phrase “midnight's children” in the aforementioned sentence refers both to the children of midnight Salim is talking about as well as the author's conscious concern with the text itself. Drawing from the postmodern tradition of “disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism, anti-illusionism and self-reflexiveness” (Woods 67) Rushdie concocts a heady mix of history and narrative technique to bring on the table a plethora of issues concerning the postcolonial identity of the Indian born after partition. By challenging the conservative comprehension of post-British India and simultaneously mocking at the utopian dreams of absolute freedom, the author creates an India in the text that resonates with alternative versions of history and narrative. As Saleem, confused with the intent of his presence in a particularly fragile point in the history of the nation, would ask himself in the self-reflexive pattern of a postmodern narrator:

I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time... Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort every-thing – to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? (MNC 166)

Saleem, bestowed with the midnightly power of peering into other people's minds and thoughts, innately discovers the very political nature of his trait at the tender age of nine and is evidently confounded by the same; as an insider-outsider in the newly partitioned, newly formed Indian nation, Saleem comes across servants who "sold their identities on little pieces of pink paper" (MNC 132), of women who "Faced with the guilts of the world" (MNC158), and is also acutely conscious of the complexity of his knowledge of being "not his parents' son..." (MNC 281). Having thus pointed out the dichotomies of marginality that existed in the young Indian nation, Rushdie brings to the forefront the inadequacy of categorical identities, the dismissiveness of such practice on the "local, practical identities of ordinary people" (Hogan 527).

Intertwined with the birth of the nation and his own, Salim's search for his self begins with the beginning of the text itself. The event of his birth has necessarily initiated the pangs of identity he would suffer from as one whose "destinies are indissolubly chained" (MNC 9) to that of the nation. When Saleem tells us that of all the midnight's children, his gift is the greatest, and thus announces himself as the leading voice of them all, the reader has no option but to agree with him. Questioning Saleem's authenticity is beyond the scope of the reader because Saleem tells us time and again that "Reality is a question of perspective" (MNC 165). If there are other versions of the narrativised history of the nation available elsewhere, he is not bothered with those. Because by identifying himself as the bearer of the destiny of the nation, Saleem seeks to find the answers to his twisted individual fate.

As a text, *Midnight's Children* is almost autobiographical in the authorial attempt to recapture India where "history is given meaning through the retelling of individual experience" (Miller 42). As one with the stories, Saleem playfully pickles and preserves the stories of the beginning and continuance of the nation as he would like to; As a postcolonial, postmodern self searching for meaning in his own life and in that of others, Saleem is not merely "obsessed by beginnings" (Karamchetti 81) but also by how the stories would come to an end. Ironically, Saleem not only emphasizes the need to focus on "good hard facts" (MNC 338), he also self-reflexively questions his own authority and authenticity as he questions "But which facts?" (MNC 338).

As one born to poverty and elevated to a life of abundance owing to the "crime" of Mary Pereira, Saleem who should have led the life of Shiva and vice-versa, also pokes fun at the so-called "hierarchical distinction between high and low cultures" (Woods 75) and blurs the boundaries of conventional wisdom. While one is tempted to suggest that Saleem, as the voice of India, could be the voice of sophistication as he claims that he can manage a "show of erudition" (MNC 213) and might maintain a "purity of accents" (MNC 213), any such comprehension is denied as he vehemently remembers that he could have been the 'othered one.' He comes to terms with his identity as one that was acquired through circumstance and not through birth. His name, in the newly formed nation, becomes the primary marker of his identity. As he ardently declares: "Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also victims of our titles" (MNC 304).

There are cracks all over Saleem's body and he leaks from these cracks, as if referring to the porous history of the subcontinent, the reality of porous borders in spite of the military

presence, and porous identities, all at once. He tells us from the very beginning about his disintegration:

“I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug--that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of an acceleration” (MNC 37)

As one of the 531 surviving children of the midnight of August 15, 1947, Saleem not only suffers from the pangs of identity in his mindscape, his body too is withered, tattered, and brittle like the fragile sense of identity he has to live with as a child of the post-independence generation. Saleem's body is analogous to the nation's that has “cracked” and “leaked” chronically in the postcolonial scenario. The communal riots of the 1940's, the language marches of the 1950's, the Indo-Pak war in 1965, the emergency rule in 1975, all these historical events are weaved into the text to demonstrate this pertinent fragility, the pangs of existence and identity that the postcolonial Indian nation has suffered from, much like Saleem's tattered physicality. Saleem thus becomes the embodiment of the nation itself:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come ... (MNC 383).

One of the major concerns of *Midnight's Children* is its almost obsessive dealing with the impotence of both Saleem as well as the Indian nation and the impact of this inherited impotence on the individual and national identities. Burdened with the pessimism begotten in the legacy of partition, the author/narrator seems absolutely convinced that India as a nation would fail in the long term. As he creates the myth of the new nation, a nation “which had never previously existed” and “would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream,” (MNC 112), a “mass fantasy,” (MNC 112), the “new myth- a collective fiction,” (MNC 112), it seems as if Rushdie is almost in agreement with the colonial masters who left the land with the hope that it fails as a nation. As an author seeking world-wide recognition, where the world primarily means a western audience, has Rushdie been guilty of the crime of playing to the benches, or in this case, to the publication houses located in US or UK? Or is it precisely done in order to negotiate the problematic of the cultural and textual issue of a postcolonial identity hybridized in the irrefutable circumstances of the nation's history? The author answers to this oft-raised query in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” thus: “The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration” (Rushdie 16). While Saleem suffers from the fragility of the identities he has generated for himself, he is also aware that it is a storied existence that can regenerate his “crumbling, over-used body” (MNC 9).

Rushdie, as one informed in the tradition of the east and the comprehension of the west, thus underlines that “in fact, identity *is* discourse, that we *are* the stories told about us. And this has important implications for the national literature - and so identity - of a country like India” (Karamcheti 82, emphasis original). Furthermore, Rushdie is no mean artist who one reads to find answers to the contemporary Indian condition from a metafictional text. What emerges thus “is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable” (Bhaba 128). As

an Indian reader of the text it is also interesting to find the text inaccessible in parts to the western audience because of the sprinkle of words in Indian languages in the text. It is absolutely deliberate in part of the author and the narrator of the text to use words that cannot be decoded by the all-knowing west. It is, in fact done to give an authenticity Saleem declares at the very outset- to proffer an Indian identity to the text. Hence, the search for identity that Saleem undertakes does not necessarily limit itself to the fictional character(s) or even the nation- it ironically looks at the textual self/selves as well so that it becomes “*in a sense, a mirror of our own*” (MNC 167, emphasis original). As Sawhney and Sawhney observe in their essay “Reading Rushdie after September 11, 2001,” “...for here was a narrator both *firangi* and *desi* (foreign and native)-a *desi* hidden in a *firangi* or vice versa” (Sawhney and Sawhney 432, emphasis original).

Like India, a nation that showed “no signs of coming” (MNC 112), Saleem, it is to be noted, was the product of a difficult labour, so difficult that it squeezed the life of his biological mother. In the recurring self-expression of defiance, of a definite unwillingness to be born in that all-important midnight of Indian independence, Saleem’s journey towards his beginning of an identity in the postcolonial atmosphere is, to borrow a phrase from William Burrough’s novel *The Naked Lunch*, “defined by negatives and absences” (Woods 65). Having been unable to avoid the coincidence of his birth, of the when and where of it, Saleem is burdened with the pangs of identity crisis that the young India faced in the global scenario, of being “Present but insubstantial; actual but without being or weight...” (MNC 381). Contrarily, Saleem’s son, the one who was “the child of a father who was not his father” (MNC 420) is one who does not “surrender to dreams” (MNC 425) though he “heard too much” (MNC 420) and that could perhaps be the “ironic compromise”(Bhaba 126) that Saleem must come to terms with in order to meet his own “demand for identity” (Bhaba 126), an identity that comprehends and bears the marks of the colossal pangs it had to begin its search with.

Born in the historic midnight of the nation’s independence and partition, Saleem is ironically trapped in the life of another, signifying life and death at once. He is not what he could have been though he is repeatedly told that “he kin be just what-all you want” (MNC 420). The loss of identity is something that Saleem has not merely to live with but is born with. Through the stories that he claims to know and tell an audience that is as unpredictable and fickle as “our Padma,” Saleem constantly tries to get into his sense of identity in a manner that is simultaneously self-reflective and unsettling. Being thus “Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another” (Fanon 8), Saleem must ensure the continuity of his fluid self in an effervescent world. Saleem’s self-conscious, self-reflexive narrative underlines a singular search for identity in a multi-polar world, and as the text exhibits it, there are multitudes of the self one has to deal with in a postcolonial India, in spite of the accompanying pangs of it.

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