



## **Decoding the Magic in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Re-reading the novel as an account of the political reality of the Partition of India**

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to view the device of magic realism used in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a lens through which the political consciousness of the two nations (India and Pakistan) is presented. By using elements of fantasy, the very event of partition is given a new dimension. This dimension is one which projects itself as a binding factor for all those who have collectively been a part of that single moment- the stroke of midnight. The partition of India is reflected as that event which brings together the fate of all those who passed through it. This, certainly, has a much deeper implication in a political sense than what is reflected as the curious bestowing of supernatural powers upon the children born at the hour of the partition. The title itself becomes a product of both the magical realism presented by Rushdie as well as the political reality of the two countries in question. The "children" metaphor for these two countries is used literally by Salman Rushdie as he creates an alternate dimension of reality where magical children reside. Further, the protagonist Saleem Sinai's journey through the effects of partition as he struggles to make sense of his fragmented identity is deeply symbolic of the national consciousness within which Saleem and his family reside. Through this paper, it is aimed to decode the various symbols of the effects of partition, the national identity of people, and the postcolonial impact on them that are presented within the world of Rushdie's novel as magic and fantasy.

**Keywords:** partition, magic realism, fantasy, identity.





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Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* presents an account of the partition of India through the character of Saleem Sinai and his family. Generations of people come together and are bound with a common fate of fragmented identity with the occurrence of a single event- the partition. Rushdie uses magic realism in order to create a literal representation of this binding of fate which has manifested itself into magical powers bestowed upon the children born at the stroke of midnight. While India and Pakistan themselves are the metaphorical "children" of midnight, Rushdie employs real children as characters in his novel who serve the purpose of depicting the consequences of the partition and its impact upon people. It is upon decoding the various symbols of magic in *Midnight's Children* that one may acquaint oneself with Rushdie's powerful statement upon the trauma and disturbance caused by the partition.

While the partition leads to a series of grand aims and promises wished to be acted upon by the political leaders, the reality is very different. Saleem's life is juxtaposed with the life of the nation; and all the crests and troughs through the course of his life are paralleled with the events occurring in India. The events and people associated with Saleem are all a reflection of a larger truth which leads their existence to present a kind of a symbolic value. Each incident and individual, then, begins to hold layers of interpretation as they depict an alternate meaning. The entire purpose of magic realism has always been to create a new dimension of the world where the impossible or the supernatural is assigned the task of presenting the truth which is otherwise difficult to carry out. In this novel, too, magic realism serves a similar purpose.

This paper seeks to decode these motifs and present the hidden political reality of the partition which lies beneath the symbols of magic and myth. The various magical powers possessed by the various children, all have a symbolic value attached; just as the little details of Saleem's life- magical and non-magical- are paralleled with the life of India as a nation. Further, the hour of midnight during which Rushdie's realm of fantasy is constructed, is a microcosmic





representation of the binding of fate of all those who co-exist through it. This paper, therefore, also seeks to analyse the precise moment of partition and its aftermath through the narrative presented by Rushdie.

The idea of magic realism has always been a matter of intrigue because, as Maggie Ann Bowers puts it in her book *Magic(al) Realism*, “it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist,” (Bower 3). Rushdie has used this technique to set up such an atmosphere of the partition of India which is rich in chaos, confusion and fragmentation in the name of freedom and liberation. The purpose of bestowing magic upon the 1001 children born in the hour of midnight has a plethora of interpretations. While the primary significance of these magical children lies in Rushdie’s attempt to create a parallel metaphor of the newly created states; it is the nature of magic that Rushdie has chosen for the specific children which requires scrutiny.

The idea of the magic being most potent in the children born exactly at the stroke of midnight may be read as a symbolic representation of the promise of change and novelty that was made right at the inception of Independence. In the first few seconds of the midnight hour, children were born with “the highest talents of which men had ever dreamed” (Rushdie 276). These included, besides Shiva and Saleem, a boy who was gifted with “the lost arts of alchemy, with which he regenerated the fortunes of his ancient but dissipated house” and a dhobi’s daughter who “could fly higher than any bird simply by closing her eyes” (276). Along with these there was a child with the gift of travelling in time. However, as the moment ended, the promise begins to start fading almost instantly and with that the children’s powers begin fading too as “Those children born in the last seconds of the hour were (to be frank) little more than circus freaks” ( 275), and these children “were the unfortunates, the living casualties of that numinous hour” as they consisted of “bearded girls”, “a boy with. . . gills of a freshwater mahaseer trout” and “ Siamese twins with two bodies dangling off a single head” (275). The ones born in the half-hour had rather interesting faculties– “a witch-girl with the power of healing by the laying-on of hands” (275) and “a wealthy tea-planter’s son in Shillong who had the blessing (or possibly the curse) of being incapable of forgetting anything he ever saw or heard” (275). This hour, then, becomes a microcosmic representation of the fate of India- the beginning, with the birth of Saleem and Shiva, seems to have a certain potency and as time passes, this potency begins to be engulfed by underlying issues that had always persisted in the state. As Rushdie himself states, “the midnight miracle had indeed been remarkably hierarchical in nature, that the children’s abilities declined dramatically on the basis of the distance of their time of birth from midnight”





(315). Magic, therefore, becomes the manifestation of reality in a manner that may allow the readers to comprehend the political intricacies of the novel by means of a literal representation.

Later in the novel, the idea of magic is manifested in the form of the subaltern magicians whose magic may be, as Nicole Weickgennet Thiara writes in *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography: Writing the Nation into Being*, “a magic of a non-miraculous kind, but despite their diminished magical potential they are nevertheless promising” (Thiara 47). As Frederick Luis Aldama suggests in *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie*, Rushdie “uses magicorealism to convey a heteroglossic worldview that conveys various critiques of colonial, religious, and imperialistic monologisms in India’s past” (Aldama 25). The characters of Shiva and Saleem are the primary source of magic, repulsion, tension, conflict and power in the novel. Like the mythical allusion associated with his name, Shiva is projected as a destructive force as opposed to Saleem’s conscious effort to construct something for the well-being of all. However, Shiva’s temperament is largely a result of his subaltern status. As Nichole Weickgennant Thiara suggests “Shiva is the many-headed monster which irritates liberal nationalist discourse, which in turn tries to keep the masses at bay” (Thiara 35).

The final manifestation of a supernatural figure in this novel is that of Indira Gandhi who is depicted as a witch-like widow. She plays the role of Saleem’s nemesis as she becomes the result of the death of his magical identity; and also, of the magical lives of all the other children of midnight. Katherine Frank has made some arguments in the article “Mr. Rushdie and Mrs. Gandhi” which point to the reason behind Indira Gandhi’s portrayal of a witch; as Rushdie perceived her “cardinal sin” to be “the Emergency she imposed in 1975” which had led to the suspension of civil rights, and “opposition leaders and thousands of political prisoners jailed, slums ruthlessly cleared” and “a notorious program of sterilization implemented” (Frank 252) by Sanjay Gandhi. These events led to a destruction of the democracy and thereby it is reflected in Saleem’s life too as he represents the body of the nation.

The text describes the hour of partition in paradoxical terms as “in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab” (Rushdie 155). Syed Amanuddin has pointed out in his article “The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy” that this novel “mythologises a newly independent nation with a history and culture of four thousand years and its current dreams and hopes and mistakes” (Amanuddin 44). The account of partition manifests itself in a combination of real events along with the fictitious events created by Rushdie where each of these ideas are



explored. While India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru's speech is heard in sporadic bursts; one of these bursts being "free India, where all her children may dwell" (158), simultaneously the reader is made aware of the actual children born at the stroke of midnight who become the literal embodiment of the idea of "Unity in Diversity". Further, the fragments of Nehru's speech are superimposed upon the birth of Saleem and Shiva in complete contradiction. As Nehru says, ". . . India awakens to life and freedom" (156), the narrative shows Vanita losing her life to bring Shiva into this world. As he goes on with his speech, ". . . and when the soul of the nation long suppressed finds utterance" (156), one finds Ahmed Aziz is "still clutching a chair" (156). This tight grasp is contrasted with the freedom of the soul; and ironically, when Nehru says "We end today a period of ill-fortune" (156), Ahmed Sinai lets go of the chair and damages his toe- an event which may be read as the collateral damage that was caused as a result of this freedom.

Saleem and Shiva's birth at the same instant may also be read as a symbol of the newly born nations at the stroke of midnight- India and Pakistan. While they were essentially one, a single moment fragmented not only the land, but also the identities of people inhabiting the parent nation. Shiva and Saleem are a depiction of the division of this identity which is further intensified by their social divide. However, it is only Saleem who has been considered to be the nation itself. As Agnes Gyorke writes in "Allegories of Nation in *Midnight's Children*", Saleem "is destined to occupy the position of the midnight's child, and thus to become the vehicle of a metaphor that had existed long before his birth" (Gyorke 172).

When Padma hears this account of the birth of two nations along with the birth of the two literal midnight's children, her immediate reaction is to call Saleem a "monster". The metaphor of the monster, too, may be decoded as an appropriate reference to the nation that was being born at the cost of a multitude of lives. The idea of a monster or a sub-human creature is analysed by Rushdie himself as he states that all the children born during the midnight hour were "only partially the offspring of their parents" as they were parented not just by their biological parents but "by history" (Rushdie 159). By stating this, Saleem makes it a point that it is not just him who has been subjected to the oddities of life but all others too who have been a part of that moment of fragmentation and division.

The novel, in its use of magic realism makes a subtle attack against Nehruvian ideas that were propagated by Jawaharlal Nehru upon the independence of India. He popularised the notion of India having "the widest tolerance of belief and custom"; and Rushdie has been quite critical of this idea as he uses the characters of the children of midnight to display the disparity



that exists among them. Upon reaching a certain level of sensibility, Saleem states he found “children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis” and Brahmins beginning to “feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of the untouchables” (Rushdie 353). Therefore, it must be noted that if such disparity exists at such a microcosmic level consisting of 1001, then the macrocosmic reality is meant to be much more disturbing. As the narrative states, “Children, however magical, are not immune to their parents; and the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their mind,” (353). Moreover, with time these children began to fear that their being was coming to a fruitless end, that there was absolutely no hope for bringing out any change as they began getting consumed with “selfishness and snobbishness and hate” (422).

The character of Shiva embodies a very significant aspect of the politics within which the novel is placed. His position is indicative of the failure of the Nehru government’s policy of eradicating inequality. His state of deprivation lies in stark contrast to the idea of curbing poverty that was propagated during the hour of independence.

As far as the creation of Pakistan is concerned, it was originally based on Jinnah’s two-nation theory which was based on the idea that there already existed two nations in India- one Hindu and the other Muslim. Therefore, he began campaigning for an independent Muslim nation called Pakistan. Rushdie, however, as Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara states in “Hybridity and the Chutification of History”, “rejects this theory and represents Pakistan’s concept of the nation as intrinsically Muslim as problematic and built on the antagonism toward its neighbour Jinnah” (Thiara 67). This idea finds an explanation when Parvati-the-witch loses patience and exclaims, “O, Saleem . . . God knows what that Pakistan has done to you; but you are so badly changed” (Rushdie414). One must also remember that since Saleem is a counterpart of Nehru in the microcosm, his notion of Pakistan irrespective of what it really is, is always displayed in very polished and formal terms. One may look back to Nehru’s statement which was quoted in *The Hindu* on August 15, 2010 where he said, “We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us, whatever may happen,” (“Mr. Nehru’s Message” 1). It is almost with a similar sense of diplomacy that Saleem speaks about his experience with Pakistan.

Indian politics of the post-partition era has been problematized by many thinkers time and again through the decades. One of the primary reasons one finds upon locating the problem is the failure of the imagination of a certain kind of public sphere that was envisioned. Saleem



exists at a position of privilege much like the political leaders of the nation and chooses to conceal himself in a private realm where he can mourn and contemplate the loss of his vision of the nation. However, those who were co-existing with him from his birth do not get a similar opportunity. Shiva, for instance, being subjected to very different circumstances throughout his life looks at this failure of the imagined prosperity of the country in a different manner. It must also be noted, that just like the elitist political leaders who Saleem seems to embody within his own disposition, he goes on to find the aggression of the lower class (represented using Shiva) to be rather disturbing. At a very early instance in his life, Saleem admits that he “didn’t like Shiva” (Rushdie 314). He goes on to justify his dislike by stating that he “disliked the roughness of his tongue, the crudity of his ideas” (314). This becomes a very significant point of analysis as it displays Saleem’s innermost feelings about the ideas of revolution and change coming from the place where change was needed most. For Saleem, much like Nehru and other figures, the discussion of elevated ideas seemed to be easier than the implementation of these ideas; and the origination of these ideas from a region which was otherwise declared to be voiceless seemed to be more threatening than anything else.

Using magical realism, Rushdie employs Saleem’s intuitive and psychic abilities as a tool to map out the new nation which was born at the stroke of midnight. Eric Strand has compared this to Benedict Anderson’s idea of the “Imagined Community”. Saleem largely depends on his imaginative potential in constructing a happy and united group of the children of midnight; much like Nehru’s vision which is almost fictitious in nature as the accomplishment of the grand promises made during the partition are far from being pursued in the real sphere. Eric Strand writes in the article “Gandhian Communalism and the Midnight’s Children Conference” that “the unlimited locomotion of Saleem’s telepathy allows him to conduct what amounts to a mapping and census of the new nation” (Strand 993). The manner in which Saleem goes on to narrate his vision to Padma even after he has been stripped of his magical powers displays the kind of elitism that was inherent in the political leaders who held the reigns of the country from the moment of independence and did not let it go even after facing a defeat. Padma becomes a symbol of the working-class or the common man whereas Saleem establishes himself as the distanced and elite nation-builder as he presents “a tall tale” (Strand 995) to her. While it is true that Saleem does not inhabit the rage of Shiva as a classic victim of the lower strata of the society and neither the extreme rationality of Indira Gandhi, yet he seems to be closer to Gandhi in his exertion of a privileged status in the society.

The major question of why or how at all do the magical children exist remains a point of conjecture. On one hand, they “embody vague notions of India’s promise and a sense of the





extraordinary potential of the nation” (Thiara, *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography* 33); on the other hand, they seem to critique this supposed extraordinariness. Saleem’s psychic abilities coupled with his oversensitive nose, and Shiva’s physical strength as a result of his large knees seem to be two sides of the same coin as one represents mental faculties while the other represents physical faculties. It is only if they combine their skills together that they can live up to the extraordinariness that was ordained for them through the bestowing of these skills. However, their abilities are fragmented just like the fate of the two nations. Saleem’s abilities in specific seem to have a certain depth which Rushdie presumably expects his readers to reach. When Saleem realises the manner in which his powers function, he feels like he “was somehow creating a world” (Rushdie 241). Upon feeling the intensity of his capabilities further, he believes that he “had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of [his] gift”; he felt that he was the creator of the events around him as he was “*making them happen*” (241). This may be paralleled with the perception of the political leaders of the time who indulged in nation-building so passionately and began to believe that they alone were the creators of the new nations born at midnight; and as it happens with these leaders, so it happens with Saleem that a realisation dawns upon him that he alone cannot be the creator of anything worthwhile as the harmonious contribution of the masses was required in the success of any grand plan.

Parvati-the-witch is another significant character in the novel whose name itself is symbolic of the supreme life force, the Divine Feminine. One may safely go on to presume that Parvati will have a connection with Shiva through the course of the novel; however, her magical powers unite not only with Shiva but also with Saleem. This trio and their overlapping of abilities and fates, then, creates a complex web of events which are all interconnected with the events occurring in the nation. Parvati-the-witch has been described by Rushdie as being “born a mere seven seconds after midnight on August 15<sup>th</sup>” and had been granted “the powers of the true adept, the illuminatus, the genuine gifts of conjuration and sorcery, the art which required no artifice” (Rushdie 277). It is through Parvati’s powers that Saleem gains insight into the transience of his existence; as she carries him in a basket making him invisible, he feels his “hold on the world slip away” and further imagines “how easy, how peaceful not to never to return” (533). This episode may be read as Saleem’s loss of grip on the nation and on all the plans he had in mind to implement for its progress as he finally learns how fragile his existence is to be able to bear such a voluminous task of nation-building.

The other children and their magical power, too, have symbolic meaning attached to them. A boy from Kerala “had the ability of stepping into mirrors and re-emerging through any





reflective surface in the land– through lakes and (with greater difficulty) the polished metal bodies of automobiles” (274); and a “Goanese girl with the gift of multiplying fish” (274); and a boy from Kashmir who could change his sex. These abilities may be read as a representation of the elite class and its position in independent India where it transcended beyond boundaries, hunger and poverty, and sexism. Certain other children, however, had their powers as a representation of the common people where the possession of such magic led to their ostracism instead. A girl “at Budge Budge outside Calcutta . . . had the power of inflicting physical wounds” (274) by her words and as a consequence it was decided to “lock her in a bamboo cage and float her off down the Ganges to the Sunderbans jungles” (274) - an ideal fate for a witch!

The Midnight’s Children’s Conference is also rich in symbolic value as it serves as a mock set-up of the Parliament in terms of the chaos it exhibits. Just like the real democracy, this little conference also has extremely elevated aims to accomplish. Nichole Weickgennant Thiara states that they “passionately discuss collectivism, individualism, revolution, capitalism, altruism, science, religion, women’s rights, improvements for untouchables and tribals” (Thiara, *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography* 34) and so on. Saleem serves as the representation of Nehru in his microcosmic conference; and like Nehru’s radically progressive ideas remain confined to theory only, Saleem’s hope also find a similar fate.

The use of numbers in the demonstration of the magical children also contains symbolic importance. Ten years after their birth, 420 children out of 1001 are dead. As stated in the novel itself, “420 has been, since time immemorial, the number associated with fraud, deception, and trickery” (Rushdie 272). The use of the number 1001 is also rich in symbolic value as its palindrome nature seems to highlight the closed loop-like existence of these children. As Rushdie has stated “there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends” (278). In fact, the number 1001 has also been described to possess a significant role in its usage as it is “the number of nights, of magic, of alternative realities- a number beloved of poets and detested by politicians,” (300).

By the end of Saleem’s journey as the blessed child of the midnight, one finds that the loss of his magical abilities is the direct reflection of the loss of democracy as Indira Gandhi declares the Emergency. This event is demonstrated by Rushdie “as a betrayal of her father’s vision and ideals and demonizes her as the hope-excising, witch-like widow” (Thiara, “Hybridity and the Chutification” 65). Indira Gandhi’s instructions of eradicating the prospects of the multiplication of the magical children led to the denial of “the possibility of reproducing themselves” as they



were “hysterectomized” (Rushdie 613). This was because they “hated feared destroyed by the Widow” who was “not only the Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect” (612).

While the bound fate of the children of midnight with their respective nation states is symbolic of fragmentation, at the same time it must be noted that “the country’s history and the children’s fate are riddled with inequality, poverty, corruption, and caste and religious prejudice” (Thiara, “Hybridity and the Chutification” 65). It is due to these reasons that Saleem as the narrator of his fate to Padma states that these children, being a product of the “Kali-Yuga” are “the children of the hour of darkness” (Rushdie 277). Saleem’s status of being an individual “whose parents were not his parents, whose son would not be his own” (Rushdie 157) is one of the primary manifestations of this darkness. A life which is bound with so many lives, yet Saleem’s closest kin exist in such a manner which are not defined by conventions. His relationship with those around him also, then, begins to reflect the relationship of the partitioned countries where they have more similarities than differences, yet the marker of difference seems to occupy a more prominent position.

Saleem’s ability to bring these magical children together grants him a leader-like position; and as Samir Dayal writes in “Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*” that Saleem “reveals himself as a purveyor of complexly significant convergences and dualities, a connoisseur of heterogeneity, parody, and burlesque— of sheer creative energy” (Dayal 432). This leads him to establish himself as a pro-active nation-builder who believes that the connection of these magical lives has occurred for a reason and in order to explore this reason he finds himself responsible. The initial meetings that they are a part of seem promising but as time passes, the children begin to develop differences which seem to overpower their similarities and that breaks the bond of fate that they were born with. Saleem mentions in his narration that “quarrels began” as “the adult world infiltrated the children’s” (422). The *Midnight’s Children Conference* (MCC) becomes a literal manifestation of the close-knit fate of the individuals who have become a part of the collective consciousness of the fateful hour of the midnight. Eric Strand writes that this conference “is based on Saleem’s idea that class differences can be transcended” (Strand 977); however, this is what becomes debatable. Their fate may be common and they may be bound together in several respects, yet their position in society is very different and that leads to a crack in the unity which ultimately results in its failure.

The concept of a bound fate is most prominently seen in Jawaharlal Nehru’s letter to Saleem upon his birth where he had written “. . . Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of



our own,” (Rushdie 167). This becomes the primary bondage of Saleem’s fate with the nation; and later, on discovering the other children of midnight on his tenth birthday he realises that his fate is linked to something way beyond his imagination. This unity of fate, however, begins showing cracks not only in Saleem’s relationship with the nation but also in his relationship with the members of his Midnight’s Children Conference. He attempts to encourage these children into imagining a promising future of the country, but the only consequences of his effort are endless rifts and chaos. Further, the idea of discussing issues about the country is only possible when done from a privileged standpoint; upon reaching the depths of reality, these issues and their suggested solutions merely seem like a set of complicated jargon which is incomprehensible to the common population. Therefore, the idea of unity almost becomes a kind of abstraction which is simply a product of Saleem’s defence of this body of children that he is destined to lead. The children of midnight, much like the population of the nation only superficially remain within a common system as their internal life and struggle is way beyond the constructed bridge of identities.

Through the analysis in this paper, one may trace the use of magical and mythical elements as symbols representing the issues of partition. The political events which took place in both pre-partitioned as well as post-partitioned India are presented by using Saleem Sinai who acts as the metaphorical representation of the body of the nation– born with immense potential only to be deprived of it all at the hands of The Widow. The novel makes a very intricate commentary upon the political issues which had cropped up ever since the independence. In order to make note of this commentary, it is very crucial to delve deep into the symbolic structures laid out by Rushdie. With his use of magic realism, it has been possible to depict the flawed reality of political leadership and the over ambitious nature of the newly created nation as magic grants a scope of creating a new dimension where absurdities are also made to appear believable.

The most interesting aspect of this novel in terms of its fantastical nature is that it does not *entirely* depend upon fantasy for the creation of its alternate dimension. It does not use fictitious names for real men that it wishes to critique; Rushdie makes use of real political figures and real political events. One might then question- what has been the need for employing magic realism at all? The answer would be, as this paper has attempted to justify, that through the tropes of magic Rushdie has solidified his critique by presenting absurd but literal representations of the political events and their impact. Each supernatural or fantastical event does not merely reflect a real event but goes on to project it in a manner that might critically analyse the impact of that event upon the consciousness of the population. This is precisely why





it becomes so essential to decode every little detail of the narrative, particularly the ones depicted in terms of fantasy and magic as those are the ones which reveal the most intricate of details.

The paper, then, depicts that the novel transcends beyond being simply a narrative of the partition as an historical event; it becomes a statement of the birth, life, and the crippling of the state machinery through the use of magic realism and myth-making.

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