

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

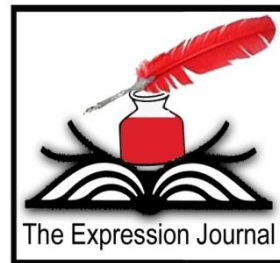
Bi-Monthly Referred & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 1 Issue 1 Feb. 2014

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

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www.expressionjournal.com



HISTORY DEFEATED IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Salman Rushdie, a great prolific writer and Booker prize winner novelist, shot into fame with his second novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) and throws new life into novel form. Saleem Sinai, hero of *Midnight's Children* tries for success and attempts to achieve concrete identity: but fate, chance, culture and personality combine, not only to shatter his dreams but also to reveal him as essentially antiheroic. He is a marginalized character resulting from colonization and social, cultural and personal deprivation. Troubles erupt him when he tries to fashion his future individually in traditionally communal society. As a marginal man he is product of two social worlds and he is placed in the psychological uncertainties of both these worlds. He is also schizoid character and in this regard he reminds the readers of Prufrockian man.

In Midnight's Children the problem of identity crisis plagues the character of Saleem, right from the very start. He is born on the midnight of August 1947 at the time when the British were leaving and India, the myth was waking up to reality. He is, therefore, mischievously handcuffed to history and is forced to accept that his destiny is indissolubly chained to that of his country. Being a midnight child he is born with a divided character. Whether he likes it or not he will have to play a part, significant at that, as he believes, as he is tied by the history of a mammoth nation which was still a myth. On the top of that, the revolutionary hand of Mary Pereira, in the hope of doing something holy and noble, condemned him to a life of permanent guilt and loss of identity by changing his nametag with that of another midnight child, Shiva. Looking at the facts one finds that Saleem Sinai is not actually what his name bears but a product of unholy alliance between a departing colonial Methwold and a poor Hindu woman. Even his identity is not a pure one but a strange mixture of the East and the West and he is too unholy or illegitimate. Methwold in his turn carried a mixture of British and French blood. Thus Saleem Sinai remains in quandary, on the horns of dilemma right from the moment he comes into this world. The act of Mary Pereira further complicates and messes his life. He is deputed in the hands of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, a Muslim couple and their child comes to the care of Hindu.

The title "Sinai" that he is going to be adorn for the rest of his life, then we find that even this name has meaning and meaning pertains to the moon, i.e. fickle and quite ironically uncertainty is what that characterizes his life from the beginning to the end. As Saleem states on the issue of history that newspapers celebrated him; politicians ratified his position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote, 'Dear baby Saleem, my belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India, which is also eternally young. We shall be watching your life with closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.'"(*Midnight's Children*, 9)

One of the results of Saleem's fragmented identity which is also one of the themes of the novel is unholy overture carried his proposals of love to his own sister Jamila. Saleem thinks that he is not exactly a real member of the family and does not carry the blood of it. He forgets the number of years and the ties that bound them together all these years. Thus problems are not one but many that confront him because of his fragmented identity. Both action and Saleem repeatedly emphasize this theme and show myriad ways in which his identity is made to suffer. Identity is shown as sham, mistaken and confused, fractured, merged and superimposed and at times even brought down to animal level and finally lost as barren.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai's identity is fragmented in retelling the history. He retells the history of the Indian sub-continent itself. Saleem Sinai, who is born in midnight, actually begins his narrative thirty two years before his birth by telling us about his grandfather, Aadam Aziz. While at the factory Saleem tells his story to his friend and coworker, Padma who is illiterate. Thus, the story we receive is ostensibly the one Saleem has been recalling and retelling.

The act of retelling, it becomes clear early on, is not an exact science: rather it is only through distorted fragmentation that one remembers and recreates its past. Saleem compares memory to the pickling, which according to him is an impure act of love. Pickling makes things new again and this is extremely important one idea without newness. The implication here is that we are alive because of our constant act of reinventing \recreating the world (reality) as we remember it as we experience it. That is called the chutnification of history.

Saleem Sinai retells the history of his family and in doing so provides and individualized history of the Indian subcontinent itself. The story covers approximately sixty years of India's Pre and Postcolonial twentieth-century history. Saleem tells us that his quest throughout the novel is for "centrality" and "meaning", an ongoing alternative narrative voice in the text reveals "identity" to be construct and meaning to be available only in versions. As the story progresses we learn that Saleem is not really Aadam Aziz's grandson: Saleem is switched at birth (by the nurse Mary Pereira) with Aziz's biological son, Shiva. Saleem is an illegitimate offspring of Vanita, the wife of poor Hindu and Methwold, a colonial Britisher who leaves India at the end of the Raj.

“To pickle is to give immortality... a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste” (549) and “The art is to change the flavor in degree, but not in kind; and above all ... to give it shape and form- that is to say, meaning” (550).

Rushdie celebrates this “impure” act of recalling and retelling history. Rushdie himself points out in *Imaginary Homeland* that Lata Mangeshkar could not have been heard singing on All India Radio as early as 1946. As Saleem reminds us, what he is presenting us with is memory’s truth and therefore his version of what happened. And he goes on to add; only a madman would prefer someone else’s version is as his own and that memory creates its own reality. Saleem, it is obvious from the start, is an unreliable narrator, but unlike conventional unreliable narrator. He is neither particularly stupid, nor particular unaware of what’s happening. Thus it turns out the reality is a question of perspective.

Saleem states “The further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems- but as you approach the present if it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Ultimately, it becomes clear that illusion itself is reality” (197). Saleem’s uncle, Hanif Aziz, who works in a world of illusions, tries to sell movies that are more realistic than fantastic song and dance films are churned out by India’s commercial film industry. But no one is interested in his work because it does not possess enough of an illusory quality. As Keith Wilson notes in his titled “Midnight’s Children and Reader Responsibility”, this novel is:

Centrally concerned with the imperfection of any art, the compromises which govern the relationship of a writer with a reader who is hungry for linearity, and the impossibility of rendering a reality-however much concerned with public history- that is not petrified into false and subjective form at the point at which an artist attempts to render it. It is a novel that deliberately invites a questioning of the novelists and of the illusory surface objectivity of the novel form. Indeed, it uses that other most beguilingly quasi-objective art form, the cinema, as a running metaphor for the deceiving clarities of realist art. (23)

The public, it appears, is more interested in fiction, rather than in reality. And as Saleem states earlier, there comes a point when the illusion itself becomes a reality. The retelling of the history or the past fictionalizes it and it therefore becomes easier to believe in its reality.

Combining fiction with facts is another strategy Rushdie uses to emphasize the ambiguous nature of “history”. History, it turns out, depends a great deal on who remembers it, how it is retold and upon the political\personal stake in it. Saleem has a vested interest in the events he narrates and he uses the past for his own, personal ends: he cuts up and retells history in a manner that allows him to be its central protagonist. Since he fears absurdity the most, he reorganizes history around himself and his family and thereby imposes meaning onto ambiguity. From the beginning, it is obvious that Saleem has not been an eyewitness to all of the history he narrates and that he is filling to provide us with his own imagined version of what must have occurred : “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our

absence" (14), he retells us several times in the text. But this is not the problem for Saleem because he has found the trick for filling the gaps of his knowledge. This system of making it up as he goes is obviously flawed, but even when he acknowledges errors like the assassination date of Mahatma Gandhi, he goes on to ask: "Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? (198). The answer to this question, From Saleem's perspective is "no".

History, Rushdie demonstrates, is always an interpretation that depends on the subjective perspective of interpreter. Thus, the fact is that Brigadier Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on a political demonstration in Jallianwalah Bagh and thousands of Indians were killed. The colonizers viewed it as a cold blooded massacre of innocent victims. As Adam Aziz witnesses what he considers to be the unprovoked killing of "one thousand and five hundred and sixteen" (32) individuals, Dyer tells his men: "We have done a jolly good thing" (35). Later, in 1947, the "fictional" boatmen Tai, infuriated by India Pakistan struggle over his valley, Kashmir, walks to chhamble with the express purpose of standing between the opposing forces and giving them a piece of his mind. Kashmiri for the Kashmiris: that was his line. "Tai, of course, is shot to death. The narrator tells us that the event of his death is open to varying interpretations: Oskar Lubin would probably have approved of his rhetorical gesture. The text has no central point of reference that anchors a universal and transcendental meaning. The reader is constantly challenged into an unfamiliar territory where he or she has to build his own subjective text, as Saleem puts it "to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (126). The action of swallowing is reminiscent of Saleem's culinary metaphor of pickling the narrative so as to preserve it from alteration and disappearance "to pickle is to give immortality [...] the art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind" (461). The text becomes a mixture, an unreliable means of understanding the world because its flavor changes throughout time and will never be tasted in the same way. "The process of revision" Saleem insists, "should be constant and endless" (460). The reader is then both a consumer and a producer of texts.

Rushdie's attempts to "purify" anything, countries, religions, languages, peoples, is an act of identity politics which only leads to separatism and eventually, communal violence. Despite his body's preference for the impure, Saleem himself is a victim of a version of identity politics: he has constructed his identity around a childhood version of "Bombay" that prevents him from making an adult acquaintance with the city. When he returns to Bombay with his son Adam, he cheers, "Back to Bomb!" on the bus, but he finds that the city has altered greatly over the years: Bellasis Road, the Taredo roundabout, the cardboard effigies of wrestlers above the entrances to Vallaghbhai Patel Stadium, Mahalaxmi Temple, Warden Road and Breach Candy Swimming Baths are all still there, but the name of the shops have changed. The city has been changed. Ultimately, it is Saleem's inability to incorporate the present, the contemporary version of Bombay into his earlier childhood version that prevents him from getting on with his life. Earlier, Durga tells him that he will die unless he is able to become interested in new things, ideas and people. But Saleem cannot comingle the present pink skyscraper with his memories of the past. Therefore, he cannot survive. He remains a victim to his

myth of past. Saleem literally develops fissures in his body that crakes him apart, until he explodes like the “Bomb in Bombay”. (552) Earlier his maternal grandfather Aadam Aziz suffered from a similar condition, except his “cracking apart” began with his inability to believe in God. Physical deformation denotes that he has failed in making good personality like a Renaissance man.

Saleem’s condition is brought on by the fact that he is suffused with too much history, that is battered and buffeted by a past to the exclusion of the contemporary moment that represents newness and therefore, in the Rushdie lexicon, hope. Although Saleem recognizes his disease for what it is, he is too tired to take any imaginative action against it. For Saleem, what begins as an initiation rite into adulthood in the Sundarbans, remains an unfinished gesture even though he recognizes the importance of his past by regaining his memory and reclaims his lost histories, all the myriad complex that go to make a man. Even though he recognizes that he and his companions become transparent in the rainforest because they have been tricked by the jungle into using up their dreams and that what has been drained out of him during his involuntary vasectomy by the widow.

The technique Rushdie uses results in exposing “history” as a hybrid construct. An important part of Saleem’s history has to do with the construct of the Midnight’s Children Club that he organizes and attempts to lead. The MCC is comprised of monsters and evildoers, as well as gifted and talented children. The voices that Saleem originally interprets as angelic turn out to be impure. A little later, this impurity is linked to the idea of the “third principle”, a space that Saleem briefly attempts to posit as an imagined alternative to his rival, Shiva’s binary perspective on life. When Saleem realizes that a paternal influence is biasing midnight’s children, he pleads: “Don’t let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses and classes, capital and labour, them and us to come between us! We ...must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of dilemma: for only by being other, by being new can we fulfill the promise of our birth” (*M C* 306). Ultimately, Saleem is unable to fight Shiva’s perspective and as the novel progresses, his ability to engage with a new space. It makes clear that in spite of the fact that his identity is in fact an “impure” construct.

Saleem’s identity is in fact revealed to be a construct composed of a hodgepodge of social, political and personal influences. In “Alpha and Omega” his biological identity is put in question by his blood type, but his blood is only one element of his overall identity and in the final analysis, it is deemed of no importance by his family who continues to love him in spite of Mary’s revelation that he was switched at birth. The narrator, in an attempt to warn the young Saleem of what is to come, states:

Human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but a homogenous; all kinds of everything which are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next. (*MC* 283)

The narrator of *Midnight’s Children* Saleem suffers a shock and a complete amnesia after the city he lives in is bombed and most of his family dies there. He forgets everything about his previous life and

he also loses his human skills and manners. By that time he has already lost his magical gift of telepathy and has gained a superhuman sense of smell instead. So he is sent to a special army unit which uses dogs for searching for rebel units in the mountains and where Saleem gains a status of one of these dogs. He becomes a man dog. Thus, not only does he lose his self, he also loses his humanity and becomes an animal. But not just any animal; he becomes a dog which in Muslim culture is considered an unclean animal (Muslims, for example, cannot touch anything a dog has touched).

The hero of *Midnight's Children* Saleem Sinai has a magical gift of telepathy which means that he can tune to anyone's thoughts and communicate with them. At some point of the book he manages to contact all the other children born at the midnight India gained independence, who live scattered all over the country and they are having forums in Saleem's head. They quarrel over what to do with their magical gifts and Saleem can let them in or out. He calls himself all-India radio. Aadam Aziz loses his faith in God and this loss makes a hole in his chest. At first the hole is invisible and only he can feel it, but as he gets old, the hole becomes visible to everybody.

The book is full of parallels such as these and the whole story can be understood as a metaphor of the development of the country – the children born at the midnight when India gained independence gained magical powers but they never manage to unite themselves nor figure out what they have been given the powers for (partly because Saleem who has the power to unite them through his telepathic sessions loses his gift quite early). Then they are captured by the premier, castrated and divested of their powers by her “doctors”. The castration has to be understood symbolically because at the time the “children” are castrated they are already around thirty so it is very likely that a lot of them have had some children and the fear of their progeny therefore does not explain this act. It is more a symbol of the lost hope.

In large measure, in his novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie attempts to disband the myths of the Indian nation. In fact, he is refuting all six types of national myths with differing levels of effectiveness.. Rushdie writes:

The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clockhands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world” (3).

Here he introduces Saleem's birth (as well as India's) as a critical even of which all should take notice. Then, he employs the character of Padma who states, “Everyone gets born, it's not such a big big thing” (133). While she is referring to Saleem's birth, Rushdie has intertwined that with the birth of India as a nation. So, to have a character calling into question the importance of the birth calls invites skepticism

of the importance of the moment of India's birth. In short, he is destroying the temporal myth by asserting that a country's birth is not the all important event it is made out to be.

To conclude, Salman Rushdie's history is a history of the world based on the beliefs of the secret societies, ranging from mystic revelations to esoteric codes, offering a radical reinterpretation of human existence and a strange and mysterious view of the world previously hidden from us.

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