



Saleem Sinai – Number one of the 1001 Midnight's Children

The display of inner and outer dimensions of understanding and not understanding within one of Salman Rushdie's most read books

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Abstract

Written as a statement against the tremble that wry modernization has brought to the Indian people's lives, Salman Rushdie's novel, "Midnight Children" (1981), depicts the inner conflicts and the outside-bounded fight of the man struggling to stick to his primary identity in times of political, economic and cultural re-identification. In order to psychically and physically outlive his times, Saleem Sinai is obliged to cope with his own process of cognitive dissonance and to deal with his lack of understanding by means of myths and fictional representations up to creating a parallel existence. Being part of a family that overcame the people's general poverty, Saleem is born at the exact moment when India gains its Independence. Finding out that he is one of the 1001said-to-be-gifted midnight children, the boy identifies with his country's fight and tries to understand all the events by transposing them into his own history².

Keywords

India, Independence, identity, modernization, family

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“Midnight Children” is divided into three books that unfold into 30 chapters, resembling an uninterrupted chain of Russian nested Matryoshka dolls, uncovering the past in order to stage the entrance of the omniscient main-character who is to be covered, immediately after, in multiple mystical layers that give the shape of the nowadays story-teller recollecting his own personal history for his wife-to-be, Padma.

Starting with a “Perforated Sheet” that shows the skin but cunningly hides the soul, leading the path to a cruel destiny, continuing with a “Fisherman’s Pointed Finger” towards a newly born little boy meant to change the face of the World in a nihilistic manner and looking, up to the end of the story through the cold eyes of a wise, amnesic, inner-emptied “Buddha” regaining his lost memory in the mythological-looking jungle of Sundarban, having his consciousness shaken only by taking part in another “Midnight” miracle, the books and chapters mark, by staggering metaphors, the border stones of a surrealistic existence belonging to the tragic main character, Saleem Sinai. He is one of the 1001 babies said to had been born the night between the 14th and the 15th of August 1947, when the “hands of time became one to show respect (...) exactly the second that India gained its Independence” (Rushdie, 2007). And it was exactly when India ceased to be an English colony that Saleem’s destiny and his new-born country’s history “got cuffed down in a mysterious way” (Rushdie, 2007).

More than that, the story says that all the babies “of the Independence” were born with exceptional powers and Saleem wasn’t an exception, being telepathic. But as the novel is the stage for “sheets” that cover truths, the little boy gets switched at birth with another special baby, son of a wealthy Muslim family, Shiva, who had been gifted with a pair of “killing knees” and who develops into the perfect alter-ego for Rushdie’s main hero. So do the two switch their lives, identities and destinies and so does the author underline his position regarding the hard-trying Hindu people. Here starts the rising and fall of Saleem Sinai within a not so perfect family, with a father taken in by the mirage of money, an unfaithful mother (Amina Sinai) taken in by the mirage of a decadent poet - once her husband - at the “Pioneer Cafe”, a “brass Monkey” as a rough-soul little sister, born on the night when her father’s assets were frozen by the state and who was taken in by the mirage of fame that would turn her into Jamila-The (muppet) Singer of the Pakistani rulers; also having a harsh “Reverend Mother” wearing two witch nipples as his grandmother, easy-going aunts and cold-hearted uncles, dubious neighbors and cold-hearted childhood friends.

Saleem’s faith is also modeled by all sorts of mystical, symbolic-like characters, as Tai, the old boatman who inspires his grandfathers’ existence by his predictions about the future or another “Midnight child” called “Parvati - the witch”, who would become Saleem’s wife towards the end of the novel. His fantastic, merely tragic life story knits together with real existing persons’ destinies who had put a stamp on the Indian history during the last hundred years as Mian Abdullah – The Humming Bird (pro-Indian Muslim political figure), Jawaharlal Nehru (Indian President), Krisna Menon (Ministry of Defence) or Indira Gandhi (Indian Prime-Minister depicted as a bitter hearted and almost vicious “Widow”).

The book depicts Saleem's family's migrations around India and newly emerged Pakistan, but also its inner conflicts and social evolution while going with the flow of the Indian history, in a merry-go-round allegoric manner.

In the same spirit, happenings in Saleem's life go by, symmetrically, at the same pace as the Indian history does, starting with the year 1915 and the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar when Adam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather hits his nose while praying and is shaken by the cognitive dissonance between the traditional and the modern society he came in contact with during his British studies, further on - the optimism disease stirred up by Mian Abdullah in 1942 takes place while Amina Sinai cheats on her husband; the times of British imperialism mark the family moving in Bombay whilst in the night when India gains its Independence in 1947 Saleem's is born; the war between China and India in 1962 mirrors Saleem's childhood conflicts while during the Indo-Pakistani War in 1965 Shiva, Saleem's alter-ego, barges into the young boy's life; the symmetry goes up to the recent history of the year 1975 marked by Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule when Saleem's son, Adaam, is born, rounding up the evolution circle of the character while the elections in '77 happen simultaneously with Saleem's "ectomy": "the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves... but that was only a side-effect, because they were truly extraordinary doctors, and they drained us of more than that: hope, too" (Rushdie, 2007).

„Midnight's Children” - Conflicting dimensions of *understanding* and not *understanding*

Traditional versus modern. Saleem Sinai's methods of coping with an agitated history and his re-identification process

Salman Rushdie depicts a deeply traditionalist people, whose history is proven to have begun no less than 2500 years ago and that is now submitted to the changes brought by a forced and quite rapid modernization process determined by the definitive British colonization process that started around the year 1850.

His writing is deeply brutal, in total contradiction with the most important Indian spiritual leader's policy in the times of the Independence – Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) the man who brought his indisputable contribution to the birth of the Republic and who was paradoxically killed because of his pacifism.

At the same time, the author doesn't hesitate to set straight the register regarding his political opinions by presenting the Indian Prime Minister (1966-1974 and 1980-1984), Indira Gandhi - daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of Independent India - otherwise a quite appreciated political figure, as the Widow, a cruel and power-thirsty leaders and as having one of the worst influence on the recently liberated Republic.

More than that, the author pictures a country torn up by conflicts driven by ethnical, religious and territory issues that had kept the Indians in a continuous tension and that finally led to the splitting of their country and of the people on religious grounds

(1947). But the conflicts also led to a severe spiritual stagnation and to a deep confusion at a consciousness level.

Hegel used to say that: “The Oriental peoples don’t know that the spirit, meaning the individual himself, is free. The Greeks and the Romans knew that some of them were free but only with Christianity did they reach the conclusion that the individual is free by himself” (2005). In the author’s view, the polytheistic approach of the Orientals deterred them from embracing the premises of the Enlightenment, “the man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity (...)” (Kant, 1784) and, as a consequence, from being prepared for the modernization of the society, process primarily drew for an individual who is not afraid to use his own understanding and free-will.

“... it is difficult for any individual man to work himself out of the immaturity that has all but become his nature. He has even become fond of his state and for the time being is actually incapable of using his own understanding, for no one has never allowed him to attempt it” (Kant, 1807).

As a consequence, the individual finds himself caught in a process of re-identification that he has to endure by finding methods to cope with. And he begins by creating his own reference system based on a different sequence of common meanings that legitimate his actions as they “are the basis of a community (...) Only with common meanings does the common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations and feelings” (Taylor, 1971). This is the case for most of “Midnight’s Children” characters, but in the heart of the action stays Saleem Sinai whom Rushdie transforms into an omniscient Panopticon (Bentham, 1787). He refuses to be caught off guard by the times and so he becomes the reference system itself, he fights against modernity by emphasising its primary feature – his understanding that is magical. He conquers modernization with the traditional tool of sorcery. Not only does he possess “the key to any door of the consciousness” but he is also able to communicate telepathically with the other 1000 Midnight’s Children, becoming their leader. The entire Indian world becomes a marionette in Saleem’s hands or, better said, nose – his all mighty secret weapon. And so “irrational action is <<made sense of>>, as we understand why it was engaged in. We make sense of action when there is a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of the situation for him. We find his action puzzling until we find such a coherence” (Taylor, 1971).

Saleem copes with the new emerging world by using one of the oldest, mystical, “weapons” of the traditional societies: constant fear of the unknown. By choosing this approach, Rushdie shapes both his main character’s destiny and the others’ faiths by taking the uncanny up to the point that it meets the precepts of sorcery. During the whole story, reality and fiction go hand in hand, borderless, one melting into the other, keeping the reader in a permanent awkward layer in between the two. “The subject of uncanny belongs to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror (...)” Usually, “in fairy-tales the world of reality is left behind from the very start and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted. Wish fulfilments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of lifeless objects can exert no uncanny influence; that feeling can not arise unless there is a conflict of judgement whether things which

have been <<surmounted>> and are regarded as incredible are not, after all, possible; and this problem is excluded from the beginning by setting of the story” (Freud, 1919).

Saleem sees himself as the unique saviour of the Indian people suppressed by the hegemony of capitalism, technology and individualism brought by modernization. But, as a metaphor of the fact that internal issues have shaken India maybe even more than the exterior interferences have, Saleem has to face his dark-side, his alter-ego, Shiva, the symbol of the Hindu mythology, a very contradictory character, even by his name meaning destruction and being, at the same time, a positive force of the universe. The Hindu believe that destruction is the natural consequence of the creation process. So Saleem has to cope with the fact that change is a *sine qua non* stage in the evolution process and that there is no such thing as supreme good or supreme evil, as he would be inclined to believe and deny Shiva’s existence.

At the same time, Rushdie faces Saleem and Shiva in order to depict the two possible alternatives of a life in a capitalist society: the one of the winner and the one of the loser. Modernity forces the individual to take his faith into his own hands and place himself in one or another tribe. But here we are also facing the spiritual issue: what are the boundaries one may cross in order to enter “the winners’ row” and, in this respect, Rushdie depicts a corrupt society guided merely by personal interests and financial purposes that might have come as consequences for a sudden modernization or for the application of an unfit pattern to a different type of society. This issue had been developed by Kant 80 years before India became a colony: “Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass” (Kant, 1784).

Young Saleem finds himself prisoner in a contradictory world he feels he has to fix due exactly to its contradictory traditional-modern character. The child identifies himself with one of the plenty Hindu Gods the Indian people cherished. And even if at that time modernity was wiping out the shadows of the polytheistic belief, Saleem perceives the context of his birth as magical: “soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, the politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate-at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement” (Rushdie, 2007). Once again, he fights modernity by prioritizing the traditional approach. And he becomes “special” in a modernized society where being common is not a sense of normality anymore.

He also becomes “optimistic” and his whole story is marked by the rising and falling of “optimism” a natural human feature that gets distorted in a traditional society as the Indian one. The modern, enlightened individual is the entrepreneur of his own happiness and of his own optimism. Gods aren’t of any help anymore. Saleem has to learn this harsh lesson during his growing-up process and so do all the Indian people. “Optimism” gets personified and takes the shape of some sort of disease, frequently blamed for economical and political dissatisfaction.

The metaphor of “optimism” mixes up with the one of “hope”: when Saleem loses his optimism, primarily enhanced by his naïve, child-like perspective, he also loses his hope and his trust - that usually happens during the growing-up process. Still, in this specific case, the loss of optimism, trust and hope depict the traditional spiritual society on the verge of transforming into a modern one ruled by capitalist principles.

The entire Panopticon approach of Saleem’s character seems to emerge from the civil restriction that the young boy and the entire society is prone to. When talking about the Enlightenment conditions, Kant himself pleads for an individual entitled to express his own self only in his personal environment and not as a matter of every domain of his daily life. “The public use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among mankind; the private use of reason, may, however, often be very narrowly restricted, without otherwise hindering the progress of enlightenment. By the public use of one’s own reason I understand the use that anyone as a scholar makes of reason before the entire literate world. I call the private use of reason that which a person may make in a civic post or office that has been entrusted to him” (Kant, 1784).

Thus, in the same spirit depicted in his “Critique of Pure Reason” (1791) the author pleads for an absolutely rational individual who can set a clear boundary between the roles he plays in his life, whose soul can exist only in strict relation with the palpable world of rules that he must obey. This theory proves itself wrong. Rushdie’s character, Saleem Sinai, is part of a society whose civil freedom has been constantly limited as a matter of tradition and the Indian people couldn’t benefit from the evolution brought by the Enlightenment. Consequently, the traditional approaches – from medicine to human rights – replace an approach based on rationality and spiritual evolution.

At the same time, the whole story told by “Saleem-the Panopticon self” is highly deterministic, for everything that happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen. All the characters and the consequences of their deeds are naturally floating on the waves of destinies well-known *a priori*. The modern individual’s free-will has nothing to do with such a view that reminds about the traditional fatalism stating that “it was meant to be”.

And when “it isn’t meant to be” Saleem uses one of the oldest, most rudimentary methods of taking control – violence. Rushdie turns his character into a serial killer. The boy reacts to the pressure put by modernity on his shoulders and refuses to cope with the changes he is part of. In order to stick to his primary identity, he eliminates, one by one, all the characters who don’t comply with his pattern. In fact, he destroys the ideas and mentalities associated with the new occidental, societal pattern, trying to fight the natural flow of evolution that takes him and his society by surprise.

Both physical and symbolic types of “violence” are constant themes of Saleem’s story picturing the struggle of keeping a certain state of affairs in spite of the times. Images, characters’ features, smells and actions – all of them are brutal, mirroring, at the same time, the political and social conflicts the Indian people are obliged to take part in.

India and Saleem Sinai - the one and the same (hi)story

The life-story that Saleem Sinai recollects for Padma, is inextricably linked to the 62 years of Indian history that gets split into half by the birth of the character. In fact, every socio-political event that takes place seems to be determined by a happening in Saleem's life or vice-versa. The Panopticon deterministic self of the hero starts wars, makes possible the emergence of the Pakistani and Bangladesh state or gets "castrated" because of Indira Gandhi's fear of losing her power in front of him.

Saleem's evolution and India's evolution are one. Rushdie succeeds to better depict the struggle of his hard-trying people by reflecting the echoes in a single individual's life. The macro-perspective is taken to a personal dimension. Saleem's fight against the "one hundred headed monster" – remembering the mythological creature Typhon, killed by Zeus - is his nation's fight against change, against the acculturation process and against modernity itself.

During 30 years both the Indian state and Saleem face the process of growing-up that starts with the day of Independence 15th of August 1947. It is hard and has to outrun lots of stages. Saleem starts his story as being Sniffer and towards the end of the novel becomes a Buddha in the others' eyes. His face is marked as the Indian people's consciousness is. But there is still hope for Saleem and room for adaptation in the case of the people, as Parvati-the-witch makes the signs disappear.

The same as his people do, the main character of the novel tries to conserve the *status quo* of his life, is enchanted by pure feelings, like love or optimism, but gets soon disillusioned and has to face the fact that life is about continuous change and pain, choices and people who don't think and don't act as he would have thought they might. The aim of the grown-ups resembles the individualistic purpose of the rulers and has nothing to do with pure spirituality. In fact, all the 1001 children of *Midnight* are "the victims" of a changing society; their torment is illustrative for the entire society's torment in the process of re-identification.

Saleem is young and old at the same time. The soothsayers have predicted that the boy wouldn't be younger or older than his country, but of the same age. Like the Indian state, Saleem is already old when he sees the sun for the same time as his history starts long before.

That is why the Independence can not represent a fresh start, as everything is still the same as it was a day before: the people and their culture are exactly the same. The facts are changed only symbolically. And the common meanings that give the reference system for their culture is part of a history that they desperately need. Otherwise, as Nietzsche argues, they wouldn't be better than a beast that lives "unhistorically", "goes into the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder. It cannot dissimulate, it conceals nothing; at every moment it seems what it actually is (...)" (Nietzsche, 1878).

Saleem's approach of history is of deep conflict being both "monumental" and "critical". He feels both crushed by the dimension of things and vexed by the wrongdoings that are happening within his country. All these feelings are taken out into

the palpable world by the means of symbols like the colors that paint the story in green, red, blue, black or white, each of them remembering about the Indian flag, blood, the Messianic vestment, Evil or even about the Caucasian features symbolizing the European hegemony and modernity.

Not accidentally, Salman Rushdie places the starters of his story in the land of Kashmir – a territory that has been disputed between India and Pakistan for more than 50 years now, a territory that hosts a 2500-years-old people who, during more than a half of a century have been witnessing unending military and social conflicts that took them almost up to the point of losing their own national identity and at the same time keeping their selves cuffed down to ancient times.

The Kashmir region could be considered illustrative for the situation of the entire Indian state as much as Saleem Sinai is a representative character for the whole Indian people, the second most numerous one in the World.

Saleem is a seeker. He is seeking his lost identity. Saleem is also an imaginary serial-killer. He kills all the truths he can not manage or cope with. He tries to kill modernity and his final gesture of naming his son after his grandfather Aadam is clearly showing that he stubbornly sticks to the past. But it's due to this very decision that he gives up to the fatality of the times, he gives up to the power of evolution.

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