

# Midnight's Children: An Allegory of Indian History

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**Abstract – Allegory is a kind of extended metaphor where the apparent storyline or imagery corresponds to a distinct set of idea that may not necessarily be a part of the surface narrative. Allegories are capable of concurrently bringing forth wide array of well-defined references and reports as the channel and drift of allegory changes. Salman Rushdie employs the trope of allegory in his *Midnight's Children* to provide his territorially pervasive and historically polysemous tour de force with a dynamic and methodical framework. The motif of dichotomy between the real world and the one created by language is personified by the sardonic and self-absorbed protagonist, Saleem Sinai. This diremption capacitates the author to give an account of India, which unlike historiography does not claim to be authentic while intending to be true. And to remain perceptibly allegorical, despite harbouring such an intention any fictionalization of history, however, cannot strike reconciliation with the actual world. This explains why Saleem commits himself to memory rather than historiography as he cannot trust the version of others more than his own. This paper intends to look at this new quasi-history and narrative about India—which is consistently pitted against the experiences of individual protagonist—with reference to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. It attempts to display how this personal and national allegory defies any affiliation for either of the two; and in doing so maintains a state of conflict between allegory and reality.**

**Keywords — Allegory, historiography, Memory, Identity, Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*.**

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Since 1980s, a new trend began to emerge in Indian English Fiction writing wherein the authors resuscitated their preoccupation with history. The writers of this generation began to challenge the fashion of writing history as being conditioned by European models. The nationalist historians had although made the European accounts of history admissible but they were not careful enough to reconstruct it completely. The Indian novelists of the last two decades of twentieth century assumed the role of historian and committed themselves to rectify history by including what was the left out and reanalysing, what was messed up by early historians. This new form of writing announced a transition from old model of nation-state to a new synthesis:

Historiography and the novel are tied together as genres which continually return to figure the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete or fractured modernity. The desire to find some third form of writing ... to reproduce this fracturing not as a grievous lack in the nation but as something different or a supplement which challenges the authority of its master narratives of nation and modernity, has been as much a part of the novel – at least since Rushdie – as it has been a part of historiography. (Mee 146)

Rushdie's Booker and Best of the Bookers award winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) constitutes a turning point in the history of Indian English Novel. Due to its overwhelming impact upon the ensuing generation of writers, the decade following its publication, have been termed 'Post-Rushdie' years. *Midnight's Children* presents a continuous conflict between personal and national domain. The protagonist who is 'handcuffed to history' is bound to brook the nation's suffering as well as to enjoy some weird powers. (Rushdie 3)

Allegory operates as an extended metaphor in which symbolic actions, characters, settings and images etc. serve to reflect some other cloaked confrontations. "All true narrative allegory has its source in a culture's attitude towards language, and in that attitude, as embodied in language itself; allegory finds the limit of its possibility" (White 45). Critics like Northrop Frye and Jonathan Culler locate allegory within a continuum of literary practice and treat it more like a style of writing or symbolic mode than narrative genre. Celebrated poststructuralist critic Paul de Man recognizes allegory as an apparatus that frees symbolism from its transcendentalist tendencies.

The distinction between Frederic Jameson's notion of national allegory and Paul De Man's contrast between allegory and symbol becomes blurred in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. With Rushdie, allegory becomes a trope for creation of a nation space. The narrative keeps on vacillating between an individual's experience and national historiography. The novel establishes a queer relationship between Saleem Sinai whose transition corresponds to that of the nation. The nation is partly embodied by Saleem and partly remains a nation state under Nehruvian leadership. For linking up an individual to the nation and public to the private, the novel is framed to allegory. The assimilation of public and private combines to construct a criticism of contemporary India and defies any modular idea of a nation state. In this way *Midnight's Children* comes closer to Frederic Jameson's definition of national allegory, "The story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (Jameson 69).

In adopting a narrative mould for their work, some of the novelists treat realism and allegory differently. Allegory is frequently employed in Postcolonial Indian fiction to delineate the nation's past while simultaneously fulfilling satirical objective. Often then, individual's narrative becomes a vehicle for historical, national and political commentary.

Using the technique of 'Fantastic Realism' (a term used by Richard Cronin); Rushdie showcases the conflict between modernity and culture; individual sensitivity and national frenzy. The conflict engenders a near lunacy in the narrator who deviates from the point, disrupts the chronology and launches a psychological search for narrative legitimacy as he is scared that his "much trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose" (Rushdie 152).

The paranoia of Saleem disintegrates the boundary between private and public. The idea of an integrated nation becomes as much uncertain as is the whimsical narrator Saleem Sinai. With him neither nation is completely socio-political-economical nor personal completely psychological.

The certitude with which Saleem judges the mass sterilization campaign as being targeted at him is transported to the reader partly because Saleem is also castrated in the end and partly because sterilization campaign of the Emergency days is suggestive of castration of India, where rights of citizens were brutally mutilated. Therefore Saleem's quirk prepares a ground for an allegory pertaining to the entire nation. For Saleem, the plural voices that are characteristic demonstration of India's unity in diversity fall prey to the restrictive state version of discourse during emergency. Rushdie portrays emergency both as an episode of individual horror as

well as a mighty failure for nation's avowed democratic values.

The narrative about the state is diffused with the psychological uncertainty as the text goes on to explain the nation as 'imaginary community' by associating it with similar group of words like myth, fable, dream, fantasy and fiction. Rushdie says:

August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna's birthday and Coconut Day; and this year – fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve – there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madras and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction, in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (Rushdie 112)

These lines could be equated with the historical speech of Nehru delivered at the stroke of midnight hour. The masses that constitute the 'people component' in the idea of nation are accentuated as the chief participant in 'mass fantasy' and 'collective fiction'. The ambiguous masses are designated as "the many-headed monster" (Rushdie, 115). The slum dwellers, whom Amina sees on her way to see Ramram Seth are reminiscent of the monstrous masses:

Children tugging at the pallu of her sari, heads everywhere staring at my mother, who thinks, It's like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads; but she corrects herself, no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people – what then? A power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used. (Rushdie 81)

This outlook of the masses as many headed monster is in conflict with the notion of unified nation-state that Nehruvian 'Tryst with Destiny' speech underlines. Nehru's speech is also entwined with the delineation of Vanita's and Amina's labour and Mary's baby-swapping episode:

In Delhi, a wiry serious man sits in the Assembly Hall and prepares to make a speech. [...] The wiry serious man gets to his feet. [...] Without written speech in hand, without having memorised any prepared words, Jawaharlal Nehru begins: '... Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny; and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge – not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially ...' [...] The monster in the streets has begun to roar, while in Delhi a wiry man is saying, '... At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom ...' [...] – 'A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance ...' [...] as Jawaharlal Nehru told the Assembly Hall, 'We end today a period of ill-fortune' [...] '... This is no time for petty or destructive criticism,' Jawaharlal Nehru told the Assembly. 'No time for ill-will. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell'. (Rushdie 115-118)

The optimistic speech by Nehru is at once subsided by the pain of Ahmed Sinai as "falling chair shattered his toe" on the precise moment when Nehru was envisioning future freedom from "period of ill-fortune" (Rushdie 117). Historiography and biographies have not only allocated Nehru a central position in the post-independence scenario but also have exhibited in him an aura of grandeur and magnificence. Contrary to this, Rushdie's Nehru at the time of independence though assumes a central role but is hardly overwhelming and is described as "wiry" (Rushdie 115-118).

The highly charged speech of Nehru not only projects a prosperous future for India but in doing so also raises the expectations for children born at midnight as they are the embodiment of new India:

In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream. (Rushdie 118)

The metaphors of human body are exhaustively employed by Rushdie to narrate and correlate the birth and sufferings of a child and a nation. Whether it is the birth of two nations as though by "caesarean section" coterminous with Saleem's or the birth of Parvati's son when national emergency is being proclaimed; the pangs and shrieks of labour are intricately linked to national events:

While Parvati pushed in the ghetto. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push push push the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister,

so in a sense they were forcing Mrs Gandhi to push, and as the night darkened towards the midnight hour, because nothing ever happens at any other time, triplets began to screech it's coming coming, and elsewhere Prime Minister was giving birth to child of her own. (Rushdie 499)

The use of organic metaphors for describing the nation state is on the lines of common economic and political practice of speaking of the growth and maturity of the nation-state as if it were a child; or hailing a person as father of nation or describing a nation as coming of age, something Smt. Gandhi invoked during the declaration of Emergency "there comes a time in the life of the nation when hard decisions have to be taken" (Wolpert 397). The metaphor of human face in generic political statements like 'changing face of India' is employed to underline the similarity between Saleem and India, "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (Rushdie 122).

The metaphorical and real dissolve as the narrative progresses. The embodiment of nation by Saleem which appears to be merely metaphorical in the beginning becomes more and more concrete while the real ancestry of Saleem becomes metaphorical. Rushdie, without making any claim for literal truth designs the text as cryptic and polysemic. Therefore the location of meaning left completely to realm of readers on the basis of their own contemplation and association.

By lumping together diverse modes of narration from allegorical to historical; mythical to real; cinematic to poetic; and oral to visual, Rushdie presents an overall synthesis and divergence that indicates an exuberance particular to postmodernist pastiche. A vivid example is the description of Bombay's original inhabitants—Koli Fishermen—in a rhythmic exposition replete with legendary allusions:

The fishermen ... sailed in Arab dhows, spreading red sails before the setting sun. They caught pomfret and crabs, and made fish-lovers of us all ... There were also coconuts and rice. And above it all, the benign presiding influence of the goddess Mumbadevi, whose name – Mumbadevi, Mumbabai, Mumbai – may well have become the city's ... but then, one day in 1633, an East Indian Company Officer named Methwold saw a vision. (Rushdie 92)

Despite a striking proximity between Nehru and Saleem with respect to their centrality, the similarity has not been made explicit. It is the letter from Nehru that catapults Saleem to fame and attest his coupling with the nation:

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: 'Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are thenewest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternallyyoung. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.' (Rushdie122)

Saleem conceives of this letter as final evidence of his status as 'mirror of nation'. This presumption of Saleem is to be read against the backdrop of the error committed by early historians who in their enthusiasm of providing Nehru a prominent role in the post-independence era wrote Indian history as footnotes to the biography of Nehru. *Midnight's Children* highlights the dire consequences of narrating a nation's history as a set of achievements by single person.

Saleem talks in Nehru's parlance. This imitation is a parody of Nehruvian parlance. One of the objects of Parody is Nehru's obsession with science, "For I too have worshipped at the shrine of science and counted myself as one of its votaries. [...] it is the scientific method alone that offers hope to mankind and an ending of the agony of the world" (Gopal 443). Mimicking Nehru's phraseology, Saleem attempts to establish his relation with history in scientific terms:

Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own,' the Prime Minister wrote, obliging me scientifically to face the question: *In what sense?* How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answering adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of dualistically-combined configurations of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. (Rushdie 237–8)

*Midnight's Children* offers a critique of Nehru's politics. Nehru regarded scientific modernization as a potent tool to go up against communal, regional and caste identities. He embedded secularism in the national polity to achieve unity among the masses: "To be an Indian of my generation was also to be convinced of the vital importance of Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a secular India. Secularism, for India, is not simply a point of view; it is question of survival" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 404). This architect of Indian secularism is also criticized for forcing upon a fundamentally religious society an exotic concept such as secularism. *Midnight's Children* mocks the charade of secularism in India which despite repeated pronouncements has not been sincerely implemented. It is ironical that amidst all the discourse of scientific modernization and secularism public domain is mired by talks of omens

and supernatural creatures. Strange as it was but even Nehru could not avoid such communications:

Religious leaders described the snake escape as a warning – the godNaga had been unleashed, they intoned, as a punishment for thenation's official renunciation of its deities. ("We are a secular state,"Nehru announced, and Morarji and Patel and Menon all agreed;but still Ahmed Sinai shivered under the influence of the freeze).(Rushdie137)

Like post-independence India a key concern for Saleem is to find a way to power so as to redeem the promise of prominence he was born with. And then he unearths his uncanny power of telepathy. "I could glimpse – shadowy still, undefined, enigmatic– my reason for having been born"(Rushdie163). Telepathy is his gadget for communicating with the nation: "Telepathy, then: the inner monologues of all the so-calledteeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space withinmy head" (Rushdie 168). Employing his newly found favour of telepathy, Saleem goes on to describe the ground reality of Nehruvian policies and nation-state:

At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pajama-cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire ... at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa, where there was a food-shortage as usual: I was two months old and my mother had run out of breast-milk. I occupied, briefly, the mind of a Congress Party worker, bribing a village schoolteacher to throw his weight behind the party of Gandhi and Nehru in the coming election campaign. (Rushdie 174)

This is a dismal image of India grappling with feudalistic plenty, hunger issues, acute poverty and corruption. A condition of old power order hobnobbing with the new. This is a mockery of Nehruvian socialist agenda. Therefore in *Midnight's Children* the flag bearer scheme of the government, the doyen concept of socialism and state economy is being brainstormed not by economists and bureaucrats but astrologers:

And finally I hit my highest point: I became Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister and author of framed letters: I sat with the great man amongst a bunch of gap-toothed, straggle beard astrologers and adjusted the Five Year Plan to bring it into harmonic alignment with the music of the spheres. (Rushdie 174)

On Saleem's tenth birthday *Midnight's Children* Conference is organized which is a replica of Indian National Congress. This Conference like Congress comprises of representatives from across India. Many historians are of the opinion that the founding father of Congress and civil servant A.O. had received a secret report regarding an 1857 like resentment among the masses and therefore to



provide an outlet to their anger had initiated the formation an all India organization which became congress in 1985. This stance of Hume is designated as 'Safety Valve' (Chandra 61-62). It has also been claimed that the reports of mass uprising was provided to Hume by religious guru who talked to the 'spirit of the masses' (Chandra 63-69). This is another similarity between the Conference and Congress as both trace their genesis in telepathic connections. The multiple and mock-allegorical potential of children is critique of Nehruvian unification. Multi-potent children represent discrepancies and incompatibility which Saleem's assertion displays:

Understand what I'm saying: during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 – between midnight and one a.m. – no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. [...] What made the event noteworthy [...] was the nature of these children, every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment, or just conceivably by sheer coincidence [...], endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. It was as though [...] history, arriving at a point of high significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time. (Rushdie 195)

The *Midnight's Children*, thus makes history akin to fiction. The uninterrupted allegories display Saleem's eccentricity which connotes socio-political condition of the nation. The novel normalizes the laudatory tendencies of historiography and exposes the compromised status of many national achievements; Nehruvian policies being one of them.

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