Midnight's Children

by
Salman Rushdie

On June 19, 1947, just two months before India's independence and partition, (Ahmed) Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay, India. Like his father, Rushdie was well educated—first at Cathedral school in Bombay, then at his father's alma mater, King's College, Cambridge, in Great Britain. He earned a Master of History degree in 1968, focusing on Arabic and Islamic civilization, but aspired to be a writer like his hero, Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Upon graduation Rushdie moved to Karachi, Pakistan, where his family had relocated in 1964, intending to pursue a career in television writing. In 1969 he returned to London, frustrated by censorship in Pakistan, and for the next ten years made his living as an advertising copywriter, while devoting his off-hours to fiction. In 1975 his first novel, *Grimus,* was published to less-than-critical acclaim but his subsequent novel, *Midnight's Children,* won the Booker Prize, launching Rushdie's career and introducing a new type of novel in Britain. The novel's scathing attacks on political dynasties, corruption, and the legacy of British colonialism are tempered with abundant humor and self-deprecating jokes, yet it gave offense. Foreshadowing the political turmoil that would embroil his later career (the 1989 religious edict from Iran condemning him to death for his *The Satanic Verses*), India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie and his publisher for libel, forcing them to make a public apology. But that did not deter Rushdie from tackling controversial subjects. Following the publication of *Midnight's Children* he appeared frequently on talk shows and wrote nonfiction pieces attacking the Thatcher government in Britain and the nostalgic 1980s film and television revivals of the old British Raj, or ruling colonial government, in India. Considered by many to be "the great Indian novel," *Midnight's Children* had a profound impact on British literature by giving voice to those affected most by colonialism and partition.

THE LITERARY WORK

A magical realist novel, set in India and Pakistan from 1915 to 1977; published in 1981.

SYNOPSIS

The fantastic life of a "child of midnight" allegorically embodies India's dream of independence, as well as the devastating effects of a colonial legacy and of partition on the goal of national unity.

Events in History at the Time of the Novel

Toward independence. After nearly two centuries of colonial rule, in 1918 the British Raj passed reforms that granted the people of India "complete responsibility as conditions permit" and created a new "dyarchy" in which power would be shared between the British and elected

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Indian representatives (Wolpert, p. 297). Coinciding with the reforms, however, was the passage of the Rowlatt Acts (March 1919), which imposed wartime emergency measures to combat "seditious conspiracy" (Wolpert, p. 298). In real terms, the Rowlatt Acts, which extended the 1915 Defense of India Act, denied basic civil rights and due process and censored the press. Disparaged as the "Black Acts," they encountered universal opposition from Indian members of the Imperial Legislative Council and even prompted several members to resign, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a prominent Muslim politician and the future "Father of Pakistan." He lambasted the government as an "incompetent bureaucracy" and declared that "the fundamental principles of justice have been uprooted and the constitutional rights of the people have been violated" (Jinnah in Wolpert, p. 298). Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a pacifist grassroots leader of the independence movement, called the Acts symptoms of a "deep-seated disease in the governing body" and urged citizens to peacefully defy them (Gandhi in Wolpert, p. 298). He proclaimed a *hartal*, or national strike, to be "accompanied by fasting and prayer, which was normally associated with mourning a loved one (Chandra, p. 182). In the novel, Naseem, the protagonist's grandmother, wonders why there is a call for fasting and prayer when no one is dead, but her husband, Dr. Aziz, understands. He murmurs, "The British are wrong to turn back the clock. It was a mistake to pass the Rowlatt Act" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children,* p. 34). Indeed, it proved to be a grave mistake, leading not only to death but to a tragedy of unimaginable proportions.

While Indians heeded Gandhi's call for a strike, paralyzing the railway system and business operations nationwide, Sikhs in particular, led by Drs. Kitchlu and Satyapal, organized meetings to discuss their response to Rowlatt. Fearing the potential action, British officials in Amritsar had Kitchlu and Satyapal arrested and deported on April 10. But instead of defusing the situation, the arrests outraged supporters and prompted them to march en masse to the British commissioner's camp. Raj troops opened fire on the crowd as they approached, killing several and turning the remainder into a terrorized mob that set fire to British banks and attacked English men and women in the streets. Order was restored when Brigadier-General R. E. H. Dyer arrived on the scene, but only temporarily. Three days later, on April 13, a crowd of 10,000 men, women, and children gathered in a park on a Sunday afternoon, not for political reasons but to celebrate a Hindu festival. Upon hearing that Sikhs had gathered at Jallianwala Bagh—in defiance of his order forbidding public assembly—Dyer's troops marched there, cornered the picnicking peasants, and, without warning, opened fire. "Dyer's troops fired for ten minutes, pouring 1,650 rounds of live ammunition into the unarmed mass of trapped humanity at point blank range. Some four hundred Indians were left dead, and twelve hundred wounded, when the brigadier and his force withdrew at sunset from the garden they had turned into a national graveyard" (Wolpert, p. 299). In the novel, Dr. Aziz is at the scene of the massacre. When he returns home covered in blood, Naseem cries out, "'But *where* have you *been,* my *God!*' 'Nowhere on earth,' he said, and began to shake in her arms" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 37).

News of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre spread quickly and enraged not only Sikhs but Hindus and Muslims across India. The event turned even the staunchest loyalists of the British Raj into Indian nationalists, and calls for independence and the end of British rule echoed far and wide. The Raj, led by Viceroy Montagu, responded by relieving Dyer of his command (though he was given a hero's welcome in England, hailed as the "Saviour of the Punjab"). Montagu promised to implement immediate reforms, but Indian National Congress President Motilal Nehru (father/founder of the Nehru dynasty) called promises made by an "irresponsible executive and military" a "mockery," and leaders looked to their own means of achieving independence (Wolpert, p. 299).

Voices of division and unity. Though Indian leaders agreed on the urgent need for independence, they strongly disagreed on the form the new nation or government should take. Under Gandhi's influence, Congress had become an all-inclusive political entity dedicated to nationhood and Hindu-Muslim unity. But India was 70 percent Hindu, with the Hindu-dominated (though nominally secular) Congress as its primary mouthpiece; many Muslims therefore felt underrepresented and distrusted Hindu leaders to heed their concerns. Moreover, using "divide and conquer" tactics, the British system of government had instituted separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, thereby splitting leadership along religious lines and enhancing divisions. Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru proposed abolishing this system in a new Indian constitution, but Muslim League President Muhammad Ali Jinnah wanted to maintain it in order to guarantee Muslims one-third of the seats in the legislature. Nehru, like Gandhi, was opposed to division along religious lines, and Congress put forward a proposal to redistribute provincial boundaries on a linguistic basis. But Jinnah strongly denounced the proposal and warned that unless a new constitution assured Muslims greater security, there would be "revolution and civil war" (Jinnah in Wolpert, p. 312).

During the next 20 years, negotiations between Congress and the Muslim League over the issue of representation deteriorated as the positions of the two groups became more polarized. In 1930 Jinnah began to speak of partition, arguing that Hindus and Muslims belong to "two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literatures . . . indeed, they belong to two different civilizations," and in 1939 he and Fazlul Huq of Bengal drafted the Lahore Resolution that first put forward the idea of Pakistan as a separate nation (Jinnah in Wolpert, p. 331). Gandhi called the Resolution the "vivisection of India" and tried to persuade both sides to compromise. But he could not convince either Congress or the League to make any significant concessions, and as World War II began, prospects of forging a consensus greatly diminished.

Independence and partition. By the end of World War II, the British had lost all desire to maintain rule in India. In February 1947, British

"EVENTS OF INDEPENDENCE"

1885	Indian National Congress founded to promote Indian self-rule.
1906	Muslim League founded.
1919	Rowlatt Acts; Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.
1920	*Satyagraha* campaign of "non-violent non-cooperation" and boycott of British goods and services, led by Mohandas Karamchand (M. K.) Gandhi.
1929	Constructive campaign of self-sufficiency, led by M. K. Gandhi, featuring "homespun" drive.
1930	Independence Day proclaimed by Jawaharlal Nehru (Jan. 26); Gandhi defies British salt tax.
1938	Sir Muhammad Iqbal murdered (April 21).
1939	Lahore Resolution—articulating demands that Pakistan become a separate nation comprised of the Muslim-majority provinces in eastern and northwestern India.
1942	Quit India movement, led by M. K. Gandhi, to oust the British Raj.
1946	Direct Action Day riots in Calcutta (Aug. 16); beginning of "civil war of secession"—5,000 dead, 100,000 homeless.
1947	Independence and partition (Aug. 15); 1-5 million die in communal violence; Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru named first prime minister of independent India.
1948	M. K. Gandhi assassinated (Jan. 30); Muhammad Ali Jinnah dies (Sept. 1).
1951	Liaquat Ali Khan assassinated (Oct. 16).
1958	Pakistan military coup brings General Muhammad Ayub Khan to power.
1962	War with China over Himalayan border conflict; major military defeat for India.
1964	Jawaharlal Nehru dies of heart attack.
1965	India-Pakistan War over Kashmir—ends in stalemate in 22 days.
1971	Bangladesh War and independence (Dec. 16).
1975	State of Emergency declared by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
1977	Emergency ends; Mrs. Gandhi defeated by Morarji Desai in national elections.

Prime Minster Clement Attlee announced that no later than June 1948, His Majesty's Government would transfer power to India and sent Lord Louis Mountbatten to serve as new Viceroy to oversee the operation. Mountbatten met with Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan (who represented the Muslim League and would become the first prime minister of Pakistan), and on April 20 Nehru agreed to the partition of the country.

On July 15, 1947—a year ahead of schedule—Mountbatten announced that independence and partition would take place in one month. Sheer pandemonium set in at his abrupt announcement. While government officials attempted to tally and divide India's assets and liabilities equally between two new nations in less than 30 days—82.5 percent for India, 17.5 percent for Pakistan—10 million Hindus and Muslims scrambled from their homes to find new ones, unsure of the exact borders they needed to cross or what they would encounter en route or at their final destinations. Tragically, what millions did encounter was a savage butchery perpetrated by all sides. From one to five million Indians—Muslim, Sikh, Jain, and Hindu—are estimated to have been killed in August 1947. Trainloads of slaughtered Muslims who arrived in Lahore, Pakistan, with the message "A present from India" written in blood across the car were answered with trainloads of murdered Hindus and Sikhs with the bloody message "A present from Pakistan" scrawled back (Mosley, p. 243). Muslims abducted, raped, and killed Hindu women; Hindus abducted, raped, and killed Muslim women; children caught in the wrong Hindu- or Muslim-controlled region were picked up by the feet, their heads dashed against the wall; neighbors turned guns on one another, buildings and farms were torched, land and life's work were lost, and families were torn apart forever. "There is no way of knowing how many parents were lost to their children in the sweep of this history, no way of knowing how many of them were lost by accident and how many by design" (Butalia, p. 41).

Whatever the final count, on all fronts the loss was catastrophic and the blame widespread. British haste and lack of adequate supervision during the transfer of power was grossly irresponsible, and the carnage and destruction perpetrated by Hindus and Muslims were indefensible. "Step by step, Delhi (Mountbatten) had been advised of the increasing gravity of the situation in the Punjab. The Viceroy had at least three chances to avert a massacre, and each time—from weariness, from lack of foresight, or from aversion to another clash with Jinnah—he looked the other way. The result was disastrous" (Mosley, p. 216). Independence had finally come, but it was, in the words of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, "a scarred daybreak, a night-bitten dawn" (Ahmad Faiz in Tully, p. 13). In *Midnight's Children* Saleem and Shiva are born at the moment of India's independence and partition. The offspring of a violent and difficult birth, both the characters and the countries came about "in the age of darkness; so that although we found it easy to be brilliant, we were always confused about being good" (*Midnight's Children*, pp. 196-97).

Democratic underdevelopment. Redeeming his nation's "tryst with destiny," Jawaharlal Nehru became India's first prime minister; he sought "life and freedom" for the country after two centuries of foreign domination (Nehru in Wolpert, p. 349). However, he inherited a nation beset with problems that could not be easily overcome. As historian Bipin Chandra notes, "All the euphoria of freedom in 1947 could not hide the ugly reality of the colonial legacy that India inherited—the misery, the mud and filth . . . the changes that had come had led only to the development of underdevelopment" (Chandra in Tully, p. 149).

The development that the British had undertaken had indeed led to underdevelopment of the masses, as well as to the creation of an elite ruling class. Teeming with natural resources and a vast potential market for British goods, India had been a business enterprise for the British Empire, and the actions it took were designed to further those interests. The railway system was built to facilitate industry, the educational system to groom civil servants, and, while the majority of Indians remained illiterate, an elite group was singled out for privilege. The British created a vast bureaucratic network—the Indian Civil Service—and staffed it with their chosen elite, which included the Nehru family. These Anglicized, upper-caste and predominantly urban Indians became ICS administrators and politicians and alone were granted the vote (they comprised 14.2 percent of the population). Within the confines of this framework, class divisions widened, preparing only a select few for independence and leaving the majority uneducated, ostracized, agrarian, and wholly unfamiliar with the democratic process. This resulted in the "chosen elite" becoming a virtual monarchy at independence and created a political dynasty of the Congress Party and Nehru family in particular, who en-

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joyed an almost uninterrupted rule for the first 30 years.

1965 Indo-Pak War. In Pakistan the transition from independence to nationhood was not smooth, either. Jinnah died shortly after independence in 1948, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in 1951, and a military coup in 1958 brought General Muhammad Ayub Khan to power. The territory of Kashmir had been disputed since partition, and at Nehru's death in 1964 tensions led to war. In the spring of 1965 the two nations began "sparring" in the Rann of Kutch, a desolate region both claimed, and the fighting escalated from there to Kashmir and the Punjab in August. Though Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto officially denied that Pakistani soldiers were fighting in Kashmir, India's new Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri declared that Pakistan's forces had invaded and vowed that "force and aggression against us will never be allowed to succeed" (Shastri in Wolpert, p. 375). Indian troops were sent to the Uri-Pooch "bulge" in Kashmir and also attacked Lahore in Pakistan. In the novel, Saleem insists the war was actually started by smugglers, working for the powerful Zulfikar family, whom Pakistani soldiers mistook for the Indian Army. "The story . . . is likely to be true as anything," Saleem says, "that is to say, except what we were officially told" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 324). Whatever the cause, fighting easily escalated with the aid of propaganda on both sides. With memories of the bloody partition still fresh and easily exploitable, the governments of India and Pakistan each bolstered support through wild exaggerations. "In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man" (*Midnight's Children*, pp. 328-29). On September 23, 1965, a UN-sponsored cease-fire took effect—just three weeks after the war had begun. Both sides were low on ammunition, more than 2,000 were dead, and neither had made any significant gains (India conquered 500 square miles of Pakistan, Pakistan 340 square miles into Indian-controlled Kashmir). Pre-war borders were restored exactly as they had been before the conflict, and an icy peace again developed.

1971 Indo-Pak War. Six years later, the legacy of partition laid its claim to the present again. Pakistan, now under another military ruler, General Yahya Khan, held its first nationwide popular election in December 1970. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—an East Pakistani lobbying for Bengali autonomy—swept the elections, which put him in line to become prime minister. Yahya Khan was vehemently opposed to Bengali leadership in West Pakistan and immediately canceled the meeting of the National Assembly that would officially vote in Sheikh Mujib (Mujibur Rahman). In March 1971 talks to resolve the conflict broke down, and Mujib proclaimed East Pakistan to be "Bangladesh," a free country. As national flags were unfurled in Dacca (now Dhaka), Yahya Khan sent his crack troops to East Pakistan, where they attacked the capital, arrested Mujib, and brought him back to Karachi. Fierce fighting broke out as the cry of "Jai Bangla!—Victory to Bengal!" filled the streets. But Bengalis were seriously outgunned, and, fearing slaughter, millions of terrified citizens poured across the border to India. India appealed to the United Nations to intervene and to United States President Richard Nixon to stop the flow of arms to West Pakistan. But Nixon refused (in fact, he was using Yahya Khan as a go-between to set up his summit with China) and, despite internal and international opposition, continued to supply weapons.

"NEHRU DYNASTY"

In Indian politics no family has been more influential than the so-called Nehru dynasty, which has ruled for more than 40 of the first 50 years of independence. Motilal inaugurated their life in government as the first president of the Indian National Congress. His son, Jawaharlal, followed his footsteps and became the first prime minister of India after independence in 1947. Two years after Jawaharlal's death in 1964, his daughter Indira Gandhi (no relation to M. K. Gandhi—she married a Parsi businessman, Firoze Gandhi, in 1952) became prime minister and served from 1966 to 1984, when she was assassinated (for three years, from 1977-80, she was out of office). Her sons, Sanjay and Rajiv, followed her into politics—Sanjay enthusiastically, Rajiv reluctantly. Sanjay, Mrs. Gandhi's close advisor who was being groomed to become prime minister, was killed in a plane crash in 1980, after *Midnight's Children* was written. Instead Rajiv became prime minister in 1984, then he too was assassinated in 1991. His widow, Sonia (an Italian), is currently head of the Congress party, serving in the Lok Sabha, or legislature, and has made several bids to become prime minister. Highly critical of this dynasty, Rushdie accuses Nehru and the Congress party of "clutching Time in their mummified fingers and refusing to let it move" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 317). He asserts that true democracy and progress will not take place in India until there is an end to this political legacy and a real changing of the guard.

Bengali refugees flooded the Indian border—the largest mass exodus in history. By September 1971, 8-10 million were living in refugee camps, costing India $200 million a month to feed. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had just overwhelmingly won her second term in office, realized that India had to intervene militarily. In December she sent Indian troops to attack Yahya Khan's forces in East Pakistan and maintain a "holding action" to contain his forces in the West. With both air superiority and mass popular support, the Indian Army advanced easily in the east and closed in quickly on Yahya Khan's forces in Dacca. On December 15 Pakistan surrendered and Mrs. Gandhi proclaimed, "Dacca is now the free capital of a free country!" (Wolpert, p. 390). Mujib was released, returned to Dacca, and became the first prime minister of Bangladesh in January.

Neocolonial nepotism. The 1971 war victory was a major triumph for Mrs. Gandhi and greatly broadened her power base, enabling her to push a sweeping reform package through the Indian parliament. Included in her program was a vow to eliminate corruption and nepotism—two of India's "oldest traditions" (Wolpert, p. 394). However, the Gandhi-Nehru family was as guilty as anyone in these practices. In fact, as she announced the crackdown on nepotism, she had just appointed her son Sanjay to be one of her top government advisors and given him a plum management job at India's new automobile factory (Maruti). As Saleem laments in the novel, "O endless sequence of nefarious sons-of-the-great!" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 323). In Pakistan, Saleem is quick to point out, the corruption, lies, and nepotism were equally prevalent—they just took different forms. In Pakistan, "a country where truth is what it is instructed to be," he says, "reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 315).

Though certainly perpetuated by post-colonial society, the British colonial legacy greatly contributed to corruption and the practice of nepotism in India and Pakistan. By creating elite ruling classes, the Raj vested power in privileged families who continue to run the nations' businesses and governments. With the creation of the ICS (which became the Indian Administrative Service) the British virtually institutionalized bribery and favoritism in a red-tape-engulfed bureaucratic system that rulers and administrators perfected through years of practice. It is a system, known in India as the "Neta-Babu Raj" (Politician Bureaucrat Government), that has thwarted progress and has become, in the eyes of many, the "bane" of India's national situation (Tully, p. 104; Fernandez in Tully, p. 48). As Rushdie notes, midnight's children, or the citizens born at independence, became both the "masters and victims of their own times"—victimized by the colonial systems they inherited and learned to master (*Midnight's Children*, p. 443).

Indira Raj and the Emergency. Though her popularity soared after India's military victory in 1971, Mrs. Gandhi found herself in political turmoil just four years later. In June 1975, with social unrest brewing due to massive inflation, allegations of corruption, and widespread poverty, Mrs. Gandhi was found guilty of election fraud in the 1971 elections—a charge that carried with it a mandatory penalty of banishment from public office for six years. Her political opponents—chiefly Jaya Prakash (known as J. P.) Narayan and Morarji Desai of the *Janata Morcha* (People's Front)—called for her immediate ouster and declared a national strike. Like "the spring of a cornered tigress determined to survive and keep her grip on what she had," Mrs. Gandhi responded by dissolving the government, arresting agitators, and declaring a state of emergency (Fishlock, p. 87). Much like the Rowlatt Acts, the Emergency suspended civil rights, dispensed with due process, and censored the press.

By August more than 10,000 of her political opponents were in jail, and Mrs. Gandhi put into effect her Twenty-Point Program of radical reforms. Included in the Program were two very unpopular reforms, led by her son Sanjay: slum eradication and forced sterilization. "Forced sterilization spread terror among the poor and illiterate. Village men fled at the sound of a jeep. In population control, as in slum clearance, officials felt licensed to act as brutally as they wished, as if the end justified even the cruellest of means" (Fishlock, p. 88). Sanjay—India's "man of tomorrow"—led the nation's youth movement (the Sanjay Youth Central Committee), forcing sterilization on the lower-class masses. At the same time, as part of the civic beautification program, bulldozers rolled through the big cities, leveling urban slums and leaving tens of thousands homeless. In the novel, Mrs. Gandhi and her programs prove to be Saleem's chief enemy. His dwelling is flattened by her government-sponsored bulldozers, his wife killed in the process, and he is sterilized, leaving him, he feels, without any future. "Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves . . . but they drained us of more than that: hope, too, was excised" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 423). For India's poor, the inability to procreate was a devastating blow economically as well as psychologically. Children meant workers, and workers meant income. Therefore the inability to reproduce robbed them of their livelihood as well as of their progeny. Rushdie, vehemently opposed to Mrs. Gandhi's suspension of democracy, says his children of midnight are "a metaphor of hope" whose purpose was ultimately "destroyed by Mrs. Gandhi" (Rushdie in Weatherby, p. 47).

In 1977 the Emergency ended and Mrs. Gandhi was ousted in national elections by Morarji Desai. But as Saleem notes in the novel, like most his is an "amnesiac nation," and just months later "the Emergency was rapidly being consigned to the oblivion of the past" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 428). Indeed, before publication Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress party were back in power.

The Novel in Focus

Plot summary. Sitting in a Bombay pickle factory near the end of his life, Saleem begins telling his fantastic life story to his fiancée, Padma. A "child of midnight" born at the exact moment of India's independence and partition, Saleem is bestowed with not only an incredible life but with extraordinary gifts. He discovers he has the power of telepathy at age 10, and when his sinuses are drained he gains an uncanny sense of smell. His life becomes "embroiled in Fate"—specifically the fate of post-independence India as seen through the eyes of an English-educated Muslim boy from Bombay: "I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the whole lot" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 11). With this pronouncement, Saleem begins the story of his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, a doctor educated in Germany who returns to practice in Kashmir. A Muslim with an orthodox clientele, Dr. Aziz is repeatedly called to treat a young woman who seems to suffer from every ailment. Religious mores dictate that he can only examine the virgin Naseem through a hole in a perforated sheet, and he falls in love with her three square inches at a time. They marry and move to Amritsar, where Dr. Aziz finds himself in the midst of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and cheats death due to the opportune timing of a sneeze.

Dr. Aziz becomes a supporter of Mian Abdullah's Islamic movement, which brings him into contact with Nadir Khan, Abdullah's secretary. When Abdullah is murdered, Nadir Khan is forced to go into hiding in Dr. Aziz's basement. While there, he falls in love with the doctor's daughter Mumtaz (an ebony-skinned beauty), and the two live underground in a Taj Mahal of their own making. But their happiness is short-lived; Nadir Khan is forced to divorce Mumtaz when he fails to consummate their marriage.

Mumtaz then marries Ahmed Sinai, who had been courting her sister Alia, and renames herself Amina. They move to Old Delhi, which is in the grip of the Ravana gang (*Ravana* is also the name of the villain of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*). An anti-Muslim band, the Ravana gang extort money and destroy those who don't pay. The gang ultimately burns down Sinai's business, but he is left with enough insurance money to begin a new life. At this time, Amina is pregnant and troubled by a prophecy told by a local fortuneteller about the son in her womb. The soothsayer, Ramram Seth, says, among other things: "There will be two heads—but you shall only see one. . . . Newspapers praise him, two mothers raise him! Sisters will weep, cobra will creep . . . spittoons will brain him—doctors will drain him . . . soldiers will try him—tyrants will fry him" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 87). In short, everything the soothsayer predicts comes true, but it's all riddles to Amina and serves only to disturb her sleep.

It is the summer of 1947, and at the behest of friends who tell Ahmed that the price of land is "dirt cheap" in Bombay, he takes the insurance money and moves his family west. They move into a large villa atop a hill purchased from an exiting Englishman, William Methwold. Two months later, at the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947, Saleem is born to the Sinais. Actually Shiva is born to the Sinais, and Saleem is born to a poor woman named Vanita as Mr. Methwold's illegitimate child. But ayah (nanny) Mary Pereira switches the babies at birth, performing her own revolutionary act—giving the illegitimate child a life of privilege and the rich-born child a life of poverty. Just as the soothsayer predicted, *The Times of India* hails Saleem as the first baby of independence and posts his picture on the front page. He and 1,000 other children of midnight will grow with the nations. A letter from Nehru predicts that Saleem's fate will "in a sense mirror the country's," and Saleem proceeds to fulfill that prophecy (*Midnight's Children*, p. 122).

Book Two brings us to Saleem's childhood in Bombay. He is greatly influenced by the cosmopolitan city in which he grows up, particularly by the glitz and escapism of Bombay's film industry, or "Bollywood." He keeps in touch with his fellow midnight children by organizing conferences he facilitates with the help of his mind—he can bring everyone together through the power of telepathy he gains on his tenth birthday. There are 581 in his "club" (which represents the number of seats in the Lok Sabha or lower house of the Indian parliament; the other 419 did not survive their first decade of life), and he "plunged whenever possible into the separate, and altogether brighter reality of the five hundred and eighty-one" (*Midnight's Children*, pp. 194-95). While the distance grows between his father and mother as his father falls deeper and deeper into alcoholism, and they ignore him and his sisters annoy him, Saleem escapes into his other world. Repeatedly he "turns inwards to my secret Children" where he finds companionship and kinship (*Midnight's Children*, p. 247).

Saleem becomes a teenager and the family moves to Pakistan. Far from his children of midnight now, his telepathic ability dwindles, but when his sinuses are drained he gains incredible olfactory powers instead. His new power of smell is uncanny, and he begins to perfect a "science of nasal ethics" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 308). He can smell the good and the bad in people and events and creates his own moral hierarchy of odors. The problem is, he prefers the baser odors to those morally superior and starts to question his own moral fiber.

Just after the move to Pakistan, war with India breaks out (the Indo-Pak War of 1965). Aunt Alia, who moved to Karachi in the wake of Amina's marriage to her "rightful" husband, finally gets revenge against her sister. Both she and the war literally destroy the Sinai family—all but Saleem and his sister Jamila Singer escape falling bombs. Saleem is hit on the head with that prophesied spittoon, however, and the blow, combined with the sudden death of his parents and the trauma of the war, devastates him. Over the next six years, he becomes extremely withdrawn and introspective; the narration dubs him "the Buddha."

When war again breaks out in 1971, Saleem puts his keen olfactory powers to work and becomes a "man-dog," a tracker for the West Pakistani Army. He is the one who sniffs out Mujib in Dacca, but the deed causes him to question his actions and loyalties. Luckily, at this point a fellow Midnight Child, Parvati the witch, finds him and smuggles him back to Delhi with a band of circus magicians. Saleem comes to live in the magicians' ghetto with Parvati and marries her when he discovers she is pregnant with Shiva's child. By this point, Shiva has become a war hero and local playboy. He is working for Sanjay Gandhi's slum eradication campaign, whose bulldozers one day clear the magician's ghetto, killing Parvati. But the baby and Saleem live, and along with his snake-charmer friend, Picture Singh, they return to Bombay, where, Saleem discovers, Mary has made a fortune manufacturing pickles (highly apropos, considering the pickle she made of his life). He goes to work for the only mother he has left and meets his fiancée, Padma, there. Certain that his death is imminent, he begins telling his life's story to Padma in order that "one day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 444). Saleem marries Padma once the "pickles" are preserved, that is, once his history has been recorded and, while winding through the crowd after the ceremony, at last comes into contact with his destiny. Saleem foresees that he will be trampled by the crowd, but he has already preserved his life, as well as insured the future—through his son who is not his son and his history preserved in pages and pickles that are "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 443). Like the other children of midnight, he is trampled underfoot, but he will never be silenced. "A thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 446).

Methwold's legacy. Linking the microcosm to the macrocosm, Salman Rushdie uses the clever analogy of William Methwold fathering Saleem and abandoning his responsibility to illustrate the devastating long-term effects of British colonialism on India. Methwold represents the British Raj, Saleem the Indian born to chaos at midnight when the nation gains independence. Methwold, anxious to leave, sells out cheap to Saleem's family and exits hastily, leaving behind influences and institutions intended and unintended, just as the British did in August 1947.

Intentionally Methwold leaves behind his mansions—his institutions—modeled after the best in Europe: Versailles, Buckingham, Escorial, Sans Souci. They are the palaces of Europe "sold on two conditions: that the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new owners; and that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15, [1947]" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 95). Like the Raj, Methwold leaves his enormous Roman structures behind—an allegory of the vast bureaucratic and democratic frameworks that the British implemented and abruptly abandoned. They built their European monstrosities and filled them with their "things," which were of little or no use to the average Indians who inherited them. Amina has no use for portraits of "old Englishwomen" or Methwold's clothes in the cupboards (*Midnight's Children*, p. 96). In fact, there are so many British things cluttering the house, there is no place for any of her family's possessions or traditions. In Rushdie's analogy, Methwold's estate is the British government's colonial legacy—a vast entanglement of European institutions and systems that are preventing India from implementing its own democracy.

"I'm transferring power, too," Methwold tells Ahmed. "Got a sort of itch to do it at the same time the Raj does" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 96). But even he realizes that the British are pulling out too abruptly and leaving too much of a mess behind. "Bad show. Lost their stomachs for India. Overnight. . . . Seemed like they washed their hands—didn't want to take a scrap with them" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 96). As in Rushdie's allegory, after 200 years the British pulled up stakes and hurried back to England and like Methwold left more than just dirty laundry behind. They left a legacy; they left a people partly fathered by the British who now had to "live like those Britishers" and, as Amina says, clean up the stains that they left on the carpets (*Midnight's Children*, p. 96).

Like Mr. Methwold's conquest, the susceptible Vanita who bore his child, many Indians succumbed to British charms and seductive offers. When groomed for prime civil service positions, many eagerly accepted. In this way, as in the coupling of Vanita and Methwold, the Raj fathered a whole new class within India—the ICS bureaucracy and political dynasty that would linger long after the British pulled out. But, as with

Methwold's progeny, some offspring of this union were unintentional. The British seeds surely impregnated these "chosen elite," but, as in the case of Saleem, they also produced unplanned and illegitimate heirs. These "unintentional" children born at midnight represented the masses who were left to rebuild and to contend with the British institutions left behind. Like Saleem, these bastard children were impeded by the massive foreign structures that barred their entry, while others, like Indira Gandhi—part of the legitimate "chosen elite"—were born into those halls and held power so tightly that no others could wrest it away.

In this elaborate analogy, Rushdie also attributes the bloody communal violence at independence to Methwold's charms and powers of illusion. His hair—perfectly parted down the middle—is a gorgeous vision of India unified and equally divided. But, as Padma says, it is "too good to be true" and turns out to be a wig (*Midnight's Children*, p. 113). It is a hairpiece masking a barren landscape. It comes off as the lid comes off in India and communal rioting tears the nation apart. Methwold's hair is as slick as his talk and just as false. When the truth is revealed, he "distributes, with what looks like carelessness, the signed title—deeds to his palaces; and drives away" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 113). And Saleem, though he's never seen his father, finds him "impossible to forget," as does the rest of India, who are left with his colonial legacy (*Midnight's Children*, p. 113).

Using the allegory of Methwold, Rushdie mingles history and fantasy to show the lasting effects of colonialism on India. Like Saleem, the nation of India is the illegitimate offspring of the English. Saleem is both Ahmed and William's son-who-is-not-their-son and repeats the process with a son-who-is-not-his-son (but Shiva's son). In fact, all the children of Saleem's generation are born with this dual legacy and lineage. "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" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 117). Through these relationships—these illegitimate children—Rushdie's novel shows that the neocolonial pattern will persist until there is real change in India. It seems to be arguing that until the European chains are broken and there is a substantive restructuring of the institutions and dynasties left behind, neocolonialism will continue to thwart Indian democracy and progress.

Sources and literary context. Though it is set at the independence of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and traces many related events, Rushdie himself hesitates to call *Midnight's Children* a "historical" novel. He describes it as a "political novel which transcends politics" (Rushdie in Weatherby p. 47). Clearly impacted by the Emergency of 1975 and the colonial legacy that contributed to it, Rushdie bases much of the novel and characters on actual people and events. But he is also quick to point out that the main characters are not based on himself or his family—in fact, the "most autobiographical things in the book are the places. Saleem's house is the house I grew up in . . . the school that he goes to is my school . . . those things are certainly based on my childhood" (Rushdie in May, p. 415). Rushdie cites the novel's literary influences, crediting, in addition to Gabriel García Márquez, Laurence Sterne, and Günter Grass, Nicolai Gogol, and Franz Kafka. He draws equally on Western and Eastern influences, consciously choosing the imagery of Saleem's family nose to invoke "The Nose" (Gogol), *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne), *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Edmond Rostand), and Ganesh (the elephant-headed god of good fortune, as well as the patron deity of literature in the Hindu pantheon). He also uses the Hindu gods Shiva and Parvati as characters and evokes Krishna often.

The structure of the novel draws from Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and is indebted to the traditions of oral cultures. Most obviously, the storyteller Saleem serves as a bard who relates his version of an epic tale, recording individual histories to convey a universal truth. Rushdie also blends the grandeur of epic with the melodrama of Bombay cinema. Not only does the novel's reproduction of memory imitate the long shots and close-ups of cinematic technique, but scenes in the novel conjure up the "Bombay talkies" of which Rushdie was enamored during his childhood. Children's classics and fairy tales, such as *The Arabian Nights,* clearly influence the content and structure of the novel as well. It is no coincidence that there are 1,001 children of midnight—the novel is at once a fantasy and a morality tale designed to entertain and enlighten its audience.

Reception. Upon publication, *Midnight's Children* was almost universally acclaimed. It won the 1981 Booker Prize for fiction, garnering praise as "comic, exuberant, ambitious, and stylistically brilliant" (May, p. 412). Anita Desai declared that Rushdie had painted a new portrait of India, and wrote, "*Midnight's Children* will surely be recognized as a great tour de force, a dazzling exhibition of the gifts of a new writer of courage, impressive strength, the power of both imagination and control and sheer stylistic brilliance" (Desai, p. 13). Writing for the *New York Times,* Clark Blaise said Rushdie's novel provided the ingredient Indian fiction had been missing: "a touch of Saul Bellow's Augie March brashness, Bombay rather than Chicago-born and going at things in its own special Bombay way" (Blaise, p. 18). Robert Towers in the *New York Review of Books* wrote that "no one should pick up *Midnight's Children* in the expectation of a rousing good story" and discredited its movement as "constantly impeded, dammed up, clogged." But despite that criticism, the review concluded by saying that Rushdie was one of the most important writers to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation (Towers, p. 30). The novel signified a bold new direction in British literature and was called the "great Indian Novel" (Weatherby, p. 41). It later won the Best of the Bookers award in 1993 as the best novel of the first 25 years of the prize's history.

—Diane Renée

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