

Memory, History, and Identity in the Post-Religious Universe of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Introduction

Salman Rushdie's first full-length novel, *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, received wide critical acclaim, including that year's Booker prize, and launched its author's resoundingly successful literary career. Within this story, more so than within the later *Satanic Versus*, can be found Rushdie's explicit attitudes towards religion, epistemology, and self-identity; attitudes that, despite radically differing circumstance, do not appear to have changed substantially in his later writings. The questions at the heart of *Midnight's Children* are how, in the absence of religion or any ultimate principles, can a person know the world, or know themselves? In a secular universe, can self-knowledge and truth be gained? And, if it can, in what ways and for what purpose? These issues are constantly present within the narrative, revolving around the great central theme upon which the novel rests; the fundamental position of spiritual and epistemological alienation and the redemptive use of the imagination in order to interpret creatively the world and oneself. Rushdie wields the imagination as a political weapon against all forms of orthodoxy, including religious systems, and simultaneously attempts to circumvent corrosive nihilism. However, it will be argued that even in this radically postmodern context, the story of *Midnight's Children* does not escape a certain balance of form or integrated structure. There is a baseline of objective order residing beneath the superficial chaos and epistemological despair of Rushdie's narrative, a hint of ultimate principles and structures that partially redeems the corrosive relativism of his imaginary worlds.

Postmodernism, Exile and Alienation

Salman Rushdie was born into a wealthy Islamic family in colonial Bombay in 1947. Educated largely in English public schools, his upbringing fostered in him a secular and thoroughly modernist outlook. In his semi-autobiographical collation of essays, *Imaginary Homelands*, he said of himself:

I am a modern, and modernist, urban man, accepting uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing, I believe in no

god... I have spiritual needs, and my work has, I hope, a spiritual dimension, but I am content to try and satisfy those needs without recourse to any idea of a Prime Mover or ultimate arbiter.

With regard to religious beliefs, he observes:

I lost my faith... at school in England... during a Latin lesson [and] from that day to this, I have thought of myself as a wholly secular person, and have been drawn to the great traditions of secular radicalism – in politics, socialism; in the arts, modernism and its offspring.¹

As a secular humanist, Rushdie advocates a rational worldview that automatically accepts the non-existence of God, or any ultimate principle, as an *a priori* given. Yet, from this position of rational scepticism Rushdie also inherited a philosophical stance of pluralism and relativism, a stance that subsequently undermined the modernism upon which his worldview is based. Hence, with the epistemological ground pulled out from beneath his position, Rushdie is left with a floating secular outlook, detached and alienated from all epistemological verifications.² Thus, in his writings the comfortable stability of the modern world takes on the more malignant qualities of the postmodern, because all ultimate principles or signifiers are found to be unattainable. He says as much when he specifically claims to be “living in the aftermath of the death of God”.³

That Rushdie ‘lost his faith in a Latin lesson’ is symbolic of the central role colonialism played in his arrival at a position of philosophical disenchantment. As an intellectual product of a colonialism that was based upon modernist values, Rushdie was consciously instilled with the very values that he later found to be arbitrary and empty. As a result, he is alienated and exiled from two worlds: the world of the West and its lingering modern values; and also from the Eastern world of tradition and religious belief systems, the world of faith-ridden India.

These themes, exile from the world of tradition and faith, and alienation from the modern world that ‘abandoned’ him philosophically and ethically, are consistently expressed as the central concern of Rushdie’s writing, especially *Midnight's Children*. In a spiritual-philosophical sense, Rushdie considers “the condition of exile as the basic metaphor for modernity and even for the human condition itself”,⁴ and himself as occupying prime position to explore such a metaphor. Rushdie writes, “those of us who have been forced by cultural

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 405.

² Anuradha Needham, ‘The Politics of Post-Colonial Identity in Salman Rushdie’, *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1989), pp. 609-624.

³ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 416.

⁴ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 12-13.

displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have had modernism forced upon us”,⁵ and that “I’ve been in a minority group all my life, as a member of an Indian Muslim family in Bombay, then of a *moharjir* – migrant – family in Pakistan, and now as a British Asian”.⁶

For Rushdie, such a condition of exile is symbolic of post-Enlightenment relativism and disillusionment, and his particular background has produced in him a state of mind where issues of alienation, identity and belonging are central. Hence, he considers himself in a position to speak with authority on behalf of the postmodern condition. He states as much when he claims:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back. This alienation... means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions.⁷

This reference to creating fiction reveals the central tenet of Rushdie’s postmodern, post-religious worldview. Only the imagination is capable of creating meaning in the barren and secular universe, and this is done through the liberating creation of fantastic fictions and innumerable alternate realities.

As a result, numerous questions pertinent to the study of religion resonate throughout the text of *Midnight's Children*. In the absence of religion or any ultimate principles, how does one know the world, or know oneself? In a secular universe, can self-knowledge and truth be gained? And, if it can, in what ways and for what purpose? These issues are constantly present within the narrative, revolving around the great central theme upon which the novel rests; the fundamental position of spiritual and epistemological alienation and the redemptive use of the imagination in order to interpret creatively the world and oneself. In such a way, Rushdie wields the imagination as a political weapon against all forms of orthodoxy, including religious systems, and simultaneously attempts to circumvent corrosive nihilism. The specifics of religion are not ignored in his writings either. In fact, religion holds a central, but inverted, position and its motifs are constantly used to express what are often fundamentally anti-religious sentiments. Rushdie has stated that he has engaged “more and more with religious belief, its importance and power, ever since my first novel used the Sufi poem *Conference of the Birds* by Farid uddin Attar as a model”.⁸

⁵ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 12-13.

⁶ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 4.

⁷ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 10.

⁸ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 430. From his very first short novelette, *Grimus*, and continuing in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Versus*, it is a truism to say that, “On

The story of *Midnight's Children* dramatically appropriates mythic-religious motifs, symbols, narrative schemas, names, imagery, and elements plucked indiscriminately from Brahmanical, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian faiths. Some parts of the story are written in a mythic and oral style. In others, explicitly religious imagery, liminal states, notions of transcendence, rebirth, and eschatology are deftly wielded to add complexity and subtlety to the seemingly anti-religious narrative. In places, such references, although always insightful, are distinctly light-hearted and humorous, such as the Catholic missionary who earnestly tells his Indian congregation that, "All available evidence... suggests that Our Lord Jesus was the most beautiful crystal shade of pale sky blue", just like Krishna, and is promptly laughed out of Church.⁹ Or the Westernised Indian child who becomes transformed into "Lord Khusro, the most successful holy child in history" through reworking the story of Superman's birth, gleaned from an American comic cover.¹⁰

However, there is a much deeper side to this pervasive appropriation of religious motifs and imagery, especially when it is applied as a backdrop to what is on the surface an unashamedly relativist and postmodern narrative. To illustrate, one can cite the inversion Rushdie makes of the classic religious theme of the human quest for ultimate knowledge of self. Also the peculiar narrative structure of *Midnight's Children* poses questions regarding the processes of self-knowledge, epistemology, and hermeneutics within a relative universe devoid of any Prime Mover or ultimate referent. These issues are deeply related and clearly express Rushdie's fundamentally anti-religious and anti-traditional attitude to epistemology, ontology and politics. Yet it will be seen that even in this climate, but on a deeper level, the story of *Midnight's Children* does not escape a certain balance of form or integrated structure. There is a baseline of objective order residing beneath the superficial chaos and epistemological despair of Rushdie's narrative, a hint of ultimate principles and structures that somewhat redeems the corrosive relativism of his imaginary worlds.

close inspection Rushdie... touches on very many aspects of religious life and beliefs, often with the most remarkable critical penetration, though sometimes in playful satire", Garry W. Trompf, 'The Divine Indian Woman', *Australian Religious Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1993), p. 38. However, the specifically religious, rather than religio-political, elements of Rushdie's fiction have largely been passed over and gone unexplored.

⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage Press, 1995), p. 103.

¹⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, pp. 269-270.

The Story: Religion Inverted and Identity Deconstructed

Midnight's Children opens with Adaam Aziz, the grandfather of the main protagonist, praying to Mecca one morning shortly after he has returned from medical school in Europe. While kneeling to pray, he hits his nose against a "frost hard tussock of earth". Instantly his blood and tears freeze and crystallise into "rubies and diamonds". The story reads:

And at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never to kiss the earth for any god or man.

This decision, however made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history.¹¹

In this opening page, the traditional Indian man is dismissed for the secular modern man. Rushdie has orientalised the traditional cultures of India, and a tension is born which remains throughout the story. In renouncing his God, Adaam loses his self-identity and belonging, he becomes contingent on his history, "vulnerable to history", and to "this belief [of his European friends] that he was somehow the invention of his ancestors".¹² His world has lost its underpinnings, and notions of self and reality are made ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The book is narrated from the point of view of Adaam's grandchild, Saleem Sinai, a product of a post-colonial, secular, and urban India. Saleem's birth is the apex of one thousand and one miraculous and impossible births that occur around midnight on August 15 1947, the very hour of India's independence.¹³ These are the 'Midnight's Children', each holding a spectacular supernatural gift. Born on the stroke of twelve, Saleem is the most powerful of these prodigious offspring, and has the ability to read people's thoughts, the very core of their being.

Chained to history, these fantastic and unlikely children embody the emergent nation state of India and reflect its subsequent awakening.¹⁴ None do this more so than Saleem, whose elongated face is like a map, *imago mundi*, of the subcontinent,¹⁵ and who explicitly symbolises modern secular Indian man. Saleem recounts that "thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly

¹¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 10.

¹² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 11.

¹³ For a detailed examination of the use of history to fashion the selfhood of characters in *Midnight's Children* see J. Kane, 'The Migrant Intellectual and the Body of History: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1996), pp. 94-118.

¹⁴ I. Karamcheti, 'Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and an Alternate Genesis', *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1986), pp. 81-82.

¹⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 231.

chained to those of my country";¹⁶ and later that "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".¹⁷

Because of the actions of Saleem's eventual nurse, the virginal Mary, as well as her criminal lover Joseph, he is switched at birth. As a result he grows up in the wrong family, a household of wealthy postcolonial Anglophiles, and is thus exiled from his true parents and alienated from his traditional culture. The resulting story, told partially in the present but meandering at times far into the distant past, reflects Saleem's, and hence modern India's, antecedents, birth, childhood, adolescence, disillusionment, despair, possible fragmentation into innumerable parts, and potential redemption.

Typical of Rushdie's literary style, the narrative is radically pluralistic, complex, convoluted, and rarely linear, yet as it progresses, Saleem's character moves steadily from a state of optimistic and naïve hopefulness towards a disillusioned fall from grace and into a nihilistic despondency.¹⁸ Finally, a climax to this strand of the story is reached when Saleem is struck down during an eschatological war with Pakistan and loses his memory, his notion of historical self. He is emptied of history, emptied of his past, and in so being, he becomes a passive ascetic labelled only 'The Buddha'.

During the dream-like chapter 'In The Saunderbands', Saleem as 'The Buddha' enters a timeless and liminal environment, the deep jungles of east India. On entry, time is symbolically killed (an old man with a scythe is shot), scale is distorted, and within the fluid environment of "incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels over-towered by the cathedral-arching trees",¹⁹ 'The Buddha', a clean slate without personality, confronts his memories. Rushdie has written of this section, "if you are going to write an epic... you need a descent into hell. That chapter is the inferno chapter".²⁰ Yet, rather than expressing the classic motif of the descent of the hero and resulting acquisition of true and essential self-knowledge and triumphant return, Rushdie gives an opposing postmodern, variation on the theme. While sitting under an enormous tree 'The Buddha' is bitten on the heel by a translucent snake, and during his subsequent fall into gnosis, instead of finding the still and eternal fulcrum of his being, he is violently rejoined to his past. He immediately begins recounting his life story and the stories of his ancestors, his history starts

¹⁶ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 118.

¹⁸ T. Heffernan, 'Apocalyptic Narratives: The Nation in Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2000), pp. 470-491.

¹⁹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 360.

²⁰ Damian Grant, *Salman Rushdie* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999), p. 53.

issuing from his mouth “because he was reclaiming everything... all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man”.²¹

Soon after this apotheosis Saleem, in possession of his contingent individuality once more, reaches the symbolic centre of the chapter, a circular glade within which sits an abandoned Kali temple. He has left the “forest of illusions” and “jungle of dreams” and has found his own true core, a notion of self that is reliant on memory and experience. In this parable, Rushdie has successfully inverted the story in which a man escapes illusion, *maya*, and finds firm reality in a negation of temporal, contingent being. Rather, Saleem is reborn into his own historical, provisional and poorly understood self. He enters the jungle as the calm, serene, and empty ‘Buddha’ and leaves again as poor Saleem, confused once more as to the nature of his identity and inhabiting a universe barren of any sacred centre.

Identity and the place history, memory and narrative play in its formation are central to the narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*. In a post-traditional world with no recourse to any ultimate or essential notions or values, people can only ever be what it is their memories tell them they are, an accumulation of their past experience. Understanding and knowledge can only be arrived at through context, to know a thing in itself, all the history and collective imaginings that have gone into creating it must themselves be understood. Hence, exactly half the chronological time covered in *Midnight's Children* (thirty-one out of sixty-two years) exists before Saleem's birth and is told as family memory.

An infinite regress of imagination and interpretation is the only true path towards knowing the world and oneself. To know a thing in itself one must encapsulate the whole of reality. Saleem states that “There are so many stories to tell, too many... I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well”.²² Over three hundred and fifty densely packed pages later, Saleem reiterates this again more forcefully:

Who am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been, seen, done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone, everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come... To understand me you have to swallow a world.²³

This is not an appealing notion to those who crave self-understanding. A vignette in *Midnight's Children* tells of a painter “whose paintings had grown

²¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, pp. 364-365.

²² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 9.

²³ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 380.

larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art. 'Look at me' he said before he killed himself, 'I wanted to be a miniaturist and I've got elephantiasis instead!'"²⁴

Selfhood is a creation, a product, of history. Like religion, it is an imagined reality, a convenient dogma to give form to the chaos of life. "Consciousness, the illusion of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue to personality... just as religion was the glue of Pakistan".²⁵ As sediments of history, people only know themselves through a continual interpretative reading of their past and present experience. At one point, an apt analogy between the growth of a human being and a text is made:

What had been at the beginning no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book – perhaps an encyclopaedia – even a whole language.²⁶

In the same way that history flows and seeps into a person the recapitulation of this history dynamically creates one's notions of self. Memory is the creative act and the narrative the final result. As Saleem recites the story of *Midnight's Children* he creates both himself and his world through his remembering. Not only does this process occur within his own mind, but also, the story he recites falls continually upon the ears of Padma, a crouching woman who sits at Saleem's feet and whose act of constant interpretation mirrors that of the readers.

The character of Padma represents the finished story Saleem is weaving. Her name, Padma – 'lotus' in Sanskrit – indicates that Saleem's very narration is a creation or blossoming of reality, cognate in symbolism to traditional pan-Indian notion of cosmogenesis as an unfolding lotus. At points Saleem eulogises her, crying, "Lotus... which grew out of Vishnu's navel, and from which Brahma himself was born: Padma the source, the mother of Time".²⁷ An image reminiscent of Vishnu residing on the Buttermilk Sea, literally dreaming the world into being, as Brahma gradually emerges from the lotus sprouting from his navel.

If it were not for the ambiguities inherent in Rushdie's text, it would appear here that he is making an equation between the reader's mind, and the creative power of *maya*, reminiscent of Buddhist or Advaitan notions of

²⁴ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 48.

²⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 351.

²⁶ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 100.

²⁷ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 199.

epistemology. Rushdie's point is equally pessimistic, for the faculty of memory from which worlds are created is selective, it is fallible. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes that he is interested in "the process of filtration itself... the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes".²⁸ To such an end, he purposefully inserts errors into Saleem's narrative throughout the text, a wrong date for the death of Gandhi, and confusion between Vyasa's narration of the *Mahabharata* and Valmiki's of the *Ramayana*. As a result, any reading of self or reality is seen to be fallible, and consequently the world is ultimately unknowable. Rushdie explicitly states that:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings... The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be... a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to "read" the world.²⁹

As one of the characters in *Midnight's Children* states, "reality is a question of perspective", absolutes can never exist, and any world is fragmentary, ephemeral and chaotic.³⁰

The epistemological issues characteristic of postmodern critique are inherent within the book's narrative structure. Reality is not seen as being exclusively accessed by the rational, reason is not 'free floating' and objective, there is no *a priori* or univocal relationship between what it said (or named) and what is ontologically real. The world is "as much the creation of Kafka... as it is of Freud [or] Marx",³¹ and "[h]uman beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions... Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps".³²

This attitude of disenchantment, which abandons both grand narratives as well as all notions of universal or objective standards, has deep and obviously negative consequences for traditional prescriptive religion. Yet, in places, Rushdie expresses these very themes through religious terminology:

²⁸ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 24.

²⁹ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 25.

³⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 164. Even "the linguistic pluralism of the heteroglot novel is... ideological... discrediting the belief that truth is one and absolute, and holding that it is instead multiple, overlapping, contradictory". M. Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 121. For Rushdie's ideological appropriation of language, his unique blend of South Asian, American, and English terminology, as well as his use of narrative structures reminiscent of traditional Indian folk-oral story telling. For Rushdie's highly effective use of profanity and crudity in this context see S. Dayal, 'Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*', *College English*, vol. 54, no. 4. (1992), pp. 431-445.

³¹ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 123.

³² Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 12.

Memory has its own special kind [of truth]. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality... Do Hindus not accept... that the world is a kind of dream; the Brahma dreamed, is dreaming the universe; that we only see dimly through that dream-web, which is *Maya*... If I say that certain things took place which you, lost in Brahma's dream, find hard to believe, then which of us is right?³³

However, because this view of an historical and contingent universe rests upon anti-religious, modernist, and postmodernist foundations, it ultimately undermines any religious worldview. According to such a position nothing can be sacred, for "the act of making sacred is in truth an event in history [and] events in history must always be subject to questioning, deconstruction, even to declaration of their obsolescence".³⁴

So, the problem faced by Saleem is that if nothing can be true absolutely, then how can meaning be created? As the story progresses, and his memory errors become increasingly obvious, Saleem himself becomes more and more unsure of the truth of his narrative and of his own perceived personality, his very selfhood. He wonders aloud:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?³⁵

In such places Rushdie's themes are reminiscent of elements of hermeneutical theory. If Saleem does not know what he means, if his memory is in error, then how are we, the reader, meant to know what he means? In an ambiguous world without the objectified spirit of Dilthey, or the essentialism of Husserl, how can interpretations ever be carried out, or truth arrived at? The very process of Saleem's constant narration can be seen as an example of Heidegger's conviction that human beings and the world they inhabit only exist through their interpretative activity. That "all experience occurs in a temporal horizon in which the present is related to the past and to a projected future".³⁶ Or, as Gadamer has stated, consciousness, even modern historical, or scientific consciousness, is governed by effective historical determinations. Self-knowledge is incapable of being infinite, people are always within a situation, and hence they can never have a complete historical reflection of their existence; one is unable to dissolve into self-knowledge.

³³ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 211.

³⁴ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 416.

³⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 166.

³⁶ Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell, 1996), p. 91.

Saleem sets the reader the task of coming to know themselves through a knowledge of their history which for Gadamer extends indefinitely into “the dark backwards of time”. For Gadamer there is always a contradiction between ultimate truth (the world as it is) and method (how the world is reflected through the intellect, in what can ultimately only ever be a false way), a contradiction that can be partially remedied through the application of the hermeneutical imaginative act. As Schleiermacher noted, knowledge cannot be governed by a set method, but rather through the imaginative act of the ‘reader’ divining what the ‘author’ (in our case Saleem, and in Saleem’s case himself) originally experienced.³⁷ For the reader of *Midnight's Children*, and for the character of Saleem, no ultimate truth is available. Rushdie himself is the only final reference point, and he gives little away. As the author he plays the role of a God that has been killed, and as a postmodern writer he would claim he has not more authority to monopolise truth than his hapless character Saleem.

For Rushdie, it is not critical hermeneutical insight that opens the way to approaching truth, but rather it is the central role of the imagination to create the world afresh. The absolute freedom of the imagination and the creation of fiction is the only escape from nihilism. From fragments of history and experience an imaginative world can be produced. This process, the strangely artificial creation of realities from mere fragments, is expressed again and again in the novel, from personal identities to the whole of India, a country, Saleem states, with:

five thousand years of history [but that is] nevertheless quiet imaginary... A country that would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will... and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by ritual of blood... India, the new myth... a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God.³⁸

The dangers of this hermeneutical approach to the world are symbolised in the beginning of the novel by Saleem’s grandfather, Adaam’s, imaginative creation of his wife from parts of her anatomy spied through a perforated sheet:

So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts... a partitioned woman... glued together by his imagination.³⁹

A mere fifteen pages later she becomes:

My Grandmother, Naseem Aziz, whom he had made the mistake of loving in fragments, and who was now unified and transmuted into

³⁷ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story*, p. 88.

³⁸ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 112.

³⁹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 25.

the formidable figure she would always remain, and who was always known by the curious title of Reverend Mother.⁴⁰

For Rushdie, the act of interpretation does not merely reflect or modify the world, it literally creates it. Later in the story, Saleem's mother attempts to love a man through loving his separate parts. Each one she wishes to be something it is not, until eventually, "Ahmed, without knowing or suspecting, found himself and his life worked upon by his wife, until, little by little, he came to resemble... a man he had never known".⁴¹ His core being literally changes as it is perceived in differing ways.

This lack of any ultimate truths or reference points, and reliance on pure imagination in the creation of reality, allows Rushdie's writing to reflect the purely phantasmagoric and bizarre. In the vein of Calvino and Marquez, the imagination liberates the author from the crude 'facts' of history and their writing takes on the quality of the supernatural, the mythic, or the religious fable. To quote Rushdie, his writing is "dedicated to that form which allows the miraculous and the mundane to coexist at the same level", in which "notions of the sacred and the profane can be simultaneously explored".⁴² But, in effect, such a form of imaginative writing, although encompassing quasi-religious forms, expresses an opposite worldview to the traditionally religious. It is self-conscious fantasy built upon the aesthetics of despair, an epistemological inability to express real truth.

Additionally, the ends of such a phantasmagorical writing style are not aimed at expressing the world in any truthful way (arguably a fundamentally religious pursuit), but rather in doing the opposite, destroying the concrete and dogmatic world-views of others. For Rushdie, the imaginative narrative fulfils a more serious role than mere philosophy - it is a political tool. He states that, "To dream is to have power... Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so it may subsequently be reconstructed",⁴³ and "[l]iterature can... give the lie to official facts",⁴⁴ and hence its primary role is to subvert and destroy, rather than adequately reflect or, in the final analysis, create. For a writer such as Rushdie, alienated and exiled, no systems are more worthy of such deconstruction than politics and religion. Because "politics and religion, both in theory and in practice are... manifestations of our dreaming selves" they are non-reflective,⁴⁵ subjective, and insubstantial, and hence to believe in

⁴⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 40.

⁴¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 68.

⁴² Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 376, p. 417.

⁴³ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 378.

⁴⁵ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 378.

them would be naivety. But apart from creative fantasy, apart from sublime art, Rushdie does not offer any better or more truthful alternatives.⁴⁶

It can be seen that this anti-religious position finally leads Rushdie directly to problems of relativism and nihilism. Once the complexities and subtleties of his text are untangled, its humour, insight and poetry absorbed, it can appear that little of substance resides beneath. One merely touches the depressingly sceptical spirit of a fractured and alienated age. Although one of the characters in *Midnight's Children* says that "it is for art... to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith",⁴⁷ such art is simple play, often inspired by anger and the desire to remove old forms, for the only essential quality human beings appear to possess is their fundamental alienation.

Such nihilism can be perceived in the tragic demise of poor Saleem. After enduring his hopeless quest for self identity and truth, a quest that is as much modern India's as it is his own, Saleem dies a fragmented death, as he is pulverised and dissolved beneath the lashings of "too much history", splintering into six hundred million distinct particles, and is crushed under foot by the swarming masses of India, whom his atomised being represents. He fragments and disintegrates, for in a universe pegged to no ultimates, without even the secularised vestiges of religious values, there is no other final alternative.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Such a violent and destructive position, disregarding of those who take their dogmas more seriously, raises questions of religious tolerance, censorship, and the clashing of diametrically opposed worldviews, questions that have surrounded Salman Rushdie since the publication of *The Satanic Versus* and receiving of a *fatwa*. At times Rushdie has appeared almost naively unaware of the destructive potential of his polemical relativism and nihilism, and the feelings of people (such as the Islamic opinion-makers in Iran) who believe the imagination needs to be mediated and conditioned by other factors before it is given free reign upon all available cultural and religious spheres. In his essay 'Is Nothing Sacred?' he faces this question and asks himself whether his radically pluralistic and flexible view of reality, his conviction in the "absolute freedom of the imagination", may be "Secular fundamentalism", and as such "as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the cAnon.s of religious faith", Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 418. However, in his subsequent publications, such as *The Moor's Last Sigh* (New York: Random House, 1995) and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), Rushdie does not appear to have radically changed his secularist and satirical stance.

⁴⁷ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 421.

⁴⁸ For the opposing view, that the disappointment of defeat and atomisation represents a 'utopian fantasy of epic failure' in a postcolonial context see J. Su, 'Epic of Failure: Disappointment as Utopian Fantasy in *Midnight's Children*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2001), pp. 545-565.

Conclusion

It is unwise, however, to castigate Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a completely nihilistic denial of universal structure, order or truth. In his writing Rushdie often shows more complexity and subtlety, and the impressions gained from its reading are not necessarily bleak, or even anti-religious. As quoted at the beginning of this examination, Rushdie admits that, "I have spiritual needs, and my work has, I hope, a moral and spiritual dimension".

Certainly, there are indications that underneath the ambiguous narrative of *Midnight's Children* there resides a hidden and cohesive structure to reality. The story runs as a continual interplay of synchronicities, recapitulations, prophetic inter-windings of fate, homologisations, and rhythmic patterns. In forming a background tempo, these hint at an organising intelligence residing deep beneath the plurality of imaginary worlds Rushdie creates, even if such a mind or ultimate *logos* can only ever be that of the author himself. Saleem talks of a "national longing for form... an expression of our belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes",⁴⁹ and states that "everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form".⁵⁰ It is a testimony to Rushdie's ability to effortlessly manipulate language that the overall tone of a book that rests upon such bleak epistemology never becomes overwhelmingly depressive or nihilistic.

Such a 'deep structure' to *Midnight's Children*, for structure is what it finally amounts to, no matter Rushdie's overt scepticism, reads almost like a subliminal shift in proportion or scale. At points the narrative does just that, shifting focus and radically deepening its view of the universe:

History in my version entered a new phase on August 15th 1947 – but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga... Already feeling somewhat dwarfed, I should add nevertheless that the Age of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present Maha-Yuga cycle which is, in total, ten times as long; and when you consider that it takes a thousand Maha-Yugas to make up just one Day of Brahma, you'll see what I mean about proportion.⁵¹

For a tale based upon notions of memory and history, such a dramatic slide in proportion has the result of resetting all characters and themes within a much broader, more solid and optimistic framework.

As explored above, the deconstruction and distrust of hard factual reality, and the seeming plurality of imaginative 'truths', inherent within the narrative can be seen to act as a form of centrifugal fragmentation. If such is

⁴⁹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 300.

⁵⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 226.

⁵¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 194.

the case, then it can be argued that on another level there is also a centripetal counter-movement which seeks to bring all the fragments into relation with each other. Religious and mythic motifs, names, and symbols set and sustain the tempo and over all form of the story – a slow rolling cyclic percussion, turning in on itself retelling, retracing, and gradually sedimenting into an ever deepening and somehow profoundly meaningful tale.

Importantly, this optimism spreads into the epistemology of Rushdie's narrative, creating a guarded hopefulness somewhat familiar to ideas of the critical use of the hermeneutical circle. On the last pages of the book, when Saleem is surveying the thirty jars of chutneys and pickles into which he has distilled and bottled the thirty chapters of the story, the lives, histories, and memories of all he has known, he is more hopeful and retrospect about his hermeneutic search for truth and value. He ponders: "What is required for chutnification? Raw materials obviously... I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas". Yet, the search goes beyond the material, and has no end: "the process of revision should be constant and endless; don't think I'm satisfied with what I've done". And lastly, and most importantly:

The art is to change the flavour in degrees, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it a shape and a form – that is to say, meaning... One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history... I hope it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth... that they are, despite everything, acts of love.⁵²

Rushdie's own background and history may have instilled in him values and a worldview that can never be called traditional, religious, or even compatible with religion, however, the one quality his characters possess that appears to be as infinite as their alienation and delusion is their continual optimism and boundless hope.

⁵² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, pp. 460-461.