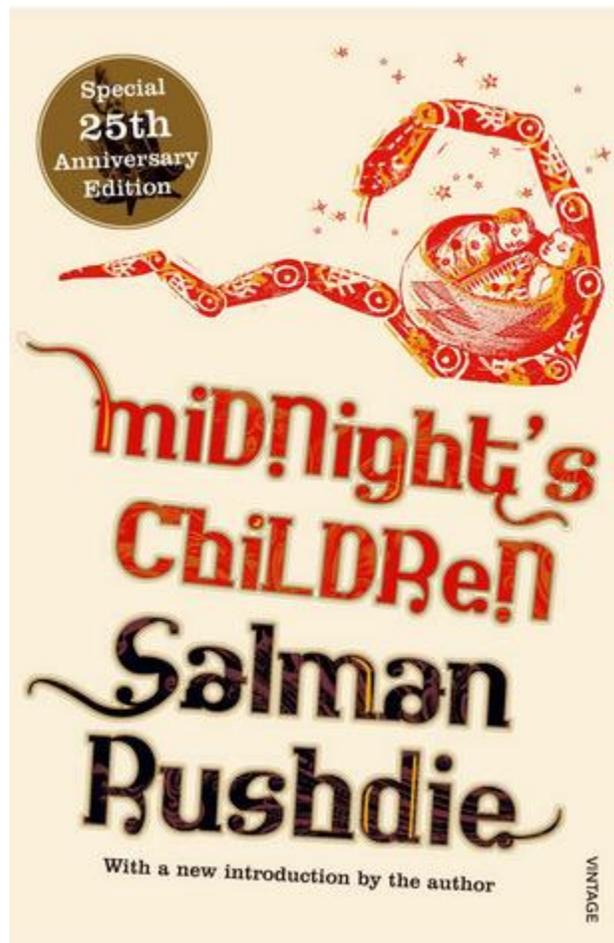


Historical Truth in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie deals with India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. It is considered an example of postcolonial literature and magical realism. The story is told by its chief protagonist, Saleem

Sinai, and is set in the context of actual historical events. The style of preserving history with fictional accounts was self-reflexive. This novel is an example of postmodern literature.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, magical realism

Absolute Truth, Universal Truth, Narcissistic Narrative

In the post-modern literary tradition, an absence of universal truth replaces prior notions of one absolute truth, in terms of history as well as such notions as identity and society. Just as post-modernism dismantles the concept of absolute truth, Linda Hutcheon's concept of the "narcissistic narrative" exemplifies the postmodern undermining of prior traditions. The need for a new way of looking at older historical forms makes *Midnight's Children* a prime candidate for analysis in terms of narcissistic narrative, providing an example that explores new views of history.

Ultimately, Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, exemplifies narcissistic narrative, inviting the reader to participate in creating and discovering an alternative to the typical historical traditions of historical truth as merely recorded facts: memory and the process of recalling memories produces individual histories that overlap some aspects of recorded history yet remain unique, individual versions of history.

The Theme

The theme of *Midnight's Children* is clear. Born at the hour of the creation of India and Pakistan from colonial British India, the children are the masters and victims of their time. Born to be destroyed by the weight of history, their lives reflect the destiny of their society. Cardinal political events in India's modern history are directly echoed in momentous happenings in their lives, while the cultural history of past Millennia forms the backdrop of the action. History and myth painfully merge. Speaking for all the children, Saleem cries out, "why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should have to bear the burden of history".

Saleem's Memory

His memory serves as a way for Saleem to shape India's history to fit in with his own, and the reader sees only his interpretation of the country's history. But, Saleem's mistake causes his readers to be skeptical of his narratives because the truth behind them is flawed by the

missing information. Lastly, Saleem is able to recount India's colonialism by encountering personal struggles, tragedies, and other crucial events at the precise moment that India does. His own birth happens to take place as India is partitioned and created into a new nation. This incident marks the beginning of Saleem's journey into becoming completely tied to India.

Saleem's Life

Saleem prospers as India does but also suffers the same way that India does. He calls the country his twin because the two share such a close bond, which is why he chooses to tell India's history in the first place. He states, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape" (3). Saleem is essentially an allegory of India because he brings together India's past, and future in order to fully describe what happened to the nation after being split up and reinvented.

History's Meaning Determined by the Present

History is individualized and history's meaning is determined by the present. Here the story proves that the history of their lives not logical. One day, Saleem loses a portion of his finger in an accident and is rushed to the hospital, where his parents learn that according to Saleem's blood type, he could not possibly be their biological son. After he leaves the hospital, Saleem is sent to live with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia for a while. Saleem returns home to his parents, Hanif commits suicide. While the family mourns Hanif's death, Mary confesses to having switched Saleem and Shiva at birth.

Rushdie's Narrative

Rushdie focuses his narration on his memory throughout the novel. He deposits a multiplicity of histories that are comprised of a mixture of ur-history and memory. History is ambiguous because reality is ambiguous. The search for a single united historical truth is unreliable; Saleem's narration is also unreliable; he himself acknowledges them at several instances.

Rushdie's narrative not only contains textual aberrations from typical narrative but also houses oral narrative within the narcissistic narrative. The self-aware narrative process that

addresses the audience and creates new rules while undermining conventional forms reflects the process of oral story telling. The elements of oral narrative overlap and work with the elements of narcissistic narrative and simulate the function of memory in history: both the narrative style and memory undermine traditional forms. Just as a person's memory jumps from one event to the next, without chronological sequence in many cases, Rushdie's narrative also leaps from one memory to the next, often interrupting itself in order to make room for a certain memory.

Narrative Connection with Memory

Wilson also observes the narrative connection with memory, as elicited by the narcissistic and oral elements of the narrative. Rushdie transcends traditional limits in his use of narcissistic and oral narrative. These artistic conventions not only relate a story but also mimic the function of memory and thereby help redefine history as individual rather than a single historical viewpoint shared by all. Focusing on memory throughout and through his narrative, Rushdie undermines the conventional ideas of history and posits a multiplicity of histories that are comprised of a *chutnified* mixture of history and memory.

History Is Unreliable?

Rushdie portrays history as unreliable when one searches for a single unified historical truth. To emphasize this point, Saleem's narration is equally unreliable, a point the narrator himself acknowledges at several instances. The most memorable of these instances occurs when Saleem admits to lying: "To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death". In *Midnight's children*, Rushdie undermines conventional forms of history, narrative, and truth. The validity of memory as a truthful account of history is offered as an alternative to ur-history. Rushdie presents a fragmented view of history that stems from the imperfect and partial nature of memory, as evinced in Saleem's narcissistic narration.

The fragmentary history gains emphasis from a narcissistic narration that mimics memory through its orality and destabilizes not only language but also the idea of recorded history as the one true history. Inviting the reader to participate in the discovery of alternative truths, the narration exemplifies Hutcheon's concept of the narcissistic narrative as it undermines conventional forms and suggests memory and individual perception as a means of grasping a

reality. The individual's reality may differ from recorded historical reality yet remains valid. The limit of the idea of alternate truths resides in memory and how one manipulates that memory.

One may choose to alter memory by the definition of others or one may retain that which provides the most meaning to that person. Because memory is alterable, both inwardly and outwardly, it is imperfect. Inwardly, one may "misremember" an event yet the sense of reality memory gives to that "false" event makes it as valid as the recorded truth. Outwardly, one may alter memory according to that recorded truth of history.

Individual Perception and Participation

Individual perception and participation allows Saleem, as well as the individual, to accept that which makes the most meaning to that person. Rushdie invites the reader to analyze the function of memory and the definition of historical truth. In doing so, he concludes and encourages the reader to conclude that "It is memory's truth, he (Saleem) insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own.

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