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# Epic of Failure: Disappointment as Utopian Fantasy in *Midnight's Children*

John J. Su

Marquette University, [john.su@marquette.edu](mailto:john.su@marquette.edu)



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And so, by a strange and melancholy paradox, the moment of failure is the moment of value; the comprehending and experiencing of life's refusals is the source from which the fullness of life seems to flow. What is depicted [in the novel] is the total absence of any fulfillment of meaning, yet the work contains the rich and rounded fullness of a true totality of life.

—Georg Lukács (126)

What I tried to do was to set up a tension in [*Midnight's Children*], a paradoxical opposition between the form and content of the narrative. The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it "teems." The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy.

—Salman Rushdie (*Imaginary Homelands* 16)

Ever since Salman Rushdie described the Indian "national longing for form" in his novel *Midnight's Children* (359), questions of form have been a central topic for Rushdie scholarship. Form, or, to use a slightly more specific term, genre, is so central because it addresses both aesthetics and

politics; indeed, it represents a crucial intersection between the two. As Tzvetan Todorov and M. M. Bakhtin teach us, genre is less a matter of taxonomy than of how we give meaning to the stories, events, and actions that occur in literature and everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Ideological conflicts are played out in literature, and literary scholars keep returning to *Midnight's Children* because it defies efforts to determine what might be the most appropriate form to depict the history of postindependence India.

The problem lies in the essential ambiguity of *Midnight's Children*: should literature even try to satisfy the "national longing for form"? This epic longing, for Rushdie, represents a dangerous desire for consistency, coherence, and meaning that can efface the cultural diversity of the Indian peoples and lead readers to be complacent in the face of a history of sectarian violence and governmental betrayal. Yet Rushdie himself composes a work that self-consciously asserts its own epic status. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, reconciles this apparent contradiction by conceding that the "national longing for form" is inescapable: "Form—once again, recurrence and shape!—no escape from it" (524). At the same time, he composes a history that he foresees to be a threat as much as a comfort, a story "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (549). The story of the intertwined destinies of Saleem and India asserts that the failures of Indian nationalism are the appropriate subject material for a true epic of nation. To the extent that Rushdie answers the national longing for form, then, he does so by creating an *epic of failure*.

Although Rushdie scholarship has frequently condemned him for his pessimism, there are theories that associate failure with insight and discovery. Georg Lukács, for example, asserts that the moment of failure in the novel is "the moment of value" (126). By drawing attention to its own inability to achieve the aesthetic totality of epic, the novel can convey "a true totality of life." Bakhtin makes a similar case, arguing that the novel's failure to maintain the monologic and authoritative voice of epic makes it possible to convey the heteroglossia that characterizes everyday life. Thus, the novel's supposed failure of representation makes it possible to perceive the world in terms of its multiplicity, not homogeneity. Lukács and Bakhtin both claim that this formal or generic failure is the novel's defining feature and the key to understanding its potential contribution to politics.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon their claim that aesthetic forms imply particular political values, I will suggest that *Midnight's Children* can be read as

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an effort to imagine a more egalitarian India through depicting the personal tragedy of Saleem Sinai.<sup>3</sup>

Rushdie expresses a very Lukácsian sensibility when he claims that the "broken mirror" with which he reflects the world of India in *Midnight's Children* acquires its value precisely because some of the "fragments" are lost (*Imaginary Homelands* 11). By insisting that the "shards of memory acquired greater status because they were *remains*," Rushdie rejects the epic conventions of objectivity, homogeneity, and totality (12).<sup>4</sup> Instead, *Midnight's Children* seeks to capture the experience of the Indian peoples by depicting Saleem Sinai's failure to equate his story with the nation's. We as readers experience the "multitudinous" nature of India by perceiving how the efforts to unify its history in an epic form fall apart—Rushdie's version of the Lukácsian notion that "the moment of failure is the moment of value." With this in mind, I will argue that the moments of failure in Rushdie's novel establish a utopian political vision for postindependence India. My analysis should not be confused with the trend in Rushdie criticism of defending his work as a deconstruction of some abstract notion of Western historiography; M. Keith Booker has demonstrated the weaknesses of that position.<sup>5</sup> Nor will I take Rushdie at his word that the novel represents an "anti-epic" (*Conversations* 126). Instead, I will explore how the novel's efforts to undermine its own epic pretensions answer the "national longing for form" in a way that preserves the diverse and often conflicting religious, cultural, and social practices within India.

Exploring *Midnight's Children* as what I will call an *epic of failure* could provide an important corrective to current readings of Rushdie's politics, for the critique of his political vision has often been based on a critique of *Midnight's Children* as a failed epic. Timothy Brennan's *Salman Rushdie and the Third World* established the terms for this line of analysis. Brennan argues that Rushdie produces an "aesthetics of resistance" that consistently undercuts any positive associations his work might build up. "We get protest, but not affirmation," Brennan writes, "except in the most abstractly 'human' sense" (166).<sup>6</sup> As a result, Rushdie can conceive of nation only in negative terms, an error that leads him to see fascism and nationalism as inevitably linked. Brennan concludes that this linkage prevents "metropolitan celebrities" like Rushdie from creating a "heroic myth" that postcolonial nations need ("India" 135, 141). Indeed, Brennan reads *Midnight's Children* as a comic "postmodern epic" burdened by

its pessimism (*Salman Rushdie* 100).<sup>7</sup> Rushdie's failure lies in his inability or unwillingness to provide an unambiguous epic of India. This same line of critique can be read in more recent essays written by M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga, and the basic premises of the argument are accepted by scholars like Aamir Mufti who are otherwise critical of Brennan. The clearest indication of Rushdie's unwillingness or inability to produce heroic models, according to this argument, is the bizarre absence of Mahatma Gandhi from *Midnight's Children*.<sup>8</sup> Rather than depicting the epic tale of resistance initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, the novel returns repeatedly to the sectarianism and tyranny instituted by Indira Gandhi.

I will argue, however, that Rushdie rejects the heroic myth as the basis for an epic of India. From his perspective, such myths contributed to the sectarian violence that litters the history of postindependence India. Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party, in particular, employed this myth to impose a unitary and homogeneous vision of nation upon its people.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Rushdie creates a utopian fantasy of an egalitarian India through his depiction of the failure of Saleem Sinai to become an epic hero. This idea of nation remains utopian because Rushdie felt that no viable political alternative to Indira's Congress Party existed at the time he was writing—the vision of a more just India, in other words, could be preserved *only* as a utopian ideal. By exploring Rushdie's effort to establish this ideal through an epic of failure, I hope both to counter Brennan's assessment that *Midnight's Children* is a "sick-and-tired portrayal of nationalist cant" ("India" 140) and to suggest why Rushdie nonetheless will not satisfy theorists on the political left.

## Uncoupling hero and nation

Central to the epic aspirations of *Midnight's Children* is the tension between form and content. In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie says that he sought to establish "a paradoxical opposition between the form and content of the narrative" (16). The novel opposes a form that echoes "the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration" to its content—Saleem's story of personal despair. Such a contrast would be impossible in a traditional epic, according to Lukács, because the age of epic comes prior to psychic interiority or subjectivity (30). In epic, Lukács writes, "everything is already homogeneous before it has been contained by

forms . . . forms are not a constraint but only a becoming conscious" (34); form transparently conveys its content, rather than acting as an "optimistic counterweight" to it. Bakhtin's notion of epic likewise denies the possibility of such a contrast between the individual and his or her world; his assertion that "epic disintegrates when the search begins for a new point of view on one's own self" implies that the history of postindependence India and epic, in his rigid sense of the term, are incompatible (34).

The contrast between form and content, from Rushdie's perspective, is necessary to an epic of postindependence India because the history of the nation itself is marked by contrasting promise and disappointment. Rushdie asserts that the promise of a unified India collapsed in the face of a sectarianism cultivated by the nation's own leaders. During the 1970s and 80s, Rushdie repeatedly attacked Indira Gandhi and the ruling Congress Party in essays and interviews; *Midnight's Children* was his first major attempt in fiction to address the "betrayal" of India by its government.<sup>10</sup> Rushdie, however, has insisted that *Midnight's Children* is not a "despairing or nihilistic" book (*Imaginary Homelands* 16). For Rushdie maintains that the promise of India has not been eradicated, even if it has been repeatedly betrayed. And this promise finds its allegorical counterpart in the book's form or mode of representation because the form expresses a set of values that guide how the events of Saleem's life and the nation more generally are perceived. So even if every existing political party betrays the ideals of democracy that guided India's independence movement, as Rushdie seems to indicate, the novel's ability to formulate a critique implies that the ideals themselves still endure. Ultimately, I will argue that for Rushdie these ideals can endure *only* as ideals—every effort to enact them represents at best a glorious failure—and that the tension between form and content provides an allegory for the irresolvable political tensions between utopian ideals for the nation and efforts to bring them to fruition.

This reading of *Midnight's Children* implicitly depends on a rather unsettling claim: the "infinite possibilities of the country" can only be represented through Saleem's personal tragedy. The opposition between the form and content of the novel suggests neither that pessimistic readings of Saleem's story are inaccurate nor that the endurance of the nation redeems him. Indeed, according to Rushdie's formulation, we come to discover the nation's infinite possibilities only because we are confronted with



Saleem's repeated failures and disappointments. Or, to use Rushdie's terms, the nation's powers of regeneration become fully apparent only by drawing a contrast with Saleem's disintegration. But why is Rushdie's vision of India predicated on the failure of his fictional figure of it, Saleem?

The opposition of individual failure and collective success—indeed, the recuperation of failure as a paradoxical success—is apparent in a wide variety of postcolonial literatures. Understanding Rushdie's use of failure could help us understand something more about the imagined communities of Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Leslie Marmon Silko, Jamaica Kincaid, and others. For the purposes of this essay, I will define failure as falling short of or disappointing a particular set of expectations. In the case of *Midnight's Children*, the most apparent failure is Saleem's inability to become an epic hero in the Virgilian tradition. From the outset of the novel, Saleem constructs a set of expectations that correspond with such an epic hero. His birth occurs at the moment of India's independence; he claims to contain the multitudes of India within him (4); and he continually links personal and national destiny. Saleem grounds this last claim on a letter he receives from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that declares that Saleem's life will be "the mirror of our own" (143). Throughout his narrative, Saleem insists that his actions shape the defining historical moments of postindependence India, from the language riots of Bombay to the death of Nehru to the state of emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Despite his identification of individual and national fate, however, Saleem is unable to affect the nation's destiny in any deliberate manner. His accidents and foibles have greater political effect than his efforts to form an ideal community of similarly gifted children, the Midnight's Children Conference. According to his own account, he incited the Bombay language riots as a result of a biking accident (229). And he himself tells us that the most important events in his life happen in his absence (14).

The comic description of Saleem's bumbling mocks the epic tradition dating back to Virgil that imagines the hero as founder of the nation. The epic modeled after Virgil, David Quint argues, is "tied to a specific national history, to the idea of world domination, to a monarchical system, even to a particular dynasty" (8). Its association of the hero and nation attributes a political meaning to narrative form by envisioning national history as coherent, linear, and teleological. Aeneas, as the model for this tradition, remains confident of his destiny from the be-

ginning of *The Aeneid*; his ultimate triumph over Turnus is all the more inevitable for its delay. In contrast, the rambling, cyclical narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*—the dominance of serendipity and contingency, Saleem's emulation of figures like Scheherazade—satirizes the history imagined by epic. Saleem's failure to fulfill the expectations of the epic hero—the incongruity between his grandiose claims and comic mishaps—renders implausible any link between personal and national destiny. By the time Saleem returns to India and proclaims "I think that when I tumbled out [of a wicker basket] into dust, shadow and amused cheers, I had already decided to save the country" (461), we know all too well that his pretensions are delusory. This comic rendering of Saleem's ambition has an important consequence in terms of how epic claims are interpreted. It becomes increasingly difficult to take seriously Saleem's claim to being "mysteriously handcuffed to history" when his own narrative reveals the improbability and implausibility of such claims (3). His claim is taken to its logical and absurd conclusion when Saleem asserts that the hidden purpose of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War was the elimination of his family.

To this extent, *Midnight's Children* resembles the epic countertradition that Quint traces from Lucan to Milton. These "epics of the defeated," as Quint calls them, resist the triumphalist history of the Virgilian epic by denying linear, teleological narrative (104). Instead, such works call into question the very possibility of ending, thereby insinuating that victors cannot dictate history any more than their victims can. The conclusion of *Midnight's Children* can be read in these terms. In the final paragraph, Saleem foretells the suffering that he and the next 1001 generations of *Midnight's Children* will face. This claim promises not only an unending string of defeat but also an endurance against oppressors. To the extent that the children represent the promise of postindependence India itself, their endurance signifies the continuing hope for a democratic and egalitarian nation state.<sup>11</sup> Long after Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party are gone, these ideals will remain.

The rejection of teleological history is not the primary focus of *Midnight's Children*, however. Rather, the story of Saleem's failure establishes a more general political critique of communities founded on the charisma and vision of a single figure. *Midnight's Children* presents a series of utopian communities—Mian Abdullah's Free Islam Convocation, Saleem's *Midnight's Children* Conference, and Picture Singh's magicians' ghetto,



to name but three—that all share a common feature: they are founded, defined, and sustained by the presence of a single individual. Each of these communities promises to bring a utopian ideal to fruition: an India without partitions; a community of leaders whose magical powers could establish “a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time” (235); a socialist community able to embrace wildly different social groups. And in the case of the Free Islam Convocation and the magicians’ ghetto, these groups contrast with historical movements—the Muslim League and the Communist movement—that from Rushdie’s perspective brought violence and fractiousness to India. But all three of these idealized groups fail because of their dependence on their leaders. The Free Islam Convocation dissolves immediately after Abdullah’s assassination; the Midnight’s Children Conference loses its ability to convene without the telepathic powers of Saleem; and the magicians’ ghetto falls into squabbling without Picture Singh to arbitrate disputes between members. Each of these communities depends so completely on its leader that the destiny of the collective and that of the individual merge.

Rushdie’s implicit critique of communities defined by a single individual represents a rejection of all who would equate themselves with nation. In terms of the novel’s political concerns, then, the failure of Saleem’s leadership ultimately represents a rejection of Indira Gandhi, the historical figure who sought to equate herself with nation: “Indira is India,” as her campaign slogan put it.<sup>12</sup> The alternative communities and their visions for a more egalitarian India founder not on their inability to envision a break with a history of sectarian violence but on their inability to imagine an alternative political mechanism of leadership. If they differ from Indira’s Congress Party in their goals for India, they nonetheless mirror its focus on a single leader. In consequence, they cannot alter history significantly enough for Rushdie.

To recapitulate my argument to this point: *Midnight’s Children* establishes an aesthetic identity between Saleem and India that creates a set of expectations associated with an epic hero. Saleem’s comic failure to meet these expectations not only undermines his claim to be the representative figure of nation but also rejects efforts to embody nation more generally. Even the most idealized of such “embodied” or epic communities fail because their destinies are too closely associated with the fate of their leader. This critique is precisely that leveled at Indira, who sought

to impose a very particular and homogeneous religious nationalism upon one of the largest and most diverse collectives in the world. Where the fictionalized communities in the novel espouse ideals of tolerance, Indira, according to Rushdie, ruthlessly exploits ethnic divisions between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims (*Imaginary Homelands* 43). Rushdie finds the equation of leader and nation dangerous because it removes social agency from individuals; the leader or epic hero becomes the sole force for effecting positive social change. And the repeated failures of such communities in the novel point to the inevitable disappointments to which they lead. Late in the novel, Saleem recalls believing that

one day soon the snake-charmer Picture Singh would follow in the footsteps of Mian Abdullah so many years ago; that, like the legendary Hummingbird, he would leave the ghetto to shape the future by the sheer force of his will; and that, unlike my grandfather's hero, he would not be stopped until he, and his cause, had won the day . . . but, but. Always a but but. What happened, happened. We all know that. (477)

Within the postindependence Indian context, the hero brings not progress but failure. Indeed, we see here Rushdie's own frustration with the political realities of India: opposition movements fail to provide a legitimate alternative because they do not differ from the Congress Party on the fundamental point of leadership. In this context, the failure of Picture almost appears as a blessing. For the figures in the novel who succeed in shaping the future by "sheer force of [their] will" are the Widow (Saleem's name for Indira) and Shiva (Saleem's rival in the *Midnight's Children* Conference), the figures associated with cruelty and intolerance. According to Rushdie, Indira's force of will leads her to centralize state power, culminating in her years of emergency rule, and to impose a rigid and narrow Indian identity upon the nation (*Imaginary Homelands* 41–46).

The resemblance between Indira and the epic hero suggests an answer to our earlier question about the necessity of Saleem's failure. His failure resists the ideal of the epic hero and the sorts of communities associated with such a figure. In other words, the rejection of traditional epic in *Midnight's Children* ultimately represents a rejection of the longing for a homogeneous India. Rushdie insists in his essays that the survival of the Indian nation state depends on maintaining ideals of tolerance,

secularism, decentralization, and democracy. "There can be no one way—religious, cultural, or linguistic—of being an Indian," Rushdie writes: "let difference reign" (44). The uncoupling of hero and nation in *Midnight's Children* rejects the political ideals associated with traditional epic by rejecting its claim to establish a single way of *representing* the national subject. The evocation and subsequent rejection of epic conventions by *Midnight's Children* suggest that any narrative form seeking to impose a unified narrative of nation can do so only through metaphorical and literal violence. The moments where *Midnight's Children* "fails" to be epic thus preserve the possibility of a more "true" epic that can represent the diversity and multivocality of the nation.<sup>13</sup>

## Valorizing failure

Intriguingly, the novel expresses no particular longing for Saleem to have succeeded in any sense of the term. Saleem is neither epic hero nor visionary. The novel avoids endorsing Saleem's vision for India, and it scarcely laments that vision's passing. Indeed, Saleem's idea that the Midnight's Children Conference would serve as a "third principle" mediating between national factions is unconvincing even to his fellow Children of Midnight. In contrast, the novel is preoccupied with his failures. Chapter after chapter displays his failures as a hero, lover, visionary, and narrator. We saw in the last section that the critique of both Indira Gandhi and various opposition movements for their common failure to "let difference reign" depends on depicting Saleem's failures. In this section, I will make perhaps an even more provocative claim: Saleem's failure as a narrator preserves the promise of democratic ideals in the novel.

This argument begins with a fairly obvious question: Why do Rushdie's political ideals depend on a valorization of failure? To begin to answer this question, we need to recognize how Rushdie's valorization of failure draws on a tradition within the modern novel exemplified by figures like William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett. Indeed, when Rushdie formulates his theory of the novel as an inherently failed project he quotes Samuel Beckett's famous proclamation: "Ever tried. Ever failed. Never mind. Try again. Fail better" (*Imaginary Homelands* 427). Only the novel's self-conscious awareness of its failure to represent the world it portrays can preserve its status as a continuing and unfinished project; its failure guarantees that the novel will not reproduce the orthodoxies it is meant

to critique. For orthodoxy depends on authority and monologism, Rushdie argues, and the novel challenges authority because it "tells us there are no rules" (423). As a form, the novel is "the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds" because it was created to express the defining characteristic of modernity: "the fragmentation of truth" (424, 422).

Rushdie's theory of aesthetics reads like a gloss on the politics of contemporary India. His assertion that the novel challenges orthodoxies and claims to absolute truth resonates with his attack on the sectarianism and centralization of state power (see, for example, *Imaginary Homelands* 26–33, 37–46, 376–92). Likewise, his insistence that the novel was created to discuss the fragmentation of truth implies that the truth per se cannot be possessed by a central authority figure or visionary but instead depends on a process of negotiation that tolerates difference. The resemblance of political and aesthetic values suggests that one can be "read" in relation to the other, something Rushdie himself does. The nation, like the novel, is an unfinished project, and its ills can be attributed to a failure to live up to an aesthetic ideal: the problem with India, according to Rushdie, is that it is "*insufficiently imagined*" (387, Rushdie's italics).<sup>14</sup>

If we accept that *Midnight's Children's* political commitments can be read through its aesthetic forms, then we can analyze the political importance of failure through an examination of the moments of aesthetic failure.<sup>15</sup> I defined failure earlier in terms of disappointed expectations and suggested that Saleem fails to fulfill the expectations he creates for himself. But the narration itself repeatedly draws attention to the ways in which it fails to achieve what Lukács calls "epic objectivity" (125). As narrator, Saleem makes a series of grandiose claims about his function in Indian history—claims that, we saw earlier, inevitably lead him into mishaps. The subjectivity and fallibility of the narrator—elements traditionally effaced within epic—are only foregrounded by the numerous historical errors he makes, forgetting even the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination.

The aesthetic and political consequence of Saleem's failure as a narrator is that he increasingly foregrounds his dependence on the audience of the novel for its composition. This dependence is most explicitly stated when Saleem describes the first time he heard his sister sing. Saleem confesses:

I have not, I think, been good at describing emotions—believing my audience to be capable of *joining in*; of imagining for themselves what I have been unable to re-imagine, so that my story becomes yours as well. (352)

Saleem's admission invites the audience to participate in his imagination. His narrative stages the impossibility of transparently recovering the past; instead, the past must be reconstituted through a process of retelling and interpretation. In this way, the story becomes a collective rather than personal property. By defining Saleem's epic tale as a performative process of creation by the narrator and audience—rather than a transparent representation of "reality" by an authoritative narrator, as Lukács and Bakhtin understand the epic—Rushdie provides a voice, in theory at least, for the multiplicity and diversity of India's peoples precisely by requiring their participation.

Of course, this claim should be treated with a certain degree of skepticism. Like other novels that purport to be oral performances, *Midnight's Children* establishes an implied audience that does not necessarily correspond to its actual audience, at least to the extent that the actual audience is composed of individual readers who may or may not imagine themselves to be part of a community. Saleem's admission of narratorial "failure" can also be viewed as a strategy for the novel's self-exoneration, a way to deny responsibility for potential interpretations of it. To claim collective authorship implicitly claims collective responsibility, a point that becomes even more relevant in the case of *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>16</sup> Finally, we should be skeptical about Saleem's claim of originality. He asks his audience to perform a task that after all is part of every act of reading: to imagine the world that the author only partially represents. And the demands that *Midnight's Children* makes in this regard are much less strenuous than those made by novels like Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* or Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. Even the self-consciousness of Saleem's claim is commonplace in postmodern fiction.

By explicitly asking readers to perform a task they always perform anyway in the act of reading, however, *Midnight's Children* emphasizes the inability of narrative to define reality without the consent of the reader. Thus it suggests that the imagined community of nation sustains itself by the daily participation, belief, and acceptance of its members. Narratives of nation efface their dependence on this continued consent;



the appeal to a common destiny, common place, and common blood all represent efforts to naturalize and essentialize a process that depends on rhetorical persuasion.<sup>17</sup>

The rejection of narrative authority comes as a natural consequence of the rejection of epic heroes and political demagoguery, for traditional narrative conventions allow claims to an omniscient and unitary vision that Rushdie rejects within the political sphere. Rushdie's efforts to undermine epic or realist narrative authority open up room within his own narrative for conflicting descriptions of events. The narrative needs to invite suspicion and criticism in order to sustain its own critique of political authority. Narrative "failure," then, preserves the ideal of open dialogue by eliciting critical responses from readers. Saleem's errors in recalling the historical record provoke resistance to his implicit authority to describe the history of India.

To see Saleem's narrative as a gloss on nationalist narratives clarifies the importance of Saleem's claims about his unreliability. Although Saleem makes a series of outlandish claims that he himself finds improbable—he claims, for example, to be literally "falling apart" despite the absence of any medical condition (37)—he is also careful to insist on reader skepticism. After he describes the founding of the Midnight's Children Conference, Saleem accepts and approves of Padma's disbelief. He says:

It's a dangerous business to try and impose one's view of things on others.

Padma: if you're a little uncertain of my reliability, well, a little uncertainty is no bad thing. Cocksure men do terrible deeds. Women, too. (254)

Notice that his reassurances about her doubts initially take the form of a warning about the dangers of narrative. Through rhetorical persuasion, narrative can "impose one's view of things" on others; trusting narrative authority makes one vulnerable to an unscrupulous narrator. Ultimately this claim refers to the efforts of the Widow to cement her political power through creating myths of her own divinity (522). But it also refers to Saleem's own overconfidence, which leads him likewise to believe in his own infallibility. He is the first but by no means only victim of his own credulity. Saleem's assumption that he has the right to punish his mother's "infidelity," for example, leads to unhappiness for the entire family

(261). And his efforts at espionage will be repeated by Indira's agents on a national scale during the state of emergency.<sup>18</sup> To believe in the destiny imagined by narratives of nation means to justify a sense of infallibility that, for Rushdie, leads to "terrible deeds."

The failure of Saleem's rhetoric safeguards the truth; like his earlier efforts to reveal the "hands holding the strings" of the story, it points to the artifice of his narrative (72). Saleem's efforts to evoke and justify Padma's uncertainty about his reliability are meant to draw attention to the ways in which the "truth" of narrative is so frequently a product of rhetoric and persuasion that passes as the transparent representation of reality. To distrust narrative, whether Saleem's or the Congress Party's, limits its power to persuade its audience to act without reflection. Narrative becomes dangerous precisely when its artifice is denied or overlooked.<sup>19</sup> As Anuradha Dingwaney Needham suggests, foregrounding narratorial anxieties about Saleem leads readers to question prior representations as well (64). This questioning targets nationalistic narratives most explicitly after Saleem observes the ballot fixing that occurs during Pakistan's elections. Witnessing the election fraud that allows the President's Muslim League to defeat Mader-i-Millat's Combined Opposition Party, Saleem observes that "I have been only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts" (389). Where Saleem's admissions of dishonesty and narrative artifice are meant to reassure readers about his general honesty, the Muslim League's refusal to make similar admissions creates an environment in which nothing can be trusted. Saleem observes:

in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case. (388)

The inability of the Muslim League to accept failure in the elections leads its members blatantly to disregard the truth: they did not lose the election because they could not have lost the election. The sense of destiny that they established for themselves supersedes the empirical truth. The "truth" thus becomes a product of rhetoric, and reality "quite literally ceases to exist" because it is so thoroughly concealed by propaganda. As a result, all that can be known is that the truth is not what the people are told.

Here we begin to see the logic behind Rushdie's valorization of failure. The fictions of national destiny composed by Pakistan's leaders drive

them to suppress their own people in the name of the nation. Rushdie's unwillingness to imagine a concrete national ideal comes not only from a rejection of the politics associated with traditional epic but also from a suspicion of the excesses to which some fictions lead. Fictions of nation can lead to ethnic violence, suppression of minority populations, and a Machiavellian determination to enact the "prophecies" that fictions produce. By pointing to the artifice of all fictions, Rushdie resists the totalization of national fiction—Saleem's "failure" to conceal the artifice of his narrative preserves the possibility of alternative aesthetic and political visions even if he does not specify what these alternatives might be like. Here again, Rushdie's aesthetics inform his political models. Earlier, I suggested that the modernist dictum of "Try again. Fail better" provided an aesthetic insisting that any artistic work was an ongoing project; Rushdie applies a similar logic to the political sphere. The nation itself becomes identified as an ongoing project whose potential can be perceived most clearly in the moments when its people and leaders fail to adhere to the ideals upon which the nation was founded. Claims of "success" in this context conceal political and aesthetic stagnation as well as self-deception. Thus, moments of failure in the novel provide the basis for Rushdie's central political tenet: the rejection of unified fictions of nation—the rejection of a "successful" epic of India.

## Extratextual worlds and utopian fantasies

If Rushdie's epic of failure espouses ideals that have affinities with leftist thinkers, his valorization of failure nonetheless represents to them an ideologically compromised method of narration. M. Keith Booker's recent critique of Rushdie is exemplary in this regard. Booker asserts that the complexity of Rushdie's work is antithetical to populist politics; it endorses a political program that is vague, ambiguous, and inaccessible to all but a highly educated few (284). Nor are the ideals themselves praiseworthy to Booker; they do not critique Western bourgeois hegemony and late capitalism. In terms of the argument of this essay, Booker might suggest that Rushdie's valorization of failure allows him to appear to be politically committed without forcing him to be committed to anything in particular. Hence, Booker concludes by following the tradition of Rushdie criticism established by Brennan, asserting that Rushdie's novels are postmodern rather than postcolonial—a distinction that associ-

ates postmodernism with complexity, fantasy, and apolitical ideals and associates postcolonialism with political commitment, realism, and Marxian ideals.

While I find this distinction somewhat problematic, I would like to focus instead on the basic contention that it supports: the absence of a progressive politics in Rushdie's fiction. Over the course of this essay, we have seen that Rushdie does indeed endorse a set of political ideals and that he rejects the heroic myth as a model for politics. However, we also recognized that Rushdie's ideals do not correspond to any existing party or ideology. *Midnight's Children* is utopian in the literal sense of the word: it imagines an egalitarian "no place," an ideal community that contrasts with the actual history of India. This utopianism seems to reject the political left because it implies that no legitimate political alternative to the Congress Party exists; Picture Singh as a representative of the left offers a glorious but failed promise to the nation. To the extent that the novel embodies hope for the future in any one character, it is in Aadam Sinai, the only child to be born of a union between Children of Midnight. But he does little to satisfy the longing for a concrete, positive political model, for he remains an undeveloped character. As Jean Kane suggests, he represents a sort of "place holder" for the future, someone to signify the promise of regeneration that Rushdie claims for the Indian peoples (115).

Rushdie's work, then, is more concerned with the disappointing governments of postindependence India than with critiquing Western bourgeois hegemony or late capitalism. The idea that all of Indira's critics are politically aligned and share similar ideals is a fantasy that the novel itself debunks. Thus, Mufti's more measured criticism of Rushdie is apt: if leftist intellectuals are looking for an ally, they should look elsewhere.

To dismiss Rushdie altogether, however, for his so-called postmodernism would be a mistake. *Midnight's Children* remains a powerful effort to imagine India, even if it is an epic of failure. If the novel depicts the subjectivity of human experience, the contingency of social formations, and the frailty of memory, it nonetheless rejects the notion that history can be reduced simply to our representations of it. Indeed, Saleem's failure as a narrator suggests the endurance of the past despite efforts to recast it. Saleem's failure to shape the world according to his whim suggests that extratextual (historical) realities limit the extent to which he can fictionalize the past. For example, as Saleem composes the conclu-

sion of his narrative, he describes the death of his life-long rival and fellow Child of Midnight, Shiva. Shortly thereafter, Saleem finds himself having to confess that he lied. He actually does not know the fate of Shiva and, indeed, fears a future confrontation with him. Despite his desire to recast uncertainty as poetic justice (Shiva is described as being shot by one of his many abandoned mistresses), Saleem finds that he fails to make his own narrative correspond to his desire. After describing his mortal terror of Shiva, Saleem explains:

That's why I fibbed, anyway; for the first time, I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred. (529)

The past is never simply what the narrator chooses to describe, Saleem realizes. Although the past maintains no existence independent of its representations, no particular representation can encompass it—no particular narrative can define it. Traces of the past endure through other sources and other narratives. Shiva may well be alive and may well confront Saleem one day in the future, and no narrative describing his death can prevent this possibility.

Saleem's failure to make the past conform to his narratives provides the occasion for a more general claim about representation. Narratives of nation are also suspect to "the temptation of every autobiographer" to create the past. Historically, nationalism has depended heavily on such creations, what Eric Hobsbawm refers to as the "invention of tradition." Saleem's story becomes a cautionary tale about the inescapable limits of this process. In a nation of 600 million people, alternative memories of the past will endure despite the best efforts of Indira Gandhi to centralize authority, to cast herself as the embodiment of India, and to play off ethnic groups against each other. Although the Widow sterilizes the *Midnight's Children* and erases all traces of their past by declaring a state of emergency in Rushdie's fictional India, Indira Gandhi loses the 1977 election after she ends the state of emergency in historical India.

Saleem's description of the ineffectual government succeeding Indira and his recognition that her absence does not itself "represent a new dawn" (525) suggest Rushdie's abiding disappointment with the entire postcolonial political structure of India. No existing political or



social structure provides anything more than limited hope; even the most idealized communities in the novel, we saw, cannot sustain themselves. Saleem's ominous observation that there is "no escape from recurrence" (342) haunts the final paragraph of the novel:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, . . . they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died. . . . (552)

If we take Saleem's prophecy at face value, then the only hope in the novel comes from the endurance and regeneration figured in the Children of Midnight. Their continued survival despite the efforts of the Widow and her kind suggests that the potential of India remains intact even as its reality fails to fulfill its promise.

However, our analysis of failure in *Midnight's Children* suggests another possibility for reading the conclusion. Saleem's prophecy regarding the future of India and its Children of Midnight invites the same skepticism that Rushdie endorses throughout the novel. Saleem explicitly composes the ending with the same certainty with which he described the past: "I shall have to write the future as I have written the past," he writes, "to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet" (550). Yet in the next sentence Saleem recognizes that the future cannot be defined with certainty: "But the future cannot be preserved in a jar." Even if his narrative has succeeded in the "chutnification" of history, it fails to contain and store the future (548). The future, Saleem maintains, defies our representational faculties. His effort at prophecy represents an attempt to define his own destiny, an effort that is undercut by his awareness that all of his previous prognostications were wrong. His childhood vision of the Midnight's Children Conference was filled with a false optimism about its destiny, an optimism for which he pays dearly. Yet, since the future defies expectation and representation, Saleem's pessimistic prediction of an India doomed to recurrence also might be wrong. If every present social formation fails to provide a just and egalitarian society, the future could always exceed our imaginings of it. Put another way, failure contains an implicit utopian promise. This promise locates in the unrepresentability of the future the possibility of unraveling deterministic national narratives and discovering political formations that are presently unimaginable.

## Notes

1. In his book on Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov argues that genre establishes a "modeling system that proposes a simulacrum of the world" (83). Generic rules, like linguistic rules, may be unconscious but nonetheless shape how we perceive and make sense of the world. Todorov quotes Bakhtin on this point: every genre "is a complex system of ways and means of apprehending reality in order to complete it while understanding it" (83). But Todorov prefers a more restricted definition of genre than Bakhtin. He argues that Bakhtin's use of the term to describe both a linguistic and historical reality leads to a bizarre claim that the novel represents both a linguistic form and a social force associated with the rejection of authority (80–91).

2. Although the rhetoric of the novel as a failed epic is less prevalent in Bakhtin than in Lukács, it is nonetheless apparent. The novel can only arise when the epic world of homogeneity and reverence "disintegrates" (Bakhtin 34). And Bakhtin invokes postlapsarian imagery to describe the dialogism that is an essential feature of the novel. "Only the mythical Adam," Bakhtin writes, "who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object" (279). Epic, in this context, is associated with a world before the fall, although it has been noted that Bakhtin's definition of epic seems to be so constrictive that nothing after Homer actually fits the category. Griffiths and Rabinowitz argue that Bakhtin sets epic up as a straw man in order to provide an implied critique of the socialist realist novel of his day (278). For a more detailed analysis of how Bakhtin associates the genre of epic with the Stalinist state, see Ken Hirschkop's excellent book, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, esp. 272–99.

3. In simplified terms, Lukács envisions a quasi-Hegelian teleology of genre that maps the progress from epic to novel upon the historical shift from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. Bakhtin denies Lukács's teleology, envisioning instead the novel as a force that challenges epicism in every age of history. The novel challenges structures of authority; within Bakhtin's immediate social context, it challenges the "epic" of Soviet social realism. For more detailed analyses of Lukács's and Bakhtin's use of genre as political critique, see Aucouturier, Tihanov, Griffiths and Rabinowitz, and Hirschkop.

4. In this essay I will employ the terms associated with epic as established by Bakhtin and Lukács. Admittedly, this represents a certain simplification of the history of epic: objectivity, homogeneity, and totality can be associated with Homeric epic, for example, only after the various oral versions have been consolidated into a single written version. However, I retain these associations

because they reflect the cultural cachet attributed to the epic form, and it is against precisely these attributions that Lukács, Bakhtin, and Rushdie define the novel.

5. The major problem in asserting the deconstructive force of *Midnight's Children*, for Booker, is that such claims assume that stylistic features of complexity, unreliability, and nonlinearity provide a de facto criticism of Western enlightenment notions of history. "But accounts of Rushdie's subversion of conventional historiography tend to be insufficiently theorized (if theorized at all)," Booker argues,

failing to specify exactly how and why the exuberant presentation of Saleem's memory as erratic, confused, and often fabricated (combined with a liberal seasoning of "transgressive" images, ranging from naturalist turds to supernaturalist telepathy) somehow shakes the mighty ideological foundations upon which the global power of Western capitalism has been built over the past three centuries. (284)

6. More recent critiques of Rushdie's work have tended to follow Brennan's assessments. Kathryn Hume, for example, argues that Rushdie has no clearly formulated political stance. As a result, "Rushdie has not found a way to endorse any kind of action at higher levels of government" (221). Without a clear political stance, Jean Kane argues, Rushdie can "offer aesthetic production alone as a politics" (116). Perhaps the most extreme form of this critique comes from Feroza Jussawalla, who finds in Rushdie's aesthetics not only an absence of political concerns but an active racial contempt for Indians and Islam (228). Even Homi Bhabha's defense of Rushdie's work seems to accept the fundamental premise that Rushdie produces little more than "an aesthetics of resistance" (167). Bhabha's argument that hybrid national narratives create disruptive alternative histories avoids addressing how this applies to the daily political realities of India.

7. Although the word *epic* is frequently applied to *Midnight's Children* and Rushdie's later novels, the word tends to be employed in a fairly general sense (see, for example, Brennan, *Salman Rushdie* 100; Tikoo 47; Rege 265). Michael Reder does provide a short section exploring the novel as an "anti-epic" that dispels the notion of epic in its first pages (230–31). Indeed, to the extent that the term *epic* is invoked in Rushdie criticism, it tends to be in terms of irony and parody. Kumkum Sangari, for example, argues that Rushdie parodies epicity. Dubravka Juraga, however, perceives Rushdie's parody in negative terms, arguing that *Midnight's Children* is not a national epic but a postmodern novel (184).

8. For commentary on the absence of Gandhi in *Midnight's Children*, see ten Kortenaar 60; Brennan, "India" 140; Brennan, *Salman Rushdie* 84; and Patrick Colm Hogan in this issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*.
9. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham makes a somewhat similar argument with respect to Rushdie's critique of the nationalist history proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. Nehru's bourgeois nationalist history attempts to shape a unified history of India by asserting it as an already accomplished fact (Needham 56). By focusing on an India "riven by all sorts of conflicts and contradictions literalized in the disintegrating body and spirit of its central protagonist" (56), *Midnight's Children* rejects such efforts.
10. In an interview with John Haffenden, Rushdie explicitly states that *Midnight's Children* concerns the "betrayal" by India's leaders (qtd. in Price 99).
11. The major difficulty in sustaining a reading of *Midnight's Children* in Quint's terms is that the Children of Midnight as a group do not appear to be clearly associated with any particular set of political ideals. Saleem envisions them to be a "third principle" that could resist the "endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us" (306). However, the children themselves reject this notion.
12. Kane also finds Rushdie to use the figure of Saleem to produce a critique of "the nationalist conception of the new country as an essential totality"; however, Kane reads the "allegorization of history" through the metaphor of Saleem's body rather than his role as a failed epic hero (95). The slogan itself, "India is Indira, and Indira is India," was first attributed to Congress President Dev Kant Barooah (Wolpert 399).
13. Along these lines, Aleid Fokkema argues that the fragmented narrative does not reject the "truth of India" but provides the only way to capture it (55). Aruna Srivastava finds Rushdie's fragmented narrative useful in the ways that it denies notions of destiny and fate (69-70).
14. Walter Benjamin's critique of aestheticizing politics might apply to Rushdie's claim that the political failure of India results, in large part, from a failure of the imagination. However, Benjamin's statement comes in the context of his critique of fascism's justification of war. Benjamin argues that "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war" (243). For Rushdie, the imagination assists politics by offering the possibility of rethinking the definition of nation in more inclusive terms, hence reducing civil strife and war.
15. I depart from Kane's assessments that Rushdie's political and aesthetic interests are irreconcilably divided in large part because I read the use of genre

differently. For Kane, Rushdie reverts ultimately to the conventions of imperial romance rather than epic (97).

16. Not surprisingly, Rushdie defends himself against accusations of blasphemy in that novel along precisely these lines—he was misinterpreted. This defense conveniently overlooks the ways that novels invite particular interpretations over others. To state simply that he was misinterpreted is somewhat disingenuous in this regard.

17. My argument follows Benedict Anderson's analysis of nations as imagined communities that depend on narrative for building solidarity. Anderson, however, associates specific print media, like newspapers, with the process of nation building. For Rushdie, narrative has a much more amorphous quality, not being associated with any particular means of dissemination.

18. Inder Malhotra estimates that 140,000 Indians were detained without trial during 1975–76 (qtd. in Price 97).

19. In a similar vein, Neil ten Kortenaar argues that the strength of Rushdie's novel comes from its ability both to create a national fiction and to expose the fictionality of the nation itself (41). For ten Kortenaar, the affirmation and subversion of national fiction is necessary because communities require fictions to provide a stable identity and history, and yet these same fictions can be used to manipulate the very populations that place too much faith in them.

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