

Time Without Partitions: *Midnight's Children* and Temporal Orientalism

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When Mogor dell'Amore returns from the *Mundus Novus* of the Americas to the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*, he brings with him fabulous tales of the "erratic nature" of time in "that half-uncharted territory." Time, he says, "was completely out of control" (328). Not only does it speed up, slow down, and run "at different speeds for different people," but there are periods "when it did not move at all" (328). "The locals," dell'Amore relates, "confirmed that theirs was a world without change, a place of stasis, *outside time*" (328; emphasis in original). The Emperor Akbar, hearing of these contraventions of the laws of time, assumes that it must be a fundamental oddity of the West, in contrast to the prosaic and predictable behaviour of temporality in the East. "[T]he lands of the West," he thinks, "were exotic and surreal to a degree incomprehensible to the humdrum people of the East," where people "worked hard, lived well or badly, died noble or ignoble deaths, believed in faiths that engendered great art, great poetry, great music, some consolation, and much confusion. Normal human lives, in sum" (329).

In this exchange between the Eastern emperor and his emissary to the exotic West, Rushdie whimsically reverses age-old Orientalist depictions of the "timeless time of the East," which relegated the Orient to a static zone of temporal otherness outside of the linear progression of history. The "imaginative, quasi-fictional quality" of Orientalist descriptions of the time and history of the East, as Edward Said writes, dramatized the distance and difference between familiar and unfamiliar spaces (55). While reaffirming the normalcy of the laws of time at home, these Orientalist depictions of exotic temporality also invited Western intervention into lands locked in mythical stasis. The job of the colonizer involved, in part, introducing time to places formerly

untouched by it or erratically resistant to it. Rushdie, again reversing the polarities of Orientalism such that the East becomes the site of a “humdrum” ordinary temporality and the West the place of temporal irregularity and instability, mimics the Orientalist view that time control and regulation were purely an imported product of the colonizer. “It was possible, and there were philosophers who argued the point vociferously,” he writes, “that time had been brought to *Mundus Novus* by the European voyagers and settlers, along with various diseases. That was why it didn’t work properly. It had not yet adapted to the new situation” (329). Emphasizing the utter normalcy of the laws of time in the exotic Mughal Empire and satirizing Orientalist misrepresentations of foreign time as no less fanciful than descriptions of “flying monkeys,” Rushdie highlights the absurdity and arrogance of believing that a fundamentally shared human phenomenon—the experience and regulation of temporal rhythms—could be the special province of only one half of the world, relegating the other half to a zone of temporal oddity, incongruity, and instability.

Rushdie’s satire of Orientalist treatments of time in this later novel offers a healthy corrective to the critical treatment accorded to time in his earlier “clock-ridden” novel, *Midnight’s Children*. Time, in that novel, has consistently been interpreted in the very Orientalist terms that Rushdie is satirizing in *The Enchantress of Florence*. According to this reading, Rushdie, resisting the importation of the time of the West, offers instead a mythical, static, and timeless version of temporality, uniquely personal and culturally distinct from the telos-driven linearity of a Western time regulated by clock and calendar. For M. Madhusudhana Rao, the single unified concept of time in both *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* is “timelessness” (135), which aids in the protagonists’ self-realization as they unchain themselves from a “world of history” that has been “spoiled by deception and horror” (139). Fantasy is a “timeless world,” Rao writes, affording Rushdie “a long distance and telescopic view of life” (140). Rushdie’s novels are, for Rao, “meditations on Time, in the manner of realizing the world of timelessness.” They generate a “timeless reality,” according to which “[h]istory or particular detail is a passing phase” (143). Countering the corruption of history with “timeless constructs”

of “language, myth and symbol,” Rushdie achieves a “richly spiritual” timeless state of “nirvana” (144), where the personal, the symbolic, and the subjective combine in opposition to “objective, impersonal historical reality” (136). Stéphanie Ravillon similarly argues that Rushdie challenges the linearity of time, capturing instead the “essence of time” by creating “fictional spaces where time could stand still” (62). Rushdie’s primary object, Ravillon asserts, is to “alter the linear time of the West and to find an architecture which might allow the linear model of history and the cyclical mode of myth to co-exist” (62). Achieving through fiction the fundamental intransigence and resistant instability of the time of the *Mundus Novus*, Rushdie demonstrates, according to Ravillon, that there are “as many conceptions of time as there [are] individuals” and that time is “multi-faceted and ever changing” (64). These critics suggest that Rushdie, in distinctively “Eastern” fashion, is opposing as unwelcome the Western intervention into India of clocks, calendars, history and even temporal progression itself. Celebrating the “nirvana” of timelessness or forcing a fusion between Western linearity and cyclical mythic time, Rushdie becomes the representative of exotic temporalities that are categorically strange and unfamiliar to Western temporal regimes. Rather than recognizing a commonality of temporal existence for all people, these readings affirm the radical ontological distinction between the time of the colonizer and the time of the postcolonial subject. Ravillon asserts that rather than breaking down such Orientalist divisions, Rushdie is in fact expressing a “desire for a partitioned time” capable of innumerable appropriations and artistic reinventions (68). Far from satirizing the Orientalist partition and segregation of temporal experience along cultural lines, these critics suggest that Rushdie is inhabiting and celebrating a state of temporal exoticism outside of the normal rules of temporal progression.

These studies, I would argue, ultimately tell us more about the curious persistence of Orientalist conceptions of time in the contemporary period than they do about the function of time in *Midnight's Children* or in Rushdie’s work more generally. For timelessness is neither an artistic nor a political ideal in *Midnight's Children*, nor is it a mythical mode of Eastern being; it is rather a dangerous and formless solution to

the insistent demands of daily time, hawked by pseudo-spiritual hucksters like the Lord Khusro as an easy path to benediction and grace, or it is imposed by violence on the central protagonist Saleem, who becomes an avatar of Eastern timeless exoticism only after having received a temporary concussion by a projectile spittoon during the 1965 India-Pakistan War at the conclusion of the novel's second part. This temporary derangement of Saleem drives him outside of the linear constraints of history and measured time, and he is indeed at that point renamed "The Buddha," a moniker that sticks with him throughout the 1971 war of Bangladeshi secession. With acid irony, Rushdie suggests that Saleem's unconscious embrace of Eastern mystification is not only the result of random and accidental violence (his being brained by the spittoon is characterized by Rushdie as the achievement of "purity") but also the means for making him vulnerable to violent appropriation and manipulation. While he is in his state of temporal grace, "The Buddha" is put on a leash by Pakistani commando forces and used to sniff out Bangladeshi rebels and civilians who are then brutally murdered. The timeless Buddha's only use is as a tool for butchering Bangladeshi secessionists who are fighting to achieve historical and political recognition. In the "Buddha" sections of the novel and elsewhere, the fantasy of timelessness seduces Rushdie's protagonist away from political engagement and away from the transformation and appropriation of the rhythms of his life. It is compared to, and certainly not celebrated in favour of, other appropriations of and struggles over clock-time, such as those of the anarchist Joe D'Costa, who hides time bombs in a broken-down clock tower. Indeed, far from partitioning a timeless time of the East and celebrating it over the relentless linearity of the time of the West, Rushdie breaks down such Orientalist partitions, insisting upon time as a common battleground, a heavily contested site of struggle over the power to shape and regulate collective rhythms.

Orientalist conceptions of the time of the Other have not only persisted but have also arguably fuelled a great deal of polemical energy within certain strains of postcolonial theory. Keya Ganguly has suggested that the category of time has all too often been mobilized as a bulwark against a European historicism painted as oppressively teleo-

logical, authoritarian, and exclusionary. In opposition to the “normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western temporality” (162), critics like Homi K. Bhabha have celebrated the non-synchronous and uniquely postcolonial temporal experience as a political expression of contra-modernity. Such assertions of a fundamental ontological difference between the time of the postcolonial subaltern and the time of the nation or empire, Ganguly argues, may do nothing more than “reproduce an old-fashioned nativism about the so-called ‘alterity’ of postcolonial cultural practices, couched in terms of non-synchronousness” (173). Ignoring Johannes Fabian’s warnings of the anthropological temptation to deny a common temporal existence to geographically distant cultures and populations,¹ this tendency to romanticize (or, for Ganguly, “mystify”) the postcolonial experience of time, ignores the possibility of articulating a shared, if historically contingent, experience of modernity as a global or intrinsically human process.

If critical attempts to champion *Midnight's Children* as a document of postcolonial temporal Otherness reflect this dominant strand of thinking about time within recent postcolonial theory, they also reflect much older and more persistent attitudes about the function of time within the “classical” tradition of Indian philosophy and cosmology as worked out by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century European Indologists, who identified the core principles of “Hindu civilization” through their readings of foundational texts such as the *Dharmasātra*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Purānas*. As Romila Thapar has argued, Orientalists “generally conceded” that Indian civilization lacked both the “sense of history” and “the notion of linear time,” a lack distinguishing it from the Greco-Roman tradition and leading to a uniquely Indian inability to differentiate between myth and history (4). Theorizing Indian time as “entirely cyclic” (4), Indologists represented it as diametrically opposed to the linear time of “dialectical change” (4–5). In her critique of this Orientalist depiction of Indian time, a depiction that she argues has remained “largely unchanged” over the last two hundred years, Thapar demonstrates the ways in which cyclic time in the *Purānas* coexisted with linear and other categories of time in ways that were neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible with historical

chronology. A vast cosmological sense of time, whereby the period of Kaliyuga lasts for over four hundred thousand years, for example, co-existed comfortably with the practice of dating eras by regnal years, a time-reckoning system dating back to the third century BC and based on “a precise point of time and the starting point of the reckoning being known” (32). Breaking down the dichotomy between the cyclical and the linear, Thapar illustrates the extent to which multiple categories and conceptions of time-reckoning remain dynamically capable of registering shifting historical functions and priorities, in India and elsewhere. The persistent desire to stereotype time in a culture or subculture as non-linear and anti-historical, whether from an impulse to condemn its naiveté or to praise its political resistance, stultifies and flattens out its horizon of possibilities for temporal engagement and action.

Such a flattening out of the possibilities for action and engagement is one of the unintended consequences of readings of *Midnight's Children* which insist upon the text's assertion of an oppositional non-linear timelessness. Rushdie's protagonist struggles to establish the significance of his idiosyncratic role within a larger historical narrative of national consciousness and political autonomy. His fiery determination to enter and alter the progression of historical time, rather than to disavow that progression in a gesture of mystical renunciation, was clearly appreciated by early reviewers of the book, albeit in sometimes absurdly hyperbolic language, as with John Leonard's wish, expressed in the *New York Times* that “Rushdie's children” would “take over the world at dawn.” While Saleem's desire to enter and transform history is fraught with obstacles, not the least of which is the danger that it will manifest itself in a totalitarian identification with the state, the novel ultimately embraces the struggle to fight for a place within historical time rather than the temptation to opt out of that struggle through pseudo-spiritual mystifications of temporal otherness. Such mystifications are dangerous and seductive in the novel. They produce little more than a stupefied state of temporary shelter, while the progression of historical time continues unchallenged and unabated.

Saleem's first experiments with timelessness begin in the womb, when he realizes his power to stop clocks and hold time “still as a dead

green pond" (141). Yet Saleem recognizes that even though his magic has stopped the clock in the local clocktower and made time stand still for his mother, it has had no impact on the larger current of historical time, which sweeps the subcontinent along to Mountbatten's partition. "[A]lthough baby-weight and monsoons have silenced the clock on the Estate clocktower," Saleem writes, "the steady beat of Mountbatten's ticktock is still there, soft but inexorable, and . . . it's only a matter of time before it fills our ears with its metonymic, drumming music" (112–113). The stopping of time is only a trick, which fails to generate a viable alternative to the British Empire's plans, a tactic politically as dead and stagnant as the pond image Rushdie uses to describe it. The other great metaphor for timelessness in Saleem's early years is the "washing chest" or laundry hamper), which he describes as a "hole in the world, a place which civilization has put outside itself." Young Saleem hides in the dirty laundry to escape paternal rage, "concealed from the demands of parents and history" (177). Yet as with the clock-stopping trick, the shelter of the washing chest is only a temporary reprieve from the pressures of history, which intrude onto Saleem's illusory paradise with the "terrible inevitability of soap" (182).

If timelessness is a temporary juvenile fantasy, it is also the product of an obsessive exoticism of the distant Indian past, exemplified in the fate of Dr. Shaapsteker, the European snake-doctor whose escaped cobras take refuge inside the broken-down clocktower full of home-made bombs. His snakes, interpreted by religious leaders as the arbiters of divine retribution against Nehru's secular nationalism, are symbols of an exotic and dangerous antiquity that will rear its head whenever the present threatens to deviate from the past. Shaapsteker's obsessive study of these symbols is part of what Saleem describes elsewhere as a larger impulse to entertain "atavistic longings" in the face of "democracy and votes for women" (281). The end result of this atavistic and exoticizing orientation toward India's past is the creation and maintenance of a grotesque tropical archive. Shaapsteker in his nineties lives in an apartment "filled with tropical vegetation and serpents pickled in brine," a victim of his belief in the superstitions of his orderlies, convinced that he is descended from a king cobra (294). Young Saleem wonders what impulse

draws him to the deluded old man's room, where "the sun neither rose nor set, and no clocks ticked" (295). Saleem's later conception of himself as pickling the past through his narrative echoes Shaapsteker's pickling of his beloved snakes in an ecstasy of timelessness. If Shaapsteker's orientation toward the past is distorted, there is no reason to believe that Saleem's pickling of time is any less dubious a project. Certainly, other manifestations of exotic timelessness in the novel are no less suspect. The transformation of Cyrus into the ageless and timeless deity Lord Khusro, who exists "in a time before Time" (306), is nothing more than a crass marketing ploy to play on people's "atavistic longings" for Eastern mysticism (306).

Less transparent, though, is that other great symbol of timelessness in the novel, the Sundarbans, where Saleem and his Pakistani commando regiment find themselves during the war of Bangladeshi secession. When the young men enter the oppressive maze of the Sundarbans, an immense mangrove forest on the border between India and Bangladesh, they are driven mad by nightmarish visions of the ghosts of their victims and of dangerously voracious female goddesses. The Sundarbans function as a dark and disorienting exotic wilderness in the novel, devoid of moral balance and restraint, much as the jungle does in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or the Marabar Caves in Forster's *A Passage to India*. The young men's entry into the Sundarbans is effected through a symbolic slaughter of time itself, as they shoot a rice farmer whose wife has been raped by Saleem. Chasing Saleem with a scythe and thus represented as "Father Time," the innocent farmer is then murdered. This murder eliminates everything associated with time in the text: dependable rhythm, continuity, causality, and teleology, all of those ostensibly "Western" importations onto the exotic East. "Time lies dead in a rice paddy," the narrative bluntly states, and with it goes any sense of human volition or autonomy. Having "murdered the hours and forgotten the date," Rushdie writes, "they no longer know if they are chasing after or running from." The Sundarbans, like Conrad's jungle or his Placido Gulf in *Nostramo*, is a place into which "history has hardly ever found the way" (413). Were the text radically suspicious of a Western linear and teleological time, murdering Time and History would seem cause for celebration. Yet in

this text, those murders are the catalyst for the characters' subjugation to a ritualized and vampiric goddess Kali. The Sundarbans, where time follows the "unknown laws" of "sorcery," is not an exotic paradise free from ticking clocks and calendars but a nightmarish overgrowth of war-time atrocities which, in causing men to abandon their moral compass, also withholds the sustenance of controlled and predictable temporality. Even after he has regained his memory and married Parvati-the-Witch, Saleem refuses to acknowledge responsibility for his rejection of temporal structure. "[A] farmer's wife tempted me," he writes, "and Time was assassinated in consequence" (467). Blaming the victim for the necessity to assassinate time, Saleem trots out an alarmingly topsy-turvy sense of moral logic, which is precisely what Rushdie suggests is a natural product of the timelessness of the Sundarbans.

If timelessness unsettles the moral as well as the causal logic of events, it may nevertheless be a welcome alternative to the rigid temporal precision and inexorability of the clock and calendar time that constitutes the official historical record. The thematic function of midnight and magic in the text is, after all, to similarly destabilize and offer invigorating alternatives to state-sanctioned and state-regulated temporal management. If the 1975 State of Emergency makes the "trains run on time" (499), that precision comes at the expense of personal liberties, political dissidence, and alternative visions for the future. Those liberties and visions are the province not of regular temporal progression but of the messianic and magical hour of midnight, which is the hour "reserved for miracles" and "somehow outside time" (243). The text's latent belief in the miraculous and magical texture of existence and its celebration of the persistence of optimism embodied in little Aadam's first word, "Abracadabra" may give the lie to the argument about timelessness that I have been developing here. Despite its inherent dangers and pitfalls, timelessness may still be the only avenue to a magical resuscitation of alternative political futures. The magicians of the novel, self-ghettoized in time as well as space, are conceivably the novel's only hope for a future outside of the strictly managed and measured confines of the clocks and calendars controlled by imperial and state authority. Yet precisely because of their temporal ghettoization, the magicians succumb to the disease of Dr. Shaapsteker.

Castrated and dispersed, the magicians finally fight shadow battles inside timeless enclaves no less stultifying and airless than Shaapsteker's room full of pickled snakes. Picture Singh, the leader of the magicians' ghetto and the man on whom Saleem has pinned so many of his hopes, ends the novel locked in a timeless and futile snake-charming contest within the Midnite-Confidential Club. Saleem, characterizing his life's story in terms of the conventional epic, suggests that his descent into the club is the obligatory visit to Hades or Jahanna requisite for any epic tale, a "black as hell" place where, significantly, timelessness also signifies loss of memory and the past. "Here you are in a world without faces or names," says the female attendant who welcomes Saleem and Picture Singh to the club, "here people have no memories, families, or past; here is for *now*, for nothing except right now" (522; emphasis in original). Like the washing chest of his youth, the Midnite-Confidential Club is a place "outside time," a "negation of history" (523). Unlike the washing chest, though, there is no accompanying juvenile fantasy of comfort in escaping the dictates of temporal precision and the dictates of the past. Timelessness is a hell where magicians work their intoxicating spells for no conceivable ends and with no lasting effects.

For the emancipatory political promise to achieve a real and lasting effect, it must avoid the temptation of an exotic and mystified escape from the constraints of temporality and re-enter the world of clock, calendar, and telos, fighting from within the clocktower, rather than from outside it. Indeed, the clocktower itself is a key site of social and political struggle in the text, occupied by a series of political pretenders to the throne of temporal progression. After baby Saleem silences the clocktower, the anarchist Joe D'Costa takes up residence in it, along with his "devices of hatred," an assortment of time bombs. Saleem later uses the clocktower to project his telepathic vision of liberal democratic harmony to the other midnight's children until Evie Burns expels him from it in a coup of American occupation. It is significant that access to the clocktower is controlled by an Indian-made lock. Unlike Saleem's toy globe which is tellingly mislabelled "made as England" rather than "made in England," the lock on the clocktower is a cheap "made in India" product which is easily bypassed. If access to the larger sphere

of global activity is prohibited because the globe itself is “made as” England, the clocktower remains an accessible point of entry into a time “made in” India and thus open to counter-appropriation and regulation outside of the dictates of the British Empire. Indeed, much of the struggle over clocks in the novel involves an attempt to appropriate and harness a temporal progression that measures and regulates not only British activity and ideology but also the localized rhythms and activities of populations left behind by the “relentless ticktock” of British time. Bombay’s time, for Saleem, is “variable and inconstant,” as indicated by the Bombay speaking clock’s always being “a few hours wrong” compared to the “relentless accuracy” of Mountbatten’s “English-made” ticktock.

While Saleem entertains the notion that temporal inconstancy might be a cultural or linguistic heritage (“no people whose word for ‘yesterday’ is the same as their word for ‘tomorrow’ can be said to have a firm grip on the time”), he equally suggests that temporal inexactitude may be less an ontological mark of otherness and more a reflection of an inequitable distribution of infrastructural resources. The speaking clock in Bombay is inexact because it is “tied to electricity” and thus dependent on the vagaries of poorly distributed third world resources (118). If temporal imprecision is ontological, it cannot be changed. If it is a result of inequitable distribution, it can be. The fear in the novel is not of linear temporal progression itself but rather that this linearity will be dictated by corrupt authorities, whose control of the clocks will exclude or trivialize a multitude of imperfectly harmonized temporal non-synchronicities. This is the tragedy of Saleem’s aunt Aalia, whose grandfather clock, because it “kept accurate time but always chimed two minutes late,” never has a “chance to strike” before being wiped out in the coordinated airstrikes of the 1965 India-Pakistan war (374). As I have suggested, the point for Rushdie is not to retreat from the dictates of temporal progression into a mystified and valorized timeless stasis but rather to appropriate and shape the contours of temporal progression in order to ensure that they are truly global, chiming just as clearly for the non-synchronized places and peoples of the globe as they do for imperial and national authorities. Such appropriations of tempo-

ral measurement happen in the novel, as when Pakistan partitions not only space but time by setting its clocks half an hour ahead. While this transformation of clock time motivates S.P. Butt, a business associate of Saleem's father, to frantically question the foundation of reality ("If they can change the time just like that, what's real any more?" [87]), it prompts another character, Mr. Kemal, to speculate on the possibility of a "Time Without Partitions" (86). This, I submit, is the text's dream as well: of a temporal progression without partitions, integrating a diversity of non-synchronous rhythms and temporalities. To put it another way, I am suggesting that Rushdie is entertaining the possibility of a temporal foundation for global humanism, one that is, as Aimé Césaire writes, a "true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world" (73).

Such a project is fraught with peril, as it clearly is in the text. The project of shaping and redirecting the course of history can be driven by petty egotism and the drive for power, as is Saleem's threatening letter to Commander Sabarmati, assembled by cutting words and phrases out of several different newspaper articles and magazine advertisements and described by Saleem as his "first attempt at rearranging history" (298). Nonetheless, the text refuses to simply give way to the notion that the only alternative to such manipulations of time is to accept its "tergiversatory nature" (282) and thus abandon the very notion of linear causality. As Saleem keeps insisting whenever his narrative strays too far from that which can be located, charted, timed, and dated, "there's no getting away from the date" and "[t]he time matters, too"—phrases the text repeats a number of times (3, 337, 482). The time, in fact, clearly does matter in the case of the midnight's children themselves, whose magic does not derive from a mystical and timeless source but is rather the product of a precisely measured synchronicity ("on such a scale [that] would stagger even C.G. Jung" [224]). Their powers derive from the powers of clock time. Precise midnight on August fifteenth of 1947 can have no possible meaning outside of the purely socially and imperially-constructed meaning granted to it by the clocks at Greenwich. Yet it does have meaning in the text, despite the fact that it is a foreign and imperial construct. It is the time that independent India has designated

as its moment of entry onto the world historical stage. The magic of clock time is that we ourselves can make it matter, Rushdie asserts, by appropriating its powers through a collective act of will and by resolutely resisting all those who are “pickled in immortality . . . clutching Time in their mummified fingers and refusing to let it move” (374–5). Without clocks, we are only timeless wanderers in the moral void of the Sundarbans. If time got us into this mess, Rushdie suggests, time is nevertheless the only way out.

Note

- 1 In his book, *Time and the Other* (1983), Fabian argues that anthropologists construct bordered cultural enclaves for their objects of research, denying “co-evalness” to cultures that are conceptualized as existing in distinctly different temporal and spatial frameworks from those of the anthropologist.

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