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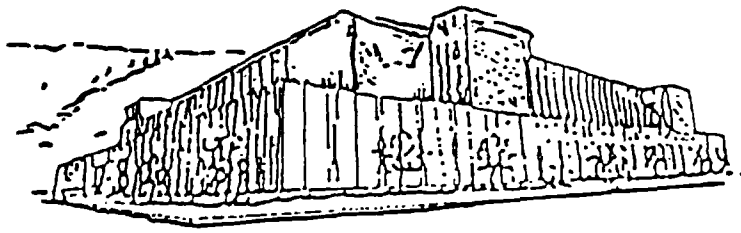
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**Charting the Development of the Artistic Imagination While Undermining the
Writer's Story: Meta-fictive Contemplation and Narrative Indeterminacy in Salman
Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

By

Joseph M. Campana

B.A. Canisius College, 1991

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

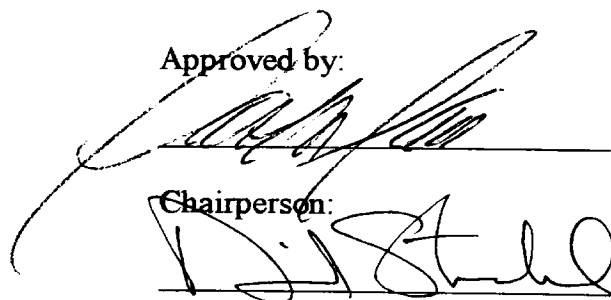
for the degree of

Master of Arts

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May 2002

Approved by:

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English

Charting the Development of the Artistic Imagination While Undermining the Writer's Story: Meta-fictive Contemplation and Narrative Indeterminacy in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Director: Kathleen Kane **KV**

Writing in response to and in the tradition of Victorian English Literature and turn-of-the-century colonial fiction such as *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster, Salman Rushdie demonstrates in *Midnight's Children* that Indian experience and Indian subjectivity are a departure from what Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, has called the theme of disillusionment in the Victorian novel (156-157) and the silent awe in the face of vast, incomprehensible mystery in Forster (200). In lieu of the stable subjectivity and the realism of the English, Rushdie creates a universe of narrative indeterminacy, a world in which it is impossible to verify the facts of birth, parentage, and national history. After reading the book, we cannot say for certain what, if anything, has happened to the narrator and what space exactly he occupies in the new nation. Rushdie gives us no facts, only playful contradictions and warring dualities.

In this paper I begin, following Said, by arguing that traditional realist modes of representation in Western culture work in the service of the Colonial project, that art fosters the politics of domination, and I continue to argue it is Rushdie's view that if one is to respond to colonial and postcolonial power-politics one must do so in a style of narration that undermines traditional Western modes of representation. I then demonstrate the manner in which Rushdie employs narrative indeterminacy to craft a dissident counter-narrative that subverts traditional Western discourse. I conclude by arguing that *Midnight's Children* is both a critique of nationalism and an extended reflection on the nature and politics of storytelling.

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I. Introduction: A Brief Examination of the Link Between the Novel and the Colonial Enterprise and an Argument Against Realism

“Empire follows Art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose.”
William Blake, from his annotations to Reynolds’s *Discourses*¹

“It is becoming commonplace that the institution of literature works to nationalist ends.”
Simon During, from *Literature—Nationalism’s Other? The Case for Revision*

Edward Said, in his seminal text *Culture and Imperialism*, makes clear the extent to which the Victorian novel not only reflects but augments the British colonial enterprise. Said claims that “Unless we can comprehend how the great European realistic novel accomplished one of its principal purposes—almost unnoticeably sustaining the society’s consent in overseas expansion—we will misread the culture’s importance and its resonances in the empire, then and now,” (12) and he goes on to explain precisely the link between the novel and conquest:

The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power. The novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the restlessness and energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeoisie, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go, what they can become. (71)

Realism, a mode of representation characterized by a singleness of intention, a consistency of voice, and a protagonist seeking both social advancement and domestic stability, is a form that is consistent with the English hegemonic impulse. The form and content of Victorian narrative mimics, sanctions, and even celebrates the political agenda, thereby instilling throughout English culture a new national consciousness, one that allows for the intensification of the imperialist project.

The rise of bourgeois society was made possible by overseas expansion and by a national zeitgeist which endorsed both the colonial endeavor abroad and the resultant class divisions at home. The realistic novel helped to unite ‘high’ and ‘low’ society in the colonial enterprise, or, more precisely, to appropriate the poorer classes by assigning them a space in the national narrative and co-opting them into a unified colonial discourse, representing them as complicit in the national agenda even if they did not reap its benefits. As Timothy Brennan writes in “The National Longing for Form,”

The *composite* quality of the novel cannot be understood only ethnically and regionally. The novel’s rise accompanied a changing concept of ‘realism’ itself, which acquired its present association with the lower classes only after the Enlightenment when, as Auerbach describes, realism came to involve: ‘the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation’ In other words, the novel brought together the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ within a national framework—not fortuitously, but for specific national reasons. (52, Brennan’s italics)

The poor are given a space in Art, in national culture, at precisely the same historical moment that they are summoned to partake of the imperial project—i.e., as a commodity, a source of cheap labor—and the novel, as opposed to the tragic play or the lyric poem, is the mode of representation best suited to chronicling their experience. Although this may appear to be a matter of giving the lower classes a voice, it is, in fact, a matter of speaking for them, of reconfiguring their experience and ideologically usurping their identity so that they can be brought en masse under the national umbrella. As Brennan notes elsewhere in his essay, “Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature—the novel” (42).

It cannot be overstated that the novel partakes unnoticeably, *invisibly* as it were, in nationalism and imperialism. Victorian novels are about English society, not so much about overseas expansion, and just as the connection between domestic prosperity and colonization is suppressed in the motherland where the bourgeoisie enjoys the fruits of Empire, so is the role of the colony in the formulation of the Victorian text.

Nevertheless, the British colony is often present in the 19th century novel, whispering from the margins of the text where it seems to be insignificant, incidental to what is at stake in the story, but is, in fact, vital to the development of the plot. Said goes so far as to argue that the colonial situation governs the movement of the entire text and that it is only by the means of a strict contrapuntal reading of the Victorian novel—an exegesis in which we study the movement of plot and the development of character in the motherland in terms of the marginalized colonial presence in the work—that we can fully understand the world of the text.²

Consider, for example, the experience of Jude Fawley in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. While Hardy's novel appears to criticize the English system of higher education and to question a tradition that will not make room for an eager—although poor and ill-bred—young scholar, in the end the text affirms the prestige and permanence of the British Academy and makes extensive, albeit subtle, use of British ownership of Australia to achieve this end. When Jude first enters Christminster he is immediately disappointed because, to him, “it seemed impossible that modern thought could house itself in such decrepit and superseded chambers” (69). However, despite these inauspicious beginnings, Jude persists in his quest, going so far at the end of the novel as to move his family back to Christminster just so that he can work there as a stonemason

and live in the shadow of the great institution. And at the very end, when even this leads to unspeakable disaster, Jude reflects on his ambitions thusly,

However it was my poverty and not my will that consented to be beaten. It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one; and my impulses—affections—vices perhaps they should be called—were too strong not to hamper a man without advantages, who should be cold blooded as a fish and selfish as a pig to have a really good chance of being one of his country's worthies. (302)

In this epiphany, Jude seems to accept his poverty as part of the just and natural order of things, and he condemns his younger self for overstepping his social bounds. He was wrong to think that there was a place for a boy of his background in the academy.

However, Jude's personal tragedy aside, it is easy to miss the fact that the entire movement of the text is made possible by the British ownership of Australia. In the beginning of the novel, Jude marries Arabella thinking that she is pregnant, and when she informs him that she is not the two separate, Jude continuing on to Christminster and she going to Australia with her father. If circumstances were different, if Britain were not the possessor of an overseas Empire, Arabella would not have such easy refuge for her shame and Jude would not be able to resume his quest so easily. It could be argued that novelists often remove minor characters from their texts to make new adventures possible for their heroes, but the distance and the ease with which Arabella travels is reflective of British power politics. Arabella's is an adventurous spirit, and while such characters are not peculiar to Victorian fiction, it is telling that her nation has provided her with both the ends and the means for her travels. Furthermore, the fact of Australia allows Arabella to keep a secret from Jude—namely, that she has in fact had his child—until well into the latter half of the novel when she asks Jude and Sue Bridehead to care for the boy. It is the young Jude who ensures his father's demise, and the faraway colony makes it

believable that he could be kept waiting in the wings until it is his time to enter the text. All of this is not to suggest that the British imperial project spelled the end of Jude Fawley, but it is to suggest imperialist arrogance was very much a part of the alienation Jude felt upon entering Christminster and that by virtue of his citizenship his life was bound up in the colonial project. Furthermore, it is to suggest that in both form and content this work gives tacit ascent to British imperialism by keeping the colony on the margin and failing to acknowledge its presence in and impact upon English society.

The realist Victorian text, an ideological correlative to Empire, ignores all that will not fit neatly into its system of signification and portrays instead the containable and coherent universe of bourgeois manners. However, it is that incommensurable world beyond the borders of the realist text which allows for the fixity and coherence of upper-class English society. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, a problematic text in its own right, is nevertheless a landmark work because it criticizes the manner in which the colonizer fixes the identity of the native according to a list of stereotypes and, more importantly, because Forster acknowledges and celebrates the fact that the colonial landscape and social interaction between colonized and colonizer defies realist representation. Take for example the scene in which Ronny and Mrs. Moore try to identify a green bird flying over their heads: "The bird in question dived into the dome of the tree. It was of no importance, yet they would have like to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge into something else" (86). Here at least borders are porous, things melt into each other, and phenomena cannot be contained in language.

Much of the novel turns on this question of representation with Forster acknowledging that truth is a matter of political power, as a situation not witnessed by any outsiders and not comprehended by its participants comes before the British court in India. The matter quickly becomes a question of who is allowed to speak and Forster demonstrates that the entire construct of imperial power breaks down when the contingency of language is exposed. Bhabha argues that Forster's text articulates what he (Bhabha) calls "the enunciatory disorder of the colonial present, the writing of cultural difference" by submitting its characters to "the nonsense of the Marabar caves." Bhabha further comments,

Cultural difference, as Adela experienced it, in the nonsense of the Marabar caves, is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is the momentous, if momentary extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of signification, at the edge of experience.

What happened at the Marabar caves? *There*, the loss of the narrative of cultural plurality; *there* the implausibility of conversation and commensurability; *there* the enactment of an undecidable, uncanny colonial present, and Anglo-Indian difficulty, which repeats but is never fully represented. (126, Bhabha's italics)

Thus, Forster acknowledges that the colonist's experience of India is fraught with indeterminacy, given to gross misinterpretation, and is well-nigh unwriteable. India, unlike bourgeois English society, will not submit to the limits of a coherent narrative discourse, especially the type of discourse imposed upon it by a man of limited imagination and sensitivity such as Ronny.

However, despite Forster's empathy for the native situation and the degree to which he grants the subaltern a sense of agency, there are still problems with this text, namely that by celebrating India's incommensurability, he aestheticizes and even

eroticizes the landscape, two discursive practices which appropriate the experience of India and reconfigure it according to an imperial master-narrative.³ Although Forster tips his cap to the mysterious, *A Passage to India* is still a realist text that performs a discursive violence on the subcontinent. It is not an example of the native voice responding to the complex, multivalent experience of Empire, recreating its experience according to its own rules of representation. The text critiques and even objects to some aspects of colonial domination, but it does not resist the exercise of imperialism in any profound way.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a text written by an Indian-born and English-educated writer, does resist colonial discourse. Rushdie's novel is a performative enunciation that, in its polyphonic and multivalent utterance, subverts the post-Enlightenment rationalism—i.e., the ontological certainty—that is the basis for hegemonic politics. Rushdie offers a dissident counter-narrative that is always conscious of itself as being only one of many possible counter-narratives. In many ways, the text's awareness of its own contingency and the narrator's doubts about his capacity for perception and representation do the most to undermine an English tradition of thought that purported to fix history in a stable, monologic metanarrative. As Jean M. Kane argues, "Rushdie further challenges the exclusive claim to truth of empirical 'facts' by embedding them in an ontology drawn from Indian myths, legends, and spiritual philosophies, thereby exposing the ideological investments of both literary realism and conventional history" (101). In other words, the candor and hilarity with which Rushdie admits that his narrator distorts experience and the ease with which Rushdie mixes the fabulous, the melodramatic, and the supernatural with the material of the historical

register mocks a British canon which celebrates mimesis, linearity, and stable subjectivity and Rushdie thereby resists the imperial endeavor by highlighting the connection between Victorian literary convention and English nationalism.⁴

Machiavelli has said that in politics the end justifies the means, but when it comes to the writing of history—i.e., to the documentation and narration of the birth and the life of a nation—I would amend the adage to say that the origin justifies the end. When a nation, a race, or a religion traces its beginnings to an imaginary landscape of “Once upon a time”—to what Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations* calls “homogeneous empty time”(263)—it invariably does so to connect itself to some ideal, very often to a lost state of innocence or to a hyperbolically glorious past, the re-attainment or perpetuation of which is the *raison d’être* of the collectivity. Destiny is inscribed in the tale of the origin and, what’s more, the tale provides sanction for corrupt leaders to pursue any and all action which leads to the realization of that destiny.

Destiny and sanction tend to cause a fervor that propels a nation beyond its frontier and for this reason by the 1930’s colonies and former colonies covered 84.6% of the globe (Loomba, xiii). The national spirit inevitably leads to conquest. Consider the words of Ernest Renan, taken from his essay, “What Is a Nation?”:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present;

to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people. (19)

For Renan, the great nation's past is an abstraction cloaked in grandiose language—"a legacy of memories," "great men," "genuine glory"—that gives consent to future heroics, read most likely as the construction or continued development of a metropolitan center and industrial capital by means of exploited labor and the addition of territory via warfare.

However, there exist more complex analyses of nationhood which question the ethos of manifest destiny, taking into account the plight of subject peoples and examining more closely the link between a nation's quotidian present and its folkloric, mythic past. For example, in "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi K. Bhabha distinguishes between pedagogical and performative acts in the formation of the national narrative, defining the former as "an a priori historical presence. . . , which founds its narrative authority in a tradition of the people" (147) and characterizing the later as "the enunciatory 'present' marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign" (147). On the one hand, Renan sees in national culture the continuous and uninterrupted regeneration of a glorious heritage imbued with a mandate to conquer, a position which allows him to subordinate race to the national principle to such an extent that he completely disavows a people's right to self-determination: "The right of the Germanic order over such-and-such a province is stronger than the right of the inhabitants of that province over themselves. . . . The primordial right of a race is as narrow and perilous for genuine progress as the national principle is just and legitimate" (13). Bhabha, on the other hand, argues that a gap opens between fragments of daily life

and the signs of a coherent national culture wherein a polyphony of contesting voices can be heard:

The boundary that marks the nation's selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production and disrupts the signification of the people as homogeneous. The problem is not simply the 'selfhood' of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-regeneration, becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and the tense locations of cultural difference. (148, Bhabha's italics)

Whereas Renan sees in nationhood an uncorrupted sign and a call-to-arms, Bhabha finds nationhood to be a site of conflicting discourses and the cultural sign to be part of a more slippery system of signification.

In concord with Bhabha, Francis Mulhern argues that tradition, what Renan calls "a rich legacy of memories" and what Bhabha calls the "pedagogical" strand of the national narrative, is a thoroughly arbitrary construct, operating in the service of a national agenda whose primary task is to weed out difference. Mulhern writes,

Tradition, usually said to be received, is in reality made, in an unceasing activity of selection, revision, and outright invention, whose function is to defend identity against the threat of heterogeneity, discontinuity and contradiction. Its purpose is to *bind* (and necessarily, therefore, to *exclude*). Tradition is prone to represent itself as custom, as the settled fact of continuity, but its real process is shot through with anxiety. (253, Mulhern's italics)

If cultural unity is the primary concern of the nation, it stands to reason that a given nation's cultural artifacts—more precisely, what that culture recognizes as its Great Art—will reflect and celebrate the national character. That which immortalizes the nation's past and locates its present in that abiding tradition will be valorized. It is in this way that culture works in the service of empire.

Victorian literature helped to manufacture British tradition by locating bourgeois manners and customs at the center of the moral universe and by relegating the politics of the colonial settlement—whether it be in Antigua, Australia, or India—to the margin of the text in much the same way British power-politics remained tangential to the gentrified social consciousness in the Industrial Revolution. While these texts often critique British manners and the plight of the London poor, they fail to offer a thorough examination of the larger power-relations that create and perpetuate this social system and they never question the centrality and the reliability of the distinctly British voice that utters these concerns. All of which is to say that the realistic text never admits to its contingency, to the limited point-of-view from which it speaks, and to the unreliability of its perception. The realist text is an artifice that never acknowledges itself as such. John Barth makes exactly this point in “Lost in the Funhouse” when he comments on the British habit of declining to reveal a character’s full name: “Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means” (69-70, Barth’s italics). By creating the illusion of reality, the Victorian text locates bourgeois manners in the “pedagogical” rather than the “performative” strand of the English national narrative and thereby masks the novel’s complicity in power-politics, hides the fact that it is binding together a society and making a nation better able to pursue its colonial mission.

Salman Rushdie answers to the English tradition not by directly questioning or ridiculing the conventions of Victorian fiction, but rather by undermining the authority of

his own text. Rushdie's text destabilizes the identity formation of its central character, thwarts its narrator's avowed purpose to locate himself at the center of the Indian national narrative, plays with the notion of genre, and undermines colonial discourse, all the while offering a deeper reflection on the nature of a writer's vocation, the authority of his/her perspective, and the provisionality of his/her text. *Midnight's Children* is a rare mix, perhaps the only one of its kind, of hypnotic storytelling and metafictional contemplation. Furthermore, by radically undermining his narrator's endeavor and by critiquing the process by which a text comes into being, Rushdie also examines the issues of national origin and destiny and critiques the spirit of nationalism, ultimately concluding that neither a text nor a nation can be governed by a unified and singular voice.

II. Unreliable and Impossible Narration, Narrative Indeterminacy and the Relationship between the Individual and the Nation

"I thought the desire to explain might be a symptom of the desire to have a self that can control knowledge and a world that can be known."

Gayatri Spivak, from *In Other Worlds*.

"In the world through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself."

Franz Fanon, from *Black Skin White Masks*

The great epistemic fiction of the 19th Century realist novel fixes a stable subject in a continuous history and these notions of subjectivity and of history work in the service of Empire. The fixed subject of this genre most often becomes a white/male/monied consciousness and that history becomes the narrative of the advancement of that consciousness in the world, the displacement of all that stands in its way, and the appropriation of all that fulfills its desire. It is a bloody tale. Foucault, in *The*

Archeology of Knowledge, establishes this link between continuous history and human consciousness. He writes,

If the history of thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities, if it could weave, around everything that men say and do, obscure synthesis that anticipate for him, prepare him, and lead him endlessly towards his future, it would provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness. Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject. Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. (12)

Here Foucault argues that the notion of a continuous history is only possible if that history documents the advancement of a sovereign consciousness through the world, and likewise, that the idea of a sovereign consciousness turns history into the story of man moving towards his future and making the world his home. The notions of sovereign consciousness and of continuous history work in the service of each other, and much of Victorian fiction, being the story of a white/monied/male sovereign consciousness moving through a continuous history, gives sanction to the colonial project and to the silencing of its victims. The aim of Bhabha's post-colonial project then is to disrupt this notion of the sovereign (white) consciousness and to assert and celebrate the voices of the victims of (white) history, while always remaining self-conscious enough to examine the position from which each voice speaks—the context and contingency of its utterance—and to recall that while each voice has the right to speak, it does not have the right to drown out other voices.⁵

Midnight's Children, as I read the book, is what Bhabha would call a performative utterance that “intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's self-generation” (*LC*, 147), a text that gives voice to Saleem Sinai, a victim of power-politics, but always

questions the position from which he speaks and never allows his voice to be the voice of India. The novel is best understood, I think, if we always keep in mind that Salman Rushdie and his narrator are going about the same thing in exactly opposite ways. Each is trying to write India's national narrative, but, whereas Saleem has an agenda and works in great haste in a last-ditch effort to make sense of his life and of the history of India—to write the story of India with himself as the main character—Rushdie, on the other hand, is more mischievous and circumspect, undercutting his narrator's attempts at identity-construction and meaning-making and calling into question the ontological possibility of a fixed subject in a unified nation. Saleem craves continuity and coherence. Rushdie doubts these things are possible. Perhaps, then, it is more precise to say that narrator and author are at cross-purposes, the former trying to write the Indian national narrative and the latter deconstructing the genre of the national text that somehow captures the essence of what it means to be a citizen of a given place.

Rushdie is at the same both deeply invested in and highly critical of Saleem's project. Saleem endures no ordinary amount of suffering in this novel, and Rushdie sets out to document his trauma as proof of the degree to which the colonizer disrupts and imperils the lives of those it dominates, even after it has granted a subject people their independence. As a boy Saleem is the object of ridicule at school and in his neighborhood because of a huge nose and terrible acne. After enjoying the status of favorite child at home, he incurs his father's wrath when, at age nine, he claims to be a prophet (a remark for which he is slapped so hard that he loses the hearing in his right ear) and is further alienated when he is discovered to be a bastard child. In his late-teens, Saleem witnesses the bombing of his parents' house from his motor-scooter as he returns

home from a visit to the Karachi red-light district. Bombs hit the houses of his two other sets of relatives in Pakistan, leaving Saleem and his loathsome uncle Mustapha as the only survivors in his clan. Later, in his mid-twenties Saleem is tricked into partaking of an invasion of Bengal, during which conflict he witnesses the deaths of his three squad-mates and the slaughter of countless civilians. And finally, after returning to India, Saleem is taken as a prisoner of Indira Gandhi's sanitation project and castrated. Throughout the text, even in Saleem's most minor trials, Rushdie identifies a British presence—at times a nearly invisible influence that guides the ambitions of India's youth and at other times a more nefarious presence that supplies arms to the Subcontinent's warring factions. Saleem is, to some extent, a victim of British politics, and this text is, in part, his attempt to restore a past to himself that has been corrupted and violated by Empire.

Saleem's is a war-torn consciousness which seeks to regenerate itself and to reorder its universe through storytelling, and for this reason, perhaps it is not too outlandish to align Saleem's project with Billy Pilgrim's in *Slaughterhouse Five* and with Tim O'Brien's narrator's project in *The Things They Carried*. These three characters endure the violence of very different types of wars, and, unlike Pilgrim and O'Brien's narrator, Saleem's trauma is not limited to the experience of armed conflict, but the point here is that each character deals with the threat of psychic dismemberment in a similar fashion. In Vonnegut's fabulist text, Billy Pilgrim checks himself into an insane asylum where he meets Eliot Rosewater, a fellow war veteran who is struggling to make sense of what happened to him in the war. Vonnegut writes,

Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing

with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden. So it goes. So they were both trying to reinvent themselves and their universe. (101).

The impulse to narrate, then, is a matter of emotional self-preservation, a process by which the storyteller revisits the scenes of his psychic disintegration and reorders these phenomena in an attempt to externalize them and to undo the violence they have done to him. It is a dangerous project because there is always the risk that the storyteller will not be able to endure the pain of revisiting the past, and though Saleem keeps reminding us that he must finish his story before the cracks finish him off, it is never clear whether these cracks are the cause or the effect of his story.

In such a recuperative project, there is little relation between the facts of the matter and the truth—if there is any truth—underlying the matter. Tim O’Brien speaks to this issue most articulately in *How to Tell a True War Story*:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always the surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (78, O’Brien’s italics)

O’Brien goes on to add, “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (89). I cite these passages in order to put the depth of Saleem’s trauma in some sort of perspective and to both recognize his right to reconstitute his experience in the manner that best suits him

and to make the larger point that when the victim of unspeakable tyranny writes back it is often most useful and necessary to do so in an alternative mode of representation, one which undermines the traditional notion of narrative reliability, while paradoxically rendering us a tale in which we deeply believe.

Saleem's far-fetched claims and outlandish narration, then, do little to nullify his actual experience, but rather they bring us under the spell of his tale and serve as a reminder that an outsider can only come to know Saleem's experience and the experience of India by listening, piecing together fragments, and sifting through both the real and the surreal, and, when this is done, one will not have what anyone would call knowledge, but rather an impression, and hopefully an appreciation, of another's experience. Rushdie, O'Brien, and Vonnegut teach us as readers that to ask "Did this happen?" is to ask the wrong question and to miss the point, and, ironically we come to trust their narrators because they are so transparently unreliable. Their project is not to be factual, but rather to recoup their voices and to undermine the authority of the people who sent them to war. In "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia," Gayatri Spivak argues that it is by narrating his/her experience of the world that individual secures his/her place in that world:

The will to explain is a symptom of the desire to have a self and a world. In other words, on the general level, the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject. These presuppositions assure our being. On a more specific level, every explanation must secure and assure a certain *kind* of being-in-the-world, which might as well be called our politics" (105-106, Spivak's italics)

Deliberately unreliable narration is its own politics: an acknowledgment that the perception of reality is contingent upon the subject-position of the perceiving agent and, therefore, an indictment of the age-old process whereby one set of perceptions and ideas

comes to be regarded as the only acceptable world-view and is then imposed on everyone else.

However, Rushdie stretches the notion of unreliable narration, offering two moments of what I will call impossible narration, the effect of which is a novel that questions both the quotidian universe and the alternative reality that it conjures up in its stead. Rushdie grants Saleem a voice and acknowledges his right to narrate his experience—to “have a self and a world,” to borrow Spivak’s phrase—but Rushdie also undercuts Saleem’s explanation, exposes its flaws and contradictions, and argues that Saleem’s self and his world are wholly imaginative concoctions. Whereas Spivak argues in the quotation above that “the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject,” Rushdie seems to make the more dire point that the self and its world are fabrications, that narrative indeterminacy threatens each explaining self’s rendering of a world.

At this point I would like to pause and to analyze the method by which Rushdie sneaks two of the indeterminate moments into the novel before I consider the larger question of the politics of narrative indeterminacy and the manner in which this trope questions the idea of nationalism and undermines the notion of a cohesive national narrative. Rushdie casts doubt on Saleem’s fabrications by means of some clever narrative chicanery in which Saleem gets us to trust him by continually remarking on his unreliability and by citing sources when he discusses events at which he is not present, and then he betrays that trust by narrating two events that he never witnessed nor had the opportunity to learn about. For example, after discovering his error regarding the date of Gandhi’s assassination, he asks, “Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far

gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (198). Later, after Padma raises her eyebrows at some of his remarks, Saleem responds, "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). And then, as he rushes toward the end of his story he admits that "it will be necessary to improvise on occasion" (459). Thus, Saleem not only qualifies his narration before he relates his anecdotes, he even tells us *why* he is unreliable—because of his desperate need for centrality and meaning and because he is in a hurry—and he even argues that perhaps it is better to be so openly untrustworthy than to exude unimpeachable conviction.

Furthermore, there are a number of events for which Saleem is not present in the novel, but most of the time, if he is not admitting to filling in gaps, he cites his sources and lets his readers know how he heard about such and such an event. For example, when he tells us about Dr. Narlikar's death at the hands of the language protestors on Chowpatty Beach, Saleem begins the anecdote by saying, "This is the story that got back to the Methwold Estate" (209). When he tells about Zafar's encounter with the smugglers in the Rann, Saleem begins, "the story I am going to tell, which is substantially that told by my cousin Zafar, is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told" (400). Saleem even tells his readers where he received all the family history that comprises the first third of the novel: his grandmother Naseem shares everything with the family when they gather at the Bougainvillea to mourn the death of Hanif. Saleem says, "She told us children about the boatman, and the Hummingbird, and the Rani of Cooch Naheen" (330). It is so obvious

as to be almost not worth mentioning that it is impossible for Saleem to know anything about Zafar's military experience and Dr. Narlikar's murder without having gotten the story from someone else, but it is as if Saleem goes out of his way to account for his knowledge of the material in the novel for which he is not present.⁶

The admissions of unreliability and the citing of sources allow Saleem to slip two moments of impossible narration past his readers, and these happen to be the moments on which the entire novel is built, both of them having to do with Saleem's birth and the questions surrounding his parentage. The moment of greatest import is the point at which Mary allegedly switches Saleem and Shiva. Saleem narrates this scene from a first-person omniscient point-of-view, an impossible perspective. Here is the story:

“Go, go,” she said to poor Flory, “see if you can help. I can do all right here.”

And when she was done—two babies in her hands—two lives in her power—she did it for Joseph, her own private revolutionary act, thinking He will certainly love me for this, as she changed name-tags on the two huge infants, giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accordions and poverty. (135)

As opposed to the other events for which he is absent, Saleem never tells us where he gets this story. In fact, he narrates the entire tale of his birth as if he were a credible witness to these events, as if he were someone other than the baby coming into the world. There is, however, one telling slip. First he says that Vanita “writhes on a bed in Dr. Narlikar's charity ward (reserved for the babies of the poor)” (129, Rushdie's parentheses), but later he says, “Twenty minutes pass, with aahs from Amina Sinai, coming harder and faster by the minute, and weak tiring aahs from Vanita in the next room” (133). It is odd that a rich woman like Amina would be placed in a charity ward

and even more peculiar that Vanita would be moved to a better room while she is in labor. There is something amiss here.

Of course, there is the possibility that Saleem is filling in some gaps, but as I have shown, he is more forthcoming at other points in the text when he fills in gaps. It is also possible that these details, or most of them, are supplied by Mary when she confesses to her crime in the *Revelations* chapter of the text, but Mary's admission, tainted by her penchant for superstition and religious orthodoxy, smacks of gratuitous self-condemnation and delirium. Long haunted by the ghost of Joseph D'Costa, Mary has been coming apart at the seams well before the moment of her confession. Consider these remarks Saleem makes about *her* reliability:

Plagued by her nightmares of assaults by Joseph D'Costa, Mary was finding it harder and harder to get sleep. Knowing what dreams had in store for her, she forced herself to stay awake; dark rings appeared under her eyes, which were covered in a thin, filmy glaze; and gradually the blurriness of her perceptions merged waking and dreaming into something very like each other. a dangerous condition to get into, Padma. Not only does your work suffer but things start escaping from your dreams. Joseph D'Acosta had, in fact, managed to cross the blurred frontier, and now appeared in Buckingham Villa not as a nightmare, but as a full-fledged ghost. (244-45, all ellipses Rushdie's)

This "ghost," it turns out, is the estranged servant Musa, fired long ago under sketchy circumstances for having allegedly pilfered Amina's dowry. It could be, however, that Mary framed Musa and that she dreamed of switching the babies, that the guilt to which she succumbs has to do with betraying Musa, and that her confession is a matter of her confusing her dream life with her waking life, as Saleem suggests she is wont to do.

I do not argue that this *is* the case, only that it is as likely as anything else.

However, given the context in which Mary offers her revelation, it is unlikely that Mary's claim is any more truthful than the others in this chapter, which include Mrs. Dubash's

revelation that her boy Cyrus is Lord Khusro Khusrovani and Aadam Aziz's proclamation that he has recently seen God. Mrs. Dubash, it turns out, co-opts the story of her son's apotheosis from a Superman comic book that Saleem had given Cyrus on the school yard in exchange for one of his famous lectures on "Parts of a Wooman's Body" (324). Saleem further explains that Cyrus accepts the mantle of divinity merely to placate his mom: "Why did he let it happen? Why did posters cover the city, and advertisements fill the newspapers, without a peep out of the child genius? Because Cyrus was simply the most malleable of boys, and would not have dreamed of crossing his mother" (323). As for Aadam's disclosure, the God he sees turns out to be none other than Musa, the alienated servant returning dusty-white and pock-marked by leprosy. Summarizing the three revelations at the end of the chapter, Saleem says, "Someone was called God who was not God; someone else was taken for a ghost and was not a ghost; and a third person discovered that although his name was Saleem Sinai, he was not his parents' son" (336-7), but Saleem's logic does not hold here as he discredits the first two proclamations but accepts the third.

The other moment of narrative impossibility occurs when Saleem tells the story of Amina's visit to the prophet Shri Ramram Seth as per her the arrangement she had made with Lifafa Das when she saved him from a mob of religious fanatics. Again, Saleem is not present for any of this, and unlike at other points in the novel, he never acknowledges his absence. On the contrary, just before he is about to narrate the prophecy itself, Saleem assures his readers that he is telling of the events as they happen:

And when the prophecy came, were cousins astonished too?—And the frothing at the mouth? What of that? And was it true that my mother, under the dislocating influence of that hysterical evening, relinquished her hold on her habitual self—which she had felt slipping

away from her into the absorbing sponge of the lightless air in the stairwell—and entered a state of mind in which anything might happen and be believed? And there is another, more horrible possibility, too; but before I voice my suspicion, I must describe, as nearly as possible in spite of this filmy curtain of ambiguities, what actually happened: I must describe my mother, her palm slanted outwards towards the advancing palmist, her eyes wide and unblinking as a pomfret's. (98)

Saleem does admit that there is a “filmy curtain of ambiguities” distorting his recollection of the event, but he follows that by assuring his readers that he is doing his best to describe “what actually happened.” Nowhere does he acknowledge that he is not yet born and nowhere does he allude to a conversation he may have had with his mother about this matter.

Contrast this with the manner in which he introduces the story of his mother's announcement of her pregnancy, an event which occurs shortly before her pilgrimage to Mr. Seth:

It's almost time for the public announcement. I won't deny I'm excited: I've been hanging around in the background of my own story for too long, and although it's still a little while before I can take over, it's nice to get a look in. So with a sense of high expectation, I follow the pointing finger in the sky and look down upon my parents' neighborhood, upon bicycles, upon street-vendors touting roasted gram in twists of paper, upon the hip-jutting, hand holding street loafers, upon flying scraps of paper and little clustered whirlwinds of flies around the sweetmeat stalls. all of it foreshortened by my high-in-the-sky point of view. (83, Rushdie's ellipses)

Whereas in the previous quotation the narrator seems to be present in the action, here he acknowledges that he is outside the events of the narration, not yet a part of the story, which is appropriate for an as-yet-unborn narrator. Furthermore, there is a reserve, a sense of poise and assurance, in the voice in this quotation—“ and although it's still a little while before I can take over, it's nice to get a look in”—unlike in my first example where Saleem twice uses the phrase, “I must describe. ” It seems here that Saleem is

conflicted, that there is something in him that wants to avoid this scene, but something more powerful urging him to continue, which is curious given that Saleem is still, technically, on the outside of this story.

I would argue that Saleem feels so drawn into the events of the prophecy not because of the divination of the soothsayer, but rather because Amina's visit to the Delhi ghetto is indicative of her infidelity and that this scene, rather than being the omniscient narration of an unborn child, is recast in Saleem's adult imagination as a means of confronting a truth he feels both compelled and loathe to face. Before Saleem pushes himself forward with the two "I must's", he says, "But there is another, more horrible possibility, too; but before I voice my suspicion. " (98), and when he does reveal his doubts, Saleem hints at the possibility that either this trip to the prophet is an assignation or that Amina has come to the ghetto to tell Nadir Khan that she is pregnant with his child. Note the frantic tone and the reluctance with which Saleem shares this part of his story:

. But now, because there are yet more questions and ambiguities, I am obliged to voice certain suspicions. Suspicion, too is a monster with too many heads; why, then, can't I stop myself unleashing it at my own mother? What, I ask, would be a fair description of the seer's stomach? And memory—my new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of mother father grandfather grandmother and everyone else—answers: soft; squashy as cornflour pudding. Again, reluctantly, I ask: What was the condition of his lips? And the inevitable response: full; overfleshed; poetic. A third time I interrogate this memory of mine: what of his hair? The reply: thinning; dark; lank; worming over his ears. And now my unreasonable suspicions ask the ultimate question. did Amina, pure-as-pure, actually. because of her weakness for men who resembled Nadir Khan, could she have. in her odd frame of mind, and moved by the seer's illness, might she not. (100, Rushdie's ellipses)

At this point Padma cuts Saleem off and argues on Amina's behalf, and though Saleem is as eager as Padma is to dismiss these suspicions, he cannot quite do it. He continues with

this “memory” and, casting his misgivings aside, offers even more damning evidence, saying that perhaps:

I was only getting my revenge, for what I certainly did see Amina doing, years later, through the grimy windows of the Pioneer Café; and maybe that’s where my irrational notion was born, to grow illogically backwards in time, and arrive fully mature at this earlier—and yes, almost certainly innocent—adventure. Yes, that must be it. But the monster won’t lie down. “Ah, it says, “but what about the matter of her tantrum—the one she threw the day Ahmed announced they were moving to Bombay?” Now it mimics her: “You—always you decide. What about me? Suppose I don’t want. . . I’ve only now got this house straight and already. . . !” So, Padma: was that housewifely zeal—or a masquerade? (101, Rushdie’s ellipses)

It is conceivable that Saleem pieced some of this together from arguments his parents may have had, especially the barnburners that must have ensued when the results of Saleem’s blood test came back, but what is most telling is that Saleem claims all of this as a personal memory and narrates the scene as if he were present, when at other times in the novel he acknowledges his absence and cites his sources. The story of a prophecy is consistent with Saleem’s avowed purpose for telling this tale, which is to locate himself as the hero at the center of India’s national narrative, but the subtext of the scene undermines that purpose and introduces another possibility, namely that upon discovering that he is illegitimate it becomes both terrifying and necessary for Saleem to discover his beginnings.

The text never resolves the issue of Saleem’s parenthood, but rather makes use of narrative indeterminacy to examine the dynamics of the imperial situation. In either case, whether he is the son of Methwold or Khan, Saleem is the bastard child of power politics. If Methwold is the father, then Saleem’s lineage dates back to the origins of Great Britain’s East India Company in 1633 and to the man who first dreamed of a British

Bombay—Officer Methwold. Saleem's father would be the last in a long line of English conquerors, and with this latter-day Methwold Rushdie draws a parallel between sexual appropriation and the colonial enterprise: Sir William cuckolds Wee-Willie Winkie, the circus-singer on the Estate, and Saleem is thereby the product of an illicit union. If, on the other hand, Nadir-Qasim is the father, then Saleem's conception was brought about first by Aadam Aziz's dream of a Muslim-controlled India and the subsequent political assassination of Mian Abdullah which sent his side-kick running into the Aziz basement. With these two possible fathers Rushdie examines two archetypal figures in the colonial power dynamic—the age-old landowner and the charismatic native insurgent—and stretches Saleem's forebears across the breadth of these extremes, casting Aadam, his grandfather, as a disciple of Mian Abdullah, and Ahmed as a business partner of Methwold, and by so doing Rushdie makes the point that whether or not Saleem has English blood in his veins he and all those of his generation are heirs to the fallout of British presence and withdrawal from India. The flip side of this is that Saleem is free, to some extent, to invent his past.

It makes sense that, having been cut off from his real origins, Saleem should invent for himself a grandiose and melodramatic start, a life that is called into being by an obscure prophecy and set in motion at the hospital by the desperate act of a love-crazed and fanatically devoted Christian nurse and that he should make these fabrications believable by narrating these events through a wholly concocted full-presence. Saleem wants the story of his life to make sense, to cohere, and at every turn to reflect his potential greatness. Similarly, nationalists, who are themselves cut off from their origins by colonial occupation, often seek to imbue in the story of their nation's birth the signs of

its greatness, but in so doing their histories take on the characteristics of fiction, becoming stories with a narrative arc, a structured plot with heroes and villains, fabulous and imaginary tales that move toward a climax and a denouement, all in the service of what Rushdie calls a “national longing for form” (*MC*, 359).

In this text, Rushdie, I think, considers the nationalist utterance simultaneously from two perspectives. On the one hand, it is a bold voice daring to be heard. As Fanon argues, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp a morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (*BS WM*, 17). Throughout this text, but most especially when he emerges from Parvati’s basket, Saleem is eager to bear the weight of Indian civilization, and for this he is heroic. In the magician’s ghetto, Saleem becomes a tireless political activist whose mission is to save the nation. His determination is promethean. He returns to his procure a civil service job, organizes demonstrations nightly in the ghetto, and exhorts Picture Singh to lead the crusade begun by Mian Abdullah in Aadam Aziz’s day, and, most notably, Saleem persists even after he is castrated, remarking when he rejoins his mates that he is astonished by their change of attitude, calling their resignation “nothing short of obscene” (531). Saleem’s text is his last and most noble attempt to write a text that speaks on behalf of those who have been marginalized, the victims of power-politics.

Furthermore, Saleem’s tendency to structure or, to use Spivak’s more apt word, “texture” history like literature is very different from (and a whole lot more justified than) the imperial narrativization of history in which conquest and domination are reconstituted as England’s destiny. In “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern,” Spivak analyzes

this relationship between history, literature, and “reality,” concluding that the manner in which one articulates the difference between history and literature is a matter of ideology:

That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind. The difference between cases of historical and literary events will always be there as a differential moment in terms of what is called ‘the effect of the real’ What is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature. Our very use of the two separate words guarantees that. This difference can never be exhaustively systematized. In fact, the ways in which the difference is articulated also has a hidden agenda. (243)

It seems that Victorian realistic fictions such as *Jude the Obscure* and *Dombey and Son*⁷ which create the illusion of a non-porous border between literature and history suppress the colonial project that is implicit in their utterance, but that Saleem’s conspicuously fabulous text which borrows from the historical register and playfully blends this material with movie plots, comic book scenarios, and bits of scripture admits to its own contingency. Saleem’s narrativization of history is thus more epistemically and historically honest than the Imperial text.

Nevertheless, despite his recognition that mimesis does not guarantee reliability and that fabrications do not necessarily discredit a narrator’s vision, Rushdie subjects Saleem’s tale to endless scrutiny, debunking its main character’s heroism, calling the motives of his actions into question, and pointing out that Saleem’s work, considered both as personal biography and national narrative, operates according to a hidden agenda. In her analysis of Rushdie’s depiction of nationhood in *Midnight Children*, Teresa Heffernan notes, “National narratives come to satisfy the desire for origins, continuity, and eternity” (475) and thus, like Saleem’s fabulous biography, national narratives can be a salve for the psychic pain of feeling lost, insignificant, anonymous, and purposeless.

Geoffrey Bennington examines this link between national narratives and individual existential angst in some detail. He writes,

It is tempting to try to approach the question of the nation directly, by aiming for its center or its origin. And there is almost immediate satisfaction to be had in so doing; for we undoubtedly find narration at the center of the nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin.

Which should be enough to inspire suspicion; our own drive to find the center and the origin has created its own myth of the origin—namely that at the origin is the myth. (121)

This is not to trivialize what happened on August 15, 1947 but rather to point out that using this date to mark the dawn of a new epoch—to see in this event a breaking point where all that came before is ontologically different from all that comes after and to deny the porousness of this historical boundary—is an arbitrary and ideological gesture that, at least potentially, threatens to marginalize other histories.

By destabilizing Saleem's origin and identity Rushdie makes a larger point about the origin and identity of India, calling into question the idea that the nation was born on August 15, 1947 and offering instead a wider frame of reference and alternative histories that speak to different heritages and foreshadow other destinies. To make this point Rushdie draws on Indian mythology and ancient history. Of mythology he writes,

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15, 1947—but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga, in which the cow of mortality has been reduced to standing, teeteringly, on a single leg! Kali-Yuga—the losing throw in our national dice game; the worst of everything; the age when property gives a man rank, when wealth is equated with virtue, when passion becomes the sole bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success (is it any wonder, in such a time, that I too have been confused about good and evil?) began on Friday, February 18, 3102 B.C.; and will last a mere 432,000 years! Already feeling somewhat dwarfed, I should add nevertheless that the Age

of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present Maha-Yuga cycle which is, in total, ten times as long; and when you consider that it takes a thousand Maha-Yugas to make just one Day of Brahma, you'll see what I mean about proportion. (233, Rushdie's ellipses)

Even more than examining the significance of the transfer of power by locating it in a nearly infinite historical continuum, Saleem's reflection questions the ethos of this particular era in that continuum, a time when politics turns virtue on its head and corrupts individual relationships.

Later, soon after he enters Karachi from the south, Saleem turns back to ancient history and finds in this narrative an omen of bad things to come his way. He thinks,

O ineluctable superiority of northerness! From which direction did Mahmud of Ghanzi descend upon these Indus plains, bringing with him a language boasting no fewer than three forms of the letter S? The inescapable answer: se, sin, and swad were the northern intruders. And Muhammad bin Sam Ghuri, who overthrew the Ghaznavids and established the Delphi Caliphate? Sam Ghuri's son, too, moved southward on his progress.

And Tuglaq, and the Mughal Emperors. but I've made my point. It remains only to add that ideas, as well as armies, swept south south south from the northern heights: the legend of Sikandar But-Shikan, the Iconoclast of Kashmir, who at the end of the fourteenth century destroyed every Hindu temple in the Valley (establishing a precedent for my grandfather), traveled down from the hills to the river-plains; and five hundred years later the mujahideen movement of Syed Ahmad Bailwi followed the well-trodden trail. Barilwi's ideas: self-denial, hatred-of-Hindus, holy war. philosophies as well as kings (to cut this short) came from the opposite direction to me. (371)

First, this reflection locates the British occupation of India in a larger historical framework and debunks the notion that England created the subcontinent, but it also interrogates the manner in which we find, or create, meaning. It is curious that in both of these longish reflections, Saleem uses the word "inescapable," which, I think, reveals both his—and perhaps a universal—wish to be caught up in a larger story, to feel

inextricably bound to something external to the self, when in fact this link is arbitrary and reflects the speaker's need to find meaning in his own endeavors. Saleem needs to make sense of his failure to inscribe his name in the historical register, and this tale makes it seem as though he was fated to anonymity because he arrived in Karachi at the wrong port.

Much like his grandfather who was introduced to Naseem in fragments and like his mother Amina who trained herself to love the separate parts of her husband, each in its turn until she loved the whole man, when Saleem tells his story, he begins with a fragment of his individual life and connects outward through a chain of cause-and-effect until he locates himself at the center of Indian national politics. In one case, Saleem links his castigation at the hand of Mr. Zagallo with the death of Nehru, claiming that he is to blame for the Prime Minister's death because he came to the aid of Jimmy Kapadia in school:

If I hadn't wanted to be a hero, Mr. Zagallo would never have pulled out my hair. If my hair had remained intact, Glandy Keith and Fat Perce wouldn't have taunted me; Masha Miovic wouldn't have goaded me into losing my finger. And from my finger flowed blood which was neither-Alpha-nor-Omega, and sent me into exile; and in exile I was filled with the lust for revenge which led me to the murder of Homi Catrack; and if Homi hadn't died, perhaps my uncle would not have strolled off a roof into the sea-breezes; and then my grandfather would not have gone to Kashmir and been broken by the effort of climbing the Sankara Acharya hill. And my grandfather was the founder of my family, and my fate was linked by my birthday to that of the nation, and the father of the nation was Nehru. Nehru's death: can I avoid the conclusion that that, too, was all my fault? (334)

Saleem's need to transform scraps of experience into a coherent, national narrative with himself at the center seems almost pathological.⁸ It is a system of logic in which everything in the external world serves to affirm his existence, and I would argue that

Saleem is caught in the vice of this referential mania because both his past and his and future have been taken from him, his past by the Indian fighters who fire-bombed his family in Pakistan and his future by Indira Gandhi. Saleem himself is a fragment, isolated and adrift in the sea of history, and he has come to view these connections to Indian national history as his only remaining hope for a meaningful existence.

While Saleem constructs meaning on the wobbly foundation of the connection between self and nation, it is Rushdie's agenda to undermine Saleem, to show that heroism is solipsism, that meaning is contingent, and that things such as nationalism and zeitgeist can be dangerous political fallacies that bring about the very real spilling of blood. Saleem needs to imbue his life with meaning, but for Rushdie meaning is a narrative fiction. In the title essay of the *Imaginary Homelands* collection, Rushdie writes, "Meaning is the shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death" (12). Elsewhere in this collection, Rushdie speaks more specifically to Saleem's experience, acknowledging that the burden of alienation and disillusionment may prompt one to reshape one's past and to reposition oneself in a national narrative. Rushdie writes, "Near the end of his broken life, (Saleem) sets out to write himself, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of adulthood have drained from him. He is no dispassionate chronicler. He wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is cutting up history to suit himself" (24). The

connections Saleem discovers may seem absurd, but they are perhaps normal reactions to the psychic trauma of a war-torn consciousness.

Saleem continually fails to resolve the tension between personal and national history, not because he is wrong to see a connection between his fate and the fate of the nation, but rather because Saleem's movement must always be from the personal and particular to the center of national events. It is his lust for meaning and for centrality that undermines his enterprise, not his tendency to consider the events of his life in a larger, more political context. There is always a larger context. The mistake is to attempt to discern an organizing principle, and the greater mistake is to recognize oneself and one's needs as that organizing principle. The primary difference between Saleem the narrator and Rushdie the author is that while Saleem tries to resolve the tension between individual identity and national history, Rushdie merely wishes to compass and explore it. According to Josna Rege, "The novel celebrates the creative tensions between personal and national identity, playing up and playing with their polarity and unity. *Midnight's Children* neither denies nor seeks to transcend polarities, but rather embraces them as artistic method, rejecting nothing, celebrating the resulting chaotic multiplicity, even if it crushes the protagonist himself into a billion pieces." Saleem would dissolve polarities and thereby seal the text, but Rushdie blocks this attempt, dissolving all the meaning Saleem creates, casting doubt on his narrator's origins, demonstrating the contingency of all that Saleem holds certain, and melding his narrator to his surroundings and to other characters where Saleem attempts to isolate himself and to construct a unified, non-porous identity.

Throughout the novel, Rushdie imbues Saleem with a sense of double consciousness, a self that Saleem is trying to understand and construct on his own terms and a self that seems to be constructed by the events around him, both the small-scale family events and the larger political events in India and Pakistan. Saleem is always at least two selves at once. When he exposes Lila Sabarmati and Homi Catrack, for example, he is both the colonizer and the colonized, on the one hand discarded by his family and treated as an outsider and, on the other hand, the author of events, a “puppet master” as he says. According to Kathryn Hume, “Saleem’s life trajectory consists of successive selves, each determined by the various fathers whom he hypothesizes for himself or adopts” (217), but I would add that what is at stake here is a more fundamental notion of the self as either an ever-evolving and changing being or a more consistent, unified self. After both family and government have done their violence to him and then abandoned him, Saleem wants to know if there is anything that remains constant in him, and if there is, he wants to know if this small, private constant is somehow connected to the larger, national story.

The relation between self and nation is a large question, the same one Joyce explores through Stephen and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, but unlike Joyce who finds universal answers in the quest myth, Rushdie makes deft use of the interplay between heterogeneity and homogeneity and never settles on such a concrete answer. Instead he casts his subject as two simultaneous beings, both the victim and the author of all that goes on around him as Saleem was in the Sabarmati affair, both a private and anonymous man as well as the center of Indian politics, and finally both constant and riddled with cracks. At one point Saleem reflects, “A human being, inside himself, is anything but a

whole, anything but homogenous, all kinds of everywhich thing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another person the next. The body, on the other hand, is homogenous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will” (230-31). And while this reflection may suffice to show that Saleem is both constant and changing, Rushdie does not leave the matter there, but pushes it further, as Saleem insists that he is cracking up but neither Padma nor Dr. Baligga can see the cracks. Thus, Rushdie seems to argue that when one sets out to construct an identity, he/she appears one way to him/herself and another way to those whom he/she encounters.

The precise nature of the relationship between the self and the nation is never resolved. India is, like Saleem, a site of the interplay between homogeneity and heterogeneity: a collection of heterogeneous and irreducible peoples on a unified landmass with clearly drawn borders. Moreover, both Saleem and his country suffer the ill-effects of external identity construction, multiple fathers, and partition. Yet, Rushdie will not allow Saleem’s story to speak to some universal notion of the Indian experience the way Stephen speaks for Ireland, nor will he allow Saleem’s experience to merge too closely with Indian national experience without questioning the nature of the connection. For example, in the *Movements Performed By Pepperpots* chapter, Saleem claims to be present both when General Ayub assumes control in Pakistan and declares marshal law and when his uncle, General Zulfikar, breaks into the president’s house and, leading Mirza naked by gunpoint, consigns him to exile, but this is perhaps a presence he does not enjoy and these are events to which he may not give witness. Whereas Saleem claims to be involved in the grand national events, Rushdie shows us the gulf between his tiny, anonymous narrator and the flow of events.

Nevertheless, there is something that binds Saleem to his country, even if he is not there when the events that shaped the nation took place—national news stuff—and even if he is not the center of all that transpires in the national story, as he often claims in the novel. As he takes the young Aadam Aziz to treat Naseem, Tai the boatman lectures the doctor on the properties of the human nose, calling it “the place where the outside world meets the world inside you” (13) and several times Saleem points out that India looks like a nose. Moreover, Saleem is born with a prodigious nose, and, once he forfeits his telepathic powers, he acquires a tremendous sense of smell. Jean M. Kane sees in this recurring image a sort of reconciliation between the individual and the nation, and, referring to Aadam’s nose, argues, “His suggestive anatomy anticipates the novel’s central conceit, the fusion of an individual body with the subcontinent and a personal biography with its political history” (104). Tai urges Aadam to “follow your nose” (13), and perhaps we as readers would do well to follow this image through the text to look for some answers.

It is not only the physical connection of the nose, nor the figurative power of this image—the potential for both a rich internal and external life—that connects Saleem to India, moors him to the landscape and locates him in a home, but it is the dual nature Rushdie gives to the nose in the text: it is both victim and actor. The first thing that happens in the book is Aadam bending over and smashing his nose on his prayer mat, and this because he was “caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief” (6). Later, Saleem rides a motor scooter around town inhaling the vapors of the city: “On my sixteenth birthday I was given a Lambretta motor-scooter; riding the city streets on my windowless vehicle, I breathed in the fatalistic hopelessness of the

slum dwellers and the smug defensiveness of the rich; I was sucked along the smell-trails of dispossession and also fanaticism, lured down a long underworld corridor at whose end was the door to Tai Bibi, the oldest whore in the world” (368). The nose, then, is a site of rebuke and encounter, a place where opposites meet and collapse into each other. Jean M. Kane argues that “*Midnight’s Children* depicts the subaltern as the porous embodiment of a violent, hybrid history and a fluid, endlessly proliferative narrative energy” (120). For Rushdie the nose is both of these: Aadam hurts his nose praying ostensibly because he misjudges the nature of the terrain underneath his prayer mat, but really because he has been infected by his European education and, while he has not abandoned all of the ancient wisdom on which he was raised, he no longer believes in old-world orthodoxy; meanwhile, Saleem uses his newfound olfactory powers to assimilate his surroundings, to draw the world into him, and to organize the materials that will find their place in the story he tells Padma. The nose, Saleem, India—all are victims of a hybrid history and sources of narrative energy, the loci of a double consciousness wherein the subject is both acted upon by an uncaring universe and author of all his observations, a creator of meaning.

If this is true, if self and nation are locations for the interplay of dualities or fields of energy, rather than stable phenomena or unified and coherent subjects, then it is necessary to examine who or what is responsible for what becomes of the self and nation after the competing forces and energies have ravaged them. As Aadam Aziz tells his daughter Alia after he had been feuding with his wife, “In any war, the field of battle suffers worse devastation than any army. It is only natural” (44). Saleem and India both suffer partition. Although, on the one hand Saleem may be held responsible both for his

own cracking up, which can be read as some kind of mania or schizophrenia, and for his solipsism—his lust for centrality, his irresistible urge to construct meaning and to see all of life as reflecting back on him—Rushdie lays the blame for this on Empire. Likewise, just as India is often held responsible by the West for the strife among its own factions and the manner in which it was partitioned after independence, it is easy to see that Britain played these factions off against each other and had an invisible hand in the politics of post-independence. All partitioning and restructuring in the novel occurs in the shadow of European culture, beginning with Ghani the landowner's European art collection, continuing with Methwold's involvement in the conception and upbringing of Saleem as well as the passing of his estate to Aadam Aziz, and ending with the *Sam and the Tiger* chapter, in which we learn that this war between India and Pakistan is being fought by two generals trained in the English military academy who, when it is all said and done, actually get on quite well with each other.

Before concluding this section, it is most crucial to note that Saleem does learn Rushdie's lesson, that he grants a place to others' stories, comes to accept a more sober and anonymous place in the world, and that he finally questions the sovereignty of meaning. Saleem's epiphanies tend to follow from the senseless violence of warfare. After recounting the horrific invasion of Bengal and his subsequent escape in Parvati's basket, Saleem writes,

[N]ow seated, seated hunched over paper in a pool of Anglepoised light, I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. Who What am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which

would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (457-58)

Here Saleem acknowledges that there is no national hero whose experience is the quintessence of "Indian-ness," that there are as many stories as there are people. Later, after he is imprisoned by Ms. Gandhi, he recedes further out of his self-created national spotlight, choosing a private existence to national glory. Alone in his cell, he contacts the *Midnight's Children* one last time and renounces their mission. He admits, "We should have avoided [politics], I should never have dreamed of purpose, I am coming to the conclusion that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity" (518). With this Saleem chooses anonymity and, more important, begins his disavowal of meaning, which he completes when he dismisses a man who defecates outside of his train window. Saleem reflects,

Once, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I'd have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times; but now I'm disconnected, unplugged, with only epitaphs left to write. (546)

This is, for sure, a terribly sad and lonely end, but Saleem meets it with great courage and in so doing liberates himself from the myth of origins and destinies and from the discursive violence of the national narrative.

III. There and Not There: Psychosexual Melodrama, Colonial Power Politics, and the Question of Presence

“All worldly pursuits and acquisitions have but two unavoidable and inevitable ends, which are sorrow and dispersion.”

Willie, from *Breaking and Entering* by Joy Williams

In his reflection on *Midnight's Children* in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie notes that throughout the text Saleem “is cutting up history to suit his purposes” (24), and nowhere is this more clear than in the Sabarmati affair when Saleem informs Captain Sabarmati of his wife’s trysts with Homi Catrack by sending the Captain an anonymous letter, the words of which have been arranged by cutting and pasting the headlines of various newspapers. Here we encounter many of the elements of a colonial power dynamic—illegitimacy, exile, sexual repression, and revenge—played out in the arena of family melodrama. Saleem’s plot against Homi Catrack is produced by a growing sense of exile he feels within his own family, the source of which is two-fold, and by his wish to teach his licentious mother a lesson.

First, after the bloody accident at school casts Saleem’s parentage in doubt, Ahmed alienates him from his affection, turning so cold on the boy that Amina decides it is best if Saleem live with his Aunt Pia and Uncle Hanif for a time, and second, Saleem has been displaced by his sister the Brass Monkey as favorite child because the once boyish and uncouth girl is growing into a beautiful young woman and a talented singer. In the aftermath of his stay in the hospital, Saleem notices these changes in his house and reflects,

My father seemed to want nothing more to do with me, an attitude of mind which I found hurtful but (considering my mutilated body) entirely understandable. In the second place, there was the remarkable change in the fortunes of the Brass Monkey. “My position

in this household,” I was obliged to admit to myself, “has been usurped.” Because now it was the Monkey whom my father admitted into the abstract sanctum of his office, the Monkey whom he smothered in his squishy belly, and who was obliged to bear the burdens of his dreams about the future. (303-04)

Saleem is wrong, of course, about the reasons for his father’s iciness, but his self-loathing is the normal by-product of a displacement that transpires beyond the scope of his understanding and outside of his control. At this moment in the text, Rushdie uses family dynamics to examine the larger political questions of conquest and exile. When a foreign power makes camp on the soil of another people, the indigenous population becomes outsiders in their own home. They become suddenly and summarily disenfranchised by a chain of events outside their control and by a financial opportunity for the conquering power. In a sense, this is what happens to Saleem as a seemingly normal chain of events in the life of a middle school boy—a fight over a girl—leads to a blood test which throws his parentage into question and at the same time his sister comes to represent a more lucrative future for the family. Saleem is no longer the inheritor of all that he once took to be his.

There is also a psycho-sexual element to Saleem’s revenge upon Homi Catrack, as there is to the colonial enterprise. While, on the one hand the Sabarmati affair demonstrates Saleem’s capacity to mimic the behaviour of Empire by cutting and pasting reality to suit his purposes, in a more subtle way it exposes the sexual tension that often underlies violence and conquest. Saleem makes no secret of his feelings for his sister and the trouble this causes him, but he is perhaps more undone by his mother’s sexuality. In the *Accident in a Washing-chest* chapter he spies his mother masturbating on the toilet while repeating Nadir Khan’s name after one of her many secret phone conversations.

He then follows her to a café where she meets her ex-husband and after witnessing the furtive glances they exchange and the dance of their hands across the table, he responds to the sexuality of his mother the way most young boys who are themselves arriving at a sexual awakening would: by taking vicarious pleasure in it while simultaneously condemning it. Adult sexuality both excites and confounds him, leaving him aroused, confused, and hostile—alone with emotions which seek sexual release but which often come to fruition in violence.

This is basic Freudianism, which Rushdie neither indulges in nor dismisses, but rather examines and parodies throughout the text. There is no denying the connection between Saleem's newspaper campaign and his mother's infidelity. The thirty-one-year-old Saleem admits twice to what motivated the pubescent boy. Describing the ride home from Aunt Pia's with his mom he writes:

Suddenly, as we drove home, I was filled once again with my recent lust for revenge upon my perfidious mother, a lust which had faded in the brilliant glare of my exile, but which now returned and was united with my new-born loathing of Homi Catrack. This two headed lust was the demon which possessed me, and drove me into doing the worst thing I ever did. (300)

Here we see the conflation of sexual desire and violence, the rechanneling of youthful libidinous energy into destruction, and the transference of repressed anger onto Homi Catrack, as Freud's tragedy of the love-triangle in the nursery plays itself out and Homi is the fall guy in Saleem's Oedipal fantasy. Saleem's language is telling. He uses the word lust three times in the above quotation, twice when referring to his mother, and he uses the word loathing when he mentions Homi Catrack. Lust and hatred are the two heads of the Oedipal demon.

In addition to this confession, the Oedipal theme recurs throughout the text, at times subtly and at times conspicuously. For example, Saleem both loses his virginity to and finds a sexual confidant in Tai Bibi, a five-hundred and twelve year old prostitute who suffers from corns, the same ailment that plagues his mother. Recounting one of their assignations, Saleem notes, “So there he was, this peculiar and hideous youth, with an old hag who said, ‘I won’t stand up; my corns,’ and then noticed that the mention of corns aroused him” (381). They are a perfect match, Saleem says, because she can control her bodily scent and imitate the smells of others and Saleem has a sensitive nose. Tai thus emits the odors of Saleem’s family members, and the sixteen-year-old indulges all of his fantasies. There is also patricide, the other head of the demon, elsewhere in the text when Zafar Zulfikar murders his father General Zulfikar “with a long, curved smuggler’s knife” (402)—a conspicuously phallic weapon—because the General humiliated his son one too many times, mocking him for his bedwetting throughout his boyhood and then tormenting him with his smugglers when Zafar did his military service in the Rann of Kutch—a secluded area in the outer reaches of Pakistan.⁹

Furthermore, Saleem makes some symbolic Oedipal connections. For example, he ascribes the failure of the Communist Party to win the elections of 1957 to the strong armed handiwork of Shiva, his alter-ego. Saleem says that “ .on polling day, he and his gang, who called themselves Cowboys, were to be seen standing outside a polling station in the north of the city, some holding long stout sticks, others juggling with stones, still others picking their teeth with knives, all of them encouraging the electorate to use its vote with wisdom and care” (265). It will be remembered that Nadir-Qasim is a communist and by taking vicarious pleasure in some hooliganism that foils his party in

the elections, Saleem exacts an imaginary revenge on the man having sex with his mother, his rival for his mother's love. Saleem also ascribes the serial killing of prostitutes to Shiva and thereby retaliates against his mother's perfidy.

However, though the text lends itself to Freudian criticism, it is, I think, a mistake to read it solely according to this metanarrative, most notably because to perform such an operation is to find meaning and explanations in a book whose project is to show that such things are contingent and arbitrary—done for the sake of constituting a stable identity in a shifting universe where the self is fluid and diverse—but, more germane to this given scenario, because Rushdie undercuts his Freudianism almost immediately after introducing it. For example, after the above quotation about Shiva foiling the Communist campaign, the older Saleem remembers in the following paragraph that he's got his dates confused:

But now Padma says, mildly, "What date was it?" And, without thinking, I answer: "Some time in the spring." And then it occurs to me that I have made another error—that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly to alter the dates, to alter the sequence of events. This is worrying. I don't know what's gone wrong. (265)

Saleem both founded the MCC (Midnight Children's Conference) and discovered Nadir and Amina at the Pioneer Café after his tenth birthday so this Oedipal fantasy is projection of a the flawed memory of a thirty-one-year-old onto his past. While the die-hard Freudian may claim that this memory, whether true or not, testifies to Saleem's Oedipal complex, it is also true that Saleem never had this fantasy as a boy, that the memory is the product of a mind desperately trying to make sense of things and that

ordering the past around such psychological buoys as mother-love and revenge are a means to this end rather than a reliable indicator of character and identity.

Rushdie further subverts Freudian readings of his text in its final pages when he cites irregularities and ambiguities throughout the novel, most notably in the moments of the text wherein the Freudian themes of incestuous love manifest themselves. When reflecting back on the entire project he compares his chapters to pickle jars and offers several disclaimers which undermine myopic and unified readings of the novel. He writes,

The process of revision should be constant and endless; don't think I'm satisfied with what I've done! Among my unhappinesses: an overly-harsh taste from those jars containing memories of my father; a certain ambiguity in the love-flavour of "Jamila Singer" (Special Formula No. 22), which might lead the unperceptive to conclude that I've invented the whole story of the baby-swap to justify an incestuous love; vague implausibilities in the jar labelled "Accident in a Washing-chest" (549)

Aside from holding himself accountable for a high-degree of narrative unreliability, Saleem here admits that the Freudian elements in the text are perhaps overstated. The text first opens itself up to a Freudian reading in the *Accident in a Washing-chest* chapter, but Saleem cannot close this book without reminding us that there is something amiss in that chapter, that this memory is open to question and that perhaps Saleem never watched his mother masturbate while crying out the name of her former husband. Perhaps he did. That is not the point. What matters is that narrative indeterminacy carries the day in this book. Simply put: we'll never know what happened.

What's even more telling than the ambiguities and implausibilities at work in the text is Rushdie's jocular tone, the sense of play he brings to the Freudian moments of the novel. There is a space in the narrative, the point at which Saleem describes his courtship

of Evie Burns and his friend Sonny Ibrahim's pursuit of the Brass Monkey, where the text opens and the author's voice intrudes to make a larger claim about the relations between Europe and the colonies. Rushdie notes, "In India, we've always been vulnerable to Europeans. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce" (221). If viewed as a clinical, overarching, and contingent discourse, the Freudian metanarrative is of dubious enough merit in the West, where rather than shedding light on human subjectivity, it reformulates it, casting the subject as a creature awash in neuroses that have their origins in childhood melodrama, nervous ticks and phobias that control our lives and could reveal ourselves to us if we could only learn to read them properly. We are the victims of all that we repress, unless, of course, we learn to read the language and to interpret the signs of our repression—a slippery system of signification at best. However, when remapped in the Subcontinent, Freudian discourse is even more suspect, stretching out of the bounds of its origins and making essentializing claims about peoples and cultures that are not necessarily germane to their experience of the world.¹⁰

Rushdie challenges the veracity of an overarching Freudian discourse by making fun of it. He parodies it, acknowledging that while we all may have a touch of the Oedipal in us, it is doubtful that we can use these urges as a barometer of our entire character. It is, in fact, laughable to do so. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us in her Preface to Part IV of *The Postmodern Reader*, parody means to be "near to" and "counter to" at the same time, that is to say that it shares in a narrative frame while at the same time dismantling that narrative frame (444). Paul Maltby calls this trope a process by which an author "ironically or paradoxically incorporates" a narrative structure into his text in order to

“destabilize it from within” (526). This is precisely what Rushdie does. We have all the elements of Oedipal tension in *Midnight’s Children*—a boy coping with a mother’s sexuality and her betrayal as in *Hamlet*, another boy slicing his father to bits in the tub—but they are at the same time imbued with comic playfulness and a sense of the absurd: Saleem hiding among dirty clothes watching while his mother disrobes and bends over revealing her “black mango” as Rushdie puts it; an enuretic young man whose betrothed has psychosomatically forestalled menstruation to postpone her marriage to this wimp, who, in turn, finally explodes and hacks up the source of all his humiliation. Indeed, it is all a bit too far-fetched and hilarious to believe that Rushdie is overly-invested in this discourse.

Nevertheless, there is something in this Oedipal business that intrigues Rushdie, and I would argue that it is the power dynamic which lurks behind the discourse, the link between psycho-sexual disorientation and the will to power. More specifically, I think that what concerns Rushdie most is the connection between his narrator’s psychological turmoil and the process by which Saleem arbitrarily and sensationalistically constructs truth in an effort to debunk two powerful men as a way of coping with his own loss of centrality. If we unpack the situation, we arrive at some interesting possible interpretations of Saleem’s newspaper campaign which ultimately, if we are to believe our narrator, captures the imagination of the entire nation.

First, as was mentioned before, Saleem goes to his Aunt Pia and Uncle Hanif’s because his father Ahmed cannot bear to see him after the results of the blood test. In addition to this, Saleem is no longer the favorite child. His sense of alienation cannot be overstated. The two men upon whom he gets his revenge have done nothing to him, but

they do occupy important and powerful positions in Indian society, positions which perhaps remind Saleem of what he has lost within his own family. Homi Catrack is a film magnate and Sabarmati is a captain in the Indian Navy. When Saleem cuts and pastes his headlines and informs the captain about his wife's assignations with the film magnate his actions take down two men at once, as the military man kills the lecher who cuckolded him and then himself goes to prison, bringing to a halt the meteoric rise of his promising career. When reflecting back on the situation, Saleem says, "By unmasking the perfidy of Lila Sabarmati, I hoped to administer a salutary shock to my own mother. Two birds with one stone; there were to be two punished women, one impaled on each fang of my forked snake's tongue" (313). Interestingly, it is not the women but the men whom Saleem impales.

The women go largely unpunished, and this is most likely because, all claims to unremitting anger aside, Saleem feels both sympathetic and attracted to them. It is important to note that Saleem gets his revenge on Homi Catrack not because of what he's done to Hanif, Saleem's uncle by blood, but rather because he has dumped his lovely Aunt Pia. Throughout his exile, Saleem enjoys a furtive sexual relationship with his aunt that begins, he later recalls, because Pia takes the prematurely testicled lad for a boy still in short pants. Saleem remembers, "And she would draw me towards her, cradling my head so that my nose was pushed down against her chest and nestled wonderfully between the soft pillows of her indescribable. unable to cope with such delights I pulled my head away. But I was her slave" (291, Rushdie's ellipses). On the night Saleem delivers Catrack's note to Pia, he is in bed with his aunt and uncle, "huddling against my mumani's perfumed curves" (297) because he has awoken in the middle of

the night screaming from a nightmare. It seems with the word “mumani” that Saleem is recalling maternal comfort, but also the sexual feelings that exist between a young boy and his mom. In this same passage, he says, “Imagine with what speed the nightmare fled from my thoughts, as I nestled against my extraordinary aunt’s petticoats” (297). Clearly the line between comfort and arousal has been blurred.

Finally, after Pia has been dismissed by Catrack, she, in her despair, consents to a more overt sexual encounter with her nephew. Saleem hears Pia crying in her room and walks in to find “her loveliest of bodies splayed out in wondrous abandon across the marital bed” (299), and from here Saleem moves closer to hug his Aunt who stretches her arms toward him, to both reciprocate the comfort she gave him the previous evening and to pursue the appetites his aunt arouses in him, desires which are new to him:

Needing no further invitation, I fly towards those arms; I fling myself between them, to lie atop my mourning aunt. The arms close around me, tightertighter, nails digging through my school-white shirt, but I don’t care—Because something has started twitching below my S-buckled belt. Auntie Pia thrashes about beneath me in her despair and I thrash with her, remembering to keep my right hand clear of the action. I hold it stiffly out above the fray. One-handed, I begin to caress her, not knowing what I’m doing, I’m only ten years old and still in shorts, but I’m crying because she’s crying, and the room is full of the noise—and on the bed as two bodies begin to acquire a kind of rhythm, unnameable unthinkable, hips pushing up towards me, while she yells, “O! O God, O God, O!” (299)

Saleem is clearly not angry with his Aunt for *her* infidelity, but rather sympathetic to her distress because she has been abandoned and excited by her because he finds her to be beautiful and to be sexually alive. These are the same things he finds repulsive in his mother and in Lila Sabarmati. When Saleem concedes that “it is not untrue to say that what came to be known as the Sabarmati affair had its real beginnings at a dingy café in the north of the city, when a stowaway watched a ballet of circling hands” (313), he is

admitting to having great difficulty recognizing his mother as a sexual being and this confusion is exacerbated by Saleem's own sexual emergence.

What matters, of course, is not that we properly diagnose Saleem, but that we understand that the process by which he assimilates all of this, copes with both his own blossoming sexual desire and his mother's, and, most importantly, the act in which all this culminates—the secret missive to Captain Sabarmati, patched together from random newspaper headlines and the ensuing deaths of Homi Catrack and Hanif Aziz—are contingent and provisional attempts at meaning-making, attempts by the subject to locate itself in the world at to make sense of what is going on around it. All of which is to say that meaning-making operates according to a hidden agenda, according to forces that are unknown even to the creating subject, and furthermore that meaning is an arbitrary construct that in its origins is often aligned with a sexual impulse and that in its end seeks to find a place in the world for the subject. Like Saleem's note to Captain Sabarmati, meaning is a series of signs unscrambled from a larger and no less provisional sign system—in this case the mass media, but in a larger sense, language itself—and rearranged to suit the purposes of the creating agent. This patched-together note is a last-ditch effort to restore his centrality in his family, to retaliate against dislocation and exile, to stave off meaninglessness and absurdity. As Hilary Putnam argues, “The world. has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—‘Perspectivism.’ It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against.” (qtd. in McGowan, 216). Saleem lashes out when he is cut adrift, responding to impulses and urges in himself that he only vaguely understands but that nevertheless manifest themselves in ruthless

aggression, and through Saleem's treachery Rushdie demonstrates that meaning-making is a violence we perform against our alienation in the world.

Colonization is, perhaps, much like the Sabarmati affair: rooted in sexual disorientation and exile, communicated by means of a provisional sign system, and manifested in violence and domination. It is a way for the colonizing power to create meaning by locating itself in the center of the world, an impulse necessitated by a deep suspicion, or some confirmed evidence, that it is not the sole recipient of some blind affection, some unconditional love. It is the action we take when all that we believe in abandons us—meaning-making through domination on a global scale. Perhaps England set out to conquer the world because of a lack it felt in its own national consciousness, a massive inferiority complex that it overcame by putting on airs.

This idea of over-compensation on a national scale may sound like so much pop-psychology as I have stated it, but it is given some attention in the work of Said and Fanon. Both of these thinkers agree that Europe set out to rule in order to have its greatness affirmed by the peoples it dominated. In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Said writes, “[This book] tries to show that European culture gained in strength by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self”(3). Fanon explores this idea at great length in *Black Skin White Masks*, where he analyzes the relationship between the conquering subject and its objectified victim:

It is always a question of the subject; one never even thinks of the object. I try to read admiration in the eyes of the other, and if, unluckily, those eyes show me an unpleasant reflection, I find that mirror flawed: Unquestionably that other one is a fool. I do not try to be naked in the sight of the object. The object is denied in terms of individuality and liberty. The object is an instrument. It should enable me to realize my subjective security. I consider myself fulfilled (the wish for plenitude) and I recognize no division. The

Other comes on to the stage only in order to furnish it. I am the Hero. Applaud or condemn, it makes no difference to me, I am the center of attention. If the other seeks to make me uneasy with his wish to have value (his fiction), I simply banish him without a trial. He ceases to exist. (212)

For both Said and Fanon colonized peoples are a means to a narcissistic end, serving as a mirror to reflect the best of Europe back to itself.

Furthermore, colonized peoples afford Europeans the opportunity to disavow all that they loath about themselves by projecting their anxieties about themselves onto the natives and ascribing to conquered peoples the characteristics that Europeans find unbecoming in themselves. This notion has been explored by Jameson and Spurr, among others. In the *Political Unconscious*, Jameson writes,

Historically, (synchronic) systems have tended to fall into two general groups, which one might term respectively the hard and the soft visions of the total system. The first group projects a fantasy future of a “totalitarian” type in which the mechanisms of domination are grasped as irrevocable and increasingly pervasive tendencies whose mission is to colonize the last remnants and survivals of human freedom—to occupy and organize, in other words, what still persists of Nature objectively and subjectively (very schematically, the Third World and the Unconscious). (92)

Here Jameson draws a parallel between the individual unconscious and the Third World and argues that both are a sort of final frontier for the mechanisms of domination, two distinct sites where freedom—read here as a lack of civilization—reign.

Spurr continues with this type of analysis in his introduction to *The Rhetoric of Empire*, arguing that perhaps the urge to control an ‘uncivilized’ other is a displacement of an urge to control the self and that the designation of the ‘Third World’ as uncivilized is an arbitrary remapping of the latent Western psyche:

The colonizer’s traditional insistence on difference from the colonized establishes a notion of the savage as *other*, the antithesis of civilized

value. And yet the tendency of modern literature and science has been to locate the savage within us, in our historical origins and our psychic structure. As modern, civilized human beings, we assert authority over the savage both within us and abroad, but the very energy devoted to such an assertion acknowledges its own incompleteness *as* authority. (7, Spurr's italics)

This is exactly the type of projection we see in Saleem in the Sabarmati affair.

Confounded by his own sexual impulses he projects his self-loathing onto Homi Catrack, whom he makes suffer for his licentiousness at the hands of Captain Sabarmati, who acts out Saleem's fantasy for revenge. In this way, Saleem externalizes all that he finds despicable in himself, but also, as Spurr notes above, the energy with he cuts and pastes his newspaper articles undermines any notion of control over the situation Saleem may wish to demonstrate.

However, Rushdie goes even further to connect the workings of the unconscious and the power relations in the family dynamic to the colonial enterprise. First, borrowing from Said,¹¹ Rushdie demonstrates the manner in which the colonizer, in this case Saleem alone in the foreign land of another home, reconstitutes his experience in a text rather than confronting it directly in all its newness and fearsomeness. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that it is "a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human" (93) and that there is a human tendency "to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity" (93). For Saleem it is the uncertainty of his parentage and his initial contact with adult sexuality that has threatened his equanimity and he confronts this not by direct interaction with anyone, but rather by piecing it together in newspaper print and passing that information to Captain Sabarmati. In other words, Saleem reconfigures and contains the affair in a text, that is to say, a provisional and overarching

text, one which ignores some important facts, like his tumble with his aunt and Lila Sabarmati's lonely life at home, and includes only the most shocking details, those devoid of ambiguity and most likely to get an emotional response.

Like any newspaper article, Saleem's note to Captain Sabarmati is overly-simplified and its content—both what it mentions and what it omits—reveals more about its author than its subject. In closing this bit of his story, Saleem writes,

A newspaper said of the Sabarmati affair: "It is a theatre in which India will discover who she was, what she is, and what she might become." . . . But Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play—only I hadn't meant it! I didn't think he'd. . . I only wanted to. . . a scandal, yes, a scare, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never, no. (314—Rushdie's ellipses)

Here Saleem confesses as to his real motives in a tone of voice that highlights his own anxiety, but Rushdie, whose voice is nearly always distinct from Saleem's in this novel, says something even more profound, namely that India is, to some degree, a construct of what has been written about it in the press and that its authors proceed according to ulterior motives which they do not always understand and cannot always control. This is nearly always the case in the textual representation of a people who are governed by another people. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison makes a similar observation concerning the manner in which white authors create and treat black characters. She writes,

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of the Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this. (929).

Just as Saleem patches his headlines together according to the fears and desires that govern his own consciousness, so is the India many of us in the West have allowed ourselves to come to know a provisional collage pieced together by historians and travelers whose observations are merely reflections of their own longings.

Saleem's propensity to build by patching together fragments, to start with one tiny concrete item and from that to generate an imaginary whole, is reminiscent of Aadam Aziz's courtship of the Reverend Mother. Fresh from medical school in Germany, Aadam is called upon by Ghani the landowner to treat his daughter Naseem under the condition that the patient remain behind a sheet and that the doctor examine only the distempered part of her body by looking through a seven-inch hole in the sheet. As Aadam sees more of his patient, part-by-part, he constructs an imaginary whole and falls in love with the woman he creates:

So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. Glued together by his imagination, she accompanied him on all his rounds, she moved in the front room of his mind, so that waking and sleeping he could feel in his fingertips the softness of her ticklish skin or the perfect tiny wrists or the beauty of the ankles. (23)

Naseem is a silent spectator in the face of Aadam's creation of her, and the doctor treats her body like a territory to be surveyed and settled, inspecting and qualifying the various parts of her that are exposed to him much the same way a colonizer examines a new landscape.

In *The Rhetoric of Empire*, David Spurr makes a connection between the colonial occupation of the land and the gaze of the colonizer upon the native. He argues that in the colonial situation "the eye treats the body as a landscape: it proceeds systematically

from part to part, quantifying and spatializing, noting color and texture, and finally passing aesthetic judgment which stresses the body's role as object to be viewed" (23). Spurr goes on to add that the "aesthetic judgment" is not the result of a detached, dispassionate series of observations, but rather that the eye is caught up in the politics of domination: "The gaze is never innocent or pure, never free of mediation by motives which may be judged noble or otherwise. The eye is always in some sense colonizing the landscape, mastering and portioning, fixing zones and poles, arranging and deepening the scene as the object of desire" (27). Naseem's body is the only sign by which she is represented, and these doctor visits quickly turn into an erotic game, two young people "playing doctor," as the saying goes. However Naseem is not so much a contestant in this game, but rather her body is the field on which the game is played, a site of desire which is both revealed to and withheld from Aziz at the same time. The perforated sheet is a magical barrier, a liminal space between the Western-thinking Aziz and the primitive, as yet unpersonified body behind it. This 'courtship' is not human interaction, but rather an encounter between a sovereign consciousness and the fantasy that consciousness brings into being according to a highly regulated, closely governed codifying process. Naseem's body becomes what Said would call "a topos, a set of references, or a congeries of characteristics" (177) and it has its origin, not in its own historical beginnings, but in the imagination of the colonizing subject. This is similar to the writing of history by Empire, which marks the origin of the colonized people with their (Empire's) arrival on the scene. It is as if by landing on the shore, the colonizers pull the natives out of some pre-historical mist into the quotidian universe.

Rushdie, however, does not write the scene entirely this way, but rather subverts the process wherein the sophisticated Euro-centric consciousness rewrites the landscape by giving Naseem a large measure of agency and by imbuing the entire scene with a sense of play. What we have in Rushdie's prose is not merely anti-colonial invective but a more jocular tale in which a young man forgets himself, his family, and his profession and adheres to the mandate of his hormones. The first thing Aadam notices at Ghani's house is a picture of Diana bathing with her nymphs, a cultural artifact which provides an interesting commentary on the events that follow. According to the myth, when Acteon happens upon the goddess and sees her naked body she transforms him into a stag who is subsequently mauled by his own dogs. In the myth, the hunter becomes the hunted because he sees what he is not meant to see. The female retains sovereignty over her own body and she dictates when she will subject herself to the male gaze. In one sense, this is the exact opposite of what happens between Aadam and Naseem, as the woman remains passive while two men, her father and her suitor, govern her body by dividing it with the perforated sheet and viewing it according to their own agenda. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, it is only according to a power dynamic that one attains the position of seeing without being seen.¹² When the living being is denied the power to reciprocate the gaze, that living being is subjected to the rule of the viewer.

However, there is more going on here. First, it is Naseem, who controls all of this gazing. With her imaginary ailments she controls both the time of the viewing and the part of her body to be viewed. As Saleem notes, "Her initial stomach-ache was succeeded by a very slightly twisted right ankle, an ingrowing toenail on the big toe of the left foot, and after a time the illnesses leapt upwards, avoiding certain

unmentionable zones, and began to proliferate around her upper half" (22). Moreover, when the sheet is removed it is Naseem who speaks first and comments upon the doctor's body, bursting out with "Doctor, my God, what a *nose!*" (25). The fact that it is Naseem who passes judgment on her suitor first and loudest when they are finally permitted to look at each other is consistent with the politics of Rushdie's entire novel, a text in which Saleem, who is for a long time the victim of European power politics and a silent figure in another's writing of history, finally asserts his voice and takes his life out of the hands of politicians. Likewise, later in her marriage, Naseem retains complete control over her body, withdrawing it nearly entirely from the human gaze. When the family photographer tries to sneak a shot of her after she has refused to pose for the family portrait she breaks the camera over his skull and, as Saleem notes, "There are no photographs of my grandmother anywhere on this earth." (41). Naseem's attitude toward sex proves to be similar to Diana's, and Ghani's painting of the goddess thus becomes an ambivalent signifier, on the one hand guaranteeing Naseem agency in her life, but on the other hand, as the backdrop to this courtship, noting the silent presence of Empire in the fabric of Indian social life.

Rushdie further explores the insidious and lingering presence of the colonizer through the figure of William Methwold, whose transaction with the Sinai family best illustrates the manner in which Empire appropriates, transforms, and subjugates those with whom it interacts, even when it appears to bestow a kindness. Methwold sells his Bougainvillaea Estate to Aziz at a bargain price on the condition that the houses be bought with everything in them, that the entire contents remain in their places exactly as Methwold left them, and that the transfer of the deed not take place until after midnight

on August 15th even though families are scheduled to move in by mid-June. Furthermore, Methwold selects all of Sinai's neighbors. These whimsical terms seem to be a harmless and temporary annoyance—bathrooms without waterpots, stains in carpets, pictures of English women on the walls—but this two-month period is both a microcosm of the entire colonial experience—the new tenants live out of suitcases as guests in their own home and are denied full access to what is theirs—and a training period in which Methwold teaches his buyers how to be English.

The mere presence of the four buildings of the Estate ensure that the mystique of Europe will resonate in the Indian imagination. Here is Rushdie's description of the Sinai's new home:

Methwold's Estate: four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents (conquerors' houses! Roman mansions; three-storey homes of gods standing on a two-storey Olympus, a stunted Kailish!)—large, durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats (towers to fit and lock princesses in!)—houses with verandahs, with servants' quarters reached by spiral iron staircases hidden at the back—houses which their owner, William Methwold, had named majestically after the palaces of Europe: Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci. (108)

Not only do the edifices themselves, with their pointy red-hatted towers, look like giant, looming British soldiers, but, what's worse, the new residents will be forever referring back to Europe when they name their homes. These gabled roofs, turret towers, and the oft repeated utterances of Versailles and Buckingham will keep the notion of European conquest embedded in the Indian consciousness. The new residents of these estates remain trapped, visually and linguistically, in a Western system of representation.

Furthermore, in his rendering of the conversations between Methwold and Sinai, Rushdie demonstrates first that nations secure power in order to indulge their whims and,

second, that power is, in part, established, maintained, and enhanced through language, or, as Foucault would say, discourse. When questioned about the peculiarity of his terms, Methwold responds, “A whim, Mr. Sinai. you’ll permit a departing colonial his little game? We don’t have much left to do, we British, except to play our games” (109). And then when asked why he wants to give the Sinai’s their property at the hour of Indian independence he says, “Oh you know; after a fashion, I’m transferring power, too. Got a sort of itch to do it at the same time the Raj does. As I said; a game. Humour me, won’t you, Sinai?” (110). Sinai does humor Methwold and in so doing we see that a troubling cultural exchange accompanies this business transaction as Sinai is lured into the European discourse and hypnotized by British culture. He has cocktails every night with Methwold at six o’clock and the Englishman fills his ears with stories of yesteryear, all in the wonderful timbre of his accent which Sinai finds intoxicating.

There is even something more insidious in the dialogue of Methwold and Sinai, in the way each mimics the native discourse and tradition of the other, and the fact that no matter who is imitating or borrowing from whom, it is always Methwold who controls the dialogue and uses it to alienate Sinai from himself and from his history. When Methwold quotes ancient Hindu texts he appropriates Indian culture, essentializes Sinai’s tradition and, claiming to understand Sinai’s history better than Sinai himself, applies ancient Hindu wisdom to his own deeply British situation. For example, when questioned about the terms of this transaction, Methwold says, “It seems, Mr. Sinai, that beneath this still English exterior, lurks a mind with a very Indian lust for allegory” (110). This turn of phrase, “Indian lust for allegory” is an over-arching, inaccurate statement, something that tries to name something quaint, traditional, and superstitious in

the Indians, when there is really only a British lust for allegory here. It is Methwold who is obsessed with repeating patterns and symbols and with remapping this transaction so that it partakes of the larger historical moment about to occur. The Sinai's just wants to move their stuff in the house. Methwold also says to Ahmed, "Look around you: everything's in fine fettle, don't you agree? Tickety-boo, we used to say. Or, as you say in Hindustani: Sabkuch ticktock hai. Everything's just fine" (111). Methwold uses this Hindustani phrase twice in this conversation and by robbing Indian language and applying it to his situation he subtly lures Sinai into seeing life in India from the colonizer's point of view. Remarking on this habit of the colonizer to apply native tradition to his own situation, Fanon writes, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of form and content, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (*WE*, 210). In effect, Methwold steals this pivotal moment in Indian history and transforms it into a British moment and he does so by robbing the words of one of the many dialects indigenous to the land and speaking in it, and of it, as if it were a universal language.

On the other hand, when Sinai speaks to Methwold, he forsakes his roots and his culture and tries to impress Methwold by imitating him. During these conversations the narrator observes that Sinai's "voice has changed, in the presence of an Englishman it has become a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl" (110). In her analysis of mimicry in the colonial situation Ania Loomba argues that the colonizer encourages this sort of imitation as a means of confirming his superiority over the native. She writes, "The underlying premise was, of course, that Indians can mimic but never exactly reproduce English values, and that their recognition of the perpetual gap between themselves and the 'real

thing' will ensure their subjection" (173). In these conversations on the patio, it is as if Sinai has agreed to measure his success by the British standard for accomplishment, and that he has admitted that while he cannot hope to duplicate what the British have achieved that he is committed to carry on their tradition.

Rushdie demonstrates the extent to which Indian bourgeois ambition corrupts independence by showing how Methwold's idiosyncrasies disrupt Sinai's family life. Ahmed allows Methwold to displace Amina Sinai in her home, stealing time she would spend with her husband in their new place by drinking and talking with him on the verandah and withholding her right to arrange her things as she sees fit. Upon hearing the terms of the purchase, Amina exclaims, "I can't even throw away a spoon? Allah, that lampshade I can't get rid of one *comb*?" (109). Rushdie intermingles comments such as these throughout Ahmed's conversation with Methwold, so what we have is three voices clashing—the imperial British voice, the complicit male Indian voice, and the astounded and angry Indian female voice, screaming protests on the fringe but not permitted to enter the male dialogue. When Amina objects privately to her husband, Ahmed defends Methwold, in effect speaking on behalf of his conquerors. Amina asks, "Has his brain gone raw, janum? What do you think: is it safe to do bargains if he's a loony?" and her husband responds, "Now listen wife, this has gone on long enough. Mr. Methwold is a fine man; a person of breeding; a man of honour; I will not have his name
And besides, the other purchasers aren't making so much noise, I'm sure Anyway, I have told him yes, so there's an end to it" (110, Rushdie's ellipses). Thus, the only person thinking straight is marginalized, told to be quiet and to take it as it comes, and the free Indian home begins its days divided against itself, one part nostalgic, having become

comfortable with colonial tradition and one part opposed to the whimsical absurdity of the departing authority, but that part hushed, that voice squelched.

However, to accuse Ahmed Sinai of familial neglect and wanton sycophancy is to over-simplify the matter and to misread the situation. He is purchasing this estate so that his family can live comfortably and placating Methwold is a necessary annoyance which operates in the service of that end. Furthermore, in the larger socio-economic picture, Sinai has little choice but to act as he does. In his essay, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Franz Fanon argues that the bourgeois class, while having misplaced its values, also bears the burden of a nearly impossible task, namely that of replacing and reproducing the capital that the mother-country will take with her when she departs. Fanon points out that narcissism and hubris tend to be endemic to the middle classes of underdeveloped countries, but he also says that the economic burden of independence will “oblige [the middle class] to send out frenzied appeals for help to the mother country” (149). Considered in this light, Sinai’s purchase of Methwold’s estate is perhaps a necessary compromise and rather than being spineless and equivocal, Sinai is being wisely expedient by accommodating Methwold.

Nevertheless, Rushdie demonstrates—most notably in the *Sam and the Tiger* chapter—that British lingering, or what I would call an incomplete absence, which begins in a seemingly quirky and harmless business transaction and an amicable conversation over drinks on the back porch, finally erupts in military violence, in a war in which the factions of the Subcontinent come to blows using British arms and military tactics to annihilate each other. When the Pakistani army invaded the East Wing in 1971, and, likewise, when Indian troops arrived in August of that year to liberate Bengal, there was

much more happening than a nasty, localized religious war. These events unfolded according to the designs of the planet's superpowers and they were recorded, given the stamp of truth, by those interested in and capable of disguising truth and altering it to suit their purposes. The 93,000 Pakistani troops that occupied Dacca fought with American guns, tanks, and aircraft. They enlisted American aid because the Chinese had denied them assistance. Meanwhile, the Americans were seeking to improve relations with China to somehow keep the world from blossoming into one unified Communist state, and Pakistan statesman Yahya Khan was arranging the President's visits to China. India, meanwhile, crossed the border and brought the war to a halt to serve its own purposes. Over ten million people had crossed the Indian border from Bengal, forcing the government to pay over \$200,000,000 million a month for refugee camps. In addition, Left wing coalitions were gaining power in Calcutta and elsewhere in India, and the government needed to flex its muscles to keep them at bay.

Thus, led by General Sam Manekshaw, the Indian troops forced the Pakistani troops, led by General Tiger Niazi, to surrender. The two generals, it turns out, were educated together in British military schools (447). The war then was a sideshow, engineered and terminated, according to concerns that were peripheral and tangential to the lives of those fighting. This, of course, is often the case, but what makes it worthy of comment is Rushdie's manner, the way he constructs the chapter, weaving together an objective catalogue of historical data, an emotive rendering of the violence suffered by numerous and anonymous soldiers and civilians, and a dialogue among the generals which demonstrates the whimsicality of those wrapping up the events and writing history. As was the case in the Methwold transaction, power allows those who have it to create

truth and to make a sport of others' lives. The chapter begins with an outline of names, dates, and statistics—a synopsis of the larger forces which brought about the Pakistani surrender on December 15, 1971 and which I have discussed above—moves into a description of the violence, as Rushdie both pans the streets and offers a close-up, and closes with a disturbing conversation between the opposing generals in which we learn that these men are friends and that they are most interested, not in the concerns of their respective sides, but in erasing this business from the historical register.

Here again Rushdie demonstrates that even after independence, history is ghost-written by the English. It is the opposing generals, two former schoolmates educated in a British-style military academy, who get to say what happened and what did not, who tally the events in much the same way Methwold sold his estate—in good cheer and high spirits, as a game two old buddies are entitled to play, given their pasts, their current stations in life, and their unfailingly pleasant dispositions. While 93,000 troops become prisoners of war and countless others are released from Indian refugee camps, Sam and the Tiger have a few drinks and set the record straight:

That night, Sam and the Tiger drank chota pegs and reminisced about the old days in the British Army. "I say, Tiger," Sam Manekshaw said, "You behaved jolly decently by surrendering." And the Tiger, "Sam, you fought one hell of a war." A tiny cloud passes across the face of General Sam, "Listen, old sport: one hears such damn awful lies. Slaughters, old boy, mass graves, special units called CUTIA or some damn thing, developed for purposes of rooting out opposition—no truth in it, I suppose? And the Tiger, "Canine Unit for Tracking Intelligence Activities? Never heard of it. Must've been misled, old man. Some damn bad intelligence-wallahs on both sides. No, ridiculous, damn ridiculous, if you don't mind me saying. "Thought as much," says General Sam, "I say, bloody fine to see you, Tiger, you old devil!" And the Tiger, "Been years, eh, Sam? Too damn long." (454)

Though he knows enough to decode the CUTIA acronym, the Tiger is exonerated by his pal, and two natives of the sub-Continent speak playfully in the jargon they learned in their British education and thereby cast aside the lives of their countrymen. In his lecture delivered at the College de France, titled *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault claims that of the “three great systems of exclusion governing discourse,” the most important is “the will to truth,” and he further claims that, “we must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them” (229). Truth then is a violence imposed on a situation that excludes some things and admits others, irreparably altering the events that occurred, and, as Rushdie shows in the language of the conversations of Sinai and Methwold and of Sam and the Tiger, even the most harmless turns of phrase—the seemingly benign remnants from the colonial past—can at once make war possible and then cover it up.

Rushdie uses Methwold and the English-educated generals to examine the larger question of absence and presence, and, by blurring the lines between what is there and what is not there, he demonstrates that truth and history are provisional and contingent, and that the thinking subject constructs knowledge, meaning, and even reality both from that which lingers after an entity is departed and that which is deferred after something new arrives. *Midnight's Children* is, among other things, a story of arrivals and departures, a tale of anticipation and expectation and of remnants and memory. There is the sense from the beginning of the novel that something is being withheld, deferred, or postponed. Saleem begins thirty-two years before his birth and seems to take his time with the stories of his grandfather and his parents, this despite the fact that his body, he claims, is literally cracking up as he writes and that he has to hurry if he is to finish his

tale before he dies. Padma even warns Saleem to quit dilly-dallying: “You better get a move on or you’ll die before you get yourself born” (38). I would argue that Saleem both tells this story and digresses for the same reason, namely because he needs to make sense of his life but in order to do so he must confront some things in his past that terrify him, most notably his encounter with the Black Widow. As Aruna Srivastava argues, “The impulse to narrate and to create stories is an impulse to order, to make sense of an apparently chaotic world, to create a coherent sense of self. *Midnight’s Children* is about Saleem’s struggle to make himself and his country into a unified subject, to assert his lineage, his family and national ties, and his alliances” (67). However, in order to narrate his life, Saleem must revisit his castration, an event that made life appear meaningless to him and thus Saleem’s impulse to narrate—what Srivastava calls “an impulse to order”—forces him to confront absurdity, which he claims to fear above all else (*MC*, 4).

Saleem compensates for his avowed fear of absurdity by casting himself as the center of his tale and of the Indian national narrative and by confining his nemesis, the Black Widow, to the margins of the novel, delaying her entrance into the story for as long as possible. The Black Widow is a ghost that haunts the narrator, a vapor that permeates the entire novel, the force behind everything that disorients Saleem and robs him of hope. Saleem has informed us from the beginning that he is impotent and he has even conceded that his urge to finish his book before he cracks up is perhaps a byproduct of his futility, but he merely alludes to these things very early in the text and puts them aside, and it is not until we are well into the book that we realize that Saleem is procrastinating, using an excess of family and national history to put off what he must disclose.

It is not until halfway through the book—after Padma, having left Saleem because she has grown tired of his failure to respond to her ministrations, returns with some herbs designed to restore our narrator’s potency—that we begin to see the degree to which Saleem’s feelings about his impotence govern the text. He drinks the concoction to placate his frustrated concubine and emerges from the ensuing two-week dizzying fever to inform us, “It was a noble attempt; but I am beyond regeneration—the Widow has done for me. Not even the real *mucuna* could have put an end to my incapacity; *feronia* would never have engendered in me the ‘lustly force of beasts’” (232). Although there have been numerous references both to sterility and to the Widow up to this point, this is the first time the two are associated with each other.

In the following chapter *At the Pioneer Café*, a section ostensibly about his mother’s adultery, we begin to realize the extent to which Saleem has been writing around the most psychologically damaging episodes of his life. He begins the chapter with a rambling, nonsensical allusion to the Widow, one that expands upon his remark in the previous chapter. I quote it below at some length:

No colours except green and black the walls are green the sky is black (there is no roof) the stars are green the Widow is green but her hair is black as black. The Widow sits on a high high chair the chair is green the seat is black the Widow’s hair has a center-parting it is green on the left an on the right black. High as the sky the chair is green the seat is black the Widow’s arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children green the walls are green the Widow’s arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow’s hand curls round them green and black. Now one by one the children mmff are stifled quiet the Widow’s hand is lifting one by one the children green their blood is black unloosed by cutting fingernails it splashes black on walls (of green) as one by one the curling hand lifts children high as sky the sky is black there are no stars the Widow laughs her tongue is green but see her teeth are black. And

children torn in two in Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of
 children roll them into little balls the balls are green the night is
 black. (249)

Coming where it does and as it does, these words make no sense the first time through the novel, but here we gain insight into the nature of Saleem's fears and are made aware of the degree to which the Widow is present in Saleem's consciousness but which foreshadows the coming of another character—the wide-hipped nurse with the green glasses and the black shoes who does the Widow's dirty work. This is the memory from which our narrator will never free himself. However, there is something amiss here. The narration is out of place.

On the one hand, it seems normal that this longer, more involved reference to the Widow would come after a shorter quip about her in the previous chapter because the quick remark sets the reader up for the longer passage, promises a larger space in the novel for the Widow. On the other hand, it is odd that a highly allusive, meandering passage rendered in Saleem's stream-of-consciousness would follow a more forthright comment. What actually happens, following the logic of the text, is that Saleem writes the fifteenth chapter before he writes the fourteenth. The first line after the stream-of-consciousness prelude to Chapter 15 reads, "The fever broke today. For two days (I'm told) Padma has been sitting up all night, placing cold wet flannels on my forehead, holding me through my shivers and dreams of Widow's hands; for two days she has been blaming herself for her potion of unknown herbs" (250). Meanwhile, Chapter 14 begins, "Padma is back. And, now that I have recovered from the poison and am my desk again, is too overwrought to be silent." (231). The events at the opening of Chapter 15 occur just as Saleem awakes from his delirium, but he is already composed and recovered when

he begins Chapter 14. When he first awakes (in Chapter 15) Saleem assures Padma that the fever had nothing to do with her potion, that he suffered a fever of this nature when he was ten and that it was recurring here because he was preparing to write about his tenth birthday. Chapter 14 is titled *My Tenth Birthday*: the chapter he claims to be preparing to write in Chapter 15 is the 14th chapter of this text. Saleem is lying to Padma—and, of course, to himself. This fever has nothing to do with childhood sickness and the memories of a birthday party. By finding the medicine for impotence, Padma has forced Saleem to recognize and to admit to himself that his condition is irremediable, and this has sent him into a swoon.

Even so, the question remains: Why does Saleem rearrange his pickle jars, leading us to believe he penned one chapter after another when the opposite seems to be the case? I would offer two responses, which, when taken together, demonstrate that author and narrator, so often at cross-purposes, may also be in collusion. For Saleem, placing the story of his telepathy in Chapter 14 before the story of his mother's adultery and his encounter with the Black Widow in Chapter 15 allows him to withhold from us the truths that are most painful to him. He has been putting these things off for nearly half the novel and this bit of juggling is a last-ditch effort to stave off the inexorable flow of his narrative toward the most painful events in his life. As a boy Saleem uses the narrative of the Midnight's Children Conference to cope with feelings of undue parental pressure and the alienation of his peers, and now, as a writer, he uses it once again to keep the story of what really happened in parentheses for the time being.

Meanwhile, for Rushdie, this juggling is a matter of craft, a case of ordering events in a way such that they are felt most deeply by the reader. I would designate

Chapter 14 as the last chapter of the first half of the novel, wherein Rushdie builds a home, a family, and a community for his narrator, all of which will disintegrate in the second half of the book, beginning with the episode at the Pioneer Café and continuing in the next chapter with the discovery of Saleem's blood-type. Even though the memory of the Pioneer Café comes back to Saleem first, the tenth birthday party must be recounted prior to this, not simply because it occurs prior to Amina's encounter with Khan, for we know that chronology never governs the movement of this text, but rather because the birthday party is the first moment in the text where the novel begins to take a new direction, begins to slip thematically from a book about home to a book about exile. The Widow, that hideous figure who is responsible for Saleem's need to procrastinate in the first place, now controls the story: she is the latent idea which can no longer be suppressed, the monster who expels Saleem from history. While she is the idea that moves the text forward, she is never present as a flesh-and-blood character on the page.

In the penultimate chapter of the novel when Saleem finally arrives at the moment where he must narrate his castration, we feel most deeply the panic this memory arouses in him and the extent to which he tries to avoid reliving this moment. He begins the chapter thusly,

I don't want to tell it!—But I swore to tell it all.—No, I renounce, not that, surely some things are better left. ?—That won't wash; what can't be cured, must be endured!—But surely not the whispering walls, and treason, and snip snip, and the women with the bruised chests?—Especially those things.—But how can I, look at me, I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory ;lunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more!—But I mustn't presume to judge; must simply continue (having once begun) until the end; sense-and-nonsense is no longer (perhaps never was) for me to evaluate.—But the horror of it, I can't won't mustn't won't can't no!—Stop this; begin.—No!—Yes. (503)

The tone and syntax of this passage most closely resembles the opening passage of Chapter 15 where Saleem narrates the emergence from his fever and the dream/hallucination he has while ill. There is some slippage and confusion in Chapters 14 and 15 because this is the moment in the text where the novel begins to transform thematically from a book about centrality, family, and home into a story of displacement, illegitimacy and exile, and here in Chapter 29 we have the culmination of this sad tale. Rushdie begins and ends the story of Saleem's anxiety and incompleteness with the same frenetic prose.

In *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Jacques Derrida performs an operation, what he calls an analysis of the structurality of structure, in which he examines the nature and function of the center of any given structure and concludes that centers exist to organize the structure, to suspend free play, and to create a certitude that mitigates anxiety. He writes,

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. Nevertheless, the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible. The concept of the centered structure is in fact the concept of a freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game. (224)

In *Midnight's Children*, one may consider the “game” to be history, the flow of events, and Saleem places himself at the center, orders the situations and interactions within the text around his existence, to master anxiety, to suspend the freeplay of history, the

random mishmash of events that threaten his existence, most notably the Black Widow's project of mass-sterilization. Clearly none of this is working too well for him. He is, of course, the most neurotic of storytellers, and it is impossible to take him at his word when he makes such claims that the war in 1965 was fought to annihilate his family and that in 1971 the war was fought to reunite him with his friends. Furthermore, the Black Widow is waiting out there with her scissors. This center cannot hold.

Derrida's notion of center involves more than the suspension of freeplay and the mastering of anxiety. He also claims that the center is, paradoxically, both within the structure and outside the structure and that, until Nietzsche, western metaphysics has been a series of substitutions of center, and Rushdie gives both of these ideas much consideration in the novel. Derrida writes,

Thus, it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. (224, Derrida's italics)

Shortly after this, Derrida adds, "The whole history of the concept of structure. . . must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (225). Nearing the age of thirty-two and sitting in the Anglepoised light of the Braganza Pickle Factory crafting a tale about his younger self caught in the throes of Indian history, Saleem is that central figure who is both inside and outside the structure. As writer of this book, he is the creator and master of the free play of the narrative, but, as the main character of his own story, he is subjected to the free play of the text and vulnerable to all that threatens to displace him as the center of this tale.

The Black Widow, or the character of Indira Gandhi, competes with Saleem for centrality,¹³ for control of what is at stake both in the text and in Indian politics, and, like Saleem, she is both inside and outside of the structure. She is at the very heart of the novel because she is the reason Saleem is telling the story in the first place: she is responsible for his castration and now if Saleem is to be a figure in history, if he is to leave something behind which lives after he dies, he must immortalize himself via storytelling. However, Ms. Gandhi, at the same time, remains outside the text because she never actually appears on the page in scene. The conflict between her and Saleem which is promised never transpires, and Rushdie is perhaps crafting the anti-story here, the book with no clash between protagonist and villain, because Saleem never meets his assailant. Saleem is castrated by a beautifully wide-hipped nurse he calls the Widow's Hand. Just the story approaches its climax, as the enemies are about to encounter, Rushdie sends in a surrogate villain.

Indira Gandhi appears in the novel as a figure who contains her opposite, a forever looming shadow that is both there and not there. A descendent of Nehru, she has taken the name of Gandhi and has thus brought together two of the greatest figures of India's movement for independence, but, with her penchant for scandal and totalitarianism, she also recalls the efficiency and tyranny of British rule. According to a documented, public view—what Rushdie calls “a matter for historians” (501)—Mrs. Gandhi cleaned up the country, wiping out ghettos with civic beautification projects and restructuring the economy. You will recall that Methwold made similar claims in honor of the British legacy. He says to Ahmed Sinai, “You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things” (110).

In both figures we see the same notion at work: that some sort of over-arching public vision and the signs by which it manifests itself—roads, proficient economies, social organization—justifies the absolute subjugation and humiliation of the disenfranchised. Rushdie characterizes Methwold and Mrs. Gandhi with the same feature, their coifs, both parted in the middle, signaling both the connection between the Emergency and British rule and the link between efficiency and heartlessness. Rather than being the character that awaits us in the traditional novel—the monster lying in wait for the hero at the center of the labyrinth—Mrs. Gandhi is present in the text as a recurring idea, or theme, a recalling of a tyrannical presence that never truly departed. Thus, as theme Mrs. Gandhi is always present and as character she is forever deferred.

Several critics read this conflict between Saleem and Indira Gandhi as a fight over who gets to narrate Indian history. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, for example, sees this as a dispute over the truth that is waged between the artist and the politician with Rushdie not surprisingly affirming the authority of the writer to question the “official” version of history. Needham writes,

Poised on borders, at a distance from the dominant ideologies that flourish on both sides of the border, the narrator envisages the male writer’s role as that of adversary, contesting official truths, constructing alternative histories. In this scheme, according to Rushdie, the writer functions as a natural rival to the politician; like the politician, he tries to make the world in his own image, competes for the same territory. Surely claiming such a role is empowering, making the writer not just into a powerful adversary but also one whose alternative claims determines how ‘official facts’ are subsequently received. Indeed for Rushdie, the writer’s role and authority exceed that of the politician. (626)

I would add to this that the most profound way in which Rushdie challenges official history is in the style of his narrative, in his mode of representation. Unlike official histories, which are linear, realistic narratives that claim to be reliable indicators of an

absolute truth, Rushdie gives us the openly unreliable and fabulous narration of a neurotic storyteller. Whereas politicians mask their ideological investment in their texts, Saleem makes his plain, and in so doing undermines the notion of absolute truth. For Rushdie then, it is not a question of whether it is the artist or the politician who can claim a monopoly on truth, but rather he wishes to make it clear that no one has the final say on questions of history.

Rushdie also distorts and collapses the notions of presence and absence and clouds the issue of what actually happened with the Midnight's Children Conference and the figure of Shiva. Very much like the Black Widow, both Shiva and the Midnight's Children Conference are both there and not there; however, whereas the Black Widow appears in the text as both theme and ghost haunting Saleem but never as character, the Midnight's Children Conference and Shiva exist as both ideas and as flesh-and-blood articles in the quotidian universe. These are exquisitely constructed and elaborately maintained points of narrative indeterminacy in the text, appearing at times to be figments of Saleem's imagination and later to have actually happened. On the one hand, the Midnight's Children Conference first appears to be a young boy's coping mechanism, a way of dealing with early on-set existential malaise and a sense of purposelessness. Saleem conjures the whole thing to combat the pressures of family life—i.e. the feeling that he must become something to repay his parents' investment in him—and his ever-growing sense of exile, both in his family and among his friends at school. As an infant Saleem has saucer-eyes and never blinks, indicating that he absorbs all of the universe around him without relief and takes it all to heart. As the people who love him tell him that a wonderful world awaits him, he becomes filled with a sense of dread that he may

not fulfill their expectations, and the Midnight's Children Conference lay at the end of a long road of imaginative flight Saleem takes from this pressure.

We can see this if we retrace Saleem's steps to the conference. First, there is the mounting pressure, both at school and at home, to be something, to have an identity. At school, all of Saleem's nine-year-old pals know exactly what they want to do with their lives, while Saleem, more intelligent and sensitive and sadly equipped with a precocious sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, hasn't got a clue. This uncertainty alienates him from his boastful friends. Here is a typical bus-ride, quoted in full, to the Cathedral and John Connon Boys' High School on Outram Road in the Old Fort District, wherein we see both the effects of certainty on Saleem and the degree to which this youthful certitude of Saleem's peers is tied to the lingering presence of the British Empire, which, recent historical events notwithstanding, perpetuates the myth that there are constants in the world, that there is a stable, unchanging future awaiting these young boys down the road:

Washed and brushed every morning, I stood at the foot of our two-storey hillock, white-shortened, wearing a blue-striped elastic belt with a snake-buckle, satchel over my shoulder, my mighty cucumber of a nose dripping as usual; Eyeslice and Hairoil, Sonny Ibrahim and precocious Cyrus-the-great waited too. And on the bus, amid rattling seats and nostalgic cracks of the window-panes, what certainties! What nearly-nine-year-old certitudes about the future! A boast from Sonny: "I'm going to be a bullfighter: Spain! Chiquitas! Hey, toro, toro!" His satchel held before him like the muleta of Manolete, he enacted his future while the bus rattled around Kemp's Corner, past Thomas Kemp and Co. (Chemists), beneath Air-India rajah's poster ("See you later, alligator! I'm off to London on Air-India") and the other hoarding, on which throughout my childhood, the Kolynos Kid, a gleamtoothed pixie in a green, elfin, chlorophyll hat proclaimed the virtues of Kolynos Toothpaste: "Keep Teeth Kleen and Keep Teeth Brite! Keep Teeth Kolynos *Super White!*" The Kid on his hoarding, the children in the bus: one-dimensional, flattened by certitude, they knew what they were for. Here is Glandy Keith Colaco, a thyroid balloon of a child with hair already sprouting tuftily on his lip: "I'm going to run my father's cinemas; you bastards want to watch movies, you'll have to come an' beg me for seats!"

And Fat Perce Fishwala, whose obesity is due to nothing but overeating, and who, along with Glandy Keith, occupies the privileged position of class bully: “Bah! That’s nothing! I’ll have diamonds and emeralds and moonstones! Pearls as big as balls!” And Eyeslice, announcing his future as a Test cricketer, with a fine disregard for his own empty eyesocket; and Hairoil, who is as slicked-down and neat as his brother is curly-topped and disheveled, says, “What selfish bums you are! I shall follow my father into the Navy, I shall defend my country!” Whereupon he is pelted with rulers, compasses, inky pellets. I held my peace; I was mild-mannered Clark Kent protecting my secret identity; but what on earth was that? “Hey, Snotnose!” Glandy Keith yelled, “Hey, whaddya suppose our Sniffer’ll grow up to be?” And the answering yell from Fat Perce Fishwala, “Pinocchio!” And the rest, joining in, sing a raucous chorus of “There are no strings on me!” (181-182)

Everything around these boys—the advertisements for toothpaste and airfare, the street names, and the chemical company—are remnants of the British Empire, and everything they bring to this boisterous conversation—their dreams and their insults—are conditioned by their colonial past. They want to play cricket and to be in the Navy, and when they insult Saleem, they invoke the name of a character from a Western fairy-tale. Clearly, it is Great Britain that imbues these kids with a sense of destiny and identity, but Rushdie is quick to undercut this. None of this is going to happen: the would-be cricket-player is blind in one-eye; and, Glandy Keith, already growing way out of proportion, has as much hope of starring in movies as he does of running a movie house. Only Saleem is smart enough to be confused and for this he is exiled from the banter.

Things are no easier for him at home where his relatives fix and burden him with an identity and a destiny and then alienate him when he disappoints them. The following rumination—another longish quotation—demonstrates Saleem’s acute sensitivity to pressure, his awareness of the flip-side to all these wonderful compliments his relatives pay him, and his growing sense of exile:

Already, at the age of nearly nine, I knew this much: everybody

was waiting for me. Midnight and baby-snaps, prophets and prime ministers had created around me a glowing and inescapable mist of expectancy. In which my father pulled me into his squashy belly in the cool of the cocktail hour to say, “Great things! My son; what is not in store for you? Great deeds, a great life!” While I, wriggling between jutting lip and big toe, wetting his shirt with my eternally leaking nose-goo, turned scarlet and squealed, “Let me go, Abba! Everyone will *see!*” And he, embarrassing me beyond belief, bellowed, “Let them look! Let the whole world see how I love my son!” and my grandmother, visiting us one winter, gave me advice, too: “Just pull up your socks, whatitsname, and you’ll be better than anyone in the whole wide world!” Adrift in this haze of anticipation, I had already felt within myself the first movings of that shapeless animal, which still, on these Padmaless nights, champs and scratches in my stomach: cursed by multitudes of hopes and nicknames (I had already acquired Sniffer and Snotnose), I became afraid that everyone was wrong—that my much trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose. (180-81)

Here again, we see the seed of Empire behind the promise of a blossoming future: Ahmed Sinai has maintained the English tradition, bequeathed to him by Methwold, of the cocktail hour, and there can be little doubt that his dreams for his boy are soaked in the nostalgia brought on by drink—i.e. he sees in Saleem a fine young Englishman; and there is Naseem telling the boy to pull up his socks, that all Saleem needs to do is dress in the proper manner of a privileged lad and he will enjoy the fruits of prosperity.

However, instead of setting out to create a storybook future for himself, Saleem retreats into the private exile of fantasy which leads him, eventually, to the Midnight’s Children Conference. He hides in a washing chest where he imagines himself to be Batman, Superman, Sinbad, and Aladdin—identities he assumes which allow him to avoid “the terrible notion that I, alone in the universe, had no idea of what I should be, or how I should behave” (181). The asylum Saleem finds in the washing chest, though, is irrevocably disturbed when he spies on his mother masturbating. As she touches herself, Saleem watches in silent horror, until a pajama string creeps up his nose, which causes

him to sneeze and sends bells ringing and voices clambering inside his head, which Saleem interprets as the unmistakable sign from above that he is a prophet. As was argued before, these fantasies are undoubtedly intensified by the psychological trauma any boy would feel while awash in his mom's sexuality, but this also sets off a chain of events that leads him to the conference. In an attempt to justify and affirm the hope his family has placed in him, Saleem sits everyone down and tells them that he believes himself to be a prophet, the next Mohammed, to which his father responds by striking him in the ear so hard that he flies across the room, crashes into a glass table, and permanently loses his hearing. It is at this point, that Saleem claims to have discovered the power of telepathy, the power to communicate with the other children born on the eve of India's freedom.

Saleem's friendships with the Midnight's Children intensify as his family-life continues to disintegrate and his kinship with his peers wanes. After Dr. Narlikar's death ends Ahmed's business partnership and his plan to build tetrapods in Benares, Saleem's dad begins to disappear into a fog of alcoholism and abstraction, and Saleem falls completely out of favor with the hilltop gang when he seeks the love of Evie Burns, a courtship which ends when she knocks him off his bike and sends him headlong into a political rally which degenerates into the first of the language riots in Bombay. All of this comes to a head at Saleem's tenth birthday party, attended by his family "which had forgotten how to be gay" (247), a few schoolmates who were forced to come by their parents, and only one member of the bougainvillea crew who comes with a message from Evie informing Saleem that he is out of the gang. Furthermore, Saleem's mother blushes at the mention of the Communist Party, arousing suspicion as to her whereabouts during

her now routine afternoon-long shopping trips and prompting Saleem to follow her about town. Things are coming apart for Saleem, so he creates a wonderful alternative universe inside his head. He admits as much when he reflects back on the party:

On my tenth birthday, abandoned by one set of children, I learned that five hundred and eighty-one others were celebrating their birthdays, too; which was how I understood the secret of my original hour of birth; and, having being [sic] expelled from one gang, I decided to form my own, a gang which was spread over the length and breadth of the country, and whose headquarters were behind my eyebrows. That's how it was when I was ten: nothing but trouble outside my head, nothing but miracles in it. (247)

On the one hand, there is the burden of high hopes for a bright future, and on the other there is a miserable present, both at home and among friends. The pressure and the exile end in the foundation of the Midnight's Children Conference.

Nevertheless, no matter how much it seems to be the case, it cannot be said with certainty that the conference exists solely in Saleem's head. It is both imaginary and real. Later, when Saleem emerges from the Sundarbans having forgotten his name and re-enters the war in the Bengal, it is Parvati-the-witch who rescues him and gives him back his name. She recognizes him from the Midnight's Children Conference. She spies him in a crowd, calls out his name, and when he responds with a dazed and puzzled look, she recalls their childhood together:

“Oh God, too much excitement!” she cries. “Arre baap, Saleem, you remember—the Children, yaar, O this is too good! So why are you looking so serious when I feel like to hug you to pieces? So many years I only saw you inside here,” she taps her forehead, “and now you're here with a face like a fish. Hey, Saleem! Come on, say hullo at least.” (453)

Rushdie will not allow for one interpretation, will not let the conference exist simply as a metaphor or as the figment of a lonely boy's imagination. In this way, the Midnight's

Children Conference is much like the ghost of Hamlet Sr.: part of Hamlet's psychological make-up, yes, but also witnessed by Horatio and others—both symbolic and real at the same time. But, whereas we routinely accept ghosts as part of Shakespeare's universe, as a very real part of the world he creates, Rushdie is up to something different here. He, at one time, begs the question of whether the stuff of his universe actually happens, and then purposefully contradicts himself and leaves the matter unresolved, telling his readers either that this is the wrong question to be asking or, more likely, that the stuff of this world both *is* and *is not* at the same time.

This is made most plain by the figure of Shiva, Saleem's imaginary alter-ego and real-life nemesis. Shiva first enters the text when Saleem retreats from the pain of ostracism both at school and among his friends in the hilltop gang at home, and he serves as a reminder that Saleem cannot find absolute peace even in the recesses of his imagination because there is a disruptive counter-voice lurking in every individual. Saleem constructs the Midnight's Children Conference as a safe haven from all that is crude and harsh in the world, as an edenic paradise where everything remains pure and innocent, where there is no sense of exile and loss, and where noble goals are pursued, but Shiva is the snake in his garden, a stark reminder that there is something amiss within Saleem, that he, like the adults and children in his life, carries the potential for corruption and chaos within himself. Saleem's goals for the conference are altruistic, his intention being to give all of the children equal voice and to find a worthy mission for the group, to do something that will make the world a better place, but from the start there arises a clamor in his head that resembles those on his bus ride to school. Shiva, a voice inside of him competing for an audience with Saleem's loftier thoughts, has other ideas. In

response to free expression and a better world, Shiva says, “That, man, that’s only rubbish. What we ever goin’ to do with a gang like that? Gangs gotta have gang bosses. You take me, I been running a gang up here in Matunga for two years now. Since I was eight. Older kids and all. What do you think of that?” Saleem counters by reiterating his belief in purpose, to which Shiva responds, “You don’t know one damn thing! What *purpose*, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got *reason*, yara?” (263). The conversation continues in this vein, with both an irreconcilable split and an irresistible attraction between Saleem and Shiva. This, then, is merely an internalization of the strife Saleem witnesses in the outside world—the blind ambition of his peers and the sinful cravings of the adults in his life—and Saleem is horrified to discover this tension within himself so he exiles Shiva from the conference, amputates that part of his psyche that reflects the worst parts of himself to his conscious mind.

This exclusion of Shiva, of course, ensures that he will always hold Saleem’s imagination captive, that he, along with the mysterious Black Widow, will be the absent figure that controls the movement of the text. As the novel progresses toward the final encounter with the Black Widow—or, more exactly, the Black Widow’s surrogate nurse—and as Saleem matures sexually, Shiva emerges from the recesses of his exile and assumes greater play in Saleem’s imagination. The Midnight’s Children Conference begins to disburse when Ahmed and Amina reconcile, that is, Saleem’s imaginative haven begins to disappear when his outer world begins to right itself, but it is also at this time that Saleem is more willing to acknowledge his rival. Reflecting on the break-up of the conference and the reunion of his parents, Saleem also begins to come to grips with Shiva:

And Shiva? Shiva, whom I cold-bloodedly denied his birthright? Never once, in that last month, did I send my thoughts in search of him; but his existence, somewhere in the world, nagged away at the corners of my mind. Shiva-the-destroyer, Shiva Knocknees. he became for me, first a stabbing twinge of guilt; then an obsession; and finally, as the memory of his actuality grew dull, he became a sort of principle; he came to represent, in my mind, all the vengefulness and violence and simultaneous-love-and-hate-of-Things in the world; so that even now, when I hear of drowned bodies floating like balloons on the Hooghly and exploding when nudged by passing boats; or trains set on fire, or politicians killed, or riots in Orissa or Punjab, it seems to me that the hand of Shiva lies heavily over all these things, dooming us to flounder endlessly amid murder rape greed war—that Shiva, in short, has made us who we are. (358)

Now that serenity is returning to his family life, it is easier for Saleem to accept Shiva, and, even so, he only accepts him as an abstraction, as the thought of violence that occurs in the world, not as something very real that exists within him. Nevertheless, this is a step forward for Saleem, an indication of the onset of maturity, and, as he continues to grow, Saleem begins to reconcile his own penchant for revenge and the lure of the darker avenues in life.

Saleem comes full circle after losing his telepathic powers when his parents trick him into a hospital visit and repair his deviated septum, shutting off the echoes in his nasal cavity and replacing the clamor of the Midnight's Children Conference with an acute sense of smell. With his olfactory nerves restored, Saleem takes a liking to the foul-smelling corners of the world and acknowledges his inner-Shiva. For his sixteenth birthday he receives a motor-scooter which he rides through the red-light district to whore-houses and gaming rooms and, following his nose, just as the ancient boatman Tai advised his grandfather, abandons the idealism of the early days of the conference and finds bliss on the seamy side of town. He says of his newfound curiosity,

Because soon I understood that my work must, if it was to have any

value, acquire a moral dimension; that the only important divisions were the infinitely subtle gradations of good and evil smells. Having realized the crucial nature of morality, having sniffed out that smells could be sacred or profane, I invented, in the isolation of my scooter-trips, the science of nasal ethics. I learned the olfactory incompatibility of Islam and socialism, and the inalienable opposition existing between the after-shave of Sind Club members and the poverty-reek of the street-sleeping beggars at the Club gates. . . more and more, however, I became convinced of an ugly truth—namely that the sacred or good held little interest for me, even when such aromas surrounded my little sister as she sang; while the pungency of the gutter seemed to possess a fatally irresistible attraction. Besides, I was sixteen; things were stirring beneath my belt, behind my duck-white pants; and no city which locks women away is ever short of whores. While Jamila sang of holiness and love-of-country, I explored profanity and lust. (380)

This is certainly a different Saleem. Back when he began the Midnight's Children Conference, he spoke of widespread social change and he was taken aback by the crude ideas and the longings of the poverty-stricken embodied in the voice of Shiva. Here he recognizes the incompatibility of competing ideologies and the inevitable and tense dissociation of the rich from the poor. Now he plunges into the world and revels in its problems, instead of retreating into his own head where he can solve its problems.

The younger, idealistic Saleem is actually more vulnerable to the machinations of Shiva. Consider the time when he attacks Glandy Keith and Fat Perce to impress Masha Miovic: “ . . . and under the spell of the champion breast-stroker, something else floats into my imagination: the image of two irresistible knees; and now I am rushing at Colaco and Fishwala; while they are distracted by giggles, my knee drives into Glandy's groin; before he's dropped a similar genuflection has laid Fat Perce low” (280). Throughout the text, Shiva has been characterized by his knees, but it is Saleem who has the bandy-legs and the violent temper. The older Saleem, with the nose and the motor-scooter, accepts

the world as it is, does not aspire to purity, and, because he gives his cravings and curiosities a wide-birth, is really quite self-possessed.

Unlike the Black Widow, Shiva does appear on the page as a character, but he is never fully present; rather he is the material form of any of Saleem's rivals, the embodiment of any figure competing with our narrator, but always a vague and foggy presence, never a distinct individual. When Saleem is a political dissident in the Communist ghetto cut off from the upper-class and from his rapacious tours on the motor-scooter, Shiva is a full-blown general marching brazenly through the streets, working the room at parties with the higher-ups, spreading his seed throughout India and cuckolding the well-to-do. When Saleem eschews Parvati's advances and her pleas for marriage, Shiva is the swarthy soldier who has left her a lock of his hair and promised a commitment. Finally, when Saleem is a prisoner in Benares awaiting his doom, Shiva escorts him to the woman with the scissors.

However, though Shiva and Saleem seem to be perpetually at odds, I would argue that the figure of Shiva remains dear to Saleem throughout the text, for it is through Shiva that Saleem maintains his connection to the material universe. Saleem is given to abstraction, speculation, dreaminess, and even to delusions of grandeur, and Shiva restores him to the world and binds him together. Right at the start, Saleem tells us that he is cracking up, but it is a psychic rather than physical dismemberment, the by-product of having seen too much and of having lost too many loved ones. The figure of Shiva places destruction and violence within the world order and thus helps Saleem to stave off meaninglessness and emotional detachment. Reflecting on the tendency of the four-man CUTIA unit to stay together no matter what, Saleem says,

I suggest that at the deep foundations of their unease lay the fear of schizophrenia, of splitting, that was buried like an umbilical cord in every Pakistani heart. In those days, the country's East and West Wings were separated by the unbridgeable landmass of India; but past and present too are divided by an unbridgeable gulf. Religion was the glue of the Pakistani, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogenous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now. (420)

In a world where bombs threaten family-life, where boundaries get redrawn, and where the invisible hand of Empire ensures both political turmoil and a discordant history, Shiva is the one thing Saleem can count on, a constant companion who ties him to his past and links his fate to the fate of the nation, thereby protecting him from psychic disintegration.

That is precisely the aim of this book: to unite both the past with the present and individual history with national history, while at the same time questioning the nature of that connection. Rushdie's work is an attempt to grant the individual a place in the world, to grant sanctity to the human voice without displacing other voices, and to locate the things that repeat themselves throughout the human quest for dignity in a political world that often denies the individual place, voice, and self-respect. If Saleem and Rushdie are often at cross-purposes, they are together in the search for that which abides. The figure of Shiva is one of the things that abides, but Rushdie insists that there are others and both he and Saleem are eager to reconcile the forward rush of time which dislocates the individual, obliterates families, and redraws borders with that which lingers from the past and keeps the individual intact.

Rushdie uses two symbols to demonstrate both the tension between and the unity of past and present. First, there is Dr. Aziz's medical kit, which denotes progress and upsets tradition but later comes to represent the lasting imprint of British colonial policy

and reminds the reader about the perils of optimism. When Aadam returns to his village a European-educated doctor he immediately rekindles his friendship with Tai, the ageless boatman, but Tai becomes distant when he notices the doctor's fancy bag between them on the floor of the boat as he ferries Aadam to his rich, besheeted patient. As Saleem notes, "To the ferryman, the bag represents Abroad; it is the alien thing, the invader, progress. And yes, it has indeed taken possession of the young Doctor's mind; and yes, it contains knives, and cures for cholera and malaria and smallpox; and yes, it sits between doctor and boatman and has made them antagonists" (16). Because he has no other recourse, Tai stops bathing in what proves to be a futile attempt to stink the young doctor out of his boat, and in what is merely a passive-aggressive response to the inexorable rush of time and the obsolescence of old ways. Tai is stuck in the past. However, despite its many newfangled contraptions, the bag also contains within it the demons of Empire. Dr. Aziz takes his bag with him to a political rally in Jallianwala Bagh to minister to the activists and refugees there when Brigadier General Dyer's men open fire to the tune of 1,650 rounds on the masses. Thrown face first to the ground clutching his bag to his chest, the doctor is trampled by the crowd, and, as they pour over him, the clasp of his bag digs into his chest, leaving a scar that does not fade until after his death, a bloody tattoo which serves to remind the doctor that though he is the beneficiary of a European education, he is not entitled to all of the rights and privileges of high culture, that he is to forever mind his place.

The other symbol, the silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli, begins its jaunt through the text as an artifact bespeaking old world tradition, but in the end comes to represent progress. The spittoon first appears in the text immediately following the

massacre in Jallianwala Bagh. The old men on Cornwallis Road spit betel juice into it and scoff at Aziz and his peers in the younger generation who are hypnotized by the words of Mian Abdullah. The spittoon reappears in the Aziz basement, one of the playthings in the clandestine affair between Mumtaz Aziz and Nadir Khan, and it falls out of the sky and bangs Saleem on the head when his house is bombed. Saleem carries it with him through his adventures in the Sudarbans and into the Communist ghetto in the shadow of the mosque. However, unlike the scar from the leather bag which Aziz bears until his death, Saleem abandons the spittoon, or rather it is lost to him after his castration as the government bulldozes it underground when it levels the ghetto in Saleem's absence. Whereas the scar abides, the spittoon is swept aside by the current of change.

What is most interesting, though, is each character's reaction to that which he carries with him. Dr. Aziz is not deterred by the scar and all that it represents, but rather continues to forge onward, enlisting among the followers of Mian Abdullah who pursue a new day for Indian Muslims and even continuing after that hope is dashed to house the cowardly Nadir Khan. Saleem, on the other hand, is much like Tai Bibi—stuck in the past even when his past is stolen from him. He is not blessed with optimism and forgetfulness. When he finally relocates his old Communist mates he is disillusioned by their collective amnesia:

and when I returned to find Picture Singh beaming in the shadow of a railway bridge, it rapidly became clear that the magicians, too, were losing their memories. Somewhere in the many moves of the peripatetic slum, they had mislaid their powers of retention, so that now they had become incapable of judgment, having forgotten everything to which they could compare anything that happened. Even the Emergency was rapidly being consigned to the oblivion of the past, and the magicians concentrated on the present with the monomania of snails. Nor did they notice that they had ever been otherwise. To me, however, this change in my old companions seemed nothing short of obscene. Saleem had

come through amnesia and been shown the extent of its immortality; in his mind, the past grew daily more vivid while the present (from which knives had disconnected him for ever) seemed colourless, confused, a thing of no consequence; I, who could remember every hair on the heads of jailers and surgeons, was deeply shocked by the magician's unwillingness to look behind them. (531)

Rushdie, it seems, does not share his narrator's strident attitude toward the past. There is the brief shift into the third person after Saleem calls the magicians obscene, an alteration of point-of-view which signals a rift between narrator and author.

There are more ominous signs, too. There is Durga, the young Aadam's wet nurse, "a monster who forgot each day the moment it ended" (532). Clearly she rubs Saleem the wrong way—"It is with great reluctance that I admit her into these pages. Her name, even before I met her, had the smell of new things; she represented novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories events complexities, and I was no longer interested in anything new." (532)—but she is here because she must be here, because there is a new day rising and it is time for Saleem and his antiquated ideas to recede into the background. Saleem fights until the very end, returning to Bombay where Picture Singh retains the title of "The Most Charming Man in the World" but nobody cares, and where Saleem is served indisputable evidence that his Midnight's Children Conference never attained the strongest of the modes of connection—the active literal—but were only the embodiment of his imaginary relationship with the world. The sun has finally set on the children of midnight, if indeed it ever rose upon them.

IV. Conclusion: Three Metaphors for the Writerly Consciousness and the Struggle to Forego Realism

“In speaking I am not banishing my death, but actually establishing it.”
Michel Foucault, from *The Archeology of Knowledge*

Saleem begins *The Kolyos Kid* chapter by admitting that he is no ordinary hero. He writes, “From ayah to Widow, I’ve been the sort of person *to whom things have been done*; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist” (285, Rushdie’s italics). For the most part, this is an accurate self-critique. Since his boyhood he has been an individual of remarkable altruism and great, if not foolish, political ambition, but his efforts have come to nothing. The Midnight’s Children Conference, which he establishes as “a sort of loose federation of equals” (263) to discuss current affairs and to prevent his generation from repeating their parents’ mistakes, dissolves after a series of self-absorbed, adolescent-type quarrels, and Saleem’s campaign to save the nation ends with his castration. However, Saleem does accomplish something worthy of comment: he writes this book, and in so doing gives his readers one of the “six-hundred-million-plus” (458) versions of India.

Midnight’s Children can be seen, then, as two stories unfolding at the same time: on the one hand, there is the story of Saleem’s misadventures, a self-reflexive tale that admits to the contingency of its enunciation and deconstructs the genre of the national narrative; and, on the other hand, there is a story in here which chronicles the growth and development of the artistic imagination, detailing the maturation of a writer’s sensibilities, documenting his/her encounter with a hostile world, and commenting on the manner in which s/he records his/her narrative. The novel, taken as a whole, is what I would call a meta-fictive bildungsroman. The three extended metaphors that are central

to the text—Saleem’s telepathy, his acute sense of smell, and the act of pickling—trace the process whereby a writer comes into possession of his/her powers and meets the demands of his/her vocation. In addition to giving an account of a writer’s life, the text repeatedly questions its mode of utterance, resisting chronological, cause-and-effect narration—what Saleem refers to as “what-nextism” and what most critics would call realism—and instead blends genres, mixing the vulgar with the sophisticated.¹⁴

First, Saleem’s telepathic powers signify a hyper-active imagination and remarkable intuition, a preternatural awareness of what is transpiring in the minds of adults and of his contemporaries. Many creative children have anywhere from one to a handful of imaginary friends. Saleem has 581,¹⁵ each of whom he endows with some sort of other-worldly power. Some of the children have typical freakish gifts. There is a werewolf, an androgynous child, a faith-healer, a girl with a beard. Some of the gifts, however, speak to a truly antic and inspired imagination. For example, there is a sharp-tongued girl whose words inflict physical wounds and who, Saleem tells us, is locked in a bamboo cage and sent floating down the Ganges. There is a boy who can eat metal. The scope and originality of this conference is a testament to Saleem’s fascination with the occult and to his prodigious intellect. Furthermore, this telepathy reveals Saleem’s uncanny sensitivity to matters of the heart and a precocious faculty for empathy. When he goes to a wrestling match with his Uncle Hanif he remarks, “I’m feeling sad We’re [sic] walking with the crowds past giant cardboard cut-outs of Dagra Singh and Tagra Baba and the rest and his sadness, my favorite uncle’s sadness is pouring into me, it lives like a lizard just beneath the hedge of his jollity, concealed by his booming laugh” (202), and just after this he says, “I am nine years old and lost in the confusion of other people’s

lives which are blurring together in the heat” (203). I would argue that Saleem’s imagination and insight are early signs of his artistic talent, of his capacity to conjure things up and to feel things deeply.

Saleem also encounters the world in a manner befitting a writer¹⁶ and Rushdie uses the nose as an extended metaphor to document the nature of this encounter. I have argued above, in the second chapter of this text, that the recurring image of the nose is the means by which Rushdie reconciles individual biography and national history, and here I add that Saleem’s nose, like his telepathy, signifies his expert acuity—an affinity for the flare and nuance city life and a keen awareness of an individual’s emotional make-up. Saleem explores the urban landscape with zeal and he absorbs it through his nose. Note his plunge into Karachi, which I quote at length:

Formlessly, before I began to shape them, the fragrances poured into me: the mournful decaying fumes of animal faeces in the gardens of the Frere Road museum, the pustular body odors of young men in lose [sic] pajamas holding hands in Sadar evenings, the knife-sharpness of expectorated beetle-nut and the bittersweet commingling of betel and opium: “rocket paans” were sniffed out in the hawker-crowded alleys between Elphinstone Street and Victoria Road. Camel-smells, car-smells, the gnat-like irritation of motor-rickshaw fumes, the aroma of contraband cigarettes and “black money,” the competitive effluvia of the city’s bus-drivers and the simple sweat of their sardine-crowded passengers. Mosques poured over me the itr of devotion; I could smell the orotund emissions of power sent out by the flag-waving Army motors; in the very hoardings of the cinemas I could discern the cheap tawdry perfumes of imported spaghetti Westerns and the most violent martial-arts films ever made. I was, for a time, like a drugged person, my heading reeling beneath the complexities of smell; but then my over-power desire for form exerted itself, and I survived. (379)

For Saleem the external world is a series of fragrances and with the imagined world of his telepathic years lost to him—or perhaps, no longer of great interest to him since new cravings that can only be satisfied in the quotidian universe are taking shape in him—

Saleem immerses himself in city life, and he describes its physical and emotional vitality in terms of smell. Comparing Karachi to Bombay, he says, “My new fellow citizens exuded the flat boiled odours of acquiescence, which were depressing to a nose which had smelt—at the very last, and however briefly—the highly-spiced nonconformity of Bombay” (369). This type of olfactory perception seems to me to be akin to Saleem’s telepathic understanding of Uncle Hanif’s sadness.

It is through his imagination, what Saleem calls telepathy, that he creates a world and through his nose that he greets the world and begins to give a discernible shape to the experience. There is great correspondence between these actions and the act of storytelling, which I would call a combination of creating an imaginary world and documenting the real world. Saleem first makes note of this connection when he comments on the time he spent alone in the clock tower as a nine-year-old:

Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow *making them happen*. which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. “I can find out any damn thing!” I triumphed, “There isn’t a thing I cannot know!” (207, Rushdie’s italics)

Though this passion is intoxicating, Saleem makes it clear that the idea that the artist invents the world is an illusion, one that must be overcome if his/her work is to amount to anything. Here we see the hubris that is common to this vocation—i.e. Saleem’s notion that he can assimilate and re-imagine the world without leaving his tower—but Saleem quickly outgrows this and, as his lust for adventure ripens and his powers mature, he abandons these formless imaginings and graduates first to the more difficult task of

giving shape to his perceptions and then further to the task of adding a moral dimension to them.

As the odors of the city accrue inside him, Saleem acknowledges the need to classify them if he is going to be able to communicate his discoveries. He has to separate and organize his experience if it is to make sense of it, and though this is not as exciting as his youthful fantasies, this sort of exhaustive and mundane work is necessary in order to bring the work of art into being and it is, in fact, a tribute to the imagination and to the spirit of adventure that brought Saleem into contact with the underbelly of Karachi. Saleem admits this when he says, “(C)lassification procedures had begun. I saw this scientific approach as my own, personal obeisance to the spirit of my grandfather. . . . to begin with I perfected my skill at distinguishing, until I could tell apart the infinite varieties of betel-nut and (with my eyes shut) the twelve different available brands of fizzy drink” (379). This tribute to the late Aadam Aziz refers both to the undying optimism which made Aziz an incorrigible and unceasing quester right up until his final days in Karachi and to his courtship of Naseem when he came to know his wife via scientific examination and classification. It appears that Saleem has inherited both his grandfather’s penchant for adventurousness and his tendency for detached calculation. It also seems that Rushdie is drawing a comparison between the doctor and the writer, Aadam’s stethoscope, which gives him elephantine ears and nose, recalling the figure of Ganesh, the scribe who records the story of Vyasa in *The Mahabharata*.¹⁸

However, Rushdie goes on to make the point that the writer examines more closely and diagnoses more complexly than the doctor, moving beyond the physical world into the more abstract universe of emotion and appetite. Saleem says,

Only when I was sure of my mastery of physical scents did I move on to those other aromas which only I could smell: the perfumes of emotions and all the thousand and one drives which make us human: love and death, greed and humility, have and have-not were labelled and placed in neat compartments in my mind. (379)

The writer gives shape to this underground universe with the language of the physical world and furthermore assigns value to that which he classifies. Saleem continues,

I understood that my work must, if it was to have any value, acquire a moral dimension; that the only important divisions were the infinitely subtle gradations of good and evil smells. Having realized the crucial nature of morality, having sniffed out that smells could be sacred or profane, I invented, in the isolation of my scooter-trips, the science of nasal ethics. (380)

Rushdie does not conceive of morality in any pious or churchgoing sense of the term here, but rather, I think, he speaks of it as a matter of discernment—i.e. a dispassionate and unbiased reexamination of values that have been handed down and perhaps absorbed without skepticism and a giving over of the self to all that one has been conditioned to abhor. Morality, then, is a matter of reorienting one's consciousness, and Saleem acknowledges this when he says, "More and more I became convinced of an ugly truth—namely that the sacred or good held little interest for me while the pungency of the gutter seemed to possess a fatally irresistible attraction" (380, my ellipses).

After the imagination has been cultivated and the world explored and classified, there remains the task of putting pen to paper and narrating the experience. Rushdie uses the metaphor of pickling to describe this process. This connection between pickling and writing is not in any way embedded in the text. Saleem explains the metaphor quite clearly and in great detail:

My special blends: I've been saving them up. Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth

to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon. Every pickle jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the great hope of the pickling of time! I, however, have pickled chapters. Tonight, by screwing the lid firmly on to a jar bearing the legend of *Special Formula No. 30: "Abracadabra"*, I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfection. (548)

Saleem, who is no longer able to biologically reproduce, compares writing to pickling and pickling to fertilization, but unlike real sexual coupling where the future is brought into being, what happens here is that the past is reborn and stored on a shelf where it waits to be sampled by those who happen upon it and continues to reshape itself long after its creator has abandoned it.

Finally, what remains to be said (by me) is only that it is fitting that Saleem should seal his text with a meta-fictive reflection on the nature of his endeavor because the work as a whole is both the unfolding of a narrative and a meditation on the nature and politics of representation. For Saleem, storytelling is an ongoing struggle between the realistic and the fabulous, between the facts of the matter and the magic underlying the matter, or better said, the inexplicable that is at the heart of the matter. He begins his project committed to realism, to duplicating his experience as precisely as possible:

I was born in the city of Bombay. once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more. On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence I tumbled forth into the world. (3)

However, as the facts assemble themselves, it becomes apparent to Saleem that they will not suffice and that they will jostle about inside him and compete for space in the story, so he quickly abandons this project and goes back before his own beginnings, reimagines the past, and chooses contingency over certitude. In the world of this novel, absolute precision is the folly of those born without a capacity for intuition and therefore lacking a sense of direction—people like Ahmed Sinai whose un-pursued ambition is to reorder the events of the Koran chronologically—and realism is a matter for the failed artist—for people who do not understand their audience like Hanif Aziz whose final project is a film called *The Ordinary Life of a Pickle Factory*. If the pickle factory is the quotidian universe, then for the realist like Hanif, it is the final aim of the author's project, but for an enchanter of Saleem's ilk it is merely a starting point, a site where things begin to be reconfigured and to undergo the first of many rebirths.

Endnotes

1. This quotation is taken from page 13 of *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said.
2. See "Jane Austen and Empire," pp. 80-96, of *Culture and Imperialism*.
3. See Spurr, pp. 28-42 and pp. 170-183, of *The Rhetoric of Empire*.
4. See "Apocalyptic Narratives: The Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" by Teresa Heffernan and "The Art of Uncertainty: Cultural Displacement and the Devaluation of the World" by Rufus Cook for discussions of realism, the national narrative, and problems of representation in the Third World. Heffernan argues that "problems of containment, boundaries, centrality, and marginality that plague the modern nation" (473) make linear narration of these events impossible. Cook discusses what he calls "the explicit connection between the antimimetic position and the experience of cultural displacement" (228).
5. See the following essays by Homi K. Bhabha: "Of Mimicry and Man," pp. 85-92; "Sly Civility," pp. 93-101; "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and The Margins of the Modern Nation," pp. 139-170; and "Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," pp. 102-122, all of which are published in *The Location of Culture*. Parts of each of these essays analyze the moments at which gaps open in the "Master Discourse," the nature of slippage in the proliferation of the colonial sign, and the manner in which authority admits to its own contingency in the colonial situation: all of these being moments that allow for native enunciation and resistance. I read Bhabha as in part responding to Foucault's notion that power systems and discourse are overarching and that there is nothing exterior to them. Furthermore, Bhabha is, I think, responding to Said's Foucauldian reading of Oriental Studies. Said writes in *Orientalism*, for example, that "the Oriental is *contained and represented by dominating frameworks*" (40, Said's italics), and throughout this text he argues that the East has been fashioned by the rhetorical structures of the West. Bhabha, on the other hand, in the aforementioned essays incorporates Derridean thought and argues that colonial discourse is part of a slippery system of signification and that gaps appear in which a polyphony of voices enunciate resistance.
6. For more examples of Saleem citing the sources for his narration, see the following pages of the 1991 Penguin edition of *Midnight's Children*: 244, 486, and 490.
7. See pp. 156-157 of *Culture and Imperialism* for Said's analysis of *Jude the Obscure* and pp. 13-14 of the same text for a contrapuntal reading of *Dombey and Son*.
8. See also "Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Patrick Suskind's *Das Parfum*, and Michel Tournier's *Le Roi Des Aulnes*," by Lorna Milne. *Symposium* 1999, Vol. 53, p. 23. In a detailed analysis of Saleem's need to for meaning and centrality, Milne writes, "Saleem colonizes historical events by collapsing the distance between history and individual existence, reducing external events phenomena to the status of peripheral occurrences that revolve around the centralizing consciousness of the protagonist, and whose only meaning is to mirror or to serve his existence" (27).
9. Adding to the sense of play in this portion of the text is the fact that Rushdie's own son is named Zafar. Here's hoping that the boy is not a bedwetter.
10. See also pp. 133-151 of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* by Ania Loomba and pp. 141-209 of *Black Skin White Masks* by Frantz Fanon. Both sections of these respective works analyze the application of Freudian psychology to the colonial situation. Loomba writes, "To universalize the Oedipal drama is to suggest that it accounts definitively for the development of identities

everywhere as if there were no differences in the ways subjectivities are framed or sexual dramas played out around the world, or as if no other differences of class or culture shape their performance” (142). Fanon goes even further to debunk any claims that Freudian psychology may make to universal truth: “It is too often forgotten that neurosis is not a basic element of human reality. Like it or not, the Oedipal complex is far from coming into being among Negroes” (151).

11. For a better understanding of the extent of the influence of Said’s work on Rushdie’s thought see “On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Edward Said,” pp. 166-184 of *Imaginary Homelands*.
12. See pp. 195-228 of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* for an account of the beginning of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptic model as used in the prison system and the manner in which this model has been transplanted into common society. Foucault’s describes the effects of the Panopticon as follows: “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (201). Much of this applies to Aziz’s courtship of Naseem, especially the part about surveillance being “permanent in its effects” if you read Naseem’s prudishness as a side-effect of her life behind the sheet.
13. See pp. 509-510 of *Midnight’s Children* for proof of the fact that Saleem considers himself and Indira Gandhi to be competitors for the central role in Indian politics: “On one sheet of paper (smelling of turnips) I read that the Prime Minister of India went nowhere without her personal astrologer. In this fragment, I discerned more than turnip-whiffs: mysteriously, my nose recognized, once again, the scent of personal danger. What I am obliged to deduce from this warning aroma: soothsayers prophesied me; might not soothsayers have undone me at the end? Might not a Widow, obsessed with the stars, have learned from astrologers the secret potential of any children born at that long-ago midnight hour? And was that why a Civil Servant, expert in genealogies, was asked to trace . . . and why he looked at me strangely in the morning? Yes, you see, the scraps begin to fit together! Padma, does it not become clear? *India is India and India is Indira* . . . but might she not have read her own father’s letter to a midnight child, in where her own sloganized centrality was denied; in which the role of mirror-of-the-nation was bestowed upon me? You see? You see? . . . And there is more, there is even clearer proof, because here is another scrap of the *Times of India*, in which the Widow’s own news agency Samachar quotes her when she speaker of her “determination to combat the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been growing.” I tell you: she did not mean the Janata Morcha! No, the Emergency held a black part as well as a white, here is the secret which has lain concealed for too long beneath the mask of those stifled days: the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight. (Whose conference had, of course, been disbanded years before; but the mere possibility of our re-unification was enough to trigger off the red alert.)” (All ellipses, italics, and parentheses are Rushdie’s.)
14. See “Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*” by Samir Dayal. *College English* 54 1992, 431-445. Dayal argues that by foregrounding the vulgar Rushdie is subverting the colonial endeavor by reversing “the hegemony of the mental, intellectual, and the ‘high’ over the physical, visceral, and the ‘low.’” (435). Elsewhere in this essay, Dayal writes, “In *Midnight’s Children*, hybridity and impurity are intentionally foregrounded, and Saleem is explicit and self-reflexive about his preference for heterogeneity and baseness, a leitmotif of his deliberately uncouth narrative” (434).

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15. See "The Indian English Novel: *Kim* and *Midnight's Children*" by Richard Cronin. *Modern Fiction Studies* 33 1987, 201-213. In what I would call an otherwise gross misreading of Rushdie's text, Cronin reads the midnight's children conference as a collection of imaginary friends. I call Cronin's essay a gross misreading of the *Midnight's Children* because he makes claims like the following: "The Indian English novel is committed to fantasy, because its premise the fantastic claim of one individual to embody the impossible diversity of India" (210). Saleem makes exactly the opposite claim about the scope of his narrative endeavor, as does Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. Nevertheless, I do agree with Cronin, that the conference is, in part, cooked up in Saleem's head. I don't think this speaks ill of Saleem in any way, nor do I align this detail in the novel with a claim on either Saleem's or Rushdie's part to "claim to embody the impossible diversity of India."
16. See pp. 33-64 of *Reading and Writing* by Robertson Davies. I realize that I am getting in shaky ground by making a claim that there is a life that is typical to a writer and that perhaps I am subscribing to a stereotype according to which we believe that anyone who has endured great suffering should write a book about it. Therefore, I make reference to Davies who makes the safer claim—in a book which more a warning than anything else to aspiring writers—that a writer should try to encounter the world in some compelling way if he/she wants to have a story to write: "There was another reason why I thought my best course was to earn my living as I pursued my work—by no means remunerative for many years—as a writer. It kept me in touch with the world of realities. If you read the lives of writers, you will find that very few of them have been reclusive. Flaubert was so, but not Stendhal and Balzac. Dickens's life was a whirlwind of charitable obligations. Tolstoy ran a large estate. Dostoevsky met the world at the gaming table, and Proust met it in the salons of the aristocracy. Anthony Trollope was a senior civil servant. I will not burden you with a tedious list of examples, because I am sure you know the truth of what I am saying" (38).
17. This fact discovered while reading "Leading History By The Nose: The Turn to the 18th Century in *Midnight's Children*" by Clement Hawes. *Modern Fiction Studies* 39 1993, 147-168.

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