

"Midnight's Children" and the Allegory of History

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SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *Midnight's Children* is commonly read as a national allegory giving imaginative form to India and its history. As such, it has become the central text in Indian literature written in English: "it sounds like a continent finding its voice," reads the blurb from the *New York Times* on the cover of the Picador paperback. Indian critics, in particular, read the novel as a national allegory that can be criticized for the things it has left out or the things it has gotten wrong.¹ Yet Timothy Brennan argues that *Midnight's Children* is a cosmopolitan text that exposes the false consciousness of nationalism, and many, such as Homi Bhabha and Gyan Prakash, celebrate Rushdie's transcendence of the nation-state. And other critics, such as David Birch, read the novel as a radically unstable postmodern allegory, a denial of the very possibility of meaning. Critical reception of the novel thus has accorded it a paradoxical status: by virtue of its exuberance and ambition it is a celebration (albeit a critical one) of India the modern nation; at the same time it exposes the ideological underpinnings of the nation, which stands revealed as a fiction manipulated by the classes that control the state.

The novel does expose the fictionality of the nation and of its history, but the denial of the possibility of literal truth does not deny the nation. Where there is no literal truth we must put our faith in fictions. All we have are fictions, but some fictions deserve our assent and others do not. This is Linda Hutcheon's point about postmodern representation: it affirms only in order to subvert, but subverts in order to affirm. Rushdie's novel explodes the notion of the nation having a stable identity and a single

history, then invites a sceptical, provisional faith in the nation that it has exploded.

I

Rushdie's allegory is not of the nation as that might be imagined to exist outside the world of texts, but of the nation as already mediated by the "pretext" of national history. This is Indian history in its canonical form, as found in encyclopedias and textbooks. David Lipscomb has shown that Rushdie had one such textbook, Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, beside him when he came to write *Midnight's Children*.² Indian history in texts such as Wolpert's is political history, the story of the nation made by middle-class nationalist politicians, and it has a well-defined narrative form: established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events. It is not history in the sense of a past recoverable by radical historians seeking the traces and the empty spaces left in the archives by classes other than the middle classes and by groups other than intellectuals. That is the project of the Subaltern Studies historians (see Guha and Spivak); it is not Rushdie's. Rushdie's novel is a meditation on the textuality of history and, in particular, of that official history that constitutes the nation.

In so far as it presumes an already existing pretext, allegory has often seemed a derivative art. This notion of the secondariness of allegory is expressed by Timothy Brennan when he describes *Midnight's Children*, not unfairly, as follows:

Characterization in any conventional sense barely exists—only a collection of brilliantly sketched cartoons woven together by an intellectual argument. Narrative never follows the emotional logic of the characters' lives, but the brittle, externally determined contours of "current events." (84-85)

In this reading, the life of Saleem Sinai is "merely" an extended metaphor of the literal narrative of history.

However, a proper reading of Rushdie's allegory requires that we reverse the valences of metaphor and literalness: allegory makes literal what in the pretext is metaphorical.³ History as found in textbooks such as Wolpert's adopts a neutral, objective voice that claims to eschew metaphor altogether. But the objec-

tive and the seemingly literal rely on dead metaphors whose metaphorical nature goes unnoticed. It is these metaphors that the allegory playfully makes literal.

The most obvious such metaphors are on the level of common figures of speech. For instance, historians of secularization might employ the figure of a space left empty by the loss of religious faith, a hollow ready to be filled with the new faith of nationalism. Rushdie makes this empty space literal, and his character Aadam Aziz is hollow inside (6). This same Aadam Aziz is present at the massacre at Amritsar in 1919, and there he suffered a bruise "so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death" (35), a literalization of the metaphor, so common as to be dead, of the wound that never heals.

This literalization of metaphor is perhaps a function of all allegory—*Pilgrim's Progress* makes literal the metaphor of the journey already implicit in Pauline Christianity; *The Romance of the Rose* elaborates the metaphor invoked when we speak of love blooming—but in Rushdie's postmodern allegory the literalization is self-consciously highlighted. In his account of the Free Islam Convocation opposed to the Muslim League and the Partition of India, Rushdie draws attention to the strategy of literalization. It is often forgotten that not all Muslims were in favour of Partition, and Saleem tells the reader,

If you don't believe me, check. Find out about Mian Abdullah and his Convocations. Discover how we've swept his story under the carpet . . . then let me tell how Nadir Khan, his lieutenant, spent three years under my family's rugs. (50; ellipsis in original)

The memory of those Muslims who supported a secular state characterized by religious tolerance has been rudely shoved "under the carpet," and it is literally to a cellar under the carpet that Nadir Khan, their representative in the novel, flees.

Much of the magic of *Midnight's Children* arises from the literalization of metaphor. A recent British Broadcasting Corporation report that speaks of an "outbreak of optimism" in Bosnia-Herzegovina employs a metaphor that Rushdie makes literal: in the years leading to Indian independence, many suffer from the "optimism disease." History texts often write that Indians who received an education in English were becoming "Westernized";

this metaphorical process is figured in the novel by a whitening of the skin. After Partition, the Indian government froze the assets of Muslim citizens, and Ahmed Sinai's balls are literally frozen. During the 1950s India might be said to have had a brief love affair with America, a fling that corresponds in the text to the youthful Saleem's infatuation with the American girl Evie Burns.

A critic of Pakistan might say with exasperation that citizens of the fundamentalist Muslim state are asked to forget all they know. Indeed, in a chapter in *Among the Believers* entitled "Killing History," V. S. Naipaul says exactly that: "The time before Islam is a time of blackness: that is part of Muslim theology" (134). The metaphor is made literal in Rushdie's fiction when Saleem suffers amnesia: Saleem's sardonic comment on his loss of memory is "[t]o sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan" (419).

These examples do not represent scattered moments of playfulness; they illustrate the process that is at the very centre of the novel's conception. *Midnight's Children* thematizes the larger metaphorical processes at work in the construction of historical narrative. The metaphors commonly deployed to figure a totality are listed by Fredric Jameson:

The social totality can be sensed, as it were, from the outside, like a skin at which the Other somehow looks, but which we ourselves will never see. Or it can be tracked, like a crime, whose clues we accumulate, not knowing that we are ourselves parts and organs of this obscenely moving and stirring zoological monstrosity. But most often, in the modern itself, its vague and nascent concept begins to awaken with the knowledge function, very much like a book whose characters do not yet know that they are being read. (114)

The metaphors that Jameson says are used to figure the totality are precisely the metaphors that Rushdie's novel makes literal: the nation as a human body, history as the detection of an original crime, and historical knowledge as an omniscience that grants access to the thoughts of strangers.

The organic metaphor of the body that contains the members of the nation is central to *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's novel is a complicated gloss on the received notion that India was "born" on August 15, 1947. Wolpert's standard history of India features more births than any multigenerational saga. Wolpert

writes that “[t]he cultural revival had given birth to violent revolutionary offspring” (261), that British India was “severed as though by caesarian section to permit two nations to be born” (348), that the Republic of India was “born” on January 26, 1950 (356), and that out of the ashes of the Bangladeshi War, “the world’s eighth largest nation had been born” (390). What Rushdie has done is to take Wolpert’s metaphors literally, to add the pangs and screams, the forceps and midwives that Wolpert implies but forgets. When a son is born to his wife Parvati at the same moment that Indira Gandhi declares a national emergency, Saleem explicitly relates the two events:

... while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push push push the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister, so in a sense they were forcing Mrs Gandhi to push, and as the night darkened towards the midnight hour, because nothing ever happens at any other time, triplets began to screech it’s coming coming coming, and elsewhere the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own. (499)

The metaphor of birth is part of the larger metaphor of the nation as person that is inseparable from the imaginative construction of the nation. Historians (and politicians conscious of making history that historians will record) speak of growth and maturity, as if the nation were a human child, of direction and progress and dangers, as if the nation were on a journey, of wounds and memory, desire and fear, as if the nation had a psychology. It is this personification of the nation that makes it possible to call Nehru the father of the nation and to speak, as Wolpert does, of the “legacy of communalism” (Wolpert 376). It is also what makes it possible to speak of the nation coming of age, the metaphor invoked by Indira Gandhi when she declared a national emergency: “there comes a time in the life of the nation when hard decisions have to be taken” (qtd. in Wolpert 397).

The person has a body, and this, too, is a favourite metaphor of historians who will speak of “the changing face of India” or of the risk of dismemberment. Nehru, eventually reconciled to the partition of India, quipped that he hoped that by “cutting off the

head we will get rid of the headache" (qtd. in Wolpert 347). Gandhi, on the other hand, continued to object to what he saw as "the vivisection of his motherland" (Wolpert 347). Later the Pakistani leader Yahya Khan would insist that "no power on earth" could separate East and West Pakistan, since they were "two limbs of the same body" (qtd. in Wolpert 385). Wolpert the historian characterizes India's eastern "wing" as "potentially its most vulnerable limb" (411), and when describing the fear of a Russian invasion of the subcontinent, imagines "shudders of apprehension through India's body politic" (412). In *Midnight's Children* the metaphor of the nation as a person is made literal and thereby comical: if India were a person it would be a grotesque such as Saleem, its paternity would be in dispute, and its ability to tell its story would be in question.⁴

The second metaphor used for imagining the totality is that of a crime and its detection. The historian, like the detective, argues back from effect to hidden cause. In *Midnight's Children* spilled blood calls on heaven to witness that the social order has been disturbed (when Saleem needs a transfusion, an analysis of his blood reveals that he is not the son of his parents). Many features of the detective novel are deployed: there are suspicious telephone conversations, a secret rendezvous at the Pioneer Café, a cryptic anonymous warning, and a final confession. The original crime that holds the secret of Saleem's paternity is the exploitation by the retiring imperialist Methwold of the wife of a poor Hindu beggar. The clues that point to the truth are the centre-parting in Methwold's brilliantined hair and a rather prominent nose. However, the clichés of detection do not here make for narrative tension and resolution. The processes of detection are not themselves the story but are thematized within the story. The narrative is not so much a whodunit but a "Who am I?"

As central to the novel as the motif of detection is the notion of omniscience, which is made literal as the science-fiction cliché of telepathy. The capacity to enter various characters' thoughts, the means whereby, according to R. G. Collingwood, the historian participates in the events he narrates, is here not constitutive of the narration but becomes part of what is narrated. Saleem

discovers that he can enter into the heads of others and read their thoughts. This makes him wonder if he cannot control people's thoughts, if he does not have the power over them that a novelist has over his characters: "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" (207).

The metaphors underlying the literal narrative of history—history as the record of a body's growth, as the detection of a hidden original crime, and as the product of a transpersonal consciousness—are embodied in the life of Saleem Sinai. This process of embodiment explains the echoes of the Christian nativity that accompany Saleem's birth and that seem out of place in a novel concerned with the typically Indian. Saleem's identity as the scion of a wealthy Muslim family is the result of the intervention by the nurse Mary Pereira, who, "like every Mary . . . had her Joseph" (119). Mary, a virgin, is inspired to an act of domestic terrorism by her unconsummated love for a Communist: she switches the baby of a rich family with the baby of a poor family born at the same time. The Christian references involved here have to do with the Incarnation, an image of the literalization at work in the text itself: Saleem's life makes flesh the "word" of Indian history.

II

Midnight's Children opens with the image of a bedsheet stained with "three drops of old, faded redness," which Saleem says will serve as his "talisman" through the next 550 pages of the novel. The sheet inscribed in blood is a literalization of the common metaphor of history written in blood. It is the metaphor employed by Wolpert when he writes that "[i]n the annals of Calcutta, Direct Action Day was to be written in blood as the 'Great Killing'" (344). Rushdie's novel asks just what kind of ink is involved here, what sort of pen does it flow from, and how should it be read.

The blood that flows in *Midnight's Children* is labelled "mercurochrome": it only looks like blood. It is not to be confused with the real blood shed in non-metaphorical violence inflicted on real human bodies. However, although the violence is real, the

blood shed by real bodies accrues significance that can only be described as metaphorical: it becomes the blood of sacrifice, a blood calling out for vengeance, or a baptism marking the coming of age. All these meanings of blood presume that blood is shared, so that the blood spilled by some is the same as that flowing through the veins of others who have not suffered direct violence. The two meanings of blood—blood is spilled in sacrifice, and blood is shared by people who are genetically related—are invoked by the early nationalist Arabinda for whom the soil of India was “sacred land to be loved and defended, if need be, with the blood of her children” (Wolpert 262).

Rushdie's strategy is to make these metaphors literal and thereby to expose their metaphorical status. Rushdie's novel asks what sort of definition of identity is provided by the blood that is carried within one's veins and that gushes forth when the skin is pierced. Saleem needs an emergency transfusion when he loses the top of his finger in a door, and an analysis of his blood performed on that occasion, in a chapter momentarily called “Alpha and Omega,” reveals that he is not the genetic son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai and not the brother of his sister. The implications determine all that follows. The nation is imagined as a family sharing a common blood, which is what allows one to speak of Nehru or Jinnah as the Father of the Nation. In both India and Pakistan the metaphor of national bloodlines has been dangerously misappropriated and the history of the nation confused with the history of a single family. Rushdie's novel, by its literalization of metaphor, seeks to make readers aware again of the metaphorical nature of all bloodlines.

Saleem begins the story of his life with the story of a grandfather. Aadam Aziz resembles Nehru in significant ways: both are from Kashmiri families; both have been educated in Europe, have lost the faith of their fathers, and uphold a secular ideal; and both were at Amritsar at the time of the massacre. Later we discover that Saleem carries none of Aadam Aziz's genes and, contrary to what we have been led to believe, has not inherited his outsized nose from that source. The discovery that Saleem is not the biological grandson of Aadam Aziz draws attention to the fictionality of Saleem's genealogy, but it is not what makes

Saleem's story of his grandfather a fiction. That story was always already a fiction in the sense of being contingent and constructed.

If Saleem had emerged from Amina Sinai's womb, he still would have had two grandfathers. The decision to retell the story of his mother's father and not that of his father's father is an arbitrary one. Why should one be his grandfather more than the other? We could explain Saleem's privileging of his maternal line of descent by saying that Saleem never knew his paternal grandfather. Ahmed Sinai, whom Saleem accepts as his father, was an orphan at the time of his marriage to Mumtaz Aziz (73). But this explanation for the privileging of one grandfather over another merely shifts the responsibility for the choice of stories on to Rushdie the author. Of course, to write about two ancestors would have made the narrative (even more) unwieldy. But that is the point: it is the demands of the narrative and not some notion of fidelity to literal truth that determine the story.

Saleem privileges not just one grandfather over another but also the story of his grandfather over that of his grandmother, whom he had also known as a child. One story is given more significance than the other because Saleem can identify with Aadam Aziz and with his dreams of secularization and modernization. Put another way, we can say that Saleem invents a grandfather in his own image.

The revelation that Saleem carries none of Aadam Aziz's genes and is not the biological offspring of Ahmed and Amina (formerly Mumtaz) Sinai is a shock for the reader, but it is not what invalidates the previous family history. That history was always an invention and is not any more fictional because it lacks a biological base. Blood ties are a metaphor.

Even before the account of the baby switch makes nonsense of all genealogy, Saleem leaves undetermined the exact line of descent. For a long time we are not told which of Aadam Aziz's children is Saleem's parent: "Meanwhile, in the old house on Cornwallis Road, the days were full of potential mothers and possible fathers" (55-56). Padma, who is with Saleem while he writes and who serves as a figure of the reader, is impatient, and who can blame her? The suspense is entirely a result of narrative

obfuscation. Suspense is, of course, always a function of the narration in the sense that the narrator knows the ending but withholds it from the readers. But in the other narratives suspense corresponds to a past lived experience of mystery or not knowing, to a blank that was eventually filled in for the characters as it will be filled in for the reader. Saleem's obfuscation is different because it corresponds to no blank that existed in the past. Saleem only knew his grandparents because he already knew his parents.

The narrative tease suggests a point that Saleem is anxious to make: he speaks of "potential" mothers as if there had existed at any time the possibility that he could have been born to someone else. The implication is that Saleem was fated to be born to a child of Aadam and Naseem, but it was not always certain to which one. This makes no conceptual sense if we think of Saleem as a flesh-and-blood human being, but it does make a kind of sense if we think of Saleem as India. Let us recall Nehru's words at the moment of independence: "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of the nation, long suppressed, finds utterance" (qtd. in Ali 76). India is imagined as having a soul waiting somewhere off-stage to be born, a soul in search of potential parents.⁵ History is written as if past events had to happen (and, from the perspective of the present, they did), but historians will present different interpretations regarding the causes of what happened. The assumption is that a modern nation called India was inevitable, but that the circumstances of its creation were contingent.

There may be general agreement on the ultimate origins of the nation: these origins are figured by Saleem's grandfather, a Western-educated Kashmiri whose faith is now in science but who marries a tradition-bound wife. The nationalists who demanded independence were an educated elite that rejected ancestral ways in favour of a modern secular nation along European lines, but they did so in the name of a traditional culture that was what distinguished India from Europe. (This leaves out Gandhi, but as Timothy Brennan points out [84], Rushdie does leave out Gandhi.) However much consensus there is on the

ultimate origins of the nation, different historians will emphasize different direct causes: was Indian independence achieved by political action? Did it primarily serve a business class or a class of civil servants? Did India first have to be imagined by writers and artists? Rushdie's novel presumes that Saleem will be born, but keeps us guessing as to whether his parentage will be that of a military general, a film director, a politician, a civil servant, or a businessman.

Ultimately Saleem reveals that his mother married Ahmed Sinai the businessman, after the collapse of her original marriage to the optimist Nadir Khan. At all times Saleem chooses his own line of descent. The contingency of the choice is brought home by the asymmetrical treatment given to symmetrical circumstances. Both of Saleem's parents had been married and divorced previously, but we hear only about his mother's unconsummated marriage to Nadir Khan and nothing about Ahmed Sinai's unsuccessful previous union. Mumtaz's first marriage has significance for the offspring of her subsequent marriage: Nadir Khan, the impotent idealist and later Communist, represents what might have been and what perhaps should have been but what was fated never to be. Rushdie here literalizes the metaphor invoked by Nehru in his speech at the moment of Indian independence: "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time has come when we shall redeem our pledge" (qtd. in Ali 76). Amina Aziz made a tryst with Nadir Khan, but when he is unable to hit the spittoon and redeem his pledge, the suppressed soul demanding utterance requires that Amina find someone else to father her children.

Midnight's Children exposes the fictionality, the constructedness, of the metaphors and narrative conventions implied in national history. Rushdie even gives us an alternate genealogy that represents a rejection of genealogy and of the project of national history. Saleem tells us his genetic father was a profligate English hypocrite who had taken advantage of a poor Hindu's wife and who had left when Indian independence was announced. This is a literalization of the metaphor used by Tariq Ali when he writes that "[t]he new state was . . . Indian in its colour, composition and make-up, but its pedigree was unmis-

takably British" (78). If Aadam Aziz embodies the established narrative of Indian history, this alternative genealogy expresses a dissatisfaction with national history and a rejection of the Indian nation-state itself as the bastard product of England's violation of the subcontinent. Radical historians, such as Partha Chatterjee, and radical critics, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, reject the nation-state as a bourgeois invention having no meaning for the mass of people who live within India's borders.

However, Rushdie's alternative genealogy, a debunking of the standard narrative of Indian history, draws attention to its own fictionality as well. When Mary Pereira confesses to Saleem's family the switch she perpetrated when Saleem was newly born, she explains that Saleem was the natural child of Vanita and her husband, the minstrel Wee Willie Winkie. Mary could not have known about Vanita's adultery with the Englishman Methwold. Saleem has invented this parentage. The account of the baby switch does not give us a final *true* version of events, but is itself another fiction.

Saleem's legal grandfather, Dr. Aziz, is named after the main Indian character in Forster's *A Passage to India*; Wee Willie Winkie, the legal father in Saleem's alternate genealogy, bears the name of the English boy-hero in a story by Kipling. The alternate genealogy advertises that it, too, is a rewriting of other fictions and is a fiction itself. Even the rejection of genealogical succession and of history involves a choice of narratives. The radical stance that sees Indian history as a rape is itself dependent on a metaphor.

David Birch writes that "[a] hundred pages or so after the start of the novel what appeared to be the family of Saleem turns out to be an illusion" (2). However, what the first 100 pages draw attention to is not the impossibility of knowing but the conditions of knowing. What had seemed literal—Saleem as the grandson of Aadam Aziz—is revealed to be metaphorical. But that the literal is actually metaphorical does not mean that it is less true. Rushdie's point is not that there is no truth, but that there is no literal level of truth. The literal level is always already a metaphor. But the truth lies in metaphor.

As we have seen, the line of descent from Aadam Aziz to Saleem would be a fiction even if Saleem had not been switched

at birth: Saleem has chosen to claim descent from this grandparent and not from another. However, the fiction is not arbitrary but meaningful, and the meaning is not changed because later it is discovered that Saleem was switched at birth. At the beginning of the novel Aadam Aziz is told by Tai the boatman that his protuberant nose is

a nose to start a family on, my princeling. There'd be no mistaking whose brood they were. Mughal Emperors would have given their right hands for noses like that one. There are dynasties waiting inside it . . . like snot. (8)

The primary function of this passage, of course, is to mislead by suggesting a genetic link between Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai. But their noses *are* linked, even if later we learn the link is not genetic. Aadam Aziz feels an itching in his nose when history is about to be made, as at the massacre of Amritsar. This is a literalization of the common metaphor of the man who is sensitive to the winds of change, who is aware of the currents of history. (Joseph D'Costa, *Mary Pereira's Communist*, is another who is sensitive to history; he sniffs the wind that comes from the north and it is full of dying [119-20].) Aadam's receptivity to history in the making foreshadows Saleem's telepathic sinuses. Both grandfather and grandson are preternaturally sensitive to historical currents. The modernizing grandfather is aware of history, the world of progress made by human beings, as is his grandson. That is why the grandson chooses to see himself as Aadam Aziz's heir (or, alternatively, why Saleem invents this particular grandfather).

The reader must recognize that Aadam Aziz is not literally Saleem's grandfather and that it is always possible to see Saleem as Methwold's son rather than Aziz's grandson. At the same time it is also perfectly valid for Saleem to choose Aziz as an ancestor. There are only metaphors, but some metaphors are more equal than others. Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, invents a thoroughly mythical genealogical connection to the Mughal emperors in order to impress the retiring imperialist Methwold (127-28). This romantic genealogy, which comes complete with family curse, is mocked by Saleem's narrative. But if history is a fiction, why should any version be preferable to another? Saleem knew

Aadam Aziz, while Ahmed Sinai's Mughal ancestors are invented whole-cloth out of his head. But that is not a sufficient answer. It is, after all, not entirely illegitimate for Ahmed Sinai, as a Muslim, to claim some sort of connection to the Mughals. The real difference between Saleem's invented genealogy and that of Ahmed Sinai, the reason one is "truer" than the other, lies in their adequacy as explanatory narratives. Ahmed's romantic genealogy is harmful because it is nostalgic and self-glorifying. Saleem's genealogy is useful because it explains the world of the present in a way that makes possible action in the present.

The novel makes a distinction between lies and fictions. Saleem hates lies. When he suspects his mother of adultery (and that he himself may be a product of adultery), he takes his revenge on Lila Sabarmati, whom he knows to be an adulteress. Adultery is an intolerable lie. But once Mary has confessed to the baby switch, what had appeared to be a lie is revealed to be merely a fiction. Saleem's mother had not lied to her husband, and Saleem can therefore be accepted as their child. Lies have to do with betrayal of the trust of others; fiction with the establishing of trust. Pakistan is governed by lies: "in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case" (389). Elsewhere Rushdie has written that Pakistan has been "insufficiently imagined" ("In God We Trust" 387). Lies force people to accept what they cannot believe. On the other hand, if the nation of India is to contribute in any way to the self-definition of its citizens, Saleem says it must be a collective fiction, "a dream we all agreed to dream" (130). Fictions give order and meaning to those who invent them; lies take away meaning from those to whom they are told and, ultimately, from the teller as well.

III

Midnight's Children offers a self-conscious fictional alternative to the lies that form the myth of the ruling Nehru-Indira Gandhi-Sanjay Gandhi dynasty. Rushdie admires Nehru, but not the political dynasty he unintentionally established. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, says Rushdie, is "a collective dream," but a

dream from which India must wake ("Dynasty" 48). Like all dynasties, he writes, it can appear to be an "organic process of the body politic," but it is "anything but natural" ("Dynasty" 47). Rushdie's alternative genealogy, based on a Nehru-like figure and also descending through daughter to grandson, has as one of its virtues a self-consciousness about its own fictive status. What Indians must do is reject the literal Nehru-Gandhi bloodline (which is really a metaphorical bloodline) and accept that Nehru is a father only in metaphor. In this way they might avoid confusions such as that propagated by the election slogan "Indira is India and India is Indira."

Rushdie offers a countermyth to the myth of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, a countermyth that exposes the naturalized metaphor on which the dynasty is built. But myth and countermyth are not alternative versions between which the reader is free to choose. The reader may accept or reject the countermyth, but the dynasty's myth must be rejected as a lie. Elsewhere Rushdie has argued that sometimes "it's better to counter myths with facts" ("Dynasty" 52); in other words, the postmodern fantasist believes that there exists a reality external to all myths against which their adequacy can be measured. The "fact" is that Family rule has damaged Indian democracy ("Dynasty" 52). The "fact" is that Indira Gandhi has been too Hindu and not sufficiently national in her politics. The "fact" is that the dynasty is a threat to the nation.

For all the self-conscious questioning of the epistemological worth of historical narration in *Midnight's Children*, some things are not left in doubt. We have no trouble judging Rushdie's Pakistan. Saleem is an impure soul in the Land of the Pure, and it is clear that he and Rushdie value impurity. The liberal novel is a cry for freedom against tyranny. The forces of tyranny include fundamentalist religious forces, but also death-dealing and *coup*-plotting military generals, and Indira Gandhi when she declares the Emergency.

Rushdie's novel engages in the subversion of every form of convention and authority. It very nearly falls apart—but not quite. It must resist chaos even as it resists tyranny. Liberal freedom is also under threat from the forces of anarchy, in the guise

of language marchers, religious rioters, and the many-headed mob. The forces of chaos are embodied in Shiva, the genetic son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai who has been raised in extreme poverty and is now filled with a violent *ressentiment*. The two enemies, tyranny and chaos, are linked: Shiva becomes Indira Gandhi's henchman.

Liberal freedom is a perilous balance between the need for freedom from tyranny and the need for a centre that can withstand the threat of disintegration. It is the balance that Rushdie says Thomas Pynchon, a fellow allegorist, advocates as well: "freedom is chaos, he told us, but so is destruction, and that's the high-wire, walk it if you can" ("Thomas Pynchon" 353). Only a liberal secular state can permit the self both freedom and security. Timothy Brennan is right to argue that *Midnight's Children* is a plea for the liberal values of human rights and civil freedoms. It is also a plea for a secular state as the only political home for the individual self.⁶

We can express the insight in a negative fashion: there is no self without the secular and democratic nation. An oppressive tyranny or a murderous anarchy both threaten the self. Indira Gandhi, Saleem, and Shiva are three figures of India, and their relations are those of superego, ego, and id. The ego must escape the tyranny of the superego, which threatens it with castration, but must not collapse into the id. Shiva is Saleem's dark shadow: he cannot be denied but cannot be fully acknowledged either.

IV

David Lipscomb assumes that Rushdie's citations from Stanley Wolpert's positivist history are parodic in purpose, that Rushdie's novel explodes "historical discourse's claim to singular authority" (182). However, I think it is more accurate to say that *Midnight's Children* both undermines and presumes the possibility of history, and it does so in order to encourage a self-reflexiveness in the reader. We see through Saleem's account of his genealogy, but are still invited to accept it. We must recognize that Aziz is not literally Saleem's grandfather, but then we may accept the validity and the value of a line of descent through Aziz. So, too, the citizens of India, if they would honour Nehru's secular ideal,

must recognize that Nehru's status as the Father of the Nation is merely a useful metaphor and that his ideal is betrayed by the ruling dynasty that claims descent from Nehru. The point of the allegory is to allow readers to accept or to reject *and* to make readers aware of their choice. History is not meaningless, but its meaning requires an act of faith. That faith, however, must not be blind. Maureen Quilligan writes that all allegory works this way:

The reader is posed a choice and a choice, moreover, which defines the reader, not the book he is reading. . . . Whether one affirms a belief in belief, or a belief in doubt, both choices are ethical, and while the mere fact of choice is not truly action, the self-awareness induced by the recognition that one has, in fact, chosen, is the kind of experience which underpins action. (265)

Saleem offers the reader a choice between faith in the nation and doubt. It is because it is a real choice that critics have read the novel in such utterly different ways, as both a celebration of India and a withering satire on the very possibility of the nation-state. We should note, however, that the freedom to decide for oneself is a liberal value not itself free of ideology. Because the choice is posed in terms of faith and doubt (and not in terms of competing faiths), it is actually weighted in favour of history and the nation. Just as Saleem's family continues to accept him as its son, so, too, Rushdie wagers on India.

Rushdie goes out of his way to show that the opportunities for self-fulfilment that give a citizen a stake in the nation are a question not of merit but of the class into which one is born. Saleem does not deserve his central position because of anything he has done or anything that he is. Saleem's concern with order and meaning are a luxury that he owes to the circumstances surrounding his birth, and therefore a mere emblem of class privilege. There is no just explanation for why one person is born to wealth and another doomed to poverty and misery, and the reader is free to prefer Shiva to Saleem as a mirror of India. But the concern for order is valuable in and of itself, and we readers cannot but opt for order over chaos. There is no absolute reason to choose Saleem, but no reader will choose Shiva. The historian offers order and narrative. His enemy is the one who seeks only chaos. The only alternative we are shown to the nation, that

admittedly self-serving invention of a wealthy *chamcha* class, is a lawless and unfathomable violence. The nation is revealed to be arbitrary but useful, an inevitably compromised wager against the darkness.

Saleem acknowledges the possibility that Shiva is the true generator of human affairs, as it is Shiva who is the only one of the Midnight's Children to father another generation. But if there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the novel, it is that Saleem is able to claim one of Shiva's offspring as his own son. He is writing his autobiography for his son (just as Rushdie dedicates the novel to his). As Saleem is well aware, identity does not reside in the blood; it is the claim and its recognition by the one claimed that matter.

But why should the alternative to Saleem be a figure of irrational destructiveness? If we were to reject the secular nation and its history, would the inevitable result be chaos? Shiva represents the dispossessed without a stake in the nation, the political threat to Saleem's India. However, he is made to represent chaos and unmeaning, the existential threat to the vulnerable self.

Saleem says he has borrowed his narrative technique—"Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday"—from Shiva, his rival (261). However, in Shiva's case these techniques are applied "without conscious thought, and their effect was to create a picture of the world of startling uniformity." Saleem's narrative is different (and presumably truer or at least more valuable) precisely because it is self-conscious and because it does invite judgement. But where might we look for an example of Shiva's own narration?

A narration "without conscious thought" and "a picture of the world of startling uniformity" seem remarkably like the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez. It has become a critical commonplace to assume that magic realism is its own genre and one particularly well suited to handling Third World and oral materials. Rushdie says he patterned his own storytelling on oral narration and deployed fantasy in order to be faithful to the reality of India, where millions believe in the world of the spirits.⁷ However, Rushdie is only nodding in the direction of orality and

religion. The majority of the magical elements in *Midnight's Children* derive from allegory and the literalization of metaphor.⁸ Rushdie's novel is an allegory of Indian history, and allegory is not an oral but a literary mode presuming a world of texts and readers (Quilligan 25). García Márquez's narration, on the other hand, certainly is based on oral narration, the stories the author had heard from his grandmother. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is exasperatingly indifferent to national history and resistant to allegorical interpretation. I am arguing that Rushdie's own technique, closer to that of Günter Grass and Pynchon, is best called allegory in order to distinguish it from Marquezan magic realism.

Saleem's description of Shiva's narration as "without conscious thought" and "of startling uniformity" also strangely resembles V. S. Naipaul's description of Gandhi's autobiography:

For its first half Gandhi's autobiography reads like a fairy-tale. He is dealing with the acknowledged marvels of his early life; and his dry, compressed method, reducing people to their functions and simplified characteristics, reducing places to names and action to a few lines of narrative, turns everything to legend. ("Indian Autobiographies" 61-62; see also *India: A Wounded Civilization* 97ff.).

The violent and rage-filled Shiva, of course, has nothing of Gandhi about him, but he does occupy the position of counterweight to the secular nation that in other histories of India is occupied by the Mahatma. In a review of Attenborough's cinematic biography of Gandhi, Rushdie says India defined itself by choosing between "Nehru, the urban sophisticate who wanted to industrialize India, to bring it into the modern age, [and] the rural, handicraft-loving, sometimes medieval figure of Gandhi" ("Attenborough's Gandhi" 104). Rushdie criticizes the Attenborough film for avoiding the debate and making Nehru Gandhi's acolyte. But Rushdie's disgust at the film is out of proportion to the film's defects, large as these are. Rushdie wants the film to be more critical of Gandhi and of non-violence than it is. Clearly, it is more than the film *Gandhi* that provokes the author's ire.

In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie himself makes India's choice not one between Nehru and Gandhi but one between Saleem

and Shiva. The significance of Gandhi's absence from Rushdie's novel is that Rushdie prefers the nation as imagined by Nehru the secular nationalist to the India for which Gandhi stood.⁹ To substitute Shiva for Gandhi is as scandalous as to draw an equivalence between the Mahatma and his assassin. But that is precisely what Rushdie does. The only episode of Gandhi's life that figures in Rushdie's allegory of Indian history is the news of his assassination. It is as though the assassination revealed the truth about Gandhi—perhaps that he aroused instinctive and irrational forces that he was not able to control?

The choice Rushdie offers his readers, between a leap of faith and an abyss of doubt, is a real choice, but not the only one possible. There are other leaps that can be made. Rushdie asks us to put our faith in a secular modern nation, not because the nation is true, but because faith can make it true, and secular tolerance and liberal freedom deserve to be made true. A reader may well decide to choose Saleem and the project of national history. My purpose in this essay is only to remind readers of what Rushdie leaves out—the Gandhian and the transcendental. Let us know what we are choosing.

NOTES

- 1 K. B. Rao, for instance, writes, Rushdie attempts to swallow all of India in his epic novel. Therein lies his ambition and his downfall. He is authentic when he writes about Bombay, the place of his birth, the city where he grew up. Probably there is no other Indian novel that captures the sights and smells of Bombay as *Midnight's Children* does, but when Rushdie writes about the rest of India, he is neither so forceful, nor so authentic. (181)
- 2 Rushdie had the first edition of Wolpert's history; my references are to a more recent, revised edition. My point is not that Rushdie allegorized Wolpert, but that he allegorized national history more generally. I use Wolpert only as a useful example of such national history.
- 3 I am extending here Maureen Quilligan's argument, made in *The Language of Allegory*, that the literal level of allegory is not located in a world outside the text, but in the words of the allegory themselves. Anyone who would like to pursue the question of the literalization of figures would have to come to terms with Margaret Homans's argument that "the wish to see all accounts of human life as figures—as myths—derives from the peculiarities of masculine psychosexual development" (15). I am indebted to Bina Freiwald for this last reference.
- 4 If the nation has a body, it can also be loved. India is often figured as the motherland: does the love of the motherland represent a sort of Oedipal desire? That at least is the notion that Rushdie plays with when he has Saleem, hiding in the washing-chest, catch a glimpse of his mother's nakedness, the crucial incident that opens up to him the possibility of communicating telepathically with all of

- India. Pakistan, on the other hand, is neither mother- nor fatherland, but was inspired by the poet Iqbal's vision of Muslim brotherhood. This metaphor is literalized in Rushdie's novel when Saleem's sister, who has become Jamila Singer, the inspirational voice of Pakistan, arouses incestuous feelings in her brother.
- 5 Alternatively, the "suppressed" soul demanding utterance may be imagined as a sneeze. To think this way is to think like Rushdie, who has Saleem discover his telepathic powers when a sneeze does something mysterious to his sinuses.
 - 6 During the crucial election that marked the end of the State of Emergency, posters appeared with the prime minister's picture proclaiming, "[s]he stood between Chaos and Order" (Ali 399). Indira Gandhi also walks Saleem's line between tyranny and chaos, but of course, she drew the line differently. Mrs. Gandhi called her Emergency "Disciplined Democracy," stressing discipline as the quality that gave yogis their "magic powers" in ancient India (Ali 401), a sort of pre-empting of the magical powers claimed by Saleem and the *Midnight's Children*.
 - 7 Rushdie talks about the impact of oral storytelling on his writing in a lecture entitled "*Midnight's Children and Shame*."
 - 8 Angus Fletcher writes that causality in allegory will always appear magical because the literal narrative is determined from outside, by a "pretext," and not by the internal demands of the literal narrative (182).
 - 9 For a materialist discussion of how Gandhi and Nehru are related in the creation of the modern nation, see Partha Chatterjee, who argues that Gandhi was much closer to the masses and their aspirations than was Nehru, who favoured a capitalist model of rationality.

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