

# *Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art*

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“THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK WITH A VENGEANCE,” is the title of an article by Salman Rushdie in the London *Times* of July 3, 1982, in which he has written about the decolonizing of the English language by such writers as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Nadine Gordimer, Derek Walcott and R. K. Narayan. The title phrase embodies certain characteristics that dominate in Rushdie’s writing: irony, showing here that erstwhile colonies of the British Empire should now be establishing supremacy in the development of English language and literature; word-play, building here the connotative network around both the title of the popular movie, “The Empire Strikes Back,” and the Raj; and insight that zeroes in on the crux of an issue.

Salman Rushdie is clearly destined to be the subject of literary criticism for years to come. A study of his contribution to the decolonizing of English alone would fill a monograph. This essay, however, attempts to be no more than an introduction to his works, and to certain narrative techniques used in *Midnight's Children*, the novel that catapulted him to fame in 1981.

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay in June 1947.<sup>1</sup> He started his education at Cathedral School, Bombay. In 1961, he left for England, where he has lived ever since. He completed his schooling at Rugby, and later took a degree in history from King’s College, Cambridge. He has worked with a multimedia theatre group, and an advertising company; he is now a full-time writer, working on freelance and commissioned articles for various newspapers and magazines. In 1964, Rushdie’s parents, and presumably the rest of the family (he has three sisters), emigrated from India to Pakistan. Rushdie has made several trips to

Pakistan, including an extended one of several months in 1975 (when he also visited India) just before starting on *Midnight's Children*. This novel took four and a half years to write, and was in the making for an even longer time.

Rushdie's other published works are a novel, *Grimus* (1975), and four short stories. His third novel, provisionally titled *Shame*, about half the length of *Midnight's Children* and set in Pakistan, is due for publication towards the end of 1983.

Two of his short stories are expanded versions of core ideas contained in *Midnight's Children*; there are dozens of potential short stories in the novel, and one might speculate that Rushdie might well develop or has already developed several of them; the episodes of the perforated sheet, the magicians' ghetto, Padma's misguided efforts at reviving Saleem's potency — these seem to be some of the author's favourites.

"The Prophet's Hair" is based on the same incident as the historical event included in the novel — a relic hair of the Prophet allegedly stolen from a Kashmir mosque, an event that set off communal clashes and caused a flare-up of Indo-Pakistani hostilities in 1964. Rushdie relates a fictionalized and far-fetched story with a combination of Arabian Nights fantasy (the illustrator's sketches adumbrate this) and raconteur humour. It is not without social satire, though. The power of the Prophet's hair cured the limbs of the sheikh's four sons, limbs that had been crushed conscientiously by the father in their infancy in order to assure them a good living — through begging. When cured, "they were, all four of them, very properly furious, because the miracle had reduced their earning power by seventy-five percent, at the worst conservative estimate; so they were ruined men."<sup>2</sup>

"The Free Radio"<sup>3</sup> is written in the style of R. K. Narayan, with an old *sadhu* type of school teacher as the narrative voice to comment on a gullible young rickshawallah who is doubly taken in by a widow with five children who did not want any more, and government propaganda that initially lured men into vasectomy by gifting a transistor radio to each volunteer. The young man habitually holds his imaginary radio to his ear, and hears "This is All India Radio," a fantasy that comes true for

Saleem in a different way when he becomes a transmitting station, and is later forcibly vasectomized.

These two stories are readable but not particularly noteworthy. The first novel, *Grimus*, however, is a remarkable work. It seems fated to suffer a peculiar kind of oblivion, or step-brother recognition, because of the runaway success of *Midnight's Children*. *Grimus* is a rare combination of intellectual quibbling and gamesmanship with an earlier form of science fiction than is popular today.

Flapping Eagle (Born-from-dead), an Amerindian from Axona, drinks an elixir and wanders through seven centuries and innumerable sexual escapades (which are ever present in variegated patterns in Rushdie), and then falls through a hole in the Mediterranean and wakes up on Calf Island. Rushdie's conceptualization of another space-dimension is ingenious:

Here we all are, a world of living beings and inanimate objects and gusts of breeze, all of us composed of infinitely more empty space than solid matter. Is it not a conceptual possibility that here, in our midst, permeating all of us and all that surrounds us, is a completely other world . . . with different perceptual tools which make us as non-existent to its inhabitants as they are to ours? In a word, another dimension.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly with Time, since there is always a Space-Time continuum in each world; the past, present and future coexist, and though ordinary human beings can move only in the present, there might be some (like the inhabitants of Calf Island) who can move from one dimension to the other.

The whole idea is consistent within its own terms, and is rather fascinating. However, it is too clever for its own good, as Rushdie said of it.<sup>5</sup> The story line is a potpourri of Romance and lustful encounters. There is the Romantic archetype of the Wandering Jew: like Ahaseurus, Flapping Eagle lives a long time (seven hundred and seventy-seven years plus) and sometimes longs for death, but unlike Ahaseurus, he is always young and virile. After 740 years of wandering he reaches Calf Island where he finds the Stone Rose, reminiscent of Arthurian romances and Tolkien, and undergoes a merging with the devil such as Dr. Faustus might have experienced if Rushdie were to rewrite Mar-

lowe. But of course, everything in Rushdie is turned around to anti-Romance, anti-hero. Lustful encounters invariably end up as impotent ones and Cinderella as a pumpkin.

Word-play, another predominant Rushdie characteristic, runs rampant in *Grimus*. *Grimus* is an anagram of Simurg, the all-powerful mythic bird of Arab lore; the mountain of Calf is Kaf, an Arabic letter that has esoteric associations; Thera, Gorf, are self-evident anagrams, and Deggle's (part-clown, part-Mephistopheles) favourite word of leave taking is "Ethiopia" derived from "Abyssinia — I'll be seein' you."

*Grimus* has several other characteristics in common with *Midnight's Children*, some of which are more fully developed and some vestigially present. Most important is the concept of a novel as propounded by Elfrida, one of the characters in *Grimus*. After listening to a story, she says:

I don't like it. . . . It's too pretty, too neat. I do not care for stories that are so, so tight. Stories should be like life, slightly frayed at the edges, full of loose ends and lives juxtaposed by accident rather than some grand design. Most of life has no meaning — so it must surely be a distortion of life to tell tales in which every single element is meaningful? . . . How terrible to have to see a meaning or a great import in everything around one, everything one does, everything that happens to one! (*Grimus*, p. 149)

This statement epitomizes Rushdie's approach to the art of the novel when coupled with another, in *Midnight's Children*:

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well.<sup>6</sup>

The connection between the two statements is worth elaborating upon. The story to which Elfrida responds is about the Angel of Death, who finds that each soul he swallows becomes a part of him and he "begins to have doubts about whether he even exists as an independent being with all these people inside him" (*Grimus*, p. 149).

This amoeba-like fission and fusion is the distinguishing trait

of the narrative voice or persona in both novels. In *Grimus*, we have Joe becoming a hermaphrodite through being christened Joe-Sue, and later becoming Flapping Eagle through an encounter with an eagle, and later merging into Grimus himself; throughout, though, there is an "I" that hasn't quite merged with the other aspect.

In *Midnight's Children*, there are two such characters. Tai the storyteller represents the synthesistic fusion of time-events; he is the repository of "racial memory," to use Yeats' term:

I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die . . . I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head. (*MNC*, p. 16)

Saleem represents this compression of history as a less harmonious process. Under alternating fission-fusion, his individual identity is by turn fragmented and enlarged by the "intertwined lives" around him; he becomes the repository of a national memory, if one might coin such a term.

The similarity between Rushdie and writers such as Garcia Marquez and Günter Grass lies in this quality of mythic sweep that dislodges history from chronometric time in order to abstract its essential meaning, and disembodies individuals in order to extract the collective consciousness within.

Rushdie uses numerous narrative devices to connect Saleem's personal story with the story of India between 1947 and 1977. Three of the main structural devices are:

- (a) he uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points in history and symbolize their long-term significance;
- (b) he links political and historical events, starting with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, with one or other of Saleem's circle of friends and family, and
- (c) he uses Padma as a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic levels.

Two other important techniques are Rushdie's use of irony and his periodic previews of events to come. The most pervasive element in his writing is, of course, his humour.

Birth images are Rushdie's obvious framework for linking autobiography with an interpretation of India's recent history. "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country," says Saleem in the first page of *Midnight's Children*, referring to the coincidence of his birth with the birth of independent India on the stroke of midnight August 14-15, 1947. Saleem and the other one thousand infants born in that numinous hour of Independence are representative of the post-Independence generation born to promises of plenitude and fulfilment and later *chutneyfied* by circumstances and the Widow.

Shiva, his alter ego and rival, is the other person born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem's mother started her labour pains exactly twenty-four hours earlier, when Pakistan came into existence.

Saleem's wife's son, by Shiva, is born at midnight of the day when Indira Gandhi clamped down Emergency Rule on India. Parvati's thirteen-day labour coincides with the thirteen days of political tumult in India when Indira, found guilty of malpractice during the election of 1971, refused to resign and later proclaimed Emergency. Parvati and Saleem, Indira and India — each undergoes a traumatically longdrawn travail. The parallel between Parvati (and Saleem's) travail and India's is precise and nightmarish, ending with:

come on Parvati, push, push, push and while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai. . . were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push. . . the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own. . . suspension of civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements. (*MNC*, p. 419)

Births and prognostications, births and symbols. Rushdie drives births home with a sledgehammer. Saleem is the son of an Englishman and a Hindu street-singer's wife; he is brought up by a Kashmiri Muslim couple whose own child is given to the street-singer by Mary Pereira, a Goanese midwife who is influenced by her Marxist lover into doing her mite towards the equalization of classes; Mary Pereira, with her Catholicism and paranoia, becomes Saleem's *ayah*. The symbolism for religious

friction, mixed ancestries, loss of identity, is very clear and very loud. So loud that one hesitates even to mention that we have in Saleem the writer, with his English father, Indian mother, Mission-schooling and Catholic ayah, an analogue of Indo-English writing.

Writing history as autobiography is another way of connecting the individual component of society with the collective stream of history. The fission-fusion element in the novel is most pervasive at this level.

*Midnight's Children*, at one level, is a Rabelaisian autobiography of Saleem Sinai whose Cyrano-nose and adolescent sexuality get him into the usual scrapes of boyhood, and who later lives a Kafkaesque nightmare in a temporarily-totalitarian state. But Saleem's story has to be more than his own, linked indissolubly to his country's. The symbols used to link the autobiography of an individual to the history of a nation are obvious, sometimes heavy-handed.

Saleem's face is compared to the map of India by his school-teacher who, incidentally, also pulls out a handful of hair thus leaving a tonsure — Kashmir? — on his head. Saleem's telepathic contact with other *Midnight Children*, and their remarkable talents, reinforce the idea that the 1,001 children are representative of India's post-independence generation, and that Saleem himself is their spokesman. Rushdie has said that the idea of placing Saleem centre-stage in so many political events came to him because a child usually sees himself centre-stage.<sup>7</sup> (Obviously he has deeper reasons in the larger context of the novel.)

Rushdie's style is brilliant; he gallops through current newspapers, lancing headlines and sticking them on to the caps of relatives and friends so that the history of India reads like a family album. Saleem's uncle, Zulfikar, is a Pakistani general who helps General Ayub Khan plan the military takeover of 1958; his aunt is a mistress of Homi Catrack, who is shot by the husband of Lila Sabarmati, another of his mistresses (Commander and Mrs. Nanavati in real life); his classmate Cyrus Dubash becomes the founder of a religious cult that seems to be an amalgam of Guru Maharaj and Hatha-yogi Lakshman Rao who claimed he could walk on water; Saleem himself triggers

off one of the worst language riots in Bombay; his mother was first married to Sheikh Abdullah's right-hand man; the disappearance of the Prophet's Hair is linked to his grandfather — the contrived connections go on.

There are several significant aspects of Rushdie's handling of history.<sup>8</sup> Through satire he shows that some of history's violent events have their source in trivial accidents as with the language demonstrations or the theft of the Prophet's Hair. At an overt level Rushdie spoofs the traditional form of histories. He takes liberties with dates, undermining chronometric exactitude that is one of the cornerstones of traditional historical writing. Saleem changes the date of Gandhi's death and of the 1957 election, but he does not retract when he realizes his error for "although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events" (*MNC*, p. 222). Memory reorders events.

Rushdie also seems to spoof traditional histories for often being no more than biographies of kings and generals. The novel seems to say that the autobiography of a common man contains and participates in the making of history. Tai's claim that he was at Jehangir's deathbed is an extension of this participation.

However, what of the more specific connections between individual and nation? Saleem's thesis is clear: Ahmed Sinai's psychologically induced impotence becomes, by the Widow's decree, physical in Saleem; this physical impotence is the external manifestation of an inner impotence that has also, Saleem implies, been imposed by the Widow.<sup>9</sup> But a closer reading of the novel would reveal that Rushdie has not quite succeeded in *showing* this strangulation as a long-drawn and consistent process. One is not convinced that the *Midnight Children* themselves are not to blame for the betrayal of the dreams of 1947. Saleem Sinai's indictment of the "system" does not absolve him in our indictment of his inaction.

Saleem has argued his case in a way that would certainly sweep the unwary off their feet. With architectural balance and with insistent echoes and foreshadowings, he builds up his case against the government. Irony is his chief tool:



Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your birth. . . . we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own. . . ." (*MNC*, p. 122)

The first Prime Minister's greeting ironically foreshadows the eagle-watch of a later prime minister which Saleem describes with frightening surrealism:

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 centre parting it is green on the left and on the right black. High as the sky the chair is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children are green the walls are green the Widow's arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream. . . . 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. . . . the sky is black there are no stars the Widow laughs. . . . (*MNC*, p. 207)

But what did the children of this numinous hour, endowed with fantastic gifts of space-time travel and levitation, blinding beauty and genius, miracle-healing and computer-memory actually do? Nothing worthwhile. And little that even an untalented average person would care to boast about. For 28 years they frittered away their talent, and then with the rise of political repression in 1976, Saleem seems to have found a handy peg on which to hang all blame.

We are told in some detail what two of the most gifted Midnight Children did. Shiva, let it be said, never had any altruistic or patriotic concerns. He carried out his ideology: "Everybody does what I say or I squeeze the shit outa them with my knees" (*MNC*, p. 220). But Saleem had ideas, aspirations *and* unlimited opportunities; he had telepathic powers with which he could know others' thoughts and could communicate with those born in the same hour. He had strange olfactory powers. With his telepathic powers he toured India, went on voyeuristic binges, improved his grades by cheating, spied on his mother and aunt, gave no direction or leadership to the Conference, and finally

betrayed the other *Midnight Children* to their murderers. With his olfactory powers, he whored all over Karachi and later betrayed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh to his Pakistani enemies. It is this treason against himself, his teammates and basic ethics that precludes any final sympathy for Saleem. There is no tragedy or sadness, only betrayal.

It has been said of modern novelists like Saul Bellow that their protagonists conclude on a note of qualified optimism that seems contrived because of the general bleakness of the final situation. With Saleem it is the other way around. Even though many aspects of his life seem to have taken a turn for the better after a decade of turmoil and suffering, he feels he has to end on a note of gloom:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot . . . reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his . . . because it is the privilege and the curse of *Midnight's Children* to be both masters and victims of their times . . . to be unable to live or die in peace. (*MNC*, p. 463)

This extreme pessimism is uncalled for. Saleem's personal life has reached a level of stability: his son Aadam has outgrown his tuberculosis, has thrived on Durga's milk, and weaned himself off it with a suddenness that reflects his willpower for even at the age of twenty-two months he has a mind of his own. The positive elements are all there, provided by the presence and services of Aadam, Picturesingh, Durga and the irreplaceable Padma.

Both Durga and Padma are earthy creatures, loud of mouth, generous in their giving. Durga, wet nurse and washerwoman, has preternatural breasts that could unleash "a torrent of milk capable of nourishing regiments." One might read into the choice of name to say she is both nourisher and destroyer, but her characterization is not such as to give her the attributes of the goddess. As a washerwoman, she "thrashed the life out of shirts and saris" and grew in power "as if she were sucking the vigour of the clothes, which ended up flat, buttonless and beaten to death." So also with her men.

On the other hand over Padma one could go into lyrical extremes, as Saleem does. But suffice it to say that she is a strong character in herself, and an excellent narrative prop and symbol. D. R. Sharma, writing in *New Quest*, is of another opinion :

how is the dumb interlocutor competent to absorb and examine a Niagara of subtle, erudite, metaphysical-cum-surrealistic interpolations of the narrative-historian? Even if Padma is removed from the book, the sweep or direction of the narrative won't be qualitatively impaired.<sup>10</sup>

Padma is not meant to absorb or examine. Literally and figuratively she is the haven that an artist needs in order to be an artist. Her role in the novel is very complex. She provides the climate, as said above; she provides the more immediate atmosphere as well, with her interjections, her comments on the narrative, her misguided efforts to get Saleem's "other pencil" to work, all of which add up to giving that realistic and tangible foil so necessary to keep the narrative to the ground.

It has been variously suggested that Padma is to be seen as a *vidushika* who in a Sanskrit play is a buffoon or jester who accompanies the hero; or as Rangeli in the Rangela-Rangeli team in folk theatre. I would suggest that if a dramatic analogue is to be taken, Padma is like the chorus in a Greek drama — always on the stage, but never initiating action; essentially a non-participant but occasionally giving a thrust to the play's progression. But if the novel is dramatized, Padma would become quite a problem for the director; with her well-endowed figure and "mammary-thumping" stance, she might become a stock-in-trade character of a typical Hindi movie, comical and exaggerated out of proportion. She would become wholly physical and literal, whereas in the novel she is both real and symbolic. She is the collective consciousness, the spirit of the country, just as Saleem is an individual consciousness participating in the history of the country. Illiterate but goodhearted, foolish yet wise, a devoted nurse but ever eager for the pleasure of the senses, Padma is the archetypal Earth-Mother put through the Rushdie anti-romance wringer.

Padma is Saleem's contact with the earth; she is the common

people who, with their basic respect for learning (even though they might poke fun at "writery"), sustain the artist; the "real" human beings who will endure long after the Methwolds (Myth world), the affluent Sinais (desert-mountain-covenant of promised land — restrictive commandments) and brutish Shivas (Rushdie's understanding of Hindu names and archetypes leaves much to be desired) turn to dust.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The biographical details included here were gathered from a talk with Salman Rushdie at Goteborg, Sweden, in September 1982.
- <sup>2</sup> Salman Rushdie, "The Prophet's Hair," *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1981), 66.
- <sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, "The Free Radio," *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 1982), 75-77.
- <sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Grimus* (London: Granada, 1981), p. 55. *Grimus* was first published in 1975 by Victor Gollancz Ltd.
- <sup>5</sup> "Interview: Salman Rushdie," *Kunapipi*, IV, 2 (1982), 25.
- <sup>6</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 1982. London: Picador (Pan Books), p. 9. (First published in 1981.) All subsequent quotations are from this edition and page references are given in parentheses.
- <sup>7</sup> See 1 above.
- <sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this theme, please refer to my article, "Autobiography as History: Saleem Sinai and India in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," *Toronto South Asian Review*, I, 2 (Summer 1982), 52-60.
- <sup>9</sup> Rushdie's interpolation as to the identification of the Widow with Mrs. Indira Gandhi (p. 421) is in poor taste and is also an artistic weakness. Such explicit parallels are better left out of a novel, and left to critics!
- <sup>10</sup> D. R. Sharma, "Chutnification of India," *New Quest* (May-June 1982), 169.