

# *The Art of Suspense: Rushdie's 1001 (Mid-)Nights*

NANCY E. BATTY

“The key to the treasure is the treasure.” (Barth)

**T**HAT SALMAN RUSHDIE'S novel, *Midnight's Children*, owes at least a small debt to Scheherazade's tales is obvious—the “cross-reference . . . to the Arabian nights, is so recurrent and so explicit that even a Padma might be supposed to pick it up” (Wilson 33). Equally apparent is the debt of the novel to the post-structural literary practice that was cogently presaged in the fiction of Laurence Sterne. The juxtaposition of the Oriental tale, the eighteenth-century Shandean novel and the modern historical “realities” of India in *Midnight's Children* is eclectic but not accidental, and the effect of this collusion is to dramatize the problematical relationship of life to art, art to life. While Keith Wilson has demonstrated that *Midnight's Children* is richly laden with literary allusion (even more, I think, than Wilson identifies) and Uma Parameswaran has noted the historical and political implications of the novel, neither of these critics has attempted to discover how or why the novel integrates its content with its particular medium, the self-conscious or reflexive novel.

Wilson's analysis of *Midnight's Children* clearly privileges the novel's status as a metafiction (in the sense that it is a novel about itself and about other literature) but it does little to illuminate the precise role that literary allusion plays in the novel; as Wilson would have it, these allusions serve merely to separate the Padmas from the scholars in a potential community of readers (34). Introducing a historical-political dimension into her analysis of the novel, Parameswaran outlines some of the narrative devices employed by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*

and then suggests how technique contributes to the overall impact of the novel:

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 his case against the government. (41)

An approach to *Midnight's Children* which would yoke the literary and formal dimensions of the novel with its historical-political dimensions is surely desirable; to catalyze such an analysis one need look no further than Scheherazade's tales for a supreme example of the political exigency of the narrative act. *A Thousand and One Nights*, itself one of the earliest of all metafiction, provides Rushdie with both the precept and the organizing principle of his narrative: *Midnight's Children* both begins and ends with explicit reference to these ancient tales. Is it possible, then, to suggest that Saleem Sinai, like Scheherazade, is engaged in a desperate political act? If, as John Barth's Scheherazade concludes, "Making love and telling stories both take more than good technique but it's only the technique that we can talk about" (31-32), then perhaps this question can be addressed through an examination of the techniques that both Scheherazade's and Saleem's narratives share, and to a common purpose: the creation of suspense.

All narratives are, to a greater or lesser extent, acts of concealment which employ retardatory structure in order to create some degree of suspense. The very premise of *A Thousand and One Nights*, however, elevates the art of suspense to a life-preserving skill and, even though they are not always read in this manner, the tales that comprise Scheherazade's narrative can be seen as an example of one of the longest digressions in the history of literature. It is significant to note that long after the details of the framed stories have been relegated to vague childhood memory, it is the briefly sketched but compelling plight of Scheherazade which haunts us. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, suspense derives precisely from the nature of Scheherazade's plight rather than from the content of her narrative. The framed tales bear little or no resemblance to Scheherazade's situation and seem to serve simply as a diversion to deflect King Shahryar from his despotic

mission to deflower and behead a virgin every day of his life. What little expectation is built between the tales in the framed narrative of Burton's translation appears to stem from Scheherazade's promise to Shahryar that her next story will be even more intriguing than the last. It is this contract between fictional narrator and fictional narratees (the tales are ostensibly told to the King at the insistence of Scheherazade's sister, Dunyazade) that provides the most apparent link between *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Midnight's Children*, but it is the very fact that both narrators employ a suspense strategy to defer the end of the narrative act that may provide a more telling comparison between the goals of Scheherazade and Saleem Sinai.

If the most compelling suspense in *A Thousand and One Nights* emanates from the framing story, then one criterion which may be applied to the successful creation of suspense is that of duration between promise and fulfilment: for example, the duration implied by the title of the narrative, which is the temporal distance from Scheherazade's initial contract with the King to the fulfilment or, since the King is persuaded to marry Scheherazade rather than to kill her, the non-fulfilment of that contract. This duration is almost precisely the length of the completed work — it is precisely the *raison d'être* of the internal narrative. Pierre Macherey, in his analysis of the novel of mystery, sheds further light on this proposal:

The time of the narrative separates the founding moments of illusion from the irruption of a truth which is also a promise of safety (*the period of ignorance is a period of danger*). The narrative progresses only by the inhibition of the truth; its movement is an ambivalence, an effort to postpone rather than to hasten revelation. The novel lasts for as long as it can cling to appearances, and in this it displays its true nature: it arises in a parenthesis, it is a go-between, an interlude, a diversion. (29; emphasis added)

Macherey's premise does not denigrate the status of the narrative act: he prefaces the above remarks by arguing that the "depths ['the explanation of the prodigious'] are less fascinating than this frail and deceptive surface" (29). It is the "frail and deceptive surface" of *Midnight's Children* that I propose to examine, but my project will depart from Macherey's pretext in that I hope to show how an analysis of technique, especially in

the context of the relationship of *Midnight's Children* to *A Thousand and One Nights*, can help to reveal significance in the novel and to show that Saleem's act of narration attempts a political act both desperate and dangerous, an act directed not at Padma (Saleem's explicit narratee) but through her to an implied listener who controls the fate of the narrator as surely as King Shahryar controls the fate of Scheherazade.

Uma Parameswaran, in an analysis of the narrative devices employed in *Midnight's Children*, touches only briefly on one of the techniques used to create suspense in the novel: Rushdie's "periodic preview of events to come" (38). This is, in fact, the most obvious and artificial suspense-creating device in the novel: it is also perhaps the most effective. It is, however, a device employed not by Salman Rushdie, but by Saleem Sinai, and while this distinction may seem captious, it is crucial for my ultimate thesis that it be made. The engagement of a suspense structure is perhaps necessitated by the first-person narrative frame, but its employment arises from the implicit contract between Saleem Sinai and his audience. Or, to put this another way, the conscious decision of the author to present his narrative in the form of first-person reflective impinges on the exigency of the narrator (Saleem) to employ techniques which will create suspense. Saleem's dilemma is similar to that of any autobiographer: what he must accomplish is a circular journey from himself to himself,<sup>1</sup> and the life that is so circumscribed must seem to be either very important or very interesting or the autobiographer will find himself alone on his journey. The fictional autobiographer, having no *a priori* claim to fame — his history, until it is narrated, is a virtual *tabula rasa* — must perhaps work harder to express and sustain the notion that his life is worthy of attention. As Parameswaran notes, one of the ways by which Saleem accomplishes this in his narrative is to link events of his own life with those of his country's history (38, 40). Saleem makes claims for both the importance and the intrigue of his existence, but these claims are repeatedly undermined by Padma's scepticism and by reminders of the narrator's mundane and crumbling circumstances in the fictional present. However, the interpolation of Padma as both a character and a narratee in the novel mitigates, as well as exacerbates, the fictional auto-

biographer's disadvantage: Padma becomes an index for reader-response to the framed narrative, much as Shahryar (and to a lesser extent, Dunyazade) serves a similar function in *A Thousand and One Nights*. In a sense, the reader is seduced into a judgement of the worth of Saleem's narrative on the basis of Padma's response, and this is further reinforced by Saleem's explicit dependence on Padma as a conduit for his narrative. But Padma, as Saleem points out, is not always easy to please, and it becomes obvious as the novel progresses that Padma not only serves as an index for Saleem's successes and failures as an autobiographer but also plays an important role in the creation of his story.

Saleem narrates because he fears absurdity (9), and this goal, as we shall see, has little to do with Padma; however, his narrative takes shape from the demands of Padma as an explicit audience. Just as Scheherazade's tales are ostensibly intended to appease young Dunyazade's rehearsed demand to hear them, their real meaning is to deflect King Shahryar from his murderous goal. If, as Macherey implies, the aim of narration is to defer its own resolution, then its method must be that of concealment: "Here is the double movement: the mystery must be concealed before it is revealed. . . . the entire elaboration of the narrative consists in the disruption and organization of this delay" (29). Like the perforated sheet through which Aadam Aziz views the various parts of Naseem's body, narrative must always reveal something while concealing everything else. Saleem's narrative self-consciously employs deferment of disclosure — "But I mustn't reveal all my secrets at once" (14) — and nowhere is this more evident than in Part One of the novel, which begins with a notice of Saleem's portentous birth, but is composed almost entirely of a retrospective of the thirty-odd years that preceded it. The structure of Part One is a prototype for the pattern of disclosure and concealment which governs the entire novel. Deferral of disclosure follows a rigid pattern of promise and fulfilment: the implicit contract between narrator and narratee is made explicit and self-conscious. Saleem laments Padma's impatience and her desire for "linear narrative" (38) and posits "a more discerning audience, someone who would understand the need for rhythm, pacing, the subtle introduction of minor chords which later rise,

swell, seize the melody" (102): in short, someone who will comprehend the need for concealment in narrative.

The tension between Padma's "what-happened-nextism" (39) and Saleem's need to conceal propels, and to a large extent shapes, the entire narrative. In a discussion of the relationship between what is "real" and what is "true," Saleem confesses his narrative philosophy: "*True*, for me, was . . . something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me. . . . *True* was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman's finger pointed in the picture on my wall" (79). If *true*, for Saleem, is what is concealed, then *real* is essentially secondary and contingent: "in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe" (270-71). But it is also what that audience can persuade the author to reveal: Saleem's story, or much of it, is also Padma's, as the following passage strongly suggests:

. . . And certainly Padma is leaking into me. As history pours out of my fissured body, my lotus is quietly dripping in, with her down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous — *so it's appropriate that I'm about to tell the story of Mian Abdullah.* (38; emphasis added)

Padma's role as Saleem's "necessary ear" (149) should not obscure her status as co-creator of his narrative. Parameswaran underestimates this function, I think, when she compares Padma to "the chorus in a Greek drama — always on the stage, but never initiating action. . ." (44). If we regard Saleem's narration as the supreme act of the novel, in the sense that Genette refers to the act of narrating as "an *act* like any other" (234), then Padma's role in *Midnight's Children* is indeed paramount. Saleem confirms this when he asks:

How to dispense with Padma? How to give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience.

\* \* \*

I should speak plainly, without the cloak of a question mark: our Padma is gone and I miss her. (150)

The integral relationship between Saleem and Padma is complex and complementary, and Padma cannot be reduced to a "convenient reader surrogate" as Wilson suggests (34). I would argue that the uneasy and reciprocal relationship between "reality" and "truth" in narrative resides in the mutual pact between narrator and audience: the narrator promises, in his own good time, to reveal all that has previously been concealed; the audience submits to this demand as long as the narrator retains credibility and interest, or as long as revelation justifies its concealment. Ross Chambers describes the narrator-narratee relationship in slightly different, although relevant, terms:

...at the bottom the narrator's motivation is like that of the narratee and rests on the assumption of exchanging a gain for a loss. Where the narratee offers attention in exchange for information, the narrator sacrifices the information for some sort of attention. Consequently, there is a sense in which the maintenance of narrative authority implies an act of seduction. . . . (50)

When the exchange of information is accomplished — when the narrative act is consummated, so to speak — the very basis for narrative is destroyed. The narrator's employment of retardatory structure defers this consummation. But the narrator-narratee contract is a tenuous one, what Meir Sternberg calls a "double-edged sword" (162). The success of retardatory structure "hinges on the artist's own skill in counteracting the reader's natural inclination to dash forward" (Sternberg 162-63) or, in Padma's case, to dash out. Having waited impatiently for Saleem to arrive at the place where he began his narrative — the night of his auspicious birth — Padma is shocked to discover the seeming irrelevance of Saleem's lengthy exploration of his short-circuited genealogy. Padma's brief departure from Saleem's life (but not his narrative) is ostensibly triggered by a disagreement regarding Saleem's use of the word "love" to describe her feelings toward him; it is, however, no less a response to a disagreement regarding the relative value of narrative digression.

Saleem's manipulation (or seduction) of his audience, informed by his conflicting desires to be secretive and at the same

time to retain Padma's interest in his narrative, is transparent, exploitive and coquettish, as when he comments on his inability to control exposition:

Interruptions, nothing but interruptions! The different parts of my somewhat complicated life refuse, with a wholly unreasonable obstinacy, to stay neatly in their respective compartments. (187)

Such coyness is deceptive: Saleem's narrative, for all it stutters, stumbles and digresses — *because* it stutters, stumbles and digresses — strikes a carefully poised balance between concealment and disclosure. Saleem's pronouncement — “I know now that [Padma] is . . . hooked . . . my story has her by the throat” (38) — is premature but is nonetheless borne out. Padma *does* return to Saleem's side and she *does* fulfil her role as narratee, but this should not surprise us. Saleem tailors his narrative for Padma: like a lover engaged in making a sexual conquest, Saleem adjusts his strategies of seduction according to the response which those strategies elicit. Padma's incredulous response to the story of the midnight children, for example, engages Saleem in a defence of his narrative, but it also teaches him a valuable lesson: “It's a dangerous business to try and impose one's view of things on others” (212). He brackets the events of the subsequent chapter with the familiar and soothing overtures of the fairy tale: “Once upon a time . . .” (213, 320).

Padma's desire to know “what happened next,” in conflict with Saleem's need to conceal, is routinely satisfied by what Parameswaran calls “periodic previews of events to come” (38). Genette, who has offered a formidable vocabulary of narratological terms, would describe this technique as “repeating prolapses” (73), but neither Parameswaran nor Genette captures the peculiar self-conscious nuance of this device as it is used in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem himself provides us with a more accurate term when he compares this technique to the employment of “trailers” in episodic cinema (346). In effect, these explicit foreshadowings are the foundation of Saleem's pact with Padma. Saleem explains: “. . . the promise of exotic futures has always seemed, to my mind, the perfect antidote to the disappointments of the present” (346). Saleem's employment of trailers, as we shall see, is pervasive, and it is complemented by yet



another cinematic narrative device which Saleem does not consciously identify. A close examination of *Midnight's Children* reveals that the chapter by chapter progression of the novel resembles the structure of an episodic film, or serial, in which synopses of previous events provide a rhythmical counterpoint to the tantalizing teasers which anticipate events to come. The comparison of Saleem's technique to that employed by episodic cinema is a relevant one: just as the cliffhanger serial is ruthless in manipulating the expectations of its audience, often resorting to misleading clues in its trailers, Saleem also employs sensationalism in order to hold the interest of his audience. Narrative synopses provide Saleem with a means of compensating for this sensationalism by imposing order and significance on past events, but these synopses also slow the narrative pace, thereby functioning to retard exposition and abet concealment.

A paradigm of the complementary function of trailer and synopsis in *Midnight's Children* is found at the end of the chapter entitled "Wee Willie Winkie" and the beginning of the subsequent chapter. Promising that he will finally reveal the details of his birth to Padma, Saleem describes elaborate preparations for the event. "Wee Willie Winkie" ends with "the sound of seconds passing, of an approaching, inevitable midnight" (106). The title of the following chapter, "Tick-Tock," links the narrative idea of a countdown with its opening line: "Padma can hear it: there's nothing like a countdown for building suspense" (106). But Saleem, relishing his control over his audience, launches into a lengthy synopsis of the previous narrative — a synopsis that ends ironically with Padma's naive praise: "'At last . . . you've learned how to tell things really fast'" (109). Saleem does not, however, confine his trailers to the ends of chapters (or the end of the writing session, as each chapter would seem to correspond to a night in the fictional present): the narrative is replete with trailers which appear in various forms, and with varying degrees of significance.

Saleem's trailers can be divided roughly into two categories: those which (seemingly) inevitably arise from the reflective nature of his project (these are clearly what Genette terms repetitive prolapses) and those which are self-consciously employed to create suspense. Repetitive prolapses occur when an

event in the narrated present triggers a “remembrance” of a future event, as when Saleem says:

(... And already I can see the repetitions beginning; because didn't my grandfather also find enormous... and the stroke, too, was not the only... and the Brass Monkey had her birds... the curse begins already, and we haven't even got to the noses yet!) (12)

Such prolapses, of course, contribute to the creation of suspense in Saleem's narrative, but Saleem also self-consciously employs this technique in a sensationalistic manner. Having narrated the death of his family in Pakistan, Saleem senses that Padma's interest is waning, and he quickly inveigles her back into his narrative world:

'I'm not finished yet! There is to be electrocution and a rain-forest; a pyramid of heads on a field...; narrow escapes are coming...! Padma, there is still plenty worth telling....' (346)

Clearly, some of the events which Saleem narrates are less important for their meaning than for their sensationalistic value—their audience appeal—and although Saleem makes great claims for the interconnectedness of people and events, some aspects of his life remain episodic and unconnected. Saleem's assertion that Homi Catrack was “the second human being to be murdered by mushrooming Saleem” (244) is an example of this kind of sensationalism. The reader soon learns that the first person murdered by Saleem was Jimmy Kapadia, and that Saleem feels responsible for Jimmy's death simply because he dreamed it. The death of Jimmy Kapadia can be seen as a device which Saleem uses to intensify his narrative act and to exaggerate its claim to intrigue and suspense. Saleem does not deny that he possesses such skill; indeed he confesses it:

Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday—these techniques, which are also attitudes of mind, I have lifted—or perhaps absorbed—from the most formidable of the midnight children.... (218)

The Homi Catrack-Jimmy Kapadia episode provides an extreme example of the way in which Saleem's trailers can be deceptive, but one which points to the hierarchical nature of

suspense in the novel. The suggestion that Saleem is responsible for at least two murders is introduced and resolved in the space of two chapters: I would argue that the reader assigns a diminished significance to these events based on Saleem's expedience in dealing with them. This is not to say that the death of Homi Catrack is irrelevant to the plot of *Midnight's Children*: in fact, the murder has grave implications for Saleem's Uncle Hanif and the future of the Sinai family at Methwold Estates; however, the episode strikes only a minor chord in the structural orchestration of the novel.

The cryptic prophecy of Ramram Seth, the soothsayer, is an example of a larger, structuring kind of trailer as opposed to other more straightforward and more quickly fulfilled narrative promises, and it is interesting to view this prophecy in terms of Saleem's self-conscious rendering of it. Prefaced by Saleem's reflection on the meaning of the words true and real, the story of Amina Sinai's visit to Ramram Seth is cloaked in narrative uncertainty, beginning with Saleem's hesitation:

Now, writing this in my Anglepoised pool of light, I measure truth against those early things: Is this how Mary would have told it? I ask. Is this what that fisherman would have said? . . . *And by those standards it is undeniably true that*, one day in January 1947, my mother heard all about me six months before I turned up. . . .

(79; emphasis added)

The entire narration of this incident is interspersed with questions regarding its veracity, and even Ramram Seth's prophecy is veiled in Saleem's doubt:

. . . but the curtain descends again, so I cannot be sure — did he begin like . . . — and then, did he change? . . . the circling fortune teller, finding history speaking through his lips. (Was that how?)

(87)

The fact that Saleem undermines the veracity of Ramram Seth's prophecy, implying that its truth is equivalent to that which is concealed in the stories of Mary Pereira, emphasizes Saleem's role as creator rather than recorder of his own history and suggests the way in which his narrative is mutable and relative rather than prescribed and final. Genette's remarks regarding

the oracle in *Oedipus* remind us of the “constructedness” of all narrative:

The oracle in *Oedipus the King* is a metadiegetic narrative in the future tense, the mere uttering of which will throw into gear the “infernal machine” capable of carrying it out. This is not a prophecy that comes true, it is a trap in the form of a narrative, a trap that “takes.” Yes, the power (and cunning) of narrative. (243)

It is important to grasp the notion of Saleem’s narrative as an artificial construct rather than an inevitable and factual rendering of his life if we are to derive the political significance from patterns of suspense in the novel. If, as I have suggested, the major criterion for determining the successful creation of suspense in narrative is that of the duration between promise and fulfilment, then an examination of this pattern in Saleem’s narrative may reveal how meaning inheres in the way that Saleem consciously structures that dialectic.

Scheherazade’s nightly narratives end with at least an implicit promise that the next story will be even better than the last: these stories are irrelevant to her plight, but they are essential to her goal of retaining the passive interest of King Shahryar. Her act of narration “fulfills a function” that is independent of its “content” (Genette 233). Saleem’s tales, while they are not entirely dissociated from his plight, are no less constructed to suit the purpose of an audience, and there is reason to believe that even Saleem’s explicit audience, Padma, regards Saleem’s autobiography as a fiction. Visibly alarmed by the story of Mary Pereira’s self-banishment from the Sinai household, Padma asks Saleem, “‘What happened to her. . . . That Mary?’” (281) and seems confused when Saleem suggests that she ask the *real* Mary who, in the fictional present of the novel, is known to Padma as the woman who tends Saleem’s son: “‘How?’ Padma wails. . . . ‘How, *ask?*’” (281). Clearly, to Padma at least, Saleem’s stories are at times only tentatively connected to his “real” existence. However, there is a point at which the content of Saleem’s narrative impinges on Padma’s “reality”: a point at which she can no longer deny the veracity, if not all of the details, of the story Saleem is telling. This point, I will argue, is the anti-climax of the novel, akin to, but an inversion of, the cessation of

Scheherazade's tales and her plea to King Shahryar to spare her life and that of her three sons. It is the moment at which Saleem's promise to Padma is fulfilled: the point at which suspense yields not to consummation but to a confession of impotence. An examination of Saleem's narrative strategy which pays particular attention to what is most carefully concealed by the narrator may demonstrate how this moment of disclosure marks the critical focus of the text.

Metaphors proliferate in *Midnight's Children*, and many of these metaphors provide us with the means to discuss narrative technique in the novel. Narrative is a perforated sheet, concealing the whole while revealing a part; it is a temporal medium, like episodic cinema, which tantalizes us with its trailers but only ever partially fulfils our expectations; it is a symphony for a "discerning audience" who can distinguish which "minor chords" will "rise, swell, seize the melody." But Saleem supplies yet another metaphor which can be used to describe the structure of his narrative:

The Hummingbird is impatient to get away . . . but he has been with us, and his presence has brought us two threads which will pursue me through all my days: the thread that leads to the ghetto of the magicians; and the thread that tells the story of Nadir the rhymeless, verbless poet and a priceless silver spittoon. (45)

Narrative, then, is a labyrinth: we need only pursue the thread (or threads) which will lead us to its heart and out again. The legacy of the Hummingbird, as described in the above trailer, is a rich synopsis and foreshadowing of the real content of Saleem's narrative. What the threads lead to: Parvati, the witch, her son, and the sterilization of the Communists in the ghetto; impotence (Nadir Kahn's verblessness), the destruction of Saleem's family, and the loss of virility which corresponds to the loss of the silver spittoon. Like the fisherman's pointing finger, this passage points to a destination beyond the horizon: the destination that is Saleem's "special doom" (122). Indeed, the threads of the magicians' ghetto (from which the Hummingbird rose) and the silver spittoon lead us through the contrivances of plot, which are no less relevant than the intricate plan of the labyrinth, to the heart of meaning. Saleem, in the last pages of his narrative,

admits the fallibility of plot, but argues for the efficacy of meaning. With yet another metaphor, that of the pickling process, Saleem advises:

The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all . . . to give it shape and form — that is to say, meaning. (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity.) (461)

If Saleem's destruction is at the heart of the novel's meaning, then what is most closely associated with his doom is the Widow. The mystery of the Widow's identity is also the most carefully guarded secret of Saleem's narrative. From her introduction on page 173 of the novel, until the revelation of her identity as Indira Gandhi on page 421, the Widow's looming presence overshadows Saleem's fate. Saleem's refusal to disclose her identity — "I'm keeping [her] for the end" (192) — is the most sustained and substantial instance of deferment of disclosure in the novel: it is the minor chord that swells and, finally, overpowers the melody.

I have argued that one of the criteria for judging the effective creation of suspense is the duration between promise and fulfillment: the longer disclosure is deferred, the greater the suspense; this is not, however, the only criterion. Saleem heightens his audience's curiosity regarding the identity of the Widow in an emotionally charged rendition of his feverish dream:

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 her teeth are black. (208)

The lyric intensity of the dream, coupled with other brief references to the Widow which are equally ominous — "the Widow has done for me" (193); "a Widow with a knife" (256); "In the Widows' Hostel, I was taught, once-and-for-all, the lesson of No Escape" (383) — contribute to an overwhelming sense of Saleem's impending doom at the hands of an unidentified woman. Indira Gandhi is mentioned as a character in the novel (I will discuss her "real" existence later) more than once before her identity is linked to that of the Widow, but Gandhi is

elsewhere referred to as “The Madam” (385) and this would seem to indicate that Saleem is consciously prolonging his ultimate and explicit disclosure:

I have included this somewhat elementary summary just in case you had failed to realize that the Prime Minister of India was, in 1975, fifteen years a widow. Or (because the capital letter may be of use): a Widow. (421)

Saleem’s identification of the Widow is not the apex of the novel; rather, it is the point at which his narrative begins to transgress the boundaries of its fiction. When Saleem confesses his Widow-induced castration to Padma, he provides her with the reason for his impotence and proves to her the existence of the fictional Saleem:

But Padma knows what I can no longer do; Padma, who once, in her anger, cried out: ‘But what use are *you*, my God, as a *lover*?’ That part, at least, can be verified: in the hovel of Picture Singh, I cursed myself with the lie of impotence. . . . (440)

With a parodic echo of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Saleem offers his castration to Padma as proof of the value of his life. Like King Shahryar, Padma is compelled to take pity on and wed her narrative suitor. Not only is Saleem’s marriage to Padma, built on its foundation of impotence rather than fertility, a parody of Scheherazade’s marriage to Shahryar, Padma herself is a parody of the knife-wielding despot. Padma’s superstitious nature links her structurally with the Widow, who Saleem says is “obsessed with the stars” (427), but there are other textual clues that suggest their association. Saleem warns Padma that if she marries him, “it will turn you into a widow” (444), and in an even more telling passage, Saleem describes awakening from his vivid dream of the Widow:

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. (208; emphasis added)

Padma, hoping to undo the Widow’s curse and restore Saleem’s virility, almost succeeds in silencing his protest: she is both ally and adversary, possessing the will to redress but the power to

destroy. Saleem's sexual impotence is the price he must pay for political awareness, but by addressing his story to the wrong widow (Padma is politically ignorant and ineffective), Saleem scarcely escapes what he fears the most: absurdity. Saleem's sexual impotence is a metaphor for his political impotence. Padma is not the Widow: Saleem has missed the spittoon.

But if Saleem is impotent, incapable of delivering his message to the right despot, what of Rushdie? Uma Parameswaran argues:

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! (45n9)

Saleem's narrative transgresses his fiction when he confesses his emasculation to Padma; does Salman Rushdie's narrative transgress the propriety of fiction when he identifies the Widow as Indira Gandhi? Indira Gandhi is undoubtedly a fictional character in a novel by Salman Rushdie, just as Saleem is a character in his own autobiography: Genette argues persuasively that "we shall not confound extradiegetic with real historical existence, nor diegetic (or even metadiegetic) status with fiction" (230). He explains that "Napoleon in Balzac" is "diegetic, even though real" (229). This duality is precisely the problem which *Midnight's Children* confronts, but the novel is neither a political treatise nor a fantastical tale: it is an act of sedition, committed not just against the state, but against a prescribed conception of literature. Rushdie's implication — that if history is composed of fictions, then fiction can be composed of history — is perhaps the most potent message of *Midnight's Children*: Parameswaran's suggestion that the explicit identification of Indira Gandhi be excised from the novel is no less an attempt at castration than the Widow's emasculation of Saleem. Rushdie employs the art of suspense in this novel not just to titillate his audience, but to salvage Saleem's desperate narrative act from absurdity and, in so doing, to risk delivering a powerful political and literary message. Only future critical exegesis which takes into account the dialectic between the historical and literary dimensions of *Midnight's Children* can hope to measure the efficacy and effects of Rushdie's project.



## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Genette agrees with Marcel Muller that this circle can never be closed; he quotes Muller: "if the Hero overtakes the Narrator, it is like an asymptote: the interval separating them approaches zero, but will never reach it" (226). Is this why Saleem is cracking apart; having begun the process of fictionalizing his life, is he incapable of ever re-merging with himself?

## WORKS CITED

- Barth, John. *Chimera*. 1972. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972.
- Burton, Richard F., trans. *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment or The Book of a Thousand and One Nights*. New York: Random, 1932.
- Chambers, Ross. *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. 1972. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. 1966. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Parameswaran, Uma. "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art." *Ariel* 14.4 (1983): 34-45.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. 1981. London: Pan, 1982.
- Sternberg, Meir. *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Wilson, Keith. "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility." *Critical Quarterly* 26.3 (1984): 23-37.