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# Can the Sundarbans Speak? Multispecies Collectivity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on nonhuman agency in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and offers an account of postcolonial multispecies collectivity as an alternative to the national collectivity that most scholars see at stake in the novel. Focusing particularly on the Sundarbans section of Rushdie's text, the article draws on multispecies justice and biosemiotics to recalibrate Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak. Ultimately, the article posits that the Sundarbans forest can indeed speak and that this agency highlights the need for postcolonial studies to more fully consider multispecies approaches and bioregionalism.

**Keywords:** multispecies collective, postcolonial nation, nonhuman agency, biosemiotics, Salman Rushdie

## I. Introduction

Like many twentieth-century postcolonial novels, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) looks at the birth of the nation-state through the personal narrative of a human male subject. Yet, in the seminal chapter titled "In the Sundarbans," national collectivity and the narrating subject are left behind. This key chapter starts off with the narrator, Saleem—who is also sometimes designated "the buddha"—proclaiming, "*I'm* bound to say that *he*, the buddha, finally incapable of continuing in the submissive performance of his [national] duty, took to his heels and fled [into the Sundarbans]. . . . But the jungle, like all refuges, was entirely

*other*—was both less and more—than *he* had expected" (Rushdie 414; emphasis added). Here, in light of the jungle's "otherness," the book's first-person narration shifts to the third person. This change in narrative point of view causes the undoing of the postcolonial human "I" that is generally considered to be the focus of bildungsromans like *Midnight's Children*. Instead of positing an "I," the Sundarbans chapter foregrounds multispecies relationality, and in so doing it shows how human beings' entanglements with nonhuman nature unmake any model of the singular subject based on imperial political cartographies. The Sundarbans forest, situated at the interstices of India and Bangladesh, emerges as a third-person nonhuman subaltern subject that has its own agency and reshapes this novel about national collectivity. What the forest offers is not a national collective that reiterates the structures and legacies of British imperialism but a multispecies collective that blurs the borders between nations and between the human and the nonhuman while serving as a refuge for marginalized humans and nonhumans within the bioregion.

*Midnight's Children* (re-)narrates the history of India as a nation through the life of Saleem, a telepathic individual who leads a group of a thousand children born with magical gifts on the eve of India's independence—midnight's children. This magical community is often read as an allegory for the nation, one that evokes and literalizes Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as an imagined community. Yet critics have not fully explored how the Sundarbans chapter's startling shift in grammatical person opens up a human-nonhuman alliance that undoes the narrowly human terms of most theories of postcolonial nationalism and challenges the masculinist violence at stake in many such theories. Indeed, a closer reading of this key chapter allows us to shift from the frame of the nation to the frame of a multispecies bioregional collective that includes human peasants, rice fields, fishers, and refugees whose ecosystem the nation-state's soldiers have intervened in and destroyed.

In this article, I foreground multispecies modes of environmentalism that take into account nonhuman agency in order to understand bioregional postcolonial collectivities that operate below and beyond

the scale of the nation. I am interested in revising Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" to explore whether the Sundarbans can speak, and if so, how it does so, to whom, and to what end. To engage with these questions, I bring to my reading of Rushdie's novel both scientific approaches and anthropological-literary theories about ecosystems and pursue a biosemiotic analysis. This analysis transforms our understanding of the novel from a vehicle focused on human collectivity to one that focuses on the multispecies community and advances a mode of multispecies justice that calls for retributions against the violence inflicted on humans and nonhumans in the bioregion during the political wars after India's independence. The proliferating signs given off by the Sundarbans' nonhuman agents promote a bioregional model of postcolonial collectivity based on ecological survival and determined by a multispecies understanding of temporality, territory, and terrain as opposed to arbitrary national borders. This model of collectivity is grounded in a new materialist understanding of geography and politics, in which beings are inextricably entangled with each other and their environments. Scholars in the field of feminist new materialisms, such as Stacy Alaimo and Donna Haraway, suggest that political agency stems from such material entanglements between species in ways that require doing away with the putative sovereignty of the individual human subject. Such approaches aid us in heeding Timothy Mitchell's call for a postcolonial studies that is attentive to the intersections of politics and ecologies.

In order to pursue a multispecies postcolonial politics beyond the figure of the human, this article moves sequentially through two modes of reading the chapter "In the Sundarbans." The first reading centers the human, draws on Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community, and considers how the forest and its ghostly illusions help Saleem regain his identity and chart a new path for Indian nationalism. The second reading decenters the human and reexamines the chapter through the lens of feminist new materialisms and biosemiotics, reflecting on the larger political goals of the forest and the creatures depicted. Through acts of multispecies justice and the flow of nonhuman signs, the Sundarbans' multispecies elements move us to consider a bioregional

form of postcolonial collectivity beyond the nation. The two readings show that a postcolonialism narrowly focused on nationalism inevitably doubles down on the human in ways that obscure the significance of bioregionalism for postcolonial studies. By juxtaposing these two modes of reading, I make visible a different kind of postcolonial politics—one that questions the anthropocentric tendencies of Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and attempts to locate a nonhuman subaltern political perspective through the agency of the natural world.

## II. The Sundarbans as a Green Refuge for the Postcolonial (Human) Subject

Before I elaborate on the central role that the Sundarbans plays as a refuge for *Midnight's Children*'s Saleem, it is important to consider the present-day significance of the Sundarbans in South Asian geography. The Sundarbans is a tropical bioregion located within the Indomalayan biogeographical realm that is comprised of a network of tidal rivers, creeks, islands, and mangrove forests and stretches from eastern India to Bangladesh (De 5–7). More than half of the Sundarbans is claimed by India, while the rest lies in Bangladesh; the two parts of the Sundarbans are recognized as separate UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UNESCO). Although the two countries have divided the region based on national boundaries, the Sundarbans as a bioregion invalidates these anthropocentric borders. The World Resources Institute observes that "[a] bioregion is a land and water territory whose limits are defined not by political boundaries, but by the geographical limits of human communities and ecological systems." The Sundarbans' complicated existence between nations means that each country attempts to claim an ecology that exceeds its geographic borders. If bioregions operate beyond the limits of nationhood, then the Sundarbans as a multispecies bioregion in *Midnight's Children* exhibits a similar dilemma within a novel that is intensely concerned with the nation-state.

Rushdie's novel is often read as a narrative of nationalism in which Saleem is essentially writing the nation into existence by standing in for the national collective. Illustrating Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined political community, Saleem proclaims himself leader of

the midnight's children, saying, "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" (Rushdie 4).[1] However, the national collectivity that emerges is both incomplete and graspable only at the scale of the individual.[2] Saleem's self-proclamation that he is the "prophet" (532) of the nation exposes the issues with this model of nationalism in which one individual defines the destiny of the nation. Following this line of analysis, postcolonial scholars have almost inevitably positioned Rushdie's novel in terms of nationalism, whether they cast it as supporting it, agitating against it, or critiquing it. While Josna Rege argues that the novel remains "emotionally committed to the narrative of the nation" (366), Timothy Brennan insists that Rushdie is frustrated with the corruption of the postcolonial nation and its subjects rather than the nation as a whole (27). Still others propose that Rushdie's novel is disillusioned with the modern nation; Teresa Heffernan, for example, writes that "narratives of nations, immersed in teleological arguments, necessarily introduce the problem of majorities and minorities, of insiders and outsiders" (473). *Midnight's Children* therefore asks us to reflect on who gets to be included within the imagined community of the nation, who gets to be designated as leader, and who gets to speak.

Even if *Midnight's Children* presumes an intensively individualistic narration of the nation, this individualistic tendency is ruptured late in the novel when Saleem loses his identity due to amnesia. In the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Saleem not only loses his entire family to a bomb explosion but also misplaces his memories due to a head injury. In a lengthy speech fragment, he says, "I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love, a fleeting but also timeless explosion in which I bow my head yes I acquiesce yes in the necessity of the blow, and then I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me" (Rushdie 392). After the explosion, Saleem is not Saleem anymore, in the sense that he loses his magical connection with the Indian nation as well as his ability to speak. He gives up his loyalty to India and begins to fight for Pakistan instead. Saleem enlists in the Pakistani army and serves five years as a soldier in the tracking and intelligence unit. He is no longer a representative of the Indian nation and becomes a Pakistani

citizen. Saleem's change of citizenship and loyalty to Pakistan become a barrier to his reclamation of his identity. Pakistan is not the nation he is magically connected to; his life is inextricably tied to the Indian nation. Therefore, Saleem is fated to live with his amnesia until he decides to return to his homeland. It is important to note that Saleem's reconnection with India arises not through the human community of the nation but through a journey into the nonhuman territory of the Sundarbans.

Saleem's passage through the Sundarbans is key to my argument about the new frame of bioregional postcolonial collectivity that emerges through multispecies entanglements. The chapter "In the Sundarbans" lies in stark contrast to the rest of the novel; Saleem finds himself in a space in which the history of the nation-state seems not to exist: "[T]he jungle which is so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in. The Sundarbans: it swallows [him] up" (413).[3] The narrator describes the soldiers' journey to the Sundarbans as feeling "as though some invisible force were directing their footsteps, drawing them into a darker heart of madness, their missions send them *south south south*, always nearer to the sea" (412; emphasis added). Saleem's journey from Dacca, East Pakistan (currently Dhaka, Bangladesh) to the south leads him into the Sundarbans, a space that appears to exist outside the history of India and Pakistan and where he can become a unified subject once more. Seeking both refuge from his army duties and reclamation of his identity, Saleem ends up in a multispecies space outside nationhood.

At first glance, the Sundarbans appears to serve as a symbolic backdrop for Saleem to reclaim his identity. Indeed, the forest seems to be primeval and ahistorical, in keeping with a longstanding European colonial tendency to cast nonhuman nature as passive matter that human agents can manipulate at will. For instance, the Pakistani soldiers feel threatened by the mangrove roots growing in the rain and "snaking about thirstily in the dusk" (415). Under the harsh conditions of the forest, the soldiers begin to hallucinate figures from their past, including civilians they killed. A peasant that the soldier Ayooba shot appears in front of him and leaks a colorless fluid onto his arm, rendering Ayooba's "gun arm" immovable the next morning (418). The narrator calls this phase of the forest the time of punishment since "they fell into a state of mind

in which they would have believed the forest capable of anything; each night it sent them new punishments" (418). Such an ahistorical reading of the above scenes casts the Sundarbans as a purely symbolic blank slate onto which the men project their memories and unconscious feelings. The soldiers' hallucinations make them repent for their former violence and "it seemed that the magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them by the hand towards a new adulthood" (419). As the jungle scenes drive the bildungsroman forward, the narrator attributes the forest's role within the narrative to the larger purpose of serving human beings and nationalism by helping the soldiers reclaim their identities. Through the struggle of living in the forest, Saleem remembers who he is and commits to the nation-state once again.

Literary criticism of the novel has also mostly examined the Sundarbans chapter by thinking about its human-driven narrative of postcolonial nationalism. The illusions induced by the Sundarbans lead to "a new adulthood" (419) for the soldiers, ultimately enabling Saleem to reclaim his lost identity and get back to his prophesied role within India's postcolonial history. Neil ten Kortenaar views the breakdown of the nature/culture binary in the Sundarbans as a reminder to Saleem about the fragile condition of the nation-state. Kortenaar writes that "[t]he Sundarbans represent a 'magic' that is different from the magic of oral story-telling. . . . In the permeable world of the jungle, the boundaries separating inside from outside, states from states, and selves from each other are rendered absurd" (221). Kortenaar positions Saleem's journey through the Sundarbans as primarily driven by fear since he "is terrified of becoming wholly transparent, a green thought in a green world" (221). Thus, Saleem's fear is closely related to a fear of the dissolution of the fragile new human subjectivity of the national subject. Kortenaar terms the journey to the Sundarbans "a figurative descent into Hell" (220). However, what makes the Sundarbans a "descent into Hell" is not the eerie experience of living amongst the mangroves but rather the newly formed human subjects' fear of losing their position of significance within the nation-state.

This fear of loss of the self appears to be resolved when Saleem regains his memories in the Sundarbans. While the first phase of the

forest's punishment involves disturbing hallucinations of the soldiers' victims, the second phase generates illusions of the soldiers' loved ones. During the men's descent into nostalgia, the forest begins to serve as a memory bank where the soldiers imagine themselves with their families. However, Saleem is not granted these visions at first; instead, a blind and translucent serpent bites him on the heel (Rushdie 419). This moment results in Saleem regaining his memories, language, and identity:

> For two days he became as rigid as a tree, and his eyes crossed, so that he saw the world in mirror-image, with the right side on the left; at last he relaxed, and the look of milky abstraction was no longer in his eyes. I was rejoined to the past, jolted into unity by snake-poison, and it began to pour out through the buddha's lips. As his eyes returned to normal, his words flowed so freely that they seemed to be an aspect of the monsoon journey. . . . [H]e was reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man. (419)

The narrative shifts from the third-person point of view back to the first-person as the newly awakened Saleem takes hold of the narrative once again. Kortenaar suggests that the "realism" of memory helps Saleem resist the loss of self he feels earlier in his time in the Sundarbans (221). However, I disagree; Saleem may regain his memories and language, but his identity remains disjointed since, during and after this moment, he cannot remember his own name. When the snake bites Saleem and pours its venom into his heel, it is a form of violent and invasive agency performed by a nonhuman being. As the snake's venom enters his bloodstream, his loss of self is complete: even though the snake's agency helps Saleem reclaim his memories, it takes away an essential part of himself—his name—that ties him to his nation in an inextricable manner.[4]

Understanding the significance of Saleem's namelessness upon his passage through the Sundarbans requires a second reading of this scene, one that shifts from a perspective that always and only prioritizes human beings to one that unravels how human perspectives are reconfigured when we take into account the agency of other living creatures. In the

following second reading of the Sundarbans chapter, I foreground the multispecies entanglements that flourish and show how they resist the anthropocentric understanding of the postcolonial nation introduced in the novel. The existence of the Sundarbans between the nations of India and East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh) and its classification as a multispecies bioregion has implications for the kinds of politics it engenders. Both Kortenaar and Rushdie are greatly interested in the human narrative within the postcolonial nation—how does Saleem finally reclaim his Indian national identity while living as a Pakistani soldier in the Sundarbans? The chapter "In the Sundarbans" is a tiny blip in Saleem's larger narrative about his shared destiny with India; in it, he faces a loss of self. However, the forest does not merely serve the human protagonist's journey toward reclaiming his identity. Here, I diverge from Kortenaar and re-examine the Sundarbans chapter through a feminist new materialist and multispecies justice lens. Reading Rushdie's chapter on the Sundarbans against the grain allows us to move beyond the nation-state and interrogate the bioregional postcolonial collectivity that emerges from within the forest.

**III. The Agency of the Sundarbans and Multispecies Justice**

My purpose for re-reading the Sundarbans chapter in Rushdie's novel is to make visible the multispecies politics and speech present in the Sundarbans of the novel and therefore potentially modify Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" to "Can the Sundarbans speak?" If we amend this influential question within the field of postcolonial studies, what does it reveal about the postcolonial nation portrayed within the novel and other forms of multispecies subaltern collectivities that can affect postcolonial politics? To date, much of postcolonial studies scholarship has given priority to the human subaltern subject within literary and political representation while acknowledging the epistemological challenges associated with representing the subaltern. The key text in this field of scholarship is Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which delves into the question of representing the unrepresentable postcolonial subject "whose identity is its difference" (80). Eurocentric thinking has constructed the subaltern subject through its inability to exist as a

subject. Spivak argues that there is no way that the subaltern can speak because it is always being spoken for and constructed by the West. She adds that scholars must not try to make the subaltern speak but rather think about its silences; she writes that "[w]hen we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important" (82; emphasis in original). Although Spivak's question references the human postcolonial subject, could the same be asked of the nonhuman postcolonial subject? Unlike human subjects, the nonhuman subject cannot speak in the linguistic sense, but as multispecies scholarship reveals, the nonhuman environment constantly responds to environmental stimuli in agential ways in order to survive. By foregrounding this point, a new question emerges, namely: How can we interpret the actions of the nonhuman postcolonial subject, and what is the nonhuman postcolonial subject's relationship to postcolonial politics?

To answer this question, I will draw on Mitchell's "Can the Mosquito Speak?" to understand the political stakes of a multispecies postcoloniality. Mitchell's piece explores the interconnections between environmental and postcolonial history and pushes readers to consider nonhuman actors within a political environment. Examining the German and Italian invasion of Egypt in 1942 during the Second World War, Mitchell reflects on how the malaria epidemic created by the war led to another kind of invasion ravaging Egypt and shaping its political future. He notes: "It is as if the elements are somehow incommensurable. They seem to involve very different forces, agents, elements, spatial scales, and temporalities. They shape one another, yet their heterogeneity offers a resistance to explanation" (Mitchell 27). Even though the gambiae mosquito clearly played a political role in shaping Egypt's past and future, Mitchell states that "the mosquito . . . is said to belong to nature. It cannot speak" (50).[5] This perspective casts the gambiae mosquito and nature itself into the realm of the subaltern, where speech and agency are impossible. The same can be said of the Sundarbans in Rushdie's novel. However, I argue that using a multispecies justice lens enables us to perceive the many ways in which the Sundarbans speaks within the novel and affects the postcolonial politics of India—renouncing nationalism

and advocating bioregional collectivity. The incommensurability between humanist politics and multispecies politics does not mean that we should refuse to acknowledge the latter's existence but that we should explore the novel using new modes of interpretation and politics.

Feminist new materialisms offer a relatively new mode of environmentalism that considers the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman through a material approach that looks at the intermingling of flesh (the porosity of the human body) and place (the environmental elements that surround and act on us). Alaimo argues that we need to espouse a multispecies liveliness to displace human exceptionalism. She contends that "[n]ew materialisms, insisting on the agency and significance of matter, maintain that . . . 'nature,' acts, interacts, and even intra-acts within, through, and around human bodies and practices" (1). The loss of sovereignty felt by the individual human subject leads to transcorporeality, "a posthumanist or counter-humanist sense of the self as opening out unto the larger material world and being penetrated by all sorts of substances and material agencies that may or may not be captured" (Alaimo 4). Further, this act of exposure is a kind of vulnerability that offers political agency through loss of sovereignty. Haraway presents a mode of multispecies engagement grounded in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "becoming." Haraway advocates a "becoming-with each other" (3), which involves making kin, or "oddkin" (2), as Haraway calls it. Through making oddkin, Haraway foregrounds alternative presents in which the creatures of the earth show us new ways of living and dying together (1). In the context of *Midnight's Children*, feminist new materialisms can help us examine the nonhuman agency prevalent in the Sundarbans and find other ways of reading the forest that do not prioritize the human protagonist.

I should note that this recent interest in multispecies approaches that cede human sovereignty reads differently in the context of subaltern and race studies, which focus on human subjects who have never enjoyed the sovereign subjectivity that critics are now trying to eliminate. Although postcolonial critics tend to prioritize the human in their analyses by arguing for the sovereignty of politically dispossessed humans, my own approach is to explore the ways that attending to persons and

beings dispossessed by and at the margins of empire can help deepen our sense of what multispecies collectivity can look like and assist us in engaging the political risks at stake in a multispecies justice angle. Multispecies justice is a fraught concept since democratizing justice for the environment and for the human can worsen power dynamics for humans who are not yet fully recognized as human. While multispecies environmentalism questions the ontological differences between humans and other species, environmental justice perspectives focus on the power differentials that allow some humans to categorize others as belonging to the human species or not (Heise 198). Ursula Heise understands multispecies justice as "a way of exploring how [these] divergent theoretical commitments might become mutually productive" (198). Drawing on Heise's understanding of this productive tension between the categories of human and nonhuman, Cajetan Iheka emphasizes the importance of "a holistic sense of ecological survival, premised on rights and obligations to human and nonhuman forms" (15). He adds that the goal of multispecies justice is "the all-important need to create spaces and habitats where various species can thrive" (15). This notion of a holistic multispecies space for survival is key to the Sundarbans' agency within *Midnight's Children* because it attempts to advocate a model of bioregional collectivity based on ecological livelihood.

A multispecies justice reading of the Sundarbans chapter reveals the forest's multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing agencies that wreak havoc on the human soldiers. As soon as the soldiers enter the forest, it functions as a kind of living consciousness and responds to the soldiers' affective behaviors. When Ayooba starts crying, the rains begin, which the narrator defines as "the logic of the jungle" (Rushdie 415). Ayooba's tears provoke the torrential rains, which cause the mangrove roots to swell up in size; the jungle picks up on the affects of the humans residing within it and changes because of the biotic forces that comprise it. The rains also serve as an index of the forest's mourning over the soldiers' previous violent acts. Although the forest does not seem to be concerned with nationalism (a political fiction) per se, the effects of nationalism impact the local population of the bioregion—the production of communities of refugees that penetrate it and human directives

to "manage" its ecologies in ways that serve certain human beings' interests. The soldiers begin to hallucinate the civilians they killed, which appears to be the forest's system of justice against the effects of nationalism. Rushdie writes that "each night [the forest] sent them new punishments, the accusing eyes of the wives of men they had tracked down and seized, the screaming and monkey-gibbering of children left fatherless by their work" (418). The forest's "punishments" are more than just projections of the soldiers' feelings of guilt and point to the multiple agencies present in the forest, such as the chattering birds and chirping insects. The use of the singular forest suggests that Rushdie is not really thinking of the many diverse agencies comprised within that are responsible for the haunting illusions of death.

These hallucinations of civilian death may seem arbitrary and invite the question of why the Sundarbans cares about human histories of violent postcolonial nationalism in the first place. The above reading of the Sundarbans as an arbiter of punishment might indicate the pathetic fallacy at work: human interests and affects are projected onto features of the natural environment. However, a closer examination reveals the Sundarbans' own goals. Here, we can begin to think about the image of the dying peasant that I referenced in my first reading of the novel:

> [O]ne night Ayooba awoke in the dark to find the translucent figure of a peasant with a bullet-hole in his heart and his scythe in his hand staring mournfully down at him, and as he struggled to get out of the boat . . . the peasant leaked a colorless fluid which flowed out of the hole in his heart and on to Ayooba's gun arm. The next morning Ayooba's right arm refused to move; it hung rigidly by his side as if it had been set in plaster. (418)

Much like the translucent snake that pours its venom into Saleem's heel and reconnects him with his memories, the peasant transfers a colorless, incapacitating fluid into Ayooba's arm. While the snake's agency results in a positive action, the peasant disables Ayooba and leaves his arm paralyzed. This figure of the peasant wielding a scythe is first introduced in the chapter preceding the men's entry into the Sundarbans.

In the process of tracking guerilla resistance, the soldiers reach the rice paddies of eastern India and begin their journey toward the forest; however, there is a moment right before they enter the Sundarbans when a peasant starts chasing the soldiers' boat—"a gesticulating peasant with a scythe, Father Time enraged" (413).[6] Before the peasant can say a word, Ayooba shoots him and the "arms . . . of [the] peasant rise up as though in prayer; knees kneel in paddy-water; a face plunges below the water-level to touch its forehead to the earth" (413). The narrator associates the peasant with Father Time, an allegorical representation of time and often of mortality; however, if we set aside this anthropocentric understanding, a multispecies reading can offer a different way of interpreting the image. The peasant is a figure who is frequently in and out of the forest, partaking in multispecies collectivities through his agricultural work in the rice paddies. When the soldiers murder the peasant on his rice paddy, they commit an act of violence against the land by upsetting the delicate temporality and earth rhythms of the peasant's agricultural work. When the dead peasant keels over onto the earth, the forest senses the violence committed against one of its own, a peasant who is inscribed in an ecological system of livelihood that both depends on and provides for the forest and rice paddies surrounding it.

This moment in the text signifies a communal relationship between the Sundarbans forest and the peasant population living in and near the region and highlights the bioregional multispecies collective that exists within and between nations. The Sundarbans mangroves support both humans and nonhumans living in this region, creating an ecosystem as they "provide habitats and food for a very high diversity of biota," "contribute significantly to delta building and prevent erosion," "support enormous coastal fisheries," and protect coastal populations from the frequent cyclonic storms of the region (Gopal and Chauhan 1737). The lives of local human communities are inextricably linked to the resources of the mangroves since "[m]ore than 12 million people (2011 estimate; 4.5 million in India, 7.5 million in Bangladesh) live in and around the Sundarbans" (Gopal and Chauhan 1738), including rice farmers, shrimp farmers, fishers, honey collectors, and refugees who settled in the region following the various partitions and independence

movements in the late twentieth century (Bhalla). Indeed, Rushdie's soldiers are also operating within the political context of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, during which ten million refugees fled across the borders of what was then East Pakistan into India, many choosing to settle in the Sundarbans region. The significance of peasants within the ecosystem of the Sundarbans means that they occupy a critical position within the multispecies landscape. As noted, the narrator refers to the dead peasant as "Father Time" and Ayooba's senseless shooting leads to "Time [lying] dead in a rice-paddy" (Rushdie 413). Although casting the peasant as Father Time prioritizes the nation time within which the soldiers are operating, if we take a multispecies justice approach to this scene, then the peasant is inscribed within the earthly rhythms of the Sundarbans. The soldiers' violence against the peasant ultimately impairs the temporality of the bioregion and the peasant's work. Just as the peasant controls the cycle of the harvest and is simultaneously shaped by the rhythms of the forest, the biotic life of the Sundarbans depends on these cyclical processes for survival, highlighting the importance of bioregional temporality and collectivity within this multispecies justice reading.

The soldiers' journey through the Sundarbans is marked by numerous experiences of the bioregion's vengeance for the peasant's death. The violent agency of the mangroves, mud, and insects in the forest point to the existence of this bioregional multispecies collective, which punishes the soldiers for killing members of its community that sustain the forest's ecosystem. The soldiers "row on, south south south, they have murdered the hours and forgotten the date" (413). Just as the soldiers' murders of peasants and civilians living in and around the Sundarbans upset the temporal rhythms of the bioregion, the forest reminds them of their violence through haunting illusions and lamentations of their victims. Unable to bear the accusing voices any longer, the soldiers stuff their ears with the mud of the forest (421). However, the mud, which contains jungle insects and bird droppings, infects the soldiers' ears, turning them deaf. The narrator observes that "although they were spared the singsong accusations of the jungle, they were now obliged to converse in a rudimentary form of sign-language. They seemed, however, to prefer their diseased deafness to the unpalatable secrets which the sundri-leaves

had whispered in their ears" (421). While the soldiers translate these "secrets" to mean the violence they committed in the name of nationalism, these secrets could also refer to the violence against nonhuman nature that humans have been perpetrating for ages. Although their deafness causes the soldiers to employ an indexical sign language, they experience momentary relief that they are unable to hear or feel the guilt of their violent acts. Saleem, however, carries the burden of hearing the accusations of his victims, "as though he alone were willing to bear the retribution of the jungle, as though he were bowing his head before the inevitability of his guilt" (421). Saleem perhaps recognizes the forest's system of justice; he terms the hallucinations caused by the forest "the retribution of the jungle," as if the forest itself were taking revenge against the soldiers' prior acts of violence. However, the forest's environment does not necessarily include the entire nation, since such a reading would take place from the standpoint of human collectivity. Rather, the Sundarbans' retribution points to the forest's recognition of the bioregional multispecies collective it is a part of since it punishes the soldiers for killing civilians living in and around the Sundarbans who both sustain and are sustained by the forest's ecosystem.

At the same time, the forest's material agency causes the soldiers' bodies to slowly become a part of the forest and its multispecies collective of insects and mangroves. When the soldiers wake up in the morning, they find their bodies covered in leeches, "which were almost entirely colorless owing to the absence of direct sunlight, but which had now turned bright red because they were full of blood, and which, one by one, exploded on the bodies of the four human beings, being too greedy to stop sucking when they were full" (416). Although the narrator provides a scientific explanation for the leeches' transparency, the stark contrast between their previous translucence and their current blood-red color speaks to their material consumption of the humans' blood as well as their subsumption of the humans' spirits. As the leeches explode with the blood they have consumed, "[b]lood trickled down legs and on to the forest floor; the jungle sucked it in, and knew what they were like" (416). The blood and spirits that the leeches ingested are now consumed for the second time by the forest floor, an event that

results in the narrator's ominous statement that the forest "knew what they were like," even though these humans (unlike the peasant figure) knew nothing about the forest. As the forest consumes the material fluids of the soldiers, it also begins to make them a part of the landscape ontologically.

Through these acts of material consumption, the forest interpellates the soldiers, changing them from within such that they become a part of the bioregional collective of the forest. The soldiers decide to satisfy their thirst by drinking rainwater dripping from the leaves of the trees. However, "perhaps because the water came to them by way of sundri leaves and mangrove branches and nipa fronds, it acquired on its journey something of the insanity of the jungle, so that as they drank they fell deeper and deeper into the thraldom of that livid green world where the birds had voices like creaking wood and all the snakes were blind" (417). Drinking the rainwater induces a "turbid, miasmic state of mind" (417) in the men as the water they consume carries a trace of the forest's bioregional consciousness, gesturing to its own ontological status that is both deeply estranging yet insistent on bringing the humans within its collective. The soldiers begin to understand the birds' speech and the snakes' senses. The forest's ontological force is unconcerned with nation time or the national collective but measures itself through the multispecies communities that reside within. This force seeps into human consciousness as human and nonhuman worlds intertwine through the act of material consumption.

The forest's agency thus seems to have the larger purpose of creating ontological change within the humans. Once the forest ends its "time of punishment," it leads the soldiers to a temple where they see four women dancing and decide to join them. Yet the day comes when the merriment ends and the soldiers realize their bodies are becoming transparent:

> In their alarm they understood that this was the last and worst of the jungle's tricks, that by giving them their heart's desire it was fooling them into using up their dreams, so that as their dream-life seeped out of them they became as hollow and trans-

> lucent as glass. The buddha saw now that the colorlessness of insects and leeches and snakes might have more to do with the depredations worked on their insectly, leechy, snakish imaginations than with the absence of sunlight. . . . [A]wakened as if for the first time by the shock of translucency, they looked at the temple with new eyes, seeing the great gaping cracks in the solid rock . . . [and] four funeral pyres. (422–23)

As the soldiers realize that the women they have been dancing with are actually dead, they finally comprehend the extent to which the forest's agency has changed their perception, making their imaginations "insectly, leechy, [and] snakish," much like the creatures inhabiting the forest.[7] Further, the narrator describes the insects and snakes in the forest as "hollow and translucent," which suggests their deficiency in comparison to the ostensibly colorful dream-lives and desires of the men. However, this interpretation of the translucent creatures in the forest is a distinctly anthropocentric understanding of the rich biotic life prevalent in this region. Just as the forest brings the humans within its multispecies collective, it also transforms their material presence by turning their bodies transparent like the colorless leeches and snakes. The forest's purpose, which was previously to punish, turns out to be the subsumption of the human within its bioregional collective. Drawing on a new materialist lens, we might read this goal as an endeavor to purge the humans of their certainty that they are entirely different from, and superior to, the supposedly lower forms of creation. Instead, they begin to resemble the rich biotic life of the bioregion and the diversity of life forms that a multispecies justice approach encourages us to recognize. The forest's retribution evokes Gandhi's principle of nonviolence as the Sundarbans cry out against the numerous injustices and murders committed in the name of nationalism and against the bioregional collective.

In turning away from human histories, the forest pushes us to consider how the bioregion promotes a model of collectivity that does not fit the standard human national collective. The forest "speaks" within the novel in surprising ways. However, it must be noted that Rushdie's Sundarbans was created with the aim of serving as a symbolic backdrop

for the human characters in the novel, thus functioning as mere setting. Although I have worked to pull a multispecies bioregional collective from Rushdie's jungle, it remains the case that Rushdie certainly did not write from or with an environmental perspective. Partly for this reason, his version of the Sundarbans is deficient due to its translucency and inability to recognize the multiplicity of this biota. As we consider the variety of "translucent" creatures such as leeches, snakes, and ghosts that occupy the Sundarbans, we can begin to perceive other ways of reading the forest's signs as not translucence or hollowness but a kind of speech stemming from its own ontology.

**IV. Reading the Translucent Creatures in the Sundarbans**

Although Rushdie does not provide this alternative mode of reading the semiotic environment of the Sundarbans, the novel pushes us toward considering a biosemiotic reading of the Sundarbans' translucence. Biosemiotics refers to the production and interpretation of signs in the biological realm that are non-linguistic (Hoffmeyer, "Biosemiotics"). Biology and semiotics scholars such as Thomas A. Sebeok, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Jakob von Uexküll, and Charles Sanders Peirce emphasize this connection between life and semiotics, arguing that the basic unit of life is the sign and not the molecule, since life depends on the transmission and interpretation of messages within DNA. As I outline above, a multispecies justice reading of the Sundarbans' agency within *Midnight's Children* allows us to consider a bioregional multispecies collective that exists beyond and between nations. Biosemiotics can help us uncover the non-linguistic signs prevalent in the multispecies Sundarbans that explicate the stakes of a bioregional postcolonial collectivity that the forest both sustains and is sustained by.

Recent work in new anthropology and literary studies spotlights the generative points of inquiry that become visible upon attending to nonhuman signs in the environment. Eduardo Kohn argues that for the Runa in Ávila, nonhuman entities such as jaguars, trees, and parakeets produce, represent, and interpret signs, resulting in what he terms "an ecology of selves" (16). Kohn suggests that the interconnected web of the material world compels readers to think an "anthropology beyond

the human" (7). Amanda Goldstein also examines how human beings are not the only ones who give off and take in signs; nonhuman life forms do so as well. She writes: "Exfoliating into images, beings decay into each other's senses, perceiving one another by means of an unwilled traffic in 'tenuous figures'" (104). Goldstein views phenomenal perception by life forms as a kind of semiosis. Building on her analysis, I argue that in *Midnight's Children*, the forest's ghostly illusions also function as a form of semiosis that the human soldiers receive and interpret in different ways. The ghostly and translucent nature of the forest's illusions pose representational challenges to human beings' efforts to understand forest semiotics. Although the soldiers see the illusion of the peasant as a form of vengeance against their violent murder, this ghostly illusion could very well have been a nonhuman creature that paralyzes Ayooba's gun arm to prevent further violence against its multispecies bioregional collective. Similarly, the novel's focus on the translucency of the numerous creatures in the forest might obscure the Sundarbans' speech—it may only ever appear to us in bits and pieces through the agency of these translucent creatures.

Reading the nonhuman signs in Rushdie's novel makes visible the Sundarbans' speech in a way that is already limned through the multispecies agency I describe above. The ending of the novel signifies a similar turn away from the national collective and instead gestures toward a multispecies collective framework. Saleem is occupied managing a chutney factory. He asks: "What is required for chutnification? Raw materials, obviously—fruit, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices. . . . But also: eyes, blue as ice, which are undeceived by the superficial blandishments of fruit; . . . a nose capable of discerning the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humors and messages and emotions" (Rushdie 530). This notion of chutnification, or pickling (involving a blending of substances and preservation), is interpreted by scholars such as Todd Giles and Judith Plotz as a metaphor for the writing of history or the sociopolitical aspect of nation-building by bringing together dissimilar communities and ideas (Giles 183; Plotz 29). However, in these lines, Saleem compares the process of pickling to being able to apprehend the hidden language of raw materials and the nonhuman world. Therefore,

the "what-must-be-pickled" may stand for the nonhuman signs from the Sundarbans that the narrator is now able to read. He adds: "To pickle is to give immortality. . . . One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history" (Rushdie 531). These "pickles of history" perhaps refer to the nonhuman mode of history that the Sundarbans provides and an understanding of postcolonial collectivity not through a national lens but a bioregional multispecies one instead.

Saleem's changed perspective on postcolonial collectivity is solidified in the novel's final pages. Saleem dies after getting trampled by crowds during Independence Day. However, the description of his death is written in the future tense and hints at a different sort of ending. He says, "we will drive *south south south* into the heart of the tumultuous crowds. . . . The dense crowd, the crowd without boundaries, growing until it fills the world" (532; emphasis added). Saleem's statement that he will move "south south south" echoes the journey of the soldiers rowing "south south south" into the Sundarbans (413). If Saleem is indeed referring to the Sundarbans through this cardinal direction, then the "crowd" no longer refers to the human crowds of Independence Day and instead alludes to the multispecies crowds in and around the bioregion of the Sundarbans, including humans and nonhumans alike. He adds that "they will trample me underfoot, . . . reducing me to specks of voiceless dust . . . [b]ecause it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes" (533). This scene initially appears to refer to the national collective, but a closer examination of the "annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes" reveals that Saleem may have been swallowed up by the Sundarbans to become part of the multispecies bioregional collective that he previously resisted.

**V. Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article, I examined the notion of the nation that the novel puts forth. The Sundarbans chapter conforms to neither Anderson's anthropological notion of the nation as an imagined human community nor Saleem's magical realist one in which he sees

the midnight's children as a political community. Instead, the forest becomes a political actor by forcing the soldiers to interrogate the violent model of nationalism that they were inscribed in and the failure of the nation as a mode of collectivity. The forest pushes them to consider the multispecies bioregional collective that exists beyond and between nations and consists of flora and fauna along with human figures who exist in symbiotic relationships with their nonhuman allies in this unique environment. The forest's agency creates a ripple effect. Saleem decides to renounce his prophesied role within the nation soon after he leaves the forest, saying, "*Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history?*" (440; emphasis in original). He adds: "I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. . . . I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine" (440). In using this language of a collective identity, Saleem hints at his newly multispecies positionality and the ontological changes that the forest has brought about.[8] At the same time, his reference to Martin Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" not only eliminates the boundaries between the self and the world but also emphasizes how the forest as a semiotic environment has seeped into Saleem's very self, which we see embodied in his pickling process. Earlier in the novel, Saleem gestures toward his position as a witness, saying, "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" (Rushdie 4). Saleem not only foreshadows his position as leader of midnight's children but also his encounter with the Sundarbans' agency. He is ultimately swallowed within its ontology. The Saleem that leaves the Sundarbans is not the same one that arrives there; he now occupies a latent multispecies positionality. Through this metafictional moment, Saleem implies that the individual can never truly be separated from the collective and, further, that humans cannot be separated from their broader multispecies environment.

*Midnight's Children* redefines the narrative of the birth of the nation-state through the Sundarbans' agency. Saleem enters the forest when he is at his weakest, empty of his national identity. He leaves the forest

a changed man. Most scholars view Saleem's journey through the Sundarbans as a reclamation of his identity, since the forest is said to exist outside of the history of the nation; however, my analysis of multispecies agency through the lenses of feminist new materialism and biosemiotics emphasizes how the forest creates its own bioregional collective. The forest's many multispecies elements—leeches, snakes, and mud—produce a cycle of agency through which the forest punishes the soldiers' nationalist violence against the members of the bioregion and subsumes the humans within its ontological system. The Sundarbans uses multispecies justice to promote a multispecies model of bioregional collectivity that exists beyond and between nations based on ecological survival. Further, the larger goal of the forest is to subsume the human within itself, and it succeeds in doing so by making Saleem relinquish his individualistic narrative and embrace the collective multispecies identity of which he is now a part.

## Notes

1 Saleem's insistence that the individual narrative is connected to the collective one within a postcolonial framework relates to Jameson's argument that so-called third-world literature functions as national allegory. Jameson claims "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (69; emphasis in original). This idea is reflected in *Midnight's Children*, which draws a connection between India's birth as a nation and Saleem's own birth and declares from the very outset that the personal and the political are inextricably connected.

2 *Midnight's Children* often proposes counternarratives to major political events in India's history such as Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Saleem declares that "in [his] India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (190), and the novel suggests that filtering the nation through the scale of an individual can be problematic.

3 Rushdie's description of the Sundarbans as a "historyless" (414) space of anonymity is a bit problematic. History does not just extend to humans and their political events. Rather, environmental history is rich in bioregions such as the Sundarbans rainforest, where the biodiversity of species warrants research and preservation. Rushdie's understanding of history in this scene is a anthropocentric one, which could be contested.

4 When Saleem is born at the stroke of midnight during India's independence, the newspaper publishes his name and photo under the headline "Midnight's Child"

(Rushdie 133). Right from his birth, Saleem's identity and name are connected to his nation purely due to the temporal collision of his birth with that of the nation.

5 Mitchell claims that the gambiae mosquito, which led to the malaria epidemic in Egypt, had large-scale consequences for Egypt's industry, development, and political status. The recently constructed Aswan Dam along the Nile River "altered the distribution and timing of its flow, as well as the temperature and chemistry of the water" (24). The gambiae mosquito was able to spread from one breeding area to the other because of these changes to the river. Further, a fertilizer shortage due to the war led to a severe shortage of food in the region and made the epidemic worse. In the end, British tactics to put an end to the epidemic were not working and they passed the reign over to the Egyptian government to handle the situation. When the Wafd party returned to power with British help in 1942, it passed the Law for the Improvement of Village Health and spurred the growth of democratic and national spirit in Egypt (38–39). By connecting the links between these disparate events, Mitchell shows how the gambiae mosquito's actions in interaction with human agency deeply impacted Egypt as a nation during this time.

6 The peasant is upset since Saleem slept with his wife earlier in the chapter. Saleem is often referred to as an "old billy-goat" (413) for the way he treats the local women of the village. Scholars such as Verma argue that Rushdie's representation of women in the novel is misogynistic. However, Weickgenannt argues that the images of female monstrosity in the novel deliberately employ misogyny to criticize the "nation's unwillingness to grant women an equal status and an equal say in constituting the nation" (81). Both arguments highlight how Saleem's India is one specifically made for male national subjects of a certain class and excludes women, Indigenous peoples, peasants, refugees, and nonhumans.

7 It is interesting to note that the Sundarbans of the novel mostly features insects and snakes rather than the tiger for which the bioregion is famous. De notes that the tiger is at the apex of the hierarchy of both terrestrial and aquatic animals in the Sundarbans, adding that "[i]t is almost impossible to land anywhere in the forests without coming across the pug marks of the tiger" (22). Rushdie's decision to exclude the tiger and include only insects and snakes suggests that the Sundarbans of the novel is a fictional one that does not include animals like the tiger that can threaten the survival of the human characters. Perhaps the multispecies agency of the Sundarbans needs to be latent for the narrative to move forward in the way that it does, privileging the survival and future of the human protagonist.

8 Rushdie's intention might not have been to write Saleem as a multispecies character who realizes his place within the bioregion. Yet I argue that the existence of the Sundarbans is just as important to Saleem as the nation of India, to which he is tied through destiny.

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