

**The Nose of a Hero: Finding the Mock Heroic in Salman  
Rushdie's Midnight's Children**

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Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* constructs a complex view of India through the juxtaposition between story telling and history. These two narrative styles create a space in which Rushdie is able to explore the fluidity of individuality within a citizen-driven society. This fluidity is primarily characterized by individual accounts of historical events, through which the readers are brought to an awareness which is person-centered, as opposed to a simple historical account. Rushdie's main character Saleem Sinai is the narrator through which most of these stories are told, mostly in a semi-autobiographical style. In retelling his own life's story, Saleem attempts to retell the story of India. Problems arise for Saleem as he places himself within a dichotomy of individuality and society, acting as the moral judge and internal voice for a nation of millions. While the thought of becoming the voice that is "bound to history" may seem romantic to our character Saleem, it is clear that his narration is unreliable, his actions are unjustified and he is in the process of being destroyed because of his quest for history. What Saleem does succeed is reflecting in the beauty of chaos and the way in which an unreliable narrator may reveal deeper understanding of certain postcolonial themes. It is supremely necessary to establish from the beginning the idea that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator and is not meant to be "an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India" (*Errata* 23). Instead, Saleem is an intelligent yet slightly misguided member of society who is writing down memories which are individualized segments of history.

*Midnight's Children*, originally published in 1980 is considered by most critics to be a dominant postcolonial text. However, as Saleem's character is developed as an unreliable anti hero, *Midnight's Children* also operates as a mock heroic through the intersection of the individual and certain postcolonial themes. This paper intends to explore the way in which the

thematic elements suggest that *Midnight's Children* operates as a mock heroic narrative; through not only Saleem's experience as the absurd hero, but also the national and historical components which are considered integral to any postcolonial novel. The mock heroic genre heralds primarily from the Restoration and Augustan authors John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a mock-heroic as that which "imitates in a derisive or satirical manner the heroic style in literature; evoking the actions or manner of a hero, esp. humorously in un-heroic circumstances" ("mock heroic"). Saleem professes himself to be the voice of the new India, assuming a serious political burden and "evoking" these heroic manners. However, considering the that he is a genetic conglomerate of three major ethnicities in India, he is impotent and his magical ability to spy on people is based an oversized "phallic" nose, Saleem is without a doubt absurd. His attempts to behave heroically is thwarted by his physical and emotional traits, thus lending a satirical voice to this postcolonial novel.

Saleem's primary feature is his oversized nose. Within this nose lies the power to navigate his country and the deepest thoughts of its inhabitants. As a result, Saleem has a swollen sense of importance, stemming from his ability to spy on people and "change" history. This unusual power is derived from the date of his birth: midnight August 15, 1947, the moment in which India became independent. Every child born on this hour had some form of magical gift which connected them to their nation's fate. Saleem places great esteem upon the relationship between himself and the other children born on this hour. They are for Saleem his true family; in the wake of betrayal from his biological and national family, this secret magical group becomes a point of legitimacy.

Despite the gift of a secret connection with an elite group of citizens, it remains that

Saleem's power is anchored in the grotesqueness of his body. Continually undermining the brevity of its power, an oversized runny nose maintains a comedic element throughout each intuition Saleem receives, returning to the premise that a mock heroic places a hero "humorously in unheroic circumstances" (mock heroic). Well aware of this, Saleem tells us: "If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance....perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque" (*Midnight's Children* 121). Introducing himself, Saleem says: "I have been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country...! was left entirely without a say in the matter.[...] And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time" (1).

Here on the very first page there are several characteristics which Saleem will retain throughout the novel and help define him as an anti hero. When it suits him, Saleem will shift responsibility away from himself and place it upon history, nation, time and fate. He reminds us; "I was left entirely without a say in the matter". Secondly Saleem is revealing his social position: "remember the wild profusion of my inheritance" which suggests a magnificence, a richness which transcends monetary wealth. Having been born into a poor family then switched at birth to live with the Sinais, Saleem inherited not only the auspices of his false family. For Saleem, the true family inheritance are powers through his nose. Unfortunately, those around him do not appreciate his gift; instead they tease Saleem for his huge nose rarely taking him as seriously as he would like. Saleem's predicament of absurdity is wrapped up in his physical appearance and people's perception of it. He is a light-skinned caricatured individual without any resemblance to his family. For those who do not appreciate the powers Saleem's nose gives him, he is more in their way than a valuable component to national history, further substantiating the necessary

satire for the mock heroic. Similar Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* as he intertwines Helen of Troy's rape with a woman's lock of hair stolen from her, Salman Rushdie connects Saleem to the abstract elements of individuality and history through his nose. This concept of the mock heroic is essential in examining Saleem Sinai as the postcolonial anti hero.

Reading *Midnight's Children* as a mock heroic text plays with colonialism on the narrative level. As a genre popular at the beginning of Britain's colonial prowess, the mock heroic carries with it significant historical connotations. Rushdie connects his characters with the absurd and satirical tones of the traditional mock heroic in order to pay homage to these specific historical moments. Neil Kortenaar examines these nods to the colonial era via art. His paper "Rushdie Give the Finger Back to the Empire" focuses on a painting hanging in Saleem's childhood home which bears similarities to a painting by Sir John Everett Millais called The Boyhood of Raleigh. Kortenaar writes that "The print has been hung in Baby Saleem's bedroom by his parents so that he might identify with Raleigh. The Sinais need the picture's call to make history, a task that is figured in terms of repeating the heroic narrative of the past and extending that narrative into the future" (Kortenaar). For Saleem to grow up identifying with Sir Walter Raleigh is a specific mock heroic technique; Rushdie is "evoking the actions or manner of a hero" upon the young Saleem. It is no coincidence that Sir Walter Raleigh was solely responsible for establishing the second British colony on the American continent. Saleem's association with a powerful colonial figure places specific pressure on Saleem to perform a role for his nation as Raleigh had for England. Instead of colonizing a continent, Saleem's quest throughout the novel is to bring meaning to his own life in the context of India. His body is a testament to the multiplicity of his nation, bearing the burden of the masses which he has collected over the year, beginning with a

symbol of colonial power and oppression hanging over him in his childhood.

In this way Saleem is not only physically incapable of intimacy, he is also psychologically estranged from his countrymen. In identifying with Raleigh, Saleem's voice as the new India is irrevocably tied to a former colonial power. Saleem grew up with a great many expectations, from others and himself. His attempts to live up to those expectations have led him to realize that he has become what he has always feared: absurd (M.C. 4). It is the tension which Saleem experiences between the political and personal realms which allow for the undermining of history and the exaltation of memory.

Saleem is accompanied by his caretaker and would be lover, Padma, who listens to the stories he tells and usually scoffs at his lofty, longwinded narrative. She plays a crucial role for Saleem in that she has his confidence. She hears his stories and in this way she reflects Rushdie's readers, also playing a more active one as the role of the modifier. As this modifier, Padma challenges Saleem's legitimacy, inserting herself into the narrative, much to his disgust. Padma is able to help the reader identify Saleem's inconsistent assertion of power through her mockery of his longwinded egocentric monologues.

This power, when it is discovered, becomes a new connection to the other children sharing his birthday. He begins to refer to these other children as his true brothers and sisters. Saleem's biological family tree is surprisingly more confused than this magical alliance with the Midnight's Children. Switched at birth by a nurse Mary Pereria with a boy named Shiva, Saleem's destiny changes from that of abject poverty to a life of privilege. Saleem's true father is attributed to Wee Willie Winkie but rumored to be a British gentleman named Methwold with whom Saleem's biological mother had an affair. Saleem's history and lineage therefore contains

Hindu, Muslim, and Christian elements, connecting him to nearly every group represented in India in the 1950s both religious and ethnic.

The idea of Rushdie's commandeering of the mock heroic genre from the colonial period allows three specific themes in the novel to be examined through the lens of the mock heroic. Saleem's perspective is the only one we are given for the novel, therefore themes he reveals will depend on his own voice and experiences for support. The first and perhaps most overarching theme of all in this novel is the question of history. Saleem travels through his life, writing down his story, aware that his-story has been stolen from him; be it the well-intentioned nurse who switched him at birth or the loss of his sole connection to the other children born at midnight August 15, 1947. History may be viewed as a tool of validation or degradation within most cultures. Saleem is deprived of the legitimacy which is provided by biological origin, instead turning to the time of his birth to supplement it. As a result, instead of relying upon historical accounts, Saleem turns to his memories, many of which he was not even living when they occurred. Rushdie discusses this "memory" narrative, suspecting that many memories however contrived they may be contain crucial moments which reveal an ultimately deeper thought: "I 'remember' how frightened we all were, I 'recall' people making nervy little jokes [...] I also know that I could not possibly have been in India at that time. I was interested to find that *even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks* my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance" (Errata 24). Specifically in the beginning sequence with Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz, a simple nose bleed is suddenly symbolic of a spiritual epiphany, thrusting Aadam and future generations into a history of questioning and re-creation. This section is critical in understanding elements of

Saleem's psyche. Aadam plays a central role; he is the patriarch which Saleem fashions himself after intellectually. This detailed and personal account of his grandfather is told in an omniscient narrative style; Saleem is somehow able to recount his grandfather's feelings and reactions to the fantastic things happening to him on the prayer mat. However, not only did this story occur thirty-two years *prior* to Saleem's birth, Aadam Aziz is in no way actually related to him. Thus Saleem's recounting of History is again connected to the idea of the mock heroic as his historical narrative skirts the edge of absurdity.

Secondly, tied very closely to history, is the specific cultural responsibility a citizen has to be active in one's country. Responsibility in many countries may go no further than referring to oneself as being British, Indian or American. These simple examples of citizenship become more complicated when as in India's case in 1947 border lines are created, all of sudden requiring people of different ethnic and religious groups to be called "Palestinian" and "Indian" denoting similar backgrounds and beliefs. In such colonial examples, these labels are meaningless, creating semantic tension. Many critics have used Saleem Sinai as a national allegory, relating his life and personal metaphors as allusive to the struggle India had as an emerging nation. As we know, Saleem has no specific family. Instead, his relations are scattered across three nationalities, several religions and most importantly, the magical connection to the people within India's borders. His paradoxical existence allows us to explore a deeper concept of belonging. It is tempting to treat Saleem as the capstone to an extremely complex cultural pyramid.

However, at what point does Saleem cease to be a tiny nation or an impeccable citizen and become merely an observer writing his commentary? Is it possible to include Eastern ideals of community into the western framework of a nation which we see imposed upon India through



Saleem's eyes? The cultural dichotomy between the individual and the Nation often times reaches a point of hilarity. Specifically the image of the blue Jesus a priest introduces to integrate cultures into a Christian based theology clearly satirizes Western attempts to evangelize other nations.

The third theme is the narrative itself. Salman Rushdie continuously uses the body as a metaphor for the text itself. Therefore, Saleem's crumbling body is not merely his old age, but a physical perspective of what a historical text may do to a person, a nation, or the author. Rushdie fills the novel with allusions to the Western literary tradition illustrating the way in which India has repossessed English as a language and a literature style after centuries of colonial occupation.

<sup>1</sup> Much of postcolonial criticism demands that historical records account for the numerous injustices committed upon colonized nations. Rushdie juxtaposes this essential postcolonial element with a character who continuously makes inaccurate historical and cultural statements. Saleem's narrative is extremely unreliable, yet thriving with the multiplicity which has followed him his whole life. He incorrectly dates certain events, misnames political officials and gets the Hindi gods confused. However, it is not the didactic accuracy which makes Saleem a valuable narrator, it is his thematic categorization of the teeming masses which are hovering within his thoughts at all times. Through the technique of the unreliable narrator, Rushdie creates a fluid and living text which portrays the postcolonial situation in India. For Saleem, we must keep in mind that it is not the facts which drive the story. The precise dates of a car bomb or a riot are not central. It is both the concepts *behind* such events and the effects they have on

<sup>1</sup> Salon Interview with Salman Rushdie, 1995: "When I was writing "Midnight's Children," I was really trying to say that the way in which English is used in India has diverged significantly from standard English. That India has made its own English the way America and Ireland and the Caribbean and Australia made their own English."  
<<http://www.salon.com/06/features/interview2.html>>

individuals which Rushdie is attempting to explore. This deviation from fact is also a key example of the narrative as its function of the mock heroic. To be fashioned in the style of the mock heroic as it is seen in western literature, Saleem's narrative must reveal some intrinsic mistakes within his history in order to create a truly self reflective satire.

Having such an unreliable narrator allows Rushdie to demonstrate individual memories. Each perspective of the same moment will carry a different interpretation based on life circumstances. Saleem's dishonesty is similar to the character Huck Finn; these narrators are not meant to be taken at face value. However their narrative reveals biases and perspectives which in turn may further open the eyes of the reader to the ever present dichotomy of perspective. In turn the reader becomes more aware of the context of the situation more so than the character may ever be able to. Like Huck, Saleem is a character who, based on his inability to accurately communicate the era which he is living in reveals a deeper and more personal experience than a strictly honest story would be able to accomplish.

These three themes of history, nation and narrative work together in a congruent manner which shed light on not only the postcolonial themes which are widely acknowledge. They also enhance a reading into Saleem as the anti hero acting within a mock heroic structure. No theme can be addressed without consciousness of the other two; they function in complete synchronicity, making one example being explicative of one or more of the themes. Saleem as a character enters into a highly personal discourse with some of the primary questions being asked by members of the postcolonial community. His emotions, reactions and inconsistencies are therefore valuable in gaining insight to the ultimate questions *Midnight's Children* poses.

Saleem's primary concern is that "above all [he] fears absurdity" (4). It is interesting that

when we observe his parentage, there is no shortage of absurdity running throughout his life. Be it a magical moment in which a patriarch comes to a realization through a nose bleed, or Saleem's infertility, the life of Saleem is singular, lonely and above all, absurd.

*Midnight's Children* begins with the return of Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather from medical school in Germany. Already, we see Saleem's preoccupation with his origins; the beginning of Saleem's tale is not the day of his birth, but rather his heritage. Aadam (whose name clearly signifies the first man according to Judeo-Christian tradition) is the patriarch who first views India through "traveled eyes"; a role which Saleem would like to associate himself with. Aadam, as Saleem "remembers" is reputed to have spread out his prayer mat, gone to pray and instead of receiving divine understanding, struck his nose on the ground and three drops of blood "transformed into rubies" (4). With hardened ruby-blood, Aadam Aziz wept, only to find his tears turned to diamonds. It is here that Saleem interjects, saying:

as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history. Unaware of this at first, despite his recently completed medical training, he stood up, rolled the prayer-mat into a thick cheroot, and holding it under his right arm surveyed the valley through clear, diamond-free eyes(4).

Why would Saleem try to link himself with a man he never met and was clearly not present at this moment? Neil Kortenaar attempts to answer this question in his essay "Salman Rushdie's Magic Realism and the Return of Inescapable Romance": "Identity in Rushdie's novel is a matter of culture (breeding in the sense of upbringing rather than of race or blood), but culture

appears every bit as ineluctable as race ever was" (Kortenaar 766). Saleem is therefore rewriting his own parentage to establish himself as a valid and functioning family unit: he is associating himself with a previous hero in the hopes that this lineage will legitimize his own "heroic" contributions. It seems absurd however; Saleem and his nemesis Shiva were switched at birth by the nurse Mary Pereira. Aadam Aziz is no blood relation. Born to a poor musician Wee Willie Winkie, Saleem found himself raised by well-to-do Indian parents while the rightful heir of the wealth Shiva is left to live in poverty. With this knowledge in hand, Saleem must in some way justify his 'gift' of sight, his ambivalence towards the nation and quite frankly his ego. To recount this tale therefore is reinforcing the need to change the way in which identity is connected to an individual's history. In the tradition of the mock heroic, returning to the *Rape of the Lock*, Rushdie is clearly creating an absurd rendition of parentage and therefore history. The mock heroic benefits Rushdie's image of history in that it is constantly undermining the fundamental value of ancestry within culture and replacing it with a superficial, nearly insignificant view of blood ties. This perspective of the insignificant parentage is one that only the reader is aware of; Saleem reflects this ambivalence while he himself continuously struggles with his origin. There is therefore an absurd juxtaposition of significance; the readers understand that Saleem struggles intensely with his History and extends his struggle to a national level. All the while Saleem's sneaky and trite actions are continually undermining this concept. As an anti hero, this fundamental struggle of origin is paramount in the political struggle between the individual and culture.

Saleem's tale, extending beyond his grandfather's experience is a crucial element in understanding where this reading of a mock heroic may come from. It is bound up in Saleem's

extreme desire to justify himself. Small minute events therefore become world changing events for Saleem. His self importance in the bigger picture of India's emergence is found throughout the novel, always over emphasizing his role. Saleem views himself as a savior of sorts: "believe it or not I was prophesied twice!" and "I became the chosen child of midnight" (126, 130).

Saleem Sinai treats history in as a malleable force which transcends western ideologies, exploring the never ending perspective of the 'teeming masses'.

Instead of focusing of crucial events in India's development such as the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Rushdie chooses to focus only on the developing perspectives of Saleem's vision of India. This allows space for inclusion of the individual within the narrative of history. However, as Saleem remembers his life in the light of his nation's history, instead of choosing cataclysmic events, his story is revealed through direct correlation of his body. Saleem's nose allows him to connect to other children born at midnight; he becomes endowed with a magical gift which guides him to hear the voices of whomever he chooses. Loran Milne connects Saleem's gift with historical narratives in her paper "Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History. She writes in the paper Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History" that "Saleem [...] 'colonize[s]' historical events by collapsing the distance between history and.. .individual existence, reducing external phenomena to the status of peripheral occurrences that revolve around the centralizing consciousness of the protagonist" (Milne 31). Milne goes further, suggesting that as Saleem is a colonizer through his omniscient gift; his pathetic attributes are also magnified. Saleem's incestuous feelings towards his sister are therefore revealed not through his genitals but instead his nose.

Saleem's perspective is not the only one we are provided with in this novel. We are given

his caregiver and eventual partner Padma who inserts her prickly insight into Saleem's narrative. Padma is invaluable in Saleem's reading of history; she is consistently scoffing him, telling him to "get on with it" and criticizing his egotistical version of his tale. Padma's role not only attempts to guide Saleem accurately down his path, it also inserts a level of comic absurdity into the lengthy narrative. "How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps - kept! - my feet on the ground? (170). We are reminded that regardless of what Padma tries, Saleem can never "hit her spitoon" (38). Revealed for what he truly is through Padma, Saleem is indeed the anti-hero very much like Stephen Daldalus: unreliable, preoccupied with his own struggles and impotent yet invaluable for what he truly is. His perception of history is perhaps unreliable with relation to dates and accurately significant events; however it is a celebration of the individual as a unit of history to choose this perspective. Lorna Milne also notes Saleem's inconsistent rendition of history: Saleem makes explicit references to the difficulty of giving an exhaustive and totally accurate account of events, owning up occasionally to lies or omissions in his narrative [...] Given the authority he derives from other sources, such as his sense of smell, this candor and self-conscious lucidity paradoxically serve at first to make him seem a more, rather than a less, reliable narrator: his totalizing consciousness seems to embrace his flaws and failings as well as his heroic, or self-aggrandizing, characteristics (Milne 10). Rushdie continuously reminds us of the important relationship between history and the individual's connection to nationality. This relationship carries significance through its exposure of Saleem's anti-hero status. As explored through the historicity of Saleem's life, the nation is

directly connected to Saleem through his "homelessness". A multi-national character, Saleem is in limbo, caught up in his multiplicity and unable to resolve the inherent contradictions which his life has ultimately produced.

The role of the nation in the life of Saleem is therefore complex and multifaceted. As we have already seen with Saleem's view of history, the role of the individual is highly dependent on personal experience, and the interpretation of those experiences may possibly produce a wide array of response. So it is with one citizen and his or her relationship with the actual nation. India's "culture" consists of several world wide religions, conflicting sects of those religions, as well as hundreds of regional traditions. Therefore as the British pulled away from colonial rule in 1947 and left India as an independent state, the idea that this new nation should act as a unified force was contrary to the very structure and mindset of those residing in the newly assigned borders. Ernest Renan lays out the historical requirements for a nation in his paper "What is a Nation", which can be found in the compiled texts titled *Nation and Narration* edited by Homi Bhabha. Renan explores the possible requirements for a nation, ranging from dynastic rule, race, religion and language. He does not however, concede that these criteria are sufficient for the establishment of a "nation". Renan instead claims that a nation is: "... like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion" (Renan 19).

When given this lens to look at the nationalistic elements of *Midnight's Children*, we see that this criteria does not exist in the least. Even before Saleem's birth, the personal experiences of his family members divided each other, based on their perspective. For his grandfather Aadam Aziz, there is direct correlation between his relationship with the Reverend Mother and his personal experiences. Aadam, based on his revelations at the prayer mat, prefers to raise his

children in tolerance of other faiths, while his wife insists that they follow the strict religious codes, leading them to this interchange:

[Reverend Mother } Would you have your children marry Germans?' And pauses, fighting for breath, letting my grandfather reveal, 'He was teaching them to hate, wife. He tells them to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians. Will you have hateful children, woman?' 'Will you have godless one?' [Reverend Mother] (42).

This central exchange evokes several responses. First of all, the multiplicity which Aadam found himself in was directly related to his personal experiences in Germany. The Reverend Mother on the other hand saw this multiplicity as threatening not only her own upbringing, but most importantly her children. Aadam and his wife are forced therefore to find some balance between raising hateful or godless children.

Saleem himself is aware of the multiplicity which exists within this concept of a nation of India. "My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit" he writes, stirring us to consider him as an allegory for his nation. Indeed, Saleem claims to be "chained to history" organizing the Midnight's Children Conference, uniting others born on the same night, previously unaware of each other's existence, but significant and powerful nonetheless. This group of children (which Saleem solemnly informs us has shrunk from the initial number of one thousand and one to five hundred and eighty-one by 1957) reveals Saleem's solution to his muddled parentage. Having been deprived of both biological mother and father, brothers and sisters, indeed even his grandfather Aadam Aziz of whom we have heard so much, Saleem turns to the children of midnight, finding five hundred and eighty-one other children who are



seemingly joined through a mutual acquaintance: their nation. Saleem tells us that "the children of midnight had grown up quite unaware of their true siblings, their fellow chosen-ones across the length and breadth of India's rough and badly-proportioned diamond" (225). The multitude of children with fantastically magical powers were not only ushered into a new era of Indian history; they *are* India, the link between remembrance and foresight. With their powers which Saleem describes as including: "the lost arts of alchemy, [...]the gift of travel, [...] prophecy, [...and...] time travel" these children reconnected the new nation of India to the magical, fantastic and deeply historical cultures of its inhabitants.

Saleem immediately turns the next page and undermines his own story saying: "Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view", removing himself from the responsibility as a narrator (230). We as readers may get annoyed with Saleem at moments like this in the novel (there are plenty), but it is this very ability of building up his national responsibilities then immediately removing himself which will not allow us as readers to ever assume that even a child with magical powers is able to operate under the shadow of the nation at *all times*, or be a representative of the nation at all times. Rushdie himself comments on Saleem's inconsistent narrative, explaining in his short essay "'Errata': or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*" that: "he [Saleem] continues to be borne out of the jungle on the crest of that fiction wave...It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own. His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes" (Rushdie *Errata* 25). Likewise, Michael Reder author of "Rewriting History and Identity" observes that in contrast to the traditional epic which Saleem asserts as his life repeatedly is instead in a constant state of redefinition, and Saleem himself is the "antithesis of an epic hero" (Reder 231). Reder

goes further to state: "Rushdie insists that the individual, too often subsumed by colonizers, the idea of the nation-state, or national mythology, must be understood as a part of history"(231).

Both Rushdie and Reder have pinpointed a key element connecting the mock heroic to *Midnight's Children*. The madman of whom Rushdie speaks acts in the narrative of another individual and accepts history without looking for the author. The conflict therefore between authorship and reader is directly related not only to the nation and the individual, but also this inherent absurdity surrounding Saleem as the anti hero. The individualizing of history is confirmation of the Postcolonial project; that is to establish and celebrate the conflict found in colonized areas. Where there is cultural conflict absurdity is not too far behind it. While Saleem places emphasis on his origins and national significance, it is clear that on a biological level he is lacking a fundamental element which would connect and elevate him to the status of belonging. Reder is therefore correct in his idea of the nation-state as a subunit of history. There can be no national project without first establishing a common origin from which its citizens arise. Saleem is clearly absurd under these requirements. He is the amalgamation of several nations, the three great religions of his region, thus simultaneously representing all, yet none.

Through Saleem's confused history and national identity has arisen a sharp and piercing narrative which succeeds at replacing history with storytelling. Bereft of all things which constitute belonging in either the eastern or western world, Saleem has been forced to create his own narrative space of belonging. Writing in the dark to Padma about his unity with the other children born at midnight, Saleem the absurd hero has created his own destiny. Like other mock heroics, *Midnight's Children* specifically organizes the narrative around key philosophical ideas which are used in a comical manner to undermine specific cultural themes. Key similarities may

be found in the mock heroic classic *The Rape of the Lock* which suggests that Rushdie indeed used a western genre to further his Postcolonial project.

One of the great mock heroics in western literature, *The Rape of the Lock* uses satire to reveal the absurdity of society, using as its central image Belinda's hair which was taken from her without her consent. For Pope, an isolated aspect of the body becomes the vehicle with which satire is developed and social commentary arises. The use of the body in such a way is integral in the development of a mock heroic in *Midnight's Children*: Similar to Belinda's hair, Saleem's nose imitates a previous heroic character. For Belinda, her hair was an echo back to the Greek epic and Helen of Troy. Saleem's over sized nose, his ability to have an omniscient perspective and his intellectual skills all link him to the Hindi god Ganesha, a god with an elephant's head attributed to be the remover of all barriers, destroying vanity and selfishness. It also important that Ganesha was created by the gods Shiva and Parvati, both of whom play integral roles as non-deity characters in *Midnight's Children*, helping develop Saleem into what he will finally become.<sup>2</sup>

Saleem Sinai's singularly absurd nose becomes iconic of not only his gifts but also a connection to a group of people which reach further than familial ties, "the children of midnight had grown up quite unaware of their true siblings, their fellow chosen-ones [...] And then, as a result of a jolt received in a bicycle-accident, I, Saleem Sinai, became aware of them all" (Rushdie 223). As Saleem's appearance is caricatured, his senses and perceptions are enhanced. When Saleem is not using his gift to spy on family members and important government officials, he is concerned with the reoccurring tension between the political and personal. This tension

directly affects his narrative, revealing the fluidity with which he is able to move between history and storytelling, borrowing lines from western poetry, Hindi mythology and family legend. What is essential here is the understanding that while Salman Rushdie as the author instructs his character to operate on a multi cultural manner in his narrative, it is an absurd and self reflective undertaking. Saleem's greatest fear is his own absurdity and yet with every line that he utters he attempts to sum up the history of nations and cultures separated by everything from geography to religion. This perhaps is the greatest way to produce an absurd narrative.

"I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something. I admit it: above all thing, I fear absurdity" (4). Saleem acknowledges his urgency. For him, his urgency is a matter of life and death; he is one of the children of midnight; the one who is falling apart. Despite his prophesied existence and contribution to a country which hardly recognizes him, Saleem is mortal, facing his death. His thousand and one nights of storytelling are quickly coming to a close, and unlike Scheherazade, the more of he narrates, the greater the toll that is taken upon his body. The story begins to leak out of the cracks and crevices which cover his body. Just as his perspective of the nation within the individual is peppered with notes of hybridity and multiplicity, so is the very structure of his narrative. Warning us, he writes: "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". Again, this concept of the body as a symbol of the text returns to the classic mock heroic imagery from *The Rape of the Lock*; Saleem's body is falling apart under the pressure of his narrative. He is falling apart under the burden of becoming the very text for this tale. The pressure of being representative of so many factions and yet still an individual has seemingly

<sup>2</sup> For further reading on Ganesha, see Rushdie's essay *Errata*, as well as the overview on Pantheon.org outlining

become too much; Saleem's body has taken a stand and can contain no more.

This multiplicity within Saleem's body is seen in the later half of the novel as the teeming masses. This multitude is jostling around inside of him, reminding us that Saleem is not allowing us as readers to cluster individuals into that simple category of a nation. This new idea of the nation has become a fluid, living organism which is completely dependent upon the individuals within it to provide an identity of hybridity, not an identity which is assimilated into a nation or history. Michael Reder speaks of Saleem's narrative voice, saying that "By allowing Saleem to narrate his own individual history, Rushdie avoids creating a version of history that homogenizes as much as it defines" (Reder 228).

Saleem's tale is a race against time; his ability to detect people, thoughts and events slows him down and begs him to take care. He has become pressured by his temporal memory. Memory by definition is by far more subjective than history. Memory depends upon the individual's interpretation of events; it is less likely to be a didactic and accurate rendition of what actually occurred. Because of this, Saleem is the archetypal unreliable narrator; we simply cannot read this narrative as accurate historical or cultural facts. Salman Rushdie himself writes of Saleem's mistakes, his own mistakes, and how perfectly invaluable they are to constructing *Midnight's Children*. In *Errata.*, Rushdie emphasizes the fact that: "Saleem Sinai is the unreliable narrator, and [...] *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence of India" (Rushdie 22). The precise dates, time and names become irrelevant to the ultimate goal of capturing the essence of an individual's struggle with identity.

Given that Saleem's narrative is an inconsistent historical account and that it incorporates

the polyglossic voices of India, it is clear that Rushdie is not attempting to reinforce the western literary tradition through narrative. Instead, Rushdie integrates certain European canonical texts into a new work of literature which transcends the traditional styles of political narrative. While the *Rape of the Lock* exists in theoretical form, giving credence to Saleem's body and its overall significance in both historicity, religion and citizenship, most of the other western literary examples are merely references; subtle manipulations of previous texts. For instance, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is echoed by Amina: "While Amina with her pot in hand looks at the pretty head and thing Should I? And, do I dare?" (Rushdie 76). Salman Rushdie uses these moments in his novel to further demonstrate colonial influence in India and commandeers these western texts to reflect a new narrative style. This new narrative style is heterogeneous, creating an amalgamation of two worlds connected through the ability to relate individual stories.

Given that the structure of the mock heroic, based on analysis of the *Rape of the Lock* is centered around an ironic, satirical criticism of the society which focuses on an aspect of the body as its main image, we can clearly see the connection between the mock heroic and *Midnight's Children*. The three central themes: nationality, history and narrative use the mock heroic to further enhanced novel's natural proclivity towards Postcolonial theory. In using the mock heroic, Rushdie commandeers a western literary genre and uses it as a tool to further explain the postcolonial situation. Just as the picture of Sir Walter Raleigh hanging on the child's wall is indicative of British power from the beginning of Saleem's life, from the beginning of the life of the novel, the backdrop which is the mock heroic is continuously reminding the readers of the reflexive powers of postcolonialism. Likewise, as the elephant head was placed on Ganesha by Shiva and Parvati, Saleem Sinai ultimately becomes a voice for the teeming masses, boring

through the obstacles which were erected by cultural hybridity and colonialism thus establishing a new wave of history. Instead of writing the history books, Saleem is filling his jars with memories.

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