

SALEEM'S HISTORICAL DISCOURSE IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Being structured around a central date for the state of India, 1947, Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* may be said to aspire to an epic status. Thus, from the very nature of the novel, the concept of history, as well as its writing, becomes one of its main concerns. Therefore, the relation between history and fiction may be considered a keypoint for a better understanding of it.

When tackling the subject of history, and especially its relation to literature, one ought to bear in mind the radical change undergone by the concept both in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century. Fundamentally, this new era puts an end to a long period where history stresses its literary qualities, "se esmera en la forma. Como un género más dentro de la Literatura, presenta de un modo hermoso, en ocasiones eterno, la crónica de sucesos pasados" (Rama 1970: 14). The turn of the eighteenth century signals a critical point: it is in the nineteenth century that "history was invented, which is to say that it left the realm of the contingent to become a fundamental mode of intelligibility" (Thiher 1990: 10). This new attitude implies the rising of history as a novel and independent discipline, reaching for a scientific status.

During the nineteenth and two thirds of the twentieth century, the study of history has been understood as an independent discipline, which was carried out by a recording of the events of the past with a view to abstracting general "truths" by what was considered to be a scientific method, and by extracting the "logical" deductions that such a knowledge implied. The nature of the events, of language, of the point of view, and the inevitable process of selection and ordering of these events were never thought to interfere with the final product. To a certain degree, nineteenth-century history writing can be defined as a combination of the two genres it gave birth to, the realist novel and the historical novel: the former characterized by the realist demands for unobtrusive objectivity, abundance of detail and factual documentation; from the latter it seems "to borrow" the concept of history "as a group of facts which exists extra-textually and which can be represented as it "really was," [and which] is never in question" (Lee 1990: 35). Thus, assumptions such as the neutrality of language and the absence of a domineering, ideologized narrating voice are features taken for granted.

This attitude is contested by the "New Historicism," which "takes the present powers and limitations of the writing of that past into account" (Hutcheon 1989: 90). Accordingly, Paul Veyne states that "en aucun cas ce que les historiens appellent un événement n'est saisi directement et entièrement; il l'est toujours incomplètement et latéralement, à travers des documents ou des témoignages" (1971: 14). The impossibility of an all-embracing and totalizing account, and the textual nature of the referents seem fundamental issues. Similarly, Hayden White, in his study on the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe, openly states the relativity of such a task: "I treat the historical work as what it most

manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (1987: ix). Thus, White stresses the linguistic nature of the historical discourse, and brings forward the ideological implications that arise when preferring one linguistic mode to another.

Stemming from Benveniste's distinction between language and discourse (1971: 179), contemporary literary theorists have developed the opposition fabula/story, where the figure of the narrator has revealed itself as central for an analysis of fiction writing. Thus, Bal's distinction (1988: 5), where the concept of fabula is defined as "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors," seems to lack the linguistic component, and thereby ideological trait, which White confers to it (1978: 90): White, who refers to "chronicle" instead of fabula, denies the possibility of resorting to a neutral account of events because there is no such a thing: the chronological order which Bal mentions should not be understood as devoid of ideology.

It is in the light of this New Historicist approach that the present study has been carried out. Among many distinctive traits, the postmodernist novel can be said to hold similar standpoints to those just mentioned: the neutrality of language and the absence of an ideologized narrating voice are looked at as old humanist assumptions which have become fundamental issues to be questioned and subverted in most contemporary fiction. It is the aim of this paper to analyze how these topics are discussed and problematized in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

I

One of the common traits by which a bulk of postmodernist fiction is characterised is the presence of a self-conscious narrator. Accordingly, *Midnight's Children* underlines this metafictional trait inherent in any piece of fiction writing, and it is Saleem's position, midway between historian and fiction writer, that makes the present approach worthwhile: as I will try to make clear, the ambiguity between both concepts is never solved in favour of either, what is important is the process undergone by the narrator.

Saleem seems to begin by accepting White's initial premise about the discursive nature of history, albeit for very different reasons. To sum up his evolution, Saleem begins by declaring that "no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (MC 211). This initial motive, which could be termed as rather banal and even capricious, will gradually give way to a more conscious attitude, one where Saleem becomes aware of the narrator's subjectivity, of its mistakes and errors, of its inaccuracy, of its "forgetfulness." Thus, the evolution that Saleem undergoes immediately after beginning his account is quite revealing: after writing his first twelve words he comes across his first obstacle ("no, that won't do"), and therefore rectifies. After four paragraphs, he totally abandons his first plan, and a thirty-two year long analepsis¹ begins. Saleem's initial plan has been entirely changed in a matter of seconds: his fairy-tale-like beginning gives way to a based-on-fact narration, which very soon proves to be unfit for the narrator's purposes, and then goes a long way back in time, in order to replace it with a flash-back. This beginning is clearly indicative of the type of discourse we will later encounter: it starts by acknowledging the individual and subjective nature of writing, whether history or fiction, and continues by implying that the position held by the narrator is in no way neutral, but, on the contrary, answers to very specific and personal purposes.

Saleem's position as a character-bound narrator (Bal 1988: 122) deserves further analysis when taking into account the different degrees in which his presence is felt. This is especially so in Book One, where he seems to place himself in a completely new position. After Saleem places

himself at the centre of the narrative, he acknowledges that "[m]ost of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence" (MC 19). The analepsis which begins on page two answers, partly, to this last statement. By means of this backward jump in time, Saleem gains a certain distance which allows him a new standpoint from which to narrate, a different perspective, a sort of distant point of view. Leaving aside the verisimilitude of this temporal jump, we cannot forget the implications that this entails: it is somewhat paradoxical that the events that took place after his birth present more difficulty when it comes to narrating them, whereas those that belong to the far-distant past hardly pose any problems. The mode of narration in which each of these pasts is carried out is a clear and direct reflection of this very same fact: the events recounted within the initial analepsis remind us of the traditional realist novel, a fact which Saleem himself seems to corroborate when he, initially, sets no limits to his knowledge:

but I seem to have found somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail, such as the way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air ... everything, and not just a few clues one stumbles across. (MC 19)

And this is no joke; he has just explained what his main objective is: by becoming a narrator who is fully in control, and master of his narration, with no apparent doubts, and always willing to give the utmost exactitude and the smallest detail, Saleem strives to become —and at times believes himself to be— an omniscient narrator. In other words, Saleem, by endowing himself with absolute power, acquires the status of a traditional historian, whose omniscience seems to be a taken-for-granted gift. However, the reader, as well as Saleem, will gradually realise that this is only a mask under which he pretends to cover his inefficiency, a mask which will continue to fall apart when confronting harsh reality. But meanwhile he will keep up his pretence: thus, he has no trouble in being the only one who is able to recall what happened a certain day, on April 13th:

As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway a tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather's nose. The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty-five to Dyer's right and twenty-five to his left. (MC 36)

A precision that has no limits, as the reader finds out only a few sentences below:

Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machine-guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. (MC 36)

I believe that the reasons for acting/posing as an external narrator are clear by now: following Rimmon-Kenan (1990: 95), the idea of a heterodiegetic narrator is implicitly associated with omniscience. But I believe that the use of this type of narrator in *Midnight's Children* is tainted by its parodic nature: on the one hand it uses this absolute power to its own benefit, but on the other hand, it shows the fragility and artificiality of such power, for a fanciful memory, imagination and inventiveness are the main assets on which it is based.

It is at the moment of Saleem's birth that the narrator, confronted with the present, cannot maintain his false attitude. When his narration catches up with his present, Saleem cannot hide any longer behind the role and attitude of a traditional realist historian/narrator. The narrator can no longer rely on hiding behind masks to do his job. The fact that now Saleem is narrating his present does not mean that things are any easier; much to

his surprise it is in Books Two and Three that he faces the difficulties of becoming a historian —and thereby, a writer of fiction as well. His being close to the events does not help at all, and in spite of the different magical powers that he enjoys, he feels unable to be as precise and accurate as he would wish to. Book Two has hardly begun, and Saleem discovers the dangers of subjectivity, he realizes that his narration is being openly fictionalized by his own attempt to fill in the gaps in knowledge that he encounters:

Perhaps the fisherman's finger was not pointing at the letter in the frame Or maybe . . . it was a finger of warning, its purpose to draw attention to itself. (*MC* 123)

Saleem continually shows that, in spite of his efforts, he is no longer master of his narrative —and perhaps discovers that he had never held such a control:

It was reported that flowers had been seen bleeding real blood. . . . The rumour spread that a mad Bengali snake-charmer, a Tubriwallah, was travelling the country. . . . After a while the rumours added that the Tubriwallah was seven feet tall. (*MC* 136)

This incapacity to recount certain events contrasts with his "ability" to quote everybody's words when he was only a couple of months old. This right to fictionalize is nothing more than a desperate attempt to overcome his difficulties; at the same time, it implies a harsh criticism of the historian's role, as well as commenting on his own unreliability, the previous step before accepting the possibility of his lying. As the narration develops the narrator enjoys further magical powers, which always turn out to be insufficient for his purposes. In fact, against all expectations, the more insight the narrator has, the more indefinite his narration becomes:

And there was worse to come; because now (although a chick-blind divided the scene into narrow slits) did I not see the expression on Evie's face begin to soften and change? —did Evie's hand (sliced lengthways by the chick) not reach out towards my electoral agent? (*MC* 185-6)

The fact that these are only rhetorical questions, to which he immediately offers a definite answer ("She did") does not dispel a sense of doubt and ambiguity that assails the reader. Thus, his questions appear less rhetorical, and more real, as we go on reading:

Did he? Didn't he? If it was him, why did he not enter the Mosque, stick in hand, to belabour the faithful as he had become accustomed to doing? If not him, then why? There were rumours . . . did they? Or not? Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt (*MC* 277)

And this time the questions are more than rhetorical ("but I can't answer the questions that I have asked" [*MC* 278]); they simply express the narrator's unfitness to produce the narrative he had hoped to carry out at the beginning of his story-telling. Saleem-narrator himself will become aware of the process he has been undergoing:

Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems —but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. (*MC* 165)

Saleem finds it almost impossible to narrate about the present: so, as he progressively realises this, he confines himself to a mere chronological narration, a sort of diary. In this struggle towards objectivity and reliability, Saleem tries to avoid the doubts and indecisions that haunt his narration

from the very beginning ("But I shall concentrate on facts" [MC 336]). The following quotations from Book One,

On April 6th, 1919, the holy city of Amristar smelled (gloriously, Padma, celestially!) of excrement. (MC 32)

On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding through this alleyway. (MC 35)

are only the beginning of a tendency that increases as the narration reaches either its least verifiable events:

On Friday, December 27th, a man answering to my grandfather's description was seen At four forty-five on Saturday Morning . . . (MC 277)

Or its most critical moments:

On the stroke of Midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms . . . at the precise instant of India's arrival at Emergency, he emerged. (MC 419)

because, as Saleem Sinai says

That much is fact; but everything else lies concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-belief which affected all goings-on in those days. (MC 335)

Facts that, as he finds out through his narration, are not as solid as they might seem: dates, the exact time of the events, numbers that reach towards precision ... all these "truths" that were meant to be the signposts along his journey seem to fail him sooner or later. At this point, Saleem—together with Rushdie— seems to be going one step beyond White's reasoning on the existence of certain "elements" which are the basis of a historical discourse. According to White,

The reality of these events does not consist in the fact that they occurred but that, first of all, they were remembered and, second, that they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence. (1981: 19)

The distance between "what is" and "what is written" is the central point, and is totally dependent on the subject which produces the discourse. White believes in the existence of a "historical field," of which only part becomes known—that is, selected; that is, written. But Saleem's point, tackling this same issue, is more radical: what happens when imaginary events find a place in that same sequence? Are they validated by the context in which they are inserted, or do they invalidate the rest of the narrative? The question remains open, although Saleem answers clearly:

Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. (MC 166)

However, Saleem refuses to change the wrong date, thereby further underlining the active role of the narrator—of the historian. The effect thus produced is twofold: once again it underlines the position of the narrator as vital for an understanding of the discourse, whether historical or fictive; but what is more important is that, by problematizing the relation of language to reality, it stresses his importance as producer and not only as receiver of meaning.

The narrator's ambivalent attitude on the diegetic level is mirrored by Saleem's position as character in his own account. The effect produced by Saleem's extreme mobility leads the reader to a degree of uncertainty as to the type of account he is facing, and an overall feeling of ambiguity is produced in the reader: what is it that s/he is reading, an autobiographical account of Saleem's life, or a historical account of India's process towards independence? This may be caused by the fact that Saleem-narrator refuses to fix his position as historian. Paul Veyne (1971: 26-7) distinguishes between two types of historians according to the type of narration they carry out, the difference lying on the amount of information and explanation which is given: thus, a *strong* history will be that which offers a high degree of explanation and little information, whereas a *weak* history will do the opposite. Saleem's story seems to seek a balance between these two poles: either he leans towards an autobiographical novel —by placing himself at the centre of his narrative— or comes close to a historian —by adopting a heterodiegetic position and distancing himself from the story. This longed for balance is never reached and the reader feels there is never enough time to decide on what we are actually reading. We are denied a passive role and are forced to get involved while reading, to take part, and to construe and misconstrue meaning: "the novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction (Hutcheon 1984: 39)

Leaving aside the narration act itself, I would here like to discuss how the narrator's changing attitude is reflected on Saleem-as-character. The initial question appears to be whether Saleem succeeds in maintaining himself at the centre, as he longs for, or whether he is denied such a position. It is this unstable position he is subjected to that becomes a main motive. Saleem departs from what seems a rather solid stand: his centrality has been offered by Nehru himself, and Saleem attempts to follow it to the letter. But in spite of this initial position, his life —that is, his writing— is an endless striving to remain at the centre of the narrative, one that he understands very well when commenting on his sister, who was "[o]bliged to fight for attention, possessed by her need to place herself at the centre of events, even of unpleasant ones" (*MC* 150).

As has just been mentioned, the continuous fluctuation undergone by the narrator is mirrored by his endless shifting from one place to another all over and outside India. His journey begins before he is born, when his pregnant mother travels to Bombay (*MC* 91), allowing our hero to come into the world at the centre of India. But even while living in Bombay the reader realises that the narrator is always in weird places which enable him to get a better view of what is going on: these allow for new angles, points of view, and perspectives which offer the unknown sides of reality; this is the reason for his being in a washing-chest, a car boot, a clock-tower, and on the hill. Even on this anecdotal level, we should be aware of the metaphorical trait of these places: on every of these occasions Saleem acquires the right amount of information he needs to interpret certain events. Similarly, the same trait can be realised on a more *historical* level: as he grows older, he is pushed to further marginal positions: his first exile takes him to uncle Hanif's home (*MC* 240); in his second exile he visits Pakistan (*MC* 282) before Karachi (*MC* 306); finally, he is dropped in newly-born Bangladesh (*MC* 354), where he retires into the jungle. After this critical experience, he returns to India with the magicians, a journey he carries out in a basket (*MC* 381), only to stay in their ghetto until he is sent to prison. After being released, he accompanies captain Picture Singh to the highly-symbolic Midnite-confidential Club (*MC* 453) in what is his final step before reaching north and secluding himself inside Braganza Pickles Ltd. Factory (back in Bombay, that is). Saleem's journey can be said to run parallel to some of the most conflictive moments of history, and

his discourse should be understood as an attempt to shed new light to these "dark areas of history" (McHale 1987: 90). It should also be noticed that Saleem almost always pertains to the defeated side, and it is to this side that his discourse must be ascribed. Once again, Saleem's words are used to give voice to a traditionally unrepresented—or even worse, misrepresented—group of human beings.

Saleem's journey is also relevant for other reasons: firstly, because of the parodic effect carried out on the traditional figure of the hero; what we have here is no doubt closer to an antihero who, nevertheless, undergoes his particular quest. Secondly, because it presents us with a hero that is physically pushed towards marginal positions; thus, his final self-seclusion is an acceptance of this ex-centred peripheral position. Once again, Saleem seems to advocate a postmodernist attitude: postmodernist fiction does not move the marginal to the centre; writing from, for, and of the margins implies situating the subject, that is, re-situating it, for it "teaches to recognize differences—of race, gender, class sexual orientation, and so on" (Hutcheon 1989: 159). Hence, Saleem's fragmentation should be understood as an attempt to represent a series of voices which would otherwise remain silent/silenced. The postmodernist act of writing may be defined as an attempt to reveal the ambivalent and carnivalesque nature of reality: in this way it stresses the existence of the margins and the peripheral, the existence of different positions, as well as suggesting multiplicity, heterogeneity, and plurality.

The very process of writing reflects some of the conflictive issues which are developed in the novel: in the same way as Saleem is unable to stay at the centre, he realizes that, by the very nature of language, a narrative, of whatever type, will always be an incomplete, biased, and one-sided discourse which will unavoidably push other discourses to the margins. Despite his efforts, Saleem cannot but acknowledge that "always, in all the trains in this story, there were these voices and these fists banging and pleading . . . Let me in, great sir" (*MC* 67). Perhaps Saleem, at least initially, can be defined as an unreliable narrator² in that he tries to gain a central position for himself and his story/history, and still has not realized that the postmodernist novel "does not move the marginal to the center. It does not invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders" (Hutcheon 1990: 69). This confrontation between the narrator and the implied author stresses once again the reader's active role in searching for meaning by means of internal confrontations. Thus, the whole novel may be seen as an overcoming of this unreliability, as a coming to terms with the nature of language itself. This conflictive and contradictory nature may be noticed on several occasions. At times it is shown in a rather straightforward way: when the language riots take place (*MC* 185), language has become the differential element which divides and holds apart different ethnic groups. The chapter "A public announcement" begins with the official account of events confronted by an unofficial one inserted in brackets, thus underlining what is a fundamental trait throughout the novel, the ideology which supports any discourse. The importance of having access to language and to an audience is summarised when referring to Brass Monkey who "was sentenced, for day after day, to silence" (*MC* 151). Gradually, Saleem realises what his real stand is, and discovers that "one of the thrusts of postmodernist revisionist history is to call into question the reliability of official history" (McHale 1987: 96), that is, the ideology which it is favouring, and by which this discourse is being enforced. Paul Veyne, after asserting that everything is historical, underlines the personal selective process which is carried out: "puisque tout est historique, l'histoire sera ce que nous choisirons" (1971: 58). This selective process is based on what Veyne defines as *intrigue* (*MC* 46). Accordingly, Saleem's discourse stems from a different and particular *intrigue*, in this way establishing a contrast by means of which meaning is generated. Apparently, his alternative discourse can only be seen as an appendix to the centre. This is achieved in a sort of casual way, as the

narrator is "lucky enough" to realize that the most important events that took place throughout the world coincide with equally important moments in the history of his family. Thus, both terms of the duality seem to blend in the most natural way. And the reader, as little surprised as the narrator himself, discovers that "on the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed-for headache" (*MC* 27); and that on August 9th, 1945, as well as the dropping of the Atomic Bomb in Nagasaki, Mumtaz (the narrator's mother) was discovered to be a virgin (*MC* 60); that on August 15th, 1947, our hero is born at the very same time that India gains its independence (*MC* 116); that the partition of Bombay coincides with the discovery of the Midnight Children (*MC* 181); that the disintegration of the Midnight Children's Conference takes place the day the Chinese armies invaded the north of India (*MC* 254); that the death of the narrator's grandfather runs parallel to J. Nehru's death, the father of India (*MC* 278-281); that the defeat by China occurs when Saleem gets his sinuses fixed (*MC* 301); and that on June 25th, 1975, at the very same time that Aadam Sinai is born, India entered the state of Emergency (*MC* 419). In presenting the events in such a peculiar way, Saleem carries out a radical subversion as to their order of importance: he "*displaces* official history altogether" (McHale 1987: 90), for he attempts to make of the official events an appendix to his own story. In this way he tries to subvert the traditional order of history, and shows that the hierarchy which rules is an artificial construction which answers to clear ideological and political motivations, however internalized they may be.

This new perspective from which postmodernist narrators are looking at history has further implications: according to Hutcheon, "the very form of the texts themselves constantly reminds the reader of his/her own ethnocentric biases because these are encoded in the very words being read" (1989: 72). On several occasions, and in different ways, the reader is forced to realise that s/he belongs to a particular culture, based on its own traditions and beliefs. Thus, the very nature of language is brought to the foreground: not only does the reader face the fact that the novel has been written in English ("Godown, gudam, warehouse, call it what you like," "I do not need to tell you that aag means fire" [both in *MC* 71]), the language belonging to the conqueror, but it also tries to make clear that English has never managed to accommodate itself to this "other" reality it is trying to depict. By means of the content, Rushdie also underlines this same idea: when reading about what happened on August 9th, 1945, the reader's immediate reaction is to connect that date with the dropping of the Atomic Bomb, a fundamental event in Western European civilization, and the reader feels somewhat disturbed when realising that for the narrator the dropping of the bomb is simply something complementary to the fact that his mother was discovered to be a virgin.

By means of this chance narration, Rushdie manages to vindicate the position of the individual when confronted with an overwhelming and obliterating history, with a totalitarian world-history. A secondary effect is to show how the individual is unavoidably linked to history; but history, too, is unavoidably linked to the individual. As Parameswaran has pointed out, commenting on *Midnight's Children*: "[W]riting history as autobiography is another way of connecting the individual component of society with the collective stream of history" (1983: 40). It is not only the reader who comes to this conclusion: Saleem Sinai had realised the same long ago. And this he magnificently shows by narrating the way in which he carried out a plan to teach his mother a lesson. The whole process deserves our attention and admiration, but the following quotation will do as a good example:

I began to cut pieces out of newspapers. From GOAN LIBERATION COMMITTEE LAUNCHES SATYAGRAHA CAMPAIGN I extracted the letters 'COM'; SPEAKER OF E-PAK ASSEMBLY DECLARED MANIAC gave me my second syllable, 'MAN'. I found 'DER' in NEHRU CONSIDERS RESIGNATION AT CONGRESS ASSEMBLY . . .

. Cutting up history to suit my nefarious purposes, I seized on WHY INDIRA GANDHI IS CONGRESS PRESIDENT NOW and kept the 'WHY'; but I refused to be tied exclusively to politics, and turned to advertising (MC 259)

Within such a tragic tone, there is place for sarcastic humour to be exerted at its utmost

FURNITURE HURLING SLAYS DEPUTY E-PAK SPEAKER:
MOURNING PERIOD DECLARED gave me 'MOURNING', from which deftly and deliberately, I excised the letter 'U'. (MC 260)

By gluing his note, Saleem glues, in an almost unnoticed way, the historical —whether it is politics, sports, advertising, gossiping— with the particular —Saleem's own private scheme. The reader's concern lies with Saleem's innermost plan, but the only way to follow this plan is to know about everything that was happening all over India at that very same moment. By gluing his note together, therefore Saleem carries out his "first attempt at rearranging history" (MC 260).

The strong relation between history and fiction had been a commonplace until the eighteenth century. What is new of the postmodernist approach is the emphasis that is placed on stressing their inseparability on grounds of their linguistic nature. Saleem's attempt to "encapsulate the whole of reality" in his narration proves a futile endeavour assailed by errors, mistakes, oblivions, misunderstandings... However, his very failure to provide an overall, totalitarian version of "reality" brings to the foreground a series of confrontations —centre vs. ex-centric, omniscience vs. partial knowledge, reliability vs. unreliability, real facts vs. imaginary facts...— by means of which meaning is generated. The outcome to this situation is the realisation that saying what-actually-happened is an impossibility, but also an unnecessary endeavour, for simultaneously the reader realises that Saleem's endless self-conscious fiction is more truth-revealing than the attempted totalitarian history mechanism used to fill in the fissures in knowledge. After all, the only Truth is:

It was —or am I wrong? I must rush on; things are slipping from me all the time — a day of horrors. It was then —unless it was another day. (MC 413)

However, this last quotation must not lead the reader to infer that a radical relativism, and complete scepticism are demanded. The truth must be looked for, but aware of the conditions which surround this search. The possibility of acquiring knowledge has been several times questioned throughout the novel, mainly due to human nature itself; but even if the narrator were given faithful access to events, dates and numbers, his narration would still be deficient because of the very nature of language. Saleem realizes that despite the fact that language reveals itself as an insufficient tool with which to carry out his task, there is no other. Throughout, Saleem learns to cope with the distance between language and reality, and becomes conscious of the limitations of the former. *Midnight's Children* is aware of this trait and therefore offers itself as a self-subversive discourse; first, by claiming to produce meaning, then, by denying it straight away.

In his 1981 paper, White explained why the historian is compelled to narrativize history:

I have sought to suggest that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. (1981: 23)

He suggests that narrativization helps the historian to draw a general,

abstract and totalizing version of reality. White defines the writing of history as an attempt to overcome the difficulties inherent in it. His attempt at closing the gap between history and fiction has been clearly defined: history, to become readable, must come close to fiction in that it must be coherent, display a recognisable structure (with beginning, middle and end), have a clearly argued plot... But Rushdie offers a fiction which embodies the opposite effect: *Midnight's Children* avoids coherence, unity, wholeness, closure. Much of its meaning rises from the different lines of argumentation to be followed or which are pointed out as possibilities, from the blending of narrators, times and countries, from the multiplicity and diversity which is offered the reader, even from the reader's indecision while reading. In short, from its contradictory and fragmented nature. This fragmented discourse—reflected by the physical fragmentation of the narrator—seems to be offered as the only possible way in which the writers of the fringe can achieve self-representation, and most important of all, avoid voicelessness. a

NOTES

1. According to Genette, an analepsis is "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (1980: 40).

2. I here follow Booth's concept of reliability/unreliability: "I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (1968: 158-9).

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