
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, the attempt is to make you feel excited about studying *Midnight's Children*. I will, therefore, give you a brief background about its author, his other works, and the critical reception of this novel.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Until the year 1980, no critic had dreamt of the magnitude of the great turnaround that the Indian English Novel would make with the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981. There was a comparative creative quietness in the 1970s after some of the best works had been published in the 1960s. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* with its East-West encounter as a theme became a much-discussed book, soon after its publication in 1960. Western and Indian critics wrote about it in national and international journals. The 1960s also saw the rise of a major Indian woman writer, Anita Desai. However, the 1970s gave no major writers and while a steady output kept flowing, there was nothing spectacular happening.

Midnight's Children was published in 1981 and it took readers all over the world, by storm. As the novel went on to be read in different quarters, it was clear that a very different and original talent had indeed arrived. The novel not only made an impact as a presence but it also influenced a number of writers who followed Rushdie. Consequently, it has proved to be a seminal work which has changed the very way in which Indian English novels had been written before its advent. What was so special about this novel, or so unique about its author, is what you should be able to recognize at the end of the different units that constitute this Block.

It is a well-recognized fact today that words mean different things to different people. So it is with texts be they novels or films. Everyone who reads a text, becomes its "author", as one of the contemporary critical theories goes i.e., each reader interprets a text from his own world view, value system, beliefs and perceptions so that the book is read very differently from the book written by the author himself! Thus, it was with *Midnight's Children*.

The West which first celebrated its arrival and impact, admired *Midnight's Children* for very different reasons than did the readers on the Indian subcontinent. The West saw in *Midnight's Children* the influence of writers such as Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera and Gabriel Marques – writers that it had appropriated for its own. The West noted it for being the first book to come from a "Commonwealth" writer (Rushdie

hates that label) that was written in style, English and sensibility that the West wanted.

Rushdie himself has categorically denied the literary influences mentioned above and has been at pains to explain the difference. For him, "books are about the world" whereas in western postmodern writing, "the world outside the text does not exist." He has also been saying so ever since, that his book is not the product of only western (or written) literature but also of the oral narrative traditions of the east.

In the West, *Midnight's Children* was read by the lay person for being a novel that was cosmopolitan in its outlook; in India, the focus was on the veracity of the historical, political realities that Rushdie had presented. So much so that Rushdie had to face a court case from Mrs. Indira Gandhi for defamation and was asked to expunge an entire chapter from the novel.

Some Indian readers also contested Rushdie's use of mythological references and found fault with his novel till he clarified that the "errors" were deliberate, and a part of his technique. At the same time, there has been a large number of readers who have loved the book, loved it for the Bombay it depicts, loved it for its liveliness, creativity, innovations, and its uniqueness.

The point that I want to make here is that this novel has held an appeal for different segments of readers in different parts of the world, albeit for different reasons for the last 20 years.

What you must try to answer at the end of these Units is the question: "Do I like *Midnight's Children*?" and if the answer is "yes" then ask yourself whether or not the book has spoken to you in a certain special way and how that is different from the way it has been read before.

Having provoked you to think, I will give you some biographical details about Rushdie so that you begin understanding the making of *Midnight's Children*. However, you know why I'm asking you to give me these answers, it is necessary that you read the book quickly at one go. My teacher for my M.A., Professor S. Nagarajan, Head of the Department of English at Poona University, used to always say, "Before you go to any critic, first read the text." Most students do it the other way around but I found, when I followed my teachers advice, that my understanding of the text was far superior than had I depended only on critics. That's how I learnt to read a text independently of critics and their views. I would like you to do so too because you are M.A students, by which I mean you are students preparing for a career as a teacher or as researcher and for both these fields, you need to read deeply and read widely. Throughout my discussion on a *Midnight's Children* I have referred to the Picador edition of the novel.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF SALMAN RUSHDIE



Salman Rushdie (1947-)

Here's a picture of Rushdie. As you can see, like the author who began the practice of using autobiography openly in his fiction, I am going to begin this section with a personal anecdote.

I met Salman Rushdie on 22 February 1984 in Bombay soon after he had won the annual award of India's long-lasting magazine *Gentleman* and had been invited to deliver the *Gentleman's* Annual Lecture. The award had been shared between Rushdie and Michael Fererira, the Billiards world champion. Rushdie had been invited to speak by *Gentleman* in Bombay and Delhi and this talk was organized in Bombay's Hotel President. The hall was packed to capacity. Everybody had come to see and hear the young handsome novelist of the Booker Prize fame.

Rushdie began his speech characteristically by drawing parallels between himself and his own character Saleem (*Midnight's Children*). He said that very much like Saleem who had shared the hour of his birth (with Shiva, another character in the book), so had Rushdie shared the *Gentleman's* award with Michael Ferreira. Thus on a light note, Rushdie set the magic of his hard-hitting one hour talk rolling before a spell-bound audience. Rushdie spoke on "Politics and the Novel." In this lecture, he mercilessly criticized the position of passive acceptance for writers propagated by George Orwell in his famous essay "Inside a Whale". Orwell felt that it was useless for a writer to try to fight oppression and that it was wiser to "simply accept it, endure it, record it."

Rushdie was angry at the quietism proposed. He felt that as a writer, though one is not obliged to write about (his) politics but he also could not ignore it "we are radioactive with history and politics is history's present tense," he asserted. No writer worth his salt should tolerate political injustice. A writer need not write about his own political views but he could certainly criticize the politics of his times as the Russian novelist Solzhenitsyn had done.

Of *Midnight's Children* he observed that though he had not planned it that way he could not keep away from the influence of contemporary history from its making (*Indian Express* 24 February 1984). Repeatedly he emphasized the role of the writer as an activist. The talk was excellent. Rushdie was clear and thought provoking, his words had been chosen with great care. After the talk and the question and answers session came to an end everybody began walking swiftly out of the hall and towards the lift, as is the Bombay manner. Rushdie stood alone in the foyer. No one was with him (Unthinkable today because of the heavy security around him). Just then I looked up and found myself face to face with him. I was delighted. I introduced myself and spoke to him for a couple of minutes. I don't quite remember what we spoke of but he replied pleasantly and then it was time for me to move on.

I have begun with a personal note to bring you close to Rushdie, the man and not just the famous writer around whom a lot of mystery and aura has been built up in the last decade because of his works and especially because of the fatwa imposed on him by Iran. Many of you will recall his surprise visit to India after an interval of twelve years on 14th April 2000 to attend Commonwealth Writers' Prize ceremony. Rushdie had won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best Book (Eurasia Region) for his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and nobody knew till the end whether or not he would attend the function. What was later reported was the stunning fact that he had been in India since a week ago. He had been travelling in India in disguise and even made a visit to the Taj Mahal accompanied by his strapping young son, Zafar, to fulfil an old promise to him! So, no one knew where he was and whether or not he was coming to the ceremony.

But the moment he entered the lounge of Hotel Oberoi In New Delhi :

“..it was as if a tidal wave had hit the 150 odd assembled glitterati. A battalion of TV and press cameramen and reporters surged forward towards Rushdie, ...everyone rubbernecked to catch a glimpse of Rushdie's bald pale pate gleaming with perspiration and his thin-lipped face suffused with a huge smile”
(Trivedi, “In Conversation” TBF)

If I were to draw a parallel between the effect Rushdie has on the audience it would not be wrong to compare it to the effect on the audience were Shakespeare to walk into the room. In other words, Rushdie, like Shakespeare, is now a writer, whose reputation precedes him wherever he goes. After this personalized account, I would like to tell you some more factual details about Rushdie's life so that you can relate them to the impact he has made on the post 1980s on the Indian English Novel in 1980s and after.

Salman Rushdie was born – no, not on 15th August 1947 (The birth date of his protagonist Saleem) but on 19 June 1947. He was born and educated in Bombay in St. Cathedral until the age of fourteen. He has described the city of Bombay as “the most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotch potch of Indian cities.” Its influence on him has been so deep that he made it the major setting of *Midnight's Children*. Indeed *Midnight's Children*, becomes the first of the Bombay novels, which have become quite common now, the novel having started a new trend in Indian English Fiction since the 1980s. A number of other Indian English novels since then are Bombay novels.

Not only did Rushdie begin the trend of writing the Bombay novels but writers after him have been quick to write the metro-centric novel, with Delhi, Calcutta and Toronto as their setting. This has been a major departure from the earlier Indian English novels that were usually set in small towns or villages. You will recall the fictitious Malgudi of R. K. Narayan's novels. Interestingly though Malgudi very closely resembles Mysore where Narayan has lived all along, he took pains to conceal its name. Rushdie takes pride in locating the familiar landmarks of Bombay by name, thus striking on immediate and autobiographical sense of identification with the reader, especially the one who knows Bombay well.

Now, why do you think Rushdie wrote about Bombay and not about a village or small town? Wouldn't it have been easier to write about something everybody was writing about? One explanation is that he was brought up in Bombay. But that alone would not suffice. Bombay, for Rushdie is something special. It is his metaphor for a cosmopolitan Indian city where people of all religions live and mingle together freely. It is the city that according to him represents the multicultural, multi-religious Indian society. He was reacting to the rising strains of fundamentalism in India around that period. Bombay for him is representative of the truly hybrid and mixed nature of the Indian civilization.

Born to Muslim parents, Rushdie did not create a pure Muslim character who reads the Koran daily or visits the mosque. His main character Saleem, is partly Hindu, partly Goan, partly Kashmiri, partly Muslim, partly British, suggesting thereby the intermingling of the different races which constitute the India that Rushdie adores.

What Rushdie did, therefore, with *Midnight's Children*, was to make a clean break from the metaphysical Hindu worldview of Indian English fiction. This paradigm shift that he executed, makes him a seminal writer at a time when nothing new was expected from the Indian novel, since it had last attracted attention in the 1960s. His influence on the writing that has followed since has been tremendous. It has opened the ways to novels about protagonists who belong to the minority communities –

Parsis, Christians, Sikhs, Jews, etc. This was never so in the pre-1980s Indian English novels.

Background

Now, to come back to his life story, Rushdie left Bombay at the age of fourteen to study at Rugby in England. It was here that he tasted his first bitter experience of racism when one of the boys with whom he shared his study, wrote "Wogs go home" on the wall over his chair (Glendenning 38). So, hurt was Rushdie that he never wanted to return to England after that. But in 1967 his parents migrated to Pakistan. So, he spent some time there after the completion of his school education. His parents finally persuaded him to join King's College in Cambridge and he returned to England to study for his graduate degree with History as the subject of his specialization. After graduation, he worked for a while in England as a stage actor and then as a copywriter in an advertising firm. Meanwhile, he was also very seriously working at becoming a writer.

Rushdie had wanted to become a writer since childhood. His parents and his family say that it was from about the age of ten that he began to say that he would be a writer. Rushdie says that the first writer he knew was Faiz Ahmed Faiz a friend of his parents, "a kind of extra uncle" to him. As Rushdie read Faiz, he admired him for combining public and social awareness and responsibility with intense lyricism and he decided he would be a writer like him (Trivedi 12).

However, Rushdie's first novel was not *Midnight's Children* but *Grimus* a work of science fiction. It was written for a contest organized by Gollancz a publishing house. Liz Calder, an editor at Gollancz and a tenant in Rushdie's home in England, encouraged Rushdie to enter the contest. Rushdie did not win the contest but Calder persuaded Rushdie to publish the book. The novel was ripped apart by critics and Rushdie felt deeply hurt by the rejection.

However, he soon recovered and decided to write an "epic" novel about India, embodying its past, present and future. He undertook an extended trip to India along with his wife in preparation. This was his first visit to India in ten years. He says in an interview that although he wrote the actual novel in England, he could not have written it just sitting out there. So, he visited India and Pakistan and spent a considerable time visiting a lot of places that he had been to before and knew he would want to use. He also visited some places such as Benaras which he had never visited before but would want to use in his novel (Interview, Kunappi 18). In his essay "The Indian writer in England", Rushdie recalls how on revisiting his house in Bombay, he was "gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim". It was in that moment of realization that, *Midnight's Children* was really born".

When it was published in 1981, the novel was an immediate success. It struck a familiar chord in readers in India as well as England. It came to be described as "one of the most important novels to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation", (*New York Times*). It was compared with the novels of Gabriel Marquez, Gunter Grass and Milan Kundera – all established names in the western world. In the same year, he won the prestigious Booker McConnell prize. It made him a celebrity overnight. The 10,000 pounds award (it is 20,000 pounds now) gave him the freedom to write without worrying about earning a livelihood. He was lionized by the media in England, and then in India, where huge crowds turned out to hear his readings and lectures.

As *Midnight's Children* become a household name, a book to own and discuss, it transformed the internal economy of the print market for Indian English fiction. It opened up the way for the pre-publication purchase of the exclusive rights of books by Indian English novelists. Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra all have since won huge advance royalties from their publishers in the west. It was almost as if this one novel had triggered off a new market for Indian English

writing and the Indian English novel had been transported from the periphery to the centre of the world .

Until Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* came on the scene, most writers including R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand had had great difficulties with getting their works published. The market wasn't just ready to accept them. Anand has put on record his dejection at not being able to publish his first novel, *Untouchable* , so much so that he even contemplated committing suicide! Until E.M Forster the author of *Passage to India* took the initiative to recommend the novel for publication. That this novel which was published in 1936 has gone on to be translated in over twenty world languages is another matter.

Similar was Narayan's sad experience as no publisher wanted to buy his book *Swami and Friends*. Graham Greene the novelist helped him to publish it at last. But the experience repeated itself with Narayan's next novel, *The English Teacher*. Disgusted ,Narayan decided to set up his own publishing house, *Indian Thought Publications* and himself began to publish every single book of his.

As a contrast, the publishing success of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and that of his successors have been a phenomena difficult to understand. And to think that Rushdie had to write his second novel to be able to experience this glory, his first *Grimus* having been totally rejected.

Rushdie's third novel was *Shame*. It was published in 1983. It is set in and about Pakistan. This novel was also short-listed for the Booker though it didn't make it. It was much acclaimed critically but was banned in Pakistan. Yet smuggled copies were read in large numbers by members of the intelligentsia. However, the book that got him into deep trouble was *The Satanic Verses* his fourth novel. It was published in 1988. It became his most controversial work. Even before the book hit the market, Rushdie caused a stir in the publishing world by receiving a very huge advance. While the book was well-received in the UK and the USA, it was banned in India since it hurt the religious sentiments of the Muslims and led to riots and killings in Bombay's Bhendi Bazaar.

Soon it was banned in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, South Africa and countries with large Muslim populations. Rushdie's fate was sealed finally when on 14 February 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini announced his "fatwa" against Rushdie, exhorting "zealous Muslims" to execute him quickly. Rushdie went into hiding and lived so for over a decade, changing houses very often. He was living in England then. The world was outraged at the imposition of the fatwa. World leaders and writers came out with public statements denouncing Iran and Rushdie was catapulted into unprecedented fame. To give you a feel of the times when this happened I shall quote a few newspaper headlines in those months soon after the fatwa. With the world's leaders and writers behind him, Rushdie's fortunes seemed very similar to Saleem's in *Midnight's Children*.

- "US WRITERS COME OUT IN RUSHDIE'S SUPPORT"
- Indian Post, 24 February 1989
- "MITTERRAND, THATCHER JOIN HANDS ON RUSHDIE ISSUE"
- Indian Post, 1 March 1989
- "THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE DEFENCE OF
SALMAN RUSHDIE AND HIS PUBLISHERS"
- World Statement, a page length advertisement in Indian Express
Bombay, 2 March 1989 signed by thousands of literary figures
across the world .

These included writers, publishers, booksellers, agents and literary organizations. But none of this worked, nor did Rushdie's public apology to the Muslims. He won his freedom only recently in the year 2000 when the "fatwa" was officially called off by Iran. That's how he was able to travel to India in April 2000 and enjoy the pleasurable experience of revisiting the country he was pining to return to again. After the lifting of the fatwa, he also decided to migrate to the U.S., feeling quite bitter at the way the British government, he felt, had failed to stand up to Iran and get the fatwa annulled.

The most amazing fact about Rushdie and his courageous spirit is that even in captivity he continued to make secret appearances and write books.



Salman Rushdie, a death sentence put on him by Iranian leaders in 1989, takes his seat on Phil Donahue's set yesterday. He said his top-secret but very public book tour was a way to fight back at bullies who would silence him.

Salman Rushdie, a death sentence put on him by Iranian leaders in 1989 takes his seat on Phil Donahue's set to promote *The Moor's Last Sigh* in the U.S. in January 1996. He said his top secret but very public book tour was a way to fight back at bullies who would silence him.

Midnight's Children

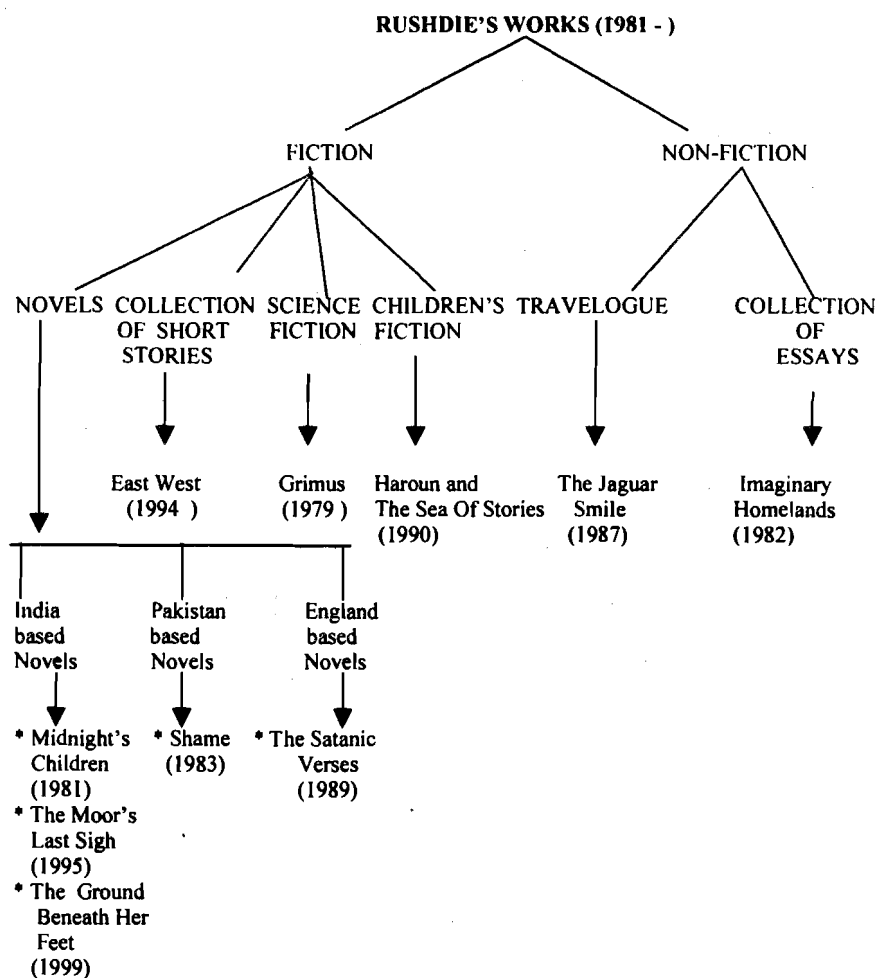
The book which he first wrote in hiding was *Haroun and the sea of Stories* (1990), a delightful "children's" book written for his son, Zafar, but which also fictionalizes his attack on the Ayatollah in the figure of Khatum Shud. The second book he wrote was *Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). This book was banned first in India and then released from the ban a couple of months later. The cause of the ban was Rushdie's open attack on Bal Thackeray a well known politician and leader of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. His fictional character wanted to convert India into a fascist Hindu state and Rushdie wanted to resist the rise of such a leader.

His last book to date, also written in captivity, is *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). The book was short listed for the Booker but it did not make it. It also won the Eurasian Region Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best Book but lost the overall prize.

However, the novel that has made real history by winning the Booker Prize not once, but twice, is *Midnight's Children*. The prize was first awarded to *Midnight's Children* in 1981, and again for being selected in 1994 as the best book among all the Booker winners in the 25 years of the Booker Prize, since the institution of the Booker Prize in 1969. *Midnight's Children* easily remains his best work. Doesn't that make you very eager to study it in detail?

THE OTHER WORKS OF RUSHDIE

In this section I am going to give you some more information about Rushdie's entire literary output. This will help you to place *Midnight's Children* in its midst as many of his themes recur. For the discussion, I shall focus only on his fiction here.



Since he published *Midnight's Children* in 1981 and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* in 1999, Rushdie has written ten works. These include five novels, one work of science fiction, one work of children's fiction, one a collection of short stories, a travelogue and one collection of essays. He has given a number of interviews, written numerous articles, and made a documentary on Kashmir. Indeed his career has been a very prolific one.

Now the interesting thing about his work – like that perhaps of all major writers – is that despite the variation in form and subject matter, certain ideas, literary and thematic concerns appear repeatedly in his works. His essays and interviews are of great help because they explicitly affirm some of these ideas. As in the case of T.S. Eliot whose essays help to understand his poetry, Rushdie's serve to explain his fiction. Although one may not trust the "teller" as essayist or the interviewee completely but the essays and the interviews certainly provide important insights. From his entire body of work, it is clear that the most recurrent ideas or themes are that of migrancy and the writer's freedom to challenge authority which appear hauntingly in all his works.

His view about his location as an expatriate or migrant writer is that he belongs to two cultures while being distanced from both. In "The Indian Writer in England" he rejects the idea of assimilation to the values of the host country, as also their absolute rejection (at the cost of idealizing the home country) which is typical he feels of most expatriates. For him, it is important that the modern day migrant must negotiate or choose selectively from the values of both cultures – the "native" and the "adopted" – and try to create a "new", "hybrid" identity (81).

However, despite his emphasis on the hybrid identity, almost all of his fiction keeps returning to Bombay in a nostalgic look backwards. His own migration has certainly made him think a lot about the subject and right from *Grimus*, his first novel, the theme has been repeated in every single work of his.

Grimus, published in 1979, is as I told you earlier a failed novel. Yet it is valuable for it contains the seeds of the competing claims of "native home" and "adopted home" for the migrant. The hero is Flapping Eagle, an American Indian in search of his lost sister, whom he finds on a Mediterranean island under the control of Grimus, a European magician.

Flapping Eagle leaves home because he has to. He is an outcast from his birth because his mother dies while bearing him and his community known for its religious fundamentals, shun him and his sister for seeking contact with the outside world. The novel speaks of Flapping Eagle "stripped of his past, forsaking the language of his ancestor for the language of the archipelagoes of the world" (36) very much like all the other novels speak about the choices made by his other protagonists.

Shame published in 1983, followed *Midnight's Children*. It is his second major book about the Indian subcontinent. It is based in Pakistan. The narrator in *Shame* is an expatriate who returns to Pakistan for an extended visit. As an outsider, who is also a cultural insider, the perspective he gives is a portrait of corruption and shamelessness among the ruling elite. The novel captures the abstract concept of shame on two levels – the national and the domestic. On the national level the main characters are thinly veiled caricatures of Zia ul Haq and Zulfikar Bhutto. On the marital plane, the men exhibit lack of sharam (Shame) in their oppression of the womenfolk. Both aspects are conveyed through the narration of the migrant visitor who describes himself as, a "translated man", standing between two cultures.

The Satanic Verses (1988) was meant to give voice and fictional flesh to the immigrant culture. It was also an attempt to explore the nature of divine revelation (the Koran), from the point of view of a secular person. The novel deals with the life of immigrants from the formerly colonized third world countries, now living in

Britain. Expected to adapt, even re-make themselves, the immigrants respond in different ways including absolute refusal to get transformed. On the other hand, others like Saladin, Chamcha (one of the two heroes in the book) who come to England with contempt for Indians and with a keen desire to embrace English ways receive a severe beating in racist England. Chamcha's attempt to become just a human being leads him to Bombay where he is reunited with his dying, until then estranged father / Fatherland.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990) is Rushdie's answer to Imam Khomeini and his other tormentors. He may have in reality apologized to the Muslims for hurting their feelings but in his heart of hearts one can see him feeling that he had every right to write what he did. The book is a delightful children's story on one level but on the other it is the story of his forced imprisonment in an unknown place and the silence imposed on him by the sentence of death passed on him by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the book, Khomeini is King Khattam Shud who is the arch enemy of all stories and the Foe of Speech.

East, West (1994) is a collection of short stories most of which have been published earlier in different magazines. The book communicates through the classification of stories, Rushdie's ideas of East and West coming together ultimately in a hybrid identity. The first section runs the India stories, the second section carries the stories located in the West, and the third carries a mixed set and is subtitled "East, West."

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995) sees Moraes Zogoiby exiled twice. Once, when his mother turns him out of her house in Bombay and next when the forces of oppression seek him and he escapes to Spain. It's the story of a character on the run. The escape, the flight, the unending journey is an image that repeatedly occurs in all expatriate fiction (Kirpal 1988). One of the most poignant descriptions in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is the one in which Moraes fears he will lose his sanity in the imprisonment imposed on him by his tormentor. The scene recalls the theme of the loss of a writer's freedom earlier explored in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999) is once again about exile, love, and loss. Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara meet when she comes from New York as a refugee. They fall in love and marry. But one day Vina vanishes from Bombay, from Ormus. Ormus, like Orpheus is doomed to search her. Symbolically, the search is for the nostalgic past, typical of expatriate writing.

1.4 THE TITLE : *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Midnight's Children draws its title from the hour of India's Independence, 15th August 1947. All the children born together at that momentous hour become in Rushdie's novel the children of the time : "Fathered, you understand, by history"(118). They represent "the highest of talents of which men have ever dreamed (199)".

Saleem's narrative tells of the joyous discovery of the midnight children through his protagonist Saleem's private "All India Radio", his own miraculous telepathic gift which provides the communications centre for all the children, in all 1001 of them. But the promise of their potential is not fulfilled. "If there is a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies, or rather it is murdered" (25)

The destruction of the *Midnight's Children* which Saleem believes is the deepest motive behind the declaration of a state of Emergency in India, is the heart of his black story. Their magical powers are completely destroyed by the widow, Mrs. Gandhi as they are all "test-and-hysterectomies" (438). This is Rushdie's way of saying that the imposition of Emergency emasculated, castrated the country.

Rushdie's wit shines through his interview of 1985 in which he speaks of how the idea of midnight children came about. Initially he says he began with one child. These then became two as he thought of swapping them.

Then I thought that you can't have just two children in a country like India. It must be more and if it's more than two, why these two? I did a mathematical calculation about the birthrate of India, with calculators, and worked out that in fact, a thousand and one children is accurate" (Interview 18).

In writing a novel about the Indian subcontinent, Rushdie in one sense belongs with the novelists who came before him, novelists such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan and yet he is very distinct.

Rao's *Kanthapura* is the sthalapurana (or place legend) par excellence of India during its freedom movement. Gandhi is his real hero. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* - different from Rao's novel is a mild satire on the average Indian's incomplete understanding of the Gandhi - led freedom struggle but still reverential of the Mahatma. Gandhi figures in *Midnight's Children* too but so faint is the historical memory of independent India that even the date of his assassination is incorrectly recorded by Saleem. The lapse only reminds the reader of the distance between the modern day Indian and Gandhian ideals.

The title *Midnight's Children* is both to be read for the promise that the 1001 children symbolized, and the failure of the post-independent generation to carry the mantle of creating an ideal society. In an act of real life imitating fiction, most English language newspapers in India felicitated the *Midnight children* born on India's fiftieth anniversary!

The number of midnight children is 1001. This figure might puzzle you. You might wonder why Rushdie chose to have 1001 children and not 1000, which is a round figure. Infact, Rushdie also says in that interview that the figure 1001 is on the low side and that probably there are twelve or thirteen hundred children being born every hour (Interview 18)! So, then why did Rushdie choose 1001? For the reason that the number recalls the 1001 stories that Scheherzade told every night in the Arabian Nights to save her life, and Rushdie's novel is about telling stories. You will find this trait of making connections between dissimilar facts and suggesting new ways of looking at things, very typical of Rushdie. That is why there is always an element of surprise that makes you think every time: "Oh yes, it is so. Now why didn't it occur to me earlier?"

1.5 THE BOOKER AND MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Since the first page of this Block, I have been mentioning that Rushdie won the Booker Prize for *Midnight's Children*. As a few other Indian English novelists including Arundhati Roy have also won it recently, the idea may not thrill us very much until we understand what winning the Booker Prize means and how it is awarded. So, in this section I'm going to give you this information.

The Booker Prize (or The Booker McConnell Prize, as should be called) was founded in 1969 by Booker McConnell, a multinational group of companies. Administered by Book Trust in the United Kingdom, this prestigious award is awarded to the best full-length novel written in English by a citizen of the UK, the Commonwealth, Eire, Pakistan or South Africa. This literary prize is sponsored by Booker McConnell Ltd. and looked after by the National Book League in the United Kingdom.

The way it is awarded is in two phases. In the first, publishers are invited to submit entries with scheduled publication dates between January and November of the award year. Earlier they could submit any number of entries. This has changed in the past few years; a publisher can now submit not more than three entries for judging. The time frame has changed as well, with the prize shortlist now announced in late September or early October and the deadline for entries being moved back to June 30. The prize itself (currently valued at 20,000 pounds Sterling) is awarded in late October. Since 1999, shortlisted novelists also receive 1000 pounds Sterling.

In the second phase, the judges read all the entries submitted by the publishers. It appears that the judges in 1995 were asked to read 140 novels, and decided that was too much of a good thing and limited the number of entries to two a publisher. The publishers are not too happy it seems, claiming that their third entry was usually a long-shot. Perhaps a radical shake-up is in order to bring the whole thing back into perspective because while critics speak of the politics of the "Booker", others from the Commonwealth countries have charged it for discriminating against their Literature.

Anyway whether or not these beliefs are supported by facts, what is a fact however is that the author who gets selected for the Prize, becomes a celebrity overnight. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was awarded the Booker in 1981; and again the "Booker of Booker Prize" in 1994. Now can you imagine a parallel achievement in recent times?

Question : Can you name the winner of the Booker Prize 2000?

Answer : It is *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood.

1.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as I've said earlier put the Indian-English novel on the world map in an unprecedented way "No other novel about India has had such an impact" (Ali 95). It also made Rushdie, at the young age of thirty-four into a major literary figure. Critical praise was showered lavishly on the work which was characterized variously as "an outstanding achievement" (Nazareth), "a novel of international importance" (Chaudhuri), a work that "sounds like a continent finding its voice" (Blaise), enormously creative in its "fecundity, extravagance, and scope" (Towers).

Rushdie's exuberant humour, brilliant wit, imaginative boldness, enormous talent, prodigious powers of storytelling, debt to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Laurence Sterne all became part of the vocabulary of critical acclaim that greeted *Midnight's Children*. It was not as if such praise was offered by reviewers in the West alone. Anita Desai, herself a leading Indian English novelist described the novel as being "of major interest to Indian readers," and went on to characterize it as a "great tour de force, a dazzling exhibition of the gifts of a new writer with courage, impressive strength, the power of both imagination and control, and sheer stylistic brilliance".

In the Indian subcontinent, the book gathered numerous favourable reviews as well. Its impact, in the subcontinent and the West, can perhaps be best gauged through the fact that the novel marks among other things the coming of age of a generation of subcontinental writers for whom English was their first language. The success of *Midnight's Children* led to a flood of novels by Indian English novelists and like this novel they too won numerous awards – national and international. When *Midnight's*

Children was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize, its critical reception more than made up for Rushdie's disappointment over his first novel *Grimus*.

Background

With regard to more extended commentaries on his works and on Rushdie himself, you will enjoy reading the full-length critical study on Rushdie by Timothy Brennan: *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. It offers very insightful readings of each of Rushdie's fictional works including *Midnight's Children*, Brennan's terms for discussing Rushdie ("cosmopolitan writer" versus "frontline fighter"; "anti-colonial liberalism" versus "nationalism," to name some) provide an interesting context within which Rushdie's works can be read and understood. Brennan's analysis is especially useful for studying Rushdie's expatriate sensibility.

Among the essays on Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* one of the most interesting, theoretically informed pieces worth mentioning are Rustom Bharucha's "Rushdie's Whale," which looks closely at Rushdie's linguistic innovations and wordplay to make the point that "Rushdie has added a new dimension to English by being idiosyncratically true to the sounds of his birth and youth"(222). Other pieces to read are Makarand Paranjape's "Inside and Outside the Whale: Politics and the New Indian English Novel" and Arun Mukherjee's "Characterization in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*."

Mukherjee critiques the novel from a feminist perspective and argues that Rushdie's attitudes are distinctly patriarchal. Kum Kum Sangari's "The Politics of the Possible," is a comparative analysis of Garcia Marquez and Rushdie which examines how Western readers classify the "magical realist" narratives (i.e., narratives that combine realism with fiction) of the two writers under the term of postmodernism and conveniently ignore the political activism in the works of these writers.

These are just a few examples. The total number of essays written on *Midnight's Children* is indeed mind-boggling. They reflect a great variety of perspective and interpretations suggesting thereby that *Midnight's Children* is that kind of work which can offer different meanings to different people all the time. Such is its universality.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In Unit 1, I have introduced you to some of the important biographical details about the novelist, given you a brief summary of Rushdie's other works to highlight his pet themes and concerns. I have also discussed the significance of the book's title and the Booker Prize that it won. The unit also describes the nature of reception that the book received in critical circles and shares with you a certain approach of reading the book which may make you relate to *Midnight's Children* better.

1.8 GLOSSARY

advent:	arrival
expatriate:	a person living in a foreign country
quietism:	passivity
seminal:	influencing others in a new way, original

historically the phase in Western civilization that follows modernity but has also been interpreted as a concept that emphasizes indeterminacy, wordplay, hybridity, fragmentation and so on.

1.9 QUESTIONS

1. Name five Bombay-centric Indian English novels published in the 1980s. Give the names of their authors and their dates of publication?
2. What characteristics of Rushdie do you gather from the way he describes his having created 1001 midnight children in the novel?
3. Remember the question I had posed to you in 1.1? Let me repeat it. How can we judge the impact of a just published novel on which there is no criticism available yet? Any suggestions and ideas?

1.10 SUGGESTED READING

Brennan, Timothy *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*

Dingwaney Anuradha. "Salman Rushdie" in Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Westport : Greenwood Press, 1993 : 363 - 85

Glendenning Victoria. "A Novelist in the Country of the Mind." *Sunday Times* (Oct 25, 1981) : 38

Kirpal Viney. *The New Indian Novel in English : A Study of the 1980s* New Delhi : Allied Publishers, 1990.

UNIT 2 *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: THE DE-DOXIFIED ENGLISH

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Beginnings
- 2.3 Problems and Challenges Faced by the Post 1930s Novelists
- 2.4 Rushdie on English and Englishes
- 2.5 Rushdie and the use of Hybridized English
- 2.6 Is Rushdie an Indian English Novelist?
- 2.7 English "De-doxified"
- 2.8 Rushdie's use of English in Descriptive Scenes
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Glossary
- 2.11 Questions
- 2.12 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will first look at the challenges and difficulties experienced by Indian English novelists to forge an English which was distinctive from British English and American English. Then we will examine how far Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* has carried on with, or broken away from the tradition created by these writers. I shall conclude the unit by discussing Rushdie's experiments with the English language in *Midnight's Children*.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Till this day, the most recurring and the most passionate debate in any seminar on Indian English writing is about the use of English by Indian writers. Don't be surprised if this should happen to you. Very typically, what happens is that first a seminar on Indian writing in English is organized. Then the papers and proceedings continue in English for a while until suddenly someone among those present will get up and launch an emotional attack (in English) on Indian writers for writing in English. The charge usually is that authentic Indian writing exists and can be written only in the regional languages.

Though no one offers to explain what 'authentic' means, a few knowing heads bob up and down in agreement. At the same time, the other half of the participants now get ready to uphold the use of English by Indian writers. The debate then turns quite bitter until the Chairperson of the Seminar intervenes to put a halt to it. Why does this happen. Why does this continue to happen? Perhaps because ever since Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhiji pronounced (during the Nationalist Freedom movement) that the use of English is an unpatriotic act and its users lacking in creativity, Indian intellectuals have seen writing in English as an un-Indian act, and so possibly the critical debate in post-Independence has remained inconclusive.

Now, what critics think is one thing but what writers do may be another. It is therefore, important for you to understand why Indian English novelists have

continued to write in English without experiencing the dilemma that some of the critics do.

2.2 THE BEGINNINGS

Indian English novelists have had two kinds of predecessors. The first set of novelists were those who began writing in the pre 1930s. They were those who wrote English with stiff correctness, always conscious that it was a foreign language. Their works and their English were imitative of the British novelists of the times. Sir Walter Scott and W.W. Reynolds were very popular with them as models.

The other group comprised novelists such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Michael Madhusudan Dutt who began writing in English but who, influenced by the rising feeling of nationalism, later switched to writing in their mother tongue, Bengali.

However, the novelists who rose in the 1930s, novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao were those who made a conscious decision to write in English as if it were an Indian language. Perhaps, they did not regard it as a foreign language since it had been domiciled in India for over a hundred years. However, where they were different from their predecessors was in their objective of re-making British English very much like American and Irish writers such as, James Baldwin and J.M. Synge had already done before them. Their self-assurance that they were using an Indian and not a foreign language gave them "the confidence to bend the language to their will" (Mukherjee, 167). Perhaps, the use of English by these writers was their way of asserting their right to write in English by giving it a new and distinct identity.

The first major novelist to experiment with English for writing fiction was Mulk Raj Anand with his novel *Untouchable*, a work that you are studying in this course. Then came G. V. Desani, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya. Experimentation with the English language has continued without a stop since their days.

What Anand did was to experiment with the diction, dialogue and the syntax of the English spoken by his characters. While he did not alter the English he used for his remarks as a narrator, in the dialogues uttered by his Punjabi characters he literally translated from Hindi and Punjabi words and idioms even at the cost of disrupting the grammatical conventions of British English. For example in *Untouchable* you will have noticed a generous use of expressions and phrases such as "eating the air" (to take a stroll), "breaking the vessel" (to expose a secret) or "black in the pulse" (something fishy) which are very common in Hindi or Punjabi but which when rendered in English appear odd and unusual. While reading the novel, you must have wondered why Anand had done this, what does he achieve with such usage, and does he succeed?

Those of you who have read *Untouchable* will agree that he succeeds in spite of the oddity of such expressions because he was trying to capture the vigorous speech of Punjabi peasants. He conveys the Punjabi farmer's sensibility without a doubt though you may also feel disturbed at the violence he does to the grammar of English. This brings us to the question whether this approach is recommended. The next section which discusses the problems experienced by writers including Anand, Narayan and Rao who were trying consciously to forge a new English for Indian creative writing will perhaps answer the question for you.

2.3 PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE POST 1930s NOVELISTS

Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan are regarded as the three major writers of Indian English Fiction because they set the operative sensibility which has more or less continued to the present. The leads that they set in the use of English will be discussed in this unit before I analyse Rushdie's innovations.

This exercise is necessary so that you understand the creation of the literary tradition inherited by Rushdie, and the unique contributions made by him in *Midnight's Children*. In fact, it is difficult to appreciate *Midnight's Children* without being able to place it in the literary history of the Indian English Novel. Hence let us try first to understand what it meant to be an Anand, Rao or Narayan writing in English about Indian society and characters. So, for this I'm going to request you to do the following exercise.

For a moment, place yourself in a time machine and go back to the 1930s. Imagine you are an aspiring writer who has been educated in English and has studied British Literature. You too want to write a novel but your awakened nationalist feelings do not allow you to imitate British novelists. You wish to innovate with the themes, the English language and the narrative technique which would help you to write about a distinct Indian society but you do not have an Indian model to follow. So what would you do.

It is important to ask yourself this question because what we today take for granted was the result of great creativity, industry and personal struggle for the writers of the times. India was still a slave country. The aura of the British as superior in everything including ideas, systems, culture was yet strong among the majority of the English-educated Indians and these were the people who would read novels written in English.

However, these writers were equally eager not to write novels that were imitations. They felt inspired to show their countrymen and to the rest of the world that they too were writing novels that were important literature in its own right. But they were also aware of the close connection between the language they were using and the cultural baggage that went with it. So, each writer sought to re-define English and make it 'Indian' enough so that it could be used to communicate the Indian cultural and social values to English-speaking readers worldwide.

Try out this exercise. Describe in English any interesting custom or belief among your regional or linguistic community. You must take care to convey the flavour of 'Indianness'.

I'm sure you enjoyed doing that exercise. But I did also realize how challenging, if not impossible, the task was? And remember you find it difficult when you have scores of models before you while these writers/had none. So, now do you see how difficult and challenging the task must have been for these Indian novelists and the many problems they must have faced to be able to write fiction using English in a decolonized way. Luckily, these novelists being an expressive lot, they have documented extensively their efforts of how they tried to re-shape the colonizer's language and use it for writing about a non-white society. Thanks to their essays, we understand their experiments and struggles better.

Perhaps, the most important statement among these writers on the attempt to Indianize English for writing the Indian novel has come from Raja Rao in his Foreword to Kanthapura which was published in 1938. Can you recall what Rao had written? He had written:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own(*English*) is the language of our intellectual make up ... but not of our emotional make up.
(v; emphasis added)

The magnitude of Rao's achievement in changing the filter of English to accommodate the emotions, the culture, the values and belief systems of his characters and their society is understood only if we compare the following statements, only one of which is from the novel. The other is what the statement might have been had Rao not re-fashioned English. Please read them and list the difference that you observe between the two:

- i. Kenchamma is a great Indian goddess who according to ancient lore is reported to have killed the demon that was preying upon the people of Kanthapura. So the people worship her till today.
- ii. Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and beautiful is she. She killed a demon ages ago, a demon that had come to ask for our young sons as food and our young women as wives.

(Kanthapura 2)

Did you notice that the first is an example of English used as an intellectual language but not as the language of emotions while the second with its oral rhythms, inverted syntactical structures and alliteration invokes a speaking voice and suggests a live audience? More important, did you observe the way in which the lines evoke the narrator's reverence and love for Kenchamma? Don't they foreground a typically traditional Indian cultural value system where one's neighbours are like one's family, and where different members share deep emotional bonds? The lines also evoke the felt horror at the demon's act on its transgressing into the lives, the self respect and honour of their big family("our young sons", "our young women"). The allegoric allusion also recalls the eternal battle between Good/the goddess and Evil/the demon that has always formed the core of traditional Indian thought and literature and which continues to live in the collective unconscious of the Indian people as an archetype. Even our films follow that pattern if you observe closely.

In the movie the good man (played by the hero) and the bad man (played by the villain) are locked in a conflict throughout the three hours. Only in the end does the good man defeat and win over the evil villain. Very much like the familiar pattern of our epics and other traditional literary works.

Kenchamma an imaginary construction of the writer is real and active. But she appears in the powerful imaginations of the people of *Kanthapura*. That thirty five words can achieve so much by clever alterations made in the linguistic and cultural structures of a foreign language and made to carry so much meaning is truly remarkable. Isn't it? Well that's what Rao has achieved. Do you know why?

Well, because English in India, as you know, is learnt by the rules of grammar. It is the language we use to study, read books, write exams, carry on intellectual debates. But it is not our mother tongue. It is not the language that comes to us when we cry out in pain. When in pain or grief an Indian might call out for his mother ("Ma") or for his God ("Hai Bhagwan"). Expressions of pain and grief are emotions. Most Indians won't use English to express their deepest emotions. So to use "English" for

expressing the emotions of Indian characters was a major challenge. And you've just seen how that was overcome by Raja Rao and his contemporaries.

The second challenge was that English is not the language you encounter on the streets. Your milkman or maid servant won't speak English nor will your rickshawwalla or your grandparents. The difficulty that Rao and Anand were experiencing was very real. How were they to write in English about people who do not normally speak English? The problem was accentuated when the novelist had to write dialogues or report the conversation among Indian characters belonging to different classes or castes of society.

Therefore, these three novelists – Rao, Anand and Narayan – experimented vigorously and tried to modify and invent new words and proverbs in English and make them “Indian” to represent the speech of their characters.

Rao successfully created in English the feeling that the characters were speaking Kannada. Indeed, he does it so effectively that even those who are not familiar with the rigid social structure of a South Indian village, will have observed in *Kanthapura* how a man's caste can be judged from his speech. He has tried to create this feeling in his novel. Similarly Anand tried to create punjabi-speaking characters in English by giving a literal translation of their dialogues.

R. K. Narayan does it in his own way. He tries to convey Tamilian society and characters in English in an almost unobtrusive way. He embeds Tamilian proverbs in translation or creates them so skillfully that you may hardly notice his experiments with English.

In *the Bachelor of Arts*, the typical Indian father tells Chandran that “rupees do not grow on trees” which is modification of the English idiom “money does not grow on trees”, only it sounds more Indian. In another instance, he changes the idiom “it's no use crying over split milk” into “it's no use crying over split milk”, and both these modifications are done so subtly that you may hardly notice them though the feeling remains that this is how Indian characters would speak. Of course, in Narayan there are present other cultural markers too - Tamilian customs, religious fasts and ceremonies that help the reader to grasp the regional origin of his characters.

In this context, let me share a funny episode with you. The year was 1977 and I was teaching the “Indian English Novel” to the First year engineering students at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. We had begun discussing *The Bachelor of Arts* and were well on to the fifth lecture. At the end of the class, a Tamilian girl student came to me and complained about the novel. She said “Narayan has brought in the Tamilian customs, beliefs, and proverbs that I see and practise in my own home everyday. How can this be a novel? What the young girl was saying was that the novel was too real to be called fiction! You see, therefore, what I mean by Narayan being very subtle with his experiments with English and using other markers to portray Indian society and people.

Thus, Narayan too bends the English language but he does it very cleverly. Rao and Anand do it more obtrusively, more consciously. Rao, like Anand, uses transliterations from the Kannada such as describing the family next door as the “That-House people”. He constantly re-works his syntax to convey the speaking voice in *Kanthapura*.

However, what is common to these novelists and most of the others such as Bhabani Bhattacharya or G. V. Desani (whom I haven't discussed here) is that they use English to convey a small geographical area or regional reality.

They translate from Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada or Bengali depending on the region from which they come. This had to happen since India is a large country and

the writers while writing their novels had chosen to write about the regions they were most familiar with. This may be seen as a limitation today since the advent of the pan – Indian English novels of the 1980s and after. However the efforts of the novelists to use their regional language to forge a new English were remarkable and represented an important landmark in the development of Indian English Fiction. The magnitude of the post 1930s Indian novelists' achievement in creating characters, their emotions, values, beliefs and caste and class relationships has to be appreciated before we can appreciate Rushdie's considerable contributions to the re-making of English in *Midnight's Children*. I hope this section has made their achievements and efforts quite clear to you.

2.3 RUSHDIE ON ENGLISH AND *englishes*

Ever since Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* won him the Booker Prize, Rushdie has been a popular speaker at seminars and press conferences. This has given him the advantage of speaking explicitly about what shapes his writing. From each of his talks the impression I gather is that he is a rather thoughtful writer who has reflected deeply on the way he would like to use the language to structure his fiction. This means that as his readers and critics we get a lot of information that enables us to apply it to his works and evaluate how far they mirror his artistic, literary objectives and philosophy.

Rushdie is the most articulate and important Indian English writer, after Raja Rao to have spoken about his aesthetics at such length. That is what makes one see parallels between them. Even though Rushdie has always denied Rao as a literary ancestor, both have been path-breaking novelists in what they have done to their use of English and in their technique. But more about technique in another unit. Here I'll be focussing on Rushdie's use of English and how successful he has been with what he has done with the language.

In 1984, in his lecture "Describing Reality as a Political Act", Rushdie described his views on English in a way that recalls Rao's views though he may have arrived at them independently. He stated that

One of the changes has to do with attitudes towards the use of English, the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we cannot use it simply the way the British did that it needs re-making for our purpose

Rushdie spoke of the English used by the British as the English written with a capital "E" and of the different *englishes* (that were now being used in different parts of the world where once the British had ruled) as being written with the small letter 'e'. These '*englishes*' were re-makings of the English inherited in the former colonial countries and societies by writers who aimed to use them for the purpose of writing about their own people and struggles in the aftermath of colonisation.

He describes this as the phenomenon of the "Empire hitting back" with a vengeance and says he finds these *englishes* to be more vibrant than English. He observes that the formerly colonised had re-fashioned English in a way that had decolonised the English language they had inherited from the British. Now, isn't this very close to what Raja Rao had said in 1938 in his Foreword? Although, Rushdie does not acknowledge his debt to Rao, the fact remains, as I said earlier, that changing the cultural baggage of the English language to represent their own societies has been the paradigm of Indian novelists (including Rushdie) writing in English. There is no other way to do it too perhaps because the novel as a literary form is the most society-centric of all literary genres. Poetry, drama can do without going into details

about a society but not the novel. It is so sociological in nature and people-centric that a reference to the culture, to the way that different peoples think, is inevitable. Hence the Indian novelist who chooses to write about Indian themes is forced to re-shape and modify the English language and make it a suitable medium to represent Indian society and characters. His precursors did it and Rushdie has done it. The questions that we then have to discuss now are: What is the contribution of Rushdie to English? What is the difference between his use of English and the use of English by Rao, Narayan and Anand? I shall discuss these questions in the section that follows.

2.4 RUSHDIE AND THE HYBRIDIZED ENGLISH

Well, the one major difference that I can readily observe and I did point it out in an earlier section is that Rao, Narayan and Anand draw upon their mother tongues – Kannada, Tamil and Punjabi to create the English they need in their novels. They bring into their novels the regional flavour that places their characters geographically, culturally and linguistically. Rushdie entering the scene of the Indian English novel with his *Midnight's Children*, which is a book not about any one region but the whole subcontinent, uses English as a pan-Indian language and not as a regional language.

How does he do it? He does it by using “Hinglish” in place of any one regional language. “Hinglish” is a mixture of Hindi the national language and English. Did you know “Hinglish” is an artificially created language? No, it wasn't created by Rushdie, but by the famous Hindi film gossip magazine *Stardust*! The late Devyani Chaubal its spunky editor in the early 1970s first began using an English that befitted Bollywood gossip so well – “Actress X pataoes actor Y”. This usage has become so common that many of you must have grown up using it in school, college and home. It is, like many things in India, hybrid in nature – Bhangra pop, for example. So it seems so natural today to use a hybrid English or “Hinglish” as it is called, for our daily conversations. “Come let's go for *chai* (tea) or “I've told her *hajaar* (a thousand) times to come on time” are all instances of Hinglish. Now, the beauty of “Hinglish” is that it is spoken and understood in different parts of the country. For one thing, the English-educated generations have overcome their colonial hang-up about using Hindi. For another, while people in the villages are trying to learn English those in the southern Indian states have picked up Hindi, possibly from TV serials! So, “Hinglish” is commonly used in the country today. It creates a sense of its being a pan-Indian language cutting across regional, religious and class barriers.

Rushdie, unlike the novelists who preceded him, uses the hybrid, pan-Indian “Hinglish” to communicate the worldview and emotions of his characters. It is very effective because it is easily recognizable as the speaking voice of the common man or woman in India. This was not so in the novels of Narayan, Rao and Anand. In their novels, you always had to consciously suspend your belief that the tongawalla or the sweeper were speaking in English. But look at this example from *Midnight's Children* :

She (Padma) attempts to cajole me from my desk : “Eat, na, food is spoiling.” I remained stubbornly hunched on paper Padma snorts. Wrist smacks across forehead.
“Okay, starve, starve, who cares two pice.”

Before I give you my interpretation, will you please write down in the space provided below what Rushdie has achieved in this passage through his use of English and how?

The first thing you must have observed is that Rushdie uses British English for the educated male narrator Saleem, and "Hinglish" for Padma (Saleem's uneducated beloved) so that gives us the knowledge that these characters belong to different social classes. While the British English highlights the stubborn moody character of Saleem, as Padma tries to "cajole" him and persuade him to eat much like an Indian wife is likely to do, her "snorts", and wrist smacks across forehead reveal his and her frustration and his inflexibility. The Hinglish used here also suggests a number of things. First, the effect of both the sentences, - "eat na, food is spoiling" and "okay, starve, starve who cares two pice" implies that Padma is not speaking English. The reason is the use of the word "na" in the first sentence and the grammatical "error" ("food is spoiling" rather than "the food is getting cold") which are more likely to be used in the vernacular. Again, in the second sentence, the use of "starve" twice for emphasis definitely communicates that it is not an English utterance. In English, one never uses a word twice for emphasis. For example "I sang while I worked." This usage of the same word twice in succession is more common in the vernacular - "Maine gaate gaate kaam kiya."

This, in a few sentences using some British English and some "Hinglish", Rushdie is able to convey a great deal about his character, their close relationship, personalities, emotions, social class, educational level and culture.

2.6 IS RUSHDIE AN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELIST?

Rather intriguingly, in an interview he gave in 1982, Rushdie stated that there is no such thing as Indian-British fiction! He felt that writers like Narayan and Anand have "more affinities to Indian writers in the Indian languages than they do to a writer like me who just happens to be writing in English" (Interview 1982).

Now while the distinctive way in which Rushdie uses English is quite obvious but what is controversial here is his view that the Indian English novel, is not separate from British fiction. Does this mean that Rushdie regards all literature written in English as an offshoot of the British novel while he considers those novelists like Rao, Narayan and Anand who borrow their regional languages as belonging to the vernacular Indian writers.

But interestingly in each of his novels, especially *Midnight's Children* he has used "Indian English" and not British English to represent the speech of his Indian characters. Indeed, if there is a difference between his forerunners and him, then it is this that while Narayan, Rao, Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya invariably were at pains not to use a single vernacular word, phrase or idiom untranslated into English, Rushdie often refuses to make such concessions for the western reader. Although he occasionally uses a Hindi or Urdu word in the original - the meaning of these unfamiliar Indianisms has to be derived largely from the context. The western reader has to work hard to decipher their significance which an Indian reader would recognize instantly because of a mutually shared cultural and sociological heritage. This method of embedding the English language with select Indianisms is a clear advancement in the Indian writer's attempt to use Hinglish as a decolonized form of English. In using it, Rushdie can be considered a pioneer in Indian English Fiction. Examine these two exchanges between Tai, the hoary boatman and the child Aziz Adam :

'No, tell, Taiji, how old (you are) truly?... And now a brandy bottle, materializes from nowhere : cheap liquor from the folds of the great warm chugha coat. Then a shudder, a belch... 'How old? You ask how Old, you little wet-head, you nose... So, old nakkoo!' (16)

The inquisitive child wanting the white bearded Tai to tell him his age, and Tai not wanting to disclose it is a scene typically enacted between all children and their elders with the former ready to believe that any one older than them must be ancient, and the latter too ashamed to acknowledge the passage of age. The exchange reveals the offence taken by the old man and returned in the pejorative "you nose" and "old nakoo", at the impudence of the disrespectful young boy towards an elder. The other Indianisms here include "*chuga*" coat and the ungrammatical use of the verb (to 'tell') without the subject ('me') and the use of the complement ('how old') without the subject and predicate ('you are'); they read like utterances in the regional languages.

That Rushdie wants to use English not merely as an intellectual's language but also to communicate emotions is clear from the opening of Chapter 6 titled "A Public Announcement":

There followed an illusionist January, a time so still
on its surface that 1947 seemed not to have begun
at all ... (while, of course, in fact....) In which the
Cabinet Mission – old Patrick Lawrence, clever
Cripps, military A. V. Alexander – saw their
scheme for the transfer of power fail. (But of course,
in fact, it would only be six months until ...) In which
the viceroy Wavell understood that *he was finished,*
washed up, or in our own expressive word, funtoosh
(64, italics added)

A slightly longer quotation but I want to use it to make two separate points. For the first point, please pay attention only to the italicized words. They communicate the emotional drain that the loss of India as a colony had meant to the departing English government. The words 'finished' and 'washed up' are not enough, Rushdie clarifies; such powerful feelings can only be communicated through our own expressive (vernacular) word 'funtoosh'.

My second point is to draw your attention to the use of dots and dashes in *Midnight's Children* which Rushdie admits he learnt from G. V. Desani in his novel *All About H Hatter* (1948) Desani first showed him that it was possible to break up the English language and put it back together in a different way. He says in his interview:

I found I had to punctuate it (*Midnight's Children*) in a very peculiar way,...
I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots,
sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three
dashes... That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let
other things into it. Desani does that all the time in *Hatter*... (1982)

If you reflect on this carefully, you will observe that that's what all the Indian English novelists have really been doing with British English. They too have been dislocating it, breaking up its existing linguistic cultural patterns, introducing new cultural patterns into it and localizing it for creative use. Rushdie has been doing that too. So, doesn't it then make Rushdie belong as much to the Indian English literary tradition as the other novelists – Narayan, Rao and Anand? Clearly like them, Rushdie is not writing British fiction, but very much an Indian English fiction.

2.7 ENGLISH "DE-DOXIFIED"

Since the late 1960s, a major revolution has been underway to question the very way in which we perceive inherited ways of thinking about reality. It began in Paris in France with Ferdinand Saussure and Ronald Barthes and has since developed into a

full fledged school of Post Structural criticism and intellectual thought. Its influence has been felt in almost every area and discipline of study.

According to this school some ideas are actually formulated by society to preserve the position and power of society's politically, socially, economically dominant groups but these ideas are passed off as 'natural' or cultural in origin. In reality these ideologies have been created to justify the presence of inequalities so that the minority or marginalized sections may not challenge the dominance of the majority or the privileged groups.

For example, the Indian belief that one is born a *sudra* or a woman because of one's *karma*, is an ideology which reasons that we are where we are because of our past actions. Because this ideology seems incontestable, once we believe in the *Karma* theory, then the power groups continue to exercise their dominance while the powerless passively accept their dominance over themselves. What makes ideologies so difficult to dislodge is the conditioning since birth of the 'naturalness' of those unequal situations in societies.

When Barthes defined Poststructuralist thought he was instrumental in challenging all such 'natural' constructions and exposing the political intentions of the powerful who were interested in keeping these ideologies and beliefs alive. He described these as the 'Doxa' or public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' (Barthes 1977b) and questioned if in truth they were natural or were they man made.

Closely following Post structuralist thinking is Postmodernism in art and architecture which has given expression to upturning given traditional, cultural public opinion or 'doxa' by consciously re-writing the same script in reverse. The effect is sensational as it pulls down the powerful from their habitual position and places the powerless in their place. Let's consider Anand's novel *Untouchable* as an example to see how this works.

In *Untouchable* the well-built low caste Bakha is spat upon, abused and slapped by the short and thin high caste Hindu merely because he accidentally touches him. Since you've studied that book, I want you to notice the special mention made in that scene of the fact that the strong Bakha could easily have beaten and overpowered the small and puny Hindu. And can you recall what run's through Bakha's mind at that time? That despite the inner rage he cannot retaliate because of his conditioning that his station in life does not allow him to beat up a high caste. Mulk Raj Anand by depicting an untouchable as the hero of his novel and by providing the narratorial comment about Bakha's conditioned state was creating history. But that is not revolutionary enough for postmodern writers.

What a postmodern work would do would be to represent the low caste as militant rather than meek. In a postmodern novel, Anand would have written the scene twice, once as he has scripted it in his novel and then again with the reverse script, wherein, he would have shown Bakha as returning the caste Hindu's slap with powerful blows that would have made the caste Hindu tremble in fear or run for his life.

This would mean rewriting a given socio cultural-script in reverse. Such rewritten reverse scripts create new realities that are as equally valid as the existing ones in which the superior group is privileged. Along these lines, an entire range of ideologies can be challenged. For example, one may challenge the superiority of man over woman, sanity versus madness, white over black and so on.

Now when the writer re-scripts given assumptions, he needs to frame language in a certain way which is called 'de-doxification'. In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* there is ample evidence of the use of 'de-doxification'. Consider this description of Jesus Christ by Tai the boat man where Jesus is spoken of not as a revered prophet

figure but as an imperfect, ordinary, fun-loving visitor having a great time in Kashmir:

The De-doxified
English

“Nakoo, listen, listen. I have seen plenty Yara, you should’ve seen Isa (Jesus) when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head.... And what an appetite!.... Saint or devil, I swear he could eat a whole kid in one go.... I told him eat, fill your hole....He just came here to live it up a little “ (16)

Obviously a cooked-up tale. Yet, Coming from the lips of the bawdy, crude boatman, his irreverence seems very much in character. At the same time Rushdie achieves his poststructural purpose ; he challenges the usual practice of privileging prophets over ordinary men. Here he does it unobtrusively but in *The Satanic Verses*, he did it so openly that it got him into severe trouble as you all know.

2.8 RUSHDIE’S USE OF ENGLISH IN DESCRIPTIVE SCENES

Rushdie uses the English language to describe landscapes or actions so that these acquire a three dimensional cinematic quality. He draws on the visual, auditory, kinesthetic senses and conveys images, feelings and sounds in a way that render them immediate and experienceable. In the passage quoted below Saleem tries to show off to Evie that he has learnt how to ride a bike. Evie is his neighbour on whom he has a crush while Evie is soft towards Sonny.

Roundandroundand... finally, to please her (Evie) , I stammered, ‘Okay... I think I’m ... let me ‘, and instantly I was on my own, she had given a farewell shove I heard her shouting. The brake ! Use the goddamn brake ya dummy !’- but my hands couldn’t move, I had gone rigid as a plank, and there LOOK OUT in front of me was the blue two – wheeler of Sonny Ibrahim, collision course, OUTA THE WAY YA CRAZY (186-87)

Did you notice the use of capital letters to convey Saleem’s inner dialogue and thoughts, and Rushdie’s practice of joining three to four words without a hyphen (roundandroundand) to communicate uninterrupted motion? This use of language is present in many passages of the book. Can you find a few others?

Again look at the following description of the arrival of spring in Kashmir after a long snow-laden winter. The metaphor used is that of a newborn chick emerging out of its eggshell , bringing with itself a sense of something new, young, fresh, just born:

The world was new again. After a winter’s gestation in its eggshell of ice, the valley had beaked its way out into the open, moist and yellow (10).

The third scene that I share with you reflects Saleem’s great sense of loss and pain at realizing that his parents don’t want him back because they have just discovered that he is not their son but someone (born to a poor singer) had been exchanged at birth in Narlikar’s Hospital by their ayah Mary Pereira :

This, then, was the beginning of my first exile ...
I bore it uncomplainingly.... I had been loaned out,
like a comic-book from the Scandal Point Second

Hand Library for some indefinite period; and that when my parents wanted me back, they would send for me. When, or even if ... (240)

Descriptions such as these are not culture specific but universal in their reach to re-create basic human experience. Beyond the writer of Indian English themes, Rushdie is also a humanist in the best sense of the word.

2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, I have highlighted the different ways in which Indian English novelists have tried to use the English language so that it could be different from the colonizer's (British) English.

I have also shown you how Rushdie, despite his disclaimer, belongs very much to the Indian English literary tradition, and have shared with you his numerous experiments and contributions to the re-making of Indian English in fiction.

Further, I have emphasized the difference between him and his forerunners in his use of 'de-doxified' English and showed him to be equally skilled in penning descriptive scenes and human experiences that belong to no particular time frame or culture.

2.10 GLOSSARY

articulate:	to express clearly and effectively
embed:	to fix something firmly and deeply (in a mass of surrounding matter)
forge:	shape
genres:	class of works of art or literature
ideology:	a set of ideas
intriguing:	interesting, provoking thought
irreverence:	lack of respect
pan-indian:	common across the regions and cultures of India
perjorative:	word or phrase that suggests that somebody is worthless
predecessor:	person who has come before someone else
privilege:	special right or advantage given to a few
syntactical:	by the rules of grammar used for ordering or connecting words in sentence
transliteration:	to translate literally
unobtrusive:	not seen or noticed easily

2.11 QUESTIONS

1. Attempt a detailed analysis of any two passages from the novel (other than those discussed here) so as to highlight Rushdie's particular talents with the use of English.
2. How far do you agree or disagree with my views on Rushdie's use of English in *Midnight's Children*? Discuss with illustrations of your own.

2.12 SUGGESTED READING

Kirpal, Viney. *The Postmodern Indian English Novel: A Study of the 1980s and 1990s* (Allied, 1996).

Parameswaran, Uma. Salman Rushdie in Indo-English Literature in *Journal of Indian Writing in English* 12:2 (July 1984).

Roy, Anjali. *Making New Words/Worlds: Options for the Indian Novelist in English* in (ed) C.D. Narasimhaiah's *Makers of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Pencraft, 2000.

UNIT 3 THEMES IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 History and the Individual
- 3.3 Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism in India
- 3.4 Fragmentation, Migrancy and Memory
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective is to help you understand what are Rushdie's main themes in *Midnight's Children* and how Rushdie has developed certain themes in ways which make him belong among other migrant Indian English novelists.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Whenever someone suggests that you read such and such a work or novel, probably the first question you are likely to ask is : "What is it about?" Of course the book may be about a certain philosophy or world view or may be stylistically or technically memorable but what every prospective reader (and I repeat *every* reader) is interested in, is the central theme, or loosely the story of the book.

E.M. Foster in *Aspects of the Novel* (Have you read it? If not, do read it) rightly says that it is human nature to be interested in a story. The moment someone says "I am going to tell you a story," no human being can resist gathering around the teller. What makes a story irresistible to the listeners is the element of suspense that the writer, especially a novelist, builds in his work with the help of what-happened-next and what-happened-next.

Thus, any novel that we take up for reading will have a series of events and situations and characters involved in those situations, so much so that the larger the novel, the more numerous will be the events and the people with their anxieties or joys. The story is made even more confusing with not only those characters speaking about themselves or to others, but also (unknown to them) there are others too who express their opinions about them and their actions and of how they feel affected by them. Over and above all this, there is the novelist himself who through narratorial comments or asides, or certain characters, is offering additional insights.

In the end, the most difficult question to answer about a book is "What is it about?" But if we are careful readers, as I believe you are, being postgraduate students, then the method is to very briefly summarize every chapter of the novel as you finish reading it. By the time you have finished reading the novel, you will discover that a few basic themes seem to emerge in the novel. This is because, at the foundation of every novel with its numerous events and happenings, lie just a handful of themes. If you can develop the art of recognizing the major themes in a novel, you will enjoy reading it so much more, besides actually feeling a sense of control over what you read. Does that make sense?

2.11 QUESTIONS

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At the beginning of Unit 1, I had requested you to read the novel once through quickly. Did you do that? Do you think you can list some of its themes? Why not give it a try in the space provided below?

You will get my response soon enough but before that let me suggest one more aspect of the themes that appear in *Midnight's Children* or in any novel for that matter. Whenever we examine the total output of any novelist, we normally find that a limited number of themes seem to be repeated in his or her different works.

For example, in Raja Rao's novels the usual theme is the superiority of vedantic, spiritual India over the materialistic west. In R. K. Narayan's novels, the clash is between the traditional Indian values and the values from the west, and the choice of the protagonist to modernize Indian values by borrowing eclectically from the west. In the novels of Anita Desai - the novelist who hit the Indian writing scene in the 1960s - the definition of a person's identity as an individual (not as an Indian) prevails. Now why do you think that this happens?

I grant that the difference in the thematic concerns of Rao, Narayan and Desai originates in their distinct personalities. That does seem like a fairly natural answer, doesn't it? Since all of us are different, we choose to write about different matters. But I want you to consider this matter from another perspective. If two novelists had absolutely identical personalities would they choose to write of the same themes? Or, would the age, the period, the environment in which the writer was born or raised also influence her choice and interpretation of her themes? Further is it also possible that though a number of writers may have preceded or followed a particular writer, it is this writer's representation of themes that seems to touch and affect his readers more than that of the other writers? If so, what is it that makes for the difference?

Keep thinking about this question and try to find an answer. You will indeed, if you try. On this note, I'm going to leave you to reflect awhile, and then take you to the next section where I will discuss the first the major theme of *Midnight's Children*, which is "History and the Individual." Check out if you were able to locate it as a result of the exercise I set you in the beginning of this section.

3.2 HISTORY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Do you find it strange that in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie establishes a strong connection between the history of India and the life of Saleem, his protagonist as if the two were Siamese twins? I did, when I first read this novel and I am sure so did many other readers. Right from the moment of his birth, Saleem is described as being "mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was no escape." (9) Thus, Rushdie sets the scene for us to believe a strange tale, if true, that Saleem Sinai by being born in Bombay on 15th August 1947 at the stroke of midnight, becomes the first child born in independent India, and that his story is the history of free India.

What makes it interesting is that though many Indians must have been born on 15th August 1947 at 12 midnight (one of my own cousins was, and you too may recall a friend or member of the family) but no one ever thought that such people carried within them the history of free India!

The connection that Rushdie establishes between every personal event in Saleem's life and that of his family, and the political and historical events that unfold in independent India is carefully maintained throughout the novel, even though sometimes it can sound a bit forced as in the latter part of the novel.

When *Midnight's Children* first appeared, this kind of connection seemed too far-fetched to many readers but you can understand how such connections are quite possible in contemporary times because of the reach of the media. You may recall a disturbing happening that occurred a few months ago. Riots broke out in Nepal after it was rumoured that the well-known Indian film star Hrithik Roshan had said in a TV interview that he disliked the Nepalese. Going by such incidents, it is no longer impossible to believe the connection between the individual and historical events nor is there any need to exercise "a willing suspension of disbelief," as we had to while reading fiction until a few decades ago.

Thus, as we read through Saleem's account, we see, among other things that Saleem was responsible for the language riots of the 1950s, that he played a pivotal role in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and that when in 1975 Indira Gandhi imprisoned political opponents and suspended the democratic rights of the people during the "Emergency" that she had proclaimed to save herself from going to prison over proven charges of corruption during the elections, he feels drained out and close to death.

Likewise, not only in free India but even before, a number of events are given an individual as well as a historical importance. For example, Saleem's grandparents Aziz and Naseem Sinai on their way from Kashmir to Agra, stop over in Amritsar, where Aziz experiences at first hand, the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. I shall now quote a passage from *Midnight's Children* mainly to demonstrate to you the manner in which Rushdie captures one of the worst moments in India's colonial history - the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre - through the mock heroic description of the chilling effects it has on the individual, Aadam Aziz - who has lived through it all.

As the fifty one men march down the alley way (to the Jallianwallah Bagh) 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... As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. 'Yaaaahh-thooo! he sneezes and falls forward ... thereby saving his life Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather." (36)

Thus, while General Dyer is firing and shooting ruthlessly at unarmed Indians, Aziz sneezes and falls forward. And when thousands of trapped Indians are shot dead, "red stuff" stains his shirt. The massacre itself is heralded by an itch in his nose. The events are tragic and serious but the effect is described in a comic and non serious absurd way. This is how Rushdie keeps drawing the parallels between the life of an ordinary individual and major historical events through the 31 chapters of the novel. The day Saleem is born, his parents acquire the house of the Englishman, Mr. Methwold, (whose parents had established British rule in India and India gains independence). His parents, grandparents and an aunt are killed on 23 September 1965, the day India's Airforce bombs Rawalpindi. Shiva his powerful and violent enemy moves in to live with Parvati-the-witch in May 1974 on the very day that India explodes its first nuclear test bomb; their son Aadam is born on 25 June 1975, the day Emergency is declared for the first time in India. The book is full of examples that demonstrate Saleem's belief that he is linked to history "both literally and metaphorically" (238).

This method is very different from the way history books are written. If I were to quote a passage from the book of Indian history on the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre then the narration would focus on dates and facts such as the number of people dead, the impact of the massacre on British rule in India and so on. Or, if it were a passage on the Emergency in India, it would focus on the reasons – real and imaginary for its imposition, and on its consequences for India and Indira Gandhi. The way Rushdie does it is to treat history as fiction, that is not to take it seriously. So, nowhere does he retell history as fact. Indeed, the history that he narrates is full of mistakes in dates, and this Saleem argues is because it is derived from recollection and memory. In other words, Saleem Rushdie seems to be writing history as Saleem's autobiography.

Rushdie would like to show us that the history in *Midnight's Children* is as much fiction as any other and that it should not be seen as an objective chronicle of the times that form the backdrop of his novel. Unlike history which is usually linear and chronological, his narration is cyclical and he obviously shows a desire to so shape his material that the reader will be forced to accept its non-objective nature. The central rule is that the small errors in the text such as the wrong dates of important events including the date of Gandhi's assassination are clues indicating that Saleem is capable of consciously distorting facts.

Rushdie has bemoaned the fact that his book is often read as history rather than as fiction. But to read it as pure fiction would be to miss the point too. Saleem's absurd story linking the history of a nation with that of an ordinary family chosen at random, is meant at one level, to expose the absurdity of history and to challenge the confidence and pride of a historian and historiographer's attempt to explain to us what really happened in the past. Yet on the other hand, it is meant to capture the most difficult period in independent India's history namely the period of the Emergency. But more of that later.

In the novel Saleem cuts up seemingly important political newspaper articles at random and then rearranges them to constitute a new view of reality. He shows the power of re-made reality when he pieces together randomly cut out newspaper items, words, syllables and letters to form a message to Commander Sabarmati that his wife is unfaithful to him; the message leads the husband into murdering his wife's paramour and being jailed. His absurd action reflects the absurdity of the historian's claim of presenting history as an objective truth and to show that history can be bent to serve dangerous and individual designs.

As I mentioned earlier, this book also represents Rushdie's great grief and sorrow at the turn of the events in Indian politics that lead to the imposition of the Emergency at the recommendation of the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1975 to save herself from going to prison. The Emergency which lasted from 1975 – 1977 had spelt the gravest threat to Indian democracy since Independence, especially because of the version that Mrs. Gandhi had given to the nation for its imposition. The Emergency, she had persuaded the President of India, was necessary to save the country from external threat, while there was none. The years of the Emergency will therefore remain etched in Indian memory as the darkest period in the history of free India. Characterized by repressions, the censorship of the press, the imprisonment of the leaders of the opposition, the torture of activists including artists, dismissals from jobs, forced retirements and untold brutalities on the people of India, it was a time when the India had become a totalitarian state. No wonder it was a period marked by an overriding feeling of impotence and crippling despair for having lost to very powerful forces. By creating a non-heroic character and a family through which Rushdie gives us the history of India, especially the dark period of the Emergency, he is trying to dramatically re-create the close brush with dictatorship and the complete helplessness that almost every average (and hence powerless) Indian of the times had experienced. The book which ends with the imposition of the Emergency is

appropriately despair-ridden because no one at that time knew that Mrs. Gandhi would lift the Emergency and call for the elections, or that the angry people of India would vote her out and replace her with the opposition. This kind of personalization of history makes the events of the times live in the psyche of the reader, an achievement that is not possible in an ordinary book of history. Saleem's life from his birth to his near death-like condition, is meant to parallel the journey of free India from an optimistic nation to a comatose, submissive one.

It may interest you to know that many West Indian writers too (Have you read any?) have created the character of a child who grows up from childhood into adulthood and established a connection between the growing child and the new nation. For example George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* shows the child gaining adulthood even as West Indian society is alongside evolving a political consciousness of its own. The grown up young man represents hope, joy, optimism and opportunity as he sets out to build a new future for himself and his country. This motif of a growing and evolving child fits in beautifully with the fiction written about the "historyless", "traditionless" West Indies.

As you know the colonizers – the British, the French and the Spaniards--had destroyed the Caribs, the original inhabitants of the West Indies and transported slaves from Central Africa to populate these islands as cheap labour for their sugar plantations. Since the slaves were not allowed to stay together in families they experienced total disconnection from the groups they had once belonged to. Over a period of a century or two, the people who lived in the West Indies had lost all sense of history and tradition. So when the English-educated West Indian novelists began writing in the 1950s, they created the character of a growing child to suggest the growth of the West Indian consciousness of its own identity.

Unlike the happy, optimistic child of West Indian literature, Rushdie's growing child Saleem only grows older; he does not evolve. And as he grows older he gets more and more misshapen and ugly and closer to death. He is emasculated and castrated during the Emergency, and he passively waits for death. He seems to have become a person who has lost all control over his life because of political circumstances and lack of will. Through this character Rushdie is trying to represent not a nation full of hope but a nation whose voice has been muzzled and which is in a hopeless state because of the historical-political events.

At the end of the novel you feel like asking: What is Rushdie really doing to history in creating a character like Saleem? Has any other Indian English writer before Rushdie used history as a theme? How is Rushdie different? Let us reflect a little on these questions.

The use of historical material in creative writing dates back to the times of the epics themselves. History was also used in the novels by Indian English writers such as Raja Rao, Khuswant Singh, Chamal Nahal, and Manohar Malgaonkar. While Singh, Nahal and Malgaonkar wrote about Indian independence and the Partition, they wrote from a perspective that suggested that there is such a thing as a history. Rushdie by contrast, is trying to suggest that history is a lie. Raja Rao, too was re-writing the history of the village *Kanthapura*, a counter history, and not just a history as narrated in history books written by British historians.

With *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao became the first Indian English novelist to write about the history of colonized India in a way which subverted and undermined the colonizers' view of India. He wrote a history which was not chronological. It was without a proper beginning, middle and end and it talked about the oppression and exploitation of the common Indian in the 1930s. His history was far from British history which projected the colonizer as someone who had come to civilize India at great sacrifice and cost. Rao's "oral" narrative was a "narrative of resistance" to the British written history of colonization.

Frantz Fanon, the author of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) has described the three phases through which writers in the former colonies gradually mature. In the first phase, their works are imitative of the colonizer's literature. In the second phase, they attack the colonizer for the wrongs they have done to their country (Rao's *Kanthapura* belongs to this phase). In the third phase, the writers address and attack the political events and politicians in the newly freed country. (Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* mainly belongs to this stage, though he also makes forays into the second stage as well).

Together, Rao and Rushdie have in their own ways challenged received versions of history, though Rushdie has attempted the theme in a more complex way. His aim is to go beyond a mere attack of the British and the Indian governments to highlight the way in which history can be changed and manipulated by those in power. The difference also lies in Rao's perception of Indian society as a homogenous one, existing within a well-defined Hindu mythical religious frame work. By contrast, Rushdie's world view is secular, plural and modern. In *Midnight's Children* we are not reading about a Muslim character but about a character who is an Indian i.e., a product of mixed traditions and many races.

The individual since the 20th century has become a very small and powerless being because governments have become very, very oppressive and powerful. This postmodern insight is clearly seen in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem, is the centre of attention at the time of his birth – the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru writes to his parents; newspapers carry his pictures, celebrate his arrival and award him for being India's first midnight child. But as he grows older, he begins to lose his position, first in the Sinai household and then in the country itself. So much so that at 31, Saleem feels completely drained out and impotent having been forcibly castrated during the Emergency. Rushdie's treatment of the theme of the individual and history highlights the tragedy of being an individual in contemporary times.

To sum up what Rushdie has done is not easy because it is obvious that he is writing this novel where the life of the individual is fused with that of the nation, not as a fictional gimmick but as an attempt to create an emotional spot in the reader about the most sad and disturbing event in the history of free India. Interestingly and (and perhaps inadvertently), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* triggered off a new mode of fiction writing amongst Indian English novelists. There have been over 20 novels since the publication of *Midnight's Children*, wherein the life of the individual runs parallel with the life of the nation. The new trend highlights the contribution of Rushdie to the Indian novel in English.

To conclude, Rushdie is the first Indian English novelist who consciously uses history in fiction to show its subjective, untruthful nature and its easy manipulation by modern day governments. He describes historical events through the emotions of his characters. To reveal the trivial role played by the individual in countering powerful modern day governments, he does it in a mock heroic, absurd way.

3.3 COLONIALISM AND NEO-COLONIALISM IN INDIA

What has set apart writers from former colonies has been among other things a desire to set right the record of their country's history, traditions and civilizations through their work. This has been specially so in the case of migrant writers. Most Indian migrant writers - and Rushdie is one of them - are what I would like to call activist writers. They carry their political challenges to authority into their books and simultaneously connect the books with the world outside.

Perhaps the distance in years from their mother country gives them the detachment necessary for writing about it as a theme. Moreover, their negative experiences with racism in the white host country have often triggered off in them a desire to offpit the strengths of their own country against those of the new country. In the process, these writers Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Kamala Markandaya have particularly attacked the phenomenon of colonization in India with a lucidity and directness that has not been available in the writings of the stay-at-home in the novelists, perhaps because of the closeness of the latter to local events.

Thus, most migrant writers tend to write books which are political acts and constitute, in my view, true postcolonial works, if by postcolonialism one means the "decolonisation of the mind". That's what freedom is and not just political independence – (which could be merely a physical gesture of handing over power to the original natives of that country).

The works of these writers challenge the ideologically-determined paradigms of historical relationships and try to free the non-white formerly colonized person from the awe in which he or she holds the colonizer. It is not surprising therefore, that these novelists have re-invented the English language and, the fictional form, and tried to re-write their colonial history in their fiction from the perspective of the colonies.

Rushdie is carrying on from where the precursors like Raja Rao left off *Kanthapura*. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie attacks British colonialism and its representatives symbolised in characters such as Methwold with a ruthless clarity and makes every attempt to link up many of the ills in independent India to the mischief played by the British during their reign. The moral of his representation is that had the foreigner never come here to plunder and colonize, India would have been a beautiful country. This is the typical migrant writer's standpoint.

In chapter 7 titled "Methwold", Bombay (or microcosm India) is represented in its pristine beauty and populated by the fisherfolk called the Kolis – its earliest inhabitants. Rushdie describes how this primeval world was overrun by different invaders beginning with the Portuguese who used the harbour to shelter there the merchant ships and their men-of-war. This was followed by the East India Company led by an officer named William Methwold who successfully realized a vision of a British Bombay when in 1668 the East India Company did get its hands on the island. The worst sufferers were the fisherfolk as the invaders changed the very character of the city (Read the country) they had begun to rule (92). Regret and nostalgia marks Rushdie's narration in this chapter, as if he would like to put the clock back physically.

The nostalgia turns to anger as his narrative challenges the myth created by the British of having come here to civilize India. Haven't we all grown up sincerely believing that British rule was a good thing for India? Our educational system, our books, our syllabus have been written from a Eurocentric perspective. So we have been subtly and gradually conditioned into accepting the superiority of the British, and appreciate their efforts to civilize us.

Rushdie's Methwold is a caricature, a symbol of evil and moral degeneration rather than a fully fleshed out character. Rushdie uses him to convey his views about colonialism. Methwold in the *Midnight's Children* is a descendant of the Methwold who was the first officer of the East India Company, and he is the last European to rule India before India got its freedom. This first and last Englishman thus becomes the direct object of Rushdie's anger as he symbolizes for him the entire colonial adventure of exploitation and demoralization. (Read Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* to understand the violent nature of the colonizing process).

Right from the beginning when Methwold or "Myth world" is described as "a six foot titan with a centre-parting in his hair, [His]face the pink of roses and eternal youth" (95), you get the message clear from Rushdie – " Here's a man not to be trusted . So, the centre-parting itself becomes a defining characteristic of the British, now only too well-known for their 'Divide & Rule' policy which was very much responsible for the cutting up of British India into an independent Pakistan and an independent India - one piece for the Muslims and the other for the Non-Muslims.

The myth of the Britain's civilizational mission is easily exposed when having identified Methwold as a liar, the reader edits every statement of Methwold's from the new perspective of mistrust. When Methwold describes to Ahmed Sinai (Saleem's father) how much the Indians owe to the British, the reader sees it as yet another fiction written by a ruler :

"you will admit we weren't all bad; built your roads, schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things ..." (109-110).

Methwold's, "we" is necessarily restricted to the British; he views his people as the men who were the civilizing influence on the Indian subcontinent and would like to remind the Indians about it on the eve of his departure. He is simply unable to acknowledge the existence of any culture other than his own. There is nothing on the Estate where he lives that would suggest anything other than European culture . The architecture used in the buildings resembles medieval England's "durable mansions with red roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory white corner towers wearing pointy red tiled hats" (94) .

William Methwold had named the four mansions after the famous places of Europe—Versailles, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sansouci Villa (108) – thus denying the existence of local architectural traditions. The act also exposes the colonizer's desire to superimpose historical European paradigms on the Indian landscape and consciousness and make the colonized pliant.

Methwold, like India's last Governor General, Lord Mountbatten insists that India should retain the economic and, political framework of the British. When the inhabitants are compelled to retain the estate and the four mansions with every piece of junk within them, what do you think they are being forced to do? "Lock, Stock and Barrel" Methwold said, "those are my terms. A whim, Mr. Sinai...you will permit a departing colonial his little game? We do not have much left to do, we British, except to play our games" (95).

This may seem unbelievable but it is a fact that those colonies were given independence earlier where Britain was certain that the new government would remain within its economic and political orbit. It is also a fact that the most lasting and intense warfare (For example, in South Africa) occurred where the freedom struggle was both nationalist as well as revolutionary, and where de-colonization would mean confiscation of foreign investments and severance of economic ties with the colonizing country. The politics of colonialism is well-documented today and you may want to read more on the subject.

Through the character and conditions set by Methwold, Rushdie is drawing our attention to this politics with a sharpness that has been common to most migrant writers from the former colonies. I want you to understand this point because Rushdie's choice of themes is very much influenced by his having lived in the former colonizer's country.

Rushdie makes us aware that the game that Methwold plays concerns not only names but objects as well. The names of the houses on his Estate are of course the names of famous European palaces which were either built at the height of absolute

monarchism in Europe or as an expression of a nostalgia of that kind of absolute power. Now, these names carry a history, an entire tradition of centralized authority and the rights of Kings. Thus, when Methwold seeks to preserve the traditions of the British Raj through the objects in his estate, his hope is that the objects will affect and influence the consciousness of the new occupants in such a way that the superiority of the traditions of the British will be permanently etched on the Indian psyche.

He also tells Ahmed Sinai that he wants to select a few suitable persons and "hand everything over absolutely : in tip top working order" (111) to them. The suitable persons he has in mind are obviously members of the Indian educated middle class whose consciousness he hopes to permanently imprint with the British value system and political, economic structures and life styles.

Rushdie is brutal in his attack through his exaggerated portrayal and caricature of Methwold. He not only exposes the myth of the so-called superiority of the British, but also the colonial games that the British had played specially since Macaulay's time to create Indians who were English in spirit and mental dependants on the British. It is too big a price to buy a house to live in but as Rushdie shows it was the price that the country paid for getting its freedom. The Estate symbolizes India, earlier possessed by the British, now being handed over to Indian owners (rulers), intact with the colonizers political and economic systems.

Methwold (The British) was not off the mark in his vision of colonizing the Indian mind because as Saleem admits "Methwold's estate is changing them". As Methwold joins them at the cocktail hour, his very presence elicits the imitative Oxford drawl among Ahmed Sinai and his friends (113). The departing British had through planned psychological conditioning ensured the continued slavery of the Indian. This is the meaning of the puzzling transfer of the Estate and the houses with everything intact in them that may have bothered you as you read through (chapter 7) of the novel. You might have wondered why a rich and polished Englishman like Methwold would want to sell his Estate on such strange conditions. You may also have wondered if Methwold wasn't a very nice and amiable Englishman who despite being the last ruler was mingling so freely among the Indian buyers of his houses. I hope it is clear through explanation that the amiability is only meant as a cover-up for deeper designs that Rushdie takes such pains to expose.

If you have read carefully, you will also recall Amina Sinai (Saleem's mother) expressing her surprise and horror at the strange conditions that Methwold was imposing on the new "tenants." "Everything?" Amina Sinai asked. "I can't even throw away a spoon? Allah, that lampshade...I can't get rid of one comb?" (95). Rushdie has built into the text the questioning of Methwold's motives by a woman of good native commonsense, such as Amina but he also wants to suggest how she is effectively silenced by men like her husband Ahmed who had obviously decided to become the new Englishmen and benefit from their new role and position in society as neo-colonials.

Rushdie's Saleem notes in his narrative how Ahmed Sinai begins to grow fairer in complexion day by day. Indeed, there is this funny scene - Can you recall it? - where a large numbers of Indian businessman including Ahmed get up one morning and find they have turned white! Rushdie has said in an interview (1983) that this is an imagery he had used to show that "They [Indians] were stepping into British shoes, their clubs, their drinks, etc..."

Thus very much like other migrant Indian English writers, Rushdie consciously sets out to expose British colonialism and its longer lasting impact called "neocolonialism". In this section, I haven't asked you too many questions. So try to answer this one. What is the significance of the scene of Vanita's seduction by

Methwold in Chapter 7? What do you think Rushdie is trying to convey in that scene? Give it a try before reading my answer.

Themes

This novel, like many novels by Indian English migrant writers is an allegory. An allegory is an extended metaphor where a sustained parallel is drawn from the story, character, actions and scenery to suggest a spiritual, political or psychological confrontation.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is an allegory where the individual's life and history are offered in a sustained parallel. Methwold, the Englishman is an extended metaphor for British colonization. His seduction of Vanita in the absence of her husband the street accordionist, Wee Willie Winkee, is a metaphor for appropriating and exploiting what rightfully belongs to another; which is also the meaning of colonialism. In every colony the ruling British officers had seduced and raped the wives of poor natives and left behind them the mixed products of their irresponsible union. Saleem is the son of Methwold and Vanita a child born of just such a union and raised by the Sinai family because of his having been exchanged at birth. Otherwise, he too would have been left to be raised in extreme poverty, like his "twin", Shiva. We have been conditioned to think of how fair and honorable the British were. Rushdie rips off the mask without remorse. Beneath the brilliantined black hair with its centre – parting, Methwold was "shiny – pated! Revealed: the deception which had tricked an accordionist's wife" (114).

To conclude this section. Rushdie is very much preoccupied with the theme of India's colonization and its lasting impact on the Indian mind as neocolonialism. He has used symbols and allegory to convey his strong feelings against this overwhelming phenomenon. His being a migrant has certainly heightened his feelings – even though he will always deny it.

3.4 FRAGMENTATION, MIGRANCY AND MEMORY

It is not surprising that Rushdie has concerned himself with the themes of colonialism and neo colonialism and Independent India's political history in *Midnight's Children*. A thematic examination of this sort is typical of all migrant novelists from the Third World You may want to know why. So first, I'll spend a few minutes elaborating this point because it has direct relevance to the three main themes in *Midnight's Children*, specially the theme of fragmentation, migrancy and memory which is the subject of this section and the underlying motivation of this novel.

In the 20th century began the largest -ever migration of peoples from the non-white to the white countries. It was around the 1950s that these migrations began – for economic reasons (i.e., for jobs etc). The trend has continued in the 21st century mainly because of the IT boom in the West.

However, that was not all. Third World writers have been migrating to the metropolitan capitals of London, Paris and New York to find a market for their works because readers in the Third World – would not support them. Thanks to the impact of colonization on their psyche, most educated people in the non-white former colonies felt that the great traditions of "culture" and "civilization" (Many of us still think so even today!) existed only in the West and that its literatures were superior to our own. The writers similarly looked for intellectual stimulation and encouragement

in the "ideal" environments of the West. While some writers actually migrated from the Third World, others like Raja Rao and Rushdie went to study in western universities and then stayed on for the same reason. Migration is not a simple phenomenon. Every migrant who stays away from his mother country, begins to experience an acute sense of homelessness and anxiety after the initial pleasures of being in the new land begin to fade away. This is the normal pattern of behaviour because the migrant suddenly begins to miss the familiar frame of references and relationships back home. In the case of migrants from the non-white colonies (such as India, W. Africa, E. Africa, the West Indies etc), these experiences have often been compounded by rejection in the host countries (usually white) on the basis of colour and race. Race riots keep erupting every now and then, even now, perhaps because members in the host countries feel threatened that they will be overrun and overtaken by former slaves, in their own country.

George Lamming, the famous Barbadian writer of the masterpiece *In the Castle of My Skin* (you remember I mentioned this book earlier too), has written an equally famous non-fictional work. It is called *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). It highlights, with sensitivity, the terrible dilemma and the divided feelings that a migrant (especially a writer) from the Third World experiences in the West. The dilemma is: it is painful to stay but it is as difficult to return. The migrant belongs to both worlds and at the same time to none. You recall how Rushdie expresses similar views in his novel *Shame* (Do read it if you haven't) and in the character of Aadam Aziz in *Midnight's Children*. But more of that later.

Interestingly, most migrants (including writers) try to cope with this sense of homelessness and rejection and their own inability to return, by over-idealization of home, or by the use of satire. Thus, they either tend to praise their mother country in superlatives or they satirize it and poke fun at its flaws to justify why they can't return. Rushdie belongs to the category of typical migrants.

Despite protestations to the contrary, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is as much a self-conscious expression of the expatriate writer's sensibility as any other, including Raja Rao's. All his novels, beginning with *The Serpent and the Rope* are self-conscious expressions of migrancy. Rushdie, if you recall, had attacked Rao for his nativist view of India.

Rushdie has always regarded himself as different from earlier migrant writers in the sense of being free from the idealization of nostalgia. But the fact is that beginning with *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie has made Bombay or Kashmir the location of virtually all his novels. He also has chosen the method of satire to write about the political history of India and about colonialism, the two themes of *Midnight's Children* already discussed in this unit.

Fragmentation, migrancy and memory his third theme can perhaps be called the central theme of not just *Midnight's Children* but all his novels. Rushdie who is aware of its centrality in his life, has written extensively on this subject, some of which I am going to draw your attention to now since it will help us understand his treatment of the theme better.

In his article "Reclaiming a City and a History" (1984), he has said that while it is natural for a migrant writer to throw a backward nostalgic glance at his mother country and to imagine that he will be able to recover the country of his past fully, he can never do it. Because of his physical alienation from that country, the migrant writer can only "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind."

This means that when a migrant writer tries to unlock the gates of the past, as he has tried to do in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie found himself writing "a novel of memory and about memory," which is why perhaps, he made Saleem into an unreliable narrator. Saleem makes mistakes of memory, and his vision, which is affected by his (personality and) circumstances is fragmentary. In other words what

Rushdie was saying was that no matter how hard an Indian writer tries to write about India "authentically", he can't because he lives outside, and he is dealing with a reality "whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." However, on the positive side he feels it is exciting for the migrant writer as she tries to reconstruct the past from the "broken pots of antiquity" because it is very much like what archaeologists try to do, that is, an act of imagination and creativity. As expatriate, Rushdie's concern is with "damaged reality" and the reconstruction of a whole reality which has been lost. Saleem laments the loss of his clairvoyant powers, and the loss of his security in childhood as the child of his parents. He laments the "disintegration" of his family in India and Pakistan after Partition, and "every thing which can sanely be called real." Saleem grows up viewing reality through a "perforated sheet," one bit at a time and the piecing together of a suppressed reality is his mission. Denied information, Saleem resigns himself to an alternative method – cognition or knowing through "memory's truth": "Well then I must content myself with shreds and scraps: as I wrote centuries ago, the trick is to fill in the gaps guided by the few clues one is given.... by the other remaining shards of the past lingering in my ransacked memory – vaults ... (*Midnight's Children*, 507). Now it's time for a question. Did you notice that as Saleem writes his "novel of memory," he makes a liberal use of the images of fragmentation? Can you list some?

How many did you find besides "the perforated sheet"? Did you list at least three to four? Good! Now it's my turn. Here goes my list. (i) Saleem refers to his "fragmented being" (ii) Aadam Aziz, his grandfather confesses to having a permanent "hole the size of a melon inside me" (22) because he can never completely rid himself of his alienness. (iii) He describes himself as "a half-and-halfer" (18). The images of fragmentation ("hole; "half") highlight his predicament as a person who has fallen between two stools having been exposed to two very different cultures – the Indian and the Western. In deference to his past (his mother; Tai the boatman) he tries to be a good Muslim but he only hurts himself and the "hole" persists; he feels oppressed by narrow thinking and religious bigotry. It is the cause later, of his estrangement from his wife, Naseem, also called Reverend Mother in the novel. (iv) India is partitioned into Pakistan (v) Pakistan is further partitioned into Bangla Desh and Pakistan (vi) Saleem has several parts of his body lopped off from a finger, to his sexual organs. (vii) Families fragment, (viii) marriages break up (ix) Fragmented parentage makes it possible for Saleem to claim: "Child of an unknown union, I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stronger talents," (291). Emotionally insecure, Saleem labours under the "fear" of losing his parents' love except under certain conditions of acceptable behaviour: "the idea that his parents' outrage might lead to a withdrawal of their love (198).

Saleem's obsession with the tracing of an ancestry is attempt to come to terms with the problems of a "divided identity", intellectually, he is drawn to the West while his emotional being looks for moorings in the mother-country. Saleem is apparently descended from the ancestral line of Aadam Aziz, himself an alienated "half-and halfer" Kashmiri Muslim. His being the child of William Methwold, the last Britisher in India, and Vanita, compounds the Kashmiri alienation with the colonial's. Being a bastard is Saleem's literal situation. Metaphorically, it echoes the typical migrant condition of a lack of belonging. Exile undoubtedly shapes and colours Saleem's perspective on life. Repeatedly confronted with conditions of exile, Saleem begins to ponder its shocks and dents upon his personality.

As Saleem becomes a homeless wanderer; his sadness and gloom echo the expatriate's. His first exile (of which he is unaware) is in losing the home of Vanita and Wee-Willie-Winkle from his very birth. The discovery that his blood group belongs to neither his father Ahmed nor his mother is responsible for another exile –

his being sent away to his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia's home. This displacement – inexplicable to the boy- gives him a shock he never recovers from.

Again when the family moves from Bombay to Karachi, Saleem is exiled from Bombay, the place he dearly loves: "I never forgive Karachi for not being Bombay." Forcibly exiled from home and place, Saleem ponders over another exile. He loses the voices of the *Midnight's Children* after a nasal operation he is tricked into undergoing by his own parents, under the pretext of being taken out on a picnic. Saleem's exile is forced and compounded with the dishonesty of others. It is not difficult to see how it leads to his disintegration. Expatriate concerns figure importantly in the novel. Memory is his guarantee against the loss of a valued childhood being. It is the expatriate's guarantee against fragmentation and loss of touch with self and reality.

"Memory's truth" teaches Saleem who he was and is. In the absence of any other trustworthy member in the family, Saleem arrives at a position where memory though "it select, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes glorifies and villifies also," is more dependable than "someone else's version (253).

Saleem says he narrates his story because he fears absurdity : "I admit it" above all things, I fear absurdity" (9). He fears the meaninglessness of not belonging to family or country, and that is terrifying. Like an angst-ridden modern writer Saleem / Rushdie tries to impose order and meaning on a meaningless existence through his writing. Memory helps him put together the fragments from the past, that migrancy had taken away from him. Fragmentation, migrancy and memory figure in *Midnight's Children* in a significant way.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

Thus, in this unit we have examined the manner in which the three recurring themes of the History and the Individual, Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism in India, and Fragmentation, Migrancy and Memory have been dealt with. The discussion has also established the connection between the themes and the migrant sensibility of Rushdie, the writer and the circumstances of his having lived away from India.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Absolute:	having limitless power
Angst:	anxiety caused by considering the sad state of the human condition
Appropriate:	steal
Castrate:	sterlized
Clairvoyant:	one who has the power to see and understand objects and Events not directly present to the senses.
Comatose:	deeply unconscious
Countering:	opposing
Elicits:	draws out
Gimmick:	a trick object used to attract attention
Ideology:	a set of ideas, especially if typical of a social or political Group

Inadvertently:	by accident
Impotent:	(of a man) unable to perform the sex act.
Imprint:	leave a mark on something
Lament:	strong expression of grief
Monarchism:	ruled by kings and queens rather than elected leaders
Nostalgia:	fondness for something formerly known
Oppression:	the condition of being treated in a hard and cruel way
Paradigm:	pattern or framework
Pliant:	yielding to the wishes and commands of others
Plunder:	loot
Primeval:	of the earliest period of the earth's existence
Pristine:	pure, unchanged from the condition when first created
Repression:	the state of being put down by force
Subvert:	to try to destroy the power and influence of especially a governing body
Totalitarian:	system where a single person or political party controls all thought and does not allow opposition parties to exist
Undermine:	to weaken by stages

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the theme of History and the Individual in *Midnight's Children*?

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

E.M. Foster. *Aspects of a Novel*, 1923.

Dieter Rimenschneider "History and the Individual in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" in Ed. Viney Kirpal. *The New Indian Novel in English : A Study of the 1980s*. Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1990.

Viney Kirpal. *The Third World Novel of Expatriation*. Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 198.

UNIT 4 TECHNIQUE IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Structure of *Midnight's Children*
- 4.3 Endings Without Beginnings: *Midnight's Children* & Epic Structure
- 4.4 Sutradhar and Nati: Saleem and Padma
- 4.5 Saleem, Unreliable Narrator
- 4.6 The Interplay of Fantasy & Realism
- 4.7 Myth in *Midnight's Children*
- 4.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Questions
- 4.11 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will take a close look at the narrative technique that Rushdie has used in *Midnight's Children* and how it is a subtle fusion of western postmodern devices and Indian oral narratological methods.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Midnight's Children is classified in a category of fiction that goes by the name of magic realism. *El realismo magical*, or magic realism, was born in Latin America and has followers all over the world. Today, whenever one thinks of magic realism, Salman Rushdie's name first comes to mind. Rushdie himself defines the term, in his essay on Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He describes it as a development out of Surrealism that "expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness". Rushdie's novels may equally be traced back to a home grown magic realism, as we will see as we move along. Yet there is a lot in common between societies that Naipaul has called "half-made societies", which nurture a particular brand of realism. What Rushdie says about Marquez's novel is true of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the novels that follow: "in the world he[Marquez] describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun".

Midnight's Children follows a technique that resembles Gabriel Garcia Marquez's style in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Many had speculated whether Rushdie was influenced by Marquez in the writing of his best known novel. But Rushdie claims to have come upon Marquez's fiction only after having sent *Midnight's Children* off for publication. Perhaps Rushdie came upon the same style following a different route, which we shall trace in a while.

The first thing one notes about magic realist novels in the west is that they move away from the world we know as the real. They are set in an unreal world that might have nothing in common with the real world we inhabit. This genre is a reaction against 19th century realism. Different people at different times and places have debated on the place of real and unreal in art. For example, Plato wanted art to be banished from his Republic because he believed that art was thrice removed from reality. But, in India, art has often involved an element of the magical and the fantastic.

Inadvertently:	by accident
Impotent:	(of a man) unable to perform the sex act.
Imprint:	leave a mark on something
Lament:	strong expression of grief
Monarchism:	ruled by kings and queens rather than elected leaders
Nostalgia:	fondness for something formerly known
Oppression:	the condition of being treated in a hard and cruel way
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- 4.0 Objectives
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will take a close look at the narrative technique that Rushdie has used in *Midnight's Children* and how it is a subtle fusion of western postmodern devices and Indian oral narratological methods.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Midnight's Children is classified in a category of fiction that goes by the name of magic realism. *El realismo magical*, or magic realism, was born in Latin America and has followers all over the world. Today, whenever one thinks of magic realism, Salman Rushdie's name first comes to mind. Rushdie himself defines the term, in his essay on Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He describes it as a development out of Surrealism that "expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness". Rushdie's novels may equally be traced back to a home grown magic realism, as we will see as we move along. Yet there is a lot in common between societies that Naipaul has called "half-made societies", which nurture a particular brand of realism. What Rushdie says about Marquez's novel is true of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the novels that follow: "in the world he[Marquez] describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun".

Midnight's Children follows a technique that resembles Gabriel Garcia Marquez's style in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Many had speculated whether Rushdie was influenced by Marquez in the writing of his best known novel. But Rushdie claims to have come upon Marquez's fiction only after having sent *Midnight's Children* off for publication. Perhaps Rushdie came upon the same style following a different route, which we shall trace in a while.

The first thing one notes about magic realist novels in the west is that they move away from the world we know as the real. They are set in an unreal world that might have nothing in common with the real world we inhabit. This genre is a reaction against 19th century realism. Different people at different times and places have debated on the place of real and unreal in art. For example, Plato wanted art to be banished from his Republic because he believed that art was thrice removed from reality. But, in India, art has often involved an element of the magical and the fantastic.

Literary realism in the west began to have a value to be cherished in the 18th century. It coincided with the development of a rational and scientific outlook and resulted in the death of Romance. Realism reached a peak in the 19th century, particularly in the writing of fiction. Over the years, its birth in response to the particular socio-cultural conditions came to be forgotten and realism became the main criterion for judging the worth of fiction. Magic realists question the demand that fiction must always imitate reality. While acknowledging the value of 19th century realism, they wish to show that fiction can mimic forms of reality other than the empirical. In fact, they try to challenge our notion of the real and the unreal. In this, they are influenced to a large extent by new paradigms in science. As some of you might be aware, new paradigms in western science have turned the notions of the real and the unreal topsy turvy. This has set off a large scale crisis about the nature of reality in the western world. Fiction's turn away from reality reflects this crisis. Fiction becomes the form for investigating the nature of truth. Fiction mocks at 19th century conventions to show that truth is always made up. *Midnight's Children* takes up each of the conventions for fiction writing and turns them inside out. Why does Rushdie do this? Do you agree that Rushdie's novel is cast in the magic realist form? If so, how is it different from western novels in the same genre?

4.2 THE STRUCTURE OF *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

What do you think of *Midnight's Children's* structure? Does it remind you of anything you have read, or heard, before? Let me share my first impressions of *Midnight's Children* when I first read it as a Master's student. I was hard put to slot it into a fixed category as it seemed to be a real pot pourri. The analogy that came to my mind, and has been used quite often by others, was that of the Chinese box. Stories within stories. Does it ring a bell? Stories within stories are nothing new to us who have grown up listening to similar stories on our mother's knees. Isn't this how the *Panchtantra* tales are strung together? I hear you ask. You are absolutely right. Not only the *Panchtantra*, but all famous collections such as *Kathasaritsagar*, *Arabian Nights* or epics are welded into a whole through a frame tale. The frame tale is usually about how the various stories came to be written, or rather, told. For example, the frame tale of the *Panchtantra* is about how the 80 year old Brahmin Visnu Sarma took up the challenge of educating three daft sons of King Amarshakti by telling them these tales. *Midnight's Children* also has a frame tale in which other stories are embedded. This is the story of Saleem Sinai's travails as he puts his novel together. How is Rushdie's structure different from that of ancient Indian narratives?

Midnight's Children is difficult to classify because it recalls another fictional genre – of metafiction. Metafiction is a form of fiction in which the process of writing fiction is the theme. This form developed to question the reality premise of 19th century fiction. It has largely been used to investigate the relation between art and life. Salman Rushdie weds the two separate genres by filtering ancient narrative structures through the postmodern. This brings us to another important question. Where does Rushdie belong? To the postcolonial or to the postmodern? Rushdie has conveniently planted one foot in each tradition. Some allege that he exoticizes India for the West's consumption. They say that his is, at best, a tourist vision of India. Others have been more charitable in including him among Indian writers while decrying his appropriation by postmodernism. Rushdie is happy to play along with postmodern theorists, which adds to the problem.

4.3 BEGINNINGS WITHOUT ENDINGS: *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* & EPIC STRUCTURE

Novels, they say, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But they don't always begin at the beginning. *Midnight's Children* meticulously follows the rules for writing novels by announcing the hero's birth. Does this beginning remind you of any novel you have read before? Rushdie has borrowed this trick from the 18th century English novelist Lawrence Sterne whose *Tristram Shandy* begins in an almost identical manner. While you wait breathlessly to meet the hero Saleem Sinai born on the midnight of 15th August 1947, the garrulous narrator (Saleem Sinai himself) leads you astray - into a maze of stories.

Is Rushdie's novel about the problem of writing fiction or about telling a story? Or is it about writing a novel about the problems of telling a story? Rushdie has the narrator, Saleem Sinai, complaining about not having a listener to whom he can narrate his story or a scribe who can copy down a story. You also hear Scheherezade in the background. What is Rushdie up to? Is he writing the epic tale of the *kaliyuga*? Saleem has a grand illusion about writing a magnum opus equal to that of Valmiki. But he has his facts all mixed up. For it was Ved Vyas not Valmiki who dictated the epic *Mahabharata* to Ganesha. Rushdie came in for a lot of flak for his near fatal error. But he came up with a smart way of covering up by blaming the narrator. He cited this error as an example of why we must not take the narrator at face value or the novel as the definitive history of India. Like his narrator, Rushdie is well versed with Hindu traditions though he was born a Muslim. In constructing *Midnight's Children*, he claimed to have been influenced by the *Panchtantra*. But his careless error in having Valmiki dictate the Ramayana to Ganesha set off a volley of objections. Rushdie's borrowings cut across linguistic and sectarian divisions for us to trace back his novel to a particular source. But they all add to a structure that is typical of ancient Indian narratives. All these tales have a teller who narrates his story to a listener. This is also true of the dramatic mode, which uses a *sutradhar* to narrate his story to a *nati*. Since well known Indian tale collections are reductions of different retellings, it is natural that they retain oral features. But why should Rushdie carry over the conventions governed by the contingencies of the spoken medium. As Walter Ong has explained, the spoken word can be retained only in its transmission to another person. The writer, however, composes in isolation. He addresses an imaginary reader with whom he has no face to face contact. While Rushdie creates the illusion of a warm speaking voice, he cannot be a storyteller in the same way that Valmiki or the unknown author of the *Panchtantra* could be. For one, he has to resort to the written word, which means the death of sound. Secondly, his literate, cosmopolitan background cannot transport him to the mind set of a culture that relies entirely on speech. Rushdie, the writer, has travelled too far into the West to come back home completely. He filters the epic tales of his Indian childhood through his postmodern frames. His adoption of Indian oral narrative structure is, therefore, self-conscious. Slightly tongue in cheek. And put along side a totally different metafictional tradition from another time and place. Why do you think Rushdie turns back to ancient Indian storytelling techniques? What effect does the mixing of these techniques with metafiction have on you?

At the very outset, Saleem Sinai creates an *Arabian Nights* ambience. He insists that he has many "stories" to "tell". These stories, as Saleem Sinai explains to Padma, have a way of "leaking" into one another. The 19th century novel has clearly defined beginnings, middles and endings. Like Sterne, Rushdie parodies the convention of beginnings by beginning with the birth of the hero. But before the hero can be born, the narrator strays into countless digressions, asides, interruptions. You are made to listen to many tales, placed under chapter headings such as the "Perforated Sheet", "Mercurochrome", "Hit-the-Spittoon", "Under the carpet", "A public Announcement", "Many-Headed Monsters" and "Methwold", before the narrator gets back to the original story of Saleem's birth. This takes roughly 100

pages. With Padma you complain, "you better get a move on or you'll die before you get yourself born"(38). But you, too, take an unmistakable delight in the embedded tales. This is how storytellers get you to listen to stories you did not set out to hear.

Oral narratives delight in love of detail and the joy of telling. This is very different from the novel's tight structure with each bit fitting tightly into the other. Saleem proves himself to be a master storyteller like Scheherezade by getting Padma "hooked" to his story. Like Scheherezade, he knows when to "leave the narrative hanging in mid-air" and when to speed it up, when to build suspense and when to linger on the details to expand the narrative. The story works on the simple principle of "what-happened-nextism" that E.M. Forester has talked of in *Aspects of the Novel*. At the same time, it is bound by the novel's tight structuring. Rushdie adheres to 19th century novelistic conventions with a loyalty that borders on the ridiculous as he also keeps digressing to break those conventions.

Besides digressing and breaking up the tight structure, Saleem also has the habit of jumbling up the sequence of events. Endings often precede beginnings. Given that he spills the beans years in advance, is there any point in continuing with the story? This is again a feature that Rushdie has borrowed from oral narratives. Since oral narratives often narrate an already known story, they need not worry either about sustaining suspense or maintaining sequence. Rushdie's motive in following this methods to make a mockery of the logic of causality favoured by 19th century realism. He wants to show that the pattern in art is the creation of the artist. As usual, Rushdie brings out the ridiculousness of the cause and effect logic by exaggerating it.

For instance, the perforated sheet forms the link between Saleem's and his grandfather's story. Just as Hummingbird is seen as the thread that would lead to the ghetto of the magicians. Later, his teacher Mr Zagallo's pulling out his hair leads to Homi Catrack's murder and his uncle Hanif's death and culminating in his grandfather's retreat to Kashmir. Salim even has the cheek to claim that the purpose of the 1971 war was to "re-unite me with an old life, to bring me back together with my old friends"(373). Rushdie's aim is to show that fiction is not reality. Because it can be shaped the way its author wants it to be. This fact is ignored in the adherence to the logic of causality.

Repetition is the favourite device of the storyteller. Rushdie is equally fond of using the "once upon a time" formulae. But his use of repetition is not dictated by the need for an on the spot composition and retention of subject matter. Rushdie uses these formulae and repetitive structures to place his novel in ancient Indian storytelling traditions. Thus, he breaks with the obsessive fixation with clock time in western fiction. Rushdie juxtaposes the two temporal schemes – the chronological and the cyclical to show the conventions of Western fiction to be rooted in Western linear time. Ancient Indian storytelling structures use a repetitive pattern, which echoes the cyclic time of Indian thought.

Midnight's Children uses formulaic constructions such as repetition, invocation to the deity, allusion to omens and portents, call and response tactics. But its parodic tone alerts the reader to the novel's distance from oral structures. There are several other hints that the novel cannot be a story. Salim is writing his story, we are often reminded, which he reads aloud to Padma because she is illiterate. Though Salim often uses phrases, ("in those years, you see", "I intone earnestly", "I don't want to listen") which indicate that the story is being told, he feels compelled to "confide in paper, before I forget" (37); "Nevertheless, whether [Padma] is listening or not, I have things to record. (118); "Condemned by a perforated sheet to a life of fragments," I wrote and read aloud (121).

4.4 SUTRADHAR AND NATI: SALEEM AND PADMA

What is Padma's role in the novel? Is Saleem using Padma merely as the mandatory listener to imitate the telling style of the epics? No doubt, Padma is the *nati* to whom the *sutradhaar* Salim narrates his story. Having Saleem tell Padma helps Rushdie simulate the storytelling situation he wishes to create. At the same time, it is very clear that Saleem is writing down the story, which Padma cannot read. The use of Padma is an excellent strategy.

Padma does several things at once. First of all, she is still rooted in the storytelling tradition from which Saleem has been uprooted. She naturally expects Saleem's story to follow the rules of all other stories she has heard before. However, she has no clue as to how novels are written. This gives Saleem the perfect opening for giving her a lecture on how novels should be written. More important, Saleem is as much a babalog as Rushdie or the readers. The story Saleem is writing "in an Anglopoised pool of light" might stretch the credibility of his anglicized readers. Padma, however, fits totally in the miracle laden universe. Saleem as well as Rushdie are always a bit hesitant in the presence of the incredible. Padma's love of superstitions, however, co-exists with "a down-to-earthery". Padma stands for the view of the ordinary uneducated Indian people who do not question the marvellous the same way as anglicized Indians do. Rushdie and Saleem both need a Padma character to make the marvelous events in the novel credible. The gap between the Saleem consciousness and the Padma consciousness also shows how Saleem is distanced from the knowledge system of his people. Saleem valiantly attempts to enter Padma's world, which he almost does by marrying her in the end.

4.5 SALEEM, UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Saleem and his creator Rushdie have so much in common that they have been confused with one another. Both are *Midnight's Children*, having been born in the year of India's independence. Both share a Kashmiri ancestry and an upper class anglicized upbringing. Saleem follows Rushdie's route from Peddar Road to Pakistan though the circumstances might have varied.

Most First novels are autobiographical. Other first novels like George Eliot's *Silas Mariner*, D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and closer home Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* have too much of the author. Even though the authors go to great lengths to deny the overlaps between fiction and fact, critics manage to explain events in the novel in the light of similar happenings in the author's life.

Something similar has happened to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Unfortunately, the confusion of fiction with fact has continued to plague him. The use of the first person narrator often makes the author vulnerable to the criticism that is really directed at the narrator. Rushdie was blamed for all Saleem's mistakes and opinions. Particularly glaring was the mistake about the Valmiki/Vyasa confusion on the very first page. "If you're going to use Hindu traditions in your story, Mr Rushdie", he was asked by a reader, "don't you think you could take the trouble to look them up?" His readers displayed a particular pleasure in catching the writer out. They were particularly incensed by what they perceived was an irreverent use of Hindu traditions.

Rushdie's readers had to wait for the publication of his next few novels to know that Rushdie's "malice for all" is not reserved for any particular religion or tradition. Most of these objections came from their looking at the novel as a definitive history of

India. At that point, very few realized that the use of a first person narrator was also part of Rushdie's narrative strategy. Authors often create a persona who is their mouthpiece. But this is not so with Saleem. Saleem's magniloquence and delusions are as much subject to the author's irony as the reader's ridicule. Rushdie came to the reader's rescue in "Errata": Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*. He made a detailed reference to all the errors he is said to have made including getting his dates and statistics wrong. While he owned up to some of the unintentional errors he made in the novel, he warned the reader that "Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator". And that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India."

Rushdie went on to explain his method. He began by feeling embarrassed and annoyed by *his* mistakes. But gradually he found that "the mistake feels more and more like Saleem's; its wrongness feels *right*." Rushdie goes on to explain that he went to the trouble of introducing mistakes in originally error free passages. Why?

Because during its writing the novel turned out to be very different from what Rushdie had set out to write. Rushdie wanted to write a novel of memory, as I have mentioned in Unit 3. But somewhere along the way he got interested in the process of filtration. The role that filters play in remembering. "So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we re-make the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool," he explained. Rushdie called attention to Saleem's filters that played a large role in the design of the novel. He links the pattern of the novel to Saleem's need to *write himself*, to imbue his life with some meaning. Saleem shapes the material, according to the author, to give himself a central role. There are several examples of Saleem "cutting history to suit himself". Every significant event in post independence Indian history coincides with the life of the protagonist, the most important being his birth. His grandfather Aadam Aziz accidentally loses his way into the Jalianwallah Bagh tragedy in Amritsar. In Delhi, his father is held to ransom by the Hindu arsonists while his mother holds centrestage in a communal riot. The hero is born as Nehru is announcing the birth of the nation. Saleem is around to plan the strategy for the 1965 war; he is also packed off to take an active part in the Bangladesh war. He is held up during the slum clearance campaign during the Emergency and forced to undergo sterilization. One notes several. These are designed "as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small."

Rushdie points out that all these errors are strewn about as a warning to the reader that Saleem is not to be taken at his word. The Ganesha error, for example, is calculated to deflate his pomposity. Considering that Saleem is boasting about his knowledge of Hindu systems, his monumental error shows that he is not to be trusted. Rushdie wants to tell us that Saleem is not a detached or dispassionate observer. He has a vested interest in projecting events in a certain manner which is to make himself appear as the hero of the story.

Saleem gets quite a few facts wrong. Here too Rushdie has an explanation. He says he wants to distinguish between truth and remembered truth. With this Rushdie takes us into some of the currently raging debates in historiography. What is the place of truth in history? What value does memory have in the telling of history? Historians like Hayden White show that the particular development of scientific history shuts out all other ways of writing history. Western history has placed an undue emphasis on verifiable truth since the 19th century in its attempt to make history writing closer to science. Other histories, however, have given as much importance to what is believed to be true as what is recorded as true. We have been led into thinking that historical documentation based on observation is the most unbiased method for presenting facts. This hides the fact that the selection and interpretation of facts is not objective. Saleem's method provides us with an inkling of how facts may not only be selected to fit a certain theory but also distorted to promote certain interests. Saleem's mistakes unmask the design of written history to

us. How certain facts favourable to certain groups are selected and passed off as the history of the entire community. Rushdie shows that unlike his novel which clearly reveals how history is made, official histories hide the fact that they are also stories.

"History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish and capable of being given many meanings." He concludes.

This is equally true with respect to the way human beings organize their lives. Like Saleem, they use the logic of memory to reconstruct their pasts. Naturally, in remembering things they screen out the unpleasant while retaining their happy memories. This causes a some amount of distortion. Rushdie is trying to say that remembered truth is as valid as literate truth and that every one has the right to their own version of truth. If you read this section with reference to the earlier unit, the point becomes very clear.

4.6 INTERPLAY OF FANTASY AND REALISM

In the past, fantasy was often dismissed as being fit only for children. After centuries of oblivion, fantasy is suddenly centrestage in the Western world. Why? The new status of fantasy has to do with the present crisis about the nature of reality. The crisis is set off by new discoveries that show that reality cannot exist independent of the observer. The West, it looks like, is having second thoughts about the solidity of the factual universe it earlier swore by. What appeared to be facts are also shown to be stories. In the new thinking that goes by the name of constructivism, science is also proved to be a story. This has obviously sent the stock of the unreal soaring. Along with it has come the recognition that our understanding of what can *be* is not universal. It depends on the world we inhabit.

Eric Rabkin tried to define fantasy. He called it a genre in which the protagonist displays a hesitation in the presence of the supernatural. He cited *Alice in Wonderland* as one of the best examples of fantasy. He categorically left out tales like *Arabian Nights* because they did not display the mandatory hesitation in the presence of the marvellous. Instead, they took the marvellous for granted. What do you think of *Midnight's Children*? Does it take the marvellous for granted? You'll find your answer in the section describing magicians ghetto and the seer's predictions about Saleem's birth to Amina Community.

Going back to what Rushdie said about Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can help us understand Rushdie's novel. In Marquez's novel, the arrival of a train is greeted with utter incredulity. Whereas the ascension of a character called Remedios the Beauty to Heaven is not. Rushdie named this the "village" world view. Now in Rushdie's novel you might have come across several characters who share this world view. You couldn't have missed the reference to Padma's response to the Reverend Mother's ability to enter her daughters' mind.

Padma accepts this without blinking; but what others will swallow as effortlessly as a laddoo, Padma may just as easily reject. *No audience is without its idiosyncrasies of belief.* (italics mine)

Later, when he speaks of "the fog of guilt" hanging around his mother's head, he is certain that "Padma would believe it, Padma would know what I mean." (158) We need a Padma to make the marvellous real. The birth of prodigious children, blue skinned Tubriwallahs and half snake-half human doctors, strange prophecies, the central fantasy of Salim's gift for hearing voices are seen by Padma or Mary Pereira. What is true according to Mary includes fortune tellers prophesying the birth of a two-headed son, sadhus awaiting the arrival of the Blessed One, little girls speaking

in the language of birds and cats. This does not necessarily have to correspond with truth written in an "Anglopoised pool of light". One could dismiss these beliefs as the superstitions of the illiterate. The problem comes when a Prime Minister is spotted soliciting the help of astrologers in drafting the country's first Five Year Plan, or when a young woman with a consciously secular upbringing succumbs to the prophecy of a Ramram Seth with the cobrawallah, monkeyman, bone-setter surrounding him. Instead of hesitation, one finds a belief in the supernatural that cuts across class, caste and gender lines. As Saleem puts it, even a "literate person in this India of ours" is not "immune from the type of information I am in the process of unveiling". (197)

In the Western idea of fantasy, the supernatural is explained as a projection of human fears. Saleem insists that he is "not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written and (read aloud to stunned Padma) is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's head truth"(200). Saleem might be a sceptic like his creator Rushdie, but this does not make him immune to the uncanny mysteries of the marvellous. Along with Rushdie, Saleem holds out for the "village" world over the urban like Marquez is alleged to have done. The difference lies in that where a Padma or Mary might swallow marvellous happenings without the slightest hesitation, Saleem might require to justify his position through philosophical argument. But the entire thrust of Saleem's arguments is to uphold and accentuate the existence of other perspectives on what *is*, which might violate secular notions of truth, "Reality can have metaphorical content, that does not make it less real".(200)

Unlike the original tellers and listeners of tales like *Arabian Nights*, Rushdie cannot take the marvellous for granted. Saleem uses a technique replete with "matter of fact descriptions of the bizarre, and its reverse, "namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday" to show a difference in "attitudes of mind"(218) - a technique and attitude that he confesses to have borrowed from Shiva his twin midnight's child. While he allows Padma and Mary to participate completely in the marvellous, Saleem/Rushdie remains at a distance.

In Rushdie's novel, postmodern scepticism is carefully counterpoised against pre-modern belief through the brilliant use of the working class interlocutor Padma. Her credulous responses to Saleem's sophisticated self-consciousness give evidence of the "miracle-seeking consciousness" of the Indian masses. Though Rushdie parodies the pre-modern, he does not cease to have affection for it. He combines the condition of fantasy - "the reader's hesitation in the presence of the supernatural" with a supernatural explanation of events as in pure marvellous. Against Saleem's cynicism is Padma's faith in all things miraculous, like new moons strange happenings, prophecies, strange coincidences.

The use of fantasy by magic realists is as I said earlier, intended to question the place of reality in art. Considering that three fourths of the world's literature does not satisfy the reality requirement of 19th century fiction, it can only be a period concept that needs to be discarded. Rushdie's magic realist mode is, by his own admission, a strategy to overcome the limitations of the historical testimony of a young boy's unreliable memory. But his strange "commingling of the improbable and the mundane" can also be seen as an attempt to give us a glimpse into other aesthetics in which art does not need to imitate life. Oriental narratives grow out of a semi-mythical universe. Here the strange and the improbable is not only the natural subject matter of fiction but the bizarre and uncanny is also accepted as the 'real'. Miracles and improbabilities, of the kind *Midnight's Children* abounds with are accepted, at certain levels, without scepticism.

However, the novel places the two perspectives side-by-side suggesting that it is not possible to translate one in terms of the other. This is different from fantasy where a delicate tension is maintained between a natural and supernatural explanation of events. Rushdie's solution is to juxtapose the two perspectives through Saleem and

Padma to uphold the supernatural as an equally valid perspective even though some might not be able to access it.

4.7 MYTH IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

By now Rushdie's readers are familiar with his carefree manner, which spares no one. At the time of the novel's publication, however, his particular brand of irreverence irked many, particularly those who hold tradition in great awe. Rushdie's allusion to Hindu myths became a serious point of debate. Could a Muslim draw on Hindu tradition? If he did, wasn't it his moral duty to educate himself and use them accurately? What is the difference in the use of myth and tradition by the earlier generation of writers and Rushdie and his children? For example, as Viney Kirpal has pointed out, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* uses the language of myth and folktale to write a modern day *sthalapurana* or *place legend*, the way there is a *place legend* about Ayodhya, the birthplace of Ram.. Writers of Raja Rao's generation share the mythic consciousness that Professor C D Narasimhaiah saw as characteristic of India – habit of perceiving the presentness in the light of the past. As mythological archetypes have a "meaningful presence" in Indian social life, the novel might rightfully be structured around a well known myth. Writers such as Rao could structure *Kanthapura* around the *Ramayana* myth with Sita (India) being rescued from Ravana (The British) by Rama (Moorthy). They could do so because the Ram-Sita Ravana myth was a living presence in Indian society. It helped Rushdie to explain the natural freedom movement in the light of the ancient past which has great meaning for the people in India.

However, writers of Rushdie's generation have adopted a parodic stance towards their mythic material, perhaps for the reasons I have discussed above. It is not possible for Rushdie, like Saleem Sinai, to participate in the "myth-laden universe" without hesitation. Rushdie's irreverent use of myth has earned him the reputation of a trickster. Something of an imposter. Do you agree? Actually, he is not as I have explained in the previous units.

But let us here examine his use of the Ganesha myth and see for ourselves. As we found out earlier, the howler about Ganesha was Saleem's not Rushdie's and was intended to deflate Saleem's belief in his erudition. Saleem uses other Indian allusions with the same rebellious careless nonchalance. His play on Padma's name, for instance irritates her. For he chooses to interpret her name not through its mythological associations but through its everyday, scatological meaning. The central myth holding the novel together is the myth of Shiva. Rushdie evokes Shiva in his destructive avatar, born to banish evil from the world. In Rushdie's novel, Shiva gradually evolves into an evil force whose sole motive is to destroy the hero Saleem for robbing him of his real parents. Only through some far fetched association can one link Shiva's actions as revenge for the evils of emergency. Rushdie reinterprets the Shiva myth like all others as it suits him: eternally playing on the meaning of words; referring to the original association of the myth; and turning it upside down.

This has a nagging connection to postmodern irony and play. Salman Rushdie has become the darling of the postmoderns for his playful treatment of all he touches. And the *bete noire* of the postcolonials for the same reason. Rushdie has protested against the uniqueness of "Indianness" in terms of tradition in "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist". He felt that to describe a work as authentic or inauthentic in relation to its faithfulness to Indian tradition was to succumb to an essentialist definition.

But more important, Rushdie's treatment of myth in *Midnight's Children* questions the realism premise of fiction. Is fiction bound by the rules of accuracy as life? What is the relationship between fiction and fact?

Technique

As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out parody need not necessarily rule out affection. The postmodern writer cannot participate in the world of tradition in an unqualified manner. He needs the distancing of parody. Yet the objective might not be to mock at tradition. Like Kirpal puts it, he can destabilize tradition to reinstall it. It is not fair that Rushdie should be singled out for his ironic attitude. Therefore, the writers that follow have also adopted the same route. Look at Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* where he subjects the Mahabharata myth to the same ironic treatment.

4.8 LET'S SUM UP

Now you know that the structure of *Midnight's Children* is not merely a gimmick. The novel's form is inseparable from the theme. The novelist employs a particular manner of telling a story because he wants to show how stories are made, and that history too is a fiction, a story. We have found out why and how Rushdie uses the epic structure. We learn that Rushdie's errors are the unreliable narrator's. We also discover how magic and realism have been blended by the author, to merge the postmodern's faith with the oral narrator's "village" world view.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Bete noir:	sworn enemy
Bizarre:	strange happenings
Delusion:	holding a false belief
Enfant terrible:	incorrigible person
Erudition:	great learning
Filters:	to remove
Historography:	writing of history
Irony:	use of words or course of events which are clearly opposite to one's meaning.
Incense:	very angry
Magnum opus:	masterpiece
Magniloquence:	in a grand sounding manner
Meticulous:	very careful with attention to detail
Persona:	a character playing the role of the author
Pomposity:	foolishly self-important
Replete:	completely full

Scepticism:	habit of not believing a claim
Uncanny:	mysterious

4.10 QUESTIONS

1. How do you respond to Rushdie's "strange commingling of the real and the probable"?
2. What is the role of the epic structure in the novel?
3. Does Rushdie have the right to use Hindu myths? Why does he use them in the particular way that he does?

4.11 SUGGESTED READING

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*, Delhi: Granta, 1991.

Mark Currie (Ed and Intro) *Metafiction* London: Longman. 1995.

Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction", in *Metafiction*. Ed. Mark Currie. London: Longman. 1995.

Viney Kirpal, "An Overview of Indian English Fiction: 1920-1990s", *Mapping Cultural Spaces: Postcolonial Indian Literature in English* (Ed) Nilufer E Bharucha and Vrinda Nabar New Delhi: Vision Books. 1998.

Anjali Roy, "Fantasy and Fiction, Myth and History: The Real/Unreal Dichotomy in *Midnight's Children*" *The Visvabharati Quarterly*, Vol 9, No 2 July-Oct 2000.

UNIT 5 CHARACTERIZATION IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Saleem as India & India as Saleem
- 5.3 Padma : Beloved Nati
- 5.4 Children of the Midnight : Shiva , Parvati and Saleem
- 5.5 Family as Character
- 5.6 Common Indian People as Characters
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Glossary
- 5.10 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, I first plan to discuss the critical concept of characters and characterization in Western fiction. Then I shall discuss the different characters in *Midnight's Children* and show how Rushdie's characterization borrows also from oral narratives.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Whenever we discuss a novel, we focus mainly on its characters, obviously because they are the main players in the story. So normal and routine is to discuss these 'people' in the novel, that we rarely ever pause to even ask ourselves : What is a Character? Of course, we all have a rough idea about what we mean by "Character" but a short discussion on this subject will help to clarify our ideas and enable us to read literary works better. So let me begin by requesting you to write down your definition of Character as a literary term :

Was that easy? Well, here is how literacy critics would define a Character; you may want to compare it with your effort.

Characters are described as the persons presented in narrative or dramatic works that are interpreted by the reader as possessing certain moral, personality and emotional qualities that get communicated through what they speak (i.e. the dialogues) or what they do (i.e. their actions) or what other characters tell us about them. The reasons for the character's temperament, aspirations and moral values reflected in speech and actions lie in what is called *motivation*.

Some characters such as Mr. Micawber in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* , or Gafoor, the taxi driver in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* may remain unchanged in outlook and nature. Others may undergo a radical change because of a gradual

process of development and motivation. For example, Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations* changes because of his desire to become a gentleman worthy of Estella's love. One simple expectation of a character whether in a realistic work or in a fantasy is that the character is "consistent". That is to say, the character should not break off suddenly or act in a way which is not convincingly founded in his or her nature or temperament as we have already come to know it.

For example, if Raju in *The Guide* were to change suddenly from jailbird into the wise sage that he becomes at the end of the novel we would not find him a consistent or convincing character. However, by introducing the *motivation* for the change in him, Narayan very ably persuades us to accept Raju's gradual transformation. Can you think of some other fictional characters you've come across in your reading recently whom you would call 'consistent' in their development?

Do you think Saleem is a consistent character?

You remember I mentioned Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* in Unit 3? Did you get to read it? Do so, at the earliest if you haven't so far. It gives a good insight into the craft of the Novel. Forster in this book has developed the distinction between *Flat* and *Round* characters. And what he says is very interesting. A *Flat* character or a "type" is a "two-dimensional" or "cardboard" character, built around "a single idea or quality". It has no depth. It is presented without much individualizing detail and therefore such a character can be adequately described in a single phrase or sentence. For example, the accordionist Wee Willie Winkie or his wife, Vanita in *Midnight's Children* is a flat character; he is just an accordionist – we have no idea how he thinks and feels, or what makes him act. Can you mention a few others?

A Round character is complex in temperament and motivation. It is presented with subtle particularity. Such a character is therefore as difficult to describe with any adequacy as a person in real life. Like real persons, they also have the capacity to spring surprises on us. Saleem, for instance, is a Round character. What is Padma: Round or Flat?

Almost all novels have some characters who are *Flat* and serve merely as functionaries, and some who are *Round* and are well characterized. It will be interesting to see how Rushdie handles his characters and their characterization in *Midnight Children*. Are the *Flat* characters only flat or are they given some individualities as well? Similarly, are the *Round* characters really "three-dimensional" or do they also share some traits with Flat characters? What is your opinion? Interestingly, characters in Indian English fiction are often neither just Flat or Round. They could be described as metaphorical representatives or symbols, frequently of ancient *ideals*. Moorthy in *Kanthapura* is an ideal character, very much as Rama in the *Ramayana* was an ideal (ideal son, ideal king).

Do you think Saleem and Shiva are realistic human beings or symbolic representations? You'll find your answer in the appropriate section of this unit.

5.2 SALEEM AS INDIA AND INDIA AS SALEEM

It is very interesting to study the character of Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. For, right in the beginning of the novel, he identifies himself with India, its histories and its destinies. Indeed he is at pains to tell us that by being a midnight child, a special responsibility had been thrust upon him. So close is the bond between him and India that he clearly hints to the reader that there is a resemblance between his face and the map of India. Look at that passage from *Midnight's Children* to see how he does this by using words such as "region", "eastern", and "western" used for cartography and not for describing human features:

Baby-snaps reveal that my large moon-face was too large; too perfectly round. Something lacking in the region of the chin. Fair skin curved across my features – but birthmarks disfigured it; dark stains spread down my western hairline; a dark patch covered my eastern ear Baby Saleem's nose : it was monstrous; and it ran. (124)

In an interview, Rushdie explains the reason for Saleem's big nose.

One day I was looking at the map of India, and all of a sudden for me [it] resembled a large nose hanging into the sea, with a drip off the end of it, which was [Sri Lanka]. Then I thought, well, you know, if Saleem is going to be the twin of the country, he may as well be the identical twin and so he sprouted this enormous nose. (1985)

If you compare Saleem's description of his own face with Rushdie's comment, you'll note a big difference. While Saleem is very serious and intent on promoting his greatness, Rushdie's tone seems lighthearted. Why do you think this is so? You needn't answer just now as there are many other similarly "awe-inspiring" descriptions that Saleem gives of himself.

Consider the manner in which he pays attention to the process of birth – his own birth, the birth of Independent India and the birth of the midnight children. Even the description of his mother's pregnancy and the growth of the foetus in her womb is as strange a description as any other in the book, perhaps even more so because the embryo is described as having two heads and other rather abnormal features. Further, did you notice that the cluster of metaphors Rushdie uses to describe this process of growth and development of the child is metaphorically the development of a literary text or the whole language. I'll quote it for your recall :

What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming one might say, a book – perhaps an encyclopaedia even a whole language. (115)

Is Saleem a country, a character, a paragraph, a chapter, the novel or just a narrator? These questions keep cropping up in the mind and add to the existing list. A few pages later, are details of his diverse "inheritance" (126). These details mention a number of factors responsible for his temperament but not all of them originate in his genetic make-up. Rather their cause lies in a whole range of social and political events. He establishes the belief that the history of his life is the history of the country and that he is India and India is Saleem.

Going further, some of the events which Saleem narrates have only a sensationalistic value; they are less important for their meaning than their dramatic appeal. Saleem makes great claims for the interconnection between people and events, even though the connection between some events and some people in his life is not clear. For example, his assertion that Homi Catrack was "the second human being to be murdered by mushrooming Saleem" (244). This is no more than sensationalism. This naming of himself in his own narration as "Saleem" and not as "me" is another. He also tells you that the first person he murdered was Jimmy Kapadia simply because he had dreamed Jimmy's death. Such a serious matter as two murders are mentioned and resolved very quickly by Saleem in his narration thus suggesting that he is prone to exaggerating his claims to fame and notoriety.

Though Rushdie makes Ganesh his mythological ancestor (Ganesh's parents were Shiva and Parvati), Saleem experiences a grave sense of loss when he discovers that his family are not his family and he is sent off to Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia's home while Amina (mythological Parvati) tries to assure Ahmed Sinai (mythological Shiva) that Saleem is indeed "her" son Ganesh.

The discovery that he is not his parents' son is a turning point in Saleem's life and he feels shattered. Again when these "parents" die in Pakistan he is really left on his own. Rushdie says he did it deliberately. He was poking fun at Saleem who believes he is India, that he is in charge of her history and destiny when in reality he is its victim ("he is castrated") and when he makes this discovery towards the end of the book, he just can't recover from this knowledge. This contradiction is hinted at quite clearly in the Chapter titled "The Kolynos Kid" which follows the description of his exile to his uncle and aunt's home :

"From ayah to Widow, I've been the sort of person to whom things have been done; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist" ... (237)

Far from being India or its history or destiny, Saleem is therefore a passive and weak character and this is brought home to us through the aside provided in the passage quoted above. Saleem can't outgrow the habit of seeing himself as the centre of the world, a stage which every child goes through and must outgrow in order to be taken seriously.

Saleem is very well aware of his role in the novel : he knows there are two Indias, the actual India and his own personalized India which he refers to as 'my India' (198), or the India discovered within his mind. He knows that he has placed himself at the centre of his story, and that his story is coloured accordingly. He also knows that his role is that of a storyteller and entertainer and no more. He wants us to believe that he is in control when in reality he is a non-entity. He is both a storyteller and a parody of one. And most certainly he is not a historian nor the great character destined to play a special role in India's destiny. He is just a person suffering from self-delusion, having lost his "family" moorings and roots. One of the lowest points in Saleem's life is reached when he becomes a sniffer (man-) dog in the Pakistani army's officially non-existent Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities.

So the question comes up : Why does Saleem exaggerate his importance and assume a mantle of responsibility which no one has given him? Have you thought up the answer by now? I'll give you a critic's explanation below.

Nancy E. Batty in her essay "Rushdie's Art of Suspense in *Midnight's Children*" has a very convincing explanation. She argues that Saleem's dilemma is that of any autobiographer; who has to "accomplish a circular journey from himself to himself". Since Saleem's life is so insignificant, he has to make it seem to be "either very important or very interesting" or he will lose his reader's interest. Saleem is not a known figure in history or in any other sphere. He is only a fictional autobiographer having no claim to fame in "real life." So he tries to accomplish this fame in his narrative by linking events of his own life with those of his country's history and sensationalizing his own role in these events and in the lives of the people he knows. Only Padma, his friend and confidante keeps on repeatedly undermining his claims to importance and drama and we get the hint that Saleem is not to be taken too seriously because he is not an objective autobiographer.

Saleem's self-delusions of being India parallels that of an actual Prime Minister of India. Saleem cites the slogan that had become quite famous during the Emergency – *Indira is India and India is Indira* (427) and wonders how Mrs. Gandhi could have even tried to snatch away from him the position her own father, Jawaharlal Nehru, had reserved for him. Had she :

“not read her own father’s letter to a midnight child, in which her own sloganized centrality was denied; in which the role of mirror— of -the-nation was bestowed upon me?” (427)

As Saleem questions the broken promise it becomes clear what Rushdie has been attempting in the character of Saleem. He has been trying to convey that if Saleem believes he is India and that India is Saleem then this is the mere delusion on the part of a pathetic and unimportant fellow. The belief of a political leader (Mrs. Gandhi) that she is the nation, was similarly also a delusion.

Mrs. Gandhi was as much sensationalizing her role and importance in India’s history as the protagonist Saleem, and Rushdie has sympathy for none.

5.3 PADMA : BELOVED NATI

Although the previous section (5.2) was entirely devoted to a discussion of Saleem’s Characterization, and in this section, I have discussed the character of Padma who is both his friend and his narratee, it will be difficult to talk of her exclusively without reference to Saleem. Her companionship completes Saleem’s life as a man and her role as his narratee completes his narration.

Padma is the narratee or audience for Saleem as well as his beloved. As a beloved, she is assertive and demanding and coming from the working class, her liaison with Saleem symbolically represents the ideal of “marriage” of the classes. As one who comes from the working class, Padma has few inhibitions and speaks openly on all matters with Saleem, including taunting him about his “useless other pencil.” Saleem is attracted to her in spite of her emotional outbursts against his ineffectiveness as a lover, and narrator. As Saleem’s narratee she is an index for the way the reader is responding to his story, much like King Shahryar in *A Thousand and One Nights* to Scherherazade’s tales. Both the teller and these tales are explicitly mentioned in *Midnight’s Children* so as to recall them as a reference point for the reader.

Padma’s scepticism undermines Saleem’s autobiography as he makes big claims for his importance and centrality in the country’s events. Padma who has a mind of her own is not just a narratee. She not only shows up Saleem’s successes and failures as an autobiographer but also plays an important role in the deflation of his character and the creation of his story. Do you agree?

Saleem himself recognizes this when he accepts inability to dispense with Padma though she is (according to the upper class and anglicized Saleem) superstitious and ignorant. Her relationship with Saleem is complex and complementary; she cannot be reduced to the status of the chorus in Greek drama, or just a narratee who can be replaced by another member or narratee.

Despite their uneasy relationship, she and Saleem have great personal chemistry. One can’t do without the other. Padma briefly disappears from Saleem’s life (but not his narrative because he keeps talking of her) over a disagreement regarding Saleem’s use of the word “love” to describe her feelings towards him. Saleem’s pronouncement – “I know now that [Padma] is ...hooked.... My story has her by the throat” (38) is borne out when Padma does return to his side to fulfil her role as his narratee and confidante. This should not surprise you because if you read the narrative closely, you find that Saleem is constantly tailoring his narrative to retain Padma’s interest. As Nancy Batty points out, his efforts are very much “like a lover engaged in a sexual conquest”. He doesn’t want her to desert him. So, he keeps her “hooked” to his story by adjusting his narrative strategies so that he keeps getting the

right response from her. Thus, he keeps playing this victim-seducer game with her very much like the traditional storyteller did with his audience.

A question comes to my mind here. What would *Midnight's Children* be without Padma? Perhaps, a lot less lively. Don't you think so? Padma represents a lively and spirited woman, a loyal friend with a carefree, untamed nature. She adds depth to the narrative by her queries and responses in a way which is very different from the way characters in western fiction do. Padma is indispensable to the novel because she is his *nati*, the live interactive audience of an oral narrative who both listens and creates a traditional storyteller's tale.

5.4 THE MIDNIGHT CHILDREN – SHIVA, PARVATI AND SALEEM

The story proper begins with Saleem becoming aware of his ability to read the minds of other people and of the existence of the midnight children who are also uncommonly gifted. Three of them prove to be outstanding. They are triplets and a discussion of Shiva and Parvati almost inevitably turns towards mention of Saleem.

Most critics have discussed Saleem as if he were a realistic character for whom the readers are expected to feel tragic emotions. But, actually he is allegorized so extensively, as Arun Mukherjee has stated that he becomes just a device in the narration of the story. Thus, though Saleem describes himself as the greatest talent of all the midnight children, he is replicated and multiplied in other midnight children, without whom he is also incomplete.

Saleem is "the greatest talent of all"; he had been endowed with "the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men" (200). Then there is Parvati-the-witch who is the most powerful female midnight child, next only to Saleem and Shiva because she was "born a mere seven seconds after midnight on August 15th, [and] had been given the powers of the adept, the illuminatus, the genuine gifts of configuration and sorcery ..." (200). The third is Shiva, who like Saleem was "born on the stroke of midnight" and had been "given the gifts of war." He is Saleem's alter ego. Shiva is also his adversary. The reason for Shiva's resentment and enmity with Saleem originates in his having been exchanged at birth with Saleem without the knowledge of his parents. Though he was actually the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai (while Saleem's parents were Vanita, a poor musician's wife and Methwold) he was condemned to a life of poverty and crime. These three children are closely linked to each other. Saleem's power to communicate with all the midnight children makes his head "a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another" through Saleem (227). Only Shiva can close off from me any part of his thoughts he chose to keep to himself (226).

Saleem with the help of Parvati becomes the leader of the midnight children, against Shiva's wishes.

Saleem is convinced that the midnight children must be there for a special purpose since each had been bestowed with supernatural or superhuman gift. But in the end they are all destroyed and contribute to India's fragmentation. The children symbolizing India's potentiality to build her future for each of its citizens, to build "the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell", as Nehru had once declared (118). They not only differ in their ideas, but they also through jealousy, strife, narrow-mindedness, regionalism and communalism cause India's disintegration into small linguistic states, mirrored in the disintegration of the *Midnight's Children's* Conference (MCC). Shiva had scoffed at the idea of the MCC, "the club- shub stuff ... for you rich boys (228). He also has no patience for Saleem's search for the purpose and meaning of their lives because poverty leaves no

room for idealistic philosophizing : Rich kid, "Shiva yelled," you don't know one damned thing! What *purpose*, man? What thing in the whole sister – sleeping world got *reason*, yara? Where's the reason in starving, man?" (220). Saleem unable to retort to Shiva's cynical analysis of the world, takes refuge in the idea that "if there is a third principle its name is childhood. But it – dies; or rather, it is murdered" (256). His rationalization hardly helps him find an answer to his search for meaning. His and the children's downfall is brought about in Benaras, symbolically one of the most holy places of Shiva worship in India, where all of them are castrated and thus, disconnected from their linkage with the country's history.

Saleem withdraws into a private shell. His downfall sees the rise of Shiva who incidentally creates a new race of children who are bastard products of his illegitimate relations with numerous "society ladies."

The story of the midnight children is really about "broken promises." The lost opportunity of these children occurred because Mrs. Gandhi, tried to project herself as the greatest Indian leader, a Durga, and thus maintain and strengthen her hold on power. Rushdie in an interview (1985) admitted that if *Midnight's Children* had any purpose ... "it was an attempt to say that the thirty-two years between independence and the end of the book didn't add up to very much, that a kind of betrayal had taken place, and that the book was dealing with the nature of that betrayal."

Saleem is left to ponder on the concept of history as perceived in Hindu cosmology. History, he says, "in [his] version" is inextricably "bound to the age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga". He consoles himself that by Hindu cosmological law, this is "a period of decay resulting in the perversion of all values and virtues." The history of man or a nation are a meaningless fraction of the moments in Brahma's life and hence constitute only an illusion. Thus, Saleem resigns himself to the reality -illusion philosophical concept. According to Vedantic thought, to believe that man or the world around him is real, is a human being's *avidya* or ignorance.

Mrs. Gandhi was instrumental, to a large extent, in destroying the democratic institutions of independent India. She reinforced it by using the Hindu notion of the repetitive cycle of destruction and regeneration, for explaining modern political processes.

That is why in the novel, the generation that follows Saleem's children of midnight, the generation represented by Aadam Sinai, is symbolically born of the traditional gods, Shiva and Parvati – the great figures of the past who are part of the cycle of destruction and regeneration as expressed by the mother goddess.

This also explains why Kali and Parvati, two names for the same goddess are seen to engage in two distinct activities in the novel. While Kali the Widow (Mrs. Gandhi) castrates the midnight children and drains them of their hope, Parvati gives birth to the next generation. Thus, the mythical cycle of destruction and regeneration continues in the present when the same traditions are called upon to justify contemporary actions. Shiva and Parvati are modelled after traditional Hindu "ideals" rather than the *Flat* or *Real* characters of Western fiction.

Saleem refers to the dangers of nostalgically reminding "a new-born, secular state" of its religio-mythical traditions. It results in a nation which is divided along linguistic, regional, communal lives. It is a nation :

.... in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant...
so that people were seized with atavistic longings, and forgetting
the new myth of freedom [revert] to their old ways, their old regionalist
loyalties and prejudices (294)

The evil Shiva and children like him were responsible for the disintegration of India which you see being physically enacted in Saleem who is seen "cracking up." These were the children who under Mrs. Gandhi's revivalism of the traditional past, lost their real potential and betrayed the idea of the unified, plural, hybrid India with their growing parochialism.

5.5 FAMILY AS CHARACTER

In an interview given four years after the publication of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie made a very significant observation. He said that "because family is so central to life in India" it was impossible to write an epic novel on a monumental scale and not place the family "near the centre" (1985). He also noted that one could write a novel about Western society and not give the family a central place, and it wouldn't seem strange. But in an Indian novel this was almost a necessity. What do you think? Those of you who have been seeing the family serials *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and *Kabhi Saas Bhi Bahu Thi* on Star TV will agree that family centred stories do pull us as a nation. Indeed, the high TV viewer ratings that these family stories have been fetching have proved threatening to many other, perhaps more slickly produced shows and serials. Almost every home in India switches on the TV for these two serials and identifies with the joys and troubles of the two joint families.

The centrality of the family is therefore, reflected in a number of Indian English novels even those written much before Rushdie and stories woven around a family hold the reader even till this day. Rushdie was quick to seize this fact and play around a bit because his book is supposed to be "a comic epic." The epic dimensions are reflected in the stories of the different generations. Yet while wanting to involve the family in his story in a central way, he didn't want it to be a mere tale of different generations as is *The Forsythe Saga* or the family serials that I mentioned above.. His intention was "to undermine this convention." So he wrote about families in almost a mock heroic and comic way.

For this, he introduced certain surprise elements in his story. First there is the Bollywood style baby swap where the reader is shocked to discover after one hundred and fifty pages of reading about a family, that the family he had been reading about is not the family of the child, whose life history he had been engaged with, but somebody else's family. The other lies in Rushdie killing off Saleem's "family" when there were still one hundred and fifty pages left to go. If you recall, just about every member of the family dies in the bomb that falls on their house in Pakistan. The third is to bring in the Nehru-Gandhi family as characters in the book – a very daring act in itself, because they were very much around and in power.

This is something very interesting because he wanted to show how Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, (India's first Prime Minister), and herself a Prime Minister and mother of two sons – Sanjay ("the second most powerful figure in India") and Rajiv (a future Prime Minister) sought to project herself and her family as being larger than life. He wanted to expose her attempts at "self-mythification."

In an introduction to Tariq Ali's *An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru – Gandhi Family* (1985), Rushdie describes how in a planned way the first family of India had set about "self-mythification" (xiii). This attempt at myth-making reached its height in 1975 when an Assamese minister sychophantly coined the campaign slogan, "India is Indira and Indira is India." This "historical" fact is included in *Midnight's Children*. Its inclusion clearly exposes Indira Gandhi's political manoeuvres as part of a major strategy to aggrandise herself and her family as the family of India's greatest leaders. This attempt at self-mythification reached its peak during the Emergency.

As I have said earlier, "the Emergency" was independent India's most shameful hour. You, who were probably not even born then may wonder why such a "fuss" is made about its imposition. Indeed when I was teaching *Midnight's Children* in IIT Bombay, a final year B.Tech student of mine, asked me just this question. In answer, let me share, with you, what I told him, having lived through the period of the "Emergency" myself that too on a university campus. Let me share an incident with you. The CBI once visited my department to check on the antecedents of a wellknown history professor simply because someone had complained about her anonymously. How would you react if the present Indian Government were to suspend our fundamental rights overnight and impose censorship on the press, TV and radio? With horror and fear? Well something like this happened on 26 June 1975 when for the first time in free India's history, the fundamental rights of her citizens were suspended and 140,000 Indians were detained without trial: what became a common phrase then was the dreaded "midnight knock" that every right-thinking Indian feared.

The police was known to come suddenly to anyone's home and take away the person to prison. And because the citizen had not rights, he could not appeal before a court of law. Many intellectuals including university professors and activists were thus thrown into jail and tortured. In the words of *The Shah Commission Report on the Emergency*, "[T]housands were detained and a series of totally illegal and unwarranted actions followed involving untold human misery and suffering" (in Ali 186).

These were the facts of history that were swept away by Mrs. Gandhi's attempts to aggrandise herself and retain power. The illegal detentions and the enormous human suffering that she caused are precisely those details that were suppressed as she pursued her ambition to re-write India's history with herself at its centre.

Rushdie's despair and rage become very clear in his characterization of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as the murderous Widow. Let's look at the descriptions that he offers of her in Saleem's narration. The widow first appears in a terrifying dream that Saleem has during a bout with fever. Here she takes the form of a huge, voracious monster who gathers children in her hands, rips them apart, and rolls them into little green balls that she hurls into the night. Saleem also describes her as having green and black hair; her "arm is long as death, its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black"; and the "children torn in two in Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of children roll them into little balls" (249).

The Widow, in this guise, most closely resembles the goddess Kali, who represents "Death and the Destroyer." In pictures, Kali is shown standing with protruding tongue, garland of skulls and hands holding weapons and severed hands. Rushdie through his narrator Saleem, clearly indicates that the Widow, Indira Gandhi, had conflated her own image with that of the traditional mother goddess. At the same time, however, Rushdie wants to show the consequences of performing such acts. The Widow, Saleem declares, "was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods."

Rushdie's characterization might at first seem extreme; surely Indira Gandhi did not conceive of herself literally as a mother goddess. However, it is clear that she was perceived in this fashion by many Indians during this period. The famous Indian artist M. F. Husain did paint a trilogy of her during the Emergency that depicts her as Durga or Kali. The point to be made here is not that Indira Gandhi went about proclaiming herself as Devi the mother goddess, but rather that her swift and cruel actions during the Emergency were perceived to be similar to the actions of Durga or Kali, and this was a role that "Mother Indira" did not repudiate.

The characterization of Mrs. Gandhi is the most scathing of all characters in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's novel is in part, an examination of the "betrayal" of India by the independent Indian government beginning with Nehru.

The Nehru-Gandhi family as a character in *Midnight's Children* acquires a special meaning. By creating Saleem, Rushdie places the artist in opposition to all historians including politicians who re-write history to suit their own ambitions. The writer has to speak up and protest and Rushdie's protest rang out loud throughout the world.

As a critical historian of India, Saleem upholds three principles. First, he acknowledges the importance of the traditions of democratic and representative forms of government. Second, he acknowledges the teeming millions of the Indian populace that are forgotten in most histories of India which tend to focus on the great figures of history (as will become clear in section 5.6).

Third, he believes in the power of the writer's imagination that helps him construct suppressed "realities" and "truths". He calls this "the chutnification of history", the power to produce counter-histories, to protest against the powerful governments of the day. To protest is a writer's duty as he said in his lecture "Inside the Whale" that I shared with you in Unit 1.

To conclude this section, the characterization of the family in *Midnight's Children* goes beyond domestic space into the space of manipulative history and politics. It is the most difficult to understand and also the most complex. I have for obvious reasons, therefore, spent more time on discussing the Family as dynasty than the family of Saleem.

5.6 COMMON PEOPLE AS CHARACTERS

In most novels and plays there are a number of faceless people who also populate the world in which the main characters live. For example, in a Shakespearean play such as *Julius Caesar*, besides the protagonist, Caesar, Brutus, Cassius and Mark Anthony, there are the huge crowds of commoners whose comments constitute the spirit of the times, the belief systems that prevailed and the world in which the former lived. So, through the remarks of some unknown persons we know so much more about the society in which these Shakespearean heroes live. The times in which Shakespeare lived were marked by a strong belief in astrology and the people were superstitious. His common people have no names, no distinct personalities or identities; they are *types*. In technical jargon they are called the *rhubbarb*; they represent the "masses" in the novel or in a play as in real life. This has also been the case with all the Indian English novels until the advent of *Midnight's Children*.

In *Midnight's Children*, for the first time, Rushdie acknowledges the millions of common people and diverse groups that make up India's population. He does this by recording the many voices and perspectives that are almost never mentioned in most narratives, and history books. As Saleem says, "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the whole world" (126).

Rushdie avoids the typical historical and fictional approach of placing the primary emphasis on the "great" figures. For example, one would expect to find Mahatma Gandhi figuring prominently in a novel about the making of modern India – the way it happens in *Kanthapura*, but in *Midnight's Children*, the Mahatma hardly appears. Instead, Saleem records the daily activities of different "common" people and reproduces their wonderful language and unique qualities.

One of the most fascinating commoners is Tai, the boatman. Do you like him? He chatters non-stop, spins grand and fantastic stories for the child Aziz and has a

wonderful relationship with him until the adult Aziz returns from Germany – as a fully qualified doctor. Aziz and he initially revive the childhood friendship but Aziz gradually distances himself from the old boatman for his orthodox views, especially his views on Aziz's meetings with Naseem whom Aziz visits regularly in Tai's boat much against Tai's wishes. Tai feels protective and wants to save Aziz from getting trapped in Landowner Ghani's designs. Tai's fantastic ideas, his abusive language and temper, his unwashed coat and stink, his coarse repartee – all make him an unforgettable character. Lifafa Das is the second unusual common character who as the peepshow man in Delhi becomes a victim of religious fanaticism. A hardworking imaginative young man who is described as "invisible until he smiled, when he became beautiful" (75).

Lifafa Das keeps on adding postcards to his peepshow so that the children can really see the whole world. A symbol of plurality and cosmopolitanism, his chance visit to a Muslim Mohalla on a tension filled day just before Independence becomes nearly fatal for him. A small girl reminiscent of children in Hitler's days – incites the crowd by identifying him as Hindu. Through wild rumour he is seen as a rapist of Muslim women. He is chased by a mad crowd and would have been lynched, but for timely intervention by Saleem's mother, Amina. If you recall, as Lifafa Das knocks at her door for refuge, she lets him in and stands defyingly between him and the angry crowd. When her reasoning fails to convince the crowd, she challenges them to touch a woman who is about to become a mother. Responding to the traditional respect for an Indian mother-to-be, the crowd melts away and Lifafa Das's life is saved.

Lifafa Das, Tai, even Mary Pereira, Saleem's ayah the one who swops Saleem for Shiva to ensure a good life for a poor child – are all memorable commoners who share significant space with the main characters because of recurring references made to them in the novel and because of their unique qualities and unusual stances.

This is an important contribution because for the first time an attempt has been made in Indian fiction to bring a large number of socially marginalized people to the centre. Can you recall another earlier novel where the writer tried to level all of them with the hero of his book? Yes, it is Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* where Bakha a low caste became the hero of the book much to the surprise of the reading public in the West. Perhaps the origin of these revolutionary steps in Indian fiction by Anand and Rushdie, lies in their marxist thinking. In addition, with Rushdie it could also be the influence of post-structuralism and postmodernism. Such characterization is an attempt to try to overturn existing inequalities by making a large number of the low borns share space with the upper class – or almost.

In fact, the many characters in the magician's ghetto (where Lifafa Das later takes Saleem's mother Amina to a soothsayer who prophesizes Saleem's birth and destiny) tend to give the city of Delhi a carnivalesque atmosphere and point towards the intermingling of languages and social practices that both include "high" (upperclass) and "low" culture. Again, during the war in Bangladesh which filters through the experiences of Ayooba, Saheed, Farooq and Saleem – common soldiers who witness the atrocities committed by the Pakistani forces -- the focus is on the common everyday experiences of average people. It is their experience in Rushdie's estimation, that comprises a more accurate history of India. Thus in creating common people as memorable characters in his novel, Rushdie has set off a new trend in Indian fiction writing. In subsequent novels that have been written by other novelists, it is fairly common now to foreground the role played by the average common person. Thus in this section, I have tried to highlight the important contribution made by Rushdie of bringing common people as characters in fiction, rather than as the rubbarb.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how Rushdie draws upon the methods of oral narratives to create characters. All his characters from Saleem to Tai are allegorized or are symbols. They are modelled more after characters in oral narratives than on those in western fiction and have a peculiarity to their characterization that defies the simplistic distinction between *Flat* and *Round* characters offered by western fictional literary criticism.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the main features of Rushdie's characterization in *Midnight's Children*.
2. Analyze, with examples, Rushdie's characterization of the Family in *Midnight's Children*.
3. Discuss the characterization of three commoners other than those examined in this unit.
4. Examine Saleem's role in the novel as autobiographer.

5.9 GLOSSARY

Alterego:	very close and trusted friend; literally, the other self.
Adversary:	opponent or enemy
Aggrandise:	power or rank
Cartography:	the science or art of making maps
Conflate:	to combine
Conceive:	to think of; consider
Inextricably:	which cannot be united or separated
Mythification:	the act of creating an invented person, not a real person.
Ponder:	to spend time in considering
Parody:	a weak and unsuccessful copy of somebody or something
Retort:	a quick, rather angry, and often amusing answer
Repudiate:	to refuse to accept
Rationalization:	to find reasons

Scepticism:	doubt
Scoff:	to speak or act disrespectfully; ridicule
Sycophant:	flatterer
Trilogy:	a group of three related books, plays, paintings etc.
Voracious:	eating or desiring large quantities of food.

Characterization

5.10 SUGGESTED READING

Nancy E. Batty "Rushdie's Art of Suspense" in *Midnight's Children*, *Ariel* 18: 3, July 1987

Arun P. Mukherjee "Characterization in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" in ed Kirpal (1990).

David Price "Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" *Ariel* 25:2, April 1994

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Ed. Viney Kirpal *The New Indian Novel in English*, New Delhi : Allied Publishers, 1990.

UNIT 6 MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AS A LITERARY EVENT

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 *Midnight's Children* as a Postmodern Novel
- 6.3 *Midnight's Children* as a Postcolonial Novel
- 6.4 *Midnight's Children* as Historical Fiction
- 6.5 The Novel of the 1980s
- 6.6 Children of *Midnight's Children*
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Glossary
- 6.9 Questions
- 6.10 Suggested Reading

6.0 OBJECTIVES

My objectives in this Unit are to help you assess the contribution of Rushdie's novel to the body of English fiction. Does it signal a new moment in the history of fiction in English? In what ways has it altered our understanding of writing fiction? Do Rushdie's experiments set the trend for a new genre in fiction? What impact did it have on the novels that followed in its wake? What does the novel's enthusiastic reception bode for Indians writing in English?

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981 was hailed as a major literary event for reasons other than its winning the Booker for that year. You are aware that the earlier generation of novelists like Rao, Narayan, Anand, Desai or Sehgal had done their bit to put Indian fiction in English on the world map. But *Midnight's Children* blazed a different sort of trail. For the first time, a novel by a writer of Indian origin was seen as best reflecting the spirit of the contemporary West. The astounding reception of the novel in the West was both a sign and anticipation of the new prestige of the margin at the center. Though the space for a novel like *Midnight's Children* was created by a West willing to forfeit its claims to mastery, the novel played a crucial role in making voices from the margin heard. The novel and the writer have subsequently become the nodes for contemporary debates on multiculturalism, postmodernism, migrancy and hybridity raging in the Western world today.

Midnight's Children broke new grounds in many ways. A truly border-crossing work, its challenge to fiction, literature, history and reality called for new classifications. Its blend of fact and fiction, myth and history, storytelling and novelistic conventions defied all rules for writing fiction and to find a new genre. Linda Hutcheon has coined the term historiographic metafiction to classify Rushdie's peculiar concoction of history and metafiction. What is historiographic metafiction? As the name suggests, it is a kind of fiction that has elements of both history and metafiction. The novel is generically differentiated from history through its dealing with events that are probable but not true. Historiographic metafiction violates this distinction by straying into traditional historical territory. If fiction can be history can

Scepticism:	doubt
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history be fiction? While fiction is distinguished from historical facts, the probability premise of fiction steers fiction in the direction of verisimilitude. Can fiction be life? How is fictional truth different from truth? How about metafiction? Metafiction is defined as the kind of fiction that is concerned with the process of its own making. Metafiction, unlike other fiction, that labours to establish the veracity of its referents, unmasks the "machinery" of fiction to show its referents to be made up. In this manner, metafiction challenges the notion of mimetic realism that was often projected as the only mode of writing fiction. Metafiction shows that mimetic realism is only one mode of creating fiction. As fictional referents can never be real, it least matters which conventions it employs.

Rushdie's name figures prominently in Hutcheon's list of practitioners of historiographic metafiction that she sees as exemplifying the condition of postmodernism. This poses a problem because Rushdie is also seen as the paradigmatic figure of post-colonialism. Postcolonial critics claim that the strong political nature of Rushdie's writing underlines his participation in the oppositional counterdiscourse of post-colonialism. Rushdie professes to carry on the *Panchatantra* and *Arabian Nights* legacy in his writings that would make him something of an oriental storyteller. But he seems equally happy basking in postmodern glory. This fencesitting attitude has made Aijaz Ahmed see him as being complicit with both postmodernism and postcolonialism. To complicate things further postmodernism and post-colonialism overlap in so many ways that it is difficult to decide whose allegiances lie where. What do you think?

6.2 MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AS A POSTMODERN NOVEL

As Rushdie's novel shows a concern with the process of how it came to be written, we can perhaps classify his novel as metafiction. Like all metafiction, the telling of the story becomes a theme in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's narrator begins by sharing with his reader the problem of beginning the novel, introduces the theme of the kind of stories considered appropriate for storytelling and the role of the narrator. Have you read any novels similar to this?

When you read a novel you are so carried away by the story that you think it really occurred. You scarcely pay attention to how it was created. What effect does Rushdie's calling your attention to the behind the scenes activity of his novel have on you? Does it spoil your fun? Rushdie not only destroys the illusion of reality that you normally expect of fiction or film but also kills the suspense by spilling the beans much ahead. What do you make of this? Like Padma, you would like to know what happened next. Similarly, when Saleem keeps referring to events that happen much later, your curiosity is sufficiently aroused to make you request him to go on. At the same time, as you already know the ending, all that leads up to it seems merely an explanation. You feel cheated out of the story. Gradually, you begin to realize that your interest in the story takes a back seat to the story making and its telling. The narrator lets you in one by one into the tricks used by storytellers to tell stories. He tells you about beginnings, middles and endings proper to a novel. He tells you about Sheherezade's eternally delayed endings. He lets you in the art of building up to a climax. You also learn about the chain through which events are linked to one another.

Having exposed the machinery, does Rushdie stick to the rules he has outlined for you? Yes. In fact, he does so in such an exaggerated fashion that you begin to wonder what's up. He appears to follow each of the novel's conventions to the letter, which gives you the feeling that he is being tongue in cheek. Remember how he reduced the notion of fiction beginning with the birth of the hero to absurdity.

Remember the middles and endings that preceded the beginning? Remember the absurd explanation for events? Why does Rushdie do this?

Rushdie does this to mock at the conventions of nineteenth century realism. In turn, he makes us examine the question of fictional realism. The debate about whether art can depict life accurately has been going on since the beginning, though the status of mimetic realism keeps changing. Mimetic realism rests on a belief in the ability of art to imitate reality accurately. Now this had become a value to be cherished, above all in 19th century fiction. Rushdie takes up this aspect for close examination. Let us go back to the definition of the novel to understand the point better.

The novel is defined as a narrative of certain length that depicts events that could probably have occurred. Realist fiction takes this aspect very seriously. Very often, you have admired a piece of fiction because it seemed so lifelike. It is exactly like it might have happened in your own life. Compare this with Rushdie's story. Saleem warns you that he is going to tell a tale that is "a strange commingling of the real and the improbable", which turns the real unreal dichotomy topsy turvy to question the probability criterion of fiction. Rushdie talks of events that are unlikely to have occurred in a Western reader's life. Unlike 19th century realism, which goes to great lengths to convince us that the events depicted there really happened, this novel highlights the bizarre and the uncanny. Magic and the supernatural are quite common in Romance but seem like an unlikely setting for fiction. But 19th century fiction that developed as a reaction to romance worked hard at producing verisimilitude. For some reason this quality of 19th century fiction that goes by the name of mimetic realism came to be the standard by which other novels were judged. The undue emphasis on realism overlooked the fact that art can never be lifelike. The conventions of 19th century, therefore, are another set of conventions that might be substituted by any other. Metafiction bares the tricks used by writers to show that novels are all made up. It shows that fiction forms its own autotelic universe that does not correspond to anything in the real world. Unlike the writer of realist fiction, metafiction does not pretend to create an illusion of truth.

This exposure of the made up nature of fiction has unraveled other truths that were unshakeable. Take the truth of history. History is presented as an objective document of observed facts. One is not made aware of the biases that the selection and interpretation of facts is highly subjective and that facts may be distorted to serve the interests of certain people. Which means that the truth of history that we have held sacrosanct is also a made up thing. It was easier for you to accept that fiction is made up. But to think that history, too, could be made up?

Rushdie and other practitioners of historiographic metafiction parody how writers make up their stories to show how history could also be a made up story. Their crossing into the territory of history in their fictional works is intended to close the division between the two. *Midnight's Children's* strange juxtaposition of history and fiction where historical facts coincide with the life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai creates a unique combination. We shall return to *Midnight's Children* as historical fiction in another section in detail. For the moment, let us look at how the novel fits into the mode of historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon celebrates as the true postmodern genre. Rushdie plays with historical incidents and conventions to show them to be as "unreal", as fictive as things that fiction refers to.

Now let us move on to the postmodern crisis of reality. Having found out that both fiction and history are different kinds of stories, it is not difficult to grasp that reality also could be a made up thing. This idea of reality as being made up by the observer is called the "constructivist" view of the universe. The problem of postmodern fiction is not merely to challenge the view that art can accurately depict reality. Or that while selecting facts, the historian chooses to tell the stories that appeal to him or promote his interests. One is talking about a different understanding of reality that throws what we take to be the real world into doubt. Postmodern fiction, by calling

attention to the made up nature of fiction and history, shows us that reality itself is of our own making. We too arrange our lives and construct our own reality in the way Saleem constructs the novel by selecting and arranging events that make him the hero. Rushdie keeps harping on the fact that the India he portrays is Saleem/Rushdie's vision of India and might be an India of the imagination but none the less true. He also shows that he is not interested in writing a history of post independence India. Rather he is keen to understand how humans "filter" reality. We all remember things that we choose to remember. Memory works by playing up all that is pleasant and pushing unpleasant happenings into the background.

Now we must recognize that postmodernism is not a global but uniquely Western phenomenon. It is either a reaction or a development of Western modernity. As a critique of modernism, postmodern concerns often spill over to post-colonial anxieties that make them appear similar. But postmodernism is a deep reaction against Western modernism, and the crisis of reality experienced by the West today. Crisis in the nature of reality has also brought down the stock of realism in literature. When reality itself is shown to be a made up thing, what can fiction possibly imitate? Postmodern Western fiction reflects and is shaped by the postmodernist crisis in the West. Postmodern fiction no longer has a story to tell. Instead, it unmasks the process of its making constantly calling attention to its made up status.

This contrasts with 19th century fiction's obsession with verisimilitude that made a religion out of mimetic realism. On first sight, it appears that Rushdie is working in the metafiction tradition. But then one thinks of several Indian collections of stories in which the writing of the stories is a theme. The occasion and the travails of telling and making the story have always formed the central story in most Indian narrative collections. True, in *Midnight's Children*, the theme of the problem of writing a novel runs through the length of the novel. And Rushdie parodies 19th century fictional expectations to expose them to be mere conventions.

But Rushdie's narrative does not stop at showing fiction as forming its own reality that need not have a one to one correspondence with what we take to be reality. As in other metafiction, the emphasis on the artifice in storytelling opens our eyes to the fact that fiction can never be life as realist conventions might lull us into believing. Art has its own truth and its own reality. The uncertainty about what we take to be real has certainly changed our ideas about fictional realism. The understanding that fiction is "an infinite play of signs" that do not stand for anything outside is strengthened by the role that language is increasingly given in shaping reality. One is happy to note that unlike other postmodern novels, Rushdie's novel is not an empty play of signs. Rather it is rooted in a very real history and is grounded in the particular problems and dilemmas of a particular society.

6.3 MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AS A POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

For a writer who has one foot in the postmodern and the other in the postcolonial world, it is difficult to separate the different strands. More so, because postmodern and postcolonial agendas collide in different respects. In what ways is post-colonialism similar to or different from postmodernism?

Postcolonialism, like postmodernism, is a critique of modernism. But unlike postmodernism, it attacks modernism from a post-colonial angle. While postmodernism is a reaction against modernism, post-colonialism is an attempt to show the irrelevance of the western division of pre-modern, modern and postmodern to non-Western societies. In every field, postmodernism attempts to reverse, extend or project the movement of modernism. This could be seen in the postmodern return to history, in its ethic of indeterminacy, or in the rediscovery of intuition and

imagination in preference to modernity's technorationalism. But the most important aspect of postmodernism is the collapse of universalizing claims of modernism. This opens a space view other than the western. This postmodern space has been liberating for postcolonialism for the simple reason that postcolonialism has been particularly concerned with revealing that what the West passes off as universal. Thus post modern dictums are actually its own models. For example, to be modern was to move in the direction of the West. This has been rejected by postcolonialism, which shows that different people can become modern in different ways. Postmodern fiction is a natural extension of modern Western fiction just as postmodernism is a growth out of modernism. Both reflect and are shaped by the trends of their times. Just as it is believed that non-Western societies should trace the Western route towards modernity, non Western fiction is expected to follow the movements in Western fiction.

While postcolonial fiction is bound to have some Western influences, it has grown in response to very different socio-political currents. Helen Tiffin made a very important distinction between postmodernism and post-colonialism when she pointed out that unlike postmodernist fiction, post-colonial works have a strong political content. Postcolonial fiction is deeply embedded in the history and politics of its society. Though the postmodern and the postcolonial might have a lot in common, the postcolonial works in an oppositional manner. The Postcolonial can be seen as a "counterdiscourse" to postmodernism.

In postcolonial fiction, the opposition to Western norms comes through rejecting the norms of writing fiction as specific to the West of a certain period. Rushdie subverts 19th century realist conventions even as he challenges mimetic realism to root them in the Western tradition. You may recall that Rushdie juxtaposes the conventions of 19th century realism with the formulae of oriental storytelling. Each fictional convention is placed against a fairytale formula to show storytelling to be governed by very different standards from fiction. For instance, stories have a way of beginning afresh after every ending; they "leak" into other stories before they are completed; the links between them might be very tenuous. These formulae stand out when incorporated in fiction and have the effect of introducing the fiction reader to the norms of storytelling. At the same time, this strategy also heightens his awareness of fictional convention. Rushdie places fairytale conventions against those of fiction to show that while in the case of the fairytale we are aware of them being conventions we don't realize that fiction is also artificial. While the artificiality of the one has become apparent due to the fact that we are far removed from it, that of the other seems natural to us.

In addition to this, Rushdie confronts Western fiction with eastern storytelling to show that Western literary structures are not universal. He apprises the Western reader of other narrative modes that might differ from those of the West. The difference in the style of Western and non-Western narratives, according to Rushdie, might be due to their emerging from particular knowledge systems. Look at the linear movement of the novel and the cyclic pattern of eastern narratives. They parallel the Western linear and Indian cyclic time respectively. Similarly, while fiction belongs to the scriptural tradition, that is, writing, storytelling is part of the spoken tradition or orature. The convention of a narrator telling his story to an interlocutor that Saleem borrows from Indian epics tales also arises from the specific needs of speech.

Rushdie, therefore, contrasts one set of conventions with another set of conventions to show them both to be artificial. Rushdie does not merely confront Western literature with Indian storytelling. He contrasts one set of conventions with another to reveal 19th century realism to be another convention. Saleem claims to be following in the steps of Indian epic creators like Valmiki. Is Rushdie writing a modern day *Ramayana*? You may note that Rushdie adopts an equally parodic stance towards his Indian materials. He is too strongly grounded in the literate tradition to return unselfconsciously to pure storytelling. Rushdie cannot be an ancient storyteller. His novels filter the pre-modern through the postmodern. At the same

time, Rushdie's inability to participate fully in the storytelling tradition does not imply disrespect towards them. Rushdie's in-between status, as that of a postcoloniality is reflected in his attempt to challenge eurocentric traditions with indigenous traditions while being aware that they are lost to him.

This brings us to another problem postcolonialism is plagued with. Does post-colonial opposition draw on a pure tradition to confront postmodernism or should it be an opposition from within? Rushdie reiterates Western fiction's conventions in an ironic fashion to show their inappropriateness to the reality he wishes to depict. But he also seems to suggest through his irreverent treatment of his traditional materials, that the solution is not in a return to an autochthonous essence. Rushdie seems to follow the strategy that Stephen Slemon noted in postcolonial resistance. He repeats the givens of Western discourse to work them outwards. Saleem's exaggerated attention to the rules of creating fiction achieves this purpose. While he builds in the Indian storytelling parallel, he does not propose them as an indigenous alternative. For a return to a pre-colonial essence is an impossibility for many like Rushdie. The compromise lies in turning both the pre-colonial and the Western inside out.

Take the much celebrated play with reality that goes under the name of magic realism. Magic realism is the most exciting thing that has happened to Western literature since the days of the Romance. But that is because of the West looking at realism as the only relationship between life and literature. Like someone said, if this were so, we would have to leave out three fourths of world's literature. *Midnight's Children* draws on one such literature - of Indian epics, tales and legends, which don't take the realist premise of Western fiction as axiomatic. Unlike realist fiction, these narratives consistently transgress into the unreal. Most of these have magical settings and characters with magical powers.

Midnight's Children also shuttles between the real and the unreal. Strange and bizarre things happen and characters engage in improbable actions. Why does Rushdie juxtapose the stories with unreal settings and the real world of novels? For two reasons. First, he wishes to show that as fiction is always made up, it does not matter whether you abandon all pretense at realism as in fairytales or labour at accuracy. Novels can't do more than tell stories. Secondly, he wants to challenge the notion of reality itself. Here we are treading a more dangerous territory. For societies differ in what they believe to be real. There is a world of difference between *secularized* societies view of the real and *non-secularized* societies view of the unreal. The difference between the two is captured in the way of thinking of Padma and that of Saleem. "Real" and "true" are different, according to Saleem. Common Indian folk like Padma and Mary are embedded in the "miracle laden" universe of India. Saleem and his maker Salman merely dream of it but cannot see it in their "Anglopoised pool of light."

While an English speaking reader might find it difficult to accept the miraculous happenings in the novel, Rushdie shows you that these appear as perfectly natural to Padma or Mary. As with other differences, Rushdie contrast Western and non-Western perspectives on reality to expand the outlines of what the West takes to be the real. While Rushdie, like his anglicized narrator Saleem, might hesitate in the presence of the supernatural, he admits persons who greet the supernatural with total belief. What do you make of this? Like everything else, Rushdie challenges the universalism of West's understanding of the unreal by giving us a glimpse into belief systems that have a different relationship with the unreal.

6.4 *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AS A HISTORICAL NOVEL

Now let us return to the novel's relationship with history. As we discussed earlier, history deals with facts while novels deal with fiction. But historical fiction is a

genre that uses historical events and figures as a backdrop for a fictionalized story. Can we classify *Midnight's Children* as historical fiction popularized by its practitioners like Sir Walter Scott? Rushdie does not merely employ a historical setting; he turns to history as a theme. Rushdie takes up the history of postindependence India ending in the Emergency as his main theme. The history of India runs parallel to the life of the narrator Saleem resulting in a unique coupling of the private with the public. Readers of *Midnight's Children* have pointed out discrepancies and anachronisms in Rushdie's account. Rushdie, on his part, claims that he never intended to write the definitive history of India. When apprised of the "errors" in his rendering of history, he sought refuge in the device of the unreliable narrator. Why does Rushdie introduce errors intentionally? Is it merely to show that fiction cannot be confined to history? This is partly so. Rushdie is more concerned with the process of history making than showing the difference between fiction and history.

The "reclaiming" of history in postcolonial fiction has a specific political agenda. The post-colonial writer's concern with the restoration of his people's history grows from the imperialist projection of postcolonial people a people without history.

The myth of the lack of "historical consciousness" among "natives" was based on two presuppositions 1) the natives had no written records 2) they had no way of systematically studying the past. Now writers like Rushdie are trying to disprove the lie. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie juxtaposes the "remembered" truth against recorded truth and establishes the validity of the former. Oral history proceeds by the logic of memory, which works by selecting, distorting, adding. This would seem a very imprecise manner of recording events compared to scientific history. But Rushdie tries to show that even the so-called objective history involves a selection and representation of events in a manner that distorts and alters them. This is not made obvious as history is written. Rushdie takes us through the process of history making.

As we follow Saleem fitting historical events to suit his thesis, we realize how objective histories too impose a pattern on related facts. You might have noted the "errors" in *Midnight's Children*. You might have noticed how Saleem provides a certain motivation to events to write himself into a central role. A similar process occurs during the process of interpretation of events in recorded histories. By showing how histories are made up, Rushdie closes the gap between Western and *Puranic* histories. He tries to show that the perceived absence of history in nations like India is due to the difference in the historiography that lingers on the status of facts. *Puranaitihasa* accords value not only to what happened but what is believed to have occurred. Rushdie holds up the truth of the imagination when he argues for his version of India based on memory or has Saleem make a case for the truth of memory.

While the role of memory and imagination in oral histories is known, we are not aware of the "imagined" nature of historical communities. Rushdie takes us back to the moment when the Indian nation was imagined. His use of the words "myth" and "dream" underlines the imagined nature of the national community. The fact that the nation is imagined into being, does not make it any less real for those who live in it. Rushdie uses this comparison to show that mythic history and scientific history are not different as they are made out to be. Both are, to a certain extent, made up. But while one enjoys the status of truth, the other is dismissed as a fantasy. This is so because one conceals its made up status while the other does not. Rushdie himself adopts *puranic* historiography to call his reader's attention to other historiographical methods that were not deemed worthy of serious study. Writers like Rushdie use these methods to restore the history of India. You might have noticed that Saleem prefers to attribute a divine motivation- the method of *Puranic* histories - to the causality of scientific history. And places *Puranic* truth along with historical calendar time to show that there are two alternative methods of preserving memory.

6.5 THE NOVEL OF THE 80'S

Viney Kirpal, in *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, notes that the Indian English novel since the 1980s is different from its precursors both in technique and sensibility. Do you agree with her?

The most traumatic event in post independence India was the imposition of Emergency in 1975, which left an indelible mark on the novels after this event. Apart from *Midnight's Children*, *The Great Indian Novel* and *Such a Long Journey* also place the Emergency as a climatic event in their plot.

Kirpal links the historical obsession of the 1980s novel to this political event. Vrinda Nabar in *Three Indian English Novels* of the 1980s traces it to a global rediscovery of history, which began in the 1960s. The debate on the status and methods of history, the universalistic claims of Western history has culminated in the revisionist project of the Subaltern Studies group in India. This project deconstructs Western historiography from a postcolonial perspective and suggests alternate perspectives. The fiction of the 1980s reflects the novelists' engagement with similar concerns. As Kirpal puts it, "official versions of history, patriarchal versions of womanhood, institutionalized versions of the subaltern are the discourses that are being contested and undermined by the post 1980s Indian English novelists".

In terms of technique, the 1980s novel demonstrates the destabilization associated with postmodernism. Kirpal believes that "writing of tradition and destabilizing it, turning it on its head and installing an alternative has given a new freedom to the Indian novelist's technique and style". Many of the features typical of 1980s' fiction are epitomized by *Midnight's Children*. The novel has become so strongly reflective of the temper of the times that it is difficult to disentangle the two. Kirpal warns that the superficial resemblances between this fiction with postmodern fiction should not lead us to equate the two. This is very important because the novel of the 1980's is still rooted in the Indian material reality. Rushdie himself made this distinction when he asserted that "books are about the world". Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, is a linguistic construct with a precarious relationship with the world outside.

6.6 THE CHILDREN OF MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Whether one believes that Rushdie "labeled a generation and liberated a literature" with Shashi Tharoor or dismisses the novel as "one great, big confused bluff", Rushdie's influence on the novels that followed cannot be wished away. Not only has the novel been used to benchmark others, younger writers appear to find it difficult to step out of the Rushdiesque mode. It is difficult to think of novels that do not carry the unmistakable Rushdie stamp. From *The Great Indian Novel* to *The God of Small Things*, the *Midnight's Children* factor is never absent. One notices the same irreverent play with words and conventions, the retreat into the bizarre and the uncanny, the epic sweep, the historical ambitions, the blend of private and public that Rushdie began. Many of these novelists are too talented to blindly ape their distinguished compatriot. But few have been able to resist the Rushdie magic and attempt, at times unsuccessfully to replicate it. Do you think that the similarities in the 1980s' fiction spring from the temper of an era or do you attribute them to the overpowering presence of Salman Rushdie? One could conclude that Rushdie invented a new genre of fiction that has been carried forward with varying degrees of success by the younger Indian writers. But it could also prove to be limiting for those who want to break free of the Rushdie mould. Some talented writers have not

received their due because Indian writing in English is expected to be the exotic masala khichdi that Rushdie patented.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

You are now in a position to understand how *Midnight's Children* set up a new genre in fiction writing. Rushdie's novel has been appropriated by both postmodernism and post-colonialism because it articulates their intersecting concerns. Whether one likes the novel or not, one is forced to concede that *Midnight's Children* has been the most significant publishing event of the last decades of the 20th century. Do you think it deserved the Booker of Booker?

6.8 GLOSSARY

Appropriate:	to set aside for some purpose / suitable
Agendas:	subjects to be considered at a meeting
Apprises:	to inform
Axiomatic:	self-evident
Anachronisms:	person or thing that appears to be in the wrong period of time
Allegiances:	loyalty
Artifice:	clever skill
Bizarre:	strange, peculiar
Collide:	to meet and strike violently
Complicit:	to be a partner in a crime
Culminated:	reach the highest point
Constructivism:	the view that reality is always constructed artificially
Discrepancies:	difference
Disentangle:	to free from confusion
Exotic:	strange and unusual
Eurocentric:	European literary practices
Epitomized:	a person or thing who has the essence of a certain quality
Harping on:	to talk a lot about something
Historiographic Metafiction:	Fiction that blends history with metafiction
Intersecting:	a point where roads, lines, cross

Interlocutor:	The person who is talking to someone
Indeterminacy:	not fixed
Indigenous:	native
Indelible:	which cannot be rubbed out
Metafiction:	Fiction concerned with the process of its own making
Patent:	invention
Precarious:	unsaved
Postmodernism:	Historically the phase in Western civilization that follows modernism but has also been interpreted as a concept that emphasizes indeterminacy, play, hybridity, fragmentation and so on.
Postcolonialism:	Has been interpreted as the period following colonialism, as decolonization or a state of being pervaded in the world today shaped by the colonial encounter.
Revisionist:	derogatory reference to an existing Marxist political system
Referent:	that which is referred to
Stance:	a way of standing
Scriptural:	according to a holy writing
Subverts:	to try to destroy the power and influence
Sacrosanct:	sacred
Secularized:	secular
Technorationalism:	the elevation of rationality in a technocratic age
Tenuous:	very thin
Transgress:	to go beyond
Tongue in cheek:	saying or doing something one does not seriously mean
Travails:	pains of giving birth to a child
Unraveled:	to make clear
Verisimilitude:	a quality of seeming to be true
Wished away:	to want the absence of something

6.9 QUESTIONS

1. What is historiographic metafiction? Does *Midnight's Children* belong to this kind of fiction?
2. Do you consider *Midnight's Children* a postcolonial or a postmodern novel?
3. Do you think Rushdie has set the trend for a new genre of fiction? If so, how?
4. How has Rushdie's novel influenced the novel of the 80s and the 90s?

6.10 SUGGESTED READING

Mark Currie. *Metafiction* (Ed and introduction by), London: Longman, 1995.

Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* Ny: Methuen, 1984.

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