

# Teasing out History: Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* towards Mock Heroism

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## Abstract

*This paper claims that Rushdie develops his protagonist Saleem as an unreliable anti-hero. In doing so, the novel borrows tools and techniques of Mock Heroism. The Restoration and Augustan authors John Dryden and Alexander Pope are chiefly responsible for the mock-heroic genre. A mock-heroic book parodies the heroic style in literature in a sarcastic fashion, mimicking the actions or manner of a hero, often comically in non-heroic circumstances. Saleem claims to be the new India's voice, taking on significant political responsibility and "evoking" these heroic deeds. He is, however, powerless, and his magical ability to spy on people is dependent on a disproportionately large nose. His reliance on his cucumber nose to sense the true history is really hilarious. In this sense, Saleem is undoubtedly an absurd hero because his attempt to recapture what has been already lost is an absurdist attempt. Saleem is well aware that his historical account of India will be incomplete anyway. Despite this, he does not hesitate to boast that he is the truest of the historians and his version of India is much better.*

**Key Words:** anti-hero, teasing out, history, mock heroism

This paper claims that Rushdie develops his protagonist Saleem as an unreliable anti-hero. In so doing, the novel borrows tools and techniques of Mock Heroism. A mock-heroic book parodies the heroic style in literature in a sarcastic fashion, mimicking the actions or manner of a hero, often comically in non-heroic circumstances. Saleem claims to be the new India's voice, taking on significant political responsibility and "evoking" these heroic deeds. He is, however, powerless, and his magical ability to spy on people is dependent on a disproportionately large nose. His reliance on his cucumber nose to sense the true history is really ludicrous. In this sense, Saleem is without a doubt an absurd hero because his attempt to recapture what has been already lost is an absurdist attempt and Saleem is well aware of the fact that his historical account of India will be incomplete anyway. Despite this, he does not hesitate to boast that he is the truest of the historians and his version of India is much better.

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Within this nose is the ability to explore his country as well as the deepest thoughts of its citizens. As a result of his capacity to spy on individuals and “alter” history, Saleem has a bloated sense of significance. His extraordinary power stems from the fact that he was born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the day India gained independence. Every child born at this hour has a mystical ability that linked them to the fate of their country. Saleem holds the link between himself and the other children born at this hour in high regard. They are Saleem’s genuine family; following betrayal from his biological and national families, this secret magical group becomes a source of legitimacy for him.

Saleem’s authority is based on the grotesqueness of his body, despite the gift of a secret connection with an elite group of residents. An enormous runny nose keeps a funny element in the novel throughout each insight Saleem receives, diminishing the duration of its potency and returning to the concept that a mock-heroic text positions a hero “humorously in unheroic circumstances.” “If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque” (*Midnight’s Children* 121). Introducing himself, Saleem says: “I have been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country! I was left entirely without a say in the matter... And I couldn’t even wipe my own nose at the time” (1). He has a kind of delusion about himself and his delusion is at times so funny.

There are various features that Saleem will retain throughout the narrative that help identify him as an anti-hero on the first page. Saleem will shift responsibility away from himself and lay it on history, nation, time, and fate when it suits him. Saleem is showing his social status as— “remember the wild profusion of my inheritance,” which implies a grandeur, a richness that goes beyond monetary affluence. Saleem inherited not only the auspices of his phony family, having been born from a destitute household and then switched at birth to live with the Sinais.

For Saleem, the genuine family heirloom is the ability to wield power through his nose. Unfortunately, many around him do not appreciate his gift and instead ridicule Saleem about his large nose, failing to take him seriously as he would like. Saleem’s ludicrous predicament is tangled with his physical appearance and how others see him. He is a light-skinned caricature who bears no resemblance to his relatives. For those who don’t appreciate the abilities Saleem’s nose bestows, he’s more of a hindrance than a vital piece of national history.

The mock-heroic genre was popular during the rise of Britain as a superpower. To pay honor to these specific historical events, Rushdie combines his characters with the ludicrous and humorous tones of the conventional mock-heroic. Through art, Neil Kortenaar investigates these connections to the colonial age. In his article “Rushdie Give the Empire the Finger,” Kortenaar examines a painting in Saleem’s childhood home that resembles a work by Sir John Everett Millais titled *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. “The print has been hung in Baby Saleem’s bedroom by his parents so that he might identify with Raleigh” (16).

The Sinais require the picture’s call to produce history, a mission that is envisioned as “repeating and expanding the heroic tale of the past into the future” (Kortenaar 17). It is a specific mock-heroic strategy for Saleem to grow up identifying with Sir Walter Raleigh; Rushdie is “evoking the actions or manner of a hero” upon the young Saleem. Sir Walter Raleigh was exclusively responsible for the establishment of the second British colony on the American continent, which is no coincidence. Saleem’s affiliation with a significant colonial person puts him under special strain to play a function for his country in the same way that Raleigh did for England. Saleem’s aim throughout the narrative is to find significance in his own life in the context of India, rather than colonizing a continent. His physique is a metaphor for his country’s diversity, bearing the weight of the masses he has accumulated over the year.

Saleem is thus not only physically incapable of connections but also psychologically distant from his fellow citizens. Saleem’s voice as the new India is inextricably linked to a former colonial power through identifying with Raleigh. Saleem was raised with a lot of expectations, both from others and from himself. In attempting to live up to those expectations, he has discovered that he has become exactly what he had feared—ludicrous (M.C. 4). It is the conflict that Saleem feels between the political and personal domains that cause history to be undermined and memory to be exalted.

To name the great mock-heroic tradition, we often remember Alexander Pope. *The Rape of the Lock*, one of the great mock heroics in western literature, utilizes satire to expose society’s ridiculousness, using Belinda’s hair as its focal image. A solitary part of the body becomes the tool through which Pope develops satire and societal critique. Similarly, in *Midnight’s Children*, the use of the body in this way is crucial in the formation of a mock-heroic— Saleem’s nose, like Belinda’s hair, imitates a previous heroic character.

Belinda's hair was reminiscent of Helen of Troy from the Greek epic. Saleem's enormous nose, omniscient perspective, and intellectual abilities all connect him to Ganesha, the Hindu god with an elephant's head who is said to be the remover of all boundaries and destroyer of vanity and selfishness. It's also worth noting that Ganesha was formed by the gods -Shiva and Parvati, both of whom play crucial non-deity roles in *Midnight's Children*, assisting Saleem in his development into the man he will eventually become.

Rushdie writes, "The children of midnight had grown up quite unaware of their true siblings, their fellow chosen-ones ... And then, as a result of a jolt received in a bicycle accident, I, Saleem Sinai, became aware of them all" (223). Saleem's senses and perceptions are enhanced as his appearance is caricatured. When Saleem isn't utilizing his skill to spy on family members and high-ranking government officials, he's worried about the recurring political-personal friction.

This tension has a direct impact on his story, displaying his ability to move fluidly between history and storytelling, drawing lines from western poetry, Hindi mythology, and family legend. What's important to remember here is that while Salman Rushdie's character is instructed to operate in a multicultural manner in his story, it's an absurd and self-reflective endeavor. Saleem's greatest fear is his own ridiculousness, yet with each line he speaks, he seeks to summarize the history of nations and cultures divided by everything from geography to religion. Perhaps the best approach to creating an insane story is to do so this way. He writes, "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (4). Saleem recognizes the importance of his situation. He is one of the children of midnight, the one who is falling apart, and his hurry is a matter of life and death for him. Saleem is mortal, facing his death, despite his foretold existence and contribution to a kingdom that barely recognizes him. His thousand and one nights of storytelling are soon coming to an end, and, unlike Scheherazade, the more he talks, the more his body suffers. The story starts to emerge from the cracks and crevices that cover his body.

Saleem is joined by Padma, his caretaker and potential lover, who listens to his stories but typically mocks his pompous, long-winded narration. She is very important to Saleem since she has his trust. She hears his stories and so mirrors Rushdie's readers,

while also taking on a more active role as a modifier. Padma, as this modifier, questions Saleem's authenticity by interjecting herself into the story, much to his irritation. Through her criticism of Saleem's longwinded egocentric speeches, Padma is able to assist the reader to detect Saleem's inconsistent assertion of power.

When this power is discovered, it creates a new bond with the other children who share his birthday. He starts referring to the other kids as his real brothers and sisters. Saleem's biological family tree is a lot more complicated than the *Midnight's Children's* magical alliance. Saleem's fate turns from abysmal poverty to a life of affluence after a nurse Mary Pereria switches him at birth with a kid called Shiva. Saleem's biological father is said to be Wee Willie Winkie, although rumor has it that he is a British gentleman named Methwold with whom Saleem's biological mother had an affair.

As a result, Saleem's history and lineage include Hindu, Muslim, and Christian elements, tying him to practically every religious and ethnic group in India in the 1950s. Rushdie's appropriation of the colonial-era mock-heroic genre permits three specific topics in the work to be explored via the prism of the mock-heroic. Because readers are only given Saleem's point of view for the novel, the ideas he reveals will rely on his own voice and experiences for support. The question of history is the novel's initial and arguably most pervasive subject.

Saleem goes through life, penning down his tale, realizing that his story has been stolen from him, whether by a well-intentioned nurse who switched him at birth or the loss of his only link to the other children born at midnight on August 15, 1947. Within most societies, history can be considered an instrument of validation or degradation. Instead of relying on the legitimacy offered by biological origin, Saleem must rely on the time of his birth to bolster his validity. As a result, rather than depending on historical accounts, Saleem turns to his recollections, many of which occurred while he was not even alive. Rushdie explains this "memory" story, believing that many recollections, no matter how fabricated, may include significant events. "I 'remember' how frightened we all were, I 'recall' people making nervy little jokes [...] I also know that I could not possibly have been in India at that time. I was interested to find that even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance" (Errata 24).

A simple nosebleed is suddenly indicative of a spiritual awakening in the beginning sequence with Saleem's grandpa Aadam Aziz, driving Aadam and future generations into a history of questioning and re-creation. This part is crucial to comprehending Saleem's mental state. Aadam is a key character; he is the patriarch on whom Saleem models himself academically. Saleem is somehow able to recount his grandfather's sentiments and reactions to the wonderful occurrences that happen to him on the prayer mat in this thorough and personal tale recounted in an omniscient narrative style. However, not only did this story take place thirty-two years before Saleem's birth, but Aadam Aziz is not connected to him in any way. As a result, Saleem's retelling of history is linked to the idea of the mock heroic, as his historical narrative veers dangerously close to ridiculousness.

Second, and closely related to history, is a citizen's distinctive cultural responsibility to be involved in their country. In many countries, responsibility is limited to identifying oneself as British, Indian, or American. These simple examples of citizenship grow more complicated when border lines are drawn, as in India's case in 1947, necessitating people of various ethnic and religious groups to be referred to as "Palestinian" and "Indian," implying comparable histories and beliefs. These designations are useless in colonial situations, causing semantic tension.

Many commentators have used Saleem Sinai as a national allegory, interpreting his life and personal metaphors as alluding to India's struggle as a developing country. As far as we know, Saleem does not have a family. Instead, his affiliations are strewn over three ethnicities, many religions, and, most crucially, a mysterious bond with the people who live within India's boundaries. His perplexing existence permits us to delve deeper into the meaning of belonging. It's tempting to think of Saleem as the apex of a colossal cultural pyramid.

When, however, does Saleem cease to be a miniature nation or a model citizen and become only a bystander penning his commentary? Is it possible to incorporate Eastern community principles within the western nation-building framework that Saleem sees pushed on India? The cultural divide between the individual and the nation can be rather amusing at times. A priest's introduction of the blue Jesus to merge civilizations into a Christian-based theology satirizes Western attempts to evangelize other countries.

The narrative itself is the third theme. The body is frequently used by Salman Rushdie as a metaphor for the literature itself. As a result, Saleem's deteriorating physique is a tangible representation of what a history book can do to a person, a nation, or the author. Rushdie peppers the work with references to Western literature, demonstrating how India has reclaimed English as a language and a literary style after centuries of colonial rule. Much postcolonial criticism calls for historical documents to account for the many injustices perpetrated against colonized peoples. Rushdie juxtaposes this crucial postcolonial element with a character who commits a series of historical and cultural inaccuracies.

Saleem's story is inaccurate, but it thrives on the ambiguity that has accompanied him throughout his life. He dates events wrong, misnames political figures, and gets the Hindi gods mixed up. Saleem's thematic categorization of the swarming hordes that are constantly hanging within his thoughts makes him a valuable narrator, not his didactic accuracy. Rushdie develops a fluid and alive text that depicts India's postcolonial condition through the method of the unreliable narrator. For Saleem, it's important to remember that the story isn't driven by facts. The exact date of a car bomb or a riot isn't important. Rushdie is aiming to investigate both the thoughts behind such events as well as the effects they have on humans. This deviance from reality is also a significant element of the narrative's mock-heroic purpose. Rushdie is able to portray individual memories by using an unreliable narrator.

Based on life circumstances, each perspective at the same time will have a distinct interpretation. These three elements of history, nation, and narrative work in tandem to illuminate not only well-known postcolonial issues but also less well-known ones. They also help to clarify Saleem's role as an anti-hero operating within a mock-heroic framework. No subject can be addressed without being aware of the other two; they work in perfect unison, forming one example and explaining one or more of the themes. Saleem, as a character, engages in a deeply personal conversation with members of the postcolonial community on some of the most pressing issues. His feelings, reactions, and inconsistencies are thus crucial in understanding the ultimate questions raised by *Midnight's Children*.

"Above all, he fears absurdity," Saleem expresses his main concern (4). It's fascinating to note that there's no shortage of craziness going through his life when we look at

his parents. Saleem's life is singular, lonely, and, above all, ludicrous, whether it's a magnificent moment in which a patriarch comes to an understanding through a nosebleed or Saleem's sterility.

*Midnight's Children* opens with Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, returning from medical school in Germany. Saleem's fascination with his origins is already evident; the beginning of Saleem's story is not the day of his birth, but rather his ancestors. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam, whose name obviously means "first man", is the patriarch who first perceives India through "traveled eyes," a character that Saleem would like to link himself with.

According to Saleem, Aadam is said to have set out his prayer mat, gone to pray, and instead of attaining heavenly enlightenment, struck his nose on the ground, resulting in three drops of blood "transforming into rubies" (4). Adam Aziz cried with hardened ruby blood, only to have his tears turn into diamonds. As he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his eyelids, Saleem interjects, adding, "He resolved never again to kiss soil for any god or man." However, this decision left a gap in him, a void in a critical inner chamber, leaving him exposed to women and history. He stood up, rolled the prayer mat into a thick cheroot, and held it under his right arm as he viewed the valley through clear, diamond-free eyes, unaware of this at first, despite his newly completed medical training (4).

Why would Saleem try to make a connection with a man he had never met and who was plainly not present at the time? In his essay "Salman Rushdie's Magic Realism and the Return of Inescapable Romance": "Identity in Rushdie's novel is a matter of culture (breeding in the sense of upbringing rather than of race or blood), but culture appears every bit as ineluctable as a race ever was" (Kortenaar 766). Saleem is thus rewriting his own ancestry in order to portray himself as a legitimate and functioning family unit: he is identifying himself with a past hero in the hopes that his "heroic" achievements would be legitimized by this lineage.

Saleem and his enemy Shiva were exchanged at birth by nurse Mary Pereira, which appears ludicrous. Aadam Aziz is not related by blood. Saleem was born to a poor musician named Wee Willie Winkie and raised by well-to-do Indian parents, while Shiva, the rightful heir to wealth, is forced to live in poverty. With this information, Saleem must justify his 'gift' of sight, his ambivalence toward the country, and, quite frankly, his ego. Recounting this anecdote emphasizes the necessity to alter the way



identity is linked to one's past. Rushdie is plainly producing a ridiculous portrayal of parenthood and inheritance in the style of the mock heroic, *Rape of the Lock*.

The mock-heroic benefits Rushdie's image of history in that it is constantly undermining the fundamental value of ancestry within the culture and replacing it with a superficial, nearly insignificant view of blood ties. This perspective of the insignificant parentage is one that only the reader is aware of; Saleem reflects this ambivalence while he himself continuously struggles with his origin. There is therefore an absurd juxtaposition of significance; the readers understand that Saleem struggles intensely with his history and extends his struggle to a national level. All the while Saleem's sneaky and trite actions are continually undermining this concept. As an anti-hero, this fundamental struggle of origin is paramount in the political struggle between the individual and culture.

Saleem's tale, extending beyond his grandfather's experience is a crucial element in understanding where this reading of a mock heroic may come from. It is bound up in Saleem's extreme desire to justify himself. Small-minute events, therefore, become world-changing events for Saleem. His self-importance in the bigger picture of India's emergence is found throughout the novel, always overemphasizing his role. Saleem views himself as a savior of sorts: "believe it or not I was prophesied twice!" and "I became the chosen child of midnight" (126).

Saleem Sinai treats history as a malleable force that transcends western ideologies, exploring the never-ending perspective of the 'teeming masses. Instead of focusing on crucial events in India's development such as the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Rushdie chooses to focus only on the developing perspectives of Saleem's vision of India. This allows space for the inclusion of the individual within the narrative of history. However, as Saleem remembers his life in the light of his nation's history, instead of choosing cataclysmic events, his story is revealed through the direct correlation of his body. Saleem's nose allows him to connect to other children born at midnight; he becomes endowed with a magical gift that guides him to hear the voices of whomever he chooses. Loran Milne connects Saleem's gift with historical narratives in her paper "Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History. She writes in the paper Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History" that "Saleem . . . 'colonizes' historical events by collapsing the distance between history and . . . individual existence, reducing external phenomena to the status of peripheral occurrences that revolve around the centralizing consciousness of the protagonist" (Milne 31). Milne goes further, suggesting that as Saleem is a colonizer through his omniscient gift; his

pathetic attributes are also magnified. Saleem's incestuous feelings towards his sister are therefore revealed not through his genitals but instead through his nose.

Saleem's perspective is not the only one we are provided with within this novel. We are given his caregiver and eventual partner Padma who inserts her prickly insight into Saleem's narrative. Padma is invaluable in Saleem's reading of history; she is consistently scoffing at him, telling him to "get on with it" and criticizing his egotistical version of his tale. Padma's role not only attempts to guide Saleem accurately down his path, but it also inserts a level of comic absurdity into the lengthy narrative. "How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps - kept! - my feet on the ground? (170). We are reminded that regardless of what Padma tries, Saleem can never "hit her spittoon" (38). Revealed for what he truly is through Padma, Saleem is indeed the anti-hero very much like Stephen Daedalus: unreliable, preoccupied with his own struggles, and impotent yet invaluable for what he truly is. His perception of history is perhaps unreliable in relation to dates and accurately significant events; however, it is a celebration of the individual as a unit of history to choose this perspective. Lorna Milne also notes

Saleem makes explicit references to the difficulty of giving an exhaustive and totally accurate account of events, owning up occasionally to lies or omissions in his narrative . . . Given the authority, he derives from other sources, such as his sense of smell, this candor, and self-conscious lucidity paradoxically serve at first to make him seem a more, rather than a less, reliable narrator: his totalizing consciousness seems to embrace his flaws, and failings as well as his heroic, or self-aggrandizing, characteristics (Milne 10). Rushdie continuously reminds us of the important relationship between history and the individual's connection to nationality. This relationship carries significance through its exposure to Saleem's anti-hero status. As explored through the historicity of Saleem's life, the nation is directly connected to Saleem through his "homelessness". A multi-national character, Saleem is in limbo, caught up in his multiplicity and unable to resolve the inherent contradictions which his life has ultimately produced.

The role of the nation in the life of Saleem is therefore complex and multifaceted. As we have already seen with Saleem's view of history, the role of the individual is highly dependent on personal experience, and the interpretation of those experiences may possibly produce a wide array of responses. So, it is with one citizen and his or her relationship with the actual nation.

Saleem himself is aware of the multiplicity which exists within this concept of the nation of India. "My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit," he writes, stirring us to consider him as an allegory for his nation. Indeed, Saleem claims to be "chained to history" organizing the Midnight's Children Conference, uniting others born on the same night, previously unaware of each other's existence, but significant and powerful nonetheless. This group of children reveals Saleem's solution to his muddled parentage. Having been deprived of both biological mother and father, brothers and sisters, indeed even his grandfather Aadam Aziz of whom we have heard so much, Saleem turns to the children of midnight, finding five hundred and eighty-one other children who are seemingly joined through a mutual acquaintance: their nation. Saleem tells us that "the children of midnight had grown up quite unaware of their true siblings, their fellow chosen ones across the length and breadth of India's rough and badly-proportioned diamond" (225). The multitude of children with fantastically magical power was not only ushered into a new era of Indian history; they are India, the link between remembrance and foresight. With their powers which Saleem describes as including: "the lost arts of alchemy, . . . the gift of travel, . . . prophecy, . . .and . . . time travel"(224) these children reconnected the new nation of India to the magical, fantastic and deeply historical cultures of its inhabitants.

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

Both Rushdie and Reder have pinpointed a key element connecting the mock-heroic to *Midnight's Children*. The madman to whom Rushdie speaks acts in the narrative of another individual and accepts history without looking for the author. The conflict therefore between authorship and reader is directly related not only to the nation and the individual but also to this inherent absurdity surrounding Saleem as the anti-hero. The individualizing of history is a confirmation of the Postcolonial project; that is to establish and celebrate the conflict found in colonized areas. Where there is cultural conflict absurdity is not too far behind it.

While Saleem places emphasis on his origins and national significance, it is clear that on a biological level he is lacking a fundamental element that would connect and elevate him to the status of belonging. Reder is therefore correct in his idea of the nation-state as a subunit of history. There can be no national project without first establishing a common origin from which its citizens arise. Saleem is clearly absurd under these requirements. He is the amalgamation of several nations, the three great religions of his region, thus simultaneously representing all, yet none.

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