Cracks, Fragments and Disintegration in *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie

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CRACKS, FRAGMENTS AND DISINTEGRATION

IN MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN BY SALMAN RUSHDIE
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Introduction

The Republic of India is an extremely diverse country. It is the seventh largest country geographically and has the second largest population in the world. The economy is the fourth largest measured by purchasing power parity. The history of the country has been turbulent with four wars since 1947, when it gained sovereignty from the British Empire after an intense struggle for independence. The population, geographical terrain and climate system is among the most diverse in the world. India has twenty-three official languages and 1,652 dialects. Administratively India is divided into twenty-nine states, which are further divided into 602 districts and six union territories. Even though approximately 82 percent of the population is Hindu, India also has the world’s second largest population of Muslims, but every major religion is represented and the population consists of over one thousand ethnic groups.  

It is obvious that writing a novel about India and attempting to describe the history and the people of such diverse country is a complicated task. Salman Rushdie has in the book Midnight’s Children nevertheless done just that. The narrative is told in the first person by Saleem Sinai, who by his birth on the exact instance of India’s independence claims to have become handcuffed to history. Saleem has telepathical powers which he discovers after a bicycle accident. At first he uses his powers to look into other people’s minds and thoughts, but after a while he manages to tune in other children whom he can communicate with. As it happens, the 1001 children who were born the hour at midnight when India gained independence have been blessed with supernatural talents; one can fly, one can see the future, another can change sex. Saleem’s gift is telepathy and he can tune in the others who does not have telepathic powers and also broadcast, almost as a radio.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India, 060918
On the first page of the novel, the protagonist speaks about how he has to tell his story before his body disintegrates. The theme of disintegration reoccurs throughout the narrative. Saleem acquires many personal injuries. He is losing a big piece of hair, which is never to grow back, he loses a finger and has to have a blood transfusion, thus it is discovered that he is not the child of his parents. According to a letter he has received from the Prime Minister Nerhu, his destiny mirrors the destiny of India. When he grows older, he starts to crack up and in the end of the novel he also foretells his own annihilation into millions of fragments. I will in this essay discuss the theme of cracks, fragments and disintegration in the novel *Midnight’s Children*. 
1. Background

1.1 Presentation of the author

1.1.1 Biographical outline

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay, India on June 19, 1947, the year of independence from British rule. His mother’s name was Negin Rushdie and his father was a Muslim businessman, Anis Ahmed Rushdie. In 1954 he went to an English mission school in Bombay. In 1961, at the age of fourteen, he went to study at Rugby school in England. Three years later he started attending Kings College, Cambridge, where he read History and acted in the Footlights Revue. Rushdie has fair skin for an Indian man, which is, according to himself, significant in terms of how his identity is perceived by other people. In India there is still a great advantage in having light skin and this in combination with his British education and English with no accent, “marked him out as simultaneously ‘other’ but recognisably ‘the same’.”\(^2\) In 1968-1969 he continued to act in the Oval House, Kennington, in London. When Rushdie met Clarissa Luard in 1969, he gave up acting and started to work as an advertising copywriter. After a year he stopped working to write an unpublished novel, *The Book of The Pir*, after which he continued to work part-time again, something that allowed him to go on writing. In 1975 the novel *Grimus* was published and Rushdie started writing *Midnight’s Children* and the year after he married Clarissa Luard. In 1981 Rushdie left his job, prior to the publication of *Midnight’s Children*, a novel which rewarded him with several literary awards, among others, the Booker Prize, Britain’s most prestigious award for fiction, and twenty-five years later, the Booker of Bookers. The novel was, however, not uncontroversial and Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, brought libel charges that forced Rushdie to

revise the book and issue an apology. The novel *Shame* was published in 1983 and Rushdie began working on *The Satanic Verses*. Later Rushdie and the writer Bruce Chatwin travelled through Central Australia and two years later he visited Nicaragua as a guest of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. The travelodge *The Jaguar Smile; A Nicaraguan Journey* was published in 1987 and he also dedicated it to an Australian travel writer, Robyn Davidson, whom he had been involved with. The marriage to Clarissa Luard was dissolved. In 1988 Salman Rushdie married an American novelist Marianne Wiggins, and the same year *The Satanic Verses* was also published, a book which was banned in India and South Africa.

In 1989 *The Satanic Verses* was burnt publicly in England and on February 14, the religious leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, pronounced a fatwa on Rushdie, condemning him to death for blasphemy. Rushdie and his wife went into hiding, but after a while, he separated from Wiggins. In the end of September 1998, the Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami promised that Iran would restrain itself from threatening Salman Rushdie, but in the beginning of October the same year, the Iranian parliament proclaimed that the fatwa against him still stands.


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4 Cundy XVI
5 http://www.rotten.com/library/bio/authors/salmon-rushdie/, 060918
6 http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth87#bibliography, 20060414
1.1.2 His writing

Salman Rushdie is a post-modern writer, who when discussing his own works says that the imagination is the driving force to synthesis or transformation. It is the imagination that can liberate us from the simple facts of history, and for Rushdie there are no unqualified facts or an absolute fiction, since the two categories overlap and leak into each other. 7

Rushdie’s upbringing in a Muslim middleclass family is an important factor in understanding his later literary output. The Rushdie family spoke Urdu, a Muslim language, but Salman was encouraged at home to use English as the language of everyday discourse. He thus became fluent in two languages and this is the foundation of the resourcefulness and playfulness of the language in Rushdie’s novels. In his youth Rushdie lost his faith in the religion of Islam, something which has influenced his writing and life as a whole. Rushdie also uses Hindu mythology in his writing, due to the polyglot nature of Indian society, where Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and other religions mix. The fact that Salman Rushdie is bilingual and has been living in different countries has made him a person who fits in everywhere, but does not belong anywhere. He states that he has both lost and gained something in translation. There are two parts of the Hindu culture that have influenced Rushdie’s work; the Hindu mythical archetypes and the Indian Film industry which spread these myths through the ‘Bombay Talkie’. 8

Rushdie says himself “I spend much more time on the architecture of my books than on their writing. It takes me a very, very long time to understand the book… what connects with what and what the machine is. That’s why it takes me five or six years to write one of those big books.”9

8 Cundy 2-3
9 Grant 15
1.2 Brief Indian History 1915-1978

1.2.1 British India

In 1757 the British Army fought and won the Battle of Plassey, and the British East India Company was established, an event which is widely seen as the beginning of the British rule over India. During World War I, there was a great sense of loyalty and generosity from India towards the British and a will to provide both soldiers and resources. As a result, there was some tendency from the British Government to move towards a certain degree of self-government, but in 1919, the Rowlatt Act was passed, which provided the British “Viceroy's government with extraordinary powers to quell sedition by silencing the press, detaining political activists without trial, and arresting any individuals suspected of sedition or treason without a warrant.”¹⁰ This resulted in a national work stoppage to mark the widespread discontent. In Amritsar, Punjab, some 10,000 people had assembled to celebrate Baisakhi, a Sikh festival at Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919. The British soldiers fired 1,650 rounds into the crowd of unarmed and unsuspecting people, killing 379 and wounding 1,137 people.¹¹

1.2.2 The independence movement

The mainstream of the independence movement was led by the Indian National Congress. The agitation for non-violence and civil disobedience subsequently developed, with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, C. Rajagopalachari and Jawaharlal Nehru.¹²

Mahatma Gandhi was born in Gujarat and was an educated lawyer in the United Kingdom. In 1893 he went to South Africa to fight for Indian indentured servants, and did not

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_independence_movement, 060414
return to India until 1915. On his return Gandhi and his mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, travelled around India and learnt about the people, culture, difficulties and life in different parts of the country. The ideas and strategies of the civil disobedience appeared to be impractical to some Indians, but Gandhi meant that it had to be done non-violently by removing cooperation with the unfair state. In 1920, Gandhi led the reorganisation of the Congress and a new constitution was written, with the goal of independence. According to Gandhi it was important that the independence movement should not be aimed against the British people, but against the unfair system of the British administration:

British officers and leaders are human beings, emphasized Gandhi, and capable of the same mistakes of intolerance, racism and cruelty as the common Indian or any other human being. Punishment for these sins was God's task, and not the mission of the freedom movement. But the liberation of 350 million people from colonial and social tyranny definitely was.  

When Gandhi urged people to boycott the schools, the courts, British products, resign from government employment, and refuse to pay taxes, over ten million people protested and the disorder was enormous. Gandhi called off the campaign in 1922 after the murder of policemen by a mob. He was distressed by this and the possibility that the fight for national freedom might degenerate into a chaos where Englishmen would be killed by mobs and British forces would retaliate against civilians. Gandhi’s wish was not to punish the British but to reform them and liberate India.  

In December 1929, The Indian National Congress met in Lahore and under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru it adopted a resolution for complete independence. A civil disobedience movement was launched all over the country and it was decided that January 26 1930 would be considered as the complete independence day. During the years 1930-31 approximately 100,000 people were arrested in the disobedience movement. In September 1931 Gandhi agreed to end the movement and participate as the representative for the

Congress in a Round Table Conference with the British. The conference ended in failure in December 1931 and in January the disobedience movement was continued. It was not until the Government of India Act of 1935 was agreed upon, that the conflict between the Congress and the government could be solved. By then, a conflict between the Congress and the Muslim League had emerged, where the Muslim League questioned the Congress’ claim to represent the whole of India and the Congress questioned the Muslim League’s claim to represent all Muslims. The Muslim League adopted the Lahore Resolution in 1940, demanding a division of India into a Muslim and a Hindu state. In 1939, the Viceroy stated India’s entrance into World War II without seeking advice from provincial governments, which made the Congress ask all of its representatives to resign from the government.  

1.2.3 Quit India Movement

On August 8, 1942, Mahatma Gandhi issued the final movement for civil disobedience, in order to get the British to leave India. The day after, Gandhi was imprisoned as were all the representatives of the Congress. This resulted in protests and demonstrations, workers remained absent and strikes were called. The reply from the British was repressive as over 100,000 arrests were carried out, fines were imposed and bombs were dropped. Despite the fact that Gandhi’s health was deteriorating, he went on 21-day fasts and continued the resistance, and even after his release caused by his decreasing health in 1944, he still demanded complete release of the Congress. The Indian resistance and the threat that greater movements would be launched after the war, made the British open a dialogue with the Indian National Congress for an eventual independence of India. On August 15, 1947, independence was won and the division of British India into the two nations India and Pakistan was a fact.  

15 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_independence_movement, 060414  
16 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_independence_movement, 060414
1.2.4 Independence

After the partition of British India, violent clashes followed between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Kashmir soon became the source for a conflict which lead to the First Indo-Pakistani War, which lasted between 1947 and 1949 and gave India the control of two thirds of the region. India’s Home Minister, Sardar Patel had the responsibility of trying to stop the communal violence that occurred since 10 million refugees, Hindus and Sikhs, came to India from Pakistan. Patel was also responsible for incorporating the 565 princely states that were not yet a part of India, and through the Velvet glove and fist diplomacy he managed to get the agreement from 562 states. On January 26, 1950, the Republic of India was declared, the first president of India was elected, and India thus officially severed ties with Britain. Before this a huge tragedy occurred. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948, shocked the nation and millions of people followed his funeral caravan. As a result, Sardar Patel suffered his first heart attack within a month after Gandhi’s death and Patel died on December 25, 1950.17

In the elections of 1957 and 1962 Jawaharlal Nehru led the Congress Party to victory and the Parliament passed reforms that increased the legal rights of women, disempowered caste discrimination, founded thousands of schools and colleges and promoted a socialist model for the economy. In 1962 India went to war with China in the Sino-Indian War over the border in the Himalayas. India was defeated and China continues to occupy Aksai Chin in Kashmir. In 1965 India and Pakistan engaged in the Second Kashmir War without any alteration of the Kashmir boundary.18

On January 19, 1966, Indira Gandhi was elected Prime Minister of India. In 1967 the Congress Party won a reduced majority in the elections, caused by disappointment over rising prices, unemployment, economic stagnation and food crisis. Indira Gandhi decided to devalue

the Indian rupee, which created many problems for both Indian business and consumers. A number of Congress politicians, led by Morarji Desai, tried to limit Indira’s authority, but she saved her popular appeal by shifting towards socialist policies. In 1969, the Indian National Congress split, but Indira Gandhi continued to govern with a slim majority. In 1971 India got involved in a Pakistani civil war after millions of, mostly Hindu, refugees had fled into India. This resulted in the independence of East Pakistan, which turned into the country of Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{1.2.5 Emergency}

India’s economic and social problems, in addition to accusations of corruption, led to political turmoil reducing Indira’s popularity and in 1974 the High Court found her guilty of abusing government funds for election purposes. Indira’s resignation was demanded in nationwide strikes and protests, which led to a paralyzed economy and administration. In 1975 the President, advised by Gandhi, declared a state of emergency. Gandhi postponed elections and suspended many civil liberties, the explanation given being the threat to national security and the breakdown of law and order. Opposition political activists and leaders were imprisoned and public protests and strikes were outlawed. Although Indira proclaimed a programme for enhancing productivity, national and job growth, the disorder continued. Congress politicians were accused of corruption, police officers were accused of arresting and torturing innocent people and Indira’s son, Sanjay Gandhi, was accused of ordering the forced castration of men and sterilization of women to control population growth and for the destruction of slums in Delhi, killing thousands of people. In 1977 Indira called for elections and was defeated by the Janata Party, led by Mararji Desai, who became the first non-

\textsuperscript{19} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Republic_of_India#The_1950s_and_1960s, 060426
Congress Prime Minister of India. Indira and Sanjay Gandhi were arrested as a consequence of investigations of the Emergency era abuses.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Republic_of_India#The_1950s_and_1960s, 060426
2 Cracks, Fragments and Disintegration

2.1 Narrative style

The novel starts with a prologue where the protagonist, Saleem Sinai says:

I was born in the city of Bombay… once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it’s important to be more… On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. (9)

The first sentences show how the story is going to be told. The narrator discusses with himself and shifts between a fairytale way of telling, that is “once upon a time”, and a telling based on facts. He discusses with himself about how he is going to tell the story, just as he does in the middle section of the book, where he discusses different titles for a chapter, and in the last part, where he tries different endings.\textsuperscript{21}

The story is told in a form which resembles the old Indian way of oral story-telling, which is like a “badly-fitting collage,”\textsuperscript{22} and is often interrupted by Saleem making predictions and prophecies, as well as telling about dreams or memories and speaking to Padma, Saleem’s concrete listener. He sometimes describes his own physical disintegration and how he can see the cracks on himself and he is also afraid that nobody will believe him. The story goes back and forth in time, circling the events. Rushdie was, among others, influenced by the story of The Arabian Nights, where Scheherazade has to tell stories in order not to get executed. Saleem hints that he also has to tell the story well enough, in order not to

\textsuperscript{21} Margareta Petersson. \textit{Unending Metamorphoses}. (Lund: Studentlitteratur. 1996.) 92
\textsuperscript{22} Michael Gorra. \textit{After Empire}. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1997.) 117
fall to pieces. He is also afraid that the story will, as well as his own cracking body, “disintegrate into tiny, unreconstructable pieces. He is obliged by the internal compulsion of his own story to reach a certain point in history and the narrative, while his omniscience allows him to meddle with and distort both.”

The way the story is told, when Saleem picks up stories within the story and introduces new characters and new marvels, he “piles digression upon digression to keep from ever getting to the end”, he wants the reader to go on reading, to be eager to see what happens next. At times Saleem questions himself, “discrediting the belief that truth is one and absolute, and holding that it is instead multiple, overlapping, conflicting”, like when he writes:

> even my nose has been playing tricks on me… and the cracks spreading all over me, radiating like a spider’s web from my navel; and the heat…a little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances. Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can’t judge. I’ll have to leave it to others. (166)

According to Linda Hutcheon, the postmodernist writer alienates “the incidents portrayed… from the spectator… in order to make [him] adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism.” Saleem also writes about “the chutnification of history” and the “pickling of time” and:

> the pickle raises questions which are not fully answered, such as: Why did Saleem need an accident to acquire his powers? Most of the other children didn’t… Or again, in ‘All-India Radio’ and others, a discordant note in the orchestrated flavours: would Mary’s confession have come as a shock to a true telepath? Sometimes, in the pickles’ version of history, Saleem appears to have known too little; at other times, too much… (460)

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23 Cundy 29  
24 Gorra 129  
25 Gorra 121  
26 Gorra 122
Rushdie is trying to set up a tension in the text by creating a paradoxical conflict between the form and the content of the story. Saleem’s life makes him miserable, but the narrative is told in a way that echoes the Indian “talent for non-stop self regeneration.”27 That is the reason why it constantly creates new stories and the form hints at the countless possibilities of the country, which is the “optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy”28 Therefore, although the story ends with the destruction of Saleem, who is falling apart into six hundred million pieces, representing every inhabitant of India, and even if they are trampling him underfoot, the reader still remembers the capacity of self-regeneration which the narrator has been equipped with, as a declaration of the ability of the imagination “to reshape from within the lives on which brute force is imposed from without.”29

The novel has been considered to have many different themes; it has been viewed as a psychological novel, a historical novel, a political novel and also as having impotence as the main theme. What determines how the novel is interpreted is how it is read. One reason for the number of ways of reading the novel is that it is allegorical and therefore has different levels of interpretation. Petersson writes:

The allegory is most evident in the description of the main character. Saleem is a changeling, which underlines his and India’s multicultural heritage. Religions, races, and social classes are mingled in his identity. He says himself that he has the ability to give birth to new parents. His biological father is the Englishman Methwold. The British heritage is therefore central. It is in his genes and therefore a part of India for ever. --- The bitter Aunt Alia sews her bile into the seams of the clothes. Saleem grows up in shorts which have been starched with the starch of jealousy. The boatman Tai so intensely wants to preserve the old world that he stops washing himself. Saleem thus translates emotions into outer earthly or bodily reactions and lets external events have internal consequences. When the father’s assets in Bombay are icebound the father is also affected in a purely concrete way by freezing and becomes impotent.30

28 Rushdie 16
29 Gorra 130
30 Petersson 102
An important structural principle in the novel is that the development of India and the development of Saleem seem to be connected. Some events occur at the same time in India and to Saleem and his family. The birth of the child and the nation at the exact same instance is one example. Both Saleem and India have also “left the child stage”\textsuperscript{31} at the same time. Saleem’s grandfather is a witness to the massacre in Amritsar and Saleem himself gets caught in the language demonstration and also helps to plan a state coup in Pakistan. Other events are interpreted so that it seems to affect the country as well. This makes concrete episodes take metaphorical meaning, as when Saleem grows rapidly as a child at the same time as one princely state after another joins the nation India.\textsuperscript{32}

As a narrator, Saleem is not very reliable. He deceives both Padma and the reader several times during the narrative. It turns out that the person who was celebrated by newspapers and politicians was not Saleem, his father is not really his father and when Saleem relates that he is going to visit Padma’s bed, that erotic implication is also false. Saleem says about Aadam Aziz’s nose; “I wish to place on record my gratitude to this mighty organ – if not for it, who would ever have believed me to be truly my mother’s son, my grandfather’s grandson? – this colossal apparatus which was to be my birthright, too.”\textsuperscript{(13)} However, Aadam Aziz is not Saleem’s grandfather. Rushdie stresses Saleem’s unreliability in the story. Saleem makes a number of mistakes and errors when telling his story and he also comments on them in order to make the reader take notice of them, and he also focuses on other errors in a way that the reader becomes suspicious. Once he even admits to having lied about Shiva’s death. Saleem’s mind contains wrong pictures and he is careless with facts. For instance he stresses that he is a Muslim who has a great knowledge of the Hindu tradition. According to Saleem, Ganesha took down the Ramayana from the poet Valmiki. But the truth

\textsuperscript{31} Petersson 105
\textsuperscript{32} Petersson 105
is that it was Vyasa who dictated the Mahabharata to Ganesha. Rushdie states that his aim with the novel changed as he wrote it. In the beginning he tried to reshape the lost times, the India of his youth, but he found that time and migration had “placed a double filter” between him and the subject. As he continued writing the novel, he found that what was really interesting was “the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool.” For instance, when escaping from the Sundarbans, Saleem claims that they were carried out by a giant tidal wave, but right after that, he writes that according to the weather forecasts, there was no tidal wave in that part of the country that year. Despite this, Saleem continues to claim to having been born out of the jungle on that fictional wave. His truth is too important to him to be changed by a simple weather report. “It is memory’s truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else’s version to his own.” According to Margareta Petersson, the theme of cracks and disintegration gives Saleem a cause to tell about the mistakes and the unreliability of the text since he always has to hurry on with the story in order to be in advance of the disintegration of his body. Petersson also writes that the narrator’s unreliability can serve the purpose of creating the feeling that everything must be questioned and that postcolonial novels “more often question conventions for histography than the possibility of writing history.” If this perspective is valid, then Saleem would be both reliable and unreliable, just as facts about history are hard to establish. The unreliable narration can be a parallel for how we all try to read and interpret the world every day.

33 Rushdie 22
34 Rushdie 24
35 Rushdie 24
36 Rushdie 25
37 Petersson 109
2.2 Saleem’s Physical Disintegration

Saleem is writing the story as a defence against the cracks and disintegration of his body. His aim with the story is to create meaning in his life by telling his story. At the time he is thirty-one years old and working in a pickle factory, where he is preserving his history in pickle jars. Saleem desires what he calls meaning and by writing himself, he tries to acquire the significance that his adult life has taken away from him. According to Michael Gorra, Saleem “sees himself as suffering from a peculiarly “Indian disease…[an] urge to encapsulate the whole of reality”. The disease consists of the impossibility of making a coherent narrative of such a dissimilar material as the autobiography and the history of the partitioned and fragmented nation.

Saleem is losing his hair, one joint of his finger, he loses his sinuses and is castrated, and as a result he disintegrates into 630 million fragments, which is the same number as the number of inhabitants of India when the novel ends in 1978. Saleem repeatedly says that to understand him you have to swallow a world and he tries to understand his own fragmented identity. Since Saleem is a result of many different nations, languages, religions and political parties, his sense of self is thus often conflicted and contradictory. Saleem’s body is linked to the body of the state, and the cracks in Saleem’s body are also linked politically (he also repeatedly says that he is handcuffed to history) and his destiny is chained to that of India’s. According to the letter he receives as a child from the Prime Minister, he is “’the newest bearer of that ancient face of India’”, whom they will watch “’with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.’”(122) Michael Gorra says that when Saleem is worrying about his disintegrating body, he is really talking about the disintegrating nation:

when Saleem starts to despair over the possible incoherence of his story, he insists that his own body has begun to fall apart, that it’s become riven with cracks and fissures that no one but he can perceive; and his personal disintegration becomes a

38 Gorra 113
39 http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/midnightschildren/, 20060712
metonymy for that of the national collage as a whole, a country that looks whole on the map but that has, in the years since the novel’s publication in particular, become increasingly divided from itself.40

In school, Saleem has been tortured during geography class, with the teacher holding and mocking him, comparing his face to the map of India. “‘These stains,’ he cries, ‘are Pakistan! Thees birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!’” (231-2)
The snot from Saleem’s nose is Ceylon and the incident culminates with the teacher, lifting Saleem by his hair and pulling his hair out; a big clump of hair, leaving Saleem with a “monkish tonsure, a circle where hair would never grow again” (232), which can be understood as Kashmir.

When there is a dance at school, there is a quarrel about the class-room door, and when it closes, one third of Saleem’s middle finger is cut off. “I look at my hand out of pure curiosity. My finger has become a fountain: red liquid spurts out to the rhythm of my heartbeat.” (235) Saleem is driven to the hospital where his mother meets him. The doctor asks about Saleem’s blood type, but Amina does not know, and she tells him “‘I am an A; but my husband, O’”. (235) They are both rhesus positive. The result from the blood-test: Saleem is neither A, nor O and rhesus negative. This leads to Ahmed Sinai’s suspicions that Saleem is not his son. Saleem thinks about this as:

“‘opposition of inside and outside! Because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhitching are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next. The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will. It is important to preserve this wholeness. But the loss of my finger (which was conceivably foretold by the pointing digit of Raleigh’s fisherman), not to mention the removal of certain hairs from my head, has undone all that. Thus we enter into a state of affairs which is nothing short of revolutionary; and its effect on history is bound to be pretty damn startling. Uncork the body, and God knows what you permit to come tumbling out. Suddenly you are forever other than you were; and the world becomes such that parents can cease to be parents, and love can turn to hate. And these, mark you,

40 Gorra 114-5
are only the effects on private life. The consequences for the sphere of public action, as will be shown, are – were – will be no less profound” (236-7)

When Saleem can leave the hospital, it is not his parents who get him, but Mary Pereira and his uncle Hanif. He is informed that he is going to stay with Hanif and his wife Pia. Although Saleem loves his uncle and his wife, he thinks of it as his first exile, and concludes that he has been loaned out and that his parents would send for him when they want him back. He thinks that he is in exile because he has inflicted “one more deformity to add to bandylegs cucumbernose horn-temples staincheeks? Was it not possible that my mutilated finger had been (as my announcement of my voices had nearly been), for my long-suffering parents, the last straw? That I was no longer a good business risk, no longer worth the investment of their love and protection?” (240) Saleem’s feeling of not being worthy of his parent’s love and protection, makes him decide to be the perfect nephew during his stay with Hanif and Pia, to reward them for taking him in.

Saleem’s identity is divided in many aspects and layers. When he was born, his biological mother was the Hindu woman, Vanita; his biological father was not her husband, but the British Methwold. His ayah when growing up is Christian. When born, the name-tags on two babies are changed, and the baby of the rich, Muslim parents goes with the poor Hindu couple. The father who raises him is a Muslim business-man, who becomes white, as all Indian businessmen have, since they took over what the British left. “It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the colour from their cheeks… in which case, perhaps my father was a late victim of a widespread, though generally unremarked phenomenon. The businessmen of India were turning white.” (179) Saleem’s mother, on the other hand, is black and not influenced by the British. She is rationalistic but changes as she gets older, she gets more superstitious and like all women in her family, she suffers from early ageing. According to Michael Gorra, Rushdie does not only celebrate the diversity of India;
through the multitude of voices inside Saleem, he shows a model for the postcolonial and post-modern self. “As Saleem contains that multitude within him, so too must those who, whether abroad or in the land of their birth, have to live in two cultures at once.”41 The post-colonial self is, as India itself, never singular or pure, but a hybrid. Rushdie proposes that “such a self should actively choose the hand that history has dealt it”42 and realise that cultures are not inviolate, which will allow the self to learn how migrancy and mimicry can become a creative force; “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.”43 In the novel *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem explains that it is like when you go to the cinema. If you watch the film from the back of the room, you have full view over what happens on the screen, but as you move closer to the screen, your perspective changes and you can only see a part of the picture, until you are so close that the only thing you can see is small dots which do not make much sense. It is like when you look at something at close range, you only see a small part, a segment or fragment, and the further you move from the object, the more you see. The same can be true about history; if you are too close to the incident in time, it is difficult to see the whole picture at once.

Through a dialogue between the old and new, something more sustaining than an impossible and continuance of the inherited background can emerge. According to Michael Gorra, Rushdie discards the idea of the whole self, and even though much modernist fiction has dealt with the disintegration of the self, Rushdie implies that we get rid of both the belief in the stability of the own identity, but also the pain that the loss of that belief may inflict:

the very fractures of the multiple self can be both a liberation and a source of strength. The Hindu faithful have traditionally believed that they lost caste in leaving India to travel over the “black water.” Because Rushdie’s sense of the self

41 Gorra 142
42 Gorra 142
43 Rushdie 17
has its roots in his imagination of an India that isn’t bound by such notions of purity, his own Indianness has therefore become a portable identity, one that he could maintain through the years of English education and the emigration that culminated in the writing of *Midnight’s Children.*

Rushdie states that one of the reasons for writing the novel was an attempt to bring back his childhood. He did not succeed in returning through his writing, since his childhood is too distant in both time and geography:

> It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his being ‘elsewhere’.

This distinction makes home seem available only through the imagination since it is so far in both time and space. Home for the migrant becomes a place built of scraps and fragments of memories from the past. This leads to the conclusion that “the migrant occupies a displaced position. The imagination becomes more and more the primary location of home but the mind is notoriously unreliable and capricious.” In *Imaginary Homelands,* Rushdie compares his fragmentary and partial memories from his childhood with “broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.” In *Midnight’s Children,* Rushdie also lets the protagonist Saleem Sinai lose a big chunk of his hair, one joint of his finger, his sinuses and finally to get castrated by the Widow. There are also mistakes in the text, where Saleem relates things that are not really true, for instance; he tells the reader that Bombay’s “patron-goddess Mumbadevi has fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombayites… As a matter of fact, the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi Day, or at least

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44 Gorra 143  
46 Rushdie 12  
47 McLeod 211  
48 Rushdie 11
it does in all versions of India except Saleem’s.” The reader should therefore not read the novel as a history book, but as a novel about Saleem’s version of his history.

There is a connection between the violence done to Saleem’s body and the violence in the country. The birth of both child and nation is violent and bloodstained and results in deaths and injuries. When Saleem is born, Ahmed Sinai breaks his toe and the doctors are so occupied with taking care of him, that they do not have the time to take care of Saleem’s biological mother, Vanita, who dies. At the same time the country experiences violence caused by the independence. Saleem describes it by saying:

I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress in the frontiers of the divided Punjab (where the partitioned nations are washing themselves in one another’s blood, and a certain Punchinello-faced Major Zulfikar is buying refugee property at absurdly low prices, laying the foundations of a fortune that will rival the Nizam of Hyderabad’s); I shall avert my eyes from the violence in Bengal and the long pacifying walk of Mahatma Gandhi. Selfish? Narrow-minded? Well, perhaps; but excusably so, in my opinion. After all, one is not born every day. (112)

When the teacher tears the hair of Saleem’s head and he loses a part of his finger, there are riots in East Pakistan and in Kashmir there are increased demands for independence. When there is disagreement in the Midnight’s Children’s Conference, the war with China breaks out, and in the end of the war, when India is defeated with damaged self-esteem and economy, Saleem is operated upon and thus “drained above”; he cannot get in touch with the others telepathically any more. When the war between India and Pakistan of 1965 breaks out, almost all of Saleem’s relatives are wiped out and he himself is “wiped clean”; he is hit in the head by his silver spittoon and suffers from a total loss of memory. During the Emergency, Saleem is “drained below”, castrated, and thus loses his hope.

49 Rushdie 22
2.3 Saleem’s purification

Soon after their arrival to Pakistan, Ahmed Sinai resolves to build a new house for them to live in. Saleem misses Bombay, but as his parents think that they should become true citizens of Pakistan; “in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal. But Saleem was forever tainted with Bombayness, his head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah’s”(310). Since Saleem had lived in India, where the number of deities almost equals the number of people, he is condemned to be a misfit. Even though he studies history, he does not feel a part of Pakistan, where his fellow students demand a stricter, more Islamic society with more rules. Saleem is convinced that the purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was to annihilate his whole family. The family was falling apart and what happened during the war “provided a merciful relief.” (338) Saleem’s dream of Kashmir is adopted by the Government, thus starting the whole war; he stresses his personal significance to the significance of the political events that happened between the countries. Since Saleem can not tell what is fact regarding how the war started, due to war propaganda, he presents his own truth, which is “the war happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins. Jehad, Padma! Holy war!” (339) The transformation of the Brass Monkey into Jamila Singer, who is striving towards the Muslim ideals of purity and submission shocks Saleem and makes him compare himself to her and he tries to reach purification, but since he cannot reach it, he instead goes to the opposite extreme and starts visiting whores.50 He can only purify himself of his sins and impurities after having been hit in the head by his spittoon, wiping out all of his memories. Saleem, on his way home, is thrown to the ground by the blast, and when he sits up, he is hit in the head by a silver spittoon, his mother’s wedding gift, and “I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love” (343). The spittoon sends him into oblivion. Saleem survives

50 http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/midnightschildren/, 20060712
the war of 1965, where he “was only wiped clean whilst others, less fortunate, were wiped out.”(345) Although he has lost all his memories, he has begun a new phase in his life. Jamila Singer arranges for Saleem to be turned over to the Army, which sends him to a camp for “Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activity” (347). Saleem is used as a tracker dog; his unit consists of three boy-soldiers. Since Saleem loses his family and is emptied of both memories and history and thus becomes wholly submissive, which he summarizes by stating that he has become a citizen of Pakistan:

So, apologizing for the melodrama, I must doggedly insist that I, he, had begun again; that after years of yearning for importance, he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business; that after my vengeful abandonment by Jamila Singer, who wormed me into the Army to get me out her sight, I (or he) accepted the fate which was my repayment for love, and sat uncomplaining under a chinhar tree; that emptied of history, the Buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan. (350)

He makes the other soldiers uneasy but they are also fascinated by Saleem, who rejects all his memories of family and history, he has a nose like a cucumber and does not care about anything but smells. When one of the soldiers tries to make him remember and asks if he does not care about his family, he answers: “‘Don’t try and fill my head with that history. I am who I am, that’s all there is.’” (351) The amnesia is more than just loss of memory. Saleem’s lost memory is also a lost identity; the link to the past, “which places him in the social and historical context that outlines his individuality.”51 According to Saleem the reason for the other soldier’s unease about him came from their “fear of schizophrenia, of splitting, that was buried like an umbilical cord of every Pakistani heart.” (351) This schizophrenia emphasizes the fragmentation of the identity.

In an interview, Rushdie claims that every epic novel needs a descent into hell52. In Midnight’s Children it comes when Saleem decides to desert; “finally incapable of continuing in the submissive performance of his duty, took to his heels and fled. Infected by the soul-

51 Cundy 35
52 Grant 53
chewing maggots of pessimism futility shame, he deserted, into the historyless anonymity of rain-forests, dragging three children in his wake” (360). Saleem has had an overdose of reality and is drained of his history through his memory loss. Until he regains his memory he is not himself and therefore mentions himself in third person. Since his companions are so young, they have not yet gained the “memories which give man a firm hold on reality” 53, and therefore their rebirth is different from the rebirth of Saleem. When they drink the water from the leaves and eat the fruit from the jungle, they all get fed with some of the insanity of the jungle. They learn how to survive in the jungle, but also experience vivid dreams and hallucinations:

the accusing eyes of the wives of men they had tracked down and seized, the screaming and monkey-gibbering of children left fatherless by their work… and in this first time, the time of punishment, even the impassive buddha with his citified voice was obliged to confess that he, too, had taken to waking up at night to find the forest closing in upon him like a vice, so that he felt unable to breathe. (362)

The boys are fleeing “into the safety of dreams” 54 and the concept of time becomes distorted. When they have been punished sufficiently, they are regressing into infancy and then becoming themselves again. “This, however, also helped to restore in him the sense of responsibility which the just-following-orders requirements of war had sapped; so it seemed that the magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them by the hand towards a new adulthood.” (364) Saleem, on the other hand, has to undergo a different rebirth. When a serpent bite him in the heel, Saleem who is numb, does not feel the bite, but “For two days he became as rigid as a tree, and his eyes crossed” (364) When he finally relaxes, his mind is not empty any longer and he begins to tell his story, but does not remember his name. The rebirth is, however, not complete. The part about the stay in the Sundarbans represents, according to Goonetilleke, the decent into hell and leads the boys and

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53 Petersson 110
54 Grant 53
Saleem into adulthood. “He is rejoined to the past, his self is unified, except that he could not remember his name.”

When they return to the boat they arrived in and leap into it, a giant wave comes and bears them out of the jungle after their seven month stay there. When they see Dacca, and on a field of dead soldiers they are informed by a man that the Indian army has come and that Shiva is with them. Saleem describes the Pakistani soldiers’ behaviour in Dacca as something that is not true because it conflicts with the image of the Pakistani soldier; “Shaheed and I saw many things that were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot in side-streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was not true because it could not have been true” (375). Here the “official historiography of the countries”56 is explained in an ironic way.

When the Indian army marches into Dacca, it is not only a military march, but in addition there is a hundred and one entertainers flown in from India marching with the soldiers. Among the entertainers is Parvati-the-witch. When Parvati sees Saleem she recognizes him and calls out his name, which gives him back his birthright; his name57. The rebirth of Saleem is thus completed; a rebirth which “prepare[s] Saleem for his deliverance from Pakistan in Parvati’s basket and his return to India”58 Saleem finds the world in Parvati’s basket peaceful, feels memories of the world slip away and remarks on how easy it would have been never to come back. “I was in the basket, but also not in the basket … in the basket, I learned what it was like, will be like, to be dead. I had acquired the characteristics of ghosts! Present, but insubstantial; actual, but without being our weight…” (381) The things

56 Petersson 108
57 Grant 54
58 Grant 55
that save him are the silver spittoon and his anger, which made Saleem able to resist the temptations and it also releases him from his numbness:

in the grip of that awful disembodied loneliness, whose smell was the smell of grave-yards, I discovered anger. Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born. Fading: an old pride in baby-snaps and framed Nehru-letter; an old determination to espouse, willingly, a prophesied historical role; and also a willingness to make allowances, to understand how parents and strangers might legitimately despise or exile him for his ugliness; mutilated fingers and monks’ tonsures no longer seemed like good enough excuses for the way in which he, I, had been treated. The object of my wrath was, in fact, everything which I had, until then, blindly accepted: my parent’s desire that I should repay their investment in me by becoming great; genius-like-a-shawl; the modes of connection themselves inspired in me a blind, lunging fury. Why me? --- Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history?” (382)

Saleem undergoes transformations when he spends his time in enclosed spaces; for instance when he spends his time in Parvati’s basket, he discovers anger and when he spends time in the washing-chest and witnesses his mother’s infidelity he has an accident which makes him able to tune in to other person’s thoughts and feelings. Saleem’s anger originates from his repeatedly disillusioning experiences and his frustration when he tries to make sense of “identity, nationhood, or parentage.”

2.4 The hole in the sheet

The novel starts with the story of Saleem’s grandfather, Aadam Aziz. Aadam is a “Westernized intellectual”, recently returned from Germany, where he has been educated as a doctor. Since Aadam would not have been able to study in Germany if not for the British Empire, he is a product of the British Empire as well as a witness to its falling apart.

When meeting his future wife, Naseem, Aadam is taken into a bedchamber where two women, built as wrestlers, were holding up a bed sheet between them. In the middle of the sheet there was cut a round hole about seven inches in diameter. Her father, Ghani the land-
owner, tells Aadam to examine his daughter, who is hidden behind the sheet. The hole in the sheet reveals only the part of her that Aadam wishes to examine. When Aadam reacts with surprise, the land-owner tells him “You Europe-returned chappies forget certain things. Doctor Sahib, my daughter is a decent girl, it goes without saying. She does not flaunt her body under the noses of strange men. You will understand that you cannot be permitted to see her, no, not in any circumstances; accordingly I have required her to be positioned behind that sheet.” (23) During the years after this event, Aadam Aziz falls under a spell of the sheet. His visits to Naseem became a weekly event, but she never got the same illness twice. “Which only shows,’ Ghani told him, ‘that you are a good doctor.” (25) Gradually Aadam got a picture of Naseem, made up of small pieces of her body, and soon this collage began to haunt him. He had fallen in love with a woman he had only seen in fragments through a hole in a bed sheet.

Naseem represents the traditional East with her traditional upbringing. She is hidden in the house and her father chooses her husband whom she is given to in a traditional marriage with ceremony and dowry. When Aadam can only see Naseem through the hole in the sheet, the suggestion is that the woman cannot be seen whole, but when Naseem is presented as Reverend Mother, or Mother India, the point is that India can only be seen and understood in fragments. Goonetilleke writes that “She is a typical Indian (female) figure in this respect – dishing out or not dishing out food, fasting as a protest (like Gandhi). Aadam tries to change her character. He asks her to move during the sex act and come out of purdah. He fails in regard to the first but, though he succeeds in regard to the second, Naseem resents it and the concession is on the surface.”61 The first real conflict between the religious Reverend Mother and the atheistic Aadam concerns the religious instructions for their children, and Aadam flings out the guru. Naseem is very often in conflict with her husband and Aadam’s problem

61 Goonetilleke 22-3
with altering Naseem “suggests the difficulty, if not impossibility, of changing traditional India”.62

Religion is an important issue in India even though the constitution states that it is a secular state, and the multiplicity of the number of deities and the many religions represented in India make it difficult not to divide the people into separate classes. According to Michael Gorra, “Saleem’s own family history is marked by a parodic version of that fragmentation”63, as his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, is only allowed to see his future wife, Naseem, in fragments through a perforated sheet, which made him regard her as a “partitioned woman”(25). Aadam stopped believing in God when he returned to Kashmir from Germany, which opened up a god-shaped hole in his stomach, a hole that Saleem later inherits, and now he thinks of the perforated sheet as “something sacred and magical, because through it he had seen the things which had filled up the hole inside him” (27) When Saleem refers to the sheet with the hole, he often refers to it as “mutilated”, an expression which connects it to the theme of cracks, fragments and disintegration. Over time, the hole in the sheet gets filled with different meanings. It suggests Aadam Aziz’s experience of a vacant inner chamber. Saleem, who has inherited his grandfather’s hole, fills it for a time with the voices of the Midnight’s Children. According to Petersson, the hole is connected to “a lack of belief depending on Western influence, a critical stand against religion, but also a vacancy which is filled with other values, first of all love.”64 The motif of the hole gives an indication of Saleem’s perspective in the story, which is Western-influenced and secularized. It also has a function in the narrative technique. “He might be said to suggest a general picture of India by giving glimpses of its different parts. But when the sheet is at last removed from Naseem’s body, Aadam Aziz realizes that the entirety is something quite different from the parts. A warning is thus built

62 Goonetilleke 23
63 Gorra 114
64 Petersson 96
into the text against apprehending Saleem’s historiography as literal truth.” On the first page in book two, Saleem admits, that in his story he only shows certain selected fragments of his life, when he uses the metaphor of the sheet and claims to have become its master: “‘Condemned by a perforated sheet to a life of fragments,’ I wrote and read aloud, ‘I have nevertheless done better than my grandfather; because while Aadam Aziz remained the sheet’s victim, I have become its master – and Padma is the one who is now under its spell.’” (121)

Aadam and Naseem’s daughter, Amina, is facing the opposite problem. She is married to a man whom she cannot love. As she finds it hard to love her whole husband, she decides to learn to love him in fragments: “she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioural, compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal tics and prejudices and likes… in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit.” (68)

Saleem’s sister, The Brass Monkey, changes gradually and eventually becomes a very popular singer after they have moved to Pakistan. She changes her name to Jamila Singer, which suggests a new identity. Jamila Singer becomes increasingly puritan and fanatical and “seems to represent Pakistan in the same way as Saleem represents India.” Since she is “from a good family” she cannot show herself in front of strange men, so when she is giving her concerts, she sings behind a white and golden sheet with a three inch hole in it. The hole is smaller than the one which showed Aadam Aziz his wife, but it still lets the whole of Pakistan love her. The Monkey, who used to set fire to people’s shoes in order to gain attention, becomes the “voice of the highly religious, non-secular nationalism of Pakistan.” As Jamila Singer, she can express all the emotions that Saleem can smell; “What I could smell, Jamila

65 Petersson 96  
66 Petersson 124  
67 Goonetilleke 36
could sing. Truth beauty happiness pain: each had its separate fragrance, and could be distinguished by my nose; each, in Jamila’s performances, could find its ideal voice. My nose, her voice: they were exactly complementary gifts; but they were growing apart” (315) The growing apart of the gifts of Jamila’s voice and Saleem’s nose can be seen as a commentary on the partition of Pakistan and India. Saleem hopes for their reunion, but she rejects his love and other love relations becomes impossible for Saleem, who when he tries, sees Jamila’s face in front of him. Jamila is, however, not entirely changed. The Brass Monkey used to take terrible revenge on the persons who dared to love her, and she replies as Jamila Singer to Saleem’s confessed love for her by turning him over to the army after his memory loss.

2.5 Midnight’s Children

The midnight’s children are the children born between midnight and one am, on the night when India gained independence. There were one thousand and one children born during that hour, and all of the children had received miraculous talents; “It was as though – if you will permit me one moment of fancy in what will otherwise be, I promise, the most sober account I can manage – as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time.”(195)

Not all children survived. Four hundred and twenty children died, a number which in India is “associated with fraud, deception and trickery.”(196) The five hundred and eighty one remaining children were not aware of each other, until Saleem through an accident, tunes them in. The children born closest to midnight have the most powerful gifts. Saleem and his antagonist Shiva are both born at midnight and Saleem gets the ability of telepathy, while Shiva has lethal knees which he uses to threaten and kill people. Saleem is born in a rich family while Shiva’s mother dies while he is born and his father is a poor street musician. In the nursing home, a nurse switches their name tags and the child of the poor parents is raised
by the rich. The Saleem that receives the letter from the Prime Minister is not the one that it is really addressed to. The midnight’s children who survive their childhood come from all over India and from different social groups. Saleem also finds out that the children can talk to each other through him, and “in the early days of 1958, the five hundred and eighty-one children would assemble, for one hour between midnight and one a.m., in the lok sabha or parliament of my brain.” (227)

Although Saleem is not the child of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, when they realise the truth about this, they still accept him as their son. This leads to the conclusion that he is a:

hybrid of dubious parentage; he is a product of India (Vanita) and, perhaps, the Raj (Methwold). Saleem becomes a representative Anglicized, middle-class intellectual; his nose, his most prominent physical trait, signifies intelligence. The true heir of India is dispossessed and brought up in the slums by Wee Willie Winkie (Vanita does not survive her child-bearing). Despite his hidden Muslim parentage and ‘Anglo’ foster-father, he carries a Hindu name, Shiva, which indicates deep historic roots, since Muslim culture was a late-comer to India, and has a further appropriateness, given that he represents the indigenous (predominantly Hindu) proletariat. His most prominent physical trait is his knees, suggesting strength, basis, foundation, someone nearer the soil. Saleem is not India, but a segment of India. So is Shiva. Nose is no whole, any more than Knees.68

The children of midnight argue about who should be the leader, Saleem and Shiva think that they, as the oldest should lead, and since Saleem is the one who makes their meetings possible, he becomes the leader. When they start discussing what they should do, they have many suggestions:

I won’t deny I was disappointed. I shouldn’t have been; there was nothing unusual about the children except for their gifts; their heads were full of all the usual things, fathers, mothers, money, food, land, possessions, fame, power, God. Nowhere, in the thoughts of the Conference, could I find anything as new as ourselves... but then I was on the wrong track, too; I could not see any more clearly than anyone else; and even when Soumitra the time-traveller said, ‘I’m telling you – all this is pointless – they’ll finish us before we start!’ we all ignored him; with the optimism of youth. (229)

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68 Goonetilleke 28
When Indira Gandhi hears about the midnight’s children, she decides to declare the Emergency of 1975-77 in order to destroy the Midnight’s Children whom she sees as a threat to her. Since she has the need for centrality which is depicted by the slogan Indira is India and India is Indira, she does not want the competition of the magical children, especially not one that has received a letter from her father, saying that he is the mirror of the nation:

For Mother Indira cannot endure the threat embodied in the pluralism of the MCC. History books may argue that Mrs. Gandhi declared the Emergency of 1975-77 because the economy had gone bad, because she feared a conspiracy against her, because she’d been caught in a bit of election fraud. But for Saleem, and for Rushdie, her declaration of that “continuous midnight which would not end for two long years” (404) had but one purpose: the destruction of the midnight’s children. “Were we competitors for centrality?” (406), Saleem asks. Did she too see the country as raw material on which she could impose a form, and decide she couldn’t stand the competition, that she would prefer to destroy the India that might be rather than risk losing her own power?\(^{69}\)

The midnight’s children are heterogeneous and come from different parts of India. Although they represent India, no single member of the MCC can claim to represent all of India, not even Saleem. The Conference, could have been an alternative parliament or a resistance, but instead they do not succeed on agreeing on a programme for their actions, but stay on a verbal level. Disagreement and prejudice eventually makes the Conference fall apart; the rich do not want anything to do with the poor, the ones with fair skin loath the ones with darker skin, the children of higher casts do not want their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables, there are religious rivalries and on top of all this there are also clashes of personalities. The Midnight’s Children’s Conference slowly disintegrates as the children “succumbs to the divisions characteristic of India; instead of forging a unity, it becomes a victim of the fissiparous tendencies of the country.”\(^{70}\) The children of the MCC are, except for Saleem, Shiva and Parvati, a sort of formless entity which is a “metaphor of hope and of possibility, which, one day, was destroyed. A metaphor of hope betrayed and possibilities

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\(^{69}\) Gorra 116  
\(^{70}\) Goonetilleke 34
denied.”\textsuperscript{71} The destruction of the Midnight’s Children is partly the work of Indira Gandhi, or the Widow, Shiva and Saleem. Indira is called the Widow, which is a symbol of ill-omen in Indian culture, and she is portrayed in a way that she is a “coming-together of the Wicked Witches of the East and of the West.”\textsuperscript{72} The ruin of the MCC is also made possible by Shiva, who had the gift of war and who is driven by his self-interest and thus betrays the others to the powerful Widow. Shiva is the God of Destruction and his betrayal is due to his deprivation and dispossession, but he is also the God of Procreation. Saleem has extraordinary gifts, as telepathy and later an extra sensitive nose, but he does not manage to use his gifts for anything useful. While the politicians talk about the Chinese aggression, Saleem’s eyes “began to stream with tears; while the nation puffed itself up, convincing itself that the annihilation of the little yellow men was at hand, my sinuses, too, puffed up” (299). Saleem is having real trouble breathing, and Amina and Ahmed are victims of the optimism disease. “Adrift in the sea of optimism, we – the nation, my parents, I – floated blindly towards the reefs.”(300) Although he is suffering from a nasal condition, along with the whole nation’s war, Saleem is happy. On the 20\textsuperscript{th} of November the Indian forces were defeated by the Chinese, and in New Delhi people were terrified of the Chinese. The only one of the Midnight’s Children who, at this point, is willing to communicate with Saleem is Parvati-the-witch. The next day, the news is of the Chinese, who stopped without having to, and the newspaper heading “CEASEFIRE!” (302), so Saleem is not suspicious when Amina says that they will celebrate with a picnic. When they are stopping and Saleem and Ahmed go in and he realises that they will operate his sinuses, he tries to fight, but loses and when he wakes up there is silence and darkness. He can no longer hear voices in his head. Despite his loss of the contact with the other children of the Conference, there is a benefit; he discovers the new world of smells.

\textsuperscript{71} Goonetilleke 34
\textsuperscript{72} Goonetilleke 34
When living in the Magician’s Ghetto, Saleem uses impotence as an excuse not to marry Parvati, but it soon becomes a fact. When Parvati hears about his impotence, she makes Shiva impregnate her, and Saleem does not have any excuse not to marry her any more. “Saleem’s class has proved sterile. The indigenous, the working class it had suppressed and marginalized, those with the roots in the soil, not necessarily rural but those in touch with the real world, are needed by India – those like Shiva and Parvati.”73 The hope in the novel is connected to the children with parents like them. When it comes to Saleem, his most prominent trait is his large nose; the child has large, elephant-like ears:

The ears are superior to the nose: what the child takes in, goes straight to the mind. The child knows what it wants and how to get it; his silence suggests reserves of strength. ‘He was elephant-headed Ganesh’ (p. 420), suggesting a promise of intelligence and prosperity (Ganesh is the patron deity of shopkeepers) and rooted in the soil, tradition. As Rushdie intends, the book shows ‘the end of a particular hope’, but it ‘implies that there is another, tougher generation on the way’.74

73 Goonetilleke 40
74 Goonetilleke 40
3 Conclusion

The India that Salman Rushdie is describing in the novel *Midnight’s Children* is a country which has a complex culture and where multiplicity, pluralism and hybridity are central ideas. The novel hints at the innumerable possibilities of the country and India is at once tremendously plentiful, heterogeneous and many things at once. The novel suggests that the writer will only last for a time and generations of writers must reinterpret India to the Indians. The writer both reinterprets and suffers, not as a private person, but as someone that must identify with the plentiful masses of the country. He can save others, but not himself and he will eventually be destroyed and he has to surrender his story to the variety of possible readings.

The protagonist in the novel is a product of many different cultures, religions and traditions. The tradition of India is also a mixed tradition and there is no such thing as a pure Indian culture, a true Indian religion or a true Indian tradition. The novel shows that India cannot be understood as one whole, but a country that multifaceted must be divided into many different fragments in order to be understood.

Saleem is writing the history of his life and the novel contains a number of mistakes, which he notices and points out, but he usually refuses to correct them. Saleem persists that things happened the way they happened, and that the person who believes someone else’s history over his own is a fool indeed. This leads to the conclusion that the novel should not be read as a history book, but as a novel about Saleem’s version of his history.

The many cracks and falling apart can be understood as entirely negative. But they have positive implications too. When Saleem crashes with his bike he gets in touch with the other midnight’s children and after the operation of his sinuses he discovers his supernatural olfactory sense. The story is told in a cyclical way and it is constantly throwing up new stories
within the story; this illustrates the Indian talent for continuous self-regeneration, and although the novel ends with the annihilation of Saleem, the suggestion of a new, more pragmatic generation through Aadam Sinai is a positive counterweight.
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