

Memory, History and Identitary Fictions in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: *Rewriting the personal, national, religious, artistic and linguistic self of its character-cum-author, Saleem Sinai, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children offers the reader a trip down memory lane, to a past which refuses to conform to fact, truth, logic or chronology. This past is moulded into numerous his-stories and cured of its factuality with the aid of the magic-realist processing grid. The whole novel is rich in extra-ordinary scenes and defamiliarising practices; selected here however, for illustrative and argumentative purposes, is the open ending which advances the intriguing image of history as a pantry shelf packed with jars of pickled memories.*

Keywords: *fiction, magic realism, memory, self*

Introduction

On the contemporary cultural stage, often described as (em)powered by globalization, postcolonial discourses have found their way to the centre. The theories they advance primarily focus on: the notions of hybridity and difference, emerging from the awareness of the dissolution of nationalist frontiers; cultural images, rooted in age old local traditions, despite their surface metamorphoses and global kaleidoscopic rearrangements; literature, initially seen as a world system, carrying ever deeper traces of national selfhood. Along these lines, as pertinently pointed out by Simon Gikandi,

one of the great ironies of the discourse of globalization [and postcoloniality] is that although English literature has become the most obvious sign of transnationalism, it is continuously haunted by its historical – and disciplinary – location in a particular *ethos* and *ethnos* (in Connell and Marsh 2011: 112).

A literary text like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (published for the first time in 1981), written from within the English tradition, but remaining an indisputable Indian novel, is symptomatic

for the phenomenon in question, which it reverses nevertheless by orienting the lens to capture the history and identity of the other, thus reinforcing the postcolonial texture.

Rewriting the personal, national, religious, artistic and linguistic self of its character-cum-author, Saleem Sinai, *Midnight's Children* offers the reader a trip down memory lane, to a past which refuses to conform to fact, truth, logic or chronology. This past is moulded into numerous his-stories and cured of its factuality with the aid of the magic-realist processing grid. The whole novel is rich in extraordinary scenes and defamiliarising practices; selected here however, for illustrative and argumentative purposes, is the open ending which advances the intriguing image of history as a pantry shelf packed with jars of pickled memories.

The word Rushdie uses to describe the process of preserving is actually that of chutnification. It does not exist in dictionaries. But then, dictionaries record 'facts' of language rather than its 'fictions'. Fictions are built in novels, where history, memory and identity are brought together and made to overlap. Rushdie's manage this melting pot following the instructions on the recipe of chutnification.

The ending scene, like the whole novel in fact, is magic and real at the same time, its meta dimension emerging from the explanatory endeavours woven into the text itself. It offers food for thought on the inner workings of the human mind and on how projections of the self are inscribed on the latter. The Indianness of the recipe not only constructs an innovative poetics, but carries a politics of its own, directed against the Western canon,

the 'Empire writ[ing] back' to the imperial 'centre', not only through nationalist assertions, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarise centre and periphery in the first place. In this way, concepts of polarity, of 'governor and governed, ruler and ruled' are challenged as an essential way of ordering reality. (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2002: 32)

Midnight's Children. Opening into the novel's ending

The final chapter of *Midnight's Children* is suggestively entitled "Abracadabra". The mediaeval magic formula inscribed on the famous

triangular amulet is used to convey, on the one hand, harmonisation with the mysterious laws which govern the world and allow communion with divinity and, on the other hand, fear of and recoil from that very divinity. It therefore sums up the dialectics of the novel's overall philosophy. "To tell you the truth, I lied..." (Rushdie 1982: 443) is how the chapter begins. From then on, the discussion between Saleem and Padma, on the truths of the fictional (though autobiographical) Saleem's identity, needs to be read against itself.

The whole conversation on the narrated character, whose actors are the narrator and the narratee, shows Rushdie's indebtedness to "the traditional techniques of the Indian oral narrative tradition", which "illustrates the possibilities of undoing the assumptions of logocentric texts in post-colonial practice." (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2002: 181, 182)

"I fell victim [...] to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (Rushdie 443) Saleem confesses to Padma who, reader dissatisfied with the proposed past-contaminated ending of the novel-in-the-novel, imposes a future onto it and onto its writer: "There is the future to think of." (Rushdie 444) But there are no such things as memories of the future, not even in a magic realist context it seems. The idea, however, hovers in Saleem's mind and will indeed take shape in the following scenes as one last empty jar waiting to be filled with pickles.

Besides tackling time and the times, the interlocutors weave stories into the dialogue, constructing in words an almost head aching mix of supernatural worlds and extraordinary characters: the story of Picture Singh – the snake charmer and Saleem's close friend; that of Durga, the washerwoman and wet nurse named after the Devi with multiple arms; that of Aadam Sinai, Saleem's infant son, who is not his son.

These "technique[s] of circling back from the present to the past, of building tale within tale, and persistently delaying climaxes are all features of traditional narration and orature." (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2002: 181) Moreover, their cultural and intertextual features are not only obvious, but give flavour to the novel discourse.

The memorable story on the very last pages of the book, which synthesises both its content and its form under a metaphorical guise, is that of a trip to Bombay made by Saleem, Picture Singh and Aadam. It begins like this: "Yes, I had left the colony of the magicians behind me for ever, I was heading abracadabra, abracadabra into the heart of

a nostalgia which would keep me alive long enough to write these pages (and to create a corresponding number of pickles).” (Rushdie 450) and is arranged on two narrative levels, the first of which provides it with a temporal and a spatial frame: August 15th, 31 years after Independence Day and (re)birth of India; the Midnite Confidential Club, where the three are having dinner and where the special powers of the chutney are discovered:

... and before long a puri was in my hand; and chutney was on the puri; and then I tasted it, and [...] it carried me back to a day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz, and was given the best chutney in the world... the taste of the chutney was more than just an echo of that long-ago taste – it was the old taste itself, the very same, with the power of bringing back the past as if it had never been away... (Rushdie 455)

The restaurant scene leads to the final one in the text’s deep structure, the visit to a pickle factory in Bombay, on the exact spot of the house where Saleem was born and which is to become his home once again: Braganza Pickles (Private) Ltd – a one hundred per cent female workplace, “a new, comfortable universe” (Rushdie 460) where men are not allowed (until Saleem’s arrival). Its owner is Mary Pereira (Mrs. Braganza), “who has stolen the name of poor Queen Catharine who gave these islands to the British” and who has taught Saleem “the secrets of the pickling process. (Finishing an education which began in this very air-space when I stood in a kitchen while she stirred guilt into green chutney)”. (Rushdie 458) Her sister, Alice Pereira (now Mrs. Fernandes), is in charge of the finances and Padma Mangroli is the guard and overseer.

Saleem’s return home and his rediscovery of family at the age of thirty-one marks a circular voyage, propelled into the future by his son (now “three years, one month and two weeks” old) entering language and the world through magic.

‘Abba...’ Father. He is calling me father. But no, he has not finished, there is strain on his face, and finally my son, who will have to be a magician to cope with the world I’m leaving him, completes his awesome first word: ‘... cadabba.’ Abracadabra! [...] my son’s enigmatic first incursion into language has left a worrying fragrance in my nostrils.” (Rushdie 459)

It sheds light on the process of creation, narcissistically reflecting the novel and the novelist within. With Saleem as Shiva (having been switched at birth by Mary Pereira) and Aadam adopted by Saleem from Shiva and Parvati, things are set on their natural but miraculous track. With the factory being passed on to Saleem and Aadam, creative pickling continues, yet measures itself against traditions.

My special blends: I've been saving them up. Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon. Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! I, indeed, have pickled chapters. Tonight, by screwing the lid firmly on to a jar bearing the legend *Special Formula No. 30: 'Abracadabra'*, I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalised my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfection. (Rushdie 459)

What follows is the metafictional debate proper, also structured like a dialogue: with the writer's own conscience and with the implied reader. The topic remains that of the art of pickling private memory, history and identity for public consumption via an open ended fictional autobiography which covers a metonymical thirty-one years for the time being.

I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which [...] I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans... believe or not believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation. (And beside them, one jar stands empty.) (Rushdie 460)

Its impact and resonance, its 'making history' as it were, is also brought into the discussion, with clear though oblique emphasis on the problematic of reality being processed into fiction and with understated fear of readers who, caught in the inertia of assuming that truths are not constructed and therefore cannot be altered in literature, find it difficult to digest the alterations.

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may raise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth... that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (Rushdie 461)

Under the circumstances, the worries already expressed give rise to hesitations with reference to available choices for an ending. Aware, it seems, that not all preserves make it into the more or less distant future and that not all leave behind a memorable taste, the narrator-author analyses the possibilities at hand in the laboratory: labelling the thirty-one jars and neatly arranging them on a shelf (presenting events chronologically, in a clear and coherent succession); pledging to have told the truth and nothing but the truth (for the authenticity of the events narrated); or adding a supernatural dimension to everything that has been said (uprooting his-story from the real and making it fantastic). Tongue in cheek, the last solution is firstly dismissed in favour of realism and its convenient omniscience (although sensitive ground is stepped on), for it to then be accepted as the only possible alternative, actually subsuming essential aspects of the previous two.

One empty jar... how to end? [...] Amid recipes, and thirty jars with chapter-headings for names? [...] Or with questions: now that I can, I swear, see the cracks on the backs of my hands, cracks along my hairline and between my toes, why do I not bleed? [...] Or dreams: [...] I, floating outside my own body, looked down at the foreshortened image of my self, and saw a grey-haired dwarf who once, in a mirror, looked relieved. [...] No, that won't do, I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet. But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty... (Rushdie 461-462)

Eventually, the magic formula with postcolonial undertones is opted for. The artist – having found, in the language and traditions of the other, possible wordings for the diversity and novelty of India – is gradually silenced, the translated individual is banned from either home and condemned to in-betweenness, the man representing the nation is slowly but surely annihilated.

I am alone in the vastness of numbers, the numbers marching one two three [...] Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to a

speck of voiceless dust [...] It is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (Rushdie 462-463)

Whether the very last words of the novel, “unable to live or die in peace”, point to its deliberate open-endedness, implying an existentialist freedom of choice, or whether they are the ingredients about to go into the next empty jar and need to be read in a more political key is unclear, but they are certainly the ultimate challenge of this uncomfortable, thought-provoking book.

Concluding lines

Re-ordering reality, re-arranging the past and boasting of being capable to anticipate the future, *Midnight's Children*, ‘writes back’ but writes forward also. It deconstructs the canonical centre, yet leaves something in its stead: the lingering question as to how polarisation had been possible to start with. Bringing the feminine East closer to the masculine West, the novel analyses their representations, reflected and refracted in parallel mirrors. The clash between two worlds and world views and their mutual contamination may be seen at the level of both form and content.

“Rushdie’s text is profoundly intertextual with the whole of the Indian narrative tradition” (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2002: 182), whose orality, diction and cultural specificity is preserved to imply Indianness rather than to describe it, while Englishness breathes through the restraint itself. Furthermore, although the novel is written in English and assumed as part of the English literary tradition, a glossary of Indian terms is needed to support the reading enterprise; thus, two languages meet and subvert each other, the difficulties in reception avenging past intrusions.

Content-wise, *Midnight's Children* focuses on “memory’s truth”, one which “selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in the end creates its own reality” (Rushdie 211) or history – fictionalised in his story of multiple, conflicting identities. The sample chosen, “Abracadabra”, makes the idea palatable and the event unforgettable, forwarding one of the most

enticing experiences that literature has ever inscribed in the collective unconscious.

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