

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: A Bildungsroman Novel

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to bring out the bildungsroman aspect of the novel by establishing the relationship between the life of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the novel, and the fate of India during his lifetime. The novel is strewn with instances highlighting bildungsroman, not only restricting itself to Saleem Sinai but also proceeding to dominate the lives of Aadam Aziz, Saleem Sinai's grandfather, and Aadam Sinai, Saleem Sinai's son. Their lives are intertwined with the history of India – both pre-and post-independent periods. This paper also tries to bring out the effectiveness of the bildungsroman by pointing out the events in the history of India.

KEYWORDS

Salman Rushdie; Bildungsroman; History of India.

Midnight's Children (MC) is about India, the country of Rushdie's cherished childhood. Rushdie depicts the social and political background of his homeland, his community, and his family in *Midnight's Children* and reveals his diasporic consciousness. What has given the novel its authenticity is the connection with autobiography – the baggage of memories that even a migrant carries. It is a panoramic novel that explicates Rushdie's nostalgic perspective of India's colonial and postcolonial blending of history, political allegory, and fantasy. It is a great work based on the liberating imagination of independence itself, with all its anomalies and contradictions working themselves out. The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of the West and make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories are of particular interest in Rushdie's work.

The book, *Midnight's Children* is divided into three parts: Book One explores the incidents from 1915 as Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz in Kashmir hits his nose on the frost hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray and he decides never to kiss the earth again for any god or man till the protagonist, Saleem Sinai's birth on 15th August 1947. Book Two focuses on Saleem Sinai's childhood and his role in the Indo-Pak war in 1965 and Book Three deals with the Bangladesh war and the dark period of Emergency in India. Rushdie synchronizes the national history with the domestic life of the three generations of the Sinai family constantly moving to various parts of India – Kashmir, Amristar, Delhi, Agra, Bombay, and then Karachi. Throughout the novel, myriad events are described which give us a glimpse into Indian history – India's first Independence

Day celebrations, Nehru's complete speech "Tryst with Destiny", Gandhi's assassination, etc., Till the end of the novel, Saleem asserts the truth of History through his own story, remaining handcuffed to his times. His saga ends with the prophetic vision of his disintegration at the Independence Day celebrations – his death in the form of fission and explosion, with the final release of energy as the bomb in Bombay. Saleem envisions a future for India's infinite children entrapped between hole and annihilation.

A bildungsroman is a novel about the development and maturation of a youthful hero or heroine. The term comes from the German for "Education Novel". Generally, such a kind of novel deals with a person's moral or psychological growth. (Global Encyclopedia 251).

The birth of Saleem Sinai is a unique event in the novel. His coming into the world, according to him was nothing less than a historical necessity. In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator says:

...and many headed monsters sent my father to Bombay, so that I could be born there. At the end of that January, history had finally, by a series of shoves brought itself to the point at which it was almost ready for me to make my entrance... (MC 90)

Having been born at a crucial moment in history, Saleem Sinai claims a place at the centre of things. In surprisingly numerous ways, India is Saleem Sinai and Saleem Sinai is India. The very time of his "clock-ridden, crime-stained birth" (MC 10) handcuffs him to Indian history. Jawaharlal Nehru writes to him,

...you are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own..." (MC 122).

Rushdie, throughout the novel, often points out that he is not writing Saleem's story alone. Through Saleem, Rushdie indirectly speaks of India:

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation?... I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and positively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection composed of dualistically – combined configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above... (MC 238)

Not only to history is Saleem linked but also his physiognomy matches geographically with India. The disfiguring 'birth-marks on his face seem to be a creation of the holocaust of the partition. The bulbous "Byzantine Domes" (MC 124) of the temples may be suggestive of the Himalayas. A dark patch colouring his eastern ear could be Bangladesh. The most important and marked feature of Saleem's physiognomy is his long, monstrous nose. It appears to be indicative of India's pride and self-glorification which make Indians as voluble as Saleem's nose runs. The geography teacher Mr. Emil Zagallo compares his face to an India map:

In the face... you don't see the whole map of India ... the Deccan peninsula hanging down ... These stains are Pakistan! These birth-mark on the right ear is the East Wing; and these horrible stained left cheek, the West ... (MC231-32).

The information about Saleem's growth is also a hint at the development of free India. His launching of "a heroic programme of self-enlargement..." (MC 124) soon after his birth and his huge appetite seems to be a pointer to India's ambitious five-year plans and the large sum of foreign funds she swallowed.

Saleem's disintegrating body is a possible reference to the underlying political fragmentation and divisive tendencies of Indian politics, past and present, which have contributed to the making of its history. Fragmentation, the bane of Indian society and politics, runs through the novel as the hero Saleem is also literally disintegrating.

I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense anymore... (MC 421-422)

His later approach to defining his identity can succeed only by relating the self to the environment. Moreover, the impact of historical and individual forces has made the narrator what he is:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come ... (MC 383)

The protagonist's bond with politics starts, right from his birth. Saleem is born exactly at the stroke of midnight on 15th August 1947. It is the time for India gets independence. Not only is Saleem born at the time of India's independence, but also one thousand other children are born in the same hour but within a difference of a few seconds. "Understand what I'm saying during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 – between midnight and one a.m. – no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India..." (MC 195). Thus,

the relationship between Saleem and India is established from his birth.

Saleem turns out to be responsible for the division of the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat in India. He, in an attempt to impress Evie Burns, the neighbourhood girl, cycles down the lane and crashes into the language march of Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (S.M.S.). This violence leads to the division of the two states and thus Saleem becomes indirectly responsible for the partition, though directly responsible for the violence. He remarks:

In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the State of Bombay, as a result of which the city became the capital of Maharashtra – so at least I was on the winning side ... (MC 192)

After the crash, Saleem meets his midnight's children – five hundred and eighty-one of them. Their voices fill his head. This chaos is also reflected in the outside world. In 1956, the government finds that the second Five Year Plan is a wreck leading to confusion in the country. It was also due to illiteracy and the mushrooming population. "That's how it was when I was ten: nothing but trouble outside my head, nothing but miracles inside it..." (MC 207) says, Saleem.

During the period 1957 – 58, the Midnight's Children's Conference disintegrated. Saleem loses the middle finger of his right hand in an accident which is the second disintegration of his body. (The first is the tonsure in the middle of his head when the geography teacher pulls his hair out in the classroom). This severance is an indication of the disintegration of the Conference. Saleem himself says, "...whether or not the cracks in the conference were the (active – metaphorical) result of my finger loss, they were certainly widening..." (MC 254).

The Sinais move to Pakistan leaving Ahmed Sinai alone in India. Thus, Saleem Sinai is being exiled from India. After 4 years the Sinais return to India and Saleem convenes a meeting of the midnight children. Because of the secret of his birth (that Saleem and Shiva are babies swapped at their birth and Shiva is deprived of all luxuries due to this), Saleem has blocked a part of his mind, where nobody could sneak. This secrecy makes the midnight children lose confidence in him. So, they launch a verbal attack on him. On the same day China attacks India at Thag La ridge. On October 20th, the Indian forces were defeated – thrashed – by the Chinese at Thag La ridge. An official statement announced: In self-defence, Chinese frontier guards were compelled to strike back resolutely. But when, that same night, the children of midnight launched a concerted assault on me, I had no defence ... (MC 298)

Though the midnight children desert him, he feels optimistic that one day he can bring all of them back. India too feels that same optimism growing, that the war would be successful. That optimism about war with China drains away when an attack takes place at Walong and it turns out to be a great disaster for India. But then China announces a ceasefire. At the same time, Bhakra Nangal Hydro-Electric Dam too suffers a crack and so the great reservoir drains out through the fissure. When this drainings takes place, something happens in Saleem Sinai's life too, which drains him of his future and his life with the midnight children. His sinus is being drained and he is freed from the nasal fluid.

...the operation...once-and-for-all clearing of my nasal passages had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing-chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight children... (MC 304)

In 1965, the Indo-Pakistan war takes place. There is bombing everywhere both in India and Pakistan. Due to the bombing, Saleem is drained of all memories and all senses except for his olfactory sense. He is born new to the world with no past to remember and no future to plan for. He becomes the 'Buddha' with silence as his language. It can be said that such fate befalls him to link him to India again. He becomes a ma-dog, a sniffer in the CUTIA unit of the Pakistan army. His loss of memory is to cut off all the links with Pakistan and to be newly born in India. He is handcuffed to Indian history and so events cannot happen without him in India. But whatever has to happen to him or to his life the basis is laid. Indira Gandhi wins the election and becomes the Prime Minister of India. A troop of Indian soldiers is sent to Bangladesh and Indo-Pakistan war starts in 1971. It is at this time that Saleem too comes to Bangladesh but is on the other side of the war and not as a soldier but as a man-dog. Saleem is convinced that

...the purpose of that entire war has been to reunite me with an old life, to bring me back together with my old friends ... and the modes of connection lingered on ... I heard about the exploits of knees ... and in Dacca, I was to meet Parvati –the-Witch ... (MC 373)

In May 1974, India tests its first nuclear weapon and enters the Nuclear age. The tests take place in Rajasthan. On the same day, Shiva who had been exempted from the Conference of Midnight's Children and the memory of Saleem explodes in his life. This time there is no getting away from Shiva for Saleem. On January 26th, when India celebrates its Republic Day, Saleem Sinai too needs to celebrate. He is married to Parvati-the – Witch, henceforth called Laylah Sinai as she is converted into a Muslim to marry

Saleem. The country's celebration seems to be for the wedding of Saleem and Parvati. Saleem too feels "... and after that, the Republic Day celebrations acquired the air of having been staged especially for our benefit..." (MC 415).

Laylah Sinai enters into 13 days labour when Indira Gandhi is forced to resign. Indira Gandhi puts on hold her resignation for thirteen days, and discusses her political strategy. At the end of the 13-day struggle, Aadam Sinai, the son of Parvati alias Laylah and Saleem is born – he too is born exactly at the stroke of midnight on 25th June 1975, at the exact time Indira comes out with her brainchild – the Emergency in India.

Like Saleem's historically important birth, his son Aadam Sinai is also born at the moment of historical landmark in India. The word 'Emergency' is heard by people for the first time in the nation. Saleem's link to India continues in the next generation too. Saleem recalls the tension-filled birth of them both (the birth of Emergency and the birth of his son):

Parvati gave a final pitiable little yelp and out he popped, while all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the pro-Moscow communists, and also school teachers lawyers poets newspapermen trade-unionists, in fact, anyone who had ever made the mistake of sneezing during the Madam's speeches, ... and suspension of civil rights, and censorship-of-the press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements: something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my son, the child of the renewed tick-tock, come out into the world... (MC 419)

Aadam Sinai thus being linked to India like his father reflects the rule of Emergency in his physiognomy. He does not utter a cry or even a whimper from his birth. He is, to say plainly, dumb. His speechlessness is because of the emergency that banned people from speaking, prohibiting them from expressing their thoughts and views. So, Aadam Sinai's efforts are all concentrated on listening to others speaking in murmured tones and the result is, that he is born with "...big ears which flapped so high and wide that they must have heard the shootings in Bihar and the screams of lathi-charges dock-workers in Bombay..." (MC 420).

During an emergency, the ghettos are bulldozed as part of the Civic Beautification Programme, an authorized operation of the Sanjay Youth Central Committee. This operation shatters the magicians' hovels and many people die. Saleem observes that this beautification programme is to capture him – the founder of Midnight Children's Conference.

Saleem or rather Rushdie beautifully synchronizes the sterilization programme during the emergency period with that of midnight children. He believes that the then Prime Minister of India has made it a point to eliminate the midnight children from the world by making them impotent. And so, four hundred and twenty midnight children undergo vasectomy and tubectomy and most important of all – Sperectomy: the draining out of hope.

Thus, Saleem's link with Indian history ends as he is drained of all the gifts bestowed on him because of his birth at midnight. But the ball is passed on to Aadam Sinai, his son who is also born during historical midnight – the birth of Emergency. Indira Gandhi is defeated in the general elections and Saleem is drained of hope. Saleem recalls, "...No longer connected to history, drained above – and – below, I made my way back to the capital,

conscious that an age, which had begun on that long-ago midnight, had come to a sort of end..." (MC 442).

The following table gives, in a nutshell, the effective use of bildungsroman in the novel – the life of the protagonist and the history of India:

Year	India's History	Saleem's Life
1947	India's Independence	Saleem Sinai's birth
1956	5-year plans take up lots of funds with little output and confusion due to discrimination of language	Confusion in Saleem's head
1962	The Chinese attacked the Indian army	Midnight's children attack Saleem Sinai
1965	Indo-Pakistan war; India's arrival at the nuclear age	Shiva's explosion into Saleem's life
1975	Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule	Parvati – Saleem's wife's labour and his son Aadam Sinai's birth

1976	Sanjay Gandhi's projects - Slum clearance and Vasectomy to reduce population	420-midnight children in captivity and Saleem's draining of hope - Sperectomy
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Conclusion

Ron Shepherd, in *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, categorises *Midnight's Children* as a novel, which fits into the mode of post-modernist fantasy. He states, "It is a Novel which is at once experimental, interrogative, confessional, polemical and irrationally subjective" (Shepherd 35). It is a clever blending of history, political allegory, and the realm of fantasy. This novel is a good example of the bildungsroman genre. In it, Rushdie has marked India's growth with the help of the story of his protagonist, Saleem Sinai. But the growth that is spoken of is not a positive one. It speaks of the disintegration of India through Saleem. Throughout the novel Saleem has been on a slide towards disintegration; he loses his finger, hair, sense of smell, and memory and finally ends up an impotent. This disintegration of Saleem's self is a hint at India's disintegration after Independence.

Through Saleem's life goes towards disintegration, there is a spark of life in the next generation, i.e., in Aadam Sinai, the son of Saleem Sinai. In the way it highlights the Indian experience throughout the novel, *Midnight's Children* is the story of a country finding its voice.

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