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Fiction, History and an Ethic of Imagination in *Midnight's Children*

In a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case...

A little bird whispers in my ear: "Be fair! Nobody, no country, has a monopoly of untruth."

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

In exploring the possibility of an ethic of imagination, this paper is positioned between two alternately contrary and commensurate notions of Salman Rushdie's project, if we can take his novels as such. On one hand his work, and for the purposes of this paper I will be focusing exclusively on *Midnight's Children*, is construed as a third-world text in the sense of operating within the rubric and alignment of postcolonial discourse. The other camp favors Rushdie as a postmodernist, and *Midnight's Children* as a "historiographic metafiction."¹ Conceiving of Rushdie as the latter does not necessarily preclude his work from being considered postcolonial, as the underlying gist of each would posit his novels, in one way or another, as "subversions of conventional Western historiography."² M. Keith Booker, whose argument I paraphrase above, contends, however, that "accounts of Rushdie's subversion of conventional historiography," as postcolonial and/or postmodern texts, "tend to be insufficiently theorized... failing to specify exactly how and why the exuberant presentation of Saleem's memory, as erratic, confused, and often fabricated, somehow shakes the mighty ideological foundations upon which the global power of Western Capitalism has been built."³ It is my contention that Rushdie does not belong in either

¹ Booker, M. Keith, "*Midnight's Children*, History, and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War," *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, (G.K Hall & Co., New York City, 1999), 295.

² Booker, 283.

³ Booker, 284.

camp, and that *Midnight's Children* is not a subversion of conventional or Western historiography so much as an engagement with its formal logic. I would argue that *Midnight's Children* contains elements of both the national allegory as a postcolonial (though not necessarily subaltern) rhetorical device and postmodern metafiction, but not in an attempt to subvert conventional historiography. Rather both forms are parodied in Rushdie's text, and are implicated along with traditional history writing. Rushdie is not "subverting" Western historiography but rather casting doubt on the claims of any written history or representation of the world, posing each as an act of the imagination. In this sense conventional history and the postcolonial national allegory are subject to the same abuses: the tendency to create a totalizing narrative that precludes the possibility for alternatives and distorts external facts for the purposes of preserving this exclusivity. Additionally, I would argue that Rushdie's parodic treatment of postmodern metafiction is meant to demonstrate the tendency for postmodernism to forgo any sense of ethical responsibility. This is all in an effort to uncover an ethic in the imaginative act. For Rushdie the realm of imagination does not furnish an escape from the real world where people are killed by bombs and bullets; in fact for Rushdie escape is impossible. In destabilizing our modes of representation Rushdie is not denying the possibility of reality, he is demanding the acknowledgement that reality always exists beyond the representation.

In order to further the discussion of *Midnight's Children* as a parody of established historiography, third-world national allegory, and postmodern metafiction, but not necessarily a politically committed subversion of history writing as such, a brief look at the difficulty befalling many critical interpretations of Rushdie's work is worthwhile. The "insufficient theorization" that Booker suggests could be due, in part, to the rather ambiguous position Rushdie seems to occupy in relation to the postcolonial third-world and the formerly colonizing first,⁴ both in his personal

⁴ There is a valid argument for multinational capitalism to be seen as a form of neocolonialism, but for the purposes of this paper it is simpler and sufficient to conceive of, if not the third and first world entirely, then at least India and Britain as no longer existing in a colonized/colonizer relationship, if conceiving of the two strictly in those terms was ever applicable.

affairs and the content of his work. Booker is using the term postcolonial in the sense of political orientation and commitment, or “cultural activity that seeks to contribute to the development of new cultural identities that contest the legacy of the colonial past in formerly colonial areas.”⁵ An ethic within this discourse (based on Booker’s definition), if one were to be identified, would seem to revolve around the moral exigencies of contesting and righting past (mis)representations by the colonial elite and developing “new cultural identities” shorn of their colonial implications. There is, in this formulation, a looking back on and refashioning of past modes of representation in order to posit an affirmative rendering. Much work in this vein has come from the Subaltern Studies Group, with the notion of recuperating lost and silenced voices. Gyanendra Pandey, in a critique of Western historiography, avers that “the historian needs to struggle to recover ‘marginal’ voices and memories, forgotten dreams and signs of resistance, if history is to be anything more than a celebratory account of the march of certain concepts and powers like the nation-state, bureaucratic rationalism, capitalism, science and progress.”⁶ Within Subaltern Studies the onus for the “development of new cultural identities” is on history, though not the “historians’ history” dominant in the West and in non-west nationalist narratives that preserve this logic. Implicit in the few alternative sources of ‘history’ that Pandey mentions, “dreams,” “memories,” and “signs of resistance,” is the notion that the history of the subaltern postcolonial subject will be not just different in content but different in kind. The form that this alternative, affirmative history assumes will be variegated and distinct.

This definition, however, would not bar Rushdie’s inclusion in postcolonial, and perhaps by extension, subaltern discourse. It should be noted as well that those scholars engaged in subaltern discourse are not themselves subaltern subjects, in fact entering into that discourse precludes that possibility. His novels, and specifically *Midnight’s Children*, include such motifs as “dreams” and “memories” in the writing of an alternative history, in this case the

⁵ Booker, 286.

⁶ Pandey, Gyanendra, “The Prose of Otherness,” *Subaltern Studies VIII, Essays in Honor of Ranajit Guha*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, 1994), 214.

autobiography/national allegory of Saleem Sinai as India. *Midnight's Children* is not, however, written from the perspective of what might be considered a subaltern, or marginal, subject. In casting Saleem into one of India's more privileged classes (though Saleem and his family undoubtedly occupy minority status, given their Muslim identity), Rushdie is specifically replaying *dominant* modes of history in parodic form. This includes nationalist postcolonial discourse.

The national allegory, while not in itself exclusively a postcolonial form, does often lend itself to the creation of "new cultural identities," crucial, in Booker's account, to any truly postcolonial work. Or, if we were to take Jameson's point of view, all novels arising from the third-world are necessarily national allegories, and "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."⁷ Without being able to comfortably avoid the "life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism,"⁸ the life and by extension written work of the third-world subject is invariably tied to the political dimension. There is no separation between the private and the public.

Booker, however, argues that "the sheer obviousness of Sinai's role as a figure of India, combined with the ironic postmodern playfulness of Rushdie's text, suggests that *Midnight's Children* is not so much a national allegory proper as a parody of such allegories."⁹ An obstacle confronting those that would accept Rushdie into the fold of postcolonial and/or subaltern writers is the ambiguity his parody engenders and thus the difficulty in establishing his underlying political motivation. There is also a tendency to perceive the element of parody in Rushdie's work as flying in the face of more politically committed writers within the third-world. Timothy Brennan advances a roster of international writers, Rushdie included, who hail from third-world locations but often make their home in the West, whom he describes as "cosmopolitan celebrities."¹⁰ Despite

⁷ Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, 15 (Fall 1986), 69.

⁸ Jameson, 68.

⁹ Booker, 292.

¹⁰ Brennan, Timothy. "Cosmopolitans and celebrities," *Race & Class*, 31, 1 (1989).

many important differences, according to Brennan these writers “seem to share a harsh questioning of radical decolonization theory; [and] a dismissive or parodic attitude towards the project of national culture.”¹¹ Brennan is in line with Booker in identifying the creation of national cultural products as a project of the committed postcolonial writer, and underscores the tendency to view a critical engagement of this project on the part of the “cosmopolitan” writer as necessarily “dismissive.”¹² Brennan casts Rushdie and his perceived ilk as derisive and elite, and their very status as “cosmopolitans” as violating “an important third-world rhetorical mode.”¹³ *Midnight’s Children*, and other of Rushdie’s work, are then left in a tenuous position: based in the third-world but written from without; incorporating a nationalist postcolonial discursive rhetoric and yet casting it as parody; and employing alternative modes of history commensurate with the subaltern but not from the position of a subaltern subject.

The inability (and flat unwillingness, in the case of Brennan) of postcolonial critics to successfully argue for Rushdie’s subversion of Western historiography and affirmative contribution to a national cultural project has been met, according to Booker, by an equally unsuccessful attempt by certain postmodernists. Though both camps seem to agree that Rushdie is doing the same thing, deposing Western modes of historical representation, the postmodern perspective takes a markedly different approach. To paraphrase, Booker contends that the postmodern fragmentation of the individual subject and the subsequent collapse of meaning within signifier/signified sign pairs, coupled with the blurring of distinction between the aesthetic and the political are all evidenced in Rushdie’s work. This adoption of a postmodern sensibility does not, however, indicate a subversion of Western historiography, per se, as the fragmentation inherent in postmodern thought is, by Jameson’s account, part and parcel of late capitalism and thus intimately bound to the logic that Rushdie supposedly subverts. This is all to say that there is nothing inherently political in the

¹¹ Brennan, 7.

¹² What he fails to recognize, however, is the potential for the constructive use of parody, and the critical role of the artist in any “project of national culture.” I will return to this point later in the paper.

¹³ Brennan, 10.

postmodernist notion of the text, and that if Rushdie's is a postmodern text, then there's nothing inherently political about it either. But what Booker fails to adequately address are the particulars of Rushdie's engagement with postmodern metafiction, and what I would argue is his parody of such theoretic. Booker creates a straw (wo)man out of Linda Hutcheon, a critic he lambastes for equating postmodern metafiction in general, and Rushdie's in particular, with subversiveness. Despite this apparent hole in Hutcheon's argument, Booker never takes into account the possibility of a subversive, political or ethical use or interpretation of postmodernism, nor does he actually address the text of *Midnight's Children* with any but the most cursory of readings.

Despite the inadequacies of Booker's argument in this section of his essay, I would agree with his basic notion that such a debate over Rushdie *is* taking place, and that perhaps critical interpretations employing both postcolonial and postmodern theories have been unsuccessful in laying claim to Rushdie's work. If Rushdie himself were to have any say in the matter, he would contend that "at times when the state takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs, then the making of the alternative realities of art, including the novel of memory, becomes politicized." I am not including Rushdie's argument because I think his is the last say on the matter. Rather because this notion, that politicians and writers "are natural rivals," that strive "to make the word in their own images,"¹⁴ is a useful place to begin a formal investigation of an ethic of imagination. For if the writer and politician vie for the same piece of territory, both seeking "to make the world" in the image they endorse or desire, then their methods, too, may overlap. The same abuses of imagination Rushdie identifies in the politician, the distortion and alteration of the past to enable the present, can also befall the writer. With the danger of slipping into hyperbole, depending on a given perspective acts of resistance can look awfully like terrorism, and violence carried out by the state is often no more than terrorism behind the veil of legitimacy.

¹⁴ Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (Granta Books, London, 1991), 14.

Here then is the beginning of an explanation. The difficulty in claiming *Midnight's Children* "subverts Western historiography" is exacerbated by the seeming ambiguity of the narrative. This, I would argue, is the effect of his relentless parody and consequent political ambivalence. In the final section of his essay, Booker accuses Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* of suppressing the "proud heritage of Marxist anticolonialism," and "any specific critique of capitalism."¹⁵ He contends that Rushdie, in line with other postcolonial challenges to Western historiography, does not distinguish the bourgeois from the antibourgeois, casting both off for their similarity of form. Booker goes on to elaborate upon Rushdie's (unfair) treatment of the communist party in India, represented by the ineffectual Qasim the Red and later in the magicians' ghetto, and to defend Indira Gandhi and the two year state of Emergency during her rule.

Booker's vitriolic attack is, if nothing else, a tad myopic. The sweeping parodic satire of nearly all political factions within *Midnight's Children* could point to anti-Stalinist Cold War propaganda, as Booker suggests. Or, and I would suggest this is the case, one could recognize that in Rushdie's, or perhaps it would be more accurate at this point to say Saleem's, treatment of politics no one comes out clean. Whether or not *Midnight's Children* 'suppresses' Marxism, or for that matter any permutation of political thought is, perhaps, beside the point. Every politician, state power, and political group engages in the creation of fictions to address the needs of the moment, and it is this that Rushdie takes issue with. Political ambivalence is the result of profound skepticism, not, in this case, bourgeois self-preservation. It should also be noted that the writer engaged in the creation of imaginative fictions is also implicated, and not just the politically motivated. In this sense Saleem's own narrative is called into question.

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¹⁵ Booker, 301. The title of this section of Booker's essay is "*Midnight's Children* and the Marxist Challenge to Bourgeois Historiography."

The trifold parody within *Midnight's Children* that I identify—the parody of state and official history and representation, of national allegory as a postcolonial rhetorical device, and of postmodernity's decentered text—is, in some sense, an artificial distinction between forms. What is ultimately under scrutiny is not any one discursive form, but the very process of representation and the creation of fictions. Separating the three is meant to highlight their importance within the narrative, but not to say that these are the exclusive and not overlapping) modes of representation and apprehending the world that are parodied within *Midnight's Children*. In fact one could make an equally strong argument for the parodic treatment of oral and written storytelling, myth, religion, family centered sagas and so on. The three that I have chosen can perhaps serve as fill-ins for the rest. Additionally, the 'allegory' as a literary form will pop up in all three sections. This is due to the various uses of allegory, for instance in both postcolonial and statist discourse, and the relation between allegory as metaphor and the postmodern stance that all language is essentially metaphoric.

I draw particular attention to the national allegory because it is the most aggressive and self-conscious use of allegory throughout *Midnight's Children*. Jameson provides useful criteria for apprehending what constitutes a national allegory written in the third-world, which is the ostensible locus of *Midnight's Children*. Without involving the criticism of Brennan concerning the cultural and ideological standing of Rushdie as a “cosmopolitan celebrity,” Jameson's definition will provide at least a point of departure. For Jameson all texts, and specifically novels, arising from the third-world are national allegories due to the relations between the “subjective and the public or political.”¹⁶ Elaborating on the differences in these relations between the first and third-world, Jameson argues:

One of the determinants of capitalist culture, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and public... between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that

¹⁶ Jameson, 69.

of the public world of classes... [and] the relations between them are wholly different in third-world culture. Third-world texts... necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.¹⁷

I quote this passage in block form in order to include the full definition of the third-world national allegory and in contrast to first world or western modes of representation. A key element of Jameson's definition is the "embattled situation" of the third-world nation, defending itself as it were from the cultural and economic incursions of the first-world. What is immediately noticeable in *Midnight's Children* is the marked lack of a first-world presence after August 15, 1947, the simultaneous birth of Saleem Sinai, the novel's protagonist, and the modern independent Indian nation-state. William Methwold, the sole Englishman to have a meaningful role in the lives of the characters (though Mountbatten is mentioned often), disappears at this point, and his continued influence is felt only in subtle, unsuspecting ways. Evie Burns is one notable exception to this, and her presence as an American living in India is certainly confrontational, though very short-lived. For Jameson the notion of being on the defensive reaches into all aspects of third-world life, so drastically coloring the day-to-day reality of the individual citizen that it cannot possibly be ignored. In *Midnight's Children*, however, the particular exigencies confronting Saleem are not foreign incursions but the growing pains of the newborn state. Saleem's "individual destiny" is not an allegory of the India nation-state "embattled" by external forces, but rather a nation striving to establish its identity. This self-actualization is not a struggle for freedom from oppression, for independence, but a struggle to realize an identity *in* independence. Removing the dynamic of subjugation from without shifts the focus to the often contradictory and violent internal elements confronting the newly conceived nation-state. While largely eliminating the "life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism" does not exclude *Midnight's Children* from participating in the discourse of the national allegorical form, it is a distinction worth noting. The

¹⁷ Jameson, 69.

difficulty some critics have faced in consigning *Midnight's Children* a role in a nationalist postcolonial project could be due in part to this move, as the rhetorical modes employed in this project are, in Saleem's parody, turned in on themselves. I will address this issue in more detail at a later point, but first the particular aspects of Saleem's allegory must be considered.

From the very opening of the novel Saleem Sinai posits himself in a unique ontological position. He is "handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (3).¹⁸ Saleem is also engaged in writing his story (and by extension the story of independent India) in order to "end up meaning something" (4). It deserves notice at this very early point in the novel that in order to "mean" something Saleem posits that his story must be written. The implication being that "meaning" lies not in the corporeal subject, per se, but beyond the subject in some textual (in the broad sense) representation. What is unique about this formulation is Saleem's self-conscious acceptance and insistence on his own role as an allegory for the nation. The collapse between the realm of the private and the public sphere is taken to the level of absurdity. Saleem quite literally embodies the nation. His face is a map of India (277); his faster than normal growth as an infant mirrors the young state's "explosive growth" (286); and his eventual dissolution into six hundred million "specks of voiceless dust" suggests his body is composed of India's population, each speck standing for one of her six hundred million citizens (552).

Beyond these physical characteristics is a direct causal relationship between the events of his life and the events of the state. This is supported by an official letter from Prime Minister Nehru, which reads, in part, "...your life, which will be, in a sense, a mirror of our own," prompts Saleem to ask, "*In what sense?*" (285, emphasis in the original). He provides a thorough exposition on the various interpretations and uses of allegorical relationships and provides examples from the preceding narrative when the various "modes of connection" were employed.

¹⁸ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*, (Penguin Books, New York City, 1980). Page number appears in parenthesis within the essay.

He even goes so far as to explain the system of causal relations to Padma, his illiterate audience of one who listens to him narrate his tale as he goes along. This pedagogic aside is a lesson both for Padma and for the reader. The point is not only to prove the literal and metaphorical connection that exists between him and the state, but also to illustrate the literariness of his usage of such connections by teaching Padma and the reader how to read the text. By pointing to moments within the text wherein he employs a patently *literary device*, the allegory, which he defines in literary terms (actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically) but at the same time maintaining the truthfulness of the story (it is, after all, ostensibly an autobiography), Saleem begins to demonstrate the artifice of his project. When Jameson discusses the lack of any boundary between the private life of the individual and the public life of the nation in the third-world it results in a politization of art and representation. The difficulties and uncertainties affecting the nation are manifest in the representation of an individual life, so that the political dimension is the signified and the life of the private subject the signifier. For Saleem the lack of a boundary, the mirroring between his life and the life of the nation, is essentially a contamination of this sign-signifier pair. Allegory as metaphor is, in Saleem's rendering, also a literal relationship of interaction. As evidenced in passages Saleem himself cites in explaining his allegory, relatively minor events in his life have broad consequences for the nation. Saleem is both stand-in for the nation, the sign, but in his own parodic logic, also its voodoo doll.

Perhaps the greatest expression of the allegory's parodic excess is the Midnight's Children Conference. Saleem as stand-in for India possesses the gift of a unique telepathy, so that he can both "look into the hearts and minds of men" (239) but also provide a platform for communication between the children of midnight. The idea of a nation is given a unified whole, and the definition of a nation as an "imagined community," as put forth by Benedict Anderson, is in this case made quite literal. Anderson writes, "I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community... *imagined* because the members... will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (emphasis in the

original).¹⁹ While it would be anachronistic to suggest Rushdie is directly quoting Anderson, as *Midnight's Children* was published two years prior to *Imaginary Communities*, there is a striking similarity in their imagery. For Anderson a nation as a coherent entity is by necessity an imagined one, and the process of creating the idea of what that entity *is* requires a collective, imaginary place of communion. This is, of course, the function Saleem fulfills, and the nation-as-idea becomes, once again, literal.

The possibility of a national allegory is predicated on the idea of a nation, and in this sense the nation-state as an imagined community exists in a similar conceptual framework as the national allegory. In the national allegory the idea of the nation and the represented life of the individual are effectively, and in varying degrees, transposed. With this in mind, the national allegory is in a sense the figuring of the individual into the imagined community of the nation-state. According to Neil Ten Kortenaar, “the nation-state itself is always a function of a double perspective, at once a projection of the self on the scale of the world and a means of locating the self within the world.”²⁰ This double perspective, the figuring of the individual “I” into the imagined “we” invariably results in distortion. For Saleem figuring the “I” involves the creation of a narrative, and within Saleem’s narrativization the gravity attached to certain events, chronology and basic facts must often times be adjusted in order to allow for his continued centrality. Part of Saleem’s insistence on his status of centered subject, as the lone stand-in for India, is parodic of the notion of any national allegory. To posit a single narrative as signifier for the nation is, as Saleem’s example demonstrates, inherently an act of censorship. Telling one story privileges that story’s form of representation over others, and in order to claim and hold centrality one must shape “facts” to fit. When confronted by Padma concerning the veracity of the children of midnight, Saleem exclaims:

¹⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, (The Thetford Press Ltd, Thetford, Norfolk, 1983), 15.

²⁰ Kortenaar, Neil Ten. *Self, Nation and Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2004), 10.

I told you the truth... Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events. (253)

The above quote demonstrates the necessary logical result of Saleem's life as the national allegory for the history of postcolonial India. In figuring himself into and as the nation-state Saleem is constantly vying for centrality, as his position within the national allegory depends on his retaining the role of signifier. The notion of "memory's truth" enables the writer to rely on his own perception of events and disregard opposing versions. As Saleem adds, "no sane human being trusts someone else's version more than his own" (253). Saleem's parody is an allegory of the nation-state but, through the parody, also an allegory of the process by which that nation-state comes into being as an imagined entity. As before when Saleem instructed Padma and the reader how to *read* the text, he is now demonstrating the way in which the national allegory is *written*.

What becomes clear in the above discussion is that both the individual subject within the nation and the nation itself must be written or in some sense represented in order to "mean anything." Part then of the process is trying to reify that meaning against competing narratives. This harkens back to Rushdie's charge against the State's treatment of "reality," and Saleem's capacity to also "take reality into his own hands." Saleem is rather defensive against Padma's suggestion of malfeasance, first insisting on the universal nature of "memory's truth," then waxing grandiloquent and including Muhammad, Jesus and the Maya, or dream-web, of the deity Brahma in his defense to question the very nature of sanity and reality. What he finally rests on, however, is the drive of the narrative itself. "But," he asks Padma, "you also—don't you—want to know what happens?" (254). In a latter section, Saleem begins to rely more heavily on Padma to serve as the barometer of believability, the "dance of her musculature" signaling to him whether she is "uninterested" or "unconvinced." These two responses serve as adequate guides to the writing of "autobiography, as... all literature," he observes, because "what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe" (325).

In showing his hand Saleem is also exposing the logic behind the state's fictions, and the violent disjuncture that can occur between what is represented and what "actually happened." As Padma gets swept up into the story he is telling her, Saleem later fulfills the role of audience as a "citizen of Pakistan," after becoming "empty of history" (419). The citizen, it should be noted, is the audience of the state's fictions. As Saleem looks upon the horrific violence unleashed on the slums of Dacca by the soldiers of West Pakistan, he labels what the evident violence as "things that weren't-couldn't-have-been true" (426), a sarcastic parroting of the state's position. Indira Gandhi provides another example of the statist abuse of fictions and the violence employed in maintaining control over what is believed. Additionally, she is the only individual that directly challenges Saleem's centrality within the text, whose India threatens to eclipse his own. Saleem considers,

Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the State and myself transmuted, in "the Madam's" mind, into that in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India?* Were we competing for centrality—was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own—and was that, was that why...? (501)

For the Widow this lust for meaning is also the lust for power, and the insertion of the self into the central role, equating the self with the state, manifests as a totalizing and repressive regime.

Saleem very clearly implicates himself in the above passage, as the equation he had based his life on becomes the Widow's own. The Widow's representation of reality in *her* India, when she and the nation become coterminous, is presented as partial, as "the Emergency...had a white part—public, visible, documented, a matter for historians—and a black part which, being secret macabre untold" (501). The "untold" being sterilizations in the slums and the imprisonment and torture of her political opponents, and the "documented" fiction is, as with Saleem, an act of imagination.

Drawing a distinction between the "white" and the "black," Saleem is marking the line between what is allowed into a representation of reality and the elements that must be suppressed in order to preserve the inviolability of that representation. Saleem shuts Shiva out of the Midnight Children's Conference for fear that the truth of their being switched at birth would jeopardize his position as would-be leader of the group and son within the Sinai/Aziz family (339). The Widow

must silence opposition in order to preserve her continued rule. Thus we see the eradication of the magicians' ghetto and the sterilization of the children of midnight on top of the silencing of political opponents—all three serving as reminders of alternate interpretations and representations of reality. Just as when West Pakistan invaded the East after the talks broke down between Yahya, Bhutto and Mujib (424), in an attempt to quash East Pakistan's "dissent." These two examples are equivalent to the omission and distortion of facts that Saleem performs in the creation of his narrative. Yet when a state's narrative of power and legitimacy is threatened, the need to ensure a consistent, totalizing control over the representation of reality results in the violent suppression of dissidents.

At this point the suggestion of an ethic of imagination emerges. Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Saleem serves not as an exemplary historian but rather a counter to the notion of unimpeachable historiography. His fictions were of an individual within the State, and his equation between the State and himself was on the level of parodic national allegory. When the fictions are on the scale of the State, however, the stakes are higher. Though both Saleem's and the State's fiction are subject to the same abuses—censoring alternatives, distorting facts, etcetera—the means of preserving that position of exclusivity is radically different. Despite the unreliability he has engendered, in presenting the "black" side of events Saleem's narrative serves to recuperate a suppressed history and runs counter to the totalizing narrative of the State. Though the parodic treatment of allegory both as a tool of the postcolonial subject and of tyrants (in the case of the Widow) creates the grounds for a profound skepticism, this should not disqualify Saleem's text entirely. Rather, in implicating himself Saleem is, as I have suggested earlier, positing the imaginative quality of every representation. An ethic then concerns how that imaginative act is approached and to what ends the representation is employed. In this sense Saleem's narrative can be both suspect and, at least in part, a more ethical rendering of reality in that his attempt to recuperate suppressed histories in the very least acknowledges their existence.

In order to further the notion of an ethic in the imaginative act, it is worthwhile to briefly explore the ways in which certain claims of postmodernism are incorporated and parodied within *Midnight's Children*. This parody is perhaps less prevalent than that of postcolonial and statist national allegory, yet the tendency for the postmodern treatment of language, which I will be focusing on here, to preclude an ethical responsibility in any text is duly dealt with. Though Booker draws particular attention to the aestheticization of politics in his discussion of postmodern metafiction, I will not deal with this theme specifically, as it is beyond the scope of this paper. In *Midnight's Children*, language itself and the internal logic that the formation of a narrative creates become implicated in the dissociation between reality and its representation. The question of meaning is constantly called into question as characters and elements in the story return again and again in various permutations. They develop into a leitmotif, where certain elements seem to “mean” only what they reference within the story. The cyclical nature of this relationship, however, begins to unravel the possibility for meaning, as one stands for the other in constant transposition. The recurrence of jewels, for instance, becomes such a leitmotif. In describing the Widow's Hand, Indira Gandhi's agent of sterilization, Saleem muses that she had “once owned a jewelry boutique. I began amid jewels; in Kashmir, in 1915 there were rubies and diamonds. My great-grandparents ran a gemstone store. Form—once again, recurrence and shape!—no escape from it” (524). The narrative form that has developed, that Saleem has, in fact created, begins to exert its own logic, and connections are made between seemingly disparate phenomena. The fact that the Widow's Hand once owned a jewelry boutique does not *mean* anything, per se, it simply calls to mind previous instances where jewels have figured into the story. The meaning is determined by sheer recurrence, and the leitmotif does not come to be associated with a recurring theme or idea beyond recurrence itself. Alternately, there are instances when a reference is clear initially but devolve as the story progresses. In the beginning of the novel: “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade” (4), suggests that Saleem, who is telling a story over a length of time, at night, to an audience of one, is in a similar position as the narrator of 1,001 Arabian Nights. The number

1,001 is picked up, representing the “number of magic” and the number of children born within the magical hour of midnight (234). Yet by the end the initial connection has been lost, or at least muddled. Saleem says, “sometimes I feel like a thousand years old: or, (because I cannot, even now, abandon form), to be exact, a thousand and one” (524). The narrative’s form and insistence on recurrence has rendered the initial metaphor empty.

In drawing such blatant attention to “form” in both examples above, Rushdie is referring to both the form of the narrative and the form that narrative is presented in namely, language. I would argue that the use of various leitmotif throughout the novel is meant to suggest the unstable nature of any sign, as explained by Jacques Lacan, “no meaning is sustained by anything other than reference to another meaning,” and, “we are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier.”²¹ The result of this endless referentiality is not a forfeiture of meaning so much as a surfeit. This results in the signifier becoming meaningless, in a sense, as the initial corresponding signified is itself a signifier in another sign pair, and so on, resulting in a meaning that is constantly deferred. Rushdie applies this logic to the number 1,001, ultimately surrendering the number to an empty leitmotif as the initial metaphor undergoes a series of permutations. Language itself runs the risk of losing any grounding in reality, and the representation becomes lost to the illusions. But ultimately this is a playful gesture, as Saleem exclaims, as if in complete amazement, that “form” has once again overtaken him.

There is one pertinent example within *Midnight’s Children*, however, when the illusion over takes the individual, and the capacity to distinguish between the representation of the thing and the thing itself becomes lost. I do not wish to force this comparison, and so will briefly elaborate on the idea of “text” as used in a postmodern notion of the word. The reading of words on a page becomes, through dutiful extension of Lacan’s above mentioned explication of the relationship between signifier and signified, to take all perceived reality as text, and each element

²¹ Lacan, Jacques. “The insistence of the letter in the unconscious,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 36/37, *Structuralism*. (1966), pp. 112-147.

we encounter in the world a sign that is read. Following in this, any understanding of the world is subject to the same distortions of meaning, and the presented “signs” must read by the sensing self. I include this brief aside in order to discuss one of the illusionists in the magicians’ ghetto, Christi Khan, who has “committed the ultimate solecism of permitting his illusionist expertise to infect his real life” (478). The magicians are so marvelously adept at their skills because their “hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was” (476). Christi Khan is a victim of, if you will allow, such a postmodern treatment of the world, wherein illusion has fully permeated his reality. I use the word illusion here to stand in for “representation” or “art,” be it language or magic, as each are media in which reality is recast. The use of the word “solecism” here is important. Solecism means both “a breach of good manners; a piece of incorrect behavior,” but also, “a grammatical mistake in speech or writing.”²² This dual definition suggests that, beyond a social faux pas, Christi Khan has committed an error in his *language*; the representation has supplanted its referent reality.

The rest of the magicians, however, are able to hold tight to that division, and are able to employ it to fully master their art. While there is nothing intrinsically ethical about the magicians’ craft, I return to the ethic of imagination at this point due not to their craft so much as their treatment of reality. Where I posited earlier that Saleem’s narrative is, though suspect, suggestive of an ethic by attempting to recuperate suppressed histories, the magicians are engaged in a similar approach to representation. The magicians approach their art in just the way Saleem brought the reader to realize all representations of reality must be approached: as limited and partial, mere impressions of some final referent reality. The postmodern treatment of language described above can result, therefore, in a shirking of ethical responsibility, as the world as text abstracts the

²² This definition is from the *Oxford American Dictionary*.

relationship between the reader and reality. Chris McNab, in an essay exploring the ethics of mortality in Derrida and Rushdie, writes of *Midnight's Children*,

The ethical confrontations that emerge... are born out of paradox. On one level there are the moral challenges in the crossover space between history and fiction... *Midnight's Children*... is a fiction which continually leaps beyond the pages of the book and compels the reader to admit, to take responsibility for, the extra-textual history where people *are* killed and bombs *do* explode... His constant digressions, admissions of authorial fallibility and deliberate chronological error, all enforce a relation to history not as fixed entity but as shifting act of narrativization.²³

McNab seems to use the word history to mean both history as it is written, an “act of narrativization,” and history as something other than or beyond text, as a place where people die—the referent reality I have been suggesting. The “paradox” that he identifies arises from the fact that Rushdie’s fiction directs us to a reality that is always qualified. For as soon as extra-textual history, reality, enters into fictions, even as a place we are ushered towards, it is no longer firmly outside the vagaries of language. Positioning oneself as a reader between the textual and extra-textual world is thus always fraught, as the boundary between each world is constantly shifting.

Although Rushdie acknowledges that there are limitations inherent in any representation, he holds that new narratives must be created. By ending *Midnight's Children* with Saleem’s (prophesized) death and the birth of his son, Rushdie is offering forth a new beginning. The children of midnight entered into the promise of a secular democratic India, and the children of the Emergency were born into the betrayal of that promise. Their story will be different, for as Saleem finds with Aadam, they “do not... surrender to dreams” (507). To “surrender” is, as detailed above, to lose sight of the extra-textual, to be lost in the illusion of the representation. Saleem, the children of midnight, and the regime of Indira Gandhi fell prey to this tendency. The next generation will, by refusing to surrender, incorporate an ethic into their creations. An ethic of the imaginative act, as I have argued, creates a fiction that both allows for and gestures toward the

²³ McNab, Chris. “Derrida, Rushdie and the Ethics of Mortality,” *The Ethics in Literature*, (Macmillan Press LTD, London, 1999), 142.

extra-textual. Yet this charge would fall into the paradox McNab describes. It would seem that in the end we can only deal with these imperfect tools, our fictions, and that an ethical rendering is only a matter of degree. Though the text can never truly account for the world beyond, it can, as Saleem continually reminds us, reveal its limitations and resist the totalization evidenced in his and statist narratives. The greatest ethic in the imaginative act is the allowance for alternative fictions, and for each succeeding generation to offer their own.