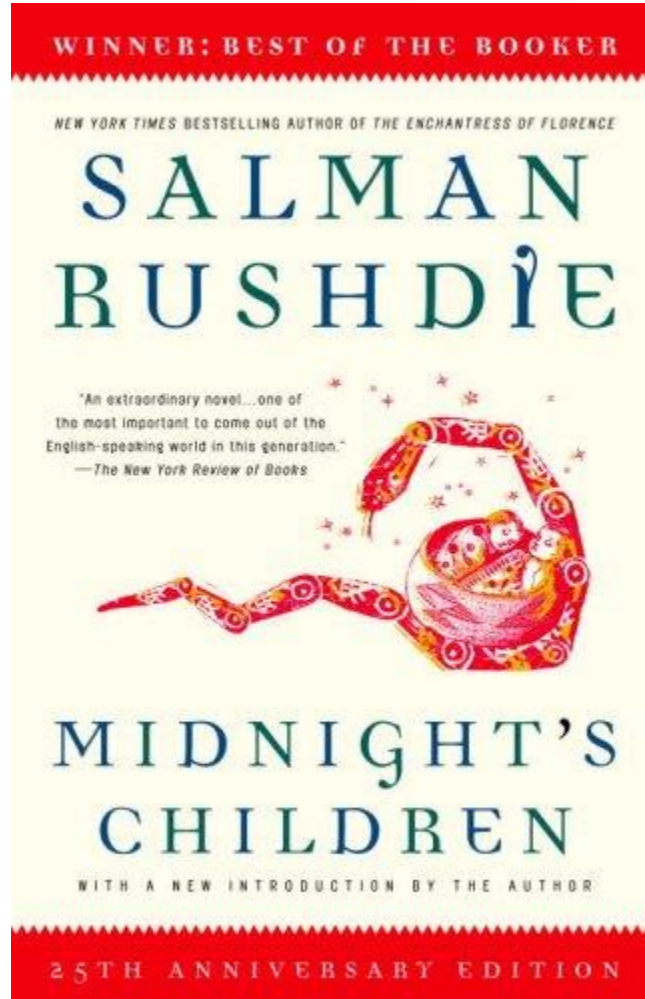


Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

S. Bhuvaneshwari

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Abstract

In this paper I deal with the novel *Midnight's Children*, in which Salman Rushdie has given us the history of the protagonist by narrating the story about himself. In this novel, he deals with Saleem Sinai, the protagonist, one of the midnight children. Saleem, the person who has the curse of impotency, is narrating his own story. At one stage, he forgets all those things that happened in his life and even forgets his name. During that time Rushdie introduces one more

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character named Parvati the witch, another midnight child and born with the gift of sorcery. And she is the person who helped Saleem to escape from Dacca in the wicker basket, and they fly back to Delhi. The whole paper gives us many views about the political rebirth of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and how Saleem tumbled out of Parvati's magic basket in the ghetto of magicians near Delhi's Friday Mosque. It also explains the dream of Saleem to serve the nation, as well as explaining about the communists, magicians and bureaucrats. Soon there is the marriage proposal by Indira Sarkar for Parvati to marry Saleem Sinai. But he refuses to marry her because he is cursed with impotence.

Rushdie's Second Novel *Midnight's Children*

Salman Rushdie remains a major Indian writer in English. His birth coincided with the birth of a new modern nation on August 15, 1947. He has been justly labeled by the critics as a post-colonial writer who knows his trade well. His second novel *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981 and it raised a storm in the hitherto middle-class world of fiction. Both writing in English, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan tried to uphold in their fiction the mainstream politics and purity of Brahmanical order, while Rushdie for the first time burst into the world of fiction with subversive themes like impurity, illegitimacy, plurality and hybridity. He understands that a civilization called India may be profitably understood as a dream a collage of many colours, a blending of cultures and nationalities, a pluralistic society and in no way unitary.

Following the Life of a Child: Saleem Sinai

Midnight's Children follows the life of a child born at the stroke of midnight as India gained its independence; he is endowed with special powers and a connection to other children born at the dawn of a new and tumultuous age in the history of the Indian sub-continent and the birth of the modern nation of India. The character of Saleem Sinai has been compared to Rushdie.

Saleem Seeking National Salvation

On December 16, 1971 Saleem tumbled out of Parvati's magic basket in the ghetto of magicians near Delhi's Friday Mosque. His return to India coincided with the supposed political

rebirth of Mrs. Indira Gandhi whose New Congress Party held more than two thirds majority in the Parliament. There was discussion that Mrs. Gandhi hankered after power and had dynastic aspiration. At this time, corruption in high places also became a subject of talk and discussion. It was reported that Mrs. Gandhi showed her inclination towards astrology and occult powers. There was a feeling that the nation was moving backwards and that there was a shift from Nehru's secular democratic legacy. Saleem had been overwhelmed by an agonizing feeling of sympathy for the country. He decided to save the country from the drift. He resolved to leave the Magician's ghetto and go to his only surviving uncle, an influential bureaucrat who would help him fulfil his 'Messianic ambitions'. (388) He was of the opinion that with the active support of the bureaucrat, he would 'find the keys of national salvation'. (389).

Under the roof of the bureaucrat uncle, he would find the ears of the ministers and would be in the company of the great in the administration. Saleem was in the grip of this magnificent fantasy when Parvati told him of her encounter with Shiva in a Dacca street, who was, as Saleem understood, the man of destiny. Parvati and Shiva were fated to meet by the divine destiny of their names. In Dacca they were united in the moment of victory. Saleem walked away from her to the home of Mustapha Aziz, the rich relative.

Mustapha Aziz: Devotion to Mrs. Indira Gandhi

Mustapha was a senior Civil Servant and loyal to the Prime Minister. He spent his spare time filling large log-books with spider-like family trees and doing research on the lineages of the greatest families of the land. He would place his geneological log books at the service of the Prime Minister who is falling increasingly beneath the twin spells of power and astrology. The narrator makes a caustic observation regarding the drift of the national politics on the road to feudalism.

.....but while the Indira Sarkar, like her father's administration, consults daily with purveyors of occult lore, while Banarasi seers help shape the history of India, I must digress into painful, personal recollections; because it was at Uncle Mustapha's that I learned, for certain, about the deaths of my family in the war of 65 (394).

Saleem learned that his sister Jamila, the Voice of Pakistan, Bulbul of the faith, had spoken out against the rulers of the war that divided Pakistan, had disappeared from the face of the earth. Saleem spent the next four hundred and twenty days in belated mourning for the dead. His dream of preferment in public service during his stay with the bureaucrat uncle evaporated in no time as he found that Mustapha nourished a canine devotion to Indira Gandhi and the powers that be. He lost faith in the spineless bureaucrat and returned to the Magicians slum, his 'true inheritance of poverty and destitution' (396), and found shelter in the shadow of the Friday Mosque. Like Gautama, the first and true Buddha, he walked like a beggar into the world.

Under the Shadow of the Mosque – Sharing a Shack

The shadow of the Mosque offered him relief from the heat of the sun. He felt comfortable in the slum and could endure cold, hunger and thirst. There developed solidarity between him and the Magicians who were Communists. Picture Singh, the communist snake charmer was the Leader of the slum. He spoke of Socialism which owed nothing to foreign influences. In spite of poverty and the ills of life the slum dwellers were subjected to, the ghetto was free from 'religious and regionalist bigotry'. (399) Picture Singh was the patriarch of the ghetto. He possessed an umbrella whose shade did restore harmony to the squabbling factions.

Saleem shared the shack of Picture Singh and fell under his spell. He was again filled with an optimism because the Communist Picture Singh offered him an alternative vision of things. It was Picture Singh who initiated Saleem into politics and revealed to him the corrupt 'black' economy and white economy.

But the patriarch of the slum was not without a heart. He loved the fatherless girl of the slum, Parvati the witch, like his own daughter. He began to search for a husband for her. He requested Saleem to marry the gifted daughter of the midnight. But Saleem turned down the proposal. He could not marry her because he was cursed with impotence.

Parvati, Saleem and Shiva

Saleem refused to marry Parvati the witch who helped him escape from East Pakistan. Spurned by Saleem, Parvati remembered his arch-enemy Shiva. She called Shiva and Shiva

came. At the end of the war in East Pakistan, Shiva had risen to 'Commanding heights' (407) and Saleem fell and became a penniless slum-dweller. The war of 1971 turned Shiva into a national idol. The legends of his exploits in the Pakistani war constituted the front lines in the national newspapers and he found himself elevated in social status as well as in military rank. He was invited to innumerable social gatherings 'to be applauded and monopolized by the noblest and the fairest'. (410)

The beautiful wives of the rich and the powerful were attracted to the charismatic army officer and fell into his arms. Shiva became a notorious seducer and fathered innumerable bastards with the women and wives across the country. He had nourished hatred and ill-will for the nobility and the rich and had a 'desire to be done with the rich bitches of Indian high society'.

It was at this time that Parvati remembered him through her magic spell. He did recall his meeting with her in Dacca and went to see her in the ghetto of magicians on 18 May 1974. The meeting of Shiva and Parvati was fraught with grave consequences as it was in the same year the desert of Pokhran was rocked by India's first nuclear explosion. Saleem's lie drove Parvati into the arms of his arch-rival, who is Wee Willie Winkie's boy Shiva.

Through his narrative, Saleem pushed Shiva into the background. There are ironies in the turn of events. 'Had not Shiva to the army quarters. She turned the simple army quarters into a palace, a Kailash fit for Shiva the God and Major Shiva devoted his attention to her for four months. On September 12, Parvati, kneeling at his feet told Shiva that she was going to have his child.

No Love for Pregnant Women

This revelation only turned the Shiva-Parvati relation into a stormy business. Shiva had the habit of losing interest in pregnant women and deserted them when they became pregnant. Fights and quarrels ensued and Shiva and Parvati connection became an earthly echo of the marital battle of the Gods which their namesakes are reported to perform on Mount Kailash in the Great Himalayas. Shiva was full of fury and anger at Parvati's disclosure and began drinking and whoring all over the country. At this time the Indian people were getting angry with the

Government of Indira Gandhi. By the end of 1974, Socialist leaders like Jaya Prakash Narayan and Gandhian leader Morarji marched against the ruling Indira Congress.

On a cold morning in 1975 Railway Minister L.N. Misra was killed by an explosion. Shiva dragged Parvati by the hair and left her in the slum. On the other leader in the ghetto, Picture Singh realized that his dream of national salvation was 'insubstantial, the meandering of a fool'. (413) People of slum were not happy at the return of Parvati with a child in her womb and they hurled abuses at her. Picture Singh again requested Saleem to marry her and save her honour like in the past when she saved his life in violence-ridden East Pakistan.

Saleem Marries Parvati

On the Republic Day of 1975, Saleem married Parvati- the -witch who bore Shiva's child. Saleem's wife Parvati was converted to Islam and she took a new name, Laylah. Like his mother Amina, Parvati changed her name because she would give birth to a child who would be born to a father not his own. The birth of Saleem's child mirrored Saleem's own because the birth of the child coincided with the declaration of Emergency on the midnight of 25 June, 1975.

Indira Gandhi Found Guilty

On June 12, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty by Allahabad High Court of malpractice during the election campaign of 1971 and it was precisely at 2.p.m. Parvati had entered into labour. The labour turmoil lasted for thirteen days, the period which coincided with the political turmoil in the country consequent upon Mrs. Gandhi's refusal to resign after the court verdict. The midwives in the labour room urged Parvati to push and push,- the opposition leaders urging Indira to resign, and thus forcing her to deliver a child of her own. On the stroke of midnight, 25th June, 1975 Indira Gandhi proclaimed emergency and suspended civil rights. At that 'precise instant of the birth of the new India' (419).

Saleem's son Adam Sinai was born. He was born with flapping ears like those of an elephant as his father Saleem was born with elephantine nose. The child of the Emergency refused to cry. Its birth at the darkest hour marked the end of the Nehruvian era of democracy

and the country's arrival at emergency. The mute baby thus, at birth, like his adoptive father, became 'handcuffed to history' (420). The boy Adam Sinai also was the child of his time which was out of joint.

Total Disillusion

The Midnight's Children were different and hence they constituted a threat to the unitary world-view of the authority. Consequently, Indira Gandhi found in Saleem a rival whose self-delusion of representing the multiple India ran counter with the vision of the Prime Minister. The turn of events in the national politics constitutes an irony of the birth of the greatest child of the midnight upon whom the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru bestowed 'the role of the mirror of the nation' through a letter in which 'her own, sloganized centrality was denied' (427). At last Saleem was disillusioned with post-colonial politics altogether and lost his connection with history and politics. He was drained of all hope in a new dawn and made his way back to Delhi with the knowledge that the new age which had begun on the Midnight of 15th August 1947 amidst promises and possibilities had come to an end.

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S. Bhuvaneshwari
Adhiyaman Arts and Science College for Women
Uthangarai 635306
Tamilnadu
India
bhuvisuji92@gmail.com

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S. Bhuvaneshwari
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