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Playing with Metaphors: National Identity in *Midnight's Children*

Abstract: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a narrative known for its irreverent treatment of national identity, its story resting as it does on the comic superimposition of Saleem Sinai's story onto the (hi)story of his nation. By playing with metaphors and simulacra, Rushdie's text explodes this superimposition, thus transforming the sacred status of the nation state into utter profanity. *Midnight's Children* deploys the resources of fiction to stretch the principle of superimposition/correspondence to its limits in order to underscore its tendency to fall apart. Representation in the novel becomes a form of aesthetic resistance made possible through remetaphorization, a notion akin to reterritorialization. This resistance strains the classical national narrative, which relies on the mirroring effect of the metaphor, and shows the metaphor disintegrating under the weight of the simulacrum. *Midnight's Children* plots Saleem's story as he discovers that his drive for reaching the very centre of meaning is not his only mistake. His ultimate mistake lies in the metaphorical postulation of the centre itself – a centre which turns out to be empty, hollow, and purely hypothetical.

Keywords: magical realism, *Midnight's Children*, narrative and identity, nationalism, Salman Rushdie, simulacrum

> Magical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space, but our sense of identity as well. (Faris 1995, 174)

> The effects of power are both immensely durable and fragile [...] the subject, far from being powerless to intervene in the operations of discursive power, has the ability to shape and reorganize the discursive formation itself. (Mondal 2003, 10)

> It is the map that precedes the territory. (Baudrillard 1983, 6)

At the outset of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai declares that he "had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (Rushdie 1997, 9). Appearing in the novel's first paragraph, this amusing turn of phrase sets the stage for a narrative known for its irreverent and pessimistic treatment of national identity – a treatment whose central premise is summed up in the image of an individual being handcuffed to the polymorphous nation. Even though Saleem is handcuffed to the Indian nation, *Midnight's Children* is in many ways a narrative containing universal insights

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with respect to national identity as such. While India is indeed the novel's ultimate reference point, one of the achievements of *Midnight's Children* lies in offering insights which hold true for the development of national identity elsewhere in the postcolonial world.

One of these insights is related to the way the protagonist's autobiography is constructed. Saleem's "autobiography" – an autobiography which functions as the metaphorical equivalent of India's national biography – indicates that the bond nationalism establishes between nation and individual does not create just another identity interwoven with other, complementary identities, be they religious, ethnic, or linguistic. Instead, it primarily creates the promise of endowing the private lives of individuals with a greater sense of meaning, one that could only be provided by a project as sacred as the nation. In his now-classic study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson highlights the incorporative nature of the nation's narrative, a mechanism which endows events with a great sense of meaning simply by superimposing them onto the nation's narrative – the same mechanism Saleem uses when he superimposes events from his private life onto the nation's narrative. Anderson points out that "the nation's biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own'" (1983, 206). Anderson draws attention to the selective process through which national history is usually constructed as a story of events impregnated with meaning. These occurrences become remarkable not necessarily on their own "merit" but as a result of their superimposition onto the nation's narrative. They then become *our own* because they are placed on the nation's narrative arc.

This mechanism for creating meaning is only possible by way of a thoroughly modern conception of time. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Anderson describes the modern conception of time which "replaced" the medieval one as predicated on "an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (Anderson 1983, 24). This simultaneity, or the concept of "meanwhile," is fundamental to nationalism's way of constructing (hi)stories as well as to the form of storytelling found in *Midnight's Children*. Both of these forms represent events as coinciding with each other and rely on producing meaning as a result of that correspondence. In other words, the often comic superimposition on which Saleem relies is fundamental to both national history and the novel itself.

By playing with metaphors and simulacra, Rushdie explodes this superimposition, thus transforming the sacred status of the nation – with all the meaning it

injects into events as a result of correspondence between the story of the individual and that of the nation – into utter profanity. *Midnight's Children*, in short, deploys the resources of fictional narrative to stretch the principle of correspondence to its limits in order to show its tendency to fall apart. In doing so, it sketches a sardonic, pessimistic, and even tragic vision of national identity.

This vision, in fact, contains an old element – perhaps as old as the nation itself. This old element relates to the seminal metaphor at the heart of Rushdie's novel – a metaphor which informs both the essence and visceral force of national identity. The metaphor of the nation as individual posits the nation as a human subject: the nation was *born* out of its people's distinctive culture, language, or civic laws; it *came of age* during one era or another; it *holds* certain religious or secular values, visions, and even a worldview. Ernest Renan invokes this key principle several times in his essay "What is a Nation?" "The nation," he says, "like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion," and its existence resembles an individual's existence in that both are a sign of the "perpetual affirmation of life" (Renan 1990, 19). From a metaphorical standpoint, the nation and individual are brought together by an act of narration which narrates "the long past" of both nation and individual.

The phonological similarity of the terms "nation" and "narration" – on which Homi Bhabha capitalizes in his collection of essays *Nation and Narration* – points us to an intimate, visceral connection between the two terms and what they signify. Just as is the case in a *Bildungsroman* about an individual, narration, from this symbolic perspective, is at once a precondition of the nation as well as the mechanism by which the nation is born and through which it thrives. The "nation" – from the Latin *natio*, literally meaning "that which has been born" – is brought to life through the travails of narrative. With that in mind, telling the story of the nation involves the creation of a narrative akin to a *Bildungsroman* – one which combines body and spirit so that both can live up to their "magical" potential. *Midnight's Children* facetiously adopts the potent, metaphoric *Bildungsroman* conventions only so that its profane and farcical origins may be uncovered. The tragedy, in other words, turns into a farce, namely as a result of the way in which the protagonist, Saleem, adopts that metaphor – *un*metaphorically.

Metaphor, as David Punter puts it, is akin to an "ectoplasm: as the fruit of an attempt to give material form to, to incarnate, that which otherwise remains latent, ghostly" (2007, 68). With Rushdie's novel in mind, Punter suggests that metaphor is "the bodying-forth of sets of correspondences" of which we have all been "aware in a *liminal* way, hovering somewhere around the threshold of articulation" (2007, 68; emphasis in original). In *Midnight's Children*, the crossing of that threshold represents a narrative movement which goes further than giving the ghost a material form: the narrative begins by deploying the metaphor's body –

extracted from the depositories of national culture – and ends by obliterating that body into pieces out of which neither the ghost nor the body can be resurrected. By the narrative's end, the full and comic embodiment of the central metaphor connecting individual and nation renders the metaphor's usually potent and affective ethos absurd rather than brimming with meaning.

"Above all things," Saleem says, "I fear absurdity" (Rushdie 1997, 9). What he seeks above all is "to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something" (9). Saleem convinces himself early on that his private life carries a great deal of meaning, that he is at the centre of national history, if not the cosmos. This meaning is created by his assertion of a visceral bond between a select number of individuals and their nascent nation. Saleem describes the moment of his birth as follows:

> 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. [...] What made the event noteworthy [...] was the nature of these children, every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment, or just conceivably by sheer coincidence [...], endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. (Rushdie 1997, 195)

For the exceedingly narcissistic Saleem, the visceral bond between individual and nation is what makes the event meaningful, not India's political independence or its victory over its colonial plunderers. By imagining the nation as merely the organizing principle of more significant private life, Saleem comically undermines the premise that the nation represents the ultimate good and thus requires sacrifices from the individual.

Narrating this miracle within an otherwise "sober account" (Rushdie 1997, 195) as Saleem promises to do, illustrates the peculiar consequences of Saleem's extreme urge to write a private narrative endowed with great meaning – his extreme but ultimately absurd urge to sew individual and nation together ever so neatly. In the process, though, his narrative ends up calling the bluff of the nationalist discourse he adopts. Although Saleem finds nothing more terrifying than absurdity, his predetermined fate leads him to what he fears the most – *being* absurd. What starts as a movement between the poles of meaning and absurdity ends up becoming a process that deconstructs the dichotomy itself. In this way, the narrative does not simply delineate the "rise and fall" of meaning but brings to the fore the traces of absurdity that always stain the very structure of meaning.

1 Magical realism: History, fiction, myth

In her study, *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy Faris argues that the style of magical realism has the distinctive capacity to bring together history and myth,[1] a process culminating in "idiosyncratic recreations of historical events" (2004, 15). The content of such a past is not derived only from material history but also from the rich chest of mythology. The combination of history and myth that magical realism brings to bear "implies that historical events and myths are both essential aspects of our collective memory" (Faris 2004, 16).

While the formation of "collective memory," which draws on both history and myth, is essential to the resilience of national identity, the ultimate orientation of that identity is the formation of knowledge of and about the private self. Saleem is more concerned with knowing and enacting his unique capacities than he is with the nation as such. Paul Ricœur makes this point with respect to individual identity whose orientation is arriving at self-knowledge. Ricœur holds that arriving at self-knowledge results from a chain of assertion which evolves in the following manner: "self-knowledge is an interpretation; self-interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction" (1991, 188). Magical realism does not simply efface or blur the distinction between history and fiction. In *Midnight's Children*, the two are meshed together organically, not by effacing the distinction between the two categories but by manipulating the rules of the world in which history and mythology function simultaneously, so as to allow Saleem to discover himself, to know his capabilities, utilize them, and, finally, discover the weaknesses of his nationalistic discourse. Therefore, instead of changing the categories of history and myth, the novel changes the properties of their context in order to underscore the centrality of self-knowledge within this process. An entire new world – complete with its own unique physical laws – must be invented for nationalism's two contradictory facets to cease being incongruous. This in itself suggests that these contradictions can never be resolved in the world as we experience it.

The new world that *Midnight's Children* speaks into existence is in line with two key characteristics of magical realism: it leads the reader to "experience

1 In an introduction to his novel, Rushdie writes that "in the West people tended to read *Midnight's Children* as a fantasy, while in India people thought of it as pretty realistic, almost a history book" (2006, xv). In "'Errata,' or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," an essay included in *Imaginary Homelands*, he says he hopes "that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India" (Rushdie 1991, 22–23).

some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events" and "disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris 2004, 7). These unsettling doubts appear as a result of the contradiction inherent in two starkly different portrayals of events. On the one hand, we witness miracles that could not be explained through reference to the properties of the phenomenal world. On the other hand, by transcending the properties of the phenomenal world, these miracles are portrayed by "a sober account" (as Saleem ironically states; Rushdie 1997, 195), namely by a portrayal that speaks the language of the phenomenal world. This in turn "disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity" by creating a new world that does not suffer the limitations of the phenomenal world. As a result, the magical-realist world becomes more than a fanciful construction or an impossibility that should not be taken seriously. The experience of being presented within a magical-realist world allows for the suspension of disbelief, making the shift in the categories of time, space, and identity a "real" possibility rather than a mere dream.

There are, of course, consequences to conjuring into existence a world in which nationalism's discursive contradictions are hypothetically resolved. The magical-realist elements in Rushdie's novel undermine the discourse of nationalism by putting it at odds with itself and with the world it allegedly seeks to bring about – ironically by making that world a possibility. If nationalism makes good use of a serviceable past – made up of myth, ancient history, fiction, or a mixture of all three – to buttress a sense of collective memory while projecting a future-oriented outlook based on the precepts of modernity, then the apt response ought not to be to draw attention to the jarring inconsistency in its discourse but to deploy the tools of narrative to create the very world that could support such a discourse. To do so is to adopt nationalism's logic and in turn underscore its magical nature and, more importantly, the impossibility of its foundational premises.

By advancing an "idiosyncratic recreation of historical events," *Midnight's Children* paradoxically flips the equation Faris proposes when she argues that "history [remains] the weight that tethers the balloon of magic [...] as if to warn against too great a lightness of mythic or magical being" (2004, 16). Although Faris makes an excellent point in suggesting that history checks the uninhibited nature of magic, fantasy, or myth, what it is even more remarkable about *Midnight's Children* is that magic might also tether what we might call the "balloon of history." By doing so, the novel produces an image of that history that is not strictly materialist. Magic, thus, checks the excesses of historical representations, excesses that might counter-intuitively exceed those of magic itself. This is especially true in the case of a novel such as Rushdie's, one of whose principal objectives is to create a fictional world in which the portrayal of nationalism with

its multiple faces, the historical and the mythological, is done in order to expose just how "otherworldly" the discourse of nationalism could be.

2 *Re*presentation: The simulacrum of national identity

Midnight's Children recreates historical events idiosyncratically in the sense of recreating their representation as such; in other words, it further undermines Saleem's nationalistic discourse by creating a representation of his representation. This recreation, however, is far from being a loss in line with Jean Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image as he characterizes it in *Simulations* – a phase that is part of a larger scheme whose end point is pure simulation (1983, 6). Rather, it is a vital gain because the representation of the representation in *Midnight's Children* becomes a form of aesthetic resistance made possible through a remetaphorization that is akin to the notion of reterritorialization: "the notion of resistance through remetaphorisation, through what the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called a 'reterritorialisation' of conquered realms [...], becomes a substrate of literary resistance itself" (Punter 2007, 54). The resistance entailed in the redeploying of metaphor and its representation, therefore, reveals an aesthetic procedure whose effect is comparable to that of the Deleuzian simulacrum, an "act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned" (Punter 2007, 60). *Midnight's Children*, therefore, goes further than recreating a parodic imitation of the classical national identity narrative. Its recreation is constituted first and foremost by its *difference* from the classical narrative, not by its similitude to it, a quality essential to parody.

The strain this aesthetic resistance places on Saleem's classical national identity narrative intensifies as the narrative progresses. It later becomes apparent that Saleem's project of meaning production (a project made possible by the mirroring effect of the metaphor, a *similitude*) is destined to disintegrate under the weight of the simulacrum (a simulacrum made possible by a magical world that has no original model, a *difference*) which takes shape slowly but surely. Saleem hints at the unstoppable disintegration as early as the novel's third chapter, which he begins as follows:

> Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug. [...] I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. (Rushdie 1997, 37)

This description could certainly be explained by Saleem's penchant for hyperbole. When he approaches the halfway point of his narrative, however, Saleem is neither hinting, nor is he being hyperbolic. He unmistakably faces the conundrum at the heart of his attempt to reconcile the representational discourse at the surface with the anti-representational simulacrum lurking beneath it. His tone here is different – distinctively solemn rather than facetious. "Am I so far gone," Saleem says,

> in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back; I must finish what I started, even if, inevitably, what I finish turns out to be not what I began. (Rushdie 1997, 166)

Saleem refuses to be the judge of what transpires at this point, at least not rhetorically. Instead of being the judge of the imminent collapse, Saleem allows for the inevitable judgement to transpire through the narrative's aesthetic procedure. The narrative's fundamental turning point, then, could be described as follows: while one initially finds within the narrative's discourse (created by Saleem) a doomed endeavour to deploy the representational logic of nationalism by embracing the metaphor of national identity unmetaphorically, one finds within its structure the overturning of that endeavour. It is for this reason that reading *Midnight's Children* in terms of the concept of a simulacrum allows for a fuller critique of the mechanisms of Saleem's national identity.

From a political standpoint, critiquing national identity through the simulacrum leads to the following conclusion: given that national identity will remain influential in mediating relationships between subjects and communities for the foreseeable future, the redefinition of this identity's core in terms of difference rather than in terms of similarity constitutes a genuine and viable breakthrough.[2] As the world remains far-removed from being truly without nations – a world Renan mistakenly saw over a century ago as a clear possibility, if not an inevitable development – the simulacrum holds the possibility of a liberating difference that could mitigate the violence of similitude, especially when it is imagined at the level of the nation. This possibility goes beyond the false choice between a more entrenched nationalism and an illusion of tolerance. These two alternatives, though seemingly oppositional, take instinctive similitude as their ultimate reference point.

Similitude becomes instinctive precisely as a result of representation's tendency to conceal and to naturalize the prefix "re-." Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exacti-

2 Difference in this context is not the equivalent of diversity, which is based on the notion of *tolerating* that which differs from the model.

tude in Science" – the story which Baudrillard uses as an entry point for his discussion on simulacra and simulation – is a case in point. The story describes an empire in which

> the Art of Cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province occupied the entirety of a city, and the map of the empire, the entirety of a province. In time, those unconscionable maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guild struck a map of the empire whose size was that of the empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following generations, who were not so fond of the study of cartography, as their forbears had been, saw that the vast map was useless, and not without pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the inclemencies of sun and winters. In the deserts of the west, still today, there are tattered ruins of that map, inhabited by animals and beggars; in all the land there is no other relic of the disciplines of geography. (Borges 1999, 325)

In their quest for perfection and scientific exactitude, the cartographers fully materialize the (hypothetical) representational nature of maps. In other words, their hubris leads them to forget about the prefix "re-" in "representation."

This "literal map" ceases to be a map altogether because it no longer has the basic justification for its existence as an object whose relationship to the territory is first and foremost metaphorical. While it is true that this extremist adoption of the metaphor kills the metaphor itself, what is of more significance is that the hypothetical bond which the metaphor maintains between map and territory dies with it as well. The cartographers' exactitude is comparable to Saleem's inclination to exploit his own hypothetical bond, which, while giving him the illusion of meaning, ends up obliterating any chance of it as, like the map, it ceases to have a *raison d'être*. This tendency of his, Saleem concedes, is part of a scientific worldview: "setting my face against all indications to the contrary, I shall now amplify, in the manner and with proper solemnity of a man of science, my place at the centre of things" (Rushdie 1997, 237–238). In addition to stressing the decisive role of the fantastical in this operation, Borges's story confirms that while this operation's first step is undertaken for the purpose of achieving accuracy and is thus in line with the endeavour to apply the maximum conformity to the logic of mimetic representation, its inevitable consequence is the radical undermining of that very logic – precisely what happens in *Midnight's Children*.

In Baudrillard's description of this operation as reflected in the cartographer's fundamentalist scientific project, the initial representational motivation is characterized by its specular and discursive nature, whereas the consequence (simulation) is characterized by its nuclear and genetic nature: "This representational imaginary, which simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of the ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive" (Baudrillard 1983, 2). These characteristics –

specular-discursive and nuclear-genetic – throw into sharp relief not only the operation of metaphor in *Midnight's Children* but also that of hyperbole, which functions as its enabler. As Christopher Warnes points out, "hyperbole, the splitting, fusing and blurring of the literal and metaphorical, and an emphasis on the constitutive and performative over the merely descriptive capacities of language, are all central to Rushdie's modes of narration and strategies of representation" (2009, 101). As is the case with the cartographers, Saleem's operation of ideal coextensivity is fuelled by a penchant for hyperbole, which in turn tries to save itself from the assault of reason by being couched in the fantastical, where such rules are suspended.

Exploiting the metaphor the way he does allows Saleem to discover that his drive for meaning, for reaching the very centre, is not the only mistake leading to the ultimate downfall of his private self as well as to the disintegration of the discourse of nationalism which sustains that self. The ultimate mistake he makes lies in the metaphorical postulation of the centre itself – a centre which turns out to be empty, hollow, and purely hypothetical. "I am coming to the conclusion that privacy," Saleem laments toward the end of his narrative, "the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity. But too late" (Rushdie 1997, 435).

3 Conclusion

Midnight's Children plots the evolution of Saleem's understanding of his national identity using the resources of narrative, the ground of all identities. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks points out via Rousseau that this linkage between narrative and identity is nothing short of the fundamental catalyst of modern narrative:

> The question of identity, claims Rousseau – and this is what makes him at least symbolically the *incipient* of modern narrative – can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition. To understand me, Rousseau says [...], the reader must follow me at every moment of my existence. (Brooks 1984, 33; emphasis in original)

Moving through *Midnight's Children*, the reader recognizes that it is a narrative which grants Saleem the opportunity to vacillate between identity and difference in the same way he vacillates between his tragic desire for meaning and his ultimate end – being absurd. This desire is the same desire that moves "the reader through narrative [...]. If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*,

and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end" (Brooks 1984, 52; emphasis in original).

Midnight's Children ties all these strands together by interrogating the individual's rudimentary desire for meaning, by pushing the limits of what national identity allows, both of which serve as the motor of narrative. In doing so, *Midnight's Children* does not criticize the cultural depositories of nationalism in a bid to promote an illusory vision of a tolerant postnational world, one in which we may all feel free to ignore the fundamental iniquities and discontent that form the underbelly of such an imagined community. Instead, it postulates an identity that draws on premodern elements as well as on forms of association that become possible only with the onset of modernity in order to reveal that a truly new project to supplant the tenacious logic of national identity must begin by liberating the subject from the visceral logic that Saleem exemplifies. Such a project must begin where *Midnight's Children* ends. It must create a new narrative animated by the difference of the simulacrum rather than by the similitude of metaphor.

Midnight's Children illustrates this point by deploying narrative mechanisms without ever positing the subject as impotent, as one who stands powerless on the receiving end of invincible discourses, as one who abdicates all responsibility for the role the subject plays in the game of identity formation.

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