

Salman Rushdie as Diasporic Myth-Maker: Myth and Memory in *Midnight's Children*

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More than two thousand years ago, Horace claimed that “they change their sky, not their mind, who cross the sea” (*Epistles* I.11.27). Nonetheless, I contend that a change of sky does, in fact, culminate in a change of mind; it results in a hybridisation of the mind, particularly in our modern world where diasporic cultural identities are both more fluid and fractious, more “dynamic and unpredictable” (Reis 53) than they have ever been before. Since “hybridisation [is] a process involving traversing” (Gunaratnam 3), hybridisation is inevitable for the traversing, travelling diasporic person. The farther they traverse, the more driven they are to participate in myth-making, in telling stories about their origins to themselves and to their children, so as to bridge the gap between their new “sky” and the old, far across the “sea” (sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical) of experience. They tell these stories as a means of reconciling themselves to their inevitable hybridisation, such that they may survive in a new land while still remaining connected to their roots. My paper explores how one such diasporic storyteller, the Indian author Salman Rushdie, bridges the gap between himself and his homeland through myth-making in his novel *Midnight's Children*.

Before launching into an analysis of the text itself, allow me to further describe what constitutes diasporic myth-making, and what makes it significant. The distance between destination and origin leads to myth-making as a matter of course; the closer the diasporic individual is to the destination, the more powerful the myth of the origin becomes, amplified by time and space, just as a voice must become ever-louder to be heard across a chasm. Members of the diaspora “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland” (Safran 83), a myth that is continuously reinvented and renegotiated through internal and external myth-making. This communal myth-making contributes to the diaspora becoming self-conscious of itself as a group, and “[t]his description of a group is seductive as it allows people

living all over the globe to articulate a connection with each other and to think themselves connected . . . with a piece of land (whether this be mythical or actual)" (Kalra et al. 9). The "piece of land" here is the idealised homeland, which, through diasporic myth-making, becomes both "mythical" and "actual." As I will discuss later in this paper, Rushdie's India, too, is both mythical and actual, an amalgamation of myth and history.

Writing is one of the primary modes of myth-making available to the diaspora. The "mythification of the past" (Dressler-Holohan 81) is therefore a central theme in diasporic literature, as it is in Rushdie's work. The diaspora must maintain its connection to the source if it is to be called diasporic; this connection is maintained, over national boundaries, by increasingly sedimentary layers of myth. These myths become more than mere stories; they become modes of rediscovery and remembrance, of collective cultural belonging.

This is not a new trend; diasporic myth-making has been in action since ancient times, when even "early Greek poetry . . . helped form connections between the mythic past and the history of the communities" (Pagkalos 32). This is a relatively common consensus among scholars of history; as another ancient historian, Finley, says, "The myth-making process . . . never wholly stopped" (295). Indeed, far from stopping, it has accelerated. The prevalence of diasporic travel has risen dramatically since the Industrial Revolution, and the global diasporic population has seen a drastic increase after the advent of advanced travel and communication technologies, which have resulted in "the diasporic process becoming globalised" (Reis 47). Otherwise, the diasporic propensity for myth-making remains the same, as it is a timeless, universal, "intrinsically human" (Barnes 122) trait for people to seek to reconnect with their origins through myth.

Salman Rushdie is one such myth-maker of the contemporary Indian diaspora. He is one of the "cultural producers in a post-colonial and transnational era, "who, in order to maintain" the cultural traditions and native identity "that he left behind, now" advocate[s] . . . a set of ethnic particularities that embody national mythology" (Chiang 33). *Midnight's Children* is an example of just such a national mythology, a product of reminiscence as much as myth-making, like many of his other works, including *The Satanic Verses* and *The Enchantress of Florence*. In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie aptly describes what might be one of the most potent motivations behind the use of myth-making by diasporic Indian writers, whose physical and cultural alienation from India means that it is impossible for them to recover precisely that which was lost, and that they will, in response, "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (428).

This sense of closing an unbridgeable gap is perhaps one of the reasons why a considerable number of writers from the Indian diaspora (such as Vikram Chandra, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ashok Mathur, to name a

few) use myth-making to reconnect with India. Rushdie is not alone. Indeed, diasporic myth-making is quintessentially Indian; the importance of diasporic loss as a creative impetus—and as a narratological trope—can be easily understood by surveying the great tales of India. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* both share the theme of homelessness, of a longing for a home that has been left behind. In the *Ramayana*, Rama is exiled from his kingdom and forced to endure years of living in the wilderness. Krishna, in the *Mahabharata*, is raised by adoptive parents in a foreign land, before he returns to rule his kingdom as a young man. The diasporic sense of loss and longing can be said to drive each of these epic narratives. Even the state of hybridity that is experienced by members of the diaspora can find parallels in the *Puranas*, where hybrid gods such as Garuda (a god who is half-bird, half-man) are described in detail. In fact, the Hindu god of literature is himself a hybrid; Ganesha is the elephant-headed god of writing, whose head is literally hunted for across the world before it is restored to him.

Such stories of travel are often used as metaphors for spiritual transformation, salvation or restoration. The mythological archetype of the hero's journey, or Campbell's heroic monomyth, is especially applicable to those who have left home, and to those who are still in search of homes—that is to say, it is applicable to the diaspora. Like Brahma, Vishnu and the many-headed gods of India, the diasporic traveller is "the hero with a thousand faces" (Campbell), who, by virtue of possessing many heads and many faces that each look out in a different direction, consequently possesses a multiplicity of perspectives. The diasporic myth-maker is the "Master of the Two Worlds," who can "pass back and forth across the world division" (Campbell 196), or, in more mundane terms, back and forth across national boundaries, necessitating the internal hybridisation described at the beginning of this paper. Myth-making facilitates "the hero's requirement to . . . knit together his two worlds" (Campbell 196), and in so doing enables the diasporic mind to heal the fissures of parting, of leaving. When taken physically out of India—the India of the body—the diasporic myth-maker must resort to inventing "Indias of the mind."

These "Indias of the mind" are not perfect or unchanging, however. Rushdie specifically states that he does not believe in a static state of "Indianness" that can be fully recovered; in fact, it is Rushdie's sense of loss, of being obliged to "deal in broken mirrors" ("*Imaginary Homelands*" 429), that inspired him to create mythical narratives in the first place. Human beings are possessed of limited points of view, and, as partial creatures, cannot perceive any situation as a whole; our systems of meaning are built out of temporal and cognitive fragments, the driftwood of a lifetime of experiences, forming "a shaky edifice" (430) to which we cling doggedly. Diasporic populations experience an even more fragmented reality than what humans generally do.

But to completely reclaim the origin through myth-making is impossible, for one cannot entirely remake or reclaim that which is lost, just as Rushdie's broken mirrors can never be entirely mended, no matter how earnestly they seek to reflect the past. One of Rushdie's many mirrors, constructed painstakingly to reflect his own loss, is the novel *Midnight's Children*. The diasporic author's dilemma is the sense of perpetual loss caused by a homeland that has been left behind, but this sense of loss is also a gift, for from this loss arises the ability to create. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's fabulist, magical realist narrative is precisely the kind of myth-making that arises from diasporic loss. Rushdie himself confirms this when he states that, in writing *Midnight's Children*, "I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor" ("Imaginary Homelands" 429).

The word "whole" implies that Rushdie's sense of incompleteness, of ethnographical loss, can somehow be restored using fiction. However, Rushdie makes it clear that the broken mirror of diasporic experience can never be repaired; in fact, there is no need to repair it, since "the broken mirror may be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed" (429). This is a curious, seemingly counter-intuitive statement, but it conveys the sheer reparative power of memory. Myth and memory are inseparable; memory *is* myth, or rather, myth is the cartilage that connects the fragments of memory, that allows memory to move, to be brought to life, to be animated. The product of this process is "a mythical past created out of disparate elements, differing in their character and their (factual) accuracy, and having their (factual) origin in widely scattered periods of time," wherein myth-making does not "merely transmit the past, it create[s] it . . . [i]n a shape which sometimes looks like history, and has been widely accepted as history" (Finley 295).

The boundary between myth and memory, or myth-making and history, is hence difficult to distinguish, as both are symbiotic processes that feed on each other and partake of each other. Even if, as Rushdie posits, there is no mirror that is not broken and no memory that is unflawed—or, as he says, "supposedly" unflawed—myth-making nevertheless seeks to mend that which is broken, and to give beauty, as well as healing, to that which is flawed. While the diasporic author's distance from his or her homeland leads to fragmentations in memory, the force of the author's longing also fuels the connectivity of myth. Rollo May, the renowned existential psychologist, argued that "[m]yth-making is essential in gaining mental health" (15), and that "[w]ishing, longing, yearning, myth-making—all these activities of human consciousness are as central as they have ever been . . . Wishing and hoping come directly out of the functions of dreaming and making myths" (61). It is no surprise, then, that Rushdie's longing and yearning for India culminates in a reflexive myth-making that is "essential" to him and that sews together the broken fragments of his memory; after all, as May says,

myth-making has a crucial therapeutic value in “rebuilding” the “broken” psyche (May 21). Myths themselves hold an undeniable “healing power” (May 86), through which leaps of imagination complete a picture of the past—and of the self—that would otherwise be incomplete. When commenting on West Indian diasporic literature, George Lamming makes a similar statement about the importance of myth to memory, and to human survival itself: “Myth... is akin to the nutritive function of milk which all sorts of men receive at birth . . . the source of spiritual foods absorbed, and learnt for exercise in the future” (15).

Thus, there is no individual without a personal mythology. In the diasporic mind, memories of one’s homeland become part of this personal mythology—both the memories experienced first-hand during one’s childhood, if such experiences exist, and the memories passed down through one’s family. Memory becomes myth, which in turn feeds memory, in a never-ending symbiotic cycle. To Rushdie, myth is like “Technicolor” and “Cinemascope” in that it brings to vibrant life the otherwise faded memories of his past. Without myth-making, memory alone is insufficient for a diasporic individual like Rushdie; without the relevance and renewed, self-directed empathy of one’s personal mythology, the memories of one’s homeland become little more than “old family-album snapshots.” Ironically, myth is what lends verisimilitude to memory. The imperfection and incompleteness of memory is what necessitates myth and makes it beautiful. Rushdie recognises the imperfection of diasporic memory when he refers to it as the “broken mirror,” but he also acknowledges the creative force of its brokenness.

[It] was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. (“Imaginary Homelands” 429)

The myth-making involved in *Midnight’s Children* is based on and inspired by the fragmented diasporic experience. Assuredly, the fragmentation of India itself (politically and geographically, particularly during and after the Partition) is an integral part of the novel’s myth-making, but the diasporic narrative is what underlies the protagonist’s voice and lends it power. Saleem, the central character of *Midnight’s Children*, is commonly cited by critics as embodying the fractured India of the Partition. While I do agree with this, I maintain that there are deeper undercurrents to Saleem’s voice, and that, beneath the surface, it is Rushdie’s own diasporic longing that drives Saleem’s search for community.

Saleem Sinai, the unreliable and often pathetic narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, is an expert at the art of lacking. The lack signified here is the lack of belonging, and indeed of a cohesive sense of self. This in itself can be seen as a diasporic phenomenon, or a symptom of the diasporic experience. Derrida’s

concept of “ellipsis” is a similar one, particularly because he refers to writing as “the passion of the origin” (373). For Rushdie, as for all diasporic authors, the origin is of unparalleled importance, even as it is impossible to reach, for the origin he left is not what the origin still is, and it is impossible to return to the origin of the past, just as it is impossible to step into the same river twice. The myth of the origin is what fuels diasporic literature. While Derrida was not discussing diasporic literature in particular in *Writing and Difference*, his description of the importance of lack (i.e. the ellipsis) to writing is highly relevant to Saleem’s character.

Writing, passion of the origin, must also be understood through the subjective genitive. It is the origin itself which is impassioned, passive, and past, in that which it is written. Which means inscribed. The inscription of the origin is doubtless its Being-as-writing, but it is also its Being-as-inscribed in a system in which it is only a function and a locus. (Derrida 373)

This passage is key to understanding the link between Saleem’s mentality and Rushdie’s own approach to myth-making. There is no doubt that the passion of the origin is what inspired *Midnight’s Children*; Rushdie himself admits as much in “Imaginary Homelands.” However, due to the unavoidable fragmentation of diasporic memory (and, as Derrida would say, of language as a whole), the existence of the origin became fallible. The very unreliability of Saleem’s narrative is testament to the fact that Rushdie is aware of this fallibility. In fact, he celebrates it. The origin is no longer a North Star, a fixed point on Rushdie’s intellectual horizon. Saleem is Rushdie’s tool for deconstructing and simultaneously manifesting the myth of the origin—of acknowledging that there is no objective origin, only a subjective “function and a locus.”

Saleem is one of the many children born at the stroke of midnight, at the dawn of India’s independence. This may appear to be a fixed and reliable origin, but as the temporal and existential slips in Saleem’s narrative grow larger, the birth of India becomes a doubtful beginning. Where was the origin located? Was India truly born at the hour of independence, or was it after the Partition? Saleem’s Being-as-writing is also a Being-as-inscribed; in Derrida’s terms, the fallibility (and, in a sense, vacuity) of India’s origin is what gives Saleem his substance. When Rushdie celebrates the broken mirror of diasporic memory, he can also be said to be celebrating the deconstruction inherent in myth. As Saleem draws close to his own death, it becomes apparent to him—and to the reader—that there is no single origin of Indian identity. The memory of the origin is actually a myth, layered by year after year of history, of destruction and integration. History itself becomes a continuous fabric of fictions, on which the stitches of time are unsteady and patternless.

This patternless deconstruction of origins may appear to be pessimistic; many of Derrida’s detractors charged him with nihilism. However, this

multiplicity of origins is something that Rushdie holds dear, and that he claims is innately optimistic:

I do not see the book as despairing or nihilistic . . . The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it “teems.” The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy. (“Imaginary Homelands” 432)

Rushdie’s deconstruction of India’s history is therefore not a dystopic one, contrary to initial appearances. It is also celebratory. The incompleteness of Saleem’s narrative, like the incompleteness of diasporic memory, lends itself to creative expression. The lack of completion is not only necessary to the very nature of art, but also a productive catharsis for the artist. In the famous Chinese folktale, *The Magic Paintbrush*, the painter Liang knows that he can never complete his paintings, for if he were to do so, they would transform into living objects and cease to be works of art (Demi). The fragmentation and incompleteness of the diasporic narrative shares that incompleteness with artistic expression as a whole. Derrida’s ellipsis hence becomes useful in analysing diasporic literature in particular, and myth-making in general.

[The] return to the book is of an *elliptical* essence. Something invisible is missing in the grammar of this repetition. As this lack is invisible and undeterminable, as it completely redoubles and consecrates the book, once more passing through each point along its circuit, nothing has budged. And yet all meaning is altered by this lack. Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same center, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. But within the *ellipsis*, by means of simple redoubling of the route, the solicitation of closure, and the jointing of the line, the book has let itself be thought as such. (373)

By playing the origin, as it were, Saleem displaces his own narrative. Since memory is inherently unstable and incomplete, it forms the “invisible and undeterminable” lack that Saleem feels. This lack is also what Rushdie confesses to experiencing, when he longs to reconnect with India not through passive nostalgia (“family-album snapshots”) but through active myth-making (“glorious Technicolor”). In *Midnight’s Children*, magical realism embodies myth, and myth is the solicitation of closure to which Derrida refers. The diasporic author repeatedly solicits closure through fiction and myth, because left to itself, a fragmented memory offers no closure. By deconstructing India’s early years of independence, Rushdie offers closure in the form of open-ended change—an acknowledgment of the continuous evolution of Indian identity, and the comforting myth/promise of an immortal India that will persist long after the myth-maker has died.

This is not to say that Saleem Sinai is a complete embodiment of Rushdie, or is Rushdie's self-inserted avatar—far from it. Rather, Saleem embodies a particular set of Rushdie's concerns, namely, his concerns of identity, fluidity and origin. Certain critics, such as Derek Walcott, are uncomfortable with the coexistence of myth and memory. To them, Rushdie's fascination with fluidity appears frivolous. His deconstruction of Indian history may seem more disrespectful than worshipful.

These writers reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory . . . Their vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past . . . The farther the facts, the more history petrifies into myth. (Walcott 370)

It is true that Rushdie believes in "the partial recall" of the human race, but to him this is an advantage at least as much as it is a disadvantage. That Walcott sees myth as something that is petrified only highlights the difference between his and Rushdie's standpoints. To Rushdie, myth is not a petrification of history but an organic and ever-growing process of history itself. Distance from the facts is inevitable, given time and distance. A diasporic person is constantly—perhaps even painfully—aware of this distance. However, this does not invalidate the diasporic experience, nor diminish the diasporic person's right to reinterpret his or her nation's history. Myth-making is an essential form of recovering one's history. To believe in the stability and infallibility of facts would only be a form of self-delusion, as even a seemingly objective history is the product of other people's myths, the overlapping, interlocking myths of one's ancestors and predecessors. Derrida's deconstruction of the origin is, perhaps, a necessary approach to history—particularly in a modern age when cultural narratives are commingling and changing each other at incredible speeds. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha comments that "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision" (7). In a world that is neither linear nor singular, multiplicity and hybridity might be the most realistic narratives left to us.

Now that I have looked into Rushdie's motivations for choosing myth-making as his modus operandi in *Midnight's Children*, I can go on to analyse that myth-making itself. Perhaps one of the most obvious techniques of myth-making is the use of mythological language, that is to say, language traditionally used in telling fables or in passing on oral histories. The language of *Midnight's Children*, and of Saleem's narration, are both highly mythical. From the very first sentence of the novel, Rushdie's fabulist myth-making is front-and-centre:

I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night . . . On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. (3)

The lackadaisical and somewhat dry tone of Saleem's narration is offset by "the language and spirit of fairy tales" (Harrison 41). Indeed, the phrases "once upon a time" and "on the stroke of midnight" are examples of standard fairytale parlance that inspire an instinctive willingness in the reader to suspend one's disbelief, and to settle down to enjoy a long bout of storytelling. When talking about his beginnings, Saleem's language is also that of a children's fairytale. The circular narration, going around and around the particulars before finally narrowing in on them, has a peculiarly elliptical effect—that of a reverse ripple, spreading inwards instead of outwards, gradually focusing the narrative in on its central themes. Derrida's concept of the origin as a changeable locus is already in effect here.

The magical significance of Saleem's time of birth achieves even greater mythical proportions as his story progresses. Fabulous events surround him from an early age—such as receiving a letter of congratulations from Nehru, nearly dying from a snake-bite, and barely surviving typhoid. Saleem himself draws parallels between what happens to him and what happens to India; since he and India share the same hour of birth, it initially appears that they also share the same fate. When Saleem eventually begins to fall apart—literally, physically fall apart—India also begins to fall apart, through the Partition and internal dissent.

The parallel between Saleem's narrative and India's is an obvious mode of myth-making, but more subtle is the parallel between India's narrative and the migrant's. That is to say, the disintegration and deconstruction of identity suffered by Saleem is suffered not only by India, but also by those that belong to the Indian diaspora. Saleem's very literal fragmentation makes him a tragic Indian version of Humpty Dumpty; he can never be put back together again. A diasporic writer like Rushdie, however, can use myth-making to put himself back together. Through *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses fiction to both celebrate and deconstruct the myth of the origin, and to reconstruct himself.

Saleem's super powers, apart from being mythological in themselves, also embody various literary devices. His telepathic sinuses allow him to partake of other characters' narratives as well, and this interweaving of voices and stories only further displaces the origin. Oddly enough, Rushdie's myth-making actually undermines many established myths of Indian history. The first myth is, of course, the myth of post-independence unity; another is the myth of the Emergency being a socially acceptable and popular measure adopted by Indira Gandhi's government. In reality, the Emergency had dissenters across India, among whom Salman Rushdie was one.

This satirical undermining of an often glossed-over period of Indian history is, of course, entirely deliberate on Rushdie's part, and it reveals that new myths have the power to unseat old ones, or to reform them. (Both reform as in improve, and reform as in *re-form*—to form again.) Old myths can, perhaps, break the crust that buries old ones; new fictions may expose old truths. Saleem's own myth—that of being a magical midnight child—is destroyed

when he discovers his true identity, and when he has to come to terms with being both Indian and Pakistani in the wake of the Partition. "Maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence," Saleem says, "that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disoriented, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies" (*Midnight's Children* 326). "Adrift" and "disoriented" are very much terms of the broader diasporic narrative, and of Rushdie's own personal narrative as well as the shattered, traumatic narrative of the Indian-Pakistani diaspora.

When truth itself becomes a confabulation of fictions, an "infinite number of falsenesses," it is no wonder that Saleem (and Rushdie) resort to myth-making as a solution. Unfortunately, many of Saleem's efforts at myth-making fall flat, just as the *Midnight Children's* Conference comes apart. Rushdie, however, deftly navigates the waters of old myths by using new ones to stay afloat. Saleem isn't entirely Rushdie's mouthpiece, but in this instance, his sentiments echo Rushdie's to a remarkable degree. Contrary to Saleem struggling with his own internal and external fragmentation, Rushdie uses that very fragmentation as his Muse for the restorative myth-making that will restore to him the India he left behind:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. ("Imaginary Homelands" 431)

Rushdie claims that diasporic fragmentation is "not an infertile territory" for his imagination, which is the direct opposite of the very literal infertility imposed on Saleem. The point where Rushdie's thoughts differ from Saleem's is where Saleem gets lost in his forest of myths and fails to *hope*, whereas Rushdie chooses to make creative use of his own plurality, gearing his myth-making towards a positive, constructive end. While Saleem's personal mythologies eventually collapse around him like the proverbial house of cards, Rushdie uses his own mythologies to unseat the very stubborn, misleading myths about India's past that lead to Saleem's demise. In this, Rushdie's myth-making is not only restorative but corrective. One of Rushdie's mythological revisionings/corrections is, for example, the forced sterilisations affected by Mrs. Gandhi during her self-declared Emergency in *Midnight's Children*. Gandhi herself denied the existence of such methods in a radio interview ("Imaginary Homelands" 430-431), but Rushdie explodes this myth of denial through Saleem's fractured narrative.

This duality is yet another representation of Rushdie's unwillingness to tell just one side of the story. It would be incorrect to assert that Rushdie's myth-making is *entirely* celebratory, even though it is partly celebratory, as discussed previously in this paper. Rather, Rushdie's depiction of Saleem's failed myths shows that myth-making can serve both positivist and negativist

causes; it can be the fire that bakes one's bread or that burns down one's house. The storyteller alone is responsible for the telling and interpretation of his or her myths, and Rushdie adeptly manipulates the larger myths of India's independence through the more personal myths of Saleem's life. While the end of the book might appear to be fatalistic, and while Saleem's own life might appear to be tragic, Rushdie nevertheless highlights the historically reformative power of fiction, of taking myth-making in directions more productive than Saleem's. Saleem's passivity and lack of action—of *active* myth-making that results in external action, as opposed to his typically passive, meandering internal monologues that together form his *hamartia*, or fatal flaw (Booker 329)—contribute to his end.

The close of the book as struck many readers as pessimistic. As will be noted later, however, Rushdie himself has argued that there is enough variety and vitality throughout the book to act as a countervailing tendency. In a curious way, moreover, Saleem's castration and impending disintegration merely fulfill the sense throughout the book that his role is to be the onlooker, the voyeur, and that he is therefore by definition sterile. (Harrison 47)

Saleem's "disintegration" mirrors India's equally literal disintegration during the Partition, and warns against the inevitability of entropy, of the gradual decline into disorder, that may await India should it continue to disintegrate along religious, communal or class lines. And yet, there is a hopefulness to the novel, too. It is a common misconception to conflate the surface events of a book with its message. This holds true for *Midnight's Children*, as well. Since India's own booming population growth has been far from sterile, Rushdie has effectively managed to pinpoint that Saleem's life was *not*, in fact, a direct parallel of India's, and that Saleem's sterilisation was not indicative of India sharing the same fate.

Besides, in *Midnight's Children*, sterilisation is not only the imposition of a physical, biological infertility on its characters; it is also a metaphor for the repeated attempts, throughout Indian history, to "cleanse" India of its Muslims (Jaffrelot 388), its "low" castes (511), and its poor (285). Despite the attempted sterilisation of India by generations of political leaders—sterilisation being an extended metaphor for censorship, the pursuit of ethnoreligious homogeneity, caste exclusionism, Hindu nationalism, and the sort of destructive jingoism that seeks to purify the national narrative by silencing or erasing the voices of minority groups, castes, religions and sexualities—India has largely continued to be stubbornly free-speaking, multi-religious and diverse. India has not completely disintegrated, unlike Saleem; it has not succumbed to the various forms of ethnoreligious cleansing and intellectual, cultural sterilisation that have been inflicted upon it through cataclysmic events like the Partition and the Emergency. The parallel between Saleem's life and India's experiences is thus incomplete, and is only another

myth that collapses at the end; it was, after all, a myth that Saleem himself constructed in order to give his life a sense of purpose. In leaving this parallel incomplete—again, like *The Magic Paintbrush* (Demi)—Rushdie leaves room for India's salvation to blossom, through India's power to regenerate and recreate itself, rather like a phoenix, after every phase of destruction. Saleem failed to renew himself, but India did not, and does not. This, perhaps, is where the stories of these two midnight's children diverge.

The myth of Saleem-as-India is, in fact, not the only mythological element of *Midnight's Children*. There are at least three distinct layers of mythology that Rushdie has painstakingly constructed. The innermost core is the historical mythology of India, or rather, the commonly accepted mythology of India's independence. Surrounding it is the layer of Saleem's personal mythology, and his belief that his life parallels India's. The final layer is the almost diaphanous, see-through frame narrative of Rushdie's own mythology as a migrant—and it is this layer that stands intact at the end, after the first two layers have been dissolved and deconstructed. Saleem's story is used to dismantle the core myth of post-independence harmony, and once that is done, Saleem's story also dismantles itself, leaving only the hybrid, thriving and limitless possibilities of Rushdie's India. These triple layers of myth-making are rather like literary Russian dolls, each nested within the other, such that the layers within can only be seen when the layers without have been deconstructed.

Finally, it is only Rushdie's diasporic mythology that is left standing—the concept of India as a multi-faceted, many-headed organism with no temporal, religious or racial boundaries. Rushdie's inclusive, diasporic voice is the very antithesis of Indira Gandhi's purist ideology, as well as of the separatist paranoia that led to India's Partition. By encasing these old mythologies in his own magical realist narrative, Rushdie uses Saleem's fantastic story to deconstruct them. He displaces the myth of a single origin, and offers instead an India that continues to be reborn, from the stories and beliefs of a multitude of people.

True to traditional mythological narratives, *Midnight's Children*, too, has a battle between two sides at its core, a “mythic struggle” that is expressed through the rivalry between Saleem and Shiva, between “the Self and the Other” (Sage 14), the Muslim and the Hindu, the privileged and the poor. The Shiva/Saleem dichotomy is an embodiment of this crucial mythological trope, and represents the Hindu/Muslim, poor/rich dichotomy that remains at the heart of much Indian political discourse to this day.

However, Rushdie deconstructs that seeming binary opposition by making the fates of both characters incidental. Saleem and Shiva are hostages of fate, for they are only who they are—Muslim and Hindu, rich and poor—based on an arbitrary circumstance, the fact that they were switched at birth. This replacement of agency with destiny is typically mythological and universally humanising, because both Saleem and Shiva are equally subject to fate. This

marks yet another mode of myth-making employed by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, wherein free will is revealed to be fashioned at least as much from fate as from actual, individual agency. The "malleable fixity" of this fundamentally mythological depiction of fate reveals how "destiny is negotiated and nurtured, manipulated and resisted in complex ways, and unavoidably inflected by other powers ranging from cosmological elements such as fortune and luck to intimate others such as kin" (Elliot and Menin 293). That Saleem and Shiva were born at the same time is one such "cosmological" element of Rushdie's constructed mythology, in which fortune and luck play crucial roles, but are in turn "inflected" by external "powers" such as Indira Gandhi and the vicissitudes of Indian politics.

Indeed, Saleem and Shiva both attempt to manipulate their "cosmological" destiny in various ways, even as they remain ultimately bound by environmental factors outside of their control. This characteristic of myth-making—comparing and contrasting agency with destiny, and free will with fate—has been actively used by myth-makers for millennia, even in seminal ancient myths such as the tale of Oedipus. Now, in *Midnight's Children*, this trope is used by Rushdie to create a common ground between Shiva and Saleem, between Hindu and Muslim. That Saleem and Shiva are both subject to fate invites the creation of a liminal, sympathetic "Third Space" (Bhabha 74-75) between them, a space for potential discourse and mutual understanding, where each may understand the other better by realising that their differences are not so much innate as circumstantial, and that they are, despite their apparent oppositional traits, backgrounds and religions, simply human and at the mercy of greater forces. While that potential for constructive discourse is not fulfilled between Saleem and Shiva themselves, the novel nonetheless suggests the need for and possibility of such a discourse between the Hindu and Muslim communities of India, and sheds light on a possible path towards peaceful cohabitation.

However, *Midnight's Children* is also something of a cautionary tale, as all myths are to varying degrees. In naming Shiva's character after the Hindu god of destruction, and having that character cause literal destruction within the text, Rushdie also metaphorises and warns against the evils of Hindu nationalism, subtly putting forth the idea that any system of belief will become destructive if taken to a militant extreme, and that, contrary to much modern press coverage that focuses disproportionately on Islamic terrorism (Chalabi 2018), Islam is not the only religion that can fall prey to such extremism. In borrowing from the terminology of Indian mythology in general, and from the god Shiva's destruction myth in particular, Rushdie only increases the efficiency and authenticity of his myth-making. Rushdie's use of recognisably Indian mythological names turns *Midnight's Children* from what would otherwise have been merely a magical realist narrative into an impactful origin myth that mythologises the key conflicts and ideological differences that have wracked post-independence Indian history.

Of course, this origin myth is not only a myth about the origins of India, but of India *as Rushdie's origin*. This is the underlying subtext beneath the surface appearance of *Midnight's Children* as a straightforward origin myth. As stated earlier in this paper, while Saleem is not a flat, one-dimensional mouthpiece for Rushdie, he still gives voice to some of the same questions of identity that preoccupy diasporic Indians like Rushdie. Saleem does, to a degree, reflect Rushdie himself, and through myth-making, Rushdie finds in Saleem a mirror of himself:

Until natural objects have been related to the myth, our feelings do not know how to deal with them; but when subsumed in the mythological they are experienced with a profound appropriateness. Art which presents to our senses objects validated thus by the myth, offers to our Reason an ultimate "experience"; not experience of material configurations; but experience such as Narcissus enjoyed, when he saw in the pool, not water, but himself. (Campbell qtd. in Larsen ch. 13)

The "natural object" here being India, Rushdie's myth-making allows him to "deal with" it, its loss and its memory both, and once that memory is "validated . . . by myth," Rushdie at last experiences the completeness of seeing himself—broken fragments and all—reflected in the character of Saleem Sinai, like Narcissus was reflected in the pool. This isn't the negatively perceived, garden-variety narcissism that society disdains as extreme self-absorption, but rather the intrinsic human drive to understand oneself through one's reflection, like a protracted Lacanian "mirror stage" (Dor 95) that gives the seeker the apperception of themselves *from outside themselves*. Indeed, "before the mirror stage," the individual "does not yet experience [themselves] as a unified totality but as something disjointed" (Dor 95). Rushdie's disjointed diasporic self only becomes a unified totality when he creates a mirror, like Saleem, through which to glimpse himself and understand himself. In essence, if "the ego is formed by the image of the other," then only by reconciling that image with one's own identity can true internal cohesion occur, wherein the ego's natural defensiveness towards the self-as-other is subsumed by an acceptance of the other-as-self, the "conversion . . . of aggressivity into love" (Julien 34). The "aggressivity" of the fractured diasporic outlook, i.e. the frustration of always being incomplete, finally achieves a measure of wholeness through the act of myth-making and the creation/reabsorption of a mirror self, much like Rushdie's creation/reabsorption of Saleem. As explored previously in this paper, when I discussed the "healing power" of myth (May 86), the "broken mirror" ("Imaginary Homelands" 429) of the diasporic mind can at last be mended through a series of recursive reflections that complete the picture of the diasporic individual's fractured face in that broken mirror, a self-perceived picture that would else have cracks running through it, cracks now sealed with the reparative, connective glue of myth.

Michael Reder does not explicitly separate Saleem's voice from Rushdie's, but he also emphasises the importance of Rushdie's hybridised, diasporic perspective to the text, and to Saleem's characterisation. Without the benefit of diasporic distance and its birds-eye view of the origin, Reder argues, Rushdie's vision of India would be less stereoscopic and more centralised (226), less "panoramic" (Sage 12) and more vulnerable to localised communal bias. By its very nature, the diasporic mindset is one that explodes boundaries, and Reder points out that *Midnight's Children* does exactly that:

In the process of personalising history, Saleem fragments official history. Rushdie's history is not continuous or monolithic; it is fragmented, individual, personalised . . . Rushdie exposes the myth that is modern India but at the same time offers a new methodology for myth-making: not a cultural or epic myth meant to represent an entire people but an individual myth that is multiply signifiable. (226)

This returns us to Derrida's point about placing importance on the "subjective genitive" (373) in order to effectively deconstruct the origin. The passion of the origin is, in Rushdie's case, simultaneously deconstructed and revered by finding the origin *everywhere*; instead of pursuing the vision of a "monolithic" India, Rushdie arrives, through his myth-making, at a diverse, "multiply signifiable" (Reder 226) India, the source of which can be found in multiple personal mythologies that are thereby traceable to multiple origins themselves. The danger lies, of course, in taking this subjective genitive so far that it becomes its own kind of monolith; it would be easy for the careless myth-maker to reduce the multiplicity of origins to a wholly subjective, dogmatic, solipsistic national identity. However, as a diasporic myth-maker acutely aware of this risk, Rushdie reminds the reader not to forget that we are all broken mirrors, and that no vision of India ought to be boiled down to a dogma, much like the dogma that resulted in Indira Gandhi's Emergency and in the tragedy of the Partition. Saleem's fallibility as a narrator and his failure as a hero are all warning signs to not take subjectivity too far, to not crown it as the end-all and be-all of myth-making. Just as the diasporic Rushdie "straddle[s] two cultures" ("*Imaginary Homelands*" 431), so must his reader straddle the myths of nationality and individualism.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie presents three types of myth-making—the political, the personal and the aesthetic. Politicians embody the first, Saleem the second, and Rushdie the third; perhaps it is through aesthetic myth-making that a balance between personal and political mythologies can be maintained. On the one hand, we have the destructive jingoism of nationalistic puritanism; on the other, we have the self-absorbed and ultimately futile melancholy of Saleem's fairytale. Rushdie's revisionist mythology balances and deconstructs these binary opposites, by binding them together and presenting a more inclusive view of India. Myth and memory, too, are fused in Rushdie's myth-making; they construct each other by

deconstructing one another, much as Saleem's narrative does with India's. *Midnight's Children* is, therefore, a double-sided origin myth, not only about India's origin but about India as Rushdie's origin.

Rushdie used the myth to create a vast decentered panoramic picture of India from its inception—again the preoccupation with origins—to the present of the text. The novel is another alternative version of a creation myth, but this time, apparently, embedded in History. (Sage 12)

As a diasporic writer whose journey away from the homeland is also “embedded” in his personal history, Rushdie admits that it is impossible to resist the temptation “to look back, even at the risk of mutating into pillars of salt” (“Imaginary Homelands” 428). Rather, the danger lies in *not* looking back. Walcott may have claimed that myth-making petrifies history (370), but myth-making is what refreshes history in the diasporic mind and what keeps history alive. The “intentional gaze,” which, in this case, is Rushdie's diasporic gaze, the openly stated intention of which is to reconnect with the origin, “has the potency to transfer to the object,” the object here being India, “the intentionality of the person looking at it” (Becchio et al. 254). To rewrite oneself, to recreate oneself, is a singularly human pursuit; it is impossible to look back on history without changing it, mythologising it, and making new myths to replace the old. Rushdie's myth-making in *Midnight's Children* is an example of this phenomenon, wherein Rushdie revises the history of his beloved homeland through the lens of diasporic longing.

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