

## Degree Project

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### Winding Back the Clocks

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#### History and fiction in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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## Introduction

The integration of historical events and characters is a key aspect in many postcolonial texts. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is no exception to this rule. However, the mode in which Rushdie plays with the concept of national history, the way the author knits a web in which history and fiction are neatly tied together is especially noteworthy. In *Midnight's Children* history plays a central role: the underpinnings of national history are questioned, reflected upon, subverted, falsified and rejected in an attempt to enrich the narrative and provide a complex, mirrored, multilayered image of Indian identity in relation to its imperial legacy. *Midnight's Children* is the story of Saleem Sinai, his family, and India. Saleem is born in Bombay on 15 August 1947, at the stroke of midnight, when India became independent. He has the gift of telepathy, and is able to connect with each child born in the same midnight hour, who also have magical powers. The protagonist later unites all of them, creating the Midnight Children's Conference, a committee that would bring forth a new Indian nation. His every action alters the course of history as he participates in many historical events. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi begins the sterilization campaign, Shiva, Saleem's nemesis and one of the midnight's children, captures him and sends him to a sterilization camp. There, he reveals the names of all other midnight's children, who are captured and sterilized, destroying the powers that threaten the prime minister. Later, Indira Gandhi loses her first election and the children are set free. Saleem then starts telling the story of his life intertwined with that of a nation in thirty jars of "pickles of history", one for each chapter of the book and each year of his life. He believes he will die on his thirty-first birthday, his body falling apart, disintegrating into millions of specks of dust.

The pervasion of history in the narrative elements of postmodern fiction can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. This is particularly so when the historical elements relate to such questions as the postcolonial perception of nation, identity, and alterity. Several important postmodern works thematizing history seek to pervert the narrative element of time to question the linearity of history and the production of historiography in close relation to the notion of empire. Examples of these include Lobo Antunes' *The Return of the Caravels* (2003), Abel Posse's *The Dogs of Paradise* (2016), or Álvaro Enrigue's *Sudden Death* (1990).

Rushdie's novel sets itself apart from the above, as is suggested in the following study, because he reshapes and repurposes specific narrative elements, such as events and characters, which allow for a new and different glance at India's recent past. He makes use of history, fusing it with fiction. The narrator's own history is intertwined and influences as well as is influenced by that of the nation, turning historical events and characters into a mix of fiction and history. In the following, what is of interest is what this treatment of history does to the genre of the historical novel. In particular, this essay tries to explore whether the novel might be considered a historical one. A clear presence of historical elements in the narrative is typical of some postmodern fiction. However, the attempt to insert Rushdie's text in such a specific genre as the historical novel can prove to be an almost impossible enterprise due to the blurring of the barriers of genre. The present study aims, thus, to establish to what extent *Midnight's Children* might be considered a historical novel. It also aims to observe what hermeneutical parallels can be drawn from the relation between history and fiction, that is to say how that relation can be interpreted. To do so, this thesis will explore Rushdie's narrative in

relation to the poetics of the genre to show that the narrative is indeed a historical novel albeit an atypical example of the genre, since it clearly distorts and disrupts both historical events and historical characters. Subsequently, drawing on postmodernist and postcolonial theory this essay will show that, the integration of history in the novel suggests an immutability in the *status quo*, an inevitability to escape India's Western past, and a negation of national identity-building events through a failed utopia.

To do this, the literature review will provide a panoramic view of relevant critical texts about *Midnight's Children*. The theoretical framework regarding the historical novel will then be presented and the same chapter will discuss how that genre is important for a nuanced understanding of the novel, while applying it at the same time to Rushdie's work. Subsequently this essay will turn to the hermeneutical analysis of the narrative, and provide readings of a selection of key excerpts related to history and identity.

### **Views on history and fiction**

Much has been written about the interrelation of nation and history in Rushdie's text. O'Brien's reading of *Midnight's Children* uses the theoretical model of aporetic time by Ricoeur to argue that the novel disrupts the narrative element of time, by denying a single temporal structure, making time multiple or diverse (165). However, the concept of aporetic time when related to the narration of *Midnight's Children* can solely be applied to Saleem Sinai's personal flow of time - this of course relates to memory and, just like in memory, time gets scrambled, distorted, out of order, chaotic (168-169). That is not to say that there is a disruption of historical time, just of the personal perspective of the narrator.

History's timeline is, to a general extent, the same as in historiography. O'Brien's fundamental thesis is that the disruption of time in the novel causes a subjectivity closely related to memory, making history individual, thus capable of being remembered in a different way than that of registered history (176). O'Brien supports his arguments on Jenkins' view that correlates the disruption of cultural history with postmodernist narrative techniques. Although it cannot be viewed as an attempt to analyze how the use of history makes the novel a postmodern text, or how this postmodern text is a historical novel, it is a useful critical view of how Rushdie's text incorporates at the same time Eastern and Western elements, adopting and challenging traditions. It also approaches the concept of transtextuality, linking the novel to Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; *The Tin Drum* by Gunther Grass; *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Márquez; and *In Search of Lost Time* by Proust<sup>1</sup>.

Dwivedi brings forward many historical details in the novel to link history with the concepts of nation and identity, at the same time relating history with memory, both collective and individual. The novel is not explicitly inserted in the genre of the historical novel, but Dwivedi offers a sociological perspective on its relation between history and fiction, in relation to some of the characters. The thesis is that there is a fictionalization of history, not a falsification, and that the model nation Rushdie proposes is individual, stemming from the India of his childhood (520).

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<sup>1</sup> These transtextual relations can also be found in ten Kortenaar's extensive analysis of *Midnight's Children*. Teverson and Upstone also mention them. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin do so from a postcolonialist perspective. Hutcheon also discusses these relations and establishes intertextuality as a major trait of the postmodern novel. And Göbel has an article that provides a close and extensive comparison between *Midnight's Children* and Sterne's text, claiming that the notion of time and the structures of both novels are similar. However, all of these transtextual relations will be looked at in detail in the following chapter.

Teverson undertakes a generic analysis of Rushdie's novel, in which the postmodernist elements are aggregated and serve to include the work in the genre of the historical novel, more specifically in a tendency known as speculative fiction, – a mixture between the historical novel and science-fiction “in which the alien qualities of ‘new worlds’ are used as a means of investigation and destabilising settled certainties concerning our own world” (111-112). Teverson observes the close relation between the novel and the concepts of history, historiography and the role of the historiographer, suggesting that the text can be seen as a form of historical fiction. Teverson's study proves useful in enumerating all historical events and dates (125), proceeding to insert Rushdie's text in the genre of the historical novel – using, however, Avrom Fleishman's and Harry Shaw's theoretical frameworks on the genre (125). What follows is a useful comparison of Rushdie and Sir Walter Scott in authorial terms, and a close comparison of *Midnight's Children* and both *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*. There is, nonetheless, no attempt to use more recent theoretical frameworks of the historical novel as a genre, and so the definition of genre pertains to the historical novel of the Romantic period.

Another study that uses history to support its argument is that of Watson, although he applies a different theoretical framework. The study analyzes the use of history to create a postcolonial discourse, arguing that this postcolonial discourse seeks to replace the traditional structures of nation and history, turning them into artificial entities (222-223).

For the present study, a more recent theoretical framework of the historical novel as a genre will be used, since previous attempts to establish a poetics using the historical novel of the Romantic period seem to fall short when applied to a

postmodern text. The approach used, then, is based on Celia Fernandez Prieto's definition of historical novel of the recent past, which will be observed in detail in the next chapter, along with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction. As will be discussed, one of the most important effects of the integration of historical elements, both distorted and not, according to Prieto and Hutcheon, is the questioning of history itself and the sense-making of historical data.

### **Reading historical fiction**

There is extensive literature on the historical novel as a genre, but the specificities of the use of history in a postmodern text such as *Midnight's Children* elude a great part of the studies done on the genre. Georg Lukács' groundbreaking work from 1937, *The Historical Novel*, which established the genre in its own right models his poetics on the realist novel. This premise makes his theory slightly off mark in relation to Rushdie's incorporation of magic realism, which functions as a structuring device used "to interrogate the assumptions of Western, rational, linear, narrative and to enclose it within an indigenous metatext" (Ashcroft, Gareth and Tiffin 119). It is usually seen as the incorporation of mythical elements from local folklore in a narrative, although Rushdie's magic realism resorts to mythical elements both from Indian and Western popular culture.

Later attempts to establish a poetics of the historical novel do encompass the period in which *Midnight's Children* was written<sup>2</sup>. That is the case in De

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<sup>2</sup> Although the problem is not one of time nor period, but of narrative techniques and elements. To determine whether a text is a historical novel or not, it must contain certain historical elements in its diegesis. However, to what extent can one say that a text that subverts those historical elements is a historical novel?

Groot's recent work, which provides a perspective on the (mostly anglophile) historical novel. De Groot incorporates the novel in a discussion that seems to problematize postmodernism, calling it a postmodern historical novel (119)<sup>3</sup>. A number of other attempts call to attention the taxonomical problem of defining the genre.

Hutcheon claims that the postmodern novel, more specifically historiographic metafiction, contests the defining notion of the use of detail as a means of achieving historical faithfulness (as it was seen in the realist historical novel), and does so in two ways. Firstly, historiographic metafiction "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" (114), opening the possibility to deliberately falsify historical details and bringing recorded history closer to human memory, by constructing a narrative with gaps and both deliberate and inadvertent errors. Secondly, contrary to realist historical fiction, which incorporates and assimilates historical data to convey a sense of verifiability to the fictional world, historiographic metafiction incorporates but does not assimilate such data, causing both narrators and readers to try and make sense of the historical facts that are presented. In this way, historiographic metafiction "acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today" (114). This notion of sense-making of history is also conveyed through the challenging or disruption of basic structuring notions, such as causality and logic, and narrative conventions.

Whether to call a text a historiographic metafiction or a historical novel is a complex question. The taxonomy issues become even more visible when McHale

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<sup>3</sup> De Groot refers to the postmodern tendency to use history as "postmodern historical novels" (119) and extensively argues against Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, which also encompasses *Midnight's Children*. Again, this seems to be a question of taxonomy.

defines *Midnight's Children* as “historical fantasy” (94-95), “postmodern apocryphal history” (95), and “secret history” (95). Of course, Hutcheon and McHale are not attempting to define the historical novel as a genre; instead they formulate a poetics of postmodernist fiction, consequently touching upon the use of history in that context.

A relatively recent study solely on the historical novel as a genre is that of Prieto. Even if it does not focus on the English literary tradition, because of its extensive and detailed definition of the genre, it is possible to draw on Prieto's poetics to study a text as complex as *Midnight's Children*. In the last chapter of her book, Prieto analyzes the use of history in postmodern fiction, drawing on previous research by Lukács and Hutcheon, and contributes to the taxonomy problem of the genre, so to speak, by calling that postmodernist tendency to subvert and distort historical elements as “historical novel of the recent past” (190).

Prieto claims that the historical novel assumes two different tendencies in the twentieth century. The first one follows the traditional model of the realist novel, respecting historical documentation and the verisimilitude of the diegetic configuration. The other, however, is more creative in the renewal of the genre: it takes a deeper approach<sup>4</sup> than the narratives historical novelists offered us in the beginning of the twentieth century and separates itself from the traditional model by distorting historical data and underlining intertextual and hypertextual procedures (167).

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<sup>4</sup> This can be done by giving the reader too much historical information in the form of dates, events, and names (while subverting all of the above), as well as linguistically, both by imitating the language of the specific period in question to provide a sense of historicity.

The first problem one faces when trying to apply Prieto's poetics to *Midnight's Children* has to do with the semantic signification of the name of the genre in question, the historical novel of the recent past. That is to say, it becomes difficult to establish a specific interval of years that is adequate to the meaning of recent past. Let us assume, then, that the interval between the date of India's independence in 1947 and the date of publication of the novel, 1981, is sufficient<sup>5</sup>. Prieto indicates four main generic traits of the historical novel (although for this study, only the first two are relevant). A semantic-pragmatic project to rebuild an age of the historical past is the first trait of the genre (101). This poses no problem regarding its application to Rushdie's text<sup>6</sup>. Prieto states that these texts offer in the title or their first few lines precise chronological and topological indications to situate the events that are going to be narrated, which also serves to underline the temporal distance between the diegesis – in the past – and the time of its reading – the present of the reader (101). This is what happens in *Midnight's Children*. Although the indication is not so precise in the title<sup>7</sup>, it does offer a clue to the chronological setting. All chronological and topological indications are in the first few lines of the novel:

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<sup>5</sup> Prieto takes Sir Walter Scott's work as the starting point to evaluate a sufficient interval between the time of the narrative and the time of publication in order to assess historicity. One needs to differentiate between two groups of novels: those, like *Waverley*, which are closer to his time and those, like *Ivanhoe*, whose action takes place in medieval settings (83). For the purpose of this study, it is the first category which is of interest. The interval between the time of the diegesis and the time of publication is around six decades and considered adequate to regard a novel as historical. Therefore, the genre definition of the historical novel of the recent past would have to be characterized by a temporal difference between diegesis and publication/writing inferior to those sixty years. An interval of about half that time, three to four decades, seems reasonable to define recent past in the historical novel, making *Midnight's Children* fulfill the criterion.

<sup>6</sup> However, in the case of this modern tendency of historical fiction, it may not be fair to talk about a semantic-pragmatic project in the same sense of what happens in the romanticism. First of all, because the concept of literary movement became blurry and faded throughout the last half of the twentieth century, contrary to other ages.

<sup>7</sup> But perhaps more precise in another sense, seeing as it states the precise hour of an event.

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 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact [...] at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. (Rushdie 3)

Although the narrative spans from 1915 to 1977, this is the first event to be mentioned and it serves as the motor to the whole narrative, making it the most central and significant historical event of the text. The words of Saleem Sinai are noteworthy in the sense that they not only offer chronological and topological indications, but also clues in between that information. One can notice a preoccupation with being precise, to escape from vagueness, and to follow the rules of historiography, clearly stating places, names, and dates. But Saleem also uses the expression "once upon a time", words taken from the realm of fairytales – perhaps a clue to the fictionalization of history.

The second generic trait of the historical novel, according to Prieto, is the fact that the diegesis is composed of historical elements – spaces, events, and characters – and purely fictional elements (Prieto 101). Regarding the first narratological category – the spaces – one can assume that the historical novel of the recent past adopts a realist tendency to depict them<sup>8</sup>. This happens in *Midnight's Children*, from all corners of India to Pakistan, all diegetic spaces are relatively faithful as representations of the historical spaces and, as such, they are a

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<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, exceptions. In *The Return of the Caravels* space is formed by a hypotaxis of the recent past to a more distant one, fusing elements of both and making them coexist in the same space (caravels and oil tankers, for example).

part of the reader's encyclopedic knowledge of spaces, being representations of real topoi where certain historical events took place. As for historical events, they are many and the narrative can also be seen as following the historical chronological line of the twentieth century: from World War I to India's independence, to the war between India and China, to the military coup in Pakistan, to the independence attempts in Bangladesh.

The third narratological category, however, poses a problem. According to Mieke Bal, the term character refers to the "anthropomorphic figures provided with specifying features the narrator tells us about" (112). This definition is quite ample and generic, and fits the purely fictional characters. Nonetheless, the historical characters possess specific features relating to the extra-textual context. This is closely tied with Hamon's definition of referential character, a character connected to the category of referential signs, recognized by the reader by its encyclopedic or dictionary meaning (121).

Prieto completes the definition of the specificities of the historical genre stating that the historical characters are fixated in our collective memory through a series of traits that are signs of their identity and, therefore, allow them to be perceived and recognized by the reader (182). One of those traits, and certainly one of the most important for that frame of reference (Bal 120) is their name, which activate connotative networks that integrate the cultural competence of the reader, and pose certain restrictions on the author (Prieto 183). These restrictions relate to the expectations of the reader, generated by the inclusion of the historical character in a fictional world, or in Bal's words: "the possibilities are limited because of the frame of reference. A mature Napoleon presented as a poor wretch would create a very odd effect: he would no longer be Napoleon" (122).

The problem here is to understand the limits of the frame of reference, especially in such a complex text as *Midnight's Children*. Laying the focus specifically on the character of Indira Gandhi, it becomes clearer how the resort to the historical frame of reference both limited and extended the author's possibilities. It was mentioned above that one of the most important traits of the historical character to provide the reader with a link between the character and its referent was the name. Indira Gandhi is rarely named in the novel, despite being a strong and very present character. The first references to the Widow, as she is named, escape this notion of referentiality and let the author build a character almost purely fictional in the perspective of the reader. Then, by revealing that the Widow was in fact Nehru's daughter, this referentiality is provided. However, it must then accommodate all other traits given by the narrator. In other words, it must convey the idea of a character representing evil, Saleem Sinai's nemesis, a figure who threatens and castrates the Midnight's Children, thus preventing a new generation to come into power. This reinforces the idea that Rushdie's India is a failed utopia, an idea explored in a more detailed manner in the next chapter.

In terms of definition of genre and application of those genre specificities to *Midnight's Children* – or possible application, since there is no mention of the work in Prieto's book – this is the theoretical framework, both of the postmodernism and of the historical novel, on which this essay molds its analysis.

### **Reading into historical fiction**

There are many terms for the different versions of history. McHale makes the distinction between public history and private history (95-96). However, one would think that, regarding a text as complex and multilayered as *Midnight's*

*Children*, the most appropriate terms for the versions of history would be the *authorized version* and the *authorial version*<sup>9</sup>. The first one relates, of course, to the known facts of the history of India: dates and events taken out of history books, easily verifiable actions, the narrative of history brought to us by the ruling powers. The second one is a bit trickier and can be seen as the untold history, Rushdie's version of history, Saleem Sinai's *personal* fictional version of history. This binomial relationship is best exemplified by the image of Indira Ghandi, the Widow, who in the novel is characterized by opposing elements: "she too had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us" (Rushdie 483). Sometimes the distinction between both is so blurred that the fictional character Saleem becomes the historical character Saleem:

What Amina Sinai did not know was that, for the second time in history, I was about to make my presence felt. (No: not that fraudulent tadpole in her stomach: I mean myself, in my historical role, of which prime ministers have written '... it is in a sense, the mirror of us all.' (94-95)

Saleem hints at the fact that the novel is built in a mirrored structure – reality/appearance, Saleem/Shiva, Saleem/India, India/Empire. The protagonist defines himself in opposition to the "fraudulent tadpole" who is Shiva. However, the most important aspect of the excerpt is that the narrator tells us he is not

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<sup>9</sup> These are terms defined by me, since McHale's didn't seem to encompass the concept of history as a product of power, nor the textual, fictional dimension of history.

merely the protagonist, but has a historical role. Saleem makes the distinction between the personal and public aspects of his narrative, joining them together. Rushdie uses this technique throughout the whole narrative, mixing historical and fictional elements. This results in an authorial version of history, in which there seems to be a balance between both categories of elements. The following excerpt from the masterfully crafted chapter “Methwold”, gives a summarized Indian history lesson:

Before *Mountbatten's tick-tock*, before *monsters* and *public announcements*; when *underworld marriages* were still unimagined and *spittoons* were unknown; earlier than *Mercurochrome*; longer ago than lady wrestlers who held up *perforated sheets*; and back and back, beyond Dalhousie and Elphinstone, before the East India Company built its Fort, before the first *William Methwold*; at the dawn of time, when Bombay was a dumbbell-shaped island tapering, at the center, to a narrow shining strand beyond which could be seen the finest and largest natural harbor in Asia, when Mazagaon and Worli, Matunga and Mahim, Salsette and Colaba were islands, too—in short, before reclamation, before *tetrapods* and sunken piles turned the Seven Isles into a long peninsula like an outstretched, grasping hand, reaching westward into the Arabian Sea; in this primeval world before *clocktowers*, the fishermen—who were called Kolis—sailed in Arab dhows, spreading the sails against the setting sun. (101, my italics)

Saleem Sinai describes India from the Kolis, the first inhabitants, to the departure of the colonizers. But this history lesson mixes both versions of history, both the

*authorized* and the *authorial*. What the reader sees is that Saleem Sinai's personal history, marked by the italicized elements, is in symbiosis with historical events. Both versions of history seem to be given exactly the same weight: the Fort built by the East India Company is as important in the excerpt as Saleem's family heirloom, the spittoon. The novel is then narrated in a way that conjoins a dual structure, uniting both versions of history.

Further playing on this duality of history is the mirrored historical relationship between Empire and India, between William Methwold and Saleem. The protagonist seems to be the product of the imperialist Methwold. He is, much like India, the offspring of the Empire. Looking closely at the Englishman's name, it seems to suggest something: Methwold – Meta-world. An argument for this can be made by looking at Methwold's experiment with the colonized at the estate. Methwold's "little game" (105) creates a meta-world, so to say. The reader can see the effects of colonization, the goals of civilizing the natives, the applied pragmatics of colonial discourse. While the Empire lets go of India, Methwold gives one last try to normalize the Indians, to make them into his own image:

But now there are twenty days to go, things are settling down, the *sharp edges of things are getting blurred*, so they have all failed to notice what is happening: the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is *changing them*. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their *imitation Oxford draws*; and they are learning, about ceiling-fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their *transformation*, is mumbling under his breath. (109, my italics)

It is then a process of transformation by imitation, a process which is a mirror of the colonial by way of a parody taken to the limits of the ironic. The process is embodied by the character of Ahmed Sinai “aping Oxford drawl, anxious to impress the departing Englishman” (122), who makes up a fictional noble family tree, lost in the magic of the gin/djinn, using stereotypical British expressions like “old chap”, a process which culminates with the strange disease that turns him white, “*almost the same but not quite*<sup>10</sup>” (Bhabha 89). Methwold’s game functions as a mirror of the colonial process. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry is clearly in play here. According to Bhabha:

The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers. (86)

In Rushdie’s novel there is a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline given by the strictness of the condition of sale. The price is right if and only if the

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<sup>10</sup> Bhabha makes the pun of “*almost the same but not quite*” vs. “*almost the same but not white*” (89). One cannot help but feel that Rushdie preempts this concept of colonial difference and plays with it, erasing the “*almost the same but not white*”, thus approximating colonized and colonizer or object and subject to use Bhabha’s terms, and blurring the lines of identity in a parodic way.

colonized follow the rules of the game and mimic the colonizers. There is also a difference in following rules and abiding by common laws. While the colonized subjected themselves to the goal of being civilized – “With our ancient civilization, can we not be as civilized as he?” (Rushdie 109) - the colonial power represented by Methwold does not need to follow the most basic social rules and, in fact, becomes the biological father of Saleem. It is curious to see how the colonized become the “authorized versions of otherness”, objects of a colonialist chain of command (Bhabha 88).

The question of mimicry is raised again a few pages later. “In India, we’ve always been vulnerable to Europeans... [...] already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. [...] Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce...” (Rushdie 212). The formation of identity and subjectivity by the narrator Saleem mimics the same process as that of his father, Ahmed Sinai, for “there is no magic on earth strong enough to wipe out the legacies of one’s parents” (Rushdie 463). It becomes clearer that there is a double process of mimicry: Ahmed Sinai mimics the customs of the Empire embodied by William Methwold, while Saleem Sinai mimics the customs and culture of the Empire via his mode of narration, unable to escape the legacy of both his fathers. It is important to remember that there are multiple levels to the characterization of Saleem, that the character is built on a mirror-like framework, and that Saleem’s history is but a mirror of India’s history, their legacies being one and the same: the influence of the Empire.

This specular structure of the novel can be seen in many binomials. Saleem mirrors India itself. Kortenaar (32) uses the voodoo doll metaphor<sup>11</sup> and it is a fitting one at that. Saleem seems to suffer in the flesh in the same way India is influenced by history because Saleem in some senses *is* India:

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 – that my poor body, singular, unlovely, *buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage* above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally *disintegrating*, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) *six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous*, and necessarily oblivious, *dust*. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (We are a *nation of forgetters*.) (Rushdie 36, my italics)

The fact that Saleem Sinai is himself, in some ways, India suggests another binomial relation, the opposition Saleem/Widow mentioned above. The first is India, the latter wants to be India. This becomes more apparent with Saleem's role in the Midnight's Children Committee. The protagonist is the forum itself, he is

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<sup>11</sup> Whenever something happens to Saleem's body, something similar happens to India: "when I was detached from my finger and blood [...] rushed out in fountains, a similar thing happened to history, and all sorts of everywhichting began pouring out all over us" (233).

the space in which the “children of *the time*: fathered [...] by history” (132) meet. Saleem is a space, a common territory. He has, contrary to Indira Ghandi, “the role of mirror-of-the-nation” (491).

Thus, Saleem Sinai’s relationship with history is a complex one: “I, too, had been placed in great danger; as if unseen forces had decided that I had also overstepped the boundaries of what I was permitted to do or know or be; as though history had decided to put me firmly in my place” (338). This “place” is a marginal one, and the narrative is written in a way that suggests Rushdie is aware of theories about postmodernism and cosmopolitan writing. While it is difficult to establish with precision Rushdie’s model reader, one can speculate that this novel seems to be written for an academic readership which would recognize all of this. The text’s postcoloniality both in form and content is almost absolutely undeniable. It can be identified in the tendency to which Boehmer calls “the cosmopolitan approach<sup>12</sup>” (243), but one can easily find references to the novel in postmodern criticism (McHale or Hutcheon) and one can even extrapolate from genre studies such as those that approach the historical novel, as mentioned in the previous chapters. The uniqueness of Rushdie’s novel makes it hybrid: a postcolonial historiographic metafiction. Its narrator has all the traits and characteristics of the protagonists of the genre: “it is clear that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (Hutcheon 113-114).

At this point, it is relevant to return to the question of Saleem Sinai’s historical role. He is the agent of history, but also its recorder. The personal and

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<sup>12</sup> “On the one hand is the cosmopolitan approach, located largely in the West, and focused on literatures written in Englishes, or other European languages, mainly by migrant, and therefore more accessible writers. This approach will no doubt continue to make up the bulk of mainstream postcolonial criticism” (Boehmer 243).

public versions of history are so closely tied together that they become one: “It is possible, even probable, that I am only the first historian to write the story of my undeniably exceptional life-and-times” (Rushdie 338). The account of Saleem’s life cannot be separated from the account of the history of India. By joining them, the result is a questioning of history. This has to do with reliability of the narrator. One cannot help but feel from the beginning that Saleem is, in a Marlowian way, spinning the proverbial yarn. There are some clues and hints to support this argument in what Prieto calls “voluntary anachronisms” (193):

Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, 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? (Rushdie 189-190)

This is the first voluntary anachronism. It is followed by a reflection on the role of history and the centrality of the protagonist in it. Saleem poses the question: would he re-write history to place himself in the center? There is no clear, black-and-white, yes-or-no answer. The way the narrative is built, the magical realism traits, and Saleem’s constant begging to be believed, all this points in one direction: his unreliability. This unreliability assumes new preponderance in a second anachronism: “I have made another error—that the election of 1957 took place

before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events” (254). Here the reader comes across the admission of error, a confession of unreliability by Saleem himself, who intentionally subverts the chronological order of events. The use of the expression “another error” seems to leave the reader to wonder what more was subverted.

As these examples suggest, history is shaped to fit the narrative and this is done explicitly: “what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe” (310). These anachronisms seem to result in the act of questioning the concept of history. In this regard, Saleem’s narrative “deliberately set[s] out to disrupt European notions of ‘history’ and the order of time”<sup>13</sup> (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 33). The binomial true-false is taken to other levels when Saleem reflects on his own experience of the war between India and Pakistan: “But did it or didn’t it? Was that how it happened? Or was All-India Radio—*great tank battle, huge Pak losses, 450 tanks destroyed*—telling the truth?” (Rushdie 389). The answer is allegorical of national history: “Nothing was real; nothing certain” (389).

In the same line of thought, there are several main points that can be made regarding the novel and its relation to the West, in the sense of approaching an idea of national identity from a postcolonial perspective. The first is the language the novel was written in. It was not written in one of the several languages native to India prior to colonial times, although it makes use of several non-English terms throughout. It was written in English, in what can be seen as an attempt to reach

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<sup>13</sup> The quote relates to genre, but the authors do use Rushdie’s novel as an example.

the Western reader, but also in what can be interpreted as a form of coming to terms with (but questioning and exposing) India's British colonial history.

The same process of questioning Western notions can be seen in the structures and devices of the novel itself. The use of magical realism, for instance, is, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, a way in which "the rational, linear world of Western realist fiction is placed against alter/native narrative modes that expose the hidden and naturalized cultural formations on which Western narratives are based (119). This becomes more complex when one thinks of the linearity of Western narratives upon which the novel is based. The reader will find references to Rider Haggard (160), Dafoe (263, 269), Shakespeare (397), Cervantes (494), Rostand (212) and even Rushdie himself makes a brief, postmodernist appearance in Saleem's canon (266), revealing the text's Western influences. However, as mentioned above, the novel's major intertexts are Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Márquez; and *The Tin Drum* by Gunther Grass. The first is, indeed Western, but by no means the archetype of linearity. Rushdie bases most of the structure and narrative ramblings on Sterne's non-linear text. The best example is Saleem Sinai's birth, much like that of Sterne's protagonist, which is mentioned early on but only narrated and included in the narrative much later, going from one event to the other, back and forth.

The second intertext can be considered Western, although marginal, and it was on this text that Rushdie based the familiar saga structure of the novel. This use of the Western canon can be seen as homage to those literary works, since it does not question nor subvert them. This is, granted, atypical from a postcolonial

point of view, but rather common when analyzed from a postmodernist perspective, especially in historiographic metafiction.

Regarding the third intertext, Rushdie infuses the novel with a *Bildungsroman* narrative similar to the novel by Grass, unfolding side by side with Germany's history in the twentieth century. The work is also Western, albeit atypical in the sense that it makes use of magical realism, set in Europe and in a time pre-Boom, or at least preceding the permeation of the Boom-generation in Western culture. The magical realism narrative procedures are particularly complex in their meaning. Saleem Sinai and the Midnight's Children are born at the stroke of midnight when India gains its independence. They are born with powers and there is an expectation, both by the reader and by the narrator, Saleem himself, to achieve great things, a new future, a new society, a new India. The Midnight's Children Committee was, in a way, supposed to deliver a utopia. This is thwarted by Indira Ghandi, and there is no real renewal, no formation of a new identity. Their powers simply fade with the utopia.

It is with a bleak look at India's future, this failed utopia, that the novel ends:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of the midnight's children to be

both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (533)

The ending of the novel itself is filled with information, but it is not difficult to speculate about a general interpretation. The series “one two three four hundred million five hundred six” both encompasses linearity and a rough estimate of India’s population at the time, crushing Saleem Sinai, “marching with him in time, but also treading on his body” (Ingersoll 79). The allusion to numbers is especially potent, as the one thousand and one can relate to the Eastern literary canon (by way of *One Thousand and One Nights*), but it perpetuates the failed utopia for generations to come. However, the most surprising element of the ending is how the midnight’s children will be “both masters and victims of their times”, which excludes the West from the structure of power (or maybe the West is already assimilated by the midnight’s children). And this failed utopia, this perpetual incurring in mistakes, is in itself part of the Indian national identity.

## **Conclusion**

*Midnight’s Children* can be seen as novel where history plays a central role. The underpinnings of national history are questioned, reflected upon, subverted, falsified and rejected in an attempt to enrich the narrative and provide a complex, mirrored, multilayered image of Indian identity in relation to its imperial legacy.

As this essay tried to show, the insertion of *Midnight’s Children* in the genre of the historical novel poses some problems. Rushdie’s book does not fit the traditional historical novel. However, it does have most of the traits one can find in

the postmodern tendency to historicize fiction, being both a postmodern historical novel and a historiographic metafiction. Purely from a standpoint of the chronological interval between the time of the diegesis and the time of publication, it can be considered a historical novel of the recent past. Furthermore, it can be considered as a semantic-pragmatic project to rebuild an age of the historical past. It contains in its first few lines, as a historical novel should, precise chronological and topological indications to situate the events that are going to be narrated. Those events are always situated in the past. Another indication that points towards the historical novel genre is that its diegesis is composed by a mixture between historical and purely fictional elements. When analyzing the historical elements, it is clear that all three relevant narratological categories – spaces, events, characters – can be found in the novel. By placing the novel in a postmodernist tendency to historicize fiction one can then understand why and with what intent history is subverted.

The present study distinguished between public history and private history (the authorized and the authorial versions of history). The novel is built in a specular structure, always using binomials. This sometimes creates narrative situations that mirror the colonial process (and the subsequent decolonization) itself, such as the Methwold episode, which could be perceived as a case of mimicry. The narrator is defined as an agent of history but also as its recorder, bestowing the novel with a clear sense of the importance of historiography. It also becomes clearer that it is not the narrative that fits history, but precisely the opposite that happens. This relates to both the notion of personal history and the concept of memory. The use of history to question identity and the relation to the West is also seen as a common trait of the postcolonial. The intertextual relations

of the novel to the Western canon may signify a homage – linking it again to the notion of mimicry – and the coming to terms with India’s historical past, especially when looking at some of the mimetic tropes, as is the case of the use of magical realism elements. These seem to point to a bleak interpretation: modern India is a failed utopia, there is almost no change in the *status quo*, the Indian is both master and victim of his time.

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