

**Truths or Lies in Historical Narratives: A study of Salman
Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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Abstract

Historians may depend on their own memories while recording the events that they saw and experienced. If it is not their first hand experience, they will rely on eye witnesses, historical archives, and other similar documents. If so, how do they know that their memories and their informants' memories are accurate? How do they know that the information that they collect from various sources are the appropriate representations of the events they aim to describe? Salman Rushdie, in his acclaimed text *Midnight's Children*, explores similar issues with a great subtlety. The novel, *Midnight's Children*, written from the perspective of the main character Saleem Sinai is as much about Indian Post Independence History as it is about Saleem's personal history. Saleem, a self proclaimed historian, tries to record everything, but at the same time he is aware that he cannot record everything. He is the one who decides what to include and what to preclude. His choices and rejections result into an abandonment of so -called objectivity in the act of writing history. His narrative rests largely upon his memory and his priorities.

Keywords: History, Memory, Lies, Narrative

Thucydides, in his introduction to the history of the Peloponnesian War wrote, "My conclusions have cost me some labor from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other"(40). If so, how do the historians know that the informants' memories are accurate? How do they know that they are appropriate representations of the events they aim to portray?

Salman Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, explores similar issues with a great subtlety. The novel, written from the perspective of the main character Saleem Sinai, is as much about Indian Post-Independence -History as it is about Saleem's own personal history, a confessional autobiography!

Saleem born exactly at the moment when India got Independence automatically shares many commonalities with the newborn India. Other 1000 midnight's children who were born that night are also linked automatically with the history of India. Thus, Saleem and India appears to be interconnected, and India and other 1000 midnight's children are also connected to each other and to the nation in a strange way. This is how Rushdie creates a background for his readers to ponder upon why Saleem records the past the way he does and how he becomes a new historian of India.

Saleem, a self proclaimed historian, tries to record everything but at the same time he is aware of his limitations. He is the one who decides what to include and what to preclude in his narrative. His choices and rejections result into an abandonment of so-called objectivity in the act of writing history. His narrative rests largely upon his memory and his priorities. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem says Ganesha sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and took down the *Ramayana*. Saleem is wrong. Similarly, during his account of the evolution of Bombay, Saleem tells us that the city's chief goddess Mumbadevi has fallen out of peoples' favor. Saleem goes to the extent of saying that the calendar of festivals reveals her decline and there is no Mumbadevi's day now. But the truth is that the calendar of festivals clearly includes Mumbadevi Day even now (Errata, the unreliable narrator, 56). Not only that, Saleem goes to extent of giving us a wrong date of Gandhi's assassination! It cannot be true that Rushdie did not know the date when Gandhi was assassinated. He must have a greater purpose behind committing such errata.

Rushdie thus tells the history of India after its independence, largely depending upon the memory of the protagonist historian. Rushdie writes in his essay, *Imaginary Homelands*: what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions (Imaginary Homelands, 10).

By making Saleem and other 1000 children born in the night when India got Independence, Rushdie becomes able to proclaim the notion that an individual is intricately tied up with the nation and its history. If so, s/he may write history of the nation the way he/she may write his/her own autobiography. Such truths or versions are equally respectable since they, attempt to reconstruct the past just the way the mainstream history books attempt to. And in the reconstruction of what has been already lost, historians trust memory as an important tool. For example, when Saleem returns to Bombay, he says “yes, it was my Bombay, but also not-mine...the past failed to reappear” (Midnight’s Children 522). The reality that he witnesses in the present does not match his expectations of the past because the past is not a place that can be revisited in a true sense.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie talks about such reconstructions when he writes that he writes to “create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (Imaginary Homelands 10). Saleem’s India is also an India of his own mind, which resides in his own memory. Thus, *Midnight’s Children* opens up the possibility of many versions of India, as there are Indians. Rushdie writes “A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends” (Midnight’s Children 230).

In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie thus depends on memory and uses it without hesitation in order to explore the possibilities of multiple versions of the same story. He legitimizes the claim that history also has to pass through the subjective lenses. This is why Rushdie makes Saleem commit some silly errors going beyond well-established historical data. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie writes: This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration, his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary (Imaginary Homelands, 10-11).

It is true that memory is selective and it can be edited for improvisation. The stories that we tell also go through lots of improvisations. We add our own flavor to the stories we hear and retell. The conflict between past and present, history and memory ultimately gives birth to a new reality. This is what happens when historians write history, and this is what may happen when

creative writers write fictions. In this regard, Saleem says:

Shaheed and I saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly...we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was not true because it could not have been true, the Tiger was a decent chap, after all, and our jawans were worth ten babus, we moved through the impossible hallucination of the night.” (*Midnight’s Children*, 432)

Here, Saleem does not believe one’s own eyes! It is because he saw with his own eyes Pakistani army behaving brutally. His heart could not accept that fact though his mind was willing to see the reality. Saleem wanted the help of notary public to confirm it but they were also absent there. He was giving at least two accounts in the book- one was what was taking place there in front of his eyes, and another was what he wanted to believe. Therefore, the credibility of the historians as well as history is definitely linked to the nature and capacity of the narrator and his/her memory. Such gaps and fissures in history are symbolically signified in the novel through Saleem’s disintegrating body. Saleem says:

Please believe that I am falling apart...I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body...buffeted by too much history...has started coming apart at the seams...This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (*Midnight’s Children*, 36).

Even though the narrative is primarily about Saleem’s trail through history, his life is linked to the hardships and atrocities that India went through after the independence. Rushdie, through Saleem, reminds the reader that there are histories and memories that are forgotten.

Thus Rushdie, in *Midnight’s Children*, exposes the true nature of history and historians, closely linking history with memory. Whether his stories about India and its struggle after Independence are correct or not, Rushdie validates that history and memory walk hand in hand and so-called historical objectivity is a very naive concept.

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