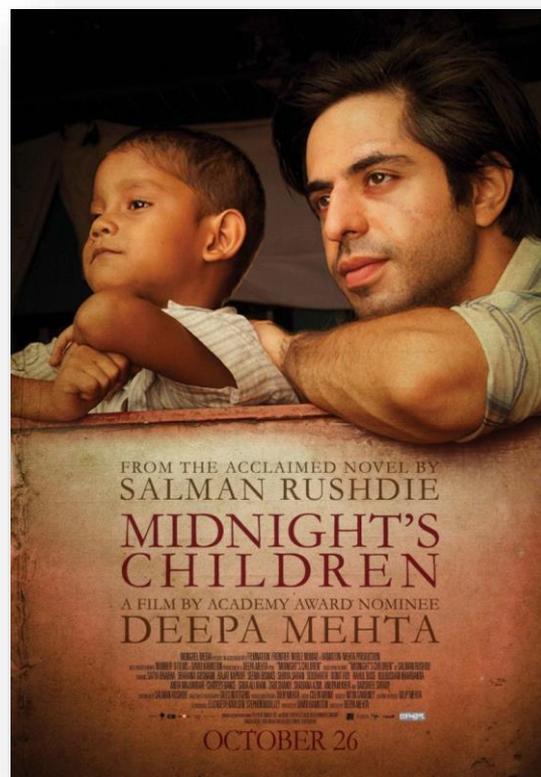


A 'Space-Clearing Gesture': Postmodernism and Postcolonialism at a Crossroads

Historiographic Metafiction and Magical Realism in *Midnight's Children* (1981, 2012)



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June 17, 2019

Abstract

This thesis will investigate how the two prominent movements of postmodernism and postcolonialism relate to one another and how their convergence is appropriated in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and its film adaptation (Mehta, 2012) to capture the post-independence reality of India. Acknowledging the problematic issues involved, it will argue that the overlap of postcolonialism with the postmodern can be a creative source of energy for postcolonial writers. The literary forms of historiographic metafiction and magical realism will be considered as the sites of this overlap. An examination of their presence in Salman Rushdie's novel and Mehta's film version will reveal how they have offered these media different ways to deal with the divisions and conflicts that the protagonist Saleem Sinai encounters in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Historiographic Metafiction, Magical Realism, *Midnight's Children* (1981, 2012), Film Adaptation, History, India, National Identity.

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Introduction

I was born in the city of Bombay, once upon a time. At the precise instant of India's arrival at independence on the stroke of midnight, I tumbled forth into the world. I, Saleem Sinai, was mysteriously handcuffed to history. My destiny, forever chained to my country's. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time.¹

With these opening lines, a soothing voice narrates the birth of Saleem Sinai and his proclaimed nation-twin, India, in the film *Midnight's Children* (2012). At the hands of director Deepa Mehta, the words are paired with footage of exploding fireworks and dancing crowds, celebrating this eagerly-awaited moment – after 190 years of British rule, the Indian subcontinent finally gains independence on August 15th, 1947. It simultaneously splits up into two nations: India and Pakistan. *Midnight's Children* follows Indian history before, during and especially after the independence and partition, through the eyes of Saleem. He begins his epic family saga in Kashmir, where his grandfather met his grandmother, and then moves on to the lives of his parents in Bombay. It is in that city that Saleem is born at midnight on August 15th. As young Saleem discovers, all 1,001 Indian children born within the first hour of independence have special powers. He himself acts as a sort of “all-India radio” with his telepathic powers and decides to bring all of the surviving children together for a *Midnight Children's Conference* (M.C.C.). Among them is his mortal enemy Shiva “of the knees”, with whom Saleem is later revealed to have been switched at birth. We accompany Saleem during his turbulent coming-of-age from India to Pakistan, to East-Pakistan (Bangladesh) during the war, the magicians' slum of New Delhi and eventually back to Bombay. In the meantime, Rushdie offers an insight into modern Indian and Pakistani history, as Saleem often shapes and is shaped by the course of his nation. Indeed, he is “handcuffed to history”.² The current thesis will study *Midnight's Children's* approach to this history and national identity in relation to the intersection between postmodern and postcolonial literary forms.

31 years before he writes the script and lends his soothing voice for narration for the film version, Salman Rushdie first penned this story in his novel, also called *Midnight's Children* (1981).³ The film adaptation may be argued to be a culmination of decades of popularity and praise. Over the years, millions of copies of the novel were sold in the West. According to Rushdie, in India the book was “so heavily and successfully pirated that the

¹ Deepa Mehta, *Midnight's Children* (2012; Toronto: Mongrel), YouTube.

² Mehta, *Midnight's Children*.

³ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

anonymous pirates started sending [him] greeting cards: “Happy New Year. Best wishes, the Pirates”.”⁴ As for praise, *Midnight’s Children* was awarded with the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Man Booker Prize in the year of its publication. In both 1993 and 2008, it won the “Booker of Bookers” during the 25th and 40th anniversary of the Booker Prize. The novel is considered to be an important milestone, having “brought about a renaissance” for Indian writing in English.⁵ Rushdie has done this through an innovative appropriation of narrative techniques and styles of fiction and a playful use of a hybrid version of the English language.

Rushdie was born barely two months before Independence in 1947 and has since lived in India, Pakistan, England and the United States. As a young man, he worked as a copywriter for an advertising company in London until he was able to make a living out of his writing. This was after the publication of his second novel, *Midnight’s Children*, in 1981. For his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie was accused of blasphemy and unbelief by members of the Muslim community. A fatwā was issued against him, which led to several attempted assassinations and bombings. Rushdie was placed under police protection and had to go in hiding for over a decade.⁶

The controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* echoes the tension in the context of Rushdie’s novels. The postcolonial reality of the Indian subcontinent involves numerous divisions and conflicts which Joyce Wexler explains were previously “suppressed during the struggle against British rule”.⁷ India is one of the biggest and most populous countries in the world and contains a multitude of languages, cultures, religions and social classes. Wexler states that “unlike [...] the Irish – the same people living in the same place – or Jews – the same people living in different places – Indians are different peoples living in the same place”.⁸

Arguably the most impactful division, and subsequently conflict, the British left in their wake is that between religious India and Pakistan. Although the birth of the two nations in 1947 was celebrated with fireworks and dancing crowds, it was a violent process separating

⁴ Salman Rushdie, “Guardian book club – Week one: Salman Rushdie on the writing of *Midnight’s Children*,” *The Guardian*, July 26, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/26/salmanrushdie.bookerprize>.

⁵ Jon Mee, “After Midnight: The Novel in the 1980s and 1990s,” in *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 358.

⁶ Andrew Anthony, “How one book ignited a culture war,” *The Guardian*, January 11, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/11/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses>.

⁷ Joyce Wexler, “What Is a Nation? Magic Realism and National Identity in *Midnight’s Children* and *Clear Light of Day*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 37, no. 2 (2002): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002198940203700209>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

them. Pakistan was formed in order to give the Muslims their own state, separate from the Hindu-majority India. This led to “perhaps the biggest movement of people – outside war and famine – that the world has ever seen”, with an estimated 12 million people becoming refugees.⁹ As Hindus headed east and Muslims headed west, religious violence committed by both sides killed between half a million and a million people. Since those early days, India and Pakistan have been involved in numerous wars. All these divisions in languages, cultures, religions and classes hinder India’s quest for a national identity. How can a newborn nation and its citizens, so divided in character, find its footing in the modern world?

Postcolonial literature grapples with this question in its attempt to deal with the cultural legacy of imperialism and colonialism, and the subsequent forming of a new nation. In their influential book called *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that it is the marginalized position of the colonized which provides postcolonial authors with “an unprecedented source of creative energy”.¹⁰ They state that with that, postcolonial writing has appropriated perspectives from European movements such as feminism, poststructuralism and postmodernism to describe their reality.¹¹ This comes as no surprise, given the overlap between the theories. Ato Quayson, among others, takes up the elusive relation between postcolonialism and postmodernism,¹² while Michael Gorra hints at the postcolonial appropriation of postmodernist techniques when he states the following:

[Postmodernism] performs – above all when the postmodern is the postcolonial – what Anthony Appiah calls a “space clearing gesture,” a parodic mimicry from within the new can emerge; sweeps the table clear – glasses, plates and silver cascading to the floor – so that it can be laid afresh.¹³

Postmodernism gained currency the 1980s and is associated with famous theorists like Lyotard, Baudrillard and Foucault. It is a departure from modernism and the assumptions of

⁹ Andrew Whitehead, “Partition 70 years on: The turmoil, trauma – and legacy,” BBC, last modified July 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40643413>.

¹⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, introduction to *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.

¹¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*.

¹² Ato Quayson, “Postcolonialism and Postmodernism,” in *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 132-155.

¹³ Michael Gorra, “The Novel in an Age of Ideology: On the Form of *Midnight’s Children*,” in *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 122-123; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Postcolonial and The Postmodern,” in *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 149.

Enlightenment rationality.¹⁴ One of the most influential theorists of the movement is Linda Hutcheon, who argues that postmodernism “is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges”.¹⁵ She puts forward the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ as a such a paradoxical form.¹⁶ Another style of fiction often ascribed to postmodernism, as well as to postcolonialism, is that of magical realism. Magical realism, contradictory in its terminology as well, concerns literature that is set in a realistic context, but incorporates magical elements. Hart and Ouyang (2005) offer an informative insight into the nature of the form in their collection of essays.

Critics like Hutcheon have linked Salman Rushdie’s writing to postcolonialism as well as to European postmodernism.¹⁷ Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* has certainly been thoroughly studied since its publication in 1981. Articles by Dayal, Watson and Giles respectively consider how the author has mixed languages, constructed the nation and (re)written history.¹⁸ Gorra explores in detail the ideology and symbolism in the novel’s writing of India and what he calls “Rushdie’s heteroglot style”.¹⁹ Rushdie’s symbolism combined with magical realism and national identity is the focus of Wexler,²⁰ whereas West-Pavlov discusses the historiographic metafiction in terms of a spatial conceptualization of Rushdie’s work.²¹ In her article, Nancy E. Batty discusses ‘the art of suspense’ in the writing of the character of Padma.²² Deepa Mehta’s 2012 film adaptation of the novel is not (yet) nearly as well-examined as its source text. Mendes and Kuorrti remark that the movie is a “protracted creative project” which has changed the way it frames the story’s narrative.²³ Interviews with its director and writer provide support for the interpretation of the themes in their movie.

¹⁴Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 65; Quayson, “Postcolonialism and Postmodernism,” 137-138.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 3.

¹⁶Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 5.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout of Empire,” in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991): 149-175.

¹⁸ Samir Dayal, “Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” *College English* 54, no. 4 (1992): 431-445, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/377839>; David Watson, “Borderline fiction: Writing the nation in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 14 (1998): 213-227, Doi: 10.1080/02564719808530196; Todd Giles, “Writing and Chutnification in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” *The Explicator* 65, no. 3 (2007): 182-185, Doi: 10.3200/EXPL.65.3.182-185.

¹⁹Gorra, *After Empire*, 137.

²⁰ Wexler, “What Is a Nation”.

²¹ Russell West-Pavlov, “Space Invaders: Space and History in Historiographic Metafiction: Rushdie, Swift, Barnes,” *Anglia* 122, no. 3 (2005): 435-456, <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/ANGL.2004.435>.

²² Nancy E. Batty, “The Art of Suspense: Rushdie’s 1001 (Mid-)Nights,” *Ariel* 18, no. 3 (1987): 49-65, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/33022>.

²³ Ana Christina Mendes and Joel Kuorrti, “Padma or No Padma: Audience in the Adaptations of *Midnight’s Children*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 52, no. 3 (2017): 501-518, Doi: 10.1177/0021989416671171.

Existing scholarship, thus, has extensively explored the theories of postcolonialism, postmodernism, historiographic metafiction and magical realism. *Midnight's Children* has been examined in terms of its style, themes and links with various criticisms. But how do these criticisms, specifically postmodernism and postcolonialism, relate to one another, and how is their convergence applied to the postcolonial reality described in Rushdie's work? The purpose of the current thesis is to tie these strings together as it investigates how postcolonialism, with the concept of appropriation, and postmodernism interact. It will argue that their amalgamation performs, to use Anthony Appiah phrase, a 'space-clearing gesture' for postcolonial literature.²⁴ Subsequently, it will look at how Rushdie's novel and its film adaptation adopt this. As mentioned at the beginning, this thesis aims to answer the following question:

How do postmodernism and postcolonialism relate to one another and how do Salman Rushdie and Deepa Mehta employ their intersection by means of historiographic metafiction and magical realism in *Midnight's Children* (1981) and its film adaptation (2012) to capture the Indian postcolonial reality?

Answering this question will reveal the ambiguous and often contradictory intersection of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Also, it will illustrate how postmodern genres can nonetheless help an author like Rushdie convey the postcolonial reality of India and its citizens in his fiction. The appropriation of magical elements and a reflexive metanarrative will be shown to offer a way to deal with the divisions and conflicts involved in the experiences of a postcolonial subject like Saleem Sinai, but also of the nation he grows up in. An examination of the movie adaptation will reveal how the medium of film has dealt with these postmodern genres to recreate that postcolonial experience. In both of these readings, the focus will be on the issues of history-making, Indian national identity and competing ideologies. This study allows readers to navigate the intersection of postmodernism and postcolonial literature as well as key elements of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in two different media.

This thesis will offer a theoretical framework for the "problematic site of interaction" between postmodernism and postcolonialism in Chapter 1.²⁵ It will argue that while there are

²⁴Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 149.

²⁵ Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout," 154.

some dangers involved in their convergence, it nonetheless presents postcolonial writing with a creative source of energy. Drawing on existing research, this chapter will also include an analysis of historiographic metafiction and magical realism, and how these terms act as points of juncture between the postmodern and the postcolonial. In Chapter 2, a close reading of the novel will demonstrate how historiographic metafiction and magic realism are employed to put into words the reality of postcolonial India. Chapter 3 will offer a second close reading in relation to these postmodern and postcolonial genres, but this time of the film version of *Midnight's Children*. With these analyses, they support the conviction that the first chapter presents.

Chapter I: Converging the posts - Problematic or Productive?

Anthony Appiah states that the intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism serves as a ‘space-clearing gesture’ for the postcolonial author.²⁶ However, combining the two means wading into troubled waters. The current chapter investigates the convergence of the postmodern with the postcolonial, specifically in terms of historiographic metafiction and magical realism. It then discusses whether the convergence is a productive one, given the political differences between the movements, which lead critics to call their site of interaction ‘problematic’.²⁷ The ideas presented lay the groundwork for the close readings in the two subsequent chapters.

In *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the development of independent literatures in postcolonial societies was informed by an abrogation of the colonizer’s dominance and the appropriation of his language and writing.²⁸ European literary theories, in agreement with Appiah’s statement, can help illuminate some of the issues that postcolonial societies have to deal with.²⁹ How can this be seen in the intersection between postcolonialism and postmodernism? Both relatively new yet immensely prominent criticisms, these theories have a number of things in common.

Most fundamentally, these theories intersect in their origins, a meeting point which can be derived from their names. The combination of ‘post’ and ‘colonialism’ hints at the emergence of postcolonialism as a response to European imperialism and colonialism. Similarly, the label ‘postmodernism’ points to the movement’s relation to modernism. To use Linda Hutcheon’s phrase, both movements are “tethered to earlier entities”³⁰ – a tethering shaped by the critique and subversion of colonialist and modernist conventions. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that these earlier movements are connected as well. During the ‘scramble for Africa’ in the 1880s and 1890s, European colonizers imported African art into European houses and museums.³¹ Primitivists believed that these cultural artefacts reflected a ‘stage’ in the course towards the civilized art society which the West had already reached. Moreover, the ‘primitive’ art was deemed to reflect the ‘dark’ side of the European psyche, a view expressed in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for example. Ashcroft and colleagues assert that coming into contact with African art reproduced the perception of the non-

²⁶ Gorra, *After Empire*, 122-123.

²⁷ Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 154.

²⁸ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 153.

³⁰ Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 160-161.

³¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 154-155.

European as ‘Other’, but also inspired modernist artists and writers to question the validity of prevailing European assumptions about art and truth.³² Modernist writers started to experiment with different styles, like the stream-of-consciousness, with the aim of capturing the war-ridden, industrialized and colonizing European modernity in a more truthful manner than they thought traditional realism could. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin demonstrate that modernism is thus influenced by the European colonial enterprise.

The relation between postcolonialism and postmodernism, then, can be traced back to the two movements they arose from; respectively, colonialism and modernism. It is important here to briefly highlight a distinction between the two *posts*. Postcolonialism, informed by a strong political motivation, fully opposes the colonialist view that the West should dominate and is superior over the non-West.³³ Postmodernism, on the other hand, has a more complicated relationship with its predecessor. Hutcheon states that “paradoxical postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism”.³⁴ While postmodernism continues modernism’s fragmentation and experimentation with literary aesthetics, it differs in attitude: modernism laments the loss of a universal order and truth, while postmodernism revels in this loss and accepts the lack of a universal consciousness.³⁵ In art, this results in the blurring of the boundary between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Famous theorist Jean-François Lyotard contends that the postmodern condition is shaped by an incredulity towards metanarratives, which are defined as universalizing frameworks that govern our ways of seeing the world and legitimizes prevailing authority.³⁶ Postmodern fiction accordingly sets out to disrupt the impulse of any system and accompanying metanarrative to put itself at the centre.³⁷ This anti-systemic attitude is echoed in postcolonial writing. For postcolonial authors, the central metanarrative governing their lives is the belief in European superiority and the often violent oppression of indigenous peoples. When these authors “write back to the centre”,³⁸ they critique and subvert the colonizer’s metanarratives.

Hutcheon explains how postmodernism and postcolonialism both participate in a ‘dialogue with history’.³⁹ Their writing has sought to re-address and reconstruct its relationship to the past. In the book in which she theorizes postmodernism, the Canadian

³²Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*, 156.

³³ Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 150.

³⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 88.

³⁵ Peter Barry, “Postmodernism,” in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 78-91.

³⁶ Quayson, *Postcolonialism*, 137-138.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 136.

³⁸ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire*.

³⁹Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 152.

literary theorist remarks that this theory has chosen to face the “nightmare of history” straight on.⁴⁰ It is inspired by poststructuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure whose theory states that the signs of language make up the central system by which we make sense of the world. He argued that “meaning and signification are entirely immanent to language itself”, rather than to the concepts language represents.⁴¹ Postmodernism appreciates this in its conception of history. For postmodernists, there is no objective, universal history. Hutcheon stresses the “meaningmaking function of human constructs” and problematizes its production of historical facts.⁴² She points to postmodern theory and art as challenging the very separation between the historical and the literary.⁴³ Historical writing, similar to fiction, is identified as a linguistic construct informed by subjective narrative forms. Postcolonial texts recognize this, as they have to take up their local past as well as the “once tyrannical weight of colonial history”.⁴⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin perceive the latter not only as the events that happened during the era of colonization, but also the whole of the past narrated by its Western colonizers. They argue that under the guise of a value free view of the past, these colonizers “relegated individual postcolonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress”.⁴⁵ These colonizers created a history, and with it a world reality, in which Europe is superior and dominant. The postcolonial task is to contest this narrative of history, independently from colonial forces, while deliberately making visible the “repressive strategies and practices” of European control.⁴⁶ The postcolonial writer in this way legitimates his own national history and identity in the process of decolonization. As for postmodernism, Hutcheon contends that it does not go so far as to *deny* historical knowledge and brand it as fully fictional – history, and the oppression in it, definitely happened.⁴⁷ In fact, the past determines the present and must therefore be revisited, but in such a way that its subjective and ideological nature is acknowledged.

Hutcheon labels writing that is engaged with this revisiting of the past as ‘historiographic metafiction’, and argues that this genre is emblematic for all of postmodern fiction.⁴⁸ It blends self-reflexive metafiction with historical fiction, thus crossing set

⁴⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 88.

⁴¹ David R. Howarth, “The Poststructuralist Project,” in *Poststructuralism and After* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25-26. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137266989_2.

⁴² Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁴ Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 152.

⁴⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Part Twelve: History,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 318.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 88.

⁴⁸ Hutcheon, preface to *A Poetics*, ix.

boundaries between history and fiction. In doing so, it is inherently paradoxical.⁴⁹ Historiographic metafiction first lays claim to historical events and people when it narrates life in the past. At the same time, the narrator points out the indeterminacy and subjectivity of this reclaiming of history. History is, after all, the product of human construction and narrative writing. This paradox, though seemingly circuitous at first sight, gives writers the opportunity to subvert from within. Hutcheon mentions the popularity among postmodernists and postcolonialists alike of literary strategies of irony and allegory in this ‘subversion writing’. These tropes are convenient for historiographic metafiction because they are characterized by a ‘doubleness’, which “allows a text to work within the constraints of the dominant while foregrounding those constraints *as constraints* and thus undermining their power”.⁵⁰

In relation to the dialogue with history, Hutcheon suggests the formal technique of magical realism is another point of conjunction between postmodern and postcolonial writing.⁵¹ The equally oxymoronic term involves the ‘organic’ mixing of fantastical elements into realistic contexts, a genre of which Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang map the existence through its various stages and components in their collection of essays.⁵² The term ‘magical realism’ was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to Post-Expressionism, after which it became an important feature of the Boom literature of 1960s Latin America. The era produced Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), considered to be the most famous and influential magical realist novel. Since then, the genre has become what Homi Bhabha called ‘the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world’.⁵³ After Latin America, it has served people from all different kinds of cultures in all kinds of languages in Asia, Africa and Australia as a ‘vehicle’ for the expression of the tensions that govern postcolonial societies.⁵⁴ Eugene L. Arva and Stephen M. Hart explain its popularity in its ability to capture the ‘felt reality’, and specifically the trauma and distortion in postcolonial history, which resulted from the ‘cultural displacement’ that came with colonialism and its aftermath.⁵⁵ Writers have represented this experience of being “repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption” by extracting

⁴⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 92.

⁵⁰ Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” 163.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

⁵² Hart and Ouyang, *Magic Realism* (2005).

⁵³ Qtd. in Stephen M. Hart, “Magical Realism: Style and Substance,” in the introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, eds. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), 1.

⁵⁴ Hart, “Style and Substance,” 6.

⁵⁵ Eugene L. Arva, “Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41304877>.

magical elements from ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ religions, myths and legends and inserting them into realist contexts.⁵⁶ Joyce Wexler’s writes in her article that postcolonial authors “require a form that evokes something beyond immediate experience; they require symbolism”.⁵⁷ This is because they seek a national identity in their texts, which is an abstract notion that cannot be captured with empirical realism. Wexler states that magical realism can achieve this because while it is grounded in empirical reality, it can deal with abstract issues because it incorporates the symbolism of myth and magic. In this way, postcolonial texts with magical realism can illustrate the contrast with the West, capture aspects of history and national identity and stimulate cultural recovery.

According to Wendy B. Faris, the category of magical realism from Latin America and other parts of the postcolonial literary world can be extended to characterize a “strong current in the stream of postmodernism” in Europe.⁵⁸ The magical realist novel contributes to the postmodern body of work in how, among other things, it often engages in metafiction to foreground its own making and storytelling. Faris adds that magical realism as the postmodernist is written as a response to totalitarian regimes, and thus, metanarratives.⁵⁹ These may be Nazism, North American hegemony in Latin America or the autocratic rule of Mrs. Gandhi. The main totalitarian regime it challenges, however, is that of the European export of traditional realism. Again, this is a case of subversion from within, as magic realism adopts a realist narrative but then disrupts the claim that an accurate representation of the world can be formed in this way. Instead, the fantastical is employed to offer a voice to the postmodernist who revels in the lack of a universal truth and certainly to the postcolonialist who desires to deal with issues like cultural displacement.

Tiffin identifies the result of the affinity between the theories to be “the erosion of the implicit or explicit universalist claims of western epistemology” and the influence of other cultures on European knowledge.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, she and many other critics recognize that to speak of postcolonial fiction *as* postmodernist is to greatly oversimplify things. There are a number of problems involved in converging the two. As briefly mentioned before, the movements are different from each other in the relation to their respective predecessors.

⁵⁶ Wen-chin Ouyang, “Magical Realism and Beyond: Ideology of Fantasy,” in the introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, eds. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), 16.

⁵⁷ Wexler, “*What Is a Nation?*” 138.

⁵⁸ Wendy B. Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1995), 165.

⁵⁹ Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children,” 179-180.

⁶⁰ Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23, no. 1 (March 1988): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198948802300116>.

Postmodernism rebels against modernism's aim to capture a universal consciousness and is accordingly entangled in what Tiffin calls a "crisis of European authority".⁶¹ Postcolonialism challenges the dominant consciousness of the colonial oppression and its aftermath, taking up pressing social and cultural inequalities, which are implemented by concrete institutions like Christianity or the colonizer's government. Postcolonial writing therefore possesses a political motivation that postmodernism lacks. After all, postmodernism is able to work comfortably within the system it opposes. Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson even goes so far as to amalgamate postmodernism with the most dominant system in place in modern society, as he famously defines the movement as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'.⁶² Postcolonialism, on the other hand, does not only interrogate and dismantle imposed ideologies and grand narratives, but also implies emancipation. In terms of literary strategies, this means that while "both 'post-'s *use* irony, the post-colonial cannot *stop* at irony".⁶³ The apolitical tendency of postmodernism has lead its critics to declare that it is actually part of Europe's neo-colonizing project.⁶⁴ Although it hints at pluralism and is fundamentally an anti-systemic mode of understanding, it can be seen as perpetuating, ironically, forms of neo-universalism. In terms of modern economics, postmodernism's celebration of plurality might be understood as the ideological work of capitalist liberalisation.⁶⁵ Tiffin warns against the increasingly hegemonic use of 'postmodern' to reincorporate non-European texts into its movement.⁶⁶ In this process, postcolonial texts that share aesthetic, formal and/or strategic elements with postmodern writing are classified by as being part of a cosmopolitan paradigm of postmodernism. Quayson states that to combine the postmodern with the postcolonial, then, is to disempower the postcolonial in its political objective.⁶⁷

It would, however, be a mistake to completely strip postmodernism of its virtues in what it can mean for postcolonial writing. This thesis agrees with Hutcheon's standpoint which argues for a productive way of linking the two.⁶⁸ Of course, the condition is that one is aware, as Hutcheon herself is, of the 'problematic' in the 'problematic site of interaction',⁶⁹ and that the postmodern and postcolonial, although similar in a number of aspects, can never

⁶¹ Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism," 171.

⁶² Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (Summer 1984): 53-92.

⁶³ Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout," 171.

⁶⁴ Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism," 171.

⁶⁵ Mee, "After Midnight," 376.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Quayson, *Postcolonialism*, 132.

⁶⁸ Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout," 151.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

be seen as the same. Postmodernism has a privileged position as a Western movement embedded in the hegemonic capitalist system. Postcolonialism is a non-European movement that struggles against the impact of Western colonialism, giving a voice to the marginalized. This shows that they are always informed by different positions in global theory and therefore have different motivations. Yet the similarities between the two criticisms, discussed above, provide postcolonial authors with innovative sites of production because of the mixing of the local and the European. These sites may consist of the self-reflexive historiographic or the magical realist, or both. In any case, the appropriation of postmodern literary techniques, given that this is done with awareness of the issues involved, can provide postcolonial writing with a 'space-clearing gesture', so that the new can emerge. The next two chapters put into practice the belief that the intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism is a productive one. They will do this in their analysis of historiographic metafiction and magical realism in respectively the novel and film version of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Chapter 2: *Midnight's Children* (1981), Historiographic Metafiction and Magical Realism

Standing in front of his childhood home in Bombay, Salman Rushdie was overwhelmed by the vivid colours of the memories that came flooding back. In 'Imaginary Homelands', he recalls how he was "gripped by the conviction" that he had "a city and a history to reclaim".⁷⁰ It was at this moment that *Midnight's Children* (1981) was born. The previous chapter argued for a valuable intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial. This chapter offers evidence for this conviction in its close reading of historiographic metafiction and magical realism and the postcolonial experience they help portray in Rushdie's book. It first offers an analysis of the text's self-reflexive history writing in terms of its negotiation with history, its unreliability, constructed audience and intertextuality. The chapter then looks at the appearance of the supernatural and the ideology it symbolizes, especially in the protagonist, midnight's children and the ending.

In wanting to reclaim his city and history, Rushdie first had the ambition to write about his personal history and the history of India as it had actually been. This proved to be an impossible task, as his memory was incomplete and fragmented. Rushdie contends that in reflecting on history, especially as an 'out-of-country' and 'out-of-language' emigrant, he is "obliged to deal with broken mirrors".⁷¹ Like postmodernism and postcolonialism, he presents a preoccupation with history, which mirrors the conception of the past as ambiguous and constructed. *Midnight's Children* is labelled as a prime example of historiographic metafiction, and has even been argued to have inaugurated the genre.⁷² Like other postmodern authors, Rushdie writes about what happened in the past in the same breath as he blatantly points out the constructedness of this history writing.

He plays with the 'broken mirrors' of his version of history in the narration by the novel's protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Saleem is engaged in his own 'dialogue with history' as he dedicates the months leading up to his 31st birthday to "the great work of preserving".⁷³ By day, he works as a cook in a pickle-factory. In preparing condiments like chutney and pickles, he preserves fruits and vegetables in glass jars. By night, Saleem busies himself with the "chutnification of history" in writing his autobiography, which takes place before, during and

⁷⁰ Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," 10.

⁷¹ Ibid, 11.

⁷² West-Pavlov, "Space Invaders," 436.

⁷³ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 44.

after the moment of independence and partition in 1947.⁷⁴ In his life, he has moved across countries and experienced first-hand the conflicts and divisions of modern Indian society. Finally settled down in his last days, he wishes to record and comprehend his turbulent history. “Memory, as well as fruit,” he says, “is being saved from the corruption of the clocks”.⁷⁵ Todd Giles states that “pickling mixes and makes anew in much the same way we remake reality every time we think and experience it”.⁷⁶ Each of the 30 chapters in *Midnight’s Children* is like a pickle-jar that contains a certain passage in Saleem’s past and each has a distinct flavour and smell. By means of this ‘chutnification’, the narrator cooks and constructs his version of the past. At the end of the novel, only one jar remains empty, for Saleem states that one cannot preserve what has not taken place.⁷⁷ His hope is that although his pickles of history “may be too strong for some palates ... it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth”.⁷⁸ Indeed, throughout the novel, he is driven by his desire to capture truth and meaning. Through the act of chutnification, he wishes to make sense of his and his country’s past. It is with this aim that Rushdie’s novel finds itself situated in the paradox of Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction.

In Saleem’s mission to attain truth in historiography, he admits that he is unable to do so because “distortions are inevitable”.⁷⁹ Earlier in the novel, he identifies his story as one of “memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality”.⁸⁰ In fact, the narrative form of *Midnight’s Children* is determined by this acknowledgement. It reflects the postcolonial desire to define one’s own history as well as the postmodern need to address the elusiveness of this venture, as it is always influenced by the broken mirrors of a fragmented memory.

During the “thousand and one digressions from the main narrative of his life”,⁸¹ Saleem constantly interrupts his fragmented historiography in order to observe its writing. His first-person self-reflexivity is established at the very beginning, when he displays uncertainty about how to start: “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 [...] and the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at

⁷⁴ Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 642.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁶ Giles, “Writing and Chutnification,” 183.

⁷⁷ Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 645.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 642.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸¹ Gorra, “The Novel in an Age of Ideology,” 117.

night. No, it's important to be more ..."⁸² This passage immediately sets the tone for the novel as thoroughly metafictional. Another example of this is linked to the novel's use of cinematic techniques to describe scenes, noticed by Mendes and Kuortti.⁸³ At some point, the young, sensitive-nosed Saleem is enrolled in the Pakistani army as a 'man-dog' after the explosion that killed his family wiped his memory during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965. Narrator Saleem admits "with some embarrassment" that "amnesia is the kind of gimmick regularly used by our lurid film-makers" and that he has once again taken on "the tone of a Bombay talkie", a Bollywood film.⁸⁴

However critically Saleem observes his own writing and intertextuality, he does not actually act on the seeing the mistakes he made in his documentation of history. In a 1987 essay, Rushdie reveals that this unreliable narration is very much intentional. The author states that "whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth," he would "favour the remembered version".⁸⁵ This statement might well be the afterthought justification of an author who did not do the research before writing, but it is an effective manifestation of 'meta' nonetheless. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem confesses that "the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date [...] in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time".⁸⁶ His refusal to rectify such an error signifies Rushdie's challenge to the notion of a universal, objective history. Instead, he uses the shards of the broken mirror to advocate for the subjectivity of history. At a later moment in the text, Saleem lies and says that Shiva, the man with which he was switched at birth but never knew and his lifelong enemy, was killed by a shot through the heart. Two pages later, Saleem hangs his head in shame as he admits his lie.⁸⁷ The truth is that he does not know where Shiva is and that he is still terrified of him. Lying, then, is Saleem's way of avoiding this demon of his past, whom he fears is still out there, seeking revenge on Saleem for taking his rich, privileged life away at birth. This self-reflexivity stresses the ambiguity of the narrator as well as that of history, and provides a way to communicate and deal with his fear.

Fortunately, in all of the narrative's uncertainty, Saleem is not alone. In writing his autobiography, he is accompanied by his lover and caregiver, Padma. His immediate addressee and constructed audience, she sits by his side and listens to Saleem as he reads

⁸² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 3.

⁸³ Mendes and Kuortti, "Padma or No Padma," 502.

⁸⁴ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 488.

⁸⁵ Salman Rushdie, "'Errata': Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 24.

⁸⁶ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 230.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 619.

aloud his story to her. She also functions as the first line of interrogation to his narrative, interrupting to ask questions like “Really truly? [...] You were truly there?”⁸⁸ or to reprimand Saleem that “at this rate, you’ll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about your birth”.⁸⁹ Her “what-happened-nextism” pressures him back into a more linear narrative whenever he spends too much time in one of his many digressions.⁹⁰ According to Nancy E. Batty, in this sense Padma is on the one hand an active “co-creator” of the narrative, and on the other hand an “index for reader-response to the framed narrative”.⁹¹ Padma guides the reader in the interpretation of Saleem’s history, encouraging suspicion towards the unreliable narration and reinforcing the emotional impact of what young Saleem went through. Missing from Batty’s account is the acknowledgment that Padma’s role might also be undermining the readers’ autonomy in its critical judgement of the unreliability of the narrator. But is this desirable? Namely, the balance between Saleem’s digressions and Padma’s ‘what-happened-nextism’ poses a significant source of suspense for the novel. Batty explains that this interaction is Rushdie’s ode to the interaction between storyteller Scheherazade and her direct audience of king Shahryar and young Dunyazade from the 18th century collection of tales *The Arabian Nights*. The “narrator-narratee relationship” is for Rushdie a tool to set up a tension in the text and examine his own eclectic writing style, which reflects its postcolonial nature in that it is influenced by different cultural and literary forces.⁹²

Certainly, *Midnight’s Children* is significantly intertextual in its incorporation of a Middle Eastern narrative frame and the aforementioned Bollywood cinema. It is furthermore very much indebted to the religions (Rushdie compares ‘man-dog’ Saleem to “Gautama the Buddha” who silently sits under a tree),⁹³ legends and languages in India.⁹⁴ Equally important is the novel’s unique appropriation of the English language and elements of the European literary tradition. Rushdie acknowledges his debt to, among others, “Dickens for his great, rotting, Bombay-like city”.⁹⁵ This intertextuality echoes the plurality of postcolonial Indian life. For Rushdie, historiographic metafiction, as the site of amalgamation of the postmodern and the postcolonial, functions as a narrative form which participates in the ‘chutnification of history’ while acknowledging the inevitable distortions of this practice. The narrator’s self-reflexivity, accompanied by the interruptions of his narratee Padma, opens up a discussion

⁸⁸ Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 405.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 44.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 45.

⁹¹ Batty, “The Art of Suspense,” 54, 53.

⁹² Ibid, 55.

⁹³ Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 487-488.

⁹⁴ See Gorra, “The Novel in an Age of Ideology,” 126.

⁹⁵ Rushdie, Introduction to *Midnight’s Children*, xiv.

about the indeterminacy of history. The narrative's postmodern playfulness creates a space for comprehension, a space in which the postcolonial author can represent and deal with the plurality and emotional absurdity of the postcolonial national identity and past.

Whereas historiographic metafiction has determined the narrative frame of *Midnight's Children*, magical realism has played a significant role in its tone, content and political ideology. For Rushdie, in contrast with most 'Westerners', a reliance on fantasy is normative.⁹⁶ Like Gabriel García Márquez, his belief is that by inserting the miraculous into otherwise realistic stories, so that "horses and carpets are expected to fly, "you could actually tell a kind of truth which you couldn't tell in other ways"⁹⁷ In *Midnight's Children*, magical realism has its first appearance in the first sentence, when Saleem says "I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time".⁹⁸ Wexler points out that the first statement represents the social realism of the *Bildungsroman* of the nineteenth-century and the second statement uses the conventional English line to signal that fantasy lies ahead.⁹⁹ This fantasy emerges in some minor ways, for example when Saleem's parents are involved in an unfortunate incident: after Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's father, finds out his assets are frozen during the discriminating prosecution of Indian Muslims, he shouts "Amina! Come here, wife! The bastards have shoved my balls in an ice-bucket!"¹⁰⁰ The reader may take this exclamation as a metaphor for the freezing of financial assets, but Rushdie has Ahmed's testicles literally turned into "little round cubes of ice".¹⁰¹ Another passage infused with the unbelievable and miraculous is when at the age of sixteen, Saleem enjoys the services of 'the whore of whores' named Tai Bibi, who claims to be five hundred and twelve years of age.¹⁰² These instances contribute to the experience of India's reality as a 'myth-ridden nation' in which magic is indeed normative.

The most important fantastical element, however, is promised by the novel's title. At the age of nine, Saleem often seeks refuge from the bullies and anxieties of his daily life in the washing chest in the bathroom. One time, while hiding from his mother in the washing chest, he is "possessed by a cataclysmic – a world-altering – an irreversible *sniff*".¹⁰³ Snot, as well as the pajama-cord stuck in his big 'cucumber-nose', shoots up to his brain. As a result of the following shock, Saleem's mind is flooded with voices from all corners of India. He becomes aware of the 1,001 children who, like him, were born "within the frontiers of the infant

⁹⁶ Gorra, "The Novel in an Age of Ideology," 126.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 3.

⁹⁹ Wexler, "What is a Nation," 145.

¹⁰⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 185.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 186.

¹⁰² Ibid, 443.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 223.

sovereign state of India” and were therefore endowed with miraculous gifts.¹⁰⁴ In the ‘headquarters’ behind his eyebrows, Saleem brings the midnight’s children together in the Midnight’s Children’s Conference (M.C.C.).¹⁰⁵ Among these children are a boy from Kerala “who had the ability of stepping into mirrors and re-emerging through any reflective surface in the land [...] and a Goanese girl with the gift of multiplying fish”.¹⁰⁶ The closer these children were born to the stroke of midnight of August 15th, the greater their gifts. Saleem’s ally Parvati-the-Witch, born seven seconds after midnight, was endowed with the power of true conjuration and sorcery. Shiva and Saleem, both born the exact moment of midnight, respectively acquired the gifts of war and of course, “the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men”.¹⁰⁷

‘Handcuffed to history’, Saleem claims he is quite literally involved in the course of Indian history, for example during the language marches in Bombay, the Indo-Pakistani war and in the state of emergency implemented by Indira Gandhi. But his life also becomes an allegory for the history of his nation-twin. Because of the extraordinary time of his birth, baby Saleem receives a letter from the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. He congratulates Saleem with his birth and writes that his life “will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own”.¹⁰⁸ For one, Saleem is the hybrid son of an Englishman and a poor Hindu woman. Like India, Saleem struggles to construct an identity because the “inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space” inside his head.¹⁰⁹ His plural sense of self echoes the numerous divisions and conflicts of the Indian postcolonial reality. Nonetheless, Saleem attempts to give shape to these inside voices. He projects this desire for meaning and purpose onto his ‘gang’ of supernatural children. He tells them about his hope of peace, saying “we [...] must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma” of the country.¹¹⁰ With the M.C.C., Saleem attempts to continue Nehru’s anti-essentialist vision for a secularized state with a “unity in diversity”.¹¹¹ This is a state in which all citizens, no matter what religion, language and culture, could live under a common nationality. Wexler has argued that “national identity

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 271.

¹⁰⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 287.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 274.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 277.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 167.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 232.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 354.

¹¹¹ Clare Barker, “The Nation as a Freak Show: Monstrosity and Biopolitics in *Midnight’s Children*,” in *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 127, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230360006_5.

requires some unifying principle that transcends empirical experience”.¹¹² For *Midnight's Children*, this involves the supernatural as a symbol for the identity of a postcolonial community. Indeed, the M.C.C. becomes the living expression of India's 'national longing for form'. Saleem and the children of midnight symbolize India's struggle of finding what Wexler calls a 'unifying principle' and national identity with its newly-gained independence.

In his ambition to impose a united form on the voices in his mind, however, Saleem is met with some fierce resistance. "Children," Saleem narrates, "however magical, are not immune to their parents; and as the prejudices and world-view of adults began to take over their minds, I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian 'blackies'; there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils".¹¹³ Young Saleem rebels against this looming disintegration of the conference, exclaiming "do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us!"¹¹⁴ Shiva's counterargument that "the world is not ideas [...] the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world [...] is things" reflects the decline of the M.C.C. and indicates the pessimistic quality of the novel which it has been criticized for.¹¹⁵ In the last stage of the novel, Saleem's other contestant appears. Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister at that time, rules according to the phrase "India is Indira and Indira is India".¹¹⁶ Gorra notes that because of her centralisation of power, Rushdie's version of "Mother Indira cannot endure the threat embodied in the pluralism of the MCC".¹¹⁷ The true purpose of her declaration of the State of Emergency, which lasted from 1975 until 1977, was the destruction of the midnight's children. She had doctors perform 'ectomies', excising the magical of their magic, of their possibility to reproduce and of their hope.¹¹⁸

In his hopeful 'chutnification of history', Saleem's final rival is his own disintegrating body. The cracks that have been spreading over his body throughout the novel finally get the best of him in the final chapter. With one empty jar left, he prophesises that on his 31st birthday, right after his and Padma's wedding, he steps out of their taxi-cab into the thronging crowd of India's Independence Day. He says he will be "the bomb in Bombay" and that the

¹¹² Wexler, "What is a Nation," 138.

¹¹³ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 353.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 354.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 354; Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," 16.

¹¹⁶ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 587.

¹¹⁷ Gorra, "The Novel in an Age of Ideology," 116.

¹¹⁸ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 613.

population of India will trample him underfoot, reducing him “to specks of voiceless dust”.¹¹⁹ Gorra asserts that Saleem’s personal disintegration “becomes a metonymy for that of the national collage as a whole, a country that looks whole on the map but that has, in the years since the novel’s publication in particular, become increasingly divided from itself”.¹²⁰ Drawing from Gorra’s implication, it may also be argued that his fragmentation symbolizes the defeat of Saleem in his quest for meaning and truth in history. In that sense, the novel’s magical ending follows the belief that it is impossible to impose a form on the past and on the nation, as they are subjective and made up of broken mirrors and too many divisions. The chutnification of history, then, is futile and even deadly.

Rushdie himself rejects such a pessimistic reading, however. In ‘Imaginary Homelands’, he responds to his critics by saying Saleem’s narrative reflects “India’s talent for non-stop self-regeneration”.¹²¹ Perhaps Saleem’s son Adam represents the rebirth in a different way of a nation that was destructed under Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. The novel as a whole can be read as a celebration of the jostling multitudes that make up the nation. Gorra aptly concludes his chapter by saying the novel is “an attempt to preserve the spirit of India’s secular and democratic independence”.¹²² Through the conception of hybrid characters like Saleem and the diversity of the midnight’s children, it challenges the universal and totalitarian regimes of British colonialism and its nationalist counterparts such as Indira Gandhi’s Emergency.

The second site of intersection between postmodernism and postcolonialism, magical realism, is exhibited in *Midnight’s Children* especially in Saleem’s character, the Midnight’s Children Conference and in the ending. Its contribution to the portrayal of Saleem’s India offers evidence for the effectiveness of inserting postmodernism into postcolonial writing. Rushdie has grounded Saleem’s chutnification in the historical reality of India, but has inserted the supernatural in order to symbolize what Arva labelled the ‘felt reality’ of life in a newborn nation.¹²³ Saleem’s person, as well as his group of midnight’s children, echoes the plurality of the ‘teeming millions’ and the divisions and rivalries that come with them. Furthermore, Rushdie has used the M.C.C. and the hardships it had to endure to capture the struggle and ‘longing for form’ and a common national identity for all Indians – a desire which defines the postcolonial experience of post-independence India.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 647.

¹²⁰ Gorra, “The Novel in an Age of Ideology,” 114-115.

¹²¹ Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” 16.

¹²² Gorra, “The Novel in an Age of Ideology,” 148.

¹²³ Arva, “Writing the Vanishing Real,” 60.

Historiographic metafiction and magical realism have been a 'vehicle' for Rushdie's novel, with which he has been able to deal with the postcolonial experience of an individual and his country. How did these literary tropes stand the test of time and change of medium? 31 years after the novel's publication, Saleem's story is reimagined onto the silver screen. The next chapter will examine the presence of historiographic metafiction and magical realism in Deepa Mehta's adaptation of *Midnight's Children*. It will continue the argument for a productive overlap between the postmodern and the postcolonial, except in slightly different terms.

Chapter 3: *Midnight's Children* (2012), Historiographic Metafiction and Magical Realism

In Rushdie's third novel *Shame* (1983), he makes the often-quoted comment that "it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained".¹²⁴ Mendes and Kuortti discuss in their article the constructed audience in the three adaptations of *Midnight's Children*. Before the 2012 film, the BBC attempted to make a television production based on the novel in 1998, and the Royal Shakespeare Company put the saga on stage in 2003. Mendes and Kuortti interpret Rushdie's comment as an acknowledgment of the independent merits of adapting literature to film. It is no secret that Rushdie has always had a great affinity with cinema – "I've been a film freak all my life".¹²⁵ This interest has certainly leaked into his writing, recognized and studied by various scholars.¹²⁶ The previous chapter briefly discussed *Midnight's Children's* incorporation of cinematic techniques as well. But how does the 1981 novel, long deemed 'unfilmable', translate to cinema? How does the film's distinct take on historiographic metafiction and magical realism, transformed because of the medium's demands, capture India's postcolonial reality?

Peter Brooker notes the difference in authors' presence in a novel versus that novel's film adaptation. He says "the author's name tends also to recede along with their text", a process which he suggests might be called a "technologically-induced version of the "death of the author" theorized by Roland Barthes".¹²⁷ In reworking his novel Rushdie suffered no such death, however. He acted as executive producer and co-wrote the screenplay with the Indo-Canadian director Deepa Mehta, although he was resistant to his involvement in the first place. In an interview with Collider, he says he eventually decided to give in to Mehta's pleading because he thought he had enough distance from the book to make a companion piece, "a cousin or a sibling", to it.¹²⁸ He also lent his voice to the film's narration. The

¹²⁴ Mendes and Kuortti, "Padma or No Padma," 503.

¹²⁵ John Williams, "Rushdie on the 'Midnight's Children' Script: 'If I Want to Hack Stuff Out, I'll Hack Stuff Out'," *Artsbeat – New York Times Blog*, April 22, 2013, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/rushdie-on-the-midnights-children-script-if-i-want-to-hack-stuff-out-ill-hack-stuff-out/>.

¹²⁶ See Mendes and Kuortti, "Padma or No Padma," or Florian Stadler, *Fiction, film, and Indian popular cinema: Salman Rushdie's novels and the cinematic imagination* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

¹²⁷ Peter Brooker, "Postmodern adaptation: pastiche, intertextuality and re-functioning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelde Whelehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107.

¹²⁸ Sheila Roberts, "Salman Rushdie Talks *Midnight's Children*, Seeing His Novel Adapted for Film, Finding the Right Actors, an Adaptation of *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, and More," *Collider*, April 30, 2013, <http://collider.com/salman-rushdie-midnights-children-interview/>.

current chapter will look into how the novel's central styles of fiction, respectively historiographic metafiction and magical realism, resurface to describe the postcolonial Indian experience in the cinematic companion piece to the original *Midnight's Children*.

In the novel, Rushdie draws upon Hutcheon's conception of historiographic metafiction in his dialogue with history through the eyes and typewriter of a self-reflexive and unreliable narrator. In the film version, some significant changes have been made. These changes were inevitable and desirable, not in the least because of the sprawling scale and subject matters of the story. Rushdie and Mehta decided to accentuate certain parts and eliminate others. Of the two styles of fiction, the metafictional nature of the narrative was subject to the most rigorous transformation. The overtly present narrator of the novel, who writes his autobiography next to his day-job at the pickle-factory, is supplanted by an off-screen, unswerving voice-over.

In her interview with Collider, Mehta explains that she wanted to add "the language of the book", so she asked Rushdie not only to write the voice-over, but also to play its role as the older Saleem.¹²⁹ On the one hand, Rushdie's presence breaks the film's fourth wall and makes it more metafictional in the sense that it blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. This is especially the case considering *Midnight's Children* is roughly based on the author's childhood. On the other hand, the voice-over has led to the reduction of the metafictional layer that came with the novel's more fleshed out character of the older Saleem. There are no more digressions from the main storyline to talk about the cracks in his body or his doctor's appointments. Crucially, cutting down the narrative frame has also meant the absence of Saleem's companion Padma. The substitution of her questioning and "what-happened-nextism" with the film's lone voice-over has led to a more limited discussion of the act of writing history and the construction of Indian identity. One may grieve her, but should admit her preservation in the film may have seemed excessive and impeding in the medium of film. Mehta and Rushdie decided to adopt more subdued and visual ways of representing the book's self-reflexive historiography.

The 'chutnification of history' is not explicitly mentioned, but the relation between food and the characters' lives are woven into the film's metaphorical imagery and voice-over. This becomes apparent when the narrator comments "family history, too, has dietary laws. One is supposed only to swallow the halal parts, drained of blood. But that makes the stories

¹²⁹ Sheila Roberts, "Director Deepa Mehta Talks *Midnight's Children*, Her Filmmaking Influences, Assembling the Diverse Cast, Adapting the Book to Screen, and More," *Collider*, May 2, 2013, <http://collider.com/deepa-mehta-midnights-children-interview/>.

less juicy, and this was a juicy part. So it must be told".¹³⁰ He understands that the recording of family history should be free of anything disreputable, but also recognizes that it makes for a more enjoyable experience of the story to include it. The passage highlights the self-consciousness of the narrator. It is reminiscent of Saleem's reflections on his writing in the novel: "No! – But I must. I don't want to tell it! – But I swore to tell it all".¹³¹ As was the case in the relationship between Saleem and Padma in the novel, the film's narrative is influenced by the demands of its audience.

In the film, the involvement of Indian history is accentuated through a creative use of the voice-over and visuals. Saleem's uncertain start in the novel ("well then: at night. No, it's important to be more"),¹³² followed by the immediate circumstances of his birth in the hospital, are abandoned for shots of crowds dancing and of fireworks, with upbeat Indian music in the background as Saleem's voice-over announces his birth.¹³³ Mendes and Kuortti argue that these images "suggest something grander than the prosaic birth of a boy".¹³⁴ The images emphasize the hope and celebration of the Indian people in that historic moment when they gained independence from the British. This hope is later illuminated with the combination of the narrator and the presented images. When Saleem is again born after the exhibit of the 30 years of history that came before him, the narrator states "Pakistan and India were born washing themselves in one another's blood".¹³⁵ He is joined by a shot of William Methwold, owner of the Sinai family's home Buckingham Villa, looking out over the ocean at the setting sun. The camera cuts to a close-up of Methwold with the British flag waving in the background. He smiles, takes off his hat and says "the empire on which the sun never sets". The Englishman's goodbye to India signals the end of the colonial period and the beginning of a troubling time. Again, the narrator voices his decision about in what direction he will steer the narrative: "I will avert my eyes from the violence. Selfish perhaps, but excusably so in my opinion. After all, one is not born every day". Instead of the violence of partition, Saleem focuses on the hopeful side of independence; the fact that he is born. The narrator's justification is followed by actual footage of Jawaharlal Nehru's speech about the "tryst with destiny" on the eve of independence.¹³⁶ This use of archival footage is repeated in the magicians' slum in Delhi, when Saleem, Parvati and their friends watch TV and see Indira

¹³⁰ Mehta, *Midnight's Children*, 00:19:40.

¹³¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 589.

¹³² *Ibid*, 3.

¹³³ Mehta, *Midnight's Children*, 00:00:50.

¹³⁴ Mendes and Kuortti, "Padma or No Padma," 509.

¹³⁵ Mehta, *Midnight's Children*, 00:33:29.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 00:33:50.

Gandhi protest against the verdict of electoral malpractice.¹³⁷ Afterwards, she announces the Emergency, which the narrator explains involves “the censorship of the press, arrest of subversive elements ... and forced sterilization”. But the narrator Saleem, and Rushdie, for that matter, is not willing to immediately give in to the gloom. With the birth of his son, he says “some things were ending, something was being born”.

The historiographic metafiction of the novel’s narrative frame was adopted by the film in a more understated manner. Rushdie’s role as the narrator and the use of archival footage makes for a reading that emphasizes *Midnight’s Children’s* base in reality. The voice-over shows self-consciousness and character when it guides the audience through Saleem’s and his nation-twin’s version of history, for example to the ‘juicier’ parts, or to his vision of the destiny of the nation. In that, it shows the “trials and tribulations of a people”,¹³⁸ while battling Mrs. Gandhi’s totalitarian rule and advocating for a more hopeful purpose for the new nation as a democratic state with harmonious diversity.

When asked if he was concerned about bringing the more magical elements to the screen, Rushdie says that it was what he and Mehta talked about more than anything else.¹³⁹ They decided to minimize the special effects to make the scenes as naturalistic as possible. With this intention, the film underscores the use of the fantasy as normative in the myth-ridden setting of India. Rushdie tells the Indian journalism outlet *News Laundry* that they “wanted to keep it within the bounds of what was anatomically possible”.¹⁴⁰ Ahmed Sinai’s testicles do not literally freeze when freeze his financial assets, like they did in the book. Instead, the scene shows Ahmed throwing ice cubes in his drink.¹⁴¹ The emphasis on the ‘realism’ within magical realism was negatively received by some critics. Rachel Saltz has argued it made for “a movie that, if never exactly dull, feels drained of the mythic juice that powers the book”.¹⁴² But by portraying the magical in a more naturalist sense, it can drive the plot forward and convey the postcolonial experience of India in a more straightforward and emotional way that fits the cinematic medium.

Adapting the novel’s main conceit of the magical children of midnight to the film in a way that it felt ‘real’ lead Mehta and Rushdie to make the children actually appear in the

¹³⁷ Mehta, *Midnight’s Children*, 01:50:45.

¹³⁸ Roberts, “Director Deepa Mehta Talks,” *Collider*.

¹³⁹ Williams, “Rushdie on the ‘Midnight’s Children’ Script,” *Artsbeat – New York Times Blog*.

¹⁴⁰ Aubrey Golden, “Salman Rushdie’s Novels on Film,” *Books Tell You Why*, April 15, 2017, <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/salman-rushdies-novels-on-film>.

¹⁴¹ Mehta, *Midnight’s Children*, 00:44:30.

¹⁴² Rachel Saltz, “Movie Review - Birth of a Nation, in the Words of Salman Rushdie,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/movies/midnights-children-adaptation-of-salman-rushdies-novel.html>.

scene. Their first scene shows Saleem distraught at both his mother for secretly meeting with her ex-lover Nadir Khan and the cacophony of deafening voices in his head.¹⁴³ These voices then materialize as some of the midnight's children and surround him. "Saleem, we are your friends! We're like you", Parvati reassures him, and tells him about the miracle of the midnight's children.¹⁴⁴ Their bodies are transparent at first, and then their edges are blurred, as is the background. This blurring creates a supernatural atmosphere for the M.C.C., while the materialization of the children makes it more comprehensible and engaging for the audience. The tension in the M.C.C. reaches their climax and their end when Saleem is grown into the older actor's body.¹⁴⁵ Saleem and Shiva argue about the purpose of the midnight's children. The former contends "we all have to stay together, na? [...] don't you all see everything else is breaking apart? Languages, religions, countries ... We can show people a new way of being", while the latter provokes a fight. Just before Shiva knocks his counterpart out, Saleem cries "the Midnight's children conference is hereby dissolved!" The physicality of this scene reinforces the sense of conflict and heightens the emotional impact. Arguably more so than in the novel, the events leading up to the abolishment of the M.C.C. highlights the severity of the divisions in the group. With the conference's symbolical value in mind, the film thus represents in a more urgent manner the animosity and violence that come with the divisions in the population of post-independence India.

As Indira Gandhi, Saleem's other rival, declares the Emergency, the narrator describes it as "a new, unfree India" being born.¹⁴⁶ It is accompanied by a continuous midnight that would last for years, depicted when Saleem walks outside and meets his friend Picture Singh, who remarks "a curse has come upon us". This tilted shot as well as the following shot of the white mice in and around a cage, both saturated with the colour blue, dramatically indicates the discomfort and despair of the time. During the 'ectomies' that Saleem and the other midnight children are subjected to, Rushdie narrates that the Emergency is "really a betrayal. [Gandhi's] betrayal of her father's dreams" as she destroys the hope of the midnight's children as the "promises of independence".¹⁴⁷

But then as the film's lows are low, its highs are high, too. Emerging from that blue midnight, Saleem returns to what is left of the magicians' slum and finds Picture Singh and his son Aadam. The three of them go to Bombay and meet up with Saleem's childhood

¹⁴³ Mehta, *Midnight's Children*, 00:54:45.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 00:55:26.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 01:09:40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 01:52:26.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 02:00:25.

‘Ayah’, Mary Pereira. On the rooftop of her chutney factory, Saleem blows out a candle for his birthday as the sky lights up with fireworks for Independence Day. The film’s ending is far more optimistic than the novel’s. Saleem’s body does not disintegrate and the population of India does not trample him underfoot. Instead, Aadam finally utters his first word, “Abracadabra”,¹⁴⁸ characterizing him as one of the new, but more careful generation of midnight’s children. The narrator ends his story by saying “A child and a country were born at midnight, once upon a time. Great things were expected of us both. The truth has been less glorious than the dream. But we have survived and made our way. And our lives have been, in spite of everything, acts of love”.¹⁴⁹ Mendes and Kuortti argue that “the authorial license is here to uplift, while serving the need for resolution in a film intended for popular spectatorship”.¹⁵⁰ The optimistic ending is thus better suited for the cinema, but it also has a different ideological meaning. It substitutes the ambiguity and bleakness of the book’s ending for a more hopeful message about postcolonial India. Although Saleem and his nation-twin have suffered a lot in their first decades, they have survived will continue to do so, accompanied by a new generation who will also strive for a peaceful future within an endlessly diverse nation.

The film *Midnight’s Children* shows productive ways of colliding the postmodern with the postcolonial in the techniques of historiographic metafiction and magical realism. The migration from the novel to its cinematic counterpart posed some challenges. Mehta and Rushdie worked with these challenges by including new forms of representation, such as a reduced but still self-conscious narrator and archival footage. The narrative frame the magical elements concerning the midnight children, the Emergency and the ending were translated to the screen with the aim to make them appear more naturalistic. Emphasizing the human drama of the supernatural situations resulted in a more emotional punch and helped the filmmakers deliver the struggle, but also the hope in their conception of the Indian postcolonial reality.

¹⁴⁸Mehta, *Midnight’s Children*, 02:10:40.

¹⁴⁹Ibid, 02:11:12.

¹⁵⁰ Mendes and Kuortti, “Padma or No Padma,” 508.

Conclusion

The current thesis explored the role of relevant theories and genres in the novel and film version of *Midnight's Children* (1981, 2012).¹⁵¹ This objective was derived from a theoretical discussion about the meeting of postmodernism and postcolonialism at a crossroads. The two are linked through the theories they distance themselves from: modernism and colonialism. In resisting the notions of universality that these earlier European movements impose, both postmodern and postcolonial fiction aim to revisit and reconstruct the oppressive past, a writing which is labelled historiographic metafiction. The other formal technique that acts as a point of conjunction between the two *posts* is magical realism, which imbues naturalist settings with the supernatural. This genre sets up a symbolization that helps authors comprehend abstract issues like national history and identity. The convergence of postmodernism and postcolonialism has also been shown to involve some complications. The former does not have the political undercurrent that the latter necessarily embodies, and it is arguable that postmodernism is a manifestation of neo-colonization. This study has argued that in spite of these problems, the infusion of the postmodern can clarify some concerns of postcolonial authors in writing about their experiences in a newly independent society. Like Saleem Sinai, it advocates for a productive way of fusing diverse entities into a collaborative whole.

This standpoint was then supported by the analysis of historiographic metafiction and magical realism, as the delegates of the amalgamation between postmodernism and postcolonialism, in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). The postmodern 'meta' approach to history writing provided Rushdie's novel with a dimension to talk about the subjectivity of his version of history and to comprehend the absurdity and plurality of post-independence India. Magical realism has been instrumental to the novel's portrayal of India as a 'myth-ridden nation' as well as the representation of the contesting ideologies vying to define what the newborn nation is or should be. The Midnight's Children Conference, the encounter with the rule of Indira Gandhi and the ending display the difficulty of executing Saleem's vision for a secularized, peaceful state.

A close reading of Mehta and Rushdie's adaptation *Midnight's Children* (2012) demonstrated that the film has used historiographic metafiction and magical realism in new creative ways to interpret the experience of living in postcolonial India. Public and personal historical events are framed by of a self-conscious voice-over, who shapes his version of India

¹⁵¹ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*; Mehta, *Midnight's Children*.

as influenced by the multitude of different peoples and political views. The film's magic is characterized by a more naturalistic portrayal, which heightens the violence and emotion that are entangled in the Indian diversity. The film's ending holds a more hopeful message than the book's, leaving the audience with distinct perception of a future in which India will overcome its divisions.

The ideological struggle at the core of *Midnight's Children* revolves around the question of whether Jawaharlal Nehru's hope for "unity in diversity" in India is possible or if it is a lost cause.¹⁵² This is a question that has attracted both optimistic and pessimistic answers, and transcends time and borders. For example, Pakistan, China and India are still in a heated argument over the area of Kashmir, and especially in the radically globalized culture of the 21st century, diversity is a key point in the construction of national identities and politics. It seems that the question remains unanswered, but fiction has offered ingenious ways to address the issue. The most innovative works of literature have done so by adopting perspectives and mechanisms from various movements, often cross-culturally.¹⁵³ For a postcolonial author like Salman Rushdie, this has been established to mean the appropriation of tropes and forms from both Western and local theories and cultures. This process should not be snubbed without further notice. Instead, its gains and complexities should be acknowledged and studied.

Midnight's Children, with its epic size and subject matter, offers a seemingly endless source of research. Some suggestions for further research drawn from the current thesis include a study of the lasting but often covert presence of British colonialism in the novel, or the text's use of pastiche in Rushdie's cross-cultural intertextuality. The 2012 film adaptation might be examined in a research of the implications of the augmented authorial presence, or in a discussion of the phenomenon of code-switching in cinema. From a political or anthropological perspective, it might be interesting to study the novel and film in how they portray national identity politics or even how the audiences reacted to this.

¹⁵²Barker, "The Nation as a Freak Show," 127.

¹⁵³Gorra, "The Novel in an Age of Ideology," 118.

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