

### Significance of Genealogies

Genealogies are crucial to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The complicated family tree of narrator Saleem Sinai figures centrally in his retelling of the history of modern India. Indeed, Saleem portrays the story of India as inseparable from the story of his family. His grandfather Aadam Aziz was present at the event that catalyzed the independence movement, the 1919 Amritsar massacre; Saleem's descendents, he foretells in the novel's final paragraph, will continue to be present at key moments in the nation's history for the next 1001 generations. The family tree of the narrator is thus cast as an interpretive key to the history of India as a postcolonial nation state. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), is portrayed certifying the connection between nation and family, writing a letter celebrating the coincidence of Saleem's birth at the very moment of India's independence in 1947: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 139).

The significance of genealogies is reinforced by Rushdie's own comments on his novel. In an essay written shortly after the publication of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie articulates his own literary genealogy:

But we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form [. . .] and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own—selected half consciously, half not—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree[.] (Rushdie, "Imaginary" 21).

The international genealogy Rushdie traces for himself as a writer is intriguing given that *Midnight's Children* purports to

provide a specifically national narrative. Rather than conceiving of cosmopolitanism to be antithetical to nationalism, Rushdie's "mongrel" cosmopolitan genealogy is cast as the necessary precondition for writing the national narrative of modern India.

### **Midnight's Children and Global Modernism**

The international genealogy Rushdie describes not only purports to guide interpretations of *Midnight's Children*; more sweepingly, Rushdie's genealogy also asserts that the significance of his novel needs to be understood in the context of a broader international phenomenon—what might be described as *global modernism*. The formal and stylistic characteristics of Anglo-American literary modernism of the early twentieth century—characteristics that literary scholars such as Rebecca Walkowitz have identified as including “wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language” (Walkowitz 2)—are appropriated by authors associated with the former colonial peripheries in the second half of the century. Indeed, Rushdie declares that his project is defined as much by literary modernism as by the history of India. In an interview, he declares: “I think *Ulysses* is the greatest novel of this century; it has a lot of stories in it, but its impulse is not narrative. I think one can't make that kind of naïve return to the world before Joyce” (Goonetilleke 4–5).

Rushdie's acknowledged debt to Joyce specifically, and to early twentieth-century literary modernism more generally, does not imply that he sought to imitate his predecessors in writing *Midnight's Children*. Rather, Rushdie redefines the parameters of modernism beyond the Eurocentric focus of canonical modernist figures, including T. S. Eliot (1921), Marcel Proust (2002), and Virginia Woolf (1924). Where T. S. Eliot drew his genealogy in explicitly Western terms in essays, such as “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921)—he evokes the notion of a “mind of Europe” as the repository of tradition—Rushdie draws inspirations globally, from the magic realism associated with Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges to Bollywood cinema.

Since its publication, *Midnight's Children* has assumed a central place in the genealogies of postmodernism and postcolonial theory. The novel's selective appropriations and deliberate mixing of cultural traditions has resonated with scholars of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon (1988), who found in Rushdie's novel a prime example of historiographic metafiction. According to this idea, the novel critically reflects on the project of writing historical narratives, even as it elaborates an alternative to putatively institutionally-endorsed narratives of nationhood. Scholars of postcolonial theory, such as Homi Bhabha likewise found in *Midnight's Children* a narrative style that was subversive in its writing back to the imperial center. Indeed, Bhabha's definition of a world literature emerging in the postcolonial era seems to have Rushdie in mind:

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature (Bhabha 12).

Rushdie's place within the canons of both postmodern and postcolonial literatures is striking, given the very different theoretical presuppositions of the two discourses. Postmodernism was understood as primarily an aesthetic phenomenon—perhaps a symptom of late capitalism, but a preoccupation of First World artists more interested in play than politics. Postcolonial theory, in contrast, emerged as an explicitly politicized discourse to explore the era of decolonization and efforts to respond to racist, Eurocentric histories. Yet Rushdie's novel invited explorations of the overlap between the postmodern and the postcolonial by Bhabha (1994), Hutcheon (1988), Anthony Appiah (1992), and others—with *Midnight's Children* figuring centrally in these discussions.

### **The Canonization of *Midnight's Children* and Its Implications**

That *Midnight's Children* could be both postmodern and postcolonial in a way that no Anglophone novel previously succeeded was key

to its success commercially and critically. Winning the 1981 Booker prize as well as the “Booker of Bookers” in 1993 and the “Best of the Booker” prizes in 2008, the novel acquired a canonical status rarely afforded a literary work, even rarer to a postcolonial work. It also played a key role in igniting global interest in English-language novels written by authors from the Indian subcontinent, including Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth. Its presence in literature classrooms across the Anglo-American academy and in scholarly books, articles, and dissertations has earned it a kind of special distinction, which M. Keith Booker sums up pithily as the “official Western masterpiece of the late Cold War years” (Booker 285).

The canonization of *Midnight's Children* testifies to the novel's success in representing political, social, and cultural tensions as elements of a flourishing nation-state rather than indicators of intractable social divisions. Rushdie's celebratory vision of fragmentation is articulated most recognizably in the 1982 essay “Imaginary Homelands,” which becomes the titular essay in Rushdie's most famous collection of non-fiction and social criticism. In this essay, Rushdie declares that his novel was “born” the moment when he recognized that he could not recapture the vibrant diversity of Bombay within his memory or in the pages of a novel (Rushdie, “Imaginary” 9). His artistic “failure,” however, is cast as the basis of the novel's value. Put another way, modernist fragmentation serves not to indicate social decline, but artistic creativity. The “broken mirror” of memory that, according to Rushdie, guides his writing frees the artist from being chained to describing the past, opening up possibilities for something new. Rushdie declares that “the shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*” (Rushdie, “Imaginary” 12; emphasis original). This artistic vision becomes the basis for claiming a vibrant, multicultural nation state defined not by a single homogeneous vision, but the summation of the visions of its diverse populations. Rushdie's vision, he declares, is “‘my’ India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions” (Rushdie, “Imaginary” 10). The fragmentary portrait of India in his

novel, then, putatively celebrates the diverse views of the nation not directly described in its pages.

For Rushdie's critics, his focus on cultural diversity, migrancy, and hybridity has been read as an endorsement of an elitist cosmopolitanism, insensitive to the importance of nationalist struggles. For the literary scholar Timothy Brennan, who wrote the first and perhaps best book-length study of Rushdie's work, Rushdie demonstrates a "cosmopolitan sensibility" that acknowledges on the theoretical level the importance of nationalist movements to decolonization struggles (Brennan 166). Rushdie's failure, however, is his unwillingness to translate this theoretical knowledge into his fictional work, which consistently prefers to understand political struggle in abstract and too often parodic terms. According to this line of thinking, such a sensibility devalues the importance of fiction's capacity to mobilize readers to commit themselves to effecting political change.

The stylistic features of global modernism, then, are seen by Rushdie's critics as embracing Western ideals of aesthetic practice at the expense of conveying the uncomfortable realities of the political struggles that are putatively the subject of his work. For the Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad, Rushdie extends the "literary imagination of High Modernism" in portraying the colonial world as "a supermarket of packaged and commodified cultures, ready to be consumed" (Ahmad 128). Here, the notion of cosmopolitanism as it emerges through modernist literary forms is seen to be entirely consistent with late capitalism, which is itself central to the history of colonialism and neocolonialism. Ahmad argues that such a sensibility dismisses notions of national belonging as unnecessary, parochial, and—worst of all—expressions of false consciousness. To believe in the importance of the nation is to be an ideological dupe.

From Rushdie's perspective, however, his modernism was not an elective decision, but a consequence of decolonization: "Writers are no longer sages, dispensing the wisdom of the centuries. And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps

had modernism forced upon us” (Rushdie, “Imaginary” 12). Put another way, modernist fragmentation becomes the literary mode appropriate to representing the social and cultural diversity of India and, putatively, an antidote to political moves to centralize state power and endorse a culturally homogeneous national identity.

The rhetorical move Rushdie makes to defend his work is itself a profoundly modernist one, made perhaps most famously in Virginia Woolf’s “Mister Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Woolf declares that the defining characteristics of what would come to be known as literary modernism was the product of an historical rupture. The “season of failures and fragments” (Woolf 335) that define Woolf’s generation of authors in contrast to their Edwardian predecessors is not a product of shifting literary taste so much as a response to broader social transformations—captured in Woolf’s inimitable phrase, “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (Woolf 320). Like Woolf before him, Rushdie establishes the conditions of his own literary production in contrast to a literary style that precedes him. The actual difference is far smaller than the rhetorical move: in Rushdie’s account, John Fowles’s *Daniel Martin* provides the strawman text endorsing the writer as guru. Fowles himself famously contrasts himself with the author-as-god figure in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, writing a pastiche of the omniscient third person narrative associated with the Victorian novel.

Returning to the image of the “broken mirror” that Rushdie invokes in “Imaginary Homelands,” the modernist move to establish historical ruptures as the basis for artistic innovation—the modernist present versus the premodern past—is modified. In this case, the historical rupture that is experienced through the individual’s partial, fragmentary experience of the world is caused by the violence of European imperialism. That is to say, Rushdie’s inability to recall the vibrancy of Bombay provides a lens to understand the broader disruptions caused by India’s absorption within the British Empire. What constitutes modernist style emerges out of an experience of exile—not the metaphorical exile so often celebrated in literary modernism, but a literal one experienced by Rushdie and authors of his generation, who found themselves moving to the colonial center

of England for education and opportunity denied them in their homelands. His personal biography, then, traces colonial history, and his artistic production becomes a response to the consequences of that history. A broken mirror thus signifies not only a critique of nineteenth-century realism and its pretensions to represent the totality of society within a single artistic lens but also a critique of colonial violence that shattered social and familial ties among those populations brought within European spheres of control.

Rushdie's global modernism, then, emerges out of a set of social conditions that necessitate a selective appropriation and revision of modernist precursors. Rushdie signals this in what initially begins as an homage to Marcel Proust. Arguing that his own preoccupation with memory in *Midnight's Children* initially was Proustian in inspiration, it subsequently changed over the course of writing the novel. Rushdie writes: "So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool" (Rushdie, "Imaginary" 24).

### ***Midnight's Children* and the Modernist Stylistics**

The repurposing of modernist stylistics is apparent in the first sentence of *Midnight's Children*, which evokes the generic conventions of fairy tales in order to show their inadequacy to convey the subject matter. Saleem Sinai begins: "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, 1947" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 3). The sly irony of casting his personal life story as a failed fairy tale—"once upon a time"—reinforces the allegorical connections between personal events and the history of postcolonial India, as Saleem goes on to confess that he was born precisely at the moment of India's independence.<sup>1</sup>

The historical specificities of postcolonial India are cast as governing the form of the novel, correcting the flights of fancy taken by its narrator. The modernist device of self-consciously breaking generic conventions enables Rushdie to convey the impossibility of his narrator divorcing himself from history through the abstraction

of fairytale. This enables the novel to make its central conceit—that it provides a form of historical knowledge that cannot be reproduced through more traditional means of writing history. Readers are given, in other words, a unique grasp of the history of India, which the novel asserts through the linkage of the personal and national, Saleem and India: “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 3).

The argument that *Midnight’s Children* provided a distinctive form of historical knowledge through its modernist stylistics emphasizes the conjunction in Rushdie’s mind between aesthetic and political values. For Rushdie, India as a viable postcolonial nation emerges analogously to the novel: through highlighting the moments when its diversity belies any construction of its unity. Rushdie writes: “After all, in all of the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India” (Rushdie, “Imaginary” 27). Or, as he will declare in a 1984 essay reflecting on the assassination of Indira Gandhi: “For a nation of seven hundred millions to make any kind of sense, it must base itself firmly on the concept of multiplicity, of plurality and tolerance, of devolution and decentralization wherever possible. There can be no one way—religious, cultural, or linguistic—of being an Indian; let difference reign” (Rushdie, “Assassination” 44). The preoccupation with fragmentation, multiple points of view, and self-conscious representation of the unreliability of any representation makes modernism uniquely suited to highlighting cultural difference as the basis of national identity.

Defending nationalism through modernist stylistics is a curious move on Rushdie’s part, given that modernism as an artistic movement has come to be associated with the defense of cosmopolitanism—the world citizen, not the national citizen. The tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that scholars, such as Neil ten Kortenaar, have identified as crucial to understanding the significance of *Midnight’s Children* is present here. What becomes apparent is that the tension between these two potentially