

Imaginary handcuffs:
misguided concern
for the past in
midnight's children



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Salman Rushdie's creation, Saleem Sinai, has a self-proclaimed "overpowering desire for form" (363). In writing his own autobiography Saleem seems to be after what Frank Kermode says every writer is after: concordance. Concordance would allow Saleem to bring meaning to moments in the "middest" by elucidating (or creating) their coherence with moments in the past and future. While Kermode talks about providing this order primarily through an "imaginatively predicted future" (8), Saleem approaches the project by ordering everything in his past into neat, causal relationships, with each event a result of what preceded it. While he is frequently skeptical of the true order of the past, he never doubts its eminence; he is certain that everyone is "handcuffed to history" (482). His belief in the preeminence of the past, though, is distinctly different than the reality of time for the Saleem who emerges through that part of the novel that Gerard Genette calls "the event that consists of someone recounting something" (26) (Saleem-now, we can call this figure). Saleem-now is motivated to act not by the past, but instead by the uncertainty and ambiguity of the future. Saleem's construction of his own story is an effort to mitigate the lack of control he feels in looking toward the unknown future. To pacify himself he creates a world that is ordered but this world is contrary to his own reality. Saleem spends much of his energy in the story setting up neat causal relationships between events in his past to demonstrate his place "at the center of things" (272). He carefully mentions his tumble into the middle of a parade for the partition of Bombay and then proceeds to propose that "in this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay" (219). When telling us of his school-mate Cyrus disappearance from school and

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emergence as a great religious prophet Saleem quickly mentions the Superman comics that he had given Cyrus earlier, and attributes Cyrus' rise to prophethood as a direct response to these comics. By viewing Cyrus' motivation in this way Saleem says "[I] found myself obliged, yet again, to accept responsibility for the events of my turbulent, fabulous world" (309). There is an obvious note of skepticism toward these most overt acts of placing himself at the center of things. At one point he asks himself " am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything ~~to~~ to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (190). But while he might doubt his most overt reordering of the past, he is never skeptical of the past's monolithic effect on its future. Saleem assembles the first book to demonstrate the breadth of his " inheritance" (119), and the heft of the book underscores the degree to which he believes that the past is " the cold waiting vains of the future" (7); to understand the activity of any moment, you need look no further than the past. When considering who he is, he responds, " My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me" (440). His belief ~~is~~ and Rushdie has him carefully say " my answer," rather than " the answer" ~~is~~ leads him to write his autobiography to demonstrate the way each event is the result of " everything that went before." As intended we come to see the characters as the product not of any forward movement, but as a product of what has already come. That which Jean Paul Sartre says of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is also true of Saleem's story: " the past takes on a sort of super-reality" (267), for it is here that the answers to the present lay. Saleem, like Faulkner, would have us believe that the characters are " explicable only in <https://assignbuster.com/imaginary-handcuffs-misguided-concern-for-the-past-in-midnights-children/>

terms of what has been" (271). But Saleem-now, Rushdie's creation, is explicable in very different terms. He is undoubtedly shaped by the past, but the primary motivating factor in his actions is the uncertainty of the future. This motivation falls into two broad categories. First, he wants to impress Padma and his son with his life story. He explains that "this is what keeps me going: I hold on to Padma. Padma is what matters" (337). As he admits, he is "needing-to-be-loved" (392), and by crafting his story carefully he can impress Padma with his worth. The very fact that he is needing to be loved, rather than is loved attests to the uncertainty of this venture. The uncertainty and anxiety is exaggerated when Padma leaves him for a spell, shortly after her departure he laments, "I feel confused . . . in her absence my certainties are falling apart" (187). In a life defined by numerous "exiles," forced by his parents, Saleem's uncertainty about any relationship is sorely felt. His other motivation for acting, and acting quickly is his desire to finish the story before his life ends. In the first page he explains, "time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, overused body permits" (3). The "perhaps" suggests his uncertainty with his own mortality ~~and~~ he is not certain how much more his body can permit, and throughout the story he says that he "must rush on" (475), so that he can finish before an uncertain death. His uncertainty about his position even after death is present in both of these concerns, and motivates him to project his image into the future. While Saleem liked to claim that he is "the sum total of everything that went before me," it becomes clear that Saleem-now is a being much larger than just the sum of these past parts. The ambiguity and uncertainty of the future is also what forces him into his hopeful belief about the importance of the

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past. He desires meaning in his life, and as Frank Kermode tells us, concordance, and its attendant meaning comes from an “imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain in the midst” (8). But Saleem is too aware of the uncertainty of the future to predict anything but his own death. He realizes when young that he cannot have control over India’s future (273), and in the end understands that he also cannot have control over his own ~~he~~ he glumly recognizes that “anything you want to be you kin be” is “the greatest lie of all” (533). Instead he looks backward with the understanding that, “if everything is planned in advance, then we all have meaning” (86). As Saleem searches for form, it is natural for him to turn to that part of his life that he can control, rather than that that he cannot. The construction of the story seems an effort to convince everyone, including himself, that things really are planned ~~that~~ that the day of his birth really did endow him with meaning. While there is a hint of incredulity toward the idea that everything is planned in advance he never backs down from the idea that they are all “handcuffed to the past” rather than dragged into an uncertain future. The Salman Rushdie-created-consciousness of Saleem, however ~~the~~ the only consciousness that we see from the inside ~~refutes~~ refutes Saleem’s own suggestion that an accurate portrayal of man has him looking backward. Saleem’s efforts are what Gary Morson would call backshadowing, or viewing the past as “having contained signs pointing to what happened later.” Morson says that this kind of storytelling “tends to eliminate sideshadows,” which can be roughly defined as a sense of the openness and ambiguity of the future (235). As we see through Saleem-now, though, sideshadows are an integral element of the texture as life. By creating Saleem-now in this way, Rushdie

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seems to be agreeing with Sartre, who succinctly stated, "we can no longer arrest man at each present and define him as the sum of what he has" (270). It is the uncertain future like a coffee cup whose "bottom that you do not see" (271) that pushes man to act, not some element of the past. Kermode's theory of concordance aims for a reordering of the past and imagining of the future, but his work focuses on the portrayal of the future and some idea of apocalypse. His emphasis on the future rather than the past seems, in part, an implicit statement about the ease with which order is found in the past like historians have a much easier time than futurists, and Kermode would rather deal with the task of the tougher profession. Martin Heidegger's explanation for the way the individual in the midst of time gains meaning similarly emphasizes the future: "running ahead is the fundamental way in which the interpretation of Dasein is carried through" (13). In his creation of Saleem-now Rushdie seems to agree with the vitality of the future in defining the individual, and by juxtaposing this reality with the temporality that Saleem hopes for, Rushdie exposes the temporal myth that a too-strong-desire for concordance can engender.