

# Midnight's children salman rushdie



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Awarded the Booker Prize in 1981, *Midnight's Children* is Salman Rushdie's most highly regarded work of fiction. Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947, and his birth occurred simultaneously with a particularly meaningful moment in Indian history. After almost one hundred years of colonial rule, the British occupation of India was coming to an end. Almost exactly three months after Rushdie's birth, India gained its long-awaited independence at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947.

Just as Rushdie was born during a revolutionary time period in Indian history, Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is born at midnight, August 15, 1947, at the exact moment India achieved its independence from British rule. Now nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing his impending death, he grows anxious to tell his life story. Throughout the novel, Saleem, in the process of his search for self-definition, attempts to solve the puzzles of his own identity.

From the moment that he is born, his life is inextricably linked to the progress of India as a nation, and Rushdie explores the dichotomy between the single and the many in order to define the identity of his characters. Furthermore, the physical and emotional fragmentation that Saleem experiences hinders his ability to determine his true identity. Saleem's continuous efforts to make meaning of his life illustrate the imperfections that make him human, a characteristic that Rushdie highlights throughout the novel.

Rushdie's work, which is considered postmodern Indian literature, is inspired by both ancient and contemporary Indian culture; however, his writing style, character development, tone, and themes differ vastly from those of ancient Indian literary works such as *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. From a very young age, Saleem yearns to understand the relationship between personal life and the political, national, and religious events of the time. "Saleem Sinai, yoked by his birth to India's fate, becomes the living embodiment of his nation, and finally its voice.

His identity embodies the identity of his collective group and of his nation" (Karamcheti 81). Born at the dawn of Indian independence, Saleem manages to represent the entirety of India within his individual self. He is, he says, "mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (Rushdie 3). The idea that a single person could represent a diverse nation like India highlights one of the novel's fundamental themes: the relationship between the single and the many.

The tension between Saleem's individual life and the collective life of the nation suggests that public and private will always influence one another; however, it remains unclear whether they can be fully associated with each other. Throughout the novel, Saleem struggles to contain all of India within himself - to equate his personal story with events of his country. Saleem firmly believes that he "shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust" (Rushdie 36).

At the time of the novel's publication, India's population was about 630 million. By claiming that he will crumble into 630 million pieces, Saleem suggests that when his body falls apart, he will release all of India and its people. With the notion that, in his individual body, Saleem contains a physical representation of every single "anonymous" Indian citizen, Rushdie symbolically uses Saleem to embody modern India. His bodily disintegration facilitates the formation of his identity in his mind as he conceives of himself as a physical embodiment of India's history.

Throughout the novel, the private life of Saleem Sinai coincides with the public life of India. India's defeat in the war metaphorically drains the country of its confidence and optimism, just as Saleem's operation literally drains his congested sinuses. Saleem's acute sense of smell once allowed him to find the other children of midnight and create the Midnight's Children's Conference. However, the narrative implies that Saleem, in losing his sharp sense of smell, also loses the ability to communicate with the midnight's children; thus, he becomes drained of hope and optimism along with India.

His seemingly personal loss reverberates across the entire country since the Midnight's Children's Conference represented India's potentially bright future. Finally, private and public histories become united and completely inseparable when Saleem claims that the war of 1965 occurred for two reasons: "because [he] dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rules; furthermore, [because he] remained impure, and therefore the war was to separate [him] from [his] sins" (Rushdie 393). Once again, Saleem declares personal responsibility for large-scale, national events. Because Saleem

equates his life path with that of India's path as a new nation, his identity is forever associated with that of India. Although Saleem seems to understand that his individuality is associated with the fate of the nation, his identity is physically and emotionally fragmented, hindering his ability to discover his true self. Rushdie's writing style contributes to this feeling of fragmentation because the readers must piece together Saleem's narrative to extract meaning from it.

Saleem's story, spread out over sixty-three years, is a fragmented narrative, oscillating back and forth between past and present and frequently broken up further by Saleem's interjections. Sudden shifts back and forth in time, instances of illusion, and Saleem's stream of consciousness narrative all contribute to the disconnectedness of the story. Saleem claims that he is physically falling apart because his body is overrun with cracks, and as a result, the past is spilling out of him. In addition to the narrative and physical fragmentation, India itself is fragmented.

Torn apart by Partition, it is divided into two separate countries, India and Pakistan. New nationalities are created, and with them come new forms of cultural identity that reflect the constant strife and separation. Consequently, Saleem as well as the people affected by this division struggle to determine their identities. Even though Saleem's identity is disintegrating, various characters play essential roles in helping him discover his true self. Saleem's archrival Shiva is born at exactly the same moment as Saleem but is raised in poverty by a single father unlike Saleem who is raised in a loving, wealthy household.

Blessed with a pair of strong knees and an amazing prowess in war, Shiva is named after the Indian god of destruction, whereas Saleem represents Brahma, the god of creation. The two boys represent violence and restraint respectively. However, Saleem acknowledges the ambiguity between good and evil and is able to mature from this realization. Born into poverty and nearly mutilated by his father in order to make a living, Shiva is as tragic as he is violent. His anger and affinity for destruction are inevitably related to his upbringing. Although Shiva is responsible for the destruction of the midnight's children, he ensures the continuation of their legacy by fathering Aadam, Saleem's son, and hundreds of other children.

Thus, Saleem recognizes that seemingly clear categories can be confused and the distinction between them can be ambiguous, and he uses this lesson to mature as an individual and develop his identity. In addition to Shiva, Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, influences his opinions and feelings as well. "What leaked into [him] from Aadam Aziz: a certain vulnerability to women, but also its cause, the hole at the center of himself caused by his failure to believe or disbelieve in God.

And something else as well - my grandfather had begun to crack" (Rushdie 98). Although Saleem and Aadam are not biologically related, Saleem inherits his grandfather's personality traits and tendencies. Aadam's uncertainty regarding faith creates "cracks" in his body, and this failure to formulate identity or meaning is passed down to his skeptical and fragmented grandson. Hence, minor characters play a fundamental role in the development of Saleem's identity. *Midnight's Children*, which is

considered postmodern literature, incorporates both ancient and contemporary aspects of Indian culture.

Although modern and ancient literature contains some similarities, writing styles, character development, and themes have changed drastically. For example, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* by the great poet and playwright Kalidasa is a play about the love of King Dusyanta for Shakuntala, the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and the celestial nymph Menaka.

Overwhelmingly erotic in tone, the play aims to produce an experience of aesthetic rapture in the audience. Vastly different in nature, *Midnight's Children* is a social commentary about the newly independent nation that conveys an urgent, ironic, and satirical tone.

Rushdie's unique writing style differs significantly from the fairly straightforward narration of Kalidasa's play. Saleem narrates in the first person, often addressing the audience directly and informally. He also writes in a prose style that feels spontaneous and improvised, as if he were writing his thoughts down rapidly, without stopping to revise or edit. Saleem rambles and frequently veers off topic, a style referred to as stream of consciousness, which reflects Saleem's desperately urgent need to finish his story before he dies.

The narration of *Midnight's Children* doesn't resemble the straightforward and concise words of the characters like in *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. Kalidasa's writing is characterized by the usage of simple, but beautiful language, as well as his extensive use of similes. Moreover, character development and description varies considerably between the two works.

Shakuntala's " lower lip has the hue of a sprouting tendril [and] her arms imitate tender branches. Youth, desirable like a flower, is primed in her physique" (The Recognition of Shakuntala, 1. 90, Vasudeva translation 73).

Shakuntala is a seemingly flawless character who is the epitome of physical and emotional perfection. Saleem's significant character flaws stand in stark contrast with this apparent perfection. He is literally falling apart and nearing death and it's only a matter of time before he crumbles into dust. The inspiration Rushdie draws from both ancient and contemporary Indian culture is notable in his fiction, yet his work differs from ancient Indian literature. *Midnight's Children* follows the journey of Saleem Sinai through his tumultuous life as he struggles to find his true identity.

Having given everything he has within him through his life and through the telling of his story as well, Saleem can surrender himself, dissolving into a metaphor for his nation, as he crumbles into as many pieces of dust as there are people in India. In its attempt to include as much of India's vast cultural identity and contemporary history as possible, *Midnight's Children* is as complete a reflection of the life and character of the subcontinent as any single novel could possibly provide.