

# Saleem as an allegory for india in 'midnight's children'



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“ To understand just one life you have to swallow the world” - Explore the presentation of Saleem as an allegory for India in ‘ Midnight’s Children’The peculiarity of the title ‘ Midnight’s Children’ makes it immediately obvious that this novel is out of the ordinary. Perhaps its most extraordinary aspect is the allegory of the character Saleem, of just one human being, for the downfall of postcolonial India. Yet Rushdie does not make it as simple as this; combined with the allegorical nature of Saleem are autobiographical and fantastical aspects. And our narrator’s distinctive wit and morals give him an identity, arguably one that’s too narrow to conceivably represent an entire country, the thing which is a conglomeration of people, politics, geography, religions, languages, and cultures. Simultaneously, obvious aspects such as Saleem sharing his birth with that of the independent Indian state, and ultimately his breakdown, mirror that of his homeland. Such associations are superficial however, because it is the depth and style of Rushdie’s narrative which really creates the parallel between Saleem Sinai and postcolonial India. But in terms of the reader’s understanding of Saleem’s life and therefore his world, a solipsistic critic would claim that a life cannot be proved to exist, let alone understood, certainly not within the parameters of a novel and therefore one cannot swallow the world - it is precisely this which needs to be explored. Despite Saleem’s clear purpose of reflecting the events in India, some factors perhaps make it impossible to fully comprehend both person and country. There is the unreliability of Saleem’s narrative, in which he draws attention to his flaws calling himself, “ an incompetent puppeteer”, and his memory which “ selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies...creates its own reality.” In the essay ‘ Is Nothing Sacred?’ Rushdie says, “ The interior space of the imagination is a <https://assignbuster.com/saleem-as-an-allegory-for-india-in-midnights-children/>

theatre that can never be closed down." On one level this serves as an epistemological idea that the reader can neither know nor understand the truth of contemporaneous India, emphasising the omniscience of Saleem as narrator. On quite another level it shows that history is put together, invented, just like a person invented by circumstance, or a character in a novel. This tells us that perhaps there is also more to the India which we have been taught of, that the facts were overwhelmed by lies, propaganda, agendas. In fact, the moment of independence, a historical fact, is called a "mass fantasy", a "collective fiction" and coincides with the birth of the midnight children who possess magical powers, a juxtaposition of truth with falsehood, imagination and reality. Rushdie's narrative mode seeks to convey a coexistence of fantasy and reality. Parvati, who has turned Saleem invisible so he can return to Bombay, fallen in love with him, but endured the impossibility of consummation because her husband "superimposed upon her features the horribly eroded physiognomy of Jamila Singer", endures a painful labour: "The cervix of Parvati-the-witch, despite contractions as painful as mule-kicks, refused to dilate." Her role in the novel is magical, yet her troublesome labour coincides temporally with the time between Mrs Gandhi's guilty verdict and consequent seizure of emergency powers. Likewise, the "grasping, choking" magical power of Shiva's knees has such significance, as the return of this violent figure into the narrative is at a similar date to that of India's first nuclear explosion. Of course there are other examples of the overlapping of fiction and fact, but in these, Rusdhie shows how strange and unstable was the political reality of the time. It may also be an ironic suggestion, that despite the novel being written for a Western audience, its magical realism, together with Saleem's memory

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confusion, has an alienating effect, perhaps Rusdhe implying that the Western reader is distant and ignorant of India's past, unable to empathise with the problems of ex-colonial victims but rather feel a sense of shame. This sense of strangeness and instability of the politics and problems of the time becomes associated with Saleem. It seems he is unable to live a personal, independent life, but only one that is occupied with the country's and other people's problems, possibly representative of them. His birth being simultaneous with that of 'new India' prompts Mr Nehru to write him a letter saying, "It will be in a sense the mirror of our own." His downfall is simultaneous with that of India, highlighted by his awareness of his bad memory and importantly, the employment of the triple end-stops "... " and a complex, perplexing syntax, "I don't want to tell it! - But I swore to tell it all. - No, I renounce, not that, surely some things are better left...? - That won't wash; what can't be cured must be endured!" This pattern of cracks and splitting of Saleem's language and psyche increases, which creates incoherence, symbolic of Saleem's and therefore India's own 'cracking up'. This is significant because it again displays Saleem's lack of individuality, how he is "handcuffed to history" - the macro-scale of history is constantly referred back to the micro-scale of the individual. Ultimately, it is a statement that not only is it possible, but perhaps necessary to observe one particular life in order to try to understand the whole world. Despite his existence as an allegorical device and his lack of individuality, Saleem does have his own personality, and is clearly human. His creativity is displayed in his language, ranging from the colloquial slang of "goonda", "Sahib", "nakkoo", to the eloquent, poetic descriptions like "incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching

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trees". There are page-long sentences, passages riddled with compound words. His impressionability and cultural diversity are illustrated in the neologisms, "twoness", "overtowered", "Godknowswhats". And his childlike humour is shown, with his account of Zafar's enuresis: "I awoke in the small hours in a large rancid pool of lukewarm liquid and began to yell blue murder," and his love of "Snakes and Ladders", symbolic of his rather cheeky fascination of sex. In creating this image of Saleem, Rushdie has employed a plethora of techniques and styles, such as magic realism, Western, Bollywoodian, and modernism. It's as if old literary techniques are insufficient in describing the newly independent India with its newfangled diversity. It is appropriate that a postcolonial novel in English tries to create a typically Indian voice and that in its very character, and that of Saleem, displays the plurality of voices that make up the country. Indeed, the idea of plurality is one of the novel's most important features. The concept that a single person could symbolise a multitudinous, diverse country encapsulates the tension between the one and the many, so relevant to the multilingual, interdenominational, cultural hybrid that was India. "Who what am I? 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." This exclamation excellently summarises Saleem's narrative; in starting his story thirty-two years before his birth, he shows his belief that the past was related to his life in some way. There is a connection between past and present, the individual and the state. As history has shaped what is present, Saleem is shaping the world around him, particularly with his "Midnight Children's Conference".

Telepathy lets him break barriers of language, barriers which caused

categorisation and violence. Rushdie makes his point of view clear giving <https://assignbuster.com/saleem-as-an-allegory-for-india-in-midnights-children/>

violent associations to such uniformity, and the peaceful ones to the pluralism of the conference. Saleem's English blood, poor background, wealthy childhood, different religious influences and "the nose of a grandmother from France" form a cultural composite, that again reflects India's diversity. A similar illustration is Lifafa Das, who causes Saleem to wonder, "is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality?" A postcolonial interpretation is that Das promotes the multiculturalism that was spawned by colonialisation and the effect it had on imagination and art. Furthermore, the Midnight Children's Conference is a construct for pluralism; the magical powers of the different members serve to empower 'the many'. This remains an ideal however, as the conference, their magic, and ultimately Saleem, completely disintegrate, a socio-historical parallel for the demise of India. It is only right that a novel should be as large as its subject matter, and probably the crucial feature of 'Midnight's Children' is the expansive allegory of Saleem, and the importance of the narrative. An understanding of India is certainly achieved through Saleem's character and language. The most important themes of 'unreliability of memory', and 'the one and the many' are paramount in achieving the overall illustration of postcolonial India through our narrator. Interestingly, it is often speculated that the novel is autobiographical. Arguably, this shows Salman Rushdie as quite vain and dislikeable due to Saleem's egotism, his self-display of being high-and-mighty. This is not the case; any possible self-portrait is not made explicit at all, but what is very clear is how Rushdie expresses himself through Saleem Sinai, the most important example of which is his promotion of pluralism, and the vitality of cross-cultural fertilisation.

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