

Individual influence on india's history in salman rushdie's midnight's children



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India - a subcontinent defined by its exceptional diversity, caused by its outstanding history. It has always been a country easy to love, but hard to describe. Salman Rushdie is said to be one of the first authors to have truly written from the heart of India's people. In *Midnight's Children*, the first book to win the prize of the "Best of the Bookers" (Weatherby 20), he successfully narrates the biography of Saleem Sinai, who is inextricably linked to his nation, as a commotion of disasters and triumphs that mirrors the course of modern India at its most impossible and glorious. One of the author's many attractive qualities as a writer is his clever use of humorous images and metaphors to explain and discuss incredibly controversial and painful issues. He describes various debatable topics, stressing the theme of how of much impact one person can have on history. As the protagonist is born on the stroke of midnight at the precise moment of India's Independence, he insists that his life is irrevocably connected to India's post-colonialist journey to create its own history. August 15, 1947, the night of India's Independence, is probably the most important date this century has contributed to the subcontinent. But can a character - fictional or not - be represented by a nation's history? By making it the heart of the story, the author speaks the voice of India through his novel. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie arouses the question of the individual's role in history, simultaneously depicting India's diversity through the usage of the narrative form of magical realism when portraying historical and political events. The novel is a unique Anglo-India blend of fiction and imaginative autobiography. Its story is set at the moment that India and Pakistan achieved independence from Great Britain, covering the whole of that vast country and its history according to the author. One of the main reasons why the book was the first winner of the <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

Booker was its usage of magical realism, describing India as a subject and not merely as a background. The fantastic and the magical, the exaggerated and the almost unreal are used to imaginatively portray controversial subjects, especially in societies that have converted from colonies to independence. Therefore, the novel is commonly labeled "magical realism" to "emphasize its juxtaposition of two normally incompatible frameworks" (Kortenaar 17). Magical realism disrupts the normal schemes of causality and time, the laws of physics, and the conventional relationship between the object and its symbolic meaning. The narrative form as a genre comes from countries where the political scene is judged by the standards of a western democracy, that only a sense of magic can do justice to it ("The Lectern"). Furthermore, the novel can be labeled as an epic book, as the story is centered on heroic characters and the action takes place on a grand scale ("Magical Realism and Post-Colonialist Device"). The outstanding narrative form is a characterizing device in *Midnight's Children*. The author tends to apply a very traditional Indian form of passing on history: the oral narrative. The events in the novel refer to the world outside the text and to a familiar narrative of history relying on conventions of verisimilitude, yet much that occurs is frankly fantastic, involving superpowers, a divinely mandated destiny, a wildly implausible personal connection to the events of history (Weatherby 17). Nevertheless, Rushdie's dense and delicate style complicates analysis: moments of humor turn serious in an instant. Therefore, he did not want to call his novel a political novel - because "it is capable of multiple interpretations", as he claims at an interview with the Times (Weatherby 48). Within the larger frame of the novel's narrative, the author tells many smaller stories, a technique that Rushdie uses time and

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again in his fiction works. Stories are culturally important, but they are also deployed here for specific purposes, intended to convey particular lessons, and to do so through metaphor, symbol, and image ("Spit and Memory"). This way, Rushdie offers the reader a wide range of possible interpretations to each one of the stories. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is portrayed as having an outstanding magical existence. Many aspects of his life do not make much sense. Some of these, such as the magical powers enjoyed by the children of midnight, can be read as symbols of the inherent promise of the generation born into a free country. In other cases, though, Rushdie gives details that do not easily correspond to any larger message. These details, which are notable but not necessarily meaningful, help to heighten the reader's sense of the absurdity of Saleem Sinai's world: "Can you believe (...) that I was a heavy child? Blue Jesus leaked into me; and Mary's desperation, and Joseph's revolutionary wildness, and the flightiness of Alice... all these made me, too" (146). These multiple references to the Bible may let the reader assume there is a religious coherence, which the author proves to be a wrong expectation in the following chapters. *Midnight's Children* is a novel that is fragmented, making frequent and abrupt transitions of place, time, and character. Far from being a careless mistake of the author, the fragmentation serves vital psychological functions, reflecting the divisive experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism. The extreme fragmentation may cause difficulty for the reader, thrusting him or her into the same feeling state experienced by exiles and the characters Rushdie portrays. Furthermore, time plays an important role in the autobiography: "Time, in my experience, has been as variable and inconstant as Bombay's electric power supply" (142). The main characters

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oral narrative begins 30 years before Independence and symmetrically ends 30 years after. Practically, the novel covers his whole life in order to come to meaning with his identity. The magical realism especially highlights the absurdity of the political scene in post-Independent India ("The Lectern"). However, factual errors and dubious claims are essential aspects of Saleem's fantastic narrative. Because of the falseness of Saleem's historical events, the reader may wonder how much he can trust Saleem's account. "I told you the truth," I say yet again, '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, its heterogeneous but usually coherent versions of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.'" (309). For instance, the fact that the narrator is omniscient through his telepathic abilities makes the reader question if the protagonist is inventing things. Other than that, the memory is a very important characteristic in the novel. Saleem remembers things from before his birth, recalls how his grandparents met and unfolds how even his ancestor enjoyed the privileges of having a gigantic nose. He portrays the road to his birth as if it were completely normal, defending his knowledge by the irrevocable loss of faith his grandfather bequeathed on him. Only later does the reader find out that this is not possible, as Saleem Sinai is not the grandchild of Aadam Aziz (see below). This, once again, calls the reader to doubt the protagonists' reliability on telling the truth. Yet, throughout the story, Saleem explains that his memory is intensified by his special ability of smelling, which was caused by an operation of his nose to ease his respiratory system. But at a certain point of his life, Saleem Sinai loses his memory. This is when the famous <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

spittoon appears as an important device of the story. Memory, truth, and storytelling are entwined into the motif of the spittoon. It allows the narrative to circle back on itself without losing its forward momentum. By reintroducing the spittoon in different contexts, Rushdie builds meaning into the image and provides the reader with a reference point and familiar angle of insight into the meaning of his tale. One particular spittoon, an extraordinary silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli, becomes a link to reality for Saleem: "What I held on to in that ghostly time-and-space: a silver spittoon. Which, transformed like myself by Parvati-whispered words, was nevertheless a reminder of the outside . . . clutching finely wrought silver, which glittered even in that nameless dark, I survived. Despite head-to-toe numbness, I was saved, perhaps, by the glints of my precious souvenir." (456). It is a point of return, a lovely but monotonous reminder of truth in a world that threatens to overwhelm with the sheer volume and variety of its voices and experiences ("Spit and Memory"). By the ending of the novel, Saleem loses his spittoon, as Indian bulldozers sent by Indira Gandhi bury it. This is another irony of his life: The nation that held together his memory ultimately destroyed it. Moreover, the novel makes a distinction between lies and fictions. "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems—but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems incredible" (Rushdie 189). Again, in this case magical realism is applied as a device for defamiliarising the familiar ("An Overview"). The birth switch, for example, represents a lie that is only revealed to the reader after the beginning of Part Two. Born on the stroke of midnight of India's Independence, the family maid Mary Pereira switches nametags of the two children born simultaneously (Shiva and Saleem). This

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way, Saleem has the fortune of growing up in a rich, Indian family. Actually, he is born to common parents, so poor that the man who is his natural father would have broken the legs of the boy he thought was his son, in order to make him a more effective beggar. For the first ten years of his life, though, neither Saleem nor his family knows of his humble roots, and so he is raised as the son in an educated and wealthy family. In couple with this, the reader is thrown into a state of ignorance: If the baby Saleem is not a Sinai, how can his whole life reflect on the actions of his " grandfather", Aadam Aziz? How is it possible, that the explanation of a magical existence based on familiar connections is nevertheless so logically entwined in the story? The fiction is not arbitrary but meaningful, and concurrently the meaning is not changed, because after all, the baby switch is discovered (Kortenaar 40). On account of these particularly absurd situations, the reader never knows the deeper truth of what might be happening, and at the same time, so much conjuring going on in the hero's imagination could bewilder a reader, but as a tour de force his fantasy is irresistible (Weatherby 42). This is exactly what characterized magical realism; the effect of its unpredictability concerning occurring events can be intensified by building up a story on false events - in a sense only to prove the absurdity of the protagonist Saleem's life. Because he is torn by conflicting evidence that his is either a special, magical existence or quite an ordinary one, Saleem Sinai portrays the story of his life, trying to find his true identity. " Please believe that I am falling apart (...) this is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (We are a nation of forgetters.)" (176) He sees himself and his family as a microcosm of what is happening to India. His own life seems so bound up with the fate of the country that he has the impression of having no existence as an individual;

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yet, he is a distinct person. One of the main questions raised in the book is if the main character mirrors India: " I mean myself, in my historical role, of which prime ministers have written (...) ' It is, in a sense, the mirror of us all'" (112). His birth conditions show a paradox of rich and poor, which is an actual emerging problem in India. Through the midnight's children Saleem represents the diversity of India. On top of that, his lack of identity portrays the problems of a country that recently gained Independence. But can a whole subcontinent be summarized by one boy, yet a magical existence?" There is no just explanation for why one person is born into wealth and another doomed to poverty" (Kortenaar 45). Saleem is constantly affected by his birth conditions, and the reader can find a typical western snobbism Saleem portrays throughout the story. Rushdie goes out of his way to show that the opportunities for self-fulfillment that give the citizens a stake in the nation are a question not of merit but of the class one is born into. Because the choice in *Midnight's Children* is posed in terms of faith and doubt, it is actually weighed in favor of history and the nation (Kortenaar 45), as to prove that not everything depends on the birth conditions. Rushdie successfully writes about how, despite Saleem's familiar wealth, he too is touched by fate in a devastating way, when he is sent to war after he loses his whole family. In addition, his mother Mumtaz (Amina) Sinai has to face various incidents of racial discrimination in the course of her life. This is also a very intense but actual problem in the subcontinent. " But then, one night, [Reverend Mother] entered the dreams of her daughter Mumtaz, the blackie whom she had never been able to love because of her skin of a South Indian fisherwoman" (69). She is the only one out of four children that is black.

Because of her skin color, her mother Naseem Aziz is incapable of loving her
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and thinks that she is damned to living a horrible future: " How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! (...) Of course they know, even blackies know white is nicer, don't you think so?" (89) This represents the racial discrimination even within the borders of a family. Directly, this has no effect on Saleem, yet it is another example of how Saleem's life can be reflected to India's quotidian life. Ironically, Mumtaz is the one to give birth to a midnight's child. The mothers of this achievement are promised a high reward in form of money and a short period of fame. The child was born at the exact stroke of midnight of the night of India's Independence, on August 15th 1947, and the family even received a letter of the Prime Minister Nehru, complimenting on the birth of Saleem. From this point on, he claims to be responsible for the course of history: " At the end of 1947, life in Bombay was as teeming, as manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever... except that I had arrived; I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe, and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all" (173). Saleem frequently voices anxiety concerning the " solipsism of arriving at an understanding of the individual's role in history", especially when history is unsettlingly permeated by what can only be understood as magic (" The Lectern"). Saleem has placed himself at the centre of his world - his significance confirmed by a prime minister's letter, a newspaper photo, and the predictions of a holy man. The fact that his birth was actually anticipated by a guru underlines Saleem's understanding of the importance of his existence: Newspapers shall praise him, two mothers shall raise him! Bicyclists love him, but crowds will shove him! Washing will hide him- voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him- blood will betray him! Spittoons will

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brain him- doctors will drain him- jungle will claim him - wizards reclaim him!
Soldiers will try him- tyrants will fry him. He will have sons without having
sons. He will be old before he is old... And he will die... before he is dead.

(96) Obviously, as the narrative form of magical realism dominates the story, the predictions become real. But at the moment of hearing the prophecies, his mother was afraid to death, which highlights the relevancy of superstition in India; this tradition to let a guru or a shaman predict the future is a practice still commonly applied to solve delicate issues in the Subcontinent.

Another central project of the novel is to answer this question: " How, in what terms, may the fate of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation?" Salman Rushdie uses magical realism to expose the complex nature of the relationship between the individual and their position in history (" The Lectern"). Saleem's birth, at the exact moment India gained her Independence, was his first direct connection to his country. "(...) I had been overwhelmed by an agonizing feeling of sympathy for the country which was not only my twin-in-birth, but also joined to me (so to speak) at the hip, so that what happened to either of us happened to us both" (538). Over time, his presence seems to influence important decisions, which makes him believe that he is responsible for the occurring events in his country. From his father's alcoholism to the petty affairs of the estate, Saleem wants to claim it all as his, no doubt in part to fulfill the enormous weight and prophecy placed on him since birth. With " If I hadn't wanted to be a hero" (387), Saleem starts an inner monologue rehearsing the curse of his life, claiming how every situation preceded the next. He ends his discourse with the assassination of the Prime Minister: " Nehru's death; can I avoid the conclusion that that, too, was all my fault?" Saleem constantly lives with an <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

enormous weight of responsibility on his shoulders, which in great part is caused by his enormous self-esteem that makes him believe his fate is directly connected to his nation's. Nevertheless, the preeminent use of magical realism convinces the reader to think likewise. During his childhood, Saleem shows enormous pride in thinking that things just happen because of him. It makes him arrogant and presumptuous, believing himself greater than others. Subsequently, this is one of the main factors why the midnight's children conference came to an end. " Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history?" (534). When Saleem grows older, he understands the amount of responsibility he has to face and learns how to deal with guilt, although he does have his moment of doubt. However, his son (who was not really his son) has to face the same type of destiny his father involuntarily lived through. Parvati the Witch, who is married to Saleem at the time Adam Sinai is to be born, who was conceived with Saleem's archenemy Shiva, was in labor for twelve days. In these twelve days, " public discontent with the Indira Congress threatened to crush the government like a fly" (582), as she was accused of two courts of campaign malpractice during the election of 1971. Then, " at the precise moment of Emergency he emerged. (...) And owing to the occult tyrannies of that benighted hour, he was mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country. " (586) As the story ends with Saleem still being the center character, the reader never finds out what happens to the mysterious son. According to V. S. Pritchett, " The book is really about the mystery of being born and the puzzle of who one is" (Weatherby 43). Coupled with the immense responsibility the boy Saleem has to face are his identity issues. Like any other child in puberty, the

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protagonist is confronted with problems concerning his individuality. Later in the novel, the conflict of the Pakistani and the Indian nationality emphasize this issue. In search for his identity, his narrative discusses aspects such as orality and hybridism in order to “metaphorically” understand his relation to the nation (Kortenaar 41). He exists, as a person and as a narrative voice, within spectra composed of these four poles: Active-literal (how Saleem impacts on history directly), passive-metaphorical (how the growth of the state is symbolizes by the growth of the baby Saleem), passive-literal (how the events of history impact Saleem's family) and active-metaphorical (how the things that happen to Saleem are shown to be symbolically at one with the events of history). Magic realism lays in the outer two: the subverting of causality with time and object with metaphor (“The Lectern”). In general, the first half of the novel is characterized by the magical literalization of metaphors (active-metaphorical) and the second by the bathetic metaphorization of the literal (passive-metaphorical) (Kortenaar 57). He realizes that his words have a small amount of meaning, especially when confessing his love to his sister: “But even as he spoke he could hear his words sounding hollow, and realized that although what he was saying was the literal truth, there were other truths which had become more important because they had been sanctified by time” (451). Knowing that what he has to say will not be heard as the truth deeply hurts his self-esteem. He openly asks a question about his existence, and what sense life makes if the truth is said to be a lie. “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. (...) I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world” (535). Saleem realizes that his existence is determined to <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

be a special one; one that is created only through everyday occurrences. But Saleem is not the only one to be born of the stroke of midnight of India's Independence. Another central motif of the novel is that of omniscience which, made literal, becomes a science-fiction cliché of telepathy (Kortenaar 35). Being born on the exact moment India gained her Independence, every midnight's child was endowed with a special ability, including supernatural forces. " Understand what I am saying: during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 (...) one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. What made the event noteworthy (...) was the nature of these children, endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous." (271) He comes to find that he has supernatural powers too, which he uses to communicate with the other children born on the same day he was, finding that they are all gifted, but not as gifted as he is, except for Shiva, the child with whom he was switched at birth. He sees himself in them, especially in Shiva. He understands his powers through their powers, and he lacks the personal attributes, which Shiva, whom he understands to be his opposite, has, particularly aggression (" Spit and Memory"). Saleem briefly characterizes a few during the first chapters, to summarize: Parvati-the-witch, his closest alliance with actual witch powers, Shiva, who was born with two destructive knees that are able to demolish a human head, aside from children with time-transcendent-, flying-, disappearing-, gender-changing and other abilities. Consequently, as he is only ten years old, the exposure of the voices of the midnight's children threatens to drown out his sense of himself as an individual human (" Spit and Memory"). Therefore, he soon destroys the conference and forbids the children to enter in his thought process. The magical powers enjoyed by the

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children of midnight can be read as symbols of the inherent promise of the generation born into a free country. "Midnight's Children: who may have been the embodiment of the hope of freedom, who may also have been freaks-who-ought-to-be-finished-off" (422). As the novel is characterized by heteroglossia, the presence of many voices and many languages at the same time, make the reader feel as if he was locked into one single head (Kortenaar 46). Also, it suggests that the conference could be a symbol for India's diversity. The midnight's children conference is a model for pluralism ("Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence corruption poverty (...) I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I had dreamed" (405)) and a testimony to the potential power inherent with coexisting diversity, which is a natural and definite element of Indian culture." Shiva and Saleem, victor and victim; understand our rivalry, and you will gain an understanding of the age in which you live" (604). The essential competition of Saleem and Shiva dominates the story. It reflects the ancient, mythological battle between the creative and destructive forces in the world. The reader usually chooses Saleem over Shiva because we cannot but opt for order over chaos (Kortenaar 45). In the story, Saleem is mortally afraid of Shiva and tries to block him out: "Shiva, whom I cold-bloodedly denied his birthright (...) but his existence, somewhere in the world, nagged away the corners of my mind" (415). Eventually, fate clamps down on Saleem and he is forced to face his arch-rival, which brings more infelicity to his life. Consequently, the battle between the two magical existences about fighting over who is in the better position to rule the world continues. Named after the Hindu god of destruction, Shiva is Saleem's rival and counterpart. He represents the

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alternate side of India: poor, Hindu, and as aggressive as Saleem is passive. " There are ironies here, which must not pass unnoticed, for had not Shiva risen as Saleem fell? Who was the slum-dweller now, and who looked down from commanding heights? There is nothing like a war for the re-invention of lives..." (569) At the end of the novel, Shiva is the one who successfully demands the destruction of the midnight's children. For Saleem, this is inexplicable, as he has always been the good one and this example clearly shows how malice in the world can easily dominate. Another irony of the situation is Adam Sinai, the son. Parvati-the-witch had an affair with Shiva, trying to make Saleem jealous. Knowing of his impotence (which was invented from Saleem), she hoped for a pregnancy, expecting Shiva to run when he hears of his child. Successfully, she grossed Shiva out of her life and leads Saleem into a marriage with her. Saleem wonders how cynical life can be, allowing him to raise a son that is not his but whose grandparents are simultaneously the people he knew as parents. Portraying Saleem's life, Salman Rushdie cleverly incorporates his own vision of India into the story. Also, the novel depicts many similarities to the author's life. For instance, Rushdie missed being a midnight's child by two months, as he was born in Bombay in June 1947 (Weatherby 10). He related many events from the novel to his own life. In his infancy, he imagined himself as a " mild mannered Clark Kent", protecting his secret identity as Superman (" Spit and Memory"). In comparison, Saleem wants to be a great mythical Indian hero that saves his nation. Rushdie also had his own reception from Britain in mind when the main character of Midnight's Children described himself as " variously called Snotnose, Stain face, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon" (Weatherby 16). The hundreds of pages that slowly

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accumulated contain thoughts and dreams going back to the earliest childhood. There are satirical reflections he had never confined to anyone. "It is as if the novel contains his whole life" (Weatherby 41). In addition, Rushdie felt his books filled what he called a "great, gaping hole" in Indian literature (Weatherby 93). India, he said, was a colonial corner for English literature and he thought it was time that was stopped. He tried to give his novel voice and fictional flesh to the immigrant culture to which he himself is a member. He was also pleased to learn that readers in Bombay had found his book to be full of revelations about their city (Weatherby 76).

Furthermore, by presenting actual political disputations, Salman Rushdie evokes the conflict of an individual and their personal influence in historical events. To prevent it from being a "kind of oracle book," he introduced some trivial historical events on the part of his narrator, Saleem, including getting the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination wrong (Weatherby 48). But these multiple uses of lies incorporated into the story make the reader doubt factual events. The first time something absurd happens, Saleem claims that even though "reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real" (278). This way, the author tricks the reader. It is Rushdie's message conveyed in the most dramatic terms: "Doubt, it seems to me, is the central condition of a human being in the 20th century" (Weatherby 102). Saleem offers the reader the choice between faith in the nation and doubt. Many post-colonial works of literature call into question the very nature of history. By juxtaposing local history with world events, or by contrasting two or more versions of the same events, a post-colonial author sometimes presents a story with so many facts that it becomes slightly unclear ("Magical Realism and Self-Conscious Writing"). Therefore, <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

the use of magical realism is crucial to constructing the parallel to the country's history. " You can even believe that the entire book is a lie and that Saleem may be reinventing history for his own purposes" (Rushdie). The errors in Saleem's story point out to one of the novel's essential claims: that truth is not just a matter of verifiable facts. Namely the Independence of India on August 15th 1947. It brought partition, the splitting up of the subcontinent into two nations, India and Pakistan, and with it misery for both (Galbraith 126). The fact that Saleem Sinai's life begins just as the era of Britain's colonial control of India ends links the life of the novel's protagonist to India's post-colonial growth. As the novel's narrator, looking back over the events of his life, Saleem proclaims himself to be dying of the same problem that can be seen of any country that has been thrust abruptly from immaturity to maturity: he is, he says, " falling apart." At first, newly independent India is strong and thrives, enjoying inherited wealth the way that a child like Saleem, born into a prosperous family, might enjoy a secure sense of privilege. This partition of the subcontinent did not occur without bitter fighting between Hindus and Muslims. As Muslims fled to Pakistan and Hindus to India, millions were killed on both sides (Areas consisting of 75% or more Muslims were to become Pakistan and the rest of the territory India (" Background to India")). The division of the religion is also very accurate in the novel. Saleem, the protagonist, and his family are Muslims. Concerning Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, an important fact is the religion of the murderer. "'Thank God,' Amina burst out, it's not a Muslim name'. And Aadam, upon whom the news of Gandhi's death had placed a new burden of age: , This Godse is nothing to be grateful for!' (...) Why not, after all? By being Godse he has saved our lives!" (125) On 30 January 1948, Gandhi was <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

shot while he was walking to a platform from which he was to address a prayer meeting. The assassin, Nathuram Godse, was a Hindu nationalist with links to the extremist Hindu Mahasabha, who held Gandhi responsible for weakening India by insisting upon a payment to Pakistan. Right after Gandhi's assassination, many revolutions occurred in India. Saleem describes them through the eyes of his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, as they were taking place in Kashmir. When a revolution occurs, the people's next and perhaps even more difficult step is to find or create an authority that means loyalty and obedience. Fortunately, after 1947, this worked out well; as Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the overwhelmingly popular congress party, was voted to be India's first independent Prime Minister in 1947 (Galbraith 124). On the other hand, after his death, the subcontinent had to suffer: " In 1964, my grandfather Naseem Aziz arrived in Pakistan, leaving behind an India in which Nehru's death had precipitated a bitter power struggle" (454). India is a land of political up's and down's: its independence from Great Britain, then Nehru's policy which was appreciated around the country, and then the manipulating government lead by Indira Gandhi. Its political instability reflects the people's need to revolt against any controlling power. Additionally, the second war between India and Pakistan, in 1965, finds its place in the story. It resulted in a stalemate between the two countries for Kashmir. When India invades Pakistan, Saleem's life is changed forever by the loss of his family, and India's identity is changed by its brutal suppression of the county that was its twin. Out of revenge for his love, Saleem's sister Jamila sends him into the Pakistani military troops. Yet another identity conflict takes place, as Saleem does not know which nationality to belong to. The horrible fighting "(...) in those days,

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assassination became as quotidian as the heat" (356), causes the boy to lose his memory, which only intensified the confusion about his existence. " But who attacked? Who defended? (...) While jeeps with loudhailers saluted me in Guru Mandir, reassuring me: ' The Indian aggressors will be utterly overthrown! We are a race of warriors! One Pathan; one Punjabi Muslim is worth ten of those babus-in-arms!" (471). On the contrary, Salman Rushdie often describes Pakistan as the " Land of the Pure". Saleem's parents said, " We must all become new people'; in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal. But I was forever tainted with Bombayness, (...) and my body was to show a marked preference for the impure" (431). But Saleem refuses to believe in that pureness. He stays convinced about India and holds on to his patriotism. This shows another aspect of personality, that he questions the truths he is told. The presidential coup he experienced at the mere age of 11 probably had its influence on this attitude. His father took him to a governmental reunion where, suddenly, the president announces a violent coup. " What began, active metaphorically, with pepper pots, ended then; not only did I overthrow a government - I also consigned a president to exile" (405) Saleem is surprised at how much applause this injustice receives, but nevertheless takes over responsibility again - as he is " the twin of the nation". Still, he is torn between two nationalities: " proving to me that I have been only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence" (453). When he was trained a " man dog" and had his dignity taken from him completely, " emptied of history"

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(488), he involuntarily became a citizen of Pakistan. " It is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth" (469). During the war, he deliberately walks through the streets of Pakistan, hoping to get shot or hit by a bomb to escape his momentary life, especially the incestuous love to his sister. As irony has it, in one day, multiple bombs kill his whole family, excluding his sister Jamila. This again proves how important his life is as to be destroyed by the enemy of his nation. Salman Rushdie also shows his growing antipathy against Indira Gandhi, and thereby against Indian politics. He told a Guardian reporter bitterly, " All the corruption and pettiness that were always there were never open. People felt ashamed of it". But in India now " it's very naked power politics: You give your loyalty to whoever pays you the most". The last third of *Midnight's Children* - the most overtly political part - was, he said, designed to make sure that " all this gets on the record" (Weatherby 47). Therefore, he chose the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as the archenemy of the protagonist. He almost constantly referred to her as " The Widow", insinuating the assassination of her husband. She is present almost everywhere and in the end; it is due to her that Saleem becomes suicidal. Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister from 1966-1977 and from 1980-1984 (" Background to India"). Initially, she was highly praised by the Indian people. But when the government threatened to decapitate her due to voter fraud, Indira decided to refuse by introducing the " state of emergency". The Indian Emergency of June 1975 to March 1977 was a 21-month period, when the President Ahmed, upon advice by Prime Minister Gandhi, declared a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, effectively <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

bestowing on her the power to rule by decree, suspending elections and civil liberties (Galbraith 132). She wanted to “organize” the Indian people and “democratize” the country. She ordered the police to arrest rebels without charge or notification of families, abuse and torture detainees and political prisoners, destroy the slum, among others. The book *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie has the protagonist Saleem Sinai in India during the Emergency. The national beautification program destroys his home in a low-income area called the “magician's ghetto”. The vasectomy program causes his sterilization. Also, there is a direct connection between Indira and Aadam Sinai, Saleem's son. As mentioned before, the child is born at the exact moment of the Emergency, which automatically links him to India's history, too. In 1984, Mrs. Gandhi brought an action against the book in the British courts, claiming to have been defamed by a single sentence in Chapter 28, in which her son is said to have had a hold over his mother by him accusing her of contributing to his father's death through her neglect. The case was settled out of court when Rushdie agreed to remove the offending sentence (Galbraith 154). The most obvious part where the author expresses his loathing towards Indira is when he makes clear that she is responsible for the destruction of the midnight's children. “O wondrous irony: the Widow, by bringing us here, to break us, has in fact brought us together! O self-fulfilling paranoia of tyrants... because what can they do to us, now that we're all on the same side, no language-rivalries, no religious prejudices!” (610) The Prime Minister catches Saleem and tortures him until he spits out the name of every single midnight's child. Having them all gathered together (except for Shiva - he is, after all, a mighty soldier), she performed a lasting psychological torture, the so-called “spectromy” (611): the draining-out of

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hope. She kept them together, always indicating their proximate freedom. When he portrays this to Padma, Saleem reflects the power-position the Prime Minister enjoyed "organizing" her people: Indira is India and India is Indira (...) The truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulating of the children of midnight. (Whose conference had, of course, been disbanded years before; but the mere possibility of our reunification was enough to trigger off the red alert). (597) In the story, Indira Gandhi is afraid that supernatural powers could overwhelm her political abilities and thus decides to perform vasectomy on each and every left over midnight's child, to prevent them from devolving their powers to further generations. The vasectomy also causes the loss of supernatural abilities. As they no longer had any connection to one another and their mutual uniform, the telepathy, was taken away, the midnight's children conference no longer existed. The children of midnight were basically a metaphor of hope and the purpose of them is to be destroyed by Mrs. Gandhi (Weatherby 47). By making Indira Gandhi's campaign responsible for the destruction of the fictional midnight's children, Rushdie holds her accountable for destroying the promise of a new future for India. Nevertheless, he declares it as something that was contributed by faith, because "it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace" (533). Throughout the novel, Salman Rushdie applies Indian background information to stress the crucial effect its diversity has on the main character. One of the fastest growing nations in the world, India has always been incredibly diverse. He <https://assignbuster.com/individual-influence-on-indias-history-in-salman-rushdies-midnights-children/>

thought the defining image of India was the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once. Rushdie's India had " always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridism: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed."

(Weatherby 77) He lays much emphasis on the large distance between rich and poor: " I breathed in the fatalistic hopelessness of the slum dwellers and the smug defensiveness of the rich" (427). In Saleem, the author portrays what great difference the birth into a rich family makes. During the course of his life, the protagonist acknowledges his luck and, by the will of destiny, learns how to appreciate luxury when he comes back to India after his time as a soldier in Pakistan. Also, through the conference, Rushdie demonstrated the possibility of a harmony in society where there are no social or racial differences. After the vasectomy and the loss of their powers, the midnight's children return to their old life and brake contact with each other, as they know that a boundary between rich and poor is not possible. Rushdie's writing is passionately concerned with the fate of the new India, with what sort of nation she is to be for all of her citizens (" An Overview"). One of the major themes that guide the reader through the story is that of India's multiplicity. Because of its miscellany, India has been a melting pot for multiple cultures over many centuries. As invaders came, they left their mark, and had been absorbed (Galbraith 13). " In India, the nations co-exist. Ancient ways of doing things continue along with the post modern. Planes cross the skies but, on the ground, people ride in horse drawn carriages" (Galbraith 28). In many passing sentences, Rushdie mentions this mixture: "(...) Anglo-Indian teachers giving private Latin tuition" (363). The

conference also portrays India's diversity, as do the different capabilities
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carried out by the children. Another conflict mentioned in the book is the religious conflict in India. Although Saleem is not directly confronted with the fighting, the competition on Hindu and Sikh is an actual problem in the subcontinent. Especially during the State of Emergency Indira Gandhi ordered the executive to prosecute the Sikhs, provoking such hate in them that finally, her own Sikh bodyguard assassinated her. “[Saleem’s] head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah’s (like India’s first Muslims, the mercantile Moplas of Malabar, I had lived in a country whose population of deities rivaled the numbers of its people)” (431). The Republic of India recognizes all religions. There is still, however, a measure of interreligious strife, the legacy of past conflict and hatred (Galbraith 128). But, as Salman Rushdie stated himself: “ Religion is the air everyone breathes. If you’re trying to write about that world (India or Pakistan), you can’t make a simple rejection of religion. You have to deal with it because it’s the centre of the culture.” In *Midnight’s Children*, he cleverly portrays religion as an important issue without making it a central motif. Towards the end, his own narrative raises the question of Saleem’s madness: are the voices of the midnight’s children merely schizophrenic voices; the magical element merely the hallucinations of madness; his arrest and treatment at the hands of the Widow merely an expression of insane paranoia? But this we will never know, as it contributes to the reader’s impression of India. “ In *Midnight’s Children*, the metaphor of the nation as a body is made literal and therefore comical: if India were a person it would be a grotesque person, such as Saleem, its paternity would be in dispute, and its ability to tell its story would be in question.” (Kortenaar 35) But can India be interpreted into the character of

Saleem? Can one single person represent a nation’s history? Rushdie
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cleverly answers this question in his novel: with the sufficient use of fantasy, everything is possible. He tries to describe India as a whole through the eyes of one man, and if a situation wouldn't fit, the narrative form of magical realism helps the main character develop its personality linked with that of his nation. In his element, Rushdie uses another metaphor I will portray to conclude this essay. One of the recurrent images in *Midnight's Children* is the "pickles of history." Pickles, of course, are an edible comestible, but they have curious properties—they are sour and yet somehow appealing for many people. "One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth...that they are despite everything, acts of love." (531) The pickles could be described as bringing both pleasure, and a sore taste in the mouth. That is, Salman's story as an integral part of Indian heritage is not unilateral: it has sunlight, but at the same time it is imbued with darkness.

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