

"Mr Mustapha Aziz and Fly" : defamiliarization of "family" in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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“Mr Mustapha Aziz and Fly”:
Defamiliarization of “family” in Salman Rushdie’s
Midnight’s Children

Neil Forsyth and Martine Hennard

“Family: an overrated idea”

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes inquires whether every narrative cannot be read as a retelling of the Oedipus story, a quest for origins in the course of which the discovery of one’s true identity is only made possible through a radical questioning of the Law. For Barthes, the conflict with the father is a key to creativity and (readerly) pleasure:

Death of the Father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn’t every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn’t story-telling always a way of searching for one’s origin, speaking one’s conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred? (Barthes 1975: 47)

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* answers Barthes’ somewhat rhetorical question in the affirmative. The importance of filial relationships is immediately established, even in the book’s title, yet in the metaphoric mode. This displacement from the biological to the poetic, from the vertical and literal to the lateral, characterizes the world of the novel as a whole, informing its subversive treatment of the idea of family – but also of the generative processes of the narrative itself.

Among the 1001 children born within the midnight hour on India’s Independence Day in *Midnight’s Children*, one can kill with his knees, some can blind with their beauty, some can vanish through mirrors or travel back and forth in time. The most gifted child of all, however, is certainly the narrator Saleem Sinai, as he alone is endowed with the magic power of story-telling. Spinning his tale to plump Padma, his spell-bound audience,

Saleem weaves in and out of his narrative the fates of his family, whose complicated patterns reproduce on a smaller scale the major episodes of India's history after independence.¹ Thus, the generating matrix for the whole text is the doubling of the family motif, whereby Saleem is not only – and, it soon turns out, not even – the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai, but also a member of a gigantic, unmanageable and freakish family, the doomed offspring of Father History and Mother India. Saleem is forced to submit to the twin tyrannies of Time and Nation, both intent on destroying him. If Kronos (soon allegorized as Chronos) devours his children, Indira Gandhi, the self-proclaimed mother and embodiment of the nation (as in the slogan “India is Indira and Indira is India”) will castrate her “son” and “rival.”² The narrator denounces Indira's reliance on another confusion, which spuriously relates her to Gandhi the “father of the nation” through a fake genealogy. Her attempt to establish a Nehru dynasty of rulers is opposed by some ministers, and this opposition is the immediate cause of the declaration of the Emergency; this in turn leads to the destruction of the children of midnight who represented the hope in an “affiliative” system.

A changeling raised in a Bombay bourgeois family, Saleem nevertheless unravels his own fake genealogy for two generations and more than a hundred pages. In so doing he plays with the entire history of fiction, both Western and Eastern, since he extends into this new hybrid territory the suspense conventionally associated with the quest for parents from the Telemacheia through Greek and medieval romance to Fielding's *Tom Jones*. (We shall consider the tradition of Eastern story-telling below). But to his

¹ The analogy between story-telling and weaving (together with the role of art according to Rushdie) is made explicit in *Shame*. Adapting the roles of Penelope and more especially Helen in the *Odyssey*, and giving it a feminist twist, Rani Harappa, wife of “Iskander the Great,” ruler of Pakistan, embroiders eighteen allegorical shawls with scenes which “sa[y] unspeakable things which nobody wanted to hear” (1983: 191). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's activity is mostly represented in culinary terms: he preserves history by “chutnifying” it and urges his reader to swallow the lot.

² See “Dynasty” (1985), an essay in which Rushdie wryly comments on the anti-democratic succession of Indira Gandhi by her son Rajiv after her assassination on 31 October 1984 and the damaging effects of this Family rule. The answer to the unchallenged imposition of a dynasty on the Indian government is to be found, Rushdie argues, in the (self-) mythologization of the Nehru-Gandhi family, “a real dynasty better than *Dynasty*, a Delhi to rival *Dallas*” (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1991: 50). He goes on to comment on that notorious election slogan which shrewdly played on Hindu mother-goddess symbols and allusions. As for Indira's surname, Rushdie recalls that “On the night of her death, *The Times*'s first edition carried a photograph of the Mahatma and the young Indira over the caption, *The granddaughter*; by the second edition, this howler had been amended to read *The disciple*, which wasn't much more accurate” (50).

faithful Padma who complains of having been tricked into believing a falsehood about the story-teller's origin, Saleem explains that it does not make any difference, since neither he nor the rest of his family "could think [their] way out of [their] pasts" due to a "collective failure of the imagination" (118); besides, at that fateful time and all over India, "children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents – the children of midnight were also the children of *the time*: fathered, you understand, by history" (118). And indeed, at that magic moment which crystallizes all the fears and hopes attending the birth of a nation, just about everything gets defamiliarized, including the very idea of the family.

Intent on debunking conservative myths, Rushdie attacks the naturalized entities of nation, history, and identity through a subversive treatment of our familiar familial system. Insistence on paternal lineage, on descent within patriarchal structures conventionally masks a potent anxiety about paternity (exploited, for example, in the myth of Athena's birth directly from the head of Zeus, and her resulting speech about why she prefers the male, at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*). To this age-old theme Rushdie adds an extra magical or postmodern turn in this psychologically complex game: not only the father's identity, but also the mother's is in doubt. And if Saleem's situation reveals the problematic nature of identity, in his next novel Rushdie was to go even further: in *Shame*, the hero has three mothers and no father.

Doubly illegitimate, then, Saleem is born out of wedlock only to be swapped at birth with his foster parents' son, Shiva. By changing name tags at Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home, Mary Pereira, later Saleem's ayah, acts up to her Marxist lover's ideals, thereby effecting a radical subversion of the social order. This act is disruptive in several ways: apart from unpicking the ideas of blood and family upon which the larger structures of class and nation are built, it violates the caring ideal associated with hospitals and especially maternity hospitals (in fact echoing several well-publicized scandals of children mixed up at birth). And since it is both a manifestation of love and a revolutionary political action, the event that gives birth to and determines the whole novel is a gesture of rebellion and desire, two forces that are at the heart of Rushdie's novelistic enterprise.

Saleem's biological mother and father are a beggar woman (wife of Wee Willie Winkie) and the departing wealthy Englishman William Methwold; their improbable coupling subverts the laws of marital union while transgressing the hierarchies of the social order in a way that already announces their son's unofficial, postcolonial and "bastardized" version of

the history of India after Independence. The two family lines in Saleem's heritage intertwine, however, so that the son of an outcast and a colon palmed off onto the Bombay bourgeoisie by a sleight of hand is nevertheless related to his family of adoption by a common physical trait. Among the biological father Methwold's distinguishing features are "a centre-parting and a nose from Bergerac" (109), which parallels the adoptive father Aadam Aziz's "cyranose" (13) out of which a dynasty is to be born:

We were a dynasty born out of a nose, the aquiline monster on the face of Aadam Aziz, and the dust, entering our nostrils in our time of grief, broke down our reserve, eroded the barriers which permit families to survive. (272)

In this sense, then, relationships are established through the poetic logic of word-play and literary allusion rather than via a linear, biologically grounded process. To put it differently, images turn out to be more generative than people.

Saleem's noseyness – a literal-metaphorical inheritance from both fathers – relates him to an even more significant spiritual father, not only Cyrano de Bergerac but also to Ganesh, the elephant-headed (and miraculously milk-drinking) Hindu god of story-telling (or one of them). Indeed it is Aadam Aziz, his adoptive rather than his biological father, who is early described as having a nose "comparable only to the elephant-headed god Ganesh" (13). So Saleem's various identities are aligned with his various fathers: the inescapable legacy of Empire in the departing colonial, William Methwold; the adoptive and cultural father who is a lapsed Muslim Indian, Aadam Aziz (whose very name leads back in two quite different directions, to Genesis and to E.M. Forster); and then this Hindu tale-spinner Ganesh. *Midnight's Children* thus reclaims the heritage of Eastern as well as Western narrative.

Yet, while being radically questioned and despite mismatches, name-tag switching, actual or fantasized affairs, illegitimate children and the dispersion of its members, the idea of the family nevertheless survives as an imaginary construct just as mysterious as the country that mirrors it on a national scale. In his essay "The Riddle of Midnight" Rushdie himself indicates that the seed and central problematic of this novel was the riddle, "Does India exist?" (1991: 26). As the narrator puts it in *Midnight's Children*, India is

a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream. [It is]

the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (112)

Transposing the fictional nation of India into the national fiction of his narrative, Saleem reminds us of the fabricated nature of individual and collective pasts: the legitimacy of the fatherland (or mother country) is thus as doubtful as Saleem's parentage and narratorial authority. Saleem's unlawful conception, which ironizes his grotesquely inflated "official" birth – Prime Minister Nehru takes the trouble to write a letter of congratulation to the newly born child – forces him to free himself from bonds (parental and others) predicated on a system of authority, domination and control. Saleem's progressive liberation from blood ties enables him to explore the disputed frontiers (Pakistan, Bangladesh) and socio-political margins (the Communist activists of the magicians' ghetto) of this naturalized entity, the Indian nation. This allows him to reconstitute to the official discourse of historiography the suppressed histories of warfare and the underclass in the hybrid genre of magic realism.

The mystery of Saleem's origins is revealed to his parents when he cuts himself badly and it turns out that he has a different blood group from his mum and dad. This "leak" (a favourite word of Rushdie's though not usually in this literal sense) provokes a major crisis which results in the rejection and ultimate ejection of the illegitimate child from the narrower family circle, a Copernican revolution whereby "the world becomes such that parents can cease to be parents and love can turn to hate" (237). Mirroring the partition of the State of Bombay, when "the body politic began to crack" (245), Saleem experiences rupture and loss as never before. He loses the top of his middle finger along with parental love, a sense of belonging, and his home. Physically mutilated and emotionally crippled, he starts wandering in ever-widening circles. This momentous disruption in the order of things initiates a process of fragmentation that each traumatic experience will accentuate until he literally and metaphorically runs dry and imagines being pulverized into specks under the trampling feet of the "four hundred million five hundred six" inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent at the very end of the novel (463). In the meantime, Saleem plays the part of the surrogate son to various parental figures, starting with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia, where he is "promoted to occupy the sacred place of the son [they] never had" (243).

Saleem is briefly reunited with his parents later only to lose them for good in the bombing of Pakistan by the Indian forces, when "father mother aunt and unborn brother or sister who was only a week away from starting

life, all of them [are] squashed flatter than rice-pancakes” (342), along with grandmother Naseem Aziz, glamorous aunt Pia, enuretic cousin Zafar and numerous other more distant and equally colourful relatives. Highlighting the links between family and writing, the narrator remarks that “a chapter ends when one’s parents die, but a new kind of chapter also begins” (346). Now orphaned for the second time and “deprived of the hundred daily pin-pricks of family life, which alone could deflate the great ballooning fantasy of history” (345), Saleem loses touch with reality in the Indo-Pakistani war and its propagandist baloney before he eventually takes refuge at uncle Mustapha Aziz’s dismal Delhi home. Obsessed with genealogies, Uncle Mustapha “spent all his spare time filling giant log-books with spider-like family trees, eternally researching into and immortalizing the bizarre lineages of the greatest families in the land” (391). Having nothing more to lose, Saleem the parasite catches a last specimen and spin-off of his original family in the web of history before being expelled:

Of my last miserable contact with the brutal intimacies of family life, only fragments remain; [. . .] the wooden flower of my uncle’s garden proclaimed strangely: *Mr Mustapha Aziz and Fly*. Not knowing that the last word was my uncle’s habitual, dessicated abbreviation of the throbbingly emotional noun ‘family’, I was thrown into confusion by the nodding signboard; after I had stayed in his household for a very short time, however, it began to seem entirely fitting, because the family of Mustapha Aziz was indeed as crushed, as insect-like, as insignificant as that mythically truncated Fly. (389-390)

At this point, Saleem has indeed freed himself of “conventional” family ties for good by emptying out the family ideal of significance – a metaphor splendidly literalized in the description of its dessicated remains. Exhibiting the skeletons in the closets of his family and its national counterpart, Saleem reveals the unofficial histories of both self and native country. Peering through the perforated sheet under which are concealed family and state secrets, he revels in telling stories from the other side of the blanket.

Saleem is also greedy, “a swallower of lives” (9) who gobbles up whatever comes within his grasp. The recurrent image, however, evolves into a disquieting parallel between cannibalism and story-telling, whereby the reader is invited to share unconsecrated, forbidden meat, since we, too, are urged “to swallow the lot as well” (9). This perhaps evokes that Freudian primal scene where the father is murdered by his sons and his body shared among them to be eaten, analyzed (or fantasized) in *Totem and Taboo*. Saleem self-consciously (and humorously) draws attention to the unlawful and transgressive aspects of his narrative activity; he turns into a spider-like

predator who catches in the texture of his plot the "juicy bits," whether raw or pickled, that will delight his listener and his readers:

Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the stories less juicy; so I am about to become the first and only member of my family to flout the laws of halal. Letting no blood escape from the body of the tale, I arrive at the unspeakable part: and, undaunted, press on. (59)

In the organic body of the text, Saleem "let[s] no blood escape" by paradoxically leaking secret information. The cuckoo in the nest of his bourgeois family can thus take revenge on a blood grouping that resulted in his exclusion by calling into question the stability of familial boundaries and the lawfulness of its bonds. This breakdown of control within the family order even allows for transgressive fantasies, such as Saleem's secret incestuous love for his sister. In other words, Saleem is both subjected to and subversive of the laws of the family and the related religious and ritual requirements. In Kristeva's words, Rushdie transgresses "the linguistic, psychic and social 'prohibition,'" which she and Bakhtin equate with "1 (God, Law, Definition)" and substitutes for it the plethoric (1001) and the structure of the carnivalesque, where "symbolic relationships and analogy take precedence over substance-causality connections" (1986: 41). Noses, pens and penises indeed keep leaking throughout the novel in accordance with Rushdie's favourite mode of transmission.

Leading a vagabond life, Saleem unravels a string of father and mother substitutes (Wee Willie Winkie, Methwold, Ahmed Sinai, Nadir Khan, Hanif, General Zulfikar, Picture Singh) since, as a story-teller, his curse and his gift are to be capable of inverting the sequence of generation. Physically sterile, he nevertheless inherits from his megalomaniac father "the gift of inventing new parents for [him]self whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers: which Ahmed wanted and never had" (108). Born at the very end of the narrative, Saleem's adoptive son will presumably repeat the history of his own father, yet with a major difference, since it reinstates the genealogical continuity that had been broken by Saleem. Named after his grandfather, Aadam Sinai happens to be the biological son of Parvati-the-witch (Saleem's wife, even though the marriage is unconsummated) and Shiva (Saleem's changeling double and rival).

[. . .] once again a child was born to a father who was not his father, although by a terrible irony the child would be the true grandchild of his father's parents; trapped in the web of these interweaving genealogies, it may even have occurred to me to wonder what was beginning, what was ending, and whether another secret count-down was in progress, and what would be born with my child. (415)

Aadam's first tell-tale word is "Abba..." father, which soon turns, however, into the magic formula "Abracadabra" (459). Saleem's misinterpretation of the baby's word captures the subversive strategy at work in the whole novel, whereby the myth of the originative role of fatherhood is debunked to be replaced by a celebration of the creative power of language.

The baby reinforces the correspondence between the beginning and the end of the novel in its treatment of genealogical notions. The beginning activates the *topos* of the birth of the main character and narrator of the story, which replays on the narrative scene the act of literary creation that Saleem both enacts and embodies. Grandfather Aadam Aziz activates a biblical subtext that is reinforced by the description of Kashmir as a Garden of Eden early in the novel, while inscribing a significant difference from its literary source (the supplementary "a" which signals the repetition as well as cultural specificity in the spelling of the name). The end of the novel repeats and yet (literally and metaphorically) displaces this birth *topos*, since Saleem's son, Aadam Sinai, equally inscribes a repetition with a difference from his predecessor by exhibiting flapping ears instead of a trunk-like nose, which links him with India's pre-colonial mythological past, as he becomes yet another version of the elephant-headed Ganesh. This ambiguous ending, which simultaneously announces the death of the generation of midnight's children and the birth of a new generation, links this novel to *Shame*, and, further, to *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's polemical opus in fact goes on to explore yet another watershed, the profound socio-cultural mutations taking place in seventh-century Arabia and contemporary England, which he captures in the leitmotif of that novel: "To be born again, first you have to die." This echoes Gramsci's famous phrase "the old was dying, and yet the new could not be born" taken up in Rushdie's introduction to his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. Gramsci's diagnosis, says Rushdie, also applies to our own period, confronted as it is with major changes that demand that nations re-imagine themselves away from fixed identifying referents. In other words, the national "family" has to accept its heterogeneous, composite and hybrid nature and history. Measuring the dangers of the return of the Law

(genealogical, hierarchical, repressive) in answer to the contemporary crises of identity, Rushdie tries to valorize and rejoice in "mongrelization," voicing the stories of the "bastard" children of colonial history.

In the author's tentative (and ineffectual) explanation of his intentions in *The Satanic Verses* one year after the *fatwa*, Rushdie declared that his last novel was

a love song to our mongrel selves. Throughout history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up beings. Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history.

And he adds, taking up one of the most memorable metaphors running through *Midnight's Children*, "Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, like flavours when you cook" ("In Good Faith," 1991: 394). Yet, as the rest of the quotation from Gramsci further notes, "In this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." Like Gramsci, Rushdie was able to foretell the morbid and even lethal quality of the "interregnum" in *Midnight's Children* as well as in his later novels and writings – as the *fatwa* and its consequences only too shockingly confirmed.

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