

## **“Specks of Voiceless Dust”: *Midnight’s Children* and the Impact of the Bildungsroman on the National Narrative of Postmodern India**

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### **Abstract**

Salman Rushdie’s use of the 19th Century Bildungsroman form in his novel, *Midnight’s Children*, explores a young man’s coming of age on the threshold of a changing society while simultaneously illustrating the futility of an Indian national narrative. Rushdie’s novel spans four generations but centers on the journey of his protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Born at the exact moment of India’s independence in 1947, Saleem is inexorably “handcuffed to history”, his birth marking the birth of a new India. Saleem embodies India in the novel, his magical powers literally enabling him to contain all of India’s voices within himself. The novel charts Saleem’s life, detailing his rise and fall through social classes and his effort to find identity in an increasingly fractured society. Critics argue that Rushdie uses the 19th Century European Bildungsroman, a type of coming of age structure, as a model to chart Saleem’s passage from birth to adulthood in *Midnight’s Children*. Many elements that characterize the genre can be found in the novel, and the influence of European narrative forms mirrors the effect of colonialism in India. Rushdie, in fact, sets up Saleem’s growth in the style of the Bildungsroman and proceeds to dismantle the genre through Saleem’s failure to achieve a concrete personal identity, as well as the character’s failure to assimilate into society. As a postmodern novel, *Midnight’s Children* rejects the idea of unified self. Therefore, if Saleem, as India, fails to rectify his fractured self, what does this say about India’s ability to achieve a unified nation narrative? This paper explores how the breakdown of the Bildungsroman in the novel reflects the inability for a national narrative of postmodern India.

**Keywords: Bildungsroman, National Narratives, Postcolonial**

### **1. Introduction**

In Salman Rushdie’s book, *Imaginary Homelands*, he claims, “human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses capable only of fractured perceptions.”<sup>1</sup> This concept of fragmented identity directly applies to Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* and the story’s protagonist, Saleem Sinai. *Midnight’s Children* can be read as an attempt to personify the nation of India. Using Saleem Sinai as a puppet for India’s emergence following the nation’s 1947 independence, the birth and adolescence of Saleem seemingly mirrors India’s coming of age. The novel spans nearly six decades and four generations, narrated by the thirty-year-old Saleem who struggles to find meaning within his past and among his increasingly fragmented world. Saleem’s passage through life initially mimics the Bildungsroman, or coming of age novels, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In my reading of *Midnight’s Children*, I examine how Rushdie plays on characteristics of the 19th century Bildungsroman, mocking European narrative forms as well as antiquated themes of self-discovery and the desire for social acceptance. Rushdie subverts the Bildungsroman model, in that Saleem grows older but does not come any closer to maturity or personal understanding. Saleem never becomes a whole character; he remains fragmented even as an adult. Saleem’s fragmented identity mimics the narrative of newly independent India and coincides with an attempt to redefine masculinity in the postcolonial nation. The narrative breaks from the imperialistic attitudes that designated men in

British-ruled India in the role of either the “manly Englishman” or the “effeminate Bengali *babu*.”<sup>2</sup> Rushdie’s resistance to essentialist definitions of masculinity must be considered within the larger context of India or any nation’s effort to reconsider social hierarchies in the wake of decolonization. A nation such as India cannot have a singular unified narrative; the countless subjective truths within India will forever obstruct the possibility of a shared national narrative. As both a postcolonial and postmodern novel, *Midnight’s Children* uses the Bildungsroman to critique the idea of a unified personal and national narrative.

## 2. Background

In order to understand Rushdie’s reworking of the Bildungsroman, one must first develop a working understanding of the narrative structure. The Bildungsroman is a narrative form that emerged at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century originating in Germany. The term “bildung” translates to education in German and “roman” is a novel.<sup>3</sup> The genre often centers on a male protagonist born to modest beginnings. In most cases, a loss of parents or another traumatic event pushes the young man away from home, forcing him to find his way in an unforgiving society. The protagonist must endure clashes between his own values, and those of society, often resulting in hardship or disappointment. Ultimately, the man reaches maturity and grows to accept society’s values; through this journey, the man finds understanding of himself and is welcomed into society. The protagonist almost always has an epiphany towards the end of the novel, enabling him to either return to his humble beginnings or a comfortable bourgeois existence with some newfound knowledge of the world. When discussing the Bildungsroman in terms of 19<sup>th</sup> Century literature, specifically *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*, Jerome Hamilton Buckley describes how this moment of realization systematically reveals that the novel’s conflict lies within the protagonist himself. Buckley explains, “And the central conflict in nearly every other Bildungsroman is likewise personal in origin; the problem lies with the hero himself...each of these young men experiences privileged moments of insight, epiphanies, spots of time, when the reality of things breaks through the fog of delusion.”<sup>4</sup> The protagonist’s epiphany is central to the frame of the Bildungsroman novel. Without the young man’s ultimate realization of his place in society and the ability to make meaning from his past, he has failed to cross the threshold from youth to adulthood.

## 3. Saleem Sinai And The Bildungsroman

Rushdie establishes the form of the Bildungsroman in order to effectively mock the structure’s ultimate search for meaning. One can draw further parallels from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bildungsroman to *Midnight’s Children* because both novels present a young man who represents a changing society. For the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bildungsroman novel, this changing social climate is a result of the Industrial Revolution. The changing nation of India, in contrast, is caused by decolonization. The Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin cites *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* as a novel that portray man’s coming of age inexorably linked to the maturation of society. Credited as the prototypical Bildungsroman novel, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* is considered to be the catalyst of the Bildungsroman style, which rose to prominence in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. Bakhtin asserts that the protagonist’s transition from boy to man aptly serves as an allegory for nations on the brink of transformation. Bakhtin argues, “It is no longer a man’s private affair. He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of man emerging along with society can be considered within the context of Indian Independence just as easily as the Industrial Revolution. In both cases the protagonist must learn to adapt under completely new circumstances, the social and political environment of the nation having been forever altered. In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie also plays on the narrative form of the Bildungsroman. Much like the protagonist described in Bakhtin’s essay, Saleem’s character is born concurrently with the nation of India; Saleem himself explains the baggage that he carried from the moment of his birth, “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.”<sup>6</sup> Saleem’s birth at the exact moment of India’s independence marks him as a man bound for a promising future. Prime Minister Nehru writes a letter to the newborn, proclaiming to Saleem and his parents, “We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.”<sup>7</sup> Saleem is born at the dawn of a new era in Indian history. The infancy of the nation is simultaneous with Saleem’s. India and Saleem are equally fragile bodies; both require nurturing and effort to achieve the aspirations set

forth at the time of their births. Saleem's role as India can also be traced through his physical appearance. Saleem describes his unsightly face as a child, explaining, "dark stains spread down my western hairline, a dark patch coloured my eastern ear".<sup>8</sup> Saleem's birthmarks, coupled with his bulbous nose, chart a map of India onto his face. The similarities between India's topography and Saleem's physical appearance, coupled with their concurrent beginnings outline the resemblance between Saleem and India.

Two events in Saleem's life are characteristic of the traumatic moment that launches the protagonist into his journey in the Bildungsroman novel. The first is Saleem's birth; his emergence into the world pushes Saleem into an identity that saddles him throughout his life. Moreover, Saleem's birth also marks the death of his biological mother, Vanita. Saleem is ten years old when he learns that his biological parents are really low-class Hindus. At this point both Vanita and Wee Willie Winkie have died, leaving Saleem no opportunity for closure or the chance to learn his true lineage. When the Sinais learn that Saleem is not their son, Saleem notices that his parents begin to favor his sister over him. He struggles to find a place in the Sinai family and increasingly loses interest in assembling the Midnight's Children Conference. Saleem explains:

In short: after my return to Buckingham Villa, even the salt of the midnight children lost its savour; there were nights, now, when I did not even bother to set up my nationwide network; and the demon lurking inside me (it had two heads) was free to get on with his devilment...If there was a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies; or rather, it is murdered.<sup>9</sup>

After learning of his true parentage, Saleem is haunted by his sudden loss of identity. He is no longer a Sinai, nor is he Muslim. His failure to accept this new history causes Saleem to abandon the element of his life that marks him as extraordinary, his ability to communicate telepathically.

These events do not culminate in the epiphany that characterizes the Bildungsroman novel, however. In spite of Saleem's telepathic powers, and his experience transgressing social classes and religions, Saleem is unable to find meaning within the narrative of his past. His unique ability allows him to get inside the minds of powerful people and listen to stories across the nation of India. When an accident with language protesters heightens Saleem's powers, he finds the ability to literally see the world through different eyes, all the more engrossed in the identities of others. Saleem explains, "I contented myself with discovering, one by one, the secrets of the fabulous beings who had suddenly arrived in my mental field of vision...I plunged whenever possible into the separate, and altogether brighter reality of the five hundred and eighty-one".<sup>10</sup> His ability to see the world from the perspectives of others, should allow Saleem the empathy to forge connection across individual narratives. Moreover, Saleem identifies with two religious groups, Hindus and Muslims. Saleem is caught, not only on the threshold of youth to adulthood, but also between religions and social classes, this hybridity should allow him disparate perspectives. Rather than an opportunity to expand his understanding, Saleem's exposure to the world has the opposite effect. His own identity progressively becomes an amalgamation of cultures that mirrors India's diverse population, eclipsing his own identity and blurring his understanding of reality. This type of triggering event is common to the Bildungsroman novel. The protagonist undergoes a test of emotional fortitude, sending the man on a journey of self-discovery. Saleem's discovery of his religious hybridity can be viewed as this triggering moment; yet, Saleem fails to turn his struggle into an opportunity of personal discovery. Saleem's connection to multiple religions and classes grants him the opportunity to unite India's stories; however, his experiences are wasted and only push him further away from understanding his own identity.

To follow a Bildungsroman story, Saleem must achieve some form of self-realization. Reading a Bildungsroman in the context of *Midnight's Children*, this self-realization should be Saleem's ability to move beyond himself and empathize with the other billion people living in India, people who are sharing his story of struggle in the decades following independence. Rushdie presents a character with all the opportunity to unite India's subaltern voices, but through Saleem's inability to transcend his self-centered personal narrative, he forfeits the possibility of an honest national narrative of India. At the end of the novel, after Saleem has disappointed all of the aspirations that surrounded his birth, he proclaims, "I hear lies being spoken in the night, anything you want to be you kin be, the greatest lie of all, cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd".<sup>11</sup> The 'crowd' Saleem refers to is not of only figures from his past, but of all the voices of India lost within his mind. As Saleem explains to his audience, "to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world".<sup>12</sup> He does not see his identity as the narrative of one, but as a narrative of the masses. Saleem has the unique ability to swallow the whole of India to better understand the country's narrative, but he squanders this gift. He has experienced India from almost every socioeconomic level, and has been both Hindu and Muslim. In spite of these experiences, Saleem continues to focus on his how the world relates to him.

These failed opportunities culminate in Rushdie's mocking of the Bildungsroman narrative. Rushdie establishes Saleem's journey in the style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bildungsroman novel, and appears to subvert the structure through Saleem's inability to achieve self-discovery or acceptance into society. Saleem's life does undermine the traditional Bildungsroman because he begins his life wealthy and full of opportunities. Saleem lives his youth among the westernized mansions of Methwold's Estates, a beacon of wealth perched high above the post-independence turmoil of Bombay. Saleem's descent into poverty is a disappointment considering the aspirations that surrounded his birth. Unlike typical Bildungsroman narratives, where the protagonist follows an upward trajectory, Saleem falls from wealth into a life of poverty. He squanders his opportunity to make an impact on Indian history; ending the novel as little more than an inconsequential speck on the map of the nation.

Though Rushdie appears to poise Saleem in a subverted Bildungsroman, he in fact dismantles the genre completely, presenting elements in Saleem's story beyond his fall to poverty that further disrupt the genre of the Bildungsroman. Specifically, Saleem does not adapt to society or find community at the end of the novel. The male protagonist's eventual realization of his place within society is a crucial component in the arch of the Bildungsroman story. Even Saleem's fatherhood does not qualify as community in the end of the novel because Aadam is not really his son. Saleem is incapable of fulfilling even the most natural impact on the world; he cannot have children; without even children of his own, it is as if Saleem could have never existed. The prophecy that Saleem explains following his birth comes true; he predicts, "I became the chosen child of midnight, whose parents were not his parents, whose son would not be his own..."<sup>13</sup> Saleem does not achieve acceptance into society that is common of the traditional Bildungsroman. His fiancée, Padma is a lowly factory worker and his son really belongs to Shiva. His position at Braganza Pickles allows him to live on the peripheries of society, granting him power only through being the sole man among a factory of female laborers. In her essay on the Bildungsroman within *Midnight's Children*, Dubravka Juraga also argues that Saleem fails to achieve the ultimate belonging characteristic of the Bildungsroman, "despite his self-proclaimed status as an allegory of India and despite his purported telepathic contact with individuals from all aspects of Indian society, Sinai never experiences any real sense of belonging to any group".<sup>14</sup> Juraga continues, her critique providing evidence as to how Saleem's final position of solitude disrupts the Bildungsroman genre; Juraga asserts:

Read as a Bildungsroman, Sinai's story is really the story of one failed effort after another to incorporate into some viable community, whether it be his family, the Midnight's Children Conference, the Pakistani Army, or the Communist Party. Saleem, however, never feels at home anywhere, especially within the imagined community of the Indian nation.<sup>15</sup>

Juraga's interpretation highlights a key element to the resolution of the Bildungsroman novel, Saleem cannot conform to the genre completely if he does not find a place within a community that reflects his overall acceptance in society. Saleem's position on the fringes of society does not qualify as acceptance but avoidance, his imitation family—a son who is not his son and a fiancée who is also an employee—comprise a weak imitation of community.

Even more than Saleem's failure to assimilate into society, Saleem's lack of personal understanding at the end of *Midnight's Children* contradicts the Bildungsroman. He lacks a concrete sense of himself, both his biological and adoptive family are missing or dead, his only connection to history stems from his broken memories. Being a child of midnight has not given him identity, but robbed him of it. Saleem cannot imagine his future without his vision being swallowed by fears of being lost within the multitudes. This is evident when Saleem describes the wedding that will take place between him and Padma. Saleem first sees every figure from his past; gradually the crowd grows, drowning him beneath a sea of bodies. Saleem illustrates:

They will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his.... 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.<sup>16</sup>

This final scene in *Midnight's Children* solidifies the impossibility for Saleem to serve as the voice to India's narrative. He has been sucked into the multitudes, his own identity crushed under millions of other stories within India. Saleem's desire to unite the voices of India within his mind drowns out his own narrative; his failure to form his own narrative ultimately precluding Saleem's life from conforming to the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century Bildungsroman.

#### 4. Fragmented Identity, Fragmented History

The fragmentation of India's narrative and Saleem's identity is also evident through Saleem's incongruous memory of history. Though Saleem seemingly embodies the nation, he is unable to reconcile truth from fiction in the narrative of India's past. His inconsistent memory offers an inaccurate account of India's history, lending doubt to his ability to serve as national narrator; he is unable to even correctly describe the day Gandhi was assassinated, a pivotal moment in India's history. Saleem explains, "I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date".<sup>17</sup> Saleem's concept of history is blurred; his quest to locate meaning in his life fogs his ability for accurate recollection of past events. After realizing his mistake, Saleem questions his own inability to serve as narrator; stating, "Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in the central role?".<sup>18</sup> Saleem's subjective narrative clouds his ability to objectively describe historical events. Saleem's history of India will forever depend on his memory. This subjective history is unavoidable for a singular person, but becomes problematic when an individual attempts to voice a false history of the entire nation. Saleem's inability to remember the events of India's history accurately is reflective of the limited perspective from which national narratives are typically presented. Saleem, unlike everyone else, is capable of understanding multiple realities. Even with his unique history, however, Saleem gets the nation's history wrong. In the introduction to a collection of essays focusing on national narratives in postcolonial writing, Vilashini Cooppan highlights, "The Indian history that *Midnight's Children* remembers and that which it forgets suggest that nations are made in the movements of memory, collectively imagined and selectively and individually idealized".<sup>19</sup> Saleem's inability to recount an accurate history of India suggests the fragmentation of India itself. Saleem, as India, cannot provide an objective view of the nation, proving that even a man with the ability to hear the stories of everyone in India cannot adequately swallow the entire nation's story.

Even if Saleem were able to accurately voice India's history, it would be a limited view of India's past. The history that *Midnight's Children* depicts is filtered twofold, once by Saleem's limited memory and again by Stanley Wolpert's, *A New History of India*, which Rushdie used when writing *Midnight's Children*. Wolpert's history is written by an American for a western audience. Meant to describe the political events that characterized the nation, *A New History of India* lacks diverse perspectives of the nation's past. In his essay, "*Midnight's Children: And the Allegory of History*", Neil Ten Kortenaar agrees that Wolpert's account provides a very limited view of India's history, focusing mostly on the powerful figures and overlooking the subaltern of India. Kortenaar explains, "Indian history in texts such as Wolpert's is political history, the story of the nation made by middle-class nationalist politicians, and it has a well defined narrative form: established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events".<sup>20</sup> The perspective of India's history in the novel comes from a very small portion of India's population. Saleem has transcended his upper-class life on Methwold's Estates, living among soldiers in Pakistan and magicians in the ghetto. In spite of this, he cannot move beyond his subjective view of India's history, a move that would characterize the epiphany necessary to the Bildungsroman.

Ultimately, the novel is not a narration of history, but rather the story of a young man's search for identity— an impossible feat in postmodern society. The novel's basis in Saleem's personal journey does not negate its resonance with the struggle of the nation, however. In her essay, "The Mirror of Us All": *Midnight's Children* and Twentieth-Century Bildungsroman, Dubravka Jurgaga contends that India's history is merely a backdrop for Saleem's coming of age story. She argues that by using the Bildungsroman, *Midnight's Children* reenacts the colonial encounter, emphasizing the fact that the "hybridity" of cultures was contrived by brute force, and not mutual agreement. Suggesting that the Bildungsroman cannot stand alongside the Indian novel, Juraga argues, "Rushdie's text is fundamentally a Western one that has been elaborately tricked out with ornamentation derived from Indian culture. . . . In *Midnight's Children*, India is not linked to the West as part of a hybrid, cosmopolitan global culture; it is merely a colorful stage setting on which Saleem Sinai can act out his thoroughly Western postmodern angst".<sup>21</sup> Saleem's search for identity proves difficult in a postmodern and post-independence India. Juraga's argument is valid in that the Bildungsroman form is absurd in the context of a postcolonial nation like India. *Midnight's Children*, through the character of Saleem, shows that the end result of growing up is not meaning and personal unification, but survival.

Yet, Juraga is incorrect to say that India is a mere backdrop for Saleem's struggle. Rather, India is a character in the novel; as a character India's struggle for unified identity will be similarly fruitless.

## 5. Conclusion

Saleem's disappointment serves as a cautionary tale for the plight to construct a national narrative. Even the most comprehensive of narrators will undoubtedly fail to capture every story within a nation. The subaltern voices will fall through the cracks, leaving a narrative that focuses on the wealthy and powerful. Ultimately, *Midnight's Children* is the story of Saleem's life from birth to middle-age and effort to find his own meaning hidden within the past. Saleem's failure is inevitable because he cannot find an explanation in a meaningless world. By dismantling the Bildungsroman, Rushdie shows, through Saleem, the absurdity of a completely unified self. Through India, Saleem's postmodern problem of total understanding is magnified. Saleem's struggle for definitive knowledge of his own identity and place in society is a microcosm of the impossibility for a collective view of a nation's history or a national narrative.

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