
Neither Nature, Nor Nurture: How Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* Defies Genealogy Through Absurdity

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Abstract

*The human tendency to search for one's biological roots through the study of genealogy can be observed in multiple discourses, in reality as well as in literature. Many traditional and patrilinear views of historiography and the idea of "betterness" have led to a constant battle between communities, social classes and groups on various bases, where each group strives to prove their superiority. The harmful results of such discourse have manifested in various ways, the biggest example of which is the tragedy of the holocaust. The belief that one's race is superior to the other because of genetics has also been termed "Social Darwinism", a misappropriation derived from Charles Darwin's theory about the "survival of the fittest." In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* there are constant references to genealogy and the importance of one's roots. However, the text is also pervaded by an absurdity, reflected through the narrator's unreliability as well as the nonsensical and magical-realist events in the novel. In this paper, I argue that Rushdie uses absurdity to subvert traditional ideas of genealogy, historiography and cultural superiority. The objective of this study is to examine the ways in which Rushdie's novel defies not only the personal genealogy of the protagonist, but also the genealogy of the nation through the formation of a "national allegory". I present an analysis of the novel through the lens of the Subaltern Studies group, and discuss how Rushdie's writing dislocates the hegemonic discourse in multiple ways, by ultimately attacking the process of "meaning-making".*

Keywords: Salman Rushdie; Genealogy; *Midnight's Children*; Postcolonialism; Subaltern Studies;

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Publication Details:

Article Received: December 25, 2020

Article Published: June 15, 2021

Article DOI: 10.53057/irls/2021.3.1.1

Journal DOI: 10.53057/irls

Recommended citation:

Raturi, V. (2021). Neither Nature, Nor Nurture: How Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* Defies Genealogy Through Absurdity. *International Review of Literary Studies*, 3(1), 1-8.

Retrieved from <https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls>

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Introduction

In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus defined ‘absurdity’ as the discomfort which results from a face-to-face encounter between the meaning-searching man and irrational, meaningless reality. Throughout history, humans have found ways to avoid this absurdity and cling to contrived notions of ‘meaning’. These attempts have resulted in an obsession with genealogy and heritage, on personal as well as global scales. Genealogy is often misused by socially dominant groups as a way to justify their apparent superiority and instil, enact and maintain racist policies. Groups ranging from the Brahmin caste in India to the Nazis of the Third Reich have justified their beliefs of racial superiority using this argument. However, the scientific answer to the question ‘Nature or Nurture?’ indicates that intelligence and talent are products of nature as well as nurture, but never of genetic endowment alone. This paper analyses how the myth of genealogy – that is, the supposed purity and superiority associated with genetics – is destabilized in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

Midnight’s Children is about Saleem Sinai, who is one of the thousand and one children born around midnight on the day of Indian independence. Though all of them have supernatural abilities, Saleem believes in his superiority because he was born at the exact stroke of midnight. He sees himself as the personification of India. Born in a wealthy family which resides in the old mansion of British administrator William Methwold, Saleem gives his genealogy extreme importance. However, the readers soon find that Mary Pereira, a mid-wife at the nursing home where Saleem was born, had switched two babies – Saleem and Shiva, both born at midnight. Saleem’s biological parents, then, are supposedly Wee Willie Winkie (a poor jester) and his wife, Vanita. But, as the plot unfolds further, it is revealed that William Methwold, with whom Saleem’s mother Vanita had had an intimate moment, is Saleem’s biological father.

I examine Salman Rushdie’s use of a crucial plot-twist – that is, the momentous change-of-name-tags at the magical midnight hour – as a way of creating alternative realities. Mary Pereira’s random act of switching the two infants at birth renders Saleem’s frenetic search for purpose and significance redundant. It thus decentres identity and alludes to a wider sense of the meaninglessness of inheritance, and, more broadly, written History. I also argue that Rushdie draws on Frederic Jameson’s assertion that all third-world texts can be read as “national allegories” (Jameson 69). While the Jamesonian generalization of “third world texts” is controversial, Rushdie’s novel is a national allegory with individual significance. It fictionalizes the idea of a nation while simultaneously creating contradictory national histories and is accompanied by a personal, postmodern allegory that resists meaning altogether. I analyze Rushdie’s references to the bloodline-focused fabrications of post-Independence India, as reflected through narrator Saleem Sinai’s search for his own roots. Drawing upon absurd, postmodern, and postcolonial theories along with social Darwinism and discourse creation, I trace the trajectory of absurdism in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, arguing that Rushdie’s novel uses absurdity to defy genealogy and traditional historiography.

A Fear of Absurdity, A Search for Meaning

In the opening chapter of *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem Sinai, the narrator of this fantastical autobiography reveals his fear of absurdity – “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning-yes, meaning-something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (Rushdie 4). The next hundred pages of the story Sinai chooses to narrate are centered around his origins – or to be precise, his apparent origins. In a symbolically important move, Saleem is born at the stroke of midnight the day India gained independence from Britain. His parallel birth alongside the emergence of independent India “mysteriously handcuffs” him to history, making his life “embroiled in Fate” (Rushdie 3). The Prime Minister writes a welcome letter to him, *sadhus* cryptically prophesy his birth, he is endowed with supernatural powers and is assured of his importance in the twin narrative of the nation’s development along with his. Within this hubbub of seemingly connected events, Saleem’s attempts at understanding his genealogy and his desperate grappling for reason go hand-in-hand. He

sees himself as an allegory of the nation – with a face shaped like the map of India, he is India’s chronicler. He grows in absurd proportions when the nation’s growth spurts and disintegrates through fissured skin when the nation’s fabric starts to weaken. The typically postmodern sense of a fragmented personal, as well as political identity, chases Sinai throughout his life, and in his attempt to escape these horrors he holds on tightly to his past.

With the motive of proving his – and his nation’s – significance, Saleem dives into his familial history, using genealogy as a vehicle for producing meaning. Thus, one entire fifth of the novel is concerned with tracing Saleem Sinai’s line of descent, beginning from his maternal grandfather, Aadam Aziz’s story. Indira Karamcheti (82) has illustrated how Saleem reaches as far back as the Genesis to create his identity – The Vale of Kashmir is seen as the Garden of Eden and Aadam Aziz’s name as a distortion of the biblical Adam. Rushdie, by using this biblical subtext is inviting the audience to believe in Saleem Sinai’s story of genesis. When the boatman Tai insists on Aziz’s abnormally large nose sheltering dynasties – “There’d be no mistake whose brood they were” – Rushdie misleads the reader by emphasizing the importance of genetics yet again, foregrounding dynasty, tradition, empire, origin, and bloodlines in his narrative (Rushdie 8). Rushdie presents Saleem Sinai’s line of descent as something Sinai treasures and takes pride in. And with one plot twist, he shatters this image.

Lineage, pedigree, and fictitious bloodlines leak into Rushdie’s narrative through various other routes. Ilse-Oksar-Ingrid-Heidelberg’s admiration of Vasco da Gama and their belief that “he was somehow the invention of their ancestors” (Rushdie 6) alienates Aadam Aziz. Ahmed Sinai lies to William Methwold about his royal Mughal pedigree, demonstrating that “he, too, longed for fictional ancestors” (106). Later in the novel, Saleem’s Uncle Mustapha is found filling registers with the “greatest” family trees of India (546). He is rivaled by a priest in Haridwar who has memorized the entire genealogy of India’s Brahmin clans. These instances, woven into the story at various stages, demonstrate an obsession with ancestry borne from desperation to provide evidence for one’s superiority. Origins are a contested topic for religions, castes, genders, and races. Those who see Saleem Sinai as a literalized metaphor of India, like Neil Ten Kortenaar (48) have also commented upon the nation’s imagined genealogy. Is the nation the grandchild, as many believed, of Nehru – who is so like Aadam Aziz in his politics, roots, and education? The voluminously disputed legacy of the nation and the significance of ‘birth’ in *Midnight’s Children* are thus interlinked.

Expanding on the idea of “national allegory”, Timothy Brennan’s reading of *Midnight’s Children* highlights the historically determined idea of a nation, tracing it back to its root word ‘natio’ – Latin for ‘born’. The nationalist ideal, then, is to place one’s country in an “immemorial past” whose “arbitrariness cannot be questioned” (Brennan 2). Benedict Anderson’s notion of all nations being *Imagined Communities* interprets meaning-making ideas as redemptions from “the everyday fatalities of existence”, thus rooting humans to a sense of community (Anderson 46). The importance given to the idea of a nation can be linked with the human desperation to locate the history of their family, and the desire to “immortalize and retain the past” (Carroll 149). Comparing man’s tracing of his lineage to a tree that finds a sense of well-being through its roots, Nietzsche identifies the genealogical urge as a means to “know oneself in a manner not entirely arbitrary and accidental” (16). These readings recognize the isomorphism between the personal and national search for meaning, both rooted in the process of denying absurdities and finding significance in a senseless world. Benedict Anderson believed that novels, by mimicking the structure of the nation, propagated the notion of “imagined communities” to larger audiences (Anderson 11). Rushdie uses the same imitative art of the novel to resist hegemonies by creating intentionally confusing and elaborately intertwined hermeneutics for his novel. Thus, Rushdie’s deference of meaning and the peripheralizing of genealogy stem concomitantly from these textualities.

The novel suggests that the Indian nation was passed from the hands of one brand of genealogically obsessed rulers to another. While the colonial rulers had royal significances attached to bloodlines, the people of India also fostered ancestral obsessions. The imperial understanding of history and genealogy imposed upon Indians gave way to yet another traditional, patriarchal concept

of lineage. Aruna Srivastava (63) notes that by choosing to start the novel with his beginnings Saleem subscribes himself to the conventional format of history. However, as the story's structure and narration gain complexity, Sinai escapes the linearity of conventional storytelling, or "what-happened-next-ism" (Rushdie 39). These textual methods subvert the traditional, inextricably entwined concepts of history and meaning-making. With this subversion, the narration and plot of *Midnight's Children* resist the cultural imperialism which had penetrated the essence of the nation. Cultural heritage, which had been disguised as a necessity by traditionalists, is revealed to be merely contingent. The genealogy question in Rushdie's novel is thus inevitably tied with these historical contestations, counter-hegemonies, and the overall hereditarian ethos of the time.

Inevitable Absurdity

After creating a setting where genealogy is so adored, Rushdie reveals that Saleem Sinai is thrice removed from his biological lineage. Firstly, he is not the biological child of Ahmed and Amina Sinai or the grandchild of Aadam Aziz. His biological parents are supposedly Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita. Yet, Saleem has not inherited his disproportionate nose or Kashmiri-sky blue eyes from Winkie, but from William Methwold, whose irresistible center-parting (which is later revealed to be yet another deception) leads to an intimate moment between him and Vanita. Lastly, the unreliability of Rushdie's narrator adds the third layer of distance between Saleem and his true lineage. Since Mary Pereira never knew about the apparent affair between Methwold and Vanita, Saleem can be interpreted to have, as the storyteller in charge, constructed his history using tools of retelling and reordering.

The incongruence of Rushdie's narrative captures the chaotic essence of history and the meaninglessness of purity. Rushdie warns us through Saleem's recurring and false historical anecdotes that "Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small" (*IH* 24). Neil Ten Kortenaar argues that before the massive revelation about Saleem Sinai's lineage, before "the account of the baby switch makes nonsense of all genealogy" (48), Rushdie had already invalidated all notions of inheritance. Rushdie's narrative distorts the line between illusion and reality, making it an "absurdist illusion" (Birch 2). Saleem's genealogy can be seen as the simulacrum – defined by postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard as "hyperreal", a simulation of a simulation (1-2). An absurdity permeates the novel through the ink of its narrator, creating a gulf between the meaningful history Sinai wishes to fabricate and the meaningless reality the world offers him, making Rushdie's world reality of layered deceptions. Rushdie's is a world where what seems to matter the most turns out to be a mere illusion– it is the world where Godot does not arrive, where Sisyphus remains entrapped in the circularity of his life. It is a postcolonial reflection of the real happenstances of his time. It is the world where Saleem, who is desperate to find the reason – "The thing is, we must be here for a purpose, don't you think? I mean, there has to be a reason, don't you agree?" – turns out to be searching in vain, his entire motive built upon a history which is illusory (*MC* 306). Saleem embodies the man Albert Camus had described as standing "face to face with the irrational" and feeling within him his "longing for reason" (22). And thus, the absurd is born – from "the confrontation of the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 22). This arbitrary, unreasonable ethos is better encapsulated in Shiva's reply to Saleem's attempts at meaning-making:

'Rich kid,' Shiva yelled, 'you don't know one damn thing! What purpose, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, Yara? For what reason you're rich and I'm poor? Where's the reason in starving, man? God knows how many millions of damn fools living in this country, man, and you think there's a purpose! Man, I'll tell you-you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That's reason, rich boy. Everything else is only mother-sleeping wind!' (*Midnight's Children* 306)

Rushdie's "chutnification" (*MC* 204) of histories and realities is a discursive method to highlight the absence of meaning – the novel's perforated sheet, if you will – and the presence of anxiety and confusion in a postcolonial environment. The absurdism establishes itself from the beginning, as the starting point of the story chosen to be narrated by Saleem Sinai. The Existentialist thinker Jean Paul-Sartre wrote in his memoir, *Words*, about the sudden way in which atheism dawned upon him. While

waiting for his friends to join him on his way to school, he started to think of the Almighty. “Immediately He tumbled into the blue and disappeared without giving any explanation. He doesn’t exist, I said to myself with polite surprise, and I thought the matter was settled” (Sartre 251). Aadam Aziz receives a similar enlightenment one Kashmiri morning as he strikes his nose on a tussock of earth and decides “never again to kiss earth for any man or god” (MC 4). Disoriented by the absurdity of his culturally dislocated existence, Aziz is “knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve” (6). Both these existential moments are borne out of an encounter with absurdism – the realization that life is “irrational, illogical, incongruous, and without reason” (Esslin xix). By highlighting the meaninglessness of the search for a rooted identity, Rushdie acknowledges the whimsicality of a time when the imprints of imperialism and the implosions of autonomy reduced life to a fortuitous game of snakes and ladders.

This anchorless lack of coherence can be connected to defiance of traditional historiography, which along with genealogy becomes what Roland Barthes had called “myth” – that which is widely accepted as the truth and made to seem natural but is a formulation (Barthes 106). Rushdie deconstructs the mythical speech of conventionality by highlighting the instability of narration and unveiling multiple illusions, thus devaluing traditional histories. By purposefully misremembering and misreading history, Rushdie creates alternative realities for political and national events. David Birch (6) has interpreted this as Rushdie’s way of highlighting the “aleatory”, or random nature of language and discourse. These alternative realities birth multiple perspectives, opening up the creative space to account for subjectivity as well as absurdity. This space in turn makes the way for Saleem to choose his lineage by the means of his narration. The “simulacrum” of his genealogy thus denies the possibility of a single, real origin by employing absurdism on a personal as well as national level.

Social Darwinisms Defeated

To view Rushdie’s process of decentring in its entirety, it is integral to understand the extent to which the misconceptions regarding “better genetics” and “superiority” have supported unequal social realities. When Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* was first published in 1859, his ground-breaking evolutionary research challenged many hegemonies. Darwin proved that human beings share apes as their common ancestors and have evolved through centuries into their current form. Darwinism proposes the “natural selection” of some organisms over others, depending on their level of dependency and adaptation to their environment. Darwin’s usage of the phrase “survival of the fittest” referred to the process of natural selection. However, the laws of nature delineated by Darwin were misappropriated to include hierarchical social laws by “Social Darwinists” (Drouard 3223). Those who enjoyed positions of social power turned natural selection into an artificial selection of the “fittest”—selected using their own fairly arbitrary scales. They used eugenics, the process of breeding the “more suitable races or stains of blood”, enabling them to make their twisted notions a reality (Galton 17). Social Darwinism and eugenics became intertwined through their shared foundational and highly false idea that some types of humans are hereditarily superior to others. These ideas formed the basis for proving the merits of oppressive systems like imperialism, slavery, and the caste system.

Contextualizing these ideas within the socio-political realities of post-independence India gives way to two foundational types of Social Darwinism. The first is the colonial type, which justifies imperialism by claiming that the British are racially superior to those they colonize. The other is the domestic type, consisting of the local fabric of India where hegemonies and hierarchies exist based on religions, castes, classes, and genders. Moreover, Social Darwinism can also be applied to ethnocentrism – or the belief that a certain culture is the “proper” one – observed in Western literature. Many cultural theorists believed in racial superiority in terms of mental capacity and inborn talent. Matthew Arnold famously described culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world”, implying that those outside the realm of Western high culture are incapable of producing anything meaningful (Arnold 7). He accounted for his elitist racism with the help of social Darwinism – “Science has now made visible to everybody the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in race” (Arnold 141). Therefore, when Rushdie uses his plot and narration as a way of subversion, it resists social hierarchies and hegemonies by creating discursive spaces in literal and literary ways.

On the literal front, the entire genealogical build-up of the novel dissolves following the discovery that Saleem has not biologically descended from Aadam. It is an affront to Social Darwinists who cite their ancestry as justification for their supposed social superiority, whether concerning race, caste, gender, or class. The absurd arbitrariness of life is at the core of the senselessness that drives this major counter-hegemony. Scientific research in the field of genealogy has now provided more sources to thwart the many Social Darwinisms. Recent scholarship has shown that family trees are susceptible to many mistakes and have a high chance of being erroneous (Lents n.p.). Rushdie's discourse-creation in *Midnight's Children* can then be seen as a postmodernist de-centering which reflects reality – that the “truth” is an ambiguous concept, and “meaning” is merely a cycle of signifiers. Saleem was looking for meaning through his ancestral roots in a world which refuses to provide any coherence and is susceptible to many errors. The fictional fact that Saleem could have been raised in the economically backward conditions that Shiva was, but landed up in an elite, upper-class household instead, is indicative of the indeterminate nature of reality.

In addition to Rushdie's method of detaching his storytelling from traditional forms of historicity, the use of absurdity in the novel can also be interpreted through the postcolonial lens of subaltern studies. The term “subaltern”, conceived by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, refers to the people who are oppressed under the hegemony of a powerful class. Ubaraj Kotwal argues that Rushdie makes the “subaltern”, whose speech is typically denied in traditional scenarios, speak through his novel (Kotwal 11). The major elite-subaltern binary in the novel is that of Saleem and Shiva. With strokes of absurdity, Rushdie's novel constantly witnesses switches in the positionalities of these characters. Shiva, for example, is in a far more privileged position after the Emergency, while Saleem's life deteriorates. The elite and the subaltern are redefined with every proceeding chapter, thus questioning the very basis of these binaries. Moreover, what Subalternists describe as the “irrationality” of the subaltern is the very tenet which binds the novel (Prakash 291). Irrationality is the major language of the book, brought to the center from the margins. Through this irrationality and absurdity, the subaltern consciousness not only makes itself heard but also affects the elite in its “own discursive ways” (Katawal 92). The most central example is subaltern Mary Pereira's abrupt decision to switch two infants' name tags, fueled by her unrequited love for a communist.

This is where *Midnight's Children's* absurdism meets “magical realism” – storytelling where the realism of the modern world is peppered with inexplicable magical elements. Though the magical realism movement emerged from 20th century Latin-American literature, the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has identified it as the “literary language of the postcolonial world” (Bhabha 6). This is because magical literary language is a result of the “improbable juxtapositions” of modern life with a history of “conquest, enslavement and colonization” (Carpentier 75). Usually, magical realism dismantles the hierarchies from below, which is what *Midnight's Children* do by denouncing a foundation on which hierarchical systems flourish – genealogy. Thus, the absurdism found in the content of the novel takes another form

In the context of international literature, Rushdie (being an Indian) occupied a subaltern space when he wrote *Midnight's Children*. His writing style – unapologetically brimming with vernacular references– defeats traditional notions of cultural hierarchies and ethnocentrism. Rushdie assumes the nonchalant style of writing that the British and those who have enjoyed power have always inhabited, writing without indices or explanations of cultural context. Choosing to tell elaborate, multifaceted stories like *Midnight's Children* through the subaltern pen is a form of resistance in itself. Michel Foucault writes that it is typically those inhabiting the position of power and knowledge who are capable of producing discourse (101). Rushdie creates alternative discourses in the Foucauldian sense of the term both inside and outside his text by constantly switching the positions of power and knowledge. His text denies all Social Darwinists their improper justifications by trivializing genealogy. Additionally, Rushdie opens up discursive spaces for counter-histories and counter-hegemonies through the consciousness of the subaltern. And lastly, his act of writing self-assuredly about a completely Indian context nullifies notions of Western cultural and literary supremacy. *Midnight's Children* thus becomes an exercise in defying genealogies – individual, national and international.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed *Midnight's Children's* initial obsession with genealogy, and ultimately connected the absurdity of the novel's plot to notions of heritage, dynastic politics, Social Darwinism, and ethnocentrism. I have shown that the major plot twist of the novel – the revelation that Saleem and Shiva were switched at birth – symbolizes Rushdie's discursive practices which aim to create counter-histories and counter-hegemonies. Using evidence from the novel and the critical works of cultural and literary theorists, I have shown that Rushdie's project of resistance against traditional hegemonies manifests itself in multiple ways. Bearing in mind the Barthesian idea of "myth" today, I have shown that Rushdie creates multiple counter-myths on various levels through *Midnight's Children*.

Firstly, the novel reacts to the local and colonial imperialism that was seen during the extended crisis of post-independence India. I have shown this using Fredric Jameson's idea of "national allegory" and Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities". Secondly, the novel resists traditional storytelling as it redefines the nation's history through its absurd, non-linear, and unstable narrative. Thirdly, the novel resists all notions of Social Darwinism by proving that one's intellectual predisposition, talents, and powers are as determined by chance as they are by either nature or nurture. Furthermore, Rushdie's text opens up discursive spaces (as defined by Michel Foucault) for the subaltern within the novel through innovative methods. Lastly, Rushdie destabilizes the literary and cultural power structures outside his text by writing in an unabashedly Indian context. In conclusion, the absurdism within the novel makes it possible for Rushdie to reflect the complex reality, and thus thwart all types of Social Darwinisms: personal, national, colonial, or cultural.

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