

# Children's Voices at Midnight: Can the Subaltern Speak in Rushdie's Narrativisation of History?

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## ABSTRACT

This essay deals with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* from the perspective of "narrativised history", discussing and problematising one of the most common interpretations of this novel as "magical realism", as a way of voicing the Subaltern. From a methodological point of view this is an attempt to elaborate a reflection upon the textual limits of historiography and the potentialities of "magical realist" narratives as instruments for the voicing of what Foucault called "subjected knowledges".

**Key words:** Rushdie, Subaltern History, Foucault, magical realism, narrativised history

Las voces de los hijos en la medianoche: ¿puede el subalterno *hablar* en la narrativización de la historia de Rushdie?

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo examina *Los hijos de la medianoche* de Salman Rushdie desde la perspectiva de la "historia narrativizada", abordando y problematizando una de las interpretaciones más comunes de esta novela como "realismo mágico", en cuanto forma de dar voz al subalterno. Desde un punto de vista metodológico, se trata de un intento por elaborar una reflexión sobre los límites textuales de la historiografía y las potencialidades de las narrativas "mágico-realistas" como instrumentos para dar voz a lo que Foucault llamó "los conocimientos sometidos".

**Palabras clave:** Rushdie, historia del subalterno, Foucault, realismo mágico, historia narrativizada.

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. 2. Narrativised History. 3. The Magical, the Real, the West and the Rest. 4. Are the Children of the Midnight kept in the Midnight? 5. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, although generally regarded as a work of fiction, can also be read as narrativised history. But in order to understand this historical dimension of Rushdie's writing, we will first need to explore how history and historiography have been re-defined by post-modern, post-structuralist and subaltern theorists. By examining these approaches I intend to show how we can

read *Midnight's Children* as history, and furthermore, as history that allows the subaltern to speak.

It is not my aim to argue that Rushdie *intended* to write history, but simply to look at his writing, liberated from the interpretative limits of authorial tyranny (Barthes 1977), as a piece of history, of narrativised history. From this perspective, and in alignment with the concern of looking for new ways of representing and reading history (Rao 2003), I will discuss how *Midnight's Children* could be read as subaltern history. For that purpose, I will consider the role of Rushdie's "magical realism" as a way of voicing the Subaltern by introducing what Foucault terms "local knowledges" subjected by "the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (Foucault 1980: 85). Thus, I will problematise first the notion of "magical realism", probably the most popular paradigm employed in the reading of *Midnight's Children*, and then I will explore that narrative as a potential history of the subaltern.

This paper thus purports to be a methodological reflection on the textual limits of historiography and the potentialities of the "magical realist" narrative as a tool for voicing Subaltern History. Although I will focus exclusively on Rushdie and his "Children of Midnight", the questions raised in shaping this discussion might also be applied to other narrative texts labelled as "magical realist", thus providing us with a device for the exploration of the interrelationships between narrativity and historiography and the role of "magical" narratives as a means for voicing "subjected knowledges".

## 2. NARRATIVISED HISTORY

Although conventionally regarded as two completely different genres, the close link between historiography and narration has been dealt with by a number of contemporary scholars. One of the first scholars, in recent times, to point at the narrative quality of history was Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), by arguing that "historians believe their narratives to be objective, but because it involves structure their narration cannot escape textuality" (Selden & Widdowson 1993: 152-3). The inescapable textual nature of any piece of written history exposes its narrativity, blurring genre-tied notions of fact and fiction and opening the possibility of reading all sorts of texts as potential histories. If what has conventionally been regarded as history uses the same "tropics of discourse" as what has been labelled as fiction (novels, stories and so on), we are presented with a common narrative ground for both genres. This commonality not only relativises the factuality of history, but also recovers the potential historicity of fiction.

It is worth remembering at this point that the radical division between history and literature that we find in modernity was not so rigid in the Renaissance, when the "historian was always ready to sacrifice objectivity to aesthetic coherence, to his moral aim and to the display of his own subjective creativity" (Onega 1995: 8).

However, the Platonist philosophers of the time perceived literature as morally pernicious because of its lack of objectivity and advocated the dissociation of history, the realm of fact, from literature, the realm of fiction and imagination. Nonetheless, "literature resisted separation from history by adopting historical methods [such as] the 'mirror', the 'history play' and the historical poem, in which literature and history are consciously combined" (Onega 1995: 9).

A similar obsession with objectivity led modern thinkers, like Hegel, to hierarchise different "nations" and their "minds" in relation to their apprehension of "history" and "objective reality" and to conclude that, for example, "the Hindu [...] lived as if in a dream in that he could not distinguish between himself and the objects of his knowledge" (Mitter 1977: 210). The alleged lack of objectivity of Indians resulted in the denial of their subjectivity, because they were "unconscious of [their] own individuality" (211), and therefore, placed them in a lower position in relation to Europeans. This view also contributed to consolidate the idea that Indians lacked any sense of historical consciousness, a myth that projects such as Rao et al's *Textures of Time* (2003) have come to challenge. It goes without saying that arguments of this sort paved the conceptual way to political practices of domination.

However, post-modern and post-structuralist critics have challenged the rigidity of the history/literature dichotomy by exposing both the narrative quality of history and the historical potentialities of all sorts of narrations. White's arguments have influenced New Historicism in its "parallel study of literary and non-literary texts" (Barry 2002: 174). Analogous efforts are those by Lyotard and Jameson, who claim "the need to find ways to represent [in history] that which so far has been beyond ordinary discourse" (Bowers 2004: 76) and, of course, Foucault who aimed at a recuperation of "local knowledges" marginalised by the master narratives of modernity. The Foucauldian emphasis on "local knowledges" constitutes a challenge to globalizing and systematising notions of history (Sarup 1988: 58). This theoretical practice and its refutation of the totalitarian constructs of modernity (e.g. rationality, world history) allow the voicing of a number of discursive and ideological spaces which were previously silenced or misrepresented.

Inspired by this notion of history, Rao et al have tried to draw on sources that range from "folk-epic courtly poetry (*kavya*) to variously categorised prose narratives", which were not considered history "probably because [they] are not dull enough to count as historical narrative" (Rao 2003: 3). Projects of this sort, which do not see history as a "fixed and stable genre", but acknowledge the fact that "the choice of genre or mode for historiographical purposes changes over time" (3), provide an interesting model that could also be applied to contemporary sources, like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Rao et al denounce the genre-tied notion of history as a potential instrument for denying the historical consciousness of cultures which might not have written or recorded their history in the "historical genre" (as colonial discourses largely did in India). In the same way, we might take into account recent attempts to narrativise history, to communicate historical facts in ways that do not fulfil conventional historiographical expectations.

*Midnight's Children* fits into this space of historical narrativisation because, setting aside the fact that the novel can be read as a meditation on the textuality of history (Kortenaar qtd by Bowers 2004: 79), it presents the reader with a number of historical facts from Independence and post-Independence times. Those facts have been embedded, or in Saleem Sinai's own words 'pickled', in a larger narrative, that of the "Children of Midnight". The story of these "children" and particularly of Saleem, is the filter through which we access the greater story of the Indian nation, the history of India. History is, therefore, fully and doubly narrativised, conveyed not only in the shape of a novel, but also revealed in the narratives of those who, in one way or another, participate in and embody it. Although the main characters are allegedly fictional, their context is not, and through the fictional envelope of these characters we can access historical data about post-Independence India.

Furthermore, this way of (re)presenting history, constructed from below, from the variegated subjectivities of the "Children of Midnight", resonates with the Subaltern group's concern with writing history free from the dominance of "elite historiography" (Guha 2000). The history of India is not focused on the great narrative of the nation as a unitary subject, but on the many and fragmentary subjectivities that share, almost accidentally, an unexpected sense of mutual belonging. Also, the intimate link between the story of India and the stories of the "Children of Midnight" —the fact that those narratives are almost interchangeable— makes them "the subject of history" (Gupta 2002: 108), the role that the subaltern is meant to play in their own history. Nonetheless, this connection in Rushdie's narrative that has the potential of voicing the subaltern more fully and thoroughly is what many have identified as its "magical" aspect.

The reason why I emphasize this "magical" aspect is because if it is actually reproducing the way the *Midnight's Children* see the world, Rushdie would be voicing a subaltern historical consciousness of post-Independence India. The ways of knowing and conceptualising the world that we find in *Midnight's Children* could be seen as an example of what Foucault phrases as "local knowledges", subdued and unvoiced by the great narratives of rational modernity. These are, then, subaltern ways of knowing which have been marginalised by elite knowledges. And if Rushdie were voicing those subaltern knowledges, *Midnight's Children* could be construed as a subaltern rewriting of India's modern history. But can Rushdie actually voice other ways of understanding the world and of imagining and writing history, or is he simply introducing a few "magical" elements into his narrative, as a literary artifice, in order to fulfil the expectations of a Western audience? I shall now turn to this issue, by problematising the notion of "magical realism" and its implications in a tentative subaltern reading of *Midnight's Children*.

### 3. THE MAGICAL, THE REAL, THE WEST AND THE REST

The phrase *magical realism* carries with it a number of assumptions and implications that seem relevant to my discussion of the subaltern potential of Rushdie's fiction. The first of these assumptions is that these two words are "oxymora describing the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms" (Bowers 2004: 1)<sup>1</sup>. However, this oppositional view of the term has been challenged on the grounds that "for the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the author who creates it, magic may be real, reality magical; there is no need to label them as such" (Zamora 1995: 3). In other words, what Zamora seems to be suggesting is that if the real is perceived in this particular way, there is nothing marvellous, magic or fantastic about it. The "magic" element would therefore be no more than a label imposed by an observer, exterior to the text and its context, for whom that particular way of understanding the real may appear to be "magical". Although Zamora deconstructs the oppositional dichotomy of the "magic" and the "real", she falls into another dichotomy by stating that magical realism draws on "non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation" (Zamora 1995: 3).

This view seems to be heavily influenced by an Orientalist outlook, which imagines a dubious dichotomy between a Rational West and a Mystic East. The association of the "magical" with the non-West, and the underlying assumption that the West stands for the "real", will leave a huge body of (mainly) pre-modern European literature, which is as "magical" as that of magical realism, in a problematic position. Furthermore, this second assumption, which shares the binary flavour of the first, assumes that the reality of the non-West is somehow marvellous or fantastic. This resonates with Hegel's ideas about the dream-like quality of Indian thought and art. Considering another's reality as fantastic, marvellous or magical assumes that the reality of the observing and speaking self is somehow more real. This situates that "other reality" as inferior, dream-like and fabulous. In other words, by labelling a certain reality, or a way of perceiving it, as "magical" we turn it into a subaltern (etymologically, an inferior other), a subjugated knowledge. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that the term was coined to designate certain manifestations of German post-Expressionism in the 1920s (Baker 1993: 82). It seems plausible that the oxymoronical sense of the dichotomy worked rather better in that context, than in the "non-Western" context to which the term has been extrapolated later.

Consequently, approaching *Midnight's Children* as a piece of "magical" realism does not aid my attempt to read it as subaltern history, since the very term assumes the same subjugation of world-knowledges that the subaltern project intends to

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<sup>1</sup> Bowers (2004) does not actually assume that particular dichotomy, although neither does she challenge it. She simply explains how the term was first understood.

contest. It would be interesting to learn at this point to what extent Rushdie relates to the term and to the fact that *Midnight's Children* is often read from a "magical realist" perspective. In a conversation with Fernando Galván he is asked whether "reality in the East is completely different from the reality in the West" (Galván 1984: 95) and whether that difference is the reason for the "magical realist" element in his work. Rushdie seems to carefully avoid the term "magical realism" or to elaborate on a magical difference between both realities. However, he agrees on the difference and adds that "in a society where most people believe in God [...] the miraculous is accepted at the same level as, for instance, the political" (Galván 1984: 95). This statement seems to dissolve the tight dichotomy between "the miraculous and the everyday [which] coexist on the page as the same kind of event, not to say that they are different kinds of events" (95).

This equation of the "magical" events with the "real" ones suggests that Rushdie is refusing to accept the magical/real dichotomy. By so doing he is implicitly taking both kinds of events as naturally coexistent in the discourse he is representing. If the naturality of the equation were honest, he would actually be voicing subaltern peoples and subjugated ways of knowing, but is this really the case? As I have said in the Introduction, it is not my aim to look at *Midnight's Children* blindfolded by a complete trust in authorial intention (or pretension). I will therefore continue to explore the potential subalternity of *Midnight's Children* and its problematic relationship with "magic" in the next section.

#### 4. ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE MIDNIGHT KEPT IN THE MIDNIGHT?

In the first lines of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem talks about the "benighted moment [by which] he had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (Rushdie 1981: 9). Thus, the Midnight is not just seen as the cradle of a generation but also the mark that entwines it with history and the indelible sign that enshrines its centrality within that history. In a way, it is a confirmation of its subjectivity, of its relevant role in the process of history-making. However, the foundational moment of that journey is referred to as the "benighted moment". The deliberateness implied in the term "benighted" suggests that the moment was purposely obscured or kept in the darkness. I will, therefore, use the Midnight, the benighted moment, as a metaphor for conveying the condition of subalternity, of unvoicedness. This metaphorical game with the novel's title aims to express the articulating question of my discussion: can the subaltern speak through *Midnight's Children*? Is he allowed to actually participate in the narrative or is he just mediated and ultimately confined to the Midnight?

Perhaps the first question to be asked is about the language in which Rushdie has chosen to construct his narrative. The fact that Rushdie writes in English

should not come as a surprise if we take into consideration that his entire education was English (Rugby School and King's College) and that he has lived in the United Kingdom since he was fourteen (with hardly any gaps)<sup>2</sup>. These data might question the subalternity of Rushdie's as a subject, but does it compromise his ability of voicing the subaltern as well?

Given that subaltern history has been written by highly educated scholars from mainly British and American universities, and assuming that their voicing of the subaltern is genuine<sup>3</sup>, we should not see Rushdie's education as an obstacle when looking at *Midnight's Children* as subaltern history. (Or in other words, given the fact that there might be other people sharing this critical concern, there is no point in ruling the writer out on those grounds.) Furthermore, and on this issue of English as a means of expression for Indian writers, another Indian author, Amit Chaudhuri, has said: "I don't think English is a foreign language [...] it's not obviously an Indian language in the way Bengali or Sanskrit are [but] it's a language used in India [and] it's an Indian language to me for all kinds of purposes" (Chaudhuri 2004: 225). Despite this careful qualification on the Indianness of English, Chaudhuri seems to accept English as a language of India and, therefore, not a foreign means of expression for Indians. Moreover, the whole series of the *Subaltern Studies* has also been written in English. If we were going to take that series as a reference point, there seems to be nothing problematic about voicing the subaltern in English.

Another issue to consider is the experimental complexity of *Midnight's Children*. Can such a novel be a useful means for voicing the subaltern? It seems evident that the way Rushdie constructs his narrative is very far from everyday discourse. Kortenaar sees *Midnight's Children* as an example of "historiographic metafiction", a genre characterised by its "self-reflexivity" and by attempting what Hutcheon phrases as "an ironic reworking of the past" (qtd. by Bowers 2004: 79). It cannot be ignored that post-modern writing, despite its often progressive agenda, is generally read and understood by only a few, constituting some sort of elite. The self-reflexivity and complexity of *Midnight's Children* places the novel within that space of post-modern writing, making it accessible almost exclusively to an educated few. However, if we turn again to Subaltern theory, we could say the same. Many of the writings that theorise about Subaltern subjectivity and representation, like those of Bhabha or Spivak, can only be read by scholars who feel comfortable in the abstrusity of those texts. Consequently, we cannot reject Rushdie as a potential voicer of the subaltern on the grounds of *Midnight's Children's* strong experimental flavour. On the contrary, Afzal-Khan understands Rushdie's formal complexity "as a strategy of liberation" (Afzal-Khan 1993: 143).

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<sup>2</sup> For Rushdie's biography see Liukkonen: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/rushdie.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Questioning the issue of representation of the subaltern, as Spivak does in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994), is not the aim of this essay

This critic sees an ideological purposefulness in Rushdie's experimentalism, because the writer

uses other generic forms besides myth, such as realism, the comic epic, even science fiction, but his aim is not so much to strive for a wholeness born of a pleasing commingling of genres as it is to mirror the state of confusion and alienation that defines postcolonial societies and individuals. (143)

Therefore we can even understand Rushdie's formal complexity as an instrument for voicing the "alienation" of the postcolonial condition. Azfal-Khan seems to overlook the playful, self-conscious and self-reflexive aspect of Rushdie's narrative, but he opens an interesting and significant discussion on the liberating potentialities of his formal experimentation. This view, albeit partially, certainly contributes to my attempt to read *Midnight's Children* as subaltern history.

Concerning the ironic quality of Rushdie's writing, it is worth remembering that it is not in the least un-self-conscious. Rushdie's collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands* contains one devoted to this issue: "'Errata': Or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*", where the writer provides us with what seems to be a fundamental criterion for the construction of his narrative: "whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version" (Rushdie 1991: 24). Although we can see this as part of Rushdie's post-modern play with the unreliability of narrators and narratives, we can also draw an important conclusion about history writing. By privileging the "remembered" over the "literal", he is questioning the full complexity of the so-called "literal". In other words, he is challenging the great narratives of objectivity and privileging the "mini-narratives" of subjective truth. This is a way of bringing in those unvoiced histories which did not have the support of literacy and therefore were left out of the literal. Although Rushdie does not make the connection between the literal and the literate, it seems most relevant in this context, as relevant and revealing as his favouring of the remembered.

The relevance of remembrance is further stated when Rushdie defends the centrality of Saleem's subjectivity because "his truth is too important to him to allow it to be unseated by a mere weather report. It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own" (Rushdie 1991: 25). In addition to the relativistic implications of the statement, we should appreciate its subversive dimension. Saleem is actively resisting alienation by buying into "someone else's version" of the history in which he is protagonist. He is fiercely opposing being decentered from his-story, thus embodying the empowered subaltern who has become the "subject of history".

Finally, it seems also relevant to consider who constitutes Rushdie's audience and how his audience-awareness conditions the construction of his narrative. We know that *Midnight's Children* was received and read in the West largely in terms of the magic realism paradigm. Chaudhuri, in his turn, sheds light on the Indian



reception of the novel by suggesting that “the Indian upper middle class who belong to Delhi, or Bombay, or whatever, feel the need for a Rushdie all the time” (Chaudhuri 2004: 227). Interestingly enough Chaudhuri’s approach is not that Rushdie writes for a certain public, but that there is already a certain “need” that Rushdie comes to fulfil. Therefore, from Chaudhuri’s viewpoint, Rushdie is only, to put it in economic terms, providing a supply to pre-existent demand. Even though this seems slightly crude, it is true, according to Chaudhuri, that Rushdie “speaks more to them” with his “historical narrative of Indian Independence, children at midnight, Partition” (227). On the other hand, the fact that Rushdie is read by the upper middle class does not necessarily mean that he writes exclusively to fulfil their expectations. In the same way that we should take with certain reservations an author’s remarks about his own work, we should also take with a pinch of salt those made by rival authors, such as Chaudhuri. Nonetheless it seems a matter of fact that *Midnight’s Children* is not read by the Indian subalterns but by an elite.

Does this hinder the work’s capacity to voice a subaltern history? Let me turn again to the example of the *Subaltern Studies* series, which has been read by an even narrower minority. To determine to what extent either subaltern theorists or Rushdie wrote to fulfil the expectations of their audience is quite difficult and not the aim of this paper to ascertain. However, it seems inevitable that whoever writes is in one way or another conditioned by his or her readers.

Thus *Midnight’s Children* can be read as a piece of subaltern history, since the possible arguments that could hinder that reading are also applicable to other subaltern histories. Issues such as language, formal complexity and audience are common to Rushdie’s narrative and to the narratives of the subaltern scholars. If we are to take previous writings of subaltern histories as genuine we could do the same with *Midnight’s Children*, a variegated patchwork of voices woven from a historical consciousness of post-Independence India.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have tried to show how the radical dichotomy between history and literature is a construct of modernity, non-existent in pre-Renaissance times and challenged by contemporary post-modern thinkers. The dissolution of this dichotomy allows us to read all sorts of texts as history. A particularly interesting text to be read in this way is Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Furthermore, this novel has the potential of being read as subaltern history. The “magical” elements in Rushdie’s narrative, although generally read within the magical realist paradigm that assumes the same subjugation of knowledges that Foucault denounces, can be seen as the actual voicing of subaltern ways of understanding the world.

The possibility of reading the novel as subaltern history has been further analysed by exploring the possible objections that could hinder this interpretation. By showing that these objections (language, complexity and audience) could also be applied to the Subaltern Project itself, and that this Project is one of the few reference points we have to subaltern practice, I have concluded that *Midnight's Children* can be read as subaltern history, as a manifestation of the silenced voice of the subaltern who is placed in the centre of his-story.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The spelling of *his-story* aims to reflect both the narrative and subjective standpoint from which history is dealt with in *Midnight's Children*. I am aware of how similar reflections on the narrativity of history and the general exclusion of women from it have led feminist theorists to coin the term *her-story*. However, and since the main character-narrator in *Midnight's Children* is Saleem Sinai, a man, I have used the form *his-story* without any further intention of addressing issues of gender

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