

“The Moral Fuzziness of the English Was Meteorologically Induced”: De-fetishization of Difference in Salman Rushdie

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to intervene in current postcolonial theory by contesting the primacy of the idiom of difference in postcolonial inquiries. I propose that, in both *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie demonstrates how postcoloniality is first and foremost an overdetermined inscription—that is, postcoloniality names a condition wherein the postcolonial subject has to stumble through proliferated national, cultural, and linguistic metaphors, with the putative “national allegory” being the ultimate articulation of such metaphoricity. This motif is forcefully figured in Rushdie’s novels by a haunting sameness in or of the materiality of the text and in the constant interruption of the ethos of difference.

KEY WORDS

difference, postcoloniality, Salman Rushdie, overdetermination
Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses



Wrestling with the doubleness occasioned by his immigration experience, Gibreel Farishta, the self-exiled Indian-British movie star in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, concludes that the real problem with his adopted mother country is her weather—or, her lack of heat:

When the day is not warmer than the night, when the light is not brighter than the dark, when the land is not drier than the sea, then clearly a people will lose the power to make distinctions, and commence to see everything—from political parties to sexual partners to religious beliefs—as much-the-same, nothing-to-choose, give-or-take. What folly! For truth is extreme, it is *so* and not *thus*, it is *him* and not *her*; a partisan matter, not a spectator sport. It is, in brief, *heated*. (354; emphasis in the original)¹

Gibreel then launches a (possibly imaginary) mission to tropicalize the city of London, believing that more heat will give more moral and national definition to the empire of yesteryear.

Tropical heat here names cultural difference (in its commonplace sense). The irony is that cultural difference as a master component in the former imperialist's ideological mapping is now turned into a demand from the former colonized subject. Does this mean that either in the colonial or the postcolonial discourse, cultural difference remains a commonly shared imaginary? And is the idiom of difference still a telling story in the domain of the postcolonial?

Difference, to be sure, has been a predominant conceptual axis

along which the discursivity of postcolonial considerations is established. Frantz Fanon, for instance, famously unearths the mechanism of desire in colonialist racial differentiation. Edward Said takes issue with the ideology of difference in the two-way transaction between knowledge and power in Orientalist narratives. On the other hand, Homi Bhabha construes cultural difference as a universal ambivalence and ambivalent universal, while for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the difference figured in the sexed/racialized subaltern subject names the *aporia* of representation.

I argue that the work of these prominent theorists has inspired and developed into two major trajectories of postcolonial theory. The first one, to a great extent, has absorbed the momentum of previous “empowering discourses” (feminism, ethnic studies, minority discourse) and foregrounds an identity politic facilitated by the idiom of difference and its cognates including heterogeneity, diversity, plurality, locality, and specificity.² Despite repeated criticism of the homogenizing tendency of postcolonialist practices (see, for example, McClintock 294, 302–303; and Shohat), numerous postcolonial-theory practitioners still posit the rhetoric of difference (heterogeneity of identity, plurality of subject-positions, geo-political and historical specificity) as the foremost paradigm in postcolonial theory.³

The other major trajectory is primarily predicated upon the overdetermination of postcoloniality by the colonial experience, the culture of imperialism, or, in Bhabha’s words, “the affect of hybridity” (120). As Spivak suggests in a double move which defines both postcoloniality and globality, “Post-colonial pedagogy must teach the overdetermined play of cultural value in the inscription of the socius. Such unacknowledged appropriative overdeterminations are the substance of contemporary globality” (“Foundations” 165).

Such a distinction, however, is not tantamount to suggesting that these two trajectories do not intersect. For one thing, the idiom of difference in effect also plays a decisive role in the second trajectory wherein the Derridean difference translates into key notions such as hybridity and radical singularity. Furthermore, although my working division-definition, for the sake of clarity, pins down the first trajectory

as if it pivoted merely around a commonplace sense of “difference,” I concede that progressive minority-discourse practitioners have begun to adjust their identity politics in accordance with Derrida’s signature notion—that is, they acknowledge the incommensurability of identity and seek a shift from the conventional identity politics of authenticity and representativeness to a politics of heterogeneity (see, for example, Radhakrishnan, “Ethnic”). It can even be argued that the real “mainstream” postcolonial theory prevailing at present is merely a syncretism. Aijaz Ahmad, for example, has noted that the predominant tendency in the cultural criticism of today, which he finds problematic, is “to waver constantly between the opposing polarities of cultural differentialism and cultural hybridity” (289). From a more sympathetic perspective, Stuart Hall combines the two trajectories in his deliberation on the past, present, and future of postcoloniality:

. . . while holding fast to differentiation and specificity, we cannot afford to forget the over-determining effects of the colonial moment, the “work” which its binaries were constantly required to do to *re-present* the proliferation of cultural difference and forms of life, which were always there, within the sutured and over-determined “unity” of that simplifying, over-arching binary, “the West and the Rest.” . . . We have to keep these two ends of the chain in play at the same time—over-determination and difference, condensation and dissemination—if we are not to fall into a playful deconstructionism, the fantasy of a powerless *utopia* of difference. (“When” 249; emphasis in the original)⁴

Nevertheless, my point in making the division while noting the popular syncretism is to draw attention to the fact that the idiom of difference, in the final instance, remains a definitive pivotal point in most critical paradigms in postcolonial theory. I argue that this conflation of different ramifications under the generic term “difference” only defuses the urgency of several critical problems that postcolonial theory has yet to resolve. First of all, the rhetoric of difference (especially that in use in difference-driven identity politics)

oftentimes only ends up allowing the subject-object dichotomy to become entrenched and mistaking this dichotomy for a power unevenness that can be redressed by an act of renaming. (To name someone/something a “subject” is to allocate him/her/it a power-position). Second of all, some discourses of difference emphatically invoke deconstructionist resonance while at the same time still operating within conventional identity politics, the kind of subject-object dichotomy mentioned just now being a telling example. Thirdly, the idiom of difference, for the most part, is deployed to serve discourses and practices of politics, that is, power relations involving negotiations and contestations of and for sites of signification. As a result, critical paradigms centered around the rhetoric of difference in postcolonial theory tend to neglect any non-political parameters. Or, due to the pre-history of postcolonial theory vis-à-vis the faulty universalism of Eurocentric mechanisms, postcolonial theory has fostered a repugnance for anything associated with universality.

This paper seeks to intervene in current postcolonial theory by contesting the primacy of the idiom of difference in postcolonial inquiries. I propose that, in both *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie demonstrates how postcoloniality is in effect an overdetermined inscription—that is, postcoloniality names a condition wherein the postcolonial subject has to stumble through proliferated national, cultural, and linguistic metaphors, with the putative “national allegory” being the ultimate articulation of such metaphoricity. This motif is forcefully figured in Rushdie’s novels by a haunting sameness in textual materiality and in the constant interruption of the ethos of difference. The episode of tropicalizing London cited above is only one of numerous examples of the postcolonial subject’s anxiety of (that is, over and about) difference.

How the Postcolonials Survive Numbers: *The Satanic Verses*

The Satanic Verses opens with a grave historical inquiry concerning the ideology of newness: “How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it

made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine? Is birth always a fall? Do angels have wings? Can men fly?" (SV 8). This passage not only reminds one of the promises and failures of newness in *Midnight's Children*, but also sets the tone for *The Satanic Verses*. Historical and cultural cognition in the postcolonial condition continues to pivot around the obsession with newness, the striving for difference.

The two protagonists, Indian-born Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, at some point of their lives both believe that they shall find newness in Britain. Gibreel, before relocating incognito in London, makes his way to super-stardom in India; he is best known for his portrayals of deities in a movie genre called "theologicals" (SV 157). Saladin, son of a snobbish capitalist against whom he has long held a grudge, receives his education in Britain upon his father's insistence and later chooses to embrace his adopted country with complete loyalty. In contrast to Gibreel, whose career and entire existence are marked by a visual relationship with gods (his filmic embodiments of gods and, later, his dreams of being the archangel), Saladin is a talented voice mimicker acclaimed for a television show called *Aliens*. The fates of the two begin to intertwine when the plane they take from Bombay to London (Saladin on his way back to London after a disappointing hometown visit, and Gibreel on a journey of self-exile) is hijacked and later exploded in the air. Both survive the crash, and each after his fall gradually becomes aware of the presence of another (an Other) inside him—an archangel and/or devil, these two being interchangeable. The journey towards newness, thus, is interrupted by postlapsarian twists and turns.

Their search for newness is echoed in many other episodes in the novel. Rosa Diamond, the old English lady who rescues Gibreel after his fall, was once married to an Anglo-Argentine gentleman during the Empire's declining years. Her sole reason for moving to that "immensity" called Argentina is "to be *new*" (SV 145; emphasis in the original). A more political twist to the idiom of newness is related to

Margaret Thatcher's hegemonic rule:

What she wants . . . is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old wooly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really *want*, and who know that with her, they can bloody well *get*. Nobody's ever tried to replace a whole fucking *class* before, and the amazing thing is she might just do it if they don't get her first. (*SV* 270; emphasis in the original)

Or, the most radical way to break away from oldness is to eliminate history or time outright—an idea tapped by the nameless Imam: "History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies—progress, science, rights—against which the Imam has set his face" (*SV* 210).

Nevertheless, the striving for newness, for difference, and for a radical break from the past is constantly beaten down, repressed and rendered impossible by the interpolation of repetitions or similitudes. And all this impossibility of difference has to do with postlapsarian history. It is after "the fall," literally and metaphorically, that the first symptom of sameness emerges—between Gibreel and Saladin, between the angel and the devil, between the human and the superhuman, and between the end of one history (Gibreel and Saladin's fall) and the inception of another one. As the narrator spells it out, "Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began" (*SV* 5).

Or, the authority of the original newness is constantly short-circuited by the multiple intrusions of others into the origin, including temporal interferences. Take, for instance, the dream episodes in the novel. The governing storyline, that of the modern Gibreel and Saladin, is realistically situated in Thatcherite Britain. Yet the most controversial episodes in the novel, those alluding to the

founding prophet of Islam, unfold in the twilight zone between (the rewriting of) history and the dream world of Gibreel, himself living in the twilight zone between the literal archangel, Gibreel's literal embodiment of the angel, and the dream of his embodiment of the angel. This temporal interpenetration shows how the subject lives through such an overdetermined postcoloniality with an intimacy with the sense of time. Time, in other words, is not just an abstract concept; time in effect has a solid materiality. Another major symptom of sameness is seen in the scene of naming. Gibreel bears the name of the archangel and his full name, Gibreel Farishta, literally means "Gabriel the angel." His original name, Ismail Najmuddin, only intensifies the excess of meaning: "Ismail after the child involved in the sacrifice of Ibrahim, and Najmuddin, *star of the faith*" (SV 17; emphasis in the original). The narrator's comment here poses an uncanny prophecy: "he'd given up quite a name when he took the angel's" (SV 17).⁵

The redundancy of signification in Gibreel's name will later collide with the rebellion against precise referencing occasioned by his "angelicdevilish" nature. This dubious duality of his has a literal origin, though, for his mother used to call him by the name of the devil: "his loving mother . . . has a different name for him, Shaitan, she calls him, just like Shaitan, same to same, because he has been fooling around with the tiffins to be carried into the city for the office workers' lunch . . . , has been putting Muslim meat compartments into Hindu non-veg tiffin-carriers, customers are up in arms. Little devil, she scolds, but then folds him in her arms, my little farishta, boys will be boys" (SV 91). Critic Joel Kuortti suggests reading this episode *via* what Lyotard describes as the naming ritual a parent imposes on a child: "even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him" (qtd. in Kuortti 137). Gibreel's stories, however, rewrite this "suspicion of referencing." When he begins to dream of himself becoming God's arch-messenger, Gibreel resents having such an improper proper name:

Gibreel, when he's tired, wants to murder his mother for giving him

such a damn fool nickname, *angel*, what a word, he begs *what? whom?* To be spared the dream-city of crumbling sandcastles and lions with three-tiered teeth, no more heart-washing of prophets or instructions to recite or promises of paradise, let there be an end to revelations, *finito*, *khattam-shud*. (*SV* 122; emphasis in the original)

Saladin, too, suffers from an excess of "naming." According to critic Feroza Jussawalla, possible historical references of "Saladin" (the word literally denotes "the religious savior") include Saladin of the Holy Wars, Saladin the medieval founder of Palestine, as well as the Saladin in *The Divine Comedy*, the only Muslim praised by Dante (107). Furthermore, Saladin's Anglicized family name Chamcha, shortened by himself from "Chamchawala," gives him a strong Indian rootedness. Literally meaning "a spoon," "chamcha" in Bombay slang means "groupie, camp follower, gutless, and even sometimes . . . homosexual" (*SV* 107). Rushdie himself, already employing the term in *Midnight's Children* (*MC* 467), explains the cultural connotations of "chamcha" as follows:

A chamcha . . . is, in fact, a spoon. The word is Urdu; and it also has a second meaning. Colloquially, a chamcha is a person who sucks up to powerful people, a yes-man, a sycophant. The British Empire would not have lasted a week without such collaborators among its colonized peoples. You could say that the Raj grew fat by being spoon-fed. Well, as we all know, the spoon-feeding ended, or at least ceased to be sufficiently nourishing, and the British left. But the effects of the Empire linger on. (qtd. in Aravamudan 14)

This (subversion of the) overdetermination of the signifier *qua* the name in the naming incidents is coupled with numerous naming accidents. While the stories meander through various historical times, characters from different time eras appear as namesakes, with the "original" oftentimes a historical figure. The sense of uncanniness aroused by such recurrences is more than palpable. Moreover, the

signifying matrix constituted by various formulae of signification, the literal and the allegorical among them, lurks everywhere, ready to interpolate (into) the scene of naming. Ayesha, the first wife of Muhammad (the historical founder of Islam), in one episode of the novel is the name of the favorite wife of the Prophet figure in the novel, Mahound; in another episode she becomes the mysterious Indian Muslim prophetess who leads the villagers of Titlipur (Butterfly Town) on a walking pilgrimage to Mecca across the Arabian Sea; and in yet another episode she turns into a vicious goddess who eventually is crushed by the Imam. Hind, the virulent wife of the Grandee who once defeated Mahound before the victory of Submission (the literal meaning of "Islam"), in the modern-day episodes becomes the wife of a Bangladeshi restaurant owner in London. On the other hand, the modern-day namesake of the Grandee, Abu Simbel, is an African black-power activist wrongly executed for committing a series of murders in a racially tense immigrant neighborhood in London. Gibreel's lover, Alleluia, bears the surname Cone, an alteration from Cohen made by her Jewish Polish émigré father as a protest against their victimized past under the Nazis; on the other hand, the hill where revelations dawn on Mahound is called Mount Cone. When Gibreel later persuades himself to assume the role of the archangel and take revenge on the soulless city of London, he is convinced that Alleluia, nicknamed Allie, has devolved into an embodiment of betrayal, Al-Lat, the namesake of one of the three pagan goddesses that Mahound has set out to destroy in order to establish his monotheism. Or, the proper name of London, in the tongue of outsiders, is translated into "Ellowen Deeowen" or "Babylondon," a corrupt form of Babylon, which itself is already a sign of human corruption, Babel: "There is no Proper London: not this improper city. Airstrip One, Mahagonny, Alphaville. He [Gibreel] wanders through a confusion of languages. Babel: a contraction of the Assyrian 'babilu.' 'The gate of God.' Babylondon" (SV 459).

The list can go on. These names are not necessarily "images of a single troubled mind freely associating" (Brennan 155), yet the scene of naming arguably becomes one of overwhelming obscenity. Critic

Brian Finney rightly suggests that, in the naming scene, Rushdie is using language to highlight the lack of distinction between the material world and the imaginative world (85). To be sure, Rushdie also foregrounds the very materiality of language, for naming becomes the forefront where “similitudes between the idioms of betrayal and loyalty” (Suleri 192) are acted out literally and nakedly. As mentioned above, naming in the hands of poststructuralist theorists like Lyotard signifies the floating scenario of signification, the discrepancy between the name and its referent. I want to argue that while the naming scene in *The Satanic Verses* to some extent flirts with this kind of poststructuralist reasonable doubt, it does not settle there. Instead, through all the negotiations between proper and improper naming, or between chance and historical necessity, *The Satanic Verses* points towards a realization that addresses not so much a call for difference as the reality of sameness. Naming, thus, can be seen as a postcolonial dialectical image in the Benjaminian sense, an image that helps illuminate the necessary elements of and for our historical understanding.

The questioning of difference is further enacted in the novel by way of several magic numbers. Take, for instance, the numeral 420, the flight number of the hijacked and exploded plane. One of the most popular Hindi movies produced in Bombay in the 1950s is entitled *Shri Charsawbees*, denoting “Mr. 420.” Not only is the movie referred to in *The Satanic Verses* (SV 407, 440), but the novel makes palpable the status of “Mr. 420” as a cultural index when a tune from the movie is sung by Gibreel during his fall: “‘O, my shoes are Japanese,’ Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation, ‘These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart’s Indian for all that’” (SV 5). Furthermore, section 420 in the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure, originally established by the colonial British empire, refers to “small-scare fraud and confidence tricks,” echoing the connotations of the name “Chamcha.” Indira and Sanjay Gandhi’s rule of India is also indexed because a famous graffiti at that time mocks Sanjay’s 4-point program and Indira’s 20-point program as “4+20=420” (Aravamudan

6–7). These cultural allusions to the number 420 have already appeared in *Midnight's Children* (MC 235, 259, 519).

The numerals 96 and 111 in the novel further figure in the struggle between monotheism and polytheism. According to Srinivas Aravamudan, the sura in the Qur'an that records the first revelation (when Muhammad is asked to accept Allah as the only God) is sura 96. In the novel, the year that Saladin leaves for Britain is year 1961 (which also happens to be the year Rushdie himself went to Britain for the first time in his life). The secret connotation of 1961 is immediately recognized by the narrator of the novel: "a year you could turn upside down and it would still, unlike your watch, tell the same time" (SV 42). This number, then, suggests the gnomic logic of reversibility: "1961" can also be seen as "96" surrounded by two "1"s, representing Muhammad's monotheistic hegemony (Aravamudan 15). The numeral 111, on the other hand, is first of all the number of days the airplane is under the control of hijackers. Moreover, "111" "one one one" names the repeated insistence on monotheism which the Prophet figure, Mahound, comes to represent. In one episode, Mahound rescues a slave from his master when the slave insists that there is only one God in the universe: "*One one one.*" Mahound's enemy, the Grandee, recalls this scene later and is appalled by Mahound's "terrifying singularity" (SV 102). Yet, when three onenesses stand side by side, the possibility of polytheism arises automatically. Aravamudan puts it well: "Mahound's reply to the temptation of polytheism is '*one one one,*' hinting at the paradoxical space for polytheism created by repetition of a 'one' which cannot be identical with itself, even as it alludes back to the three goddesses in question" (15–16).

Sara Suleri suggests that the hegemony of oneness is disturbed by the number "two": she notes "the text's tautological insistence on at least two central protagonists, at least two nations on the verge of crisis, at least two prophets to embody the centrality of doubt to the structure of religious discourse" (195). Suleri has sought to read religious fidelity into the novel's ostensible blasphemy in the midst of the *fatwa* controversy, yet her reading seems to flirt with the definitive oneness reading as well. For instance, she contends that Mahound stands for the

discursive necessity for a nationalist imagination of history (“the prophet figures as the one body cognizant of the intransigent idea of nation” [200]), and that “history happens with less fuss when it is impelled by the modernity of a unitary narrative” (199). Furthermore, after foregrounding the motif of doubleness, she goes on to dismiss the number “two”: “By linking his narrative to the structure of a necessary tautology, Rushdie both crucially revises the unitary myth of Islamic culture and continues that obsessive tale of Anglo-India, which can only sexualize colonial exchange in terms of an aborted homoeroticism” (195). In other words, Suleri views Rushdie’s novel as mimicking the typical homoerotic/homophobic paradigm of colonial discourse. While such an eroticized version of history can be suggestive, Suleri’s reading is coupled with a sense of nostalgia for the “singled-minded commitment to the pragmatics of prophecy” figured by Mahound (200). The episode of the satanic verses, wherein Mahound mistakes the devil’s verses for godly messages, is construed by her as “a proleptic figure for the seductions of cultural difference that obtain in the Indian subcontinent” (201). The reader may be hard-pressed to decide on the destiny of such seductions once they have been mediated by the various critical discourses.

Sparing the Finger: *Midnight’s Children*

The narrative of *Midnight’s Children* unfolds in the form of the personal memoir of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Together with one thousand other babies, Saleem is born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment when India officially becomes independent. These “prodigies” later form a special community not only because of their shared origin but also because of the magical powers with which they are all endowed. Saleem, born at the precise moment of his nation’s nativity, possesses the power of telepathy, while his virtual rival Shiva, born at the same golden moment, turns into a formidable warrior. On his tenth birthday, Saleem establishes the M.C.C. (Midnight Children’s Conference) and assumes leadership of the group of five hundred and eighty-one remaining “midnight’s children.”⁶

To be certain, *Midnight's Children* literally welcomes allegorical readings. The narrative teems with self-allegorization: "I [Saleem] had been mysteriously handcuffed to history" (*MC* 3); "India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. I have been, in my life, the living proof of the fabulous nature of this collective dream . . ." (*MC* 130); "[midnight's children] can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished . . ." (*MC* 240).

Assuming a larger-than-life attempt at the "chutnification of history" (*MC* 548), Saleem even develops a complicated nexus of relationships between history and himself, charted by the dynamic between the literal and the allegorical:

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term "modes of connection" composed of "dualistically-combined configurations" of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world.

. . . By the combination of "active" and "literal" I mean, of course, all actions of mine which directly—*literally*—affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events. . . . The union of "passive" and "metaphorical" encompasses all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected me metaphorically—for example, . . . the unavoidable connection between the infant state's attempts at rushing towards full-sized adulthood and my own early, explosive efforts at growth. . . . Next, "passive" and "literal," when hyphenated, cover all moments at which national events had a

direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family. . . . And finally there is the "mode" of the "active-metaphorical," which groups together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history. (*MC* 285–86; emphasis in the original)

If Saleem Sinai is made to see himself as "the mirror of [India]" (*MC* 143), the repository of all allegorical intentions is stored in the *event*—the event of a nation's decolonization epitomized in a child's birth. The date, August 15, 1947, serves as a differential sign that separates the present from the past. The emphasis on an ostensibly neutral date, however, undermines the "intention of newness" on the part of the postcolonial subject.

The striving for newness and for difference is the major storyline of postcolonial nation-building. As India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru makes clear in his Independence speech, cited by Saleem: "At the stroke of the midnight's hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom"; "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance . . ." (*MC* 134). What Saleem does not cite is the "striving" in Nehru's speech: "[T]he past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now. That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfill the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. . . . And so we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams."

In the novel, this striving for difference soon turns into a struggle for authenticity, embodied in the conflict between Saleem Sinai and the real son of the Sinais, Shiva, their rival claims to the most genuine pedigree. Saleem's need to be different returns to haunt him repeatedly as he discovers his own otherness. The nation that he mirrors also repeatedly fails to live up to the promise of difference. My argument is that not only does Rushdie mean to critique the obsession with difference in postcolonial national discourse, but his critique is itself

literally incorporated, in the form of identity or repetition, in his text. Throughout the novel, sameness recurs in all areas of the plot: there is repetition of the same images, recapitulation of the “morals” of previous events, the similitude between/among characters, and so on. While critics have exhaustively treated the novel’s more conspicuous allegorical aspects (that is, those allegorical elements whose interpretations are primarily anticipated and provided by the narrator-protagonist), not many critics have elaborated on the element of sameness in the novel. Nor have critics been willing to look at those seemingly meaningless moments of image accumulation. Recurring images, at first sight, come across as a rejection of singularity and a tendency towards closed-ness of historical perception. Moreover, the dazzling array of recurrent images in *Midnight’s Children* gives us an impression of a fatigued history—and a fatigued history, to some extent, implies a secondary one. Yet I will argue that the instances of sameness in the narrative of *Midnight’s Children*, along with the co-presence of the meaningful and the meaningless, form in effect a profane “illumination” of the bad side of history. The image of the finger serves as a pointed example.

The image of the finger begins its metaphorical journey with a painting of young Walter Raleigh hanging on the “sky-blue wall” of baby Saleem’s room. Neil ten Kortenaar has identified the painting in question as *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, painted in 1870 by Sir John Everett Millais (see “Ekphrasis”). In this painting, young Raleigh and another boy sit at the foot of a seasoned old fisherman, listening to accounts of the latter’s adventures abroad. The fisherman points his right index finger at the sky while he relates enchanting stories. As the adult Saleem recalls, from the very beginning his destiny is tied to this finger:

In a picture hanging on a bedroom wall, I sat beside Walter Raleigh and followed a fisherman’s pointing finger with my eyes; eyes straining at the horizon, beyond which lay—what?—my future, perhaps; my special doom, of which I was aware from the beginning . . . because the finger pointed . . . across a brief expanse

of sky-blue wall, driving my eyes towards another frame, in which my inescapable destiny hung, forever fixed under glass: here was a jumbo-sized baby-snap with its prophetic captions, and here, beside it, a letter on high-quality vellum, embossed with the seal of state—the lions of Sarnath stood above the dharma-chakra on the Prime Minister’s missive, which arrive . . . one week after my photograph appeared on the front page of the *Times of India*.

Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth!” (MC 142–43)

This picture is disturbing because, as a child, Saleem is raised totally on the model of an English boy. His mother and *ayah* would dress him up in “the attire of the English milords”—he is so stunningly “*chweel*” that one time a neighbor has to exclaim: “It’s like he’s just stepped out of the *picture*!” (142; emphasis in the original). Moreover, the fisherman’s pointing finger in the Raleigh painting serves as a link between Saleem and the city of Bombay: “because if one followed [the finger] even further, it led one out through the window, down the two-storey hillock, across Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy Pools, and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; a sea on which the sails of Koli dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun . . . an accusing finger, then, which obliged us to look at the city’s dispossessed” (MC 143–44; ellipsis in the original).⁷

There is yet another primitive association with the fisherman’s finger. Saleem’s grandfather Aadam Aziz as a young man is befriended by the boatman and storyteller, Tai, in his Kashmiri hometown: “the Boy Aadam, my grand-father-to-be, fell in love with the boatman Tai precisely because of the endless verbiage which made others think him cracked. It was magical talk . . .” (MC 10). This friendship breaks off when Tai resentfully rejects the scientific ways of life that the German-trained Aziz has brought back from abroad. Since then, Tai has refused to clean himself, and his body odors turn into “a gesture of

Raleigh painting in his childhood room, along with two other frames related to the painting. This chapter, furthermore, is entitled “The Fisherman’s Pointing Finger.”

As the same image occurs repeatedly, the narrator’s desire to allegorize only intensifies. For example, when Saleem’s mother, Amina, reads that a Bombay newspaper is offering a reward to any mother who gives birth to a baby at the exact instant of the state’s birth, “Amina’s finger, jabbing triumphantly at the page, punctuated the utter certainty of her voice. . . . Amina announced. ‘That’s going to be me’” (*MC* 113). When Saleem discovers the mysterious phone calls his mother receives from her ex-husband, the same image continues to haunt his narration: “Electricity in the air. Heat, buzzing like bees. A mantle, hanging somewhere in the sky, waiting to fall gently around my shoulders . . . somewhere, a finger reaches towards a dial; a dial whirs around and around, electrical pulses dart along cable, seven, zero, five, six, one. The telephone rings” (*MC* 189; ellipsis in the original).

The geography and gymnastics teacher in Saleem’s primary school, Emil Zagallo, always dismissing the children as “jungle-Indians, bead-lovers,” also contributes to young Saleem’s experience of violence. Zagallo’s Goanese mother having been abandoned by a decamped British shipping agent, Zagallo “was not only an ‘Anglo’ but probably a bastard as well.” However, he likes to affect a Latin accent and claims to be Peruvian. His misplaced racist furor is revealed, again, *via* a finger: “[Zagallo] hung a print of a stern, sweaty soldier in a pointy tin hat and metal pantaloons above his blackboard and had a way of stabbing a finger at it in times of stress and shouting, ‘You see heem, you savages? Thees man eez civilization! You show heem respect: he’s got a *sword!*’” (*MC* 275; emphasis in the original). The list of these invocations of the finger can go on. For example, Saleem’s younger days are accompanied by “the rosary-fingering presence of Mary Pereira [the woman who swabbed Saleem and Shiva at their birth]” (*MC* 304). At the height of Indo-Pakistani conflict, Saleem’s Muslim family moves to Pakistan, and one lingering memory of that country for Saleem is “the mosque’s long pointing finger” (*MC* 394). When air raids during the

Indo-Pakistani war in 1965 kill most of Saleem's family members, the image of the finger, uncannily, serves its purpose one more time as a ghostly object: "the fingers of the explosion reaching down down to the bottom of an almirah . . ." (*MC* 409). When Indira Gandhi (referred to as "the Widow" in the text) imposes a State of Emergency (1975–1977), Saleem is captured and castrated at the "Widow's Hostel" in Benares. Todd Kuchta suggests that Saleem's chopped finger at age eleven figures and foreshadows his later castration by the Widow, and that all these images of castration (literal and metaphorical), including that of the debased "sword" of the soldier in the "pointy tin hat and metal pantaloons," point to "the impeded maturation of Indian politics" (219).

In the midst of the postcolonial narrative's fear of sameness, as evinced in *Midnight's Children*, the trace of "culture" lingers and plays an essential part without the postcolonial subject's knowledge. Towards the end of his memoir, Saleem believes that his body is about to fall apart. At that moment, he hears his baby son utter his very first word ever, "Abracadabra." The amazed Saleem hastens to explain that "Abracadabra" is not an Indian word at all; it derives from the Jewish cabbalistic tradition and denotes the number 365: the number of days in the year, of the heavens, and of the spirits emanating from the god Abraxas (*MC* 547–48). The fact that this Indian Muslim baby begins his cultural journey into the world *via* a concept outside his "original" culture already says a lot about the inherent difference or otherness of this or any cultural tradition. Indeed, in the utterance of this series of syllables, "Abracadabra," both sense and senselessness come into play. There are a set of predetermined signifieds attached to this word, yet this series of sounds is necessarily nonsensical, that is, either undetermined (as to having sense) or overdetermined. After the Abracadabra-baby talk incident, Saleem and his son accompany Saleem's aged snake-charmer friend, Picture Singh, on a trip to challenge a younger charmer who has stolen Singh's championship title—yet another example of the struggle for "difference." On board the train, it occurs to Saleem that the sound of the train's engine resembles "A-bra-ca-da-bra." While this association reveals once again

the limitations of Saleem's imagination, which ostensibly cannot escape the need to give sense to (potentially) culturally-charged signs, that is, the drive to *interpret*, this signifying act accidentally swerves in the production of the syllables "A-bra-ca-da-bra." The associative, moderating power of the magic number melts into nothing but sounds that may help the postcolonial subject sustain a physical relationship with the world. So it seems that what faces such a subject, at the end of the day, is the need to de-fetishize those other overpowering magic numbers (e.g. "1947") inscribed in the postcolonial experience.

If, then, the instances of naming, numbering, doubling, and multiplying in *The Satanic Verses* name the ethos of sameness as the overdetermined condition of postcoloniality, the narrative teeming with proliferating iterative images in *Midnight's Children* further foregrounds (or "points to") the impossibility of breaking free from the bonds of a (post)colonial culture. One then wonders whether the postcolonial subject can ever escape from the manipulation of such a cultural "pedagogy."

NOTES

¹ Rushdie's primary works cited here, *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, will be referred to hereafter as *MC* and as *SV*.

² On postcolonialism's self-claimed congeniality to minority discourse see, for example, Bhabha's notion that the necessary performativity of postcolonial struggles depends upon minority differences: "The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (2; emphasis in the original). Or, see Stuart Hall ("Culture") and Radhakrishnan ("Ethnic"; "Postcoloniality") for their arguments regarding the

politics of identity in relation to the postcolonial. Both, for instance, conceptualize affirmative postcolonial identities as functions of ethnicity-informed identification; both emphasize the productive and creative aspects of identity formation. Radhakrishnan, in particular, emphasizes a relationship of continuity between colonialism and nationalism, and between nationalism and its "significant Other," namely the diaspora ("Postcoloniality" 753). Also see Frankenberg and Mani; Hutcheon; Mishra and Hodge 407–408; and Miyoshi.

³ See, for example, Bahri 53, 55; Goldberg; Loomba xvi, 14–19; Catherine Hall 76; Mishra 42–43; Mongia, Introduction 1–3; Radhakrishnan, "Postcoloniality" 753; Ray and Schwarz 150.

⁴ Throughout the essay, all the ellipsis points in quotations indicate my own omissions unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Spivak points out the allusion to Ismail in Melville's *Moby Dick* implicit in Gibreel's original name. She argues that this reference emphasizes the motif of male bonding in *The Satanic Verses* (*Outside* 223–24). There are, however, other more biographical readings. For example Brennan, based on friends' suggestions, maintains that the Gibreel character refers to the Bombay super movie star Amitabh Bachan (153)—a reference that does not seem necessarily useful for the understanding of the novel.

⁶ This means that four hundred and twenty midnight's children did not make it to the founding of the Midnight Children's Conference. Here is another example of "significant" numbers in Rushdie's novels. Aside from its use in *The Satanic Verses*, the numeral 420 is construed this way in *Midnight's Children*: "420 has been, since time immemorial, the numeral associated with fraud, deception and trickery" (*MC* 235).

⁷ Ten Kortenaar employs the technique of ekphrasis (verbal representation of a visual image or design) and suggests that Rushdie, with the triptych formed by the Raleigh painting, the Prime Minister's letter, and the window, instead of trying to rewrite the history implied in Millais's painting, is mainly drawing attention to the nature of the storytelling done by both the canvas and the text, by both the imperialist and the postcolonial ("Ekphrasis" 242). For Ten Kortenaar, it does not matter very much that the Sinais apparently have misread the Raleigh painting (in the sense that the parents want to put Saleem in the painting by dressing him up in Elizabethan style, and Saleem

himself literally follows the direction of the pointing finger to find an uncanny Bombay). What matters, Ten Kortenaar argues, is that such mimicry and misunderstanding disturb the colonial pedagogy by “a reading that makes nonsense of obedience” (258). Kuchta, on the other hand, reads the Raleigh painting more as an indication of India’s pseudo-independent status: “The finger serves as an allegorical object whose meaning evolves within the dialectic of Saleem’s present memory of the past. Initially a celebration of Saleem’s status as midnight’s child and thus of India’s independence, it implicitly reminds Saleem of his homeland’s colonization, its conquest by European domination and culture, and indicates India’s inability to sustain its poor. The finger thus undermines the notion of India’s complete independence from imperialism and from the problems associated with imperial rule” (217).

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