Ideological Illusionism and the Media of Illusion: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Résumé: *L'article examine, dans le texte du roman Midnight's Children de Salman Rushdie, les représentations des formes et des caractéristiques du discours idéologisé, transmis par l'intermédiaire des moyens des communication en masse les plus divers. En focalisant la charge idéologique du discours et de la communication politiques, du message propagandiste dans ses divers hypostases médiatiques, (la presse écrite, la radio, le cinéma), Rushdie exemplifie et problématise la nature des techniques de manipulation publique et de distorsion de l'information, destinées á alimenter les tensions et les divisions dans l'espace social et politique du Sous-continent Inde. L'analyse critique du discours que l'auteur pratique d'une manière comique et satirique acquiert des valences symboliques, grâce aux nombreux parallèles entre les stratégies discursives de la propagande nationaliste, communaliste ou religieuse et le monde de la magie, de l'illusion, du cirque et du carnaval. Défini souvent comme un maître du réalisme magique, Rushdie semble suggérer que les élites politiques et leur entier appareil idéologique et médiatique sont de redoutables pratiquants d'un autre type de 'réalisme magique', où les moyens linguistiques et para-linguistiques opérant dans les discours de la communication publique concourent dans la mystification et déformation de la réalité.*
Mots-clés: *discours idéologisé, techniques de manipulation, communication publique, distorsion de l'information*

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Midnight's Children (1981), Salman Rushdie's sweeping fictional representation of the postcolonial destiny of the Indian Subcontinent, has often been described as a dialogical narrative, epitomising the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogical or polyphonic novel, the inherent site of discursive multiplicity or *heteroglossia*. Rushdie's narrative discourse is indeed an echo chamber of proliferating, competing discourses and counter-discourses engaging public communication by regulating, and often manipulating, the collective perception of history, nationhood, political and social reality. The novel becomes an anatomy of discourse in all its ideational and ideological aspects – historical, nationalistic, political, social, ethnic, religious, artistic – and its various media of propagation (or propaganda, for that matter) – written, audio-visual, pictorial, photographic, theatrical, cinematic. Rushdie's metafictional self-reflexivity, often interrogating the ingenuity and legitimacy of his own narrative discourse, runs parallel with a sustained undermining and critique of all public discourses engaged in the construction of the meta-discourses of officialdom and the publicly sanctioned 'truths' which inform the meta-narratives of history and nationalism. The subliminal insidiousness of official public discourses and the sanctioning of power and ideology as discursive and meta-discursive performance can be argued to represent a major thematic strand *of Midnight's Children*.

The novel's inscription of India's narrative of nationhood focuses on the enunciation and performance of nationalistic discourse at both linguistic and paralinguistic levels. The idea of nationhood as a collective dream finds its expression not only in iterative acts or narrative constructs but is also actualised as physical performance. In *Midnight's Children*, the concept of nationhood becomes actualised and literalised as the nation's performing of its dream of itself, as a symbolic dramatic performance of multitudes enacting the discourse of nationalism about the oneness of the many. But while the traditional, iconic representations of nationhood focus on the compactness of oneness, Rushdie's depiction of the nation's spectacle foregrounds the numerousness of the many, as suggested by the repeated reference to the 'many-headed monster' in the streets and to the multiple midnight births – an image perhaps more apposite to the diversity coalesced into the new nation state. The symbolism of the childbirth scenes accompanying the moment of Independence is complemented by another image of fertility, vitality and spiritual liberation – the motley icon of carnival. The description of the streets, filled with the fertile spirit of the popular festival and its exulting crowds, illustrates the generative potential of the carnival, theorised by Bakhtin as the locus of freely assumed, fluid identities, which dislodge the status quo of

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received hierarchies and assert the multiplicitous discourses of dialogic diversity. Michael Gorra aptly remarks that not only do 'those multitudes call to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "heteroglossia" of the novel form', but *Midnight's Children* 'enacts its heteroglossia on a thematic level as well as a stylistic one' (Gorra 121). Rushdie's textual heteroglossia is primarily related to the representation of the Indian nation, whose historical, ethnic and cultural diversity cannot be reduced to the monologic block of one single discourse or emblematic image. As Gorra argues,

> No single member of the MCC can legitimately claim to represent India as a whole – not even Saleem, who writes…In a congress of different voices no one person can be fully identified with the truth. For the linguistic pluralism of the heteroglot novel is an ideological one as well, discrediting the belief that truth is one and absolute, and holding that it is instead multiple, overlapping, conflicting (Gorra 121).

Rushdie's narration of the nation's birth is also portentous of the perils awaiting the fledgling national spirit. Despite the optimistic, exultingly carnivalesque atmosphere, the recurrent image of 'the many headed monster of the crowd…the monster in the streets' (114) seems to anticipate the lurching monstrosity of communalism and dissent, now latent in the crowd's monolithic fantasy of the national construct. This climactic moment of apotheosis crowning the nationalist dream is overshadowed by Rushdie's postmodern 'ideological suspicion of ideological certainty, an acute awareness of ideology's deforming power' (Gorra 121).

Since nationalism itself has often been regarded as a new and equally monologic ideology displacing the dogma of colonialism, Rushdie retains an ambiguous vantage point in his 'attempt to engage the ideologically defined discourses of both colonialism and its ideological counterparts' (Gorra 130). Timothy Brennan sees Rushdie as the consummate 'cosmopolitan', 'in perpetual flight from a fixed national or ideological identity' and wary of any 'radical decolonization theory' (Brennan 142, 30). Gorra seems to agree that Rushdie's cautionary tales 'engage in what Brennan describes as the demythification of Third World nation-building, in a way that's sometimes held to confirm western prejudices, showing that a new nation <can act as abominably as the English did>' (Gorra 130). Moreover, it seems that India's 'many-headed monster' of a nation is ultimately an alien concept, a community previously imagined in geographical terms by the coloniser. Gorra examines the irrelevance of the national idea to the construction of collective cultural identity in postcolonial Africa and India:

> Fanon argues that in Africa the appeal to a precolonial culture is never conceived of in national terms; indeed, the nations themselves are colonial creations. Instead the appeal becomes a racial one…In India the appeal to an essential or authentic identity at first appears to work in exactly the opposite way, for it's couched not in terms of what is larger than the nation but in terms of what's smaller, of one's religious or linguistic or caste affiliations. But Fanon remains a reliable guide. In some ways India's national form does seem a colonial construct, a creation of the British, like Kenya (Gorra 138).

As Rushdie himself emphasises, British-imagined or not, and whatever the fissures of its imagination, the nation-country was 'a dream that everyone agreed to dream. And now I think there actually is a country called India' (quoted in Gorra 139). Despite its critical moments, the project of the Indian nation has proved its viability in the course of time, considering that it is 'one that's already five thousand years old' (Gorra 139).

In other words, the novel's exposure of the inherent faultlines of the national edifice, of what Bhabha calls the ambivalent articulation of the nation, can be understood as an implicit critique of the imperial legacy. Rushdie qualifies the dream of a monolithic national consciousness by his cautionary metaphor of the many-headed monster, and of 'the two, synchronous midnight births', which brings to mind the twinned births of India and Pakistan. The soothsayer's prophesy that 'there will be two heads – but you will see only one' (87), alludes to the nation's two-headed religious factionalism. Thus, the symbolism of the two births points, on the one hand, to 'the emergence of India and Pakistan, born together from a cleft womb, still as restless in relation to each other as the day they stepped into the harsh light of nationhood' (Bhabha ix). On the other hand, it suggests the ethnic and religious fracture in the body of the newborn India. This original

split is further complicated by the allegorical story of changelings, uncertain parentage and confused identity, with its sustained admonition against the relativity of human perceptions and constructs. Rushdie confronts the self-willed, ideological certainty of the national construct with the 'corresponding assumption of what Kundera describes as <the wisdom of uncertainty>' (Gorra 121). Grant comments on the symbolic weight of the trope of confused parentage: 'A good deal of critical attention has been lavished on the theme of problematic parentage in Rushdie, which is understandable, since it recurs in all his novels and is (he himself reminds us) an important circumstance in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the founding epics of India' (Grant 51).

If the collective fantasy of the national idea derives its legitimacy from the founding epic of the 'imagined community', to use Anderson's term for the myth of the nation, the fantasies induced with manipulative deliberation by the powers-that-be and their propagandistic apparatus are represented as the attendant mystifications of politically manoeuvred nationalism. Rushdie illustrates the symptoms of the displacement of reality by fantasy via his critique of the mass media, the ultimate manipulator of reality, a category from which the artist is not exempt. The mass-media are envisioned throughout the novel not as a means of mass communication, but rather of miscommunication and thought control, in which the demarcation between factuality and fictitiousness is fluid. To begin with, Saleem's delusion of identity and sense of historical mission is sparked off by a newspaper's metaphorical salutation of his arrival and by the 'metaphorical reality' of a statesman's letter. His description of his telepathic powers is 'stuck with this radio metaphor', by virtue of which he is able 'not only to broadcast my messages; but also…to act as a sort of national network' (221). When, 'consumed by the two-headed monster of revenge' (251), Saleem schemes to scourge the 'unobservant adulteress' (251) Lila Sabarmati so as 'to administer a salutary shock to [his] own mother' (254), his modern adaptation of the Hamletian dramatisation ruse takes the form of a collage of newspaper clippings. It is tellingly ironic that his 'first attempt at rearranging history' resides in 'cutting up history to suit my nefarious purposes' (252-3). His subversive game of assembling private and public drama out of headlines ridicules the media's tailoring of political and nationalist propaganda.

Later in the novel, 'while newspaper headlines marched towards war' (289), we are given headline-glimpses of the contradictory interpretations of the Indo-Chinese border conflict, of fact confusingly misrepresented by either side so as to lull public opinion into self-satisfaction. In Saleem's dystopian account of the oppressive, intellectually stagnant atmosphere of Pakistan's politics of submission to the godly state, Rushdie illustrates the swaying power of the state policy of mystification and mind-control by surrealistic images of distorted perception. Public communication becomes a pernicious instrument for bending reality to suit the current autocracy's nationalistic and religious propaganda, whose hold over collective consciousness is rendered by metaphors suggesting an alienating, surreal, or rather hyper-real, sense of public reality. The people's confusion between illusion and reality and their ideological manipulation by the powers-that-be is figured through the metaphor of the desert and its mirages:

> It was, in those days, a city of mirages; hewn from the desert, it had not wholly succeeded in destroying the desert's power…the hidden desert retained its ancient power of apparition-mongering, with the result that Karachiites had only the slipperiest of grasps on reality, and were therefore willing to turn to their leaders for advice on what was real and what was not. Beset by illusionary sand-dunes and the ghosts of ancient kings, and also by the knowledge that the name of the fate upon which the city stood meant 'submission,' my new fellow-citizens exuded the flat boiled odours of acquiescence, which were depressing to a nose which had smelt…the highly-spiced nonconformity of Bombay (299).

There is an ironic contrast between the country's fouled ethics and its religious purity. Even Saleem begins to see his impure cultural heritage, his hybrid identity and pluralist thinking as a tainting mark of otherness in a land of officialised uniformity. His self-conscious sense of impurity resembles Naipaul's representations of 'tainted' colonial subjectivity: 'in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal. But Saleem was forever tainted with Bombayness, his head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah's… I was doomed to be a misfit' (301). Saleem's inherited humanism is at odds with the surreal bigotry of Pakistan's young generation and their complicity with the system, inconceivable for their counterparts of the free world: 'not even learning could make me be a part of this country devoid

of midnight children, in which my fellow-students took out processions to demand a stricter, more Islamic society – proving that they had contrived to become the antitheses of students everywhere on earth, by demanding more-rules-not-less' (301).

In the alternative, fabricated reality of Pakistan, the exile of factuality is complete. Saleem comments with Orwellian bitterness on the falsification of reality operated by the totalitarian rule:

> Divorce between news and reality: newspapers quoted foreign economists – PAKISTAN A MODEL FOR EMERGING NATIONS – while peasants (unreported) curse the so-called 'green revolution'…while editorials praised the probity of the nation's leadership, rumours, thick as flies, mentioned Swiss bank accounts and the new American cars of the President's son. The Karachi Dawn spoke of another dawn – GOOD INDO-PAK RELATIONS JUST AROUND THE CORNER? – but, in the Rann of Kutch, yet another inadequate son was discovering a different story (323).

The insubstantiality of material construction is paralleled by the shiftiness of the country's surreal, dystopian climate of 'mirages and lies' (324). Pakistan's political history is defined as a 'story [which] does indeed end in fantasy', since its politics invites comparison with the illusionist's craft: 'travesty-of-justice...electoral-jiggery-pokery…chicanery' (324). The 'death-of-democracy' is inflicted by an 'autocratic-tyranny' (324), whose shrewd brain-washing and disinformation humbles the mystifications of the narrator: 'thus proving to me that I had been only the humblest of jugglers with facts; and that, in a country where truth is what it is constructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case' (324).

The displacement of reality by officially validated fantasy is exemplified by the fantastic press reports about the Indo-Pak border conflict over the Rann of Kutch, in which the crude reality of corruption and manipulation 'lies concealed beneath the doubly hazy air of unreality and make-believe which affected all goings-on in those days, and especially all events in the phantasmagoric Rann…so that the story I am going to tell…is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say except what we were officially told' (324). The legends propounded by the state propaganda, meant to obscure the truth about illicit fortunes and phoney wars, are debunked as alleged reports of experiences of an otherworldly, supernatural 'sorcerer's world [where] a crazy war was fought in which each side thought it saw apparitions of devils fighting alongside its foes…[the] legends of terrible things which happened in this amphibious zone, of demonic sea-beasts with glowing eyes' (325). The enormity of the state lie is revealed through the juxtaposition of diverging accounts of events, in which the fighters' phantasmal visions seem less outlandish than the blatant falsifications of the headlines: 'Hidden behind the newspaper reports – DASTARDLY INDIAN INVASION REPELLED BY OUR GALLANT BOYS – the truth about General Zulfikar became a ghostly, uncertain thing; the paying-off of border guards became, in the papers, INNOCENT SOLDERS MASSACRED BY INDIAN FAUJ' (326).

Comparing the rich potentiality of his past to the dreamlike absurdity of his present, Saleem reflects bitterly: 'and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence – that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disorientated, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies' (315). The two spatial and temporal coordinates of his young life are connected by the shared psychological reality of delusion – India is a space of both collective and individual self-delusion, shaping Saleem's self-image as a maker of history and controller of parallel realities, while Pakistan is the space of collective delusion promoted as state policy. Pakistan assails him with the fantasies of others, thus outbidding and draining his imagination. Yet, his obsessive belief in the modes of connection between private and public history survives.

Another episode concerned with the role of the media in public mystification refers to the commercialisation of 'spiritual products' proliferating on the avid Indian market of superstition and mysticism. For instance, 'the meteoric rise of India's richest guru' (261), actually the religious fraud of his childhood friend Cyrus-the-great, is revealed to have been staged with the assistance of the press. Commenting on the parallel reality of mysticism and religious sensationalism, Saleem observes: 'there are as many versions of India as there are Indians; and, when set beside Cyrus's India, my own seems almost mundane' (261). With barely concealed envy, Saleem claims to be the indirect instrument of Lord Khusro's ascent, as he provided him with 'that most precious of *Superman* comics, the one containing the frame story', thereby enabling Cyrus's fanatical mother 'to

rework and reinvent the most potent of modern myths – the legend of the coming of the superman' and thus have 'hoardings trumpeting the coming of Lord Khusro Khusrovand Bhagwan' (262). The episode farcically contradicts Saleem's earlier contention that the midnight children 'can be seen as the last throw of everything that is antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy' (197). The survival of India's mystical gullibility is also satirised for its grotesque permeability to imported Western myths and advertising.

A quintessentially Bombay novel, written by a consummate cinema lover and critic such as Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* appositely dwells on the make-believe world of Bollywood and on the cinema in general as a pre-eminent medium of representation, but also of illusion and mediated reality. His experience of cinematic discourse does not only provide Saleem with his 'filmi'-borrowed narrative gimmicks, but also constitutes the most potent metaphor for the interpenetration of fantasy and reality, discourse and image, verbal and visual discourses. As Grant opines, the cinema is also most congenial with the aspirations and hallmark of Rushdie's art: 'as we might expect, in a verbal art form that aspires to the pictorial; that strains, as Joseph Conrad urged it should, to make us *see*, it is the visual media that offer themselves most readily for metaphorical elaboration' (Grant 49). Referring to Saleem's cinematic use of the 'memory of a mildewed photograph', the critic highlights the original ploy by which the image is made to yield illusions of synaesthetic perception: 'The photograph is not simply 'described'; it is milked of its visuality to provide a soundtrack' (Grant 49). While photography remains one important medium for 'pickling memory', Grant rightly notes that 'it is film that provides more dynamic images for the novel…and it is the cinema above all that provides him with a reference point, an adaptable metaphor for the manipulation of point of view…and…the processes of perception and retrospection themselves are interpreted via the cinema screen' (Grant 49-50). In a much celebrated fragment, Saleem uses the silver screen as the primary locus where truth can be defined– the illusion of reality as the reality of illusion:

> Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusions dissolves – or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion is reality (164).

Saleem's satirical representation of reality and meaning as mediated by 'more modern forms of mediation' is sustained by references not only to the mass-media, but also to 'telecommunications generally, both as instrument and image' (Grant 48). The chapter relating Saleem's 'drainage', or his undoing as a medium of live communication, emphasises the irony that this very undoing is effected through similar means. As Grant points out, the 'instrumentality of telecommunication is underlined by the narrator himself' (Grant 48), who, in a tongue-in-cheek testament to his 'future exegetes', offers posterity the key to interpreting his destruction:

> at the very eye of the hurricane that was unleashed upon me – the sword, to switch metaphors, with which the *coup de grace* was applied – there lay a single unifying force. I refer to telecommunications. Telegrams, and after telegrams, telephones, were my undoing; generously, however, I shall accuse nobody of conspiracy; although it would be easy to believe that the controllers of communication had resolved to regain their monopoly of the nation's air-waves (287).

Grant rightly views Rushdie's own brand of communication theory and practice from a primarily technical and stylistic angle, as 'a specially important means of access to fictive plenitude…a feature that adds to the plurality of voices through which the novel is articulated' by a narrator 'disdaining old-fashioned omniscience' (Grant 47-8).

I would contend, however, that there is more to Rushdie's pastiche of the communication media than mere technical innovation and diversity and that his motives are primarily parodic and satirical. His references to the fabricated images and discourses invading the public scene expose the gross mystifications and distortions of the media. Brennan fallaciously interprets Rushdie's pastiche as a perpetration, for the benefit of the Western reader, of the very mystifications which he

sets out to criticise. Grant accuses Brennan of misreading the author's emphatically parodic imitation of the media:

> [Brennan] chooses to take Rushdie to task for his use of the media, suggesting that this is another instance of ideological compromise, a sell-out to Western values – as defined by 'the media and the market'. Rushdie is accused of 'historicizing events without processing them…in the manner of the media' and of responding to events according to 'the way in which the news and media desensitise our response'. He is seen by this critic as being complicit in the process whereby '"native" or local culture seems to be rendered meaningless by a communications network that effortlessly crosses borders and keeps an infinite stock of past artistic styles'; and – finally – as investing in that 'crossbreeding of market and media' which 'produces an inhuman blob, as faceless as it is powerful' (Grant 50).

Contesting Brennan's view of Rushdie's complicity from the inside, Grant expresses his agreement with Andrzej Gasiorek, who, 'by contrast, argues that Rushdie stands *outside* the frame of his media references, offering a critique of rather than collaboration of their operations' (Grant 50). Saleem, however, who evinces the inconstancy of the classic unreliable narrator, is as liable to re-arrange reality and prove as untrustworthy as the media. It is through this complicity, after all, that Saleem justifies his own claim to credibility, because in a world rendered more and more fantastic by the monstrosity of its mystifications, his fantasies become both understandable and excusable. Brennan actually acknowledges Rushdie's offensive position when he says that 'behind his parody of selfish civic liars is a theory about the intricate workings of an international political system…for Rushdie extends his critique to the point where 'communications' as a feature of contemporary political control comes to embrace fiction itself, including his own' (Brennan 96).

Brennan's conclusion that 'the motifs of communication and the *chamcha* come together' (Brennan 97) also warns that the Third World's neo-colonial dependence on Western technology and media translates as mimicry and indiscriminate appropriation of First World propagandistic channels and practices, often for 'nefarious purposes'. Mass manipulation as instrumented by communication technologies constitutes a major thematic concern of most of Rushdie's fiction, also pursued in *Shame*, and most penetratingly in *The Satanic Verses*, where not only the westernized Chamcha, but also the nativist Gibreel and the fundamentalist Mullah use telecommunications to propagate their visions. As Brennan contends, the narrator's role in the mystification of history is demonstrated by 'Saleem's complicity with the media, and the importance of its forms to the national message of the novel' (Brennan 97). Furthermore, the narrative's farfetched hypothesis that 'the key moments of Indian history occurred because Saleem was their agent…such that no crime within the pages of *Midnight's Children* is committed without Saleem's complicity' (Brennan 98), makes the narrator appear a master of illusion himself. In Brennan's view, 'Saleem is culprit not because he fails to resist, or because he conspires for personal gain, but rather because he proliferates *metaphor* and masters illusion ('dreams')' (Brennan 98). The critic aptly captures the protagonist's dual role when he observes that 'telecommunications' are Saleem's undoing…both as victim and as author. Far from exempting his own writing from the mind control needed to impose one's own view of the world, he treats his novel as if it were a paradigm of the state lie' (Brennan 98). Saleem undoubtedly qualifies as an unreliable narrator, a blame which he self-consciously assumes when he admits that 'errors are possible, and overstatements, and jarring alterations in tone…but I remain conscious that errors have already been made, and that…the risk of unreliability grows' (263). Flattered by Padma's unquestioning reception of his account, he rationalises his disingenuousness by invoking the artist's licence to recreate the world: 'because in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe' (263).

In this light, it is highly significant that his conference disintegrates because of his suppression of truth and manipulative exclusion of Shiva, which resembles precisely the modus operandi of the 'controllers of communication…of the nation's air-waves' (287) whom Saleem denounces:

> I was obliged to come to the conclusion that Shiva, my rival, my changeling brother, could no longer be admitted into the forum of my mind; for reasons which were, I admit, ignoble. I was afraid he would discover…the secrets of our birth. Shiva, for whom the world was things, for whom history could only be explained as the continuing struggle of oneself-against-the-crowd, would certainly

> insist on claiming his birthright; and, aghast at the very notion of my knock-kneed antagonist replacing me in the in the blue room of my childhood while I, perforce, waked morosely off the two-storey hillock to enter the northern slums; refusing to accept that the prophecy of Ramram Seth was intended for Winkie's boy, that it was to Shiva that the Prime Minister had written, and for Shiva that the fisherman pointed out to sea…I resolved that my destructive, violent alter ego should never again enter the increasingly fractious councils (274).

With the cynicism of the 'apparatuses of ideological control' (Brennan 97), Saleem banishes the truth by the mere suppression of information when he attempts 'to erect a barrier around my new knowledge, which could deny it to the Children' (274). Fearful of his own displacement from power, Saleem displaces Shiva's true significance, but his authority is called into question: 'secrecy, prevarication, high-handedness, egotism; my mind, no longer a parliament chamber, became the battleground on which they annihilated me' (289). His banishment by the children, in a burlesque reversal, where the schemer falls in his own trap, is first of all a punishment for acting as their 'big brother Saleem', an Orwellian formula. Juxtaposing the Children's desertion of the conference with the dismemberment of the Indian army by the Chinese, Saleem shuns the reality of his guilt with the same feigned innocence with which the government disclaims responsibility for the disaster: 'Gurkhas and Rajputs fled in disarray from the Chinese army; and in the upper reaches of my mind, another army was also destroyed by things – bickerings, prejudices, boredom, selfishness – which I had believed too small, too petty to have touched them' (290).

Thus, Saleem becomes a false prophet preaching in the desert. It is symbolic that Saleem's actual exile in Pakistan is juxtaposed with his banishment from the centre of the MCC, the metaphorical heart of the new India. Having exiled himself and others from truth, he reaps what he sowed. After denying Shiva his true identity, he is himself flung into the void of nonentity:

> having exiled Shiva, I found myself hurled into an exile from which I was incapable of contacting my more-than-five-hundred colleagues: I was flung across the Partition-created frontier into Pakistan…so that, exiled once more from my home, I was also exiled from the gift which was my truest birthright: the gift of the midnight children' (274).

Saleem feels punished for erecting barriers in the way of truth, thus displacing Shiva from his rightful position both in the real and the numinous world of the conference. This is only one of the many instances in the novel where all positive energies are drained by the sickening germ of faulty or broken communication, of partial or falsified representations of reality.

Ultimately, one of the novel's core themes remains that of human communication and media of representation in all their discursive forms. Its stories and central tropes serve to illustrate the disastrous effects of private and public miscommunication and misrepresentation of reality. Novelistic discourse is self-consciously legitimised as the pre-eminent discourse about discourse, whose authority of interpretation, assessment and judgement of the world's discursive practices and theories resides in its critical take on the moral validity of all discursive and meta-discursive performance of public communication.

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