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Beyond the Binary: Rorty Rushdie

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BEYOND THE BINARY: RORTY ON RUSHDIE

by
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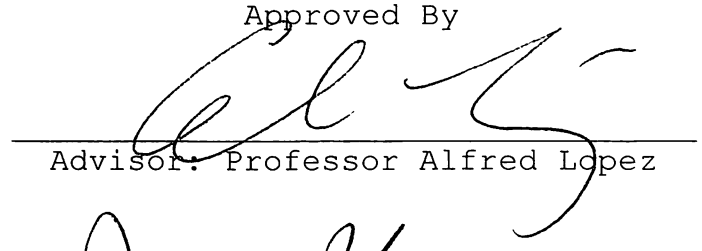

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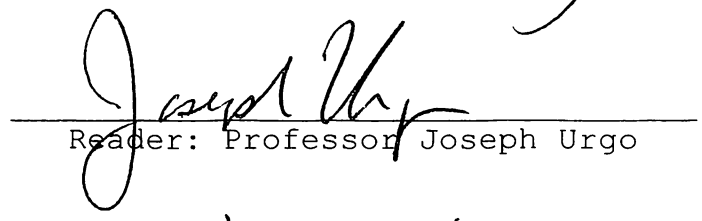

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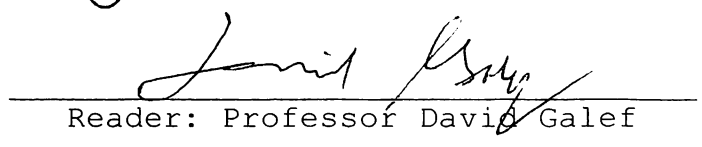

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Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a two-pronged postcolonial critique. Saleem Sinai's metanarrative of emancipation that also overhauls the postcolonial episteme.[1] While Rushdie's confrontation of native subjectivity and the epistemic structures that inhibit the native's agency are plainly rooted in the postcolonial conversation, the major theorists in the field do not offer models of opposition that properly house his intervention. The work of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak is representative of the trajectory of the strategies of discursive opposition to the employed by postcolonial theory. None of these theorists' metaphors for opposition create sufficient distance from the knowledge structures that prevent the postcolonial object from attaining his subjectivity. For this reason, I wish to turn to the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty for a theory of literature that provides an alternative way to think about and read the quest for centrality in *Midnight's Children*.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty claims that literature fulfills two purposes. It provides

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[1] See Foucault on knowledge and discourse in Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida.* (Berkeley, California, 1987) 221-56.

"illustrations of what private perfection - a self-created autonomous human life - can be like" and "gives us details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended" (*CIS* xiv, xvi). In addition, he thinks of both the narrative and aesthetics as tools that *re*describe various parts of human experience. Redescription is the central metaphor in Rortian criticism. It stresses reading the novel for descriptions of self creation and cruelty that broaden or deepen conceptions of a shared human experience. My contention is that by analyzing *Midnight's Children* in these terms the full scope of Rushdie's postcolonial critique can be seen in a different and valuable light. Cruelty, in the postcolonial context, takes the form of epistemic violence[2] and is overcome through the creative process. Rushdie's aesthetic, which relies on creating increasing epistemic instability, is a redescription of the knowledge structures key to the remission of the native to an object position. Rushdie's metanarrative should be read as a redescription of the postcolonial condition which improves on the possibilities for native agency presented by the three theorists. However, before beginning a "Rortian reading"

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[2] Foucault's concept of discursive violence in Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987) 221-56.

of the novel, a discussion of postcolonial theory is necessary.

Chapter I. The Trajectory of Postcolonial Theory

Alfred Lopez refers to the postcolonial conversation as a "baggy monster."[3] Indeed, the postcolonial approaches the complicated array of issues stemming from the aftermath and current manifestations of western empire from a variety of entry points and disciplines. One such area of concern is the question of native subjectivity: can the native overcome more than three hundred years of political, ideological, and cultural oppression in which he has been the object of colonial ambition and western discourse? Gayatri Spivak's conclusion to the title's question in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?[4]" represents the hesitant "no" put forth on the part of the three major postcolonial theorists. However, this conclusion is inconsistent with Rushdie's critique in *Midnight's Children*. The shortcoming of these theoretical interventions is their proximity to a binary of opposition.

Edward Said articulates this binary in the ground-breaking cultural study, *Orientalism*. In it, Said documents the existence of a body of western attitudes,

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[3] Alfred Lopez, *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism.* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 6.
[4] See Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: Illinois, 1988.

illustrated in literature, art, and academic research which creates the "Orient" as an object for western investigation, analysis, representation, and description. Said points out that the geographical boundaries, although not completely random, comprise almost the entirety of Asia and the near East, which includes an unbelievably diverse collection of peoples, customs, beliefs, as well as cultural and geographic formations. All these peoples and their customs were (and still are, to some extent) collected under an umbrella of assumptions that created an "oriental" character whose opposite and superior is the westerner. The binary locks the westerner in the position of discursive subject and the native as his object.

The follow-up to *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, tracks the service of these attitudes and their accompanying discursive body in the colonial empires of Europe, particularly Britain and France. Said ties the propagation of the ideological binary of opposition and its various manifestations within western cultural theory and literature to the political utility of the colonial civilizing missions. What resulted was a set of received ideas that conflated the authority of western colonial power and an orientalist western epistemology. Western descriptions of the native worked to pacify him and secure

colonial holdings while the drive to empire held oriental discourse in a position of privilege. These mutually supporting power structures buried the native under the weight of western description. He had no terms other than the colonizer's with which to describe himself.

The work of Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri C. Spivak represent three different ways to think about the opposition to this brand of western discursive dominance. Said, who concerned himself primarily with the literature of empire, offers a contrapuntal strategy for analysis. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he offers that "by looking at the different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility" (Said 18). Said sets the history of "orientalist" scholarship against-the history of empire-against nineteenth century English literature in order to facilitate a "contrapuntal" analysis. The native as an agent of his own self-representation is absent. While Said does well to point out the shortcomings and injustice of metropolitan constructs of the native, the contrapuntal does not allow him to speak for himself. As a theoretical intervention, it only increases the native visibility to

the westerner, but it offers no affirmative strategy for his emancipation from the westerner.

Homi Bhabha's metaphors for cultural interaction, mimicry and hybridity, also grant the native a limited subjectivity. He views the inherent ambivalence within the well represented (Aziz from *Passage to India*, Ralph Singh from *The Mimic Men*, and Ahmed Sinai from *Midnight's Children*) phenomenon of mimicry as a means of opposition. According to Bhabha's argument in *The Location of Culture*:

> what they [instances of colonial mimicry] share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely "rupture" the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence...The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure. (Bhabha 86)

Bhabha refers here to the danger mimicry poses to the civilizing mission of British colonial authority in India. As Said documents, the British employed missionaries and educators to propagate their cultural values in all their

colonies[5]. The result was the appearance of anglicized natives who "mimicked" their colonizers. The uncertainty Bhabha refers to exists in the mind of the colonizer who is unsure whether his partial presence reflected in the native takes the form of mimesis or mockery. The success of the civilizing mission, whose ultimate goal is full control of the native, is undermined by the mission itself because the objects it produces are living examples of the uncertainty of the desired control.

The Location of Culture also introduces Bhabha's broader notion of cultural hybridity, of which mimicry is a manifestation. Hybridity as a strategy of opposition extends from the sort of ambivalence mimesis engenders. The moment of cultural interaction that spawns the mimic man creates something that exists between the binary opposites of colonized and colonizer. The native must evaluate privileged European cultural practices from within his own framework. When the colonizer calls upon the native to learn and adopt the dominant culture, the native necessarily interprets and signifies elements of that culture differently from his colonial masters.

[5] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism.* (New York: Vinatage, 1994) 41-43.

Bhabha's humorous example of the "vegetarian Bible" illustrates this concept at work[6]. He cites the experience of a nineteenth-century Indian missionary who encounters a group of Indian Christians who believe in the Bible's ethical strength and divine authority but refuse to believe in the book's European origin and to take the sacrament. These hybrid Christians refuse communion because the Europeans eat beef, and their Hindu culture prohibits its consumption. Further, they reason, such a book could not come from the Europeans because the word of God would not be entrusted to those who eat meat. Their Christianity signifies the hybrid moment. To make the words of the European holy book and their traditional beliefs consistent the Christians of the "vegetarian Bible" must deny its origin. In doing so, they deny its power as an accomplice to the civilizing mission.

Bhabha shows that cultural interaction is not the zero-sum game Said outlines in *Culture and Imperialism.* The desire for the "vegetarian Bible" illustrates the hybrid moment's power to create unprecedented cultural formulations whose tensions grant the native agency like the "vegetarian" Christians' denial of the colonizer's

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[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture.* (London: Routledge, 1994) 102-104.

intended use of the Bible. However, this subjectivity is limited because the moment's genesis still lies in the colonial binary of opposition. Though hybridity and mimicry are metaphors for opposition that work toward the native's agency, they require the native to act only in *response* to his colonizer. Bhabha thus remands the native to a reactionary state of agency. The colonizer's position remains the favored one.

Gayatri Spivak returns to the old orientalist idea of employing a translator to speak for the native. Her "native informant"[7] is a third world intellectual whose hybrid identity allows her to represent more accurately her other postcolonial figure, the non-intellectual subaltern. The native informant substitutes a representative attitude of *darstelling* for one of *vertretung,* both of which come from Marx[8]. The first term is a form of representation that presupposes a complete understanding of its object. Indeed, Said's nineteenth century orientalist is an unabashed practitioner of *vertretung.* Spivak's native informant is able to adopt the more responsible *darstelling* because of her sensitivity to the discursive violence brought about by presumptuous colonial narrators.

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[7] Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 255-264.
[8] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Surveys in Exile.* Ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1974) 239.

Privileging *darstelling* places an emphasis on listening when forming representations thereby allowing the informant a more engaged, responsible relationship to her object. This move only creates a privileged-underprivileged distinction within the category of "native." A better means of representation is not autonomy.

Like Bhabha's means of critical opposition, Spivak's still achieves only a limited native subjectivity because her vision of postcolonial relations still holds the binary as its genesis of knowledge. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the critic concludes that the academic privilege of the native informant, which furthers the subaltern's exile in silence, is the intellectual empowerment of the prior. The limiting factor in the subjectivity question is once again linked to the binary of opposition. What liberates the native informant from the subaltern's fate is the inculcation of western knowledge that allows her to "responsibly" translate for the subaltern. Said suggests the contrapuntal in an effort to undermine the objectivity of the Western created Orient. Spivak's native informant needs the full mastery of western academia's histories and vocabularies to enter the conversation on behalf of herself and the subaltern. This means that attaining her hybrid subjectivity - and thereby a responsible representation of

the subaltern - is dependant upon access to primarily western records of literature, ethnology, philosophy, and history.

The opposition strategies of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha are representative of the direction of postcolonial thinking in terms of native subjectivity. Indeed, Albert Lopez refers to their work as "the 'Big Three Systems' of postcolonial analysis" (*PP* 23). However, none of the critics offer a model of opposition that is capable of housing Rushdie's critique in *Midnight's Children*. Said's contrapuntal, Bhabha's hybridity, and Spivak's native informant offer the native, at most, a limited subjectivity. Each adopts the binary as the definitive element of native epistemology. The native cannot speak for himself because the binary remains the genesis of postcolonial knowledge, even if it is tempered by hybridity. The native cannot wrangle free of western privilege until he has a discourse all his own. In terms of aesthetics and storyline, *Midnight's Children* does not mirror the three visions of postcolonial opposition that Said, Bhabha, and Spivak formulate. It presents an independent discourse through the redescription of the native speaker and postcolonial epistemology. Rorty's notions of what the novel is capable of showing its readers

open up this reading.

Chapter II. Rorty's Theory of Literature

Rorty's vision of the novel contextualizes Saleem's agency project as part of the creation of what he calls "human solidarity." In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty communicates great hope in the novel as an ethical agent because of its ability to depict the suffering of others, "those previously unattended," as well as the different sorts of cruelty of which the individual is capable. By reading literature with this in mind, the reader can imaginatively identify with characters that carry out and are the victims of acts of cruelty, thereby broadening awareness of such acts which, hopefully, diminishes their frequency. According to Rorty, "such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, 'they do not feel it as *we* would,' or 'there must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?'" (*CIS* xvi).

The ethical value of storytelling is based on what it allows us to know. For Rorty, literature, and especially the novel, allows us to know the "other" as one capable of the same thoughts, epiphanies, fantasies, fictions, and feelings "we" are. The conversion of the "other" into one of "us" furthers an end he identifies as human solidarity.

Rorty sees solidarity as a type of consciousness or knowledge that "is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (RORTY xvi). Solidarity is not based on something essential within the human being. Rather, it is the recognition of a shared condition. It is literature's job to describe and redescribe continually the varying elements of human experience in an effort to make the knowledge of the shared human condition more accessible to a greater number of readers.

Rorty's faith in the creative narrative's ability to facilitate solidarity grows out of his view that language, in epistemological terms, is primary, contingent and dynamic:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and

> that human languages are human creations. (RORTY 5)
>
> [Donald] Davidson lets us think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of the coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors. This analogy lets us think of "our language" - that is, of the science and culture of twentieth-century Europe - as something that took shape as a result of a great number of contingencies. (RORTY 16)

These two passages connect two important ideas: (1) truth is a human creation, and (2) it is dependent on language, which is in turn subject to the contingencies of human experience. In Rorty's view, what we know is based on what and how we describe the world. He cites Darwin, Newton, Yeats, Mill, and Nietzsche as revolutionaries, not simply in their respective fields, but in the way they described human experience, how they used language. Viewing their contributions in a historicist light casts language in the role of epistemic tool.

> What was glimpsed at the end of the eighteenth century was that anything could be made to look

> good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed…what the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. (RORTY 7)

Redescription is the key to Rorty's formulation of literature as an ethical tool. The poet (in general terms) redescribes some element(s) of the world around him so that his readers are provided with the words to think about it in a new way. Solidarity is furthered when cruelty is redescribed as such. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty cites *1984* as an example of the kind of literary redescription that broadens our ability to identify cruelty. He reads Orwell's portrayal of Winston's torturer O'Brien as a redescription of an intellectual's role in a corrupt and hypocritical dystopia. According to Rorty, O'Brien's seven-year study, pursuit, and destruction of Winston's mind illustrate that "torture is the only art form and the only intellectual discipline left" to someone of his considerable talents working in the suffocating bureaucracy and ideological environment of a Soviet style oligarchy (RORTY 180).

The significance of Orwell's redescription emerges when it is placed in historical context. *1984* allowed western readers familiar with the ideological promise of Marxism to divorce its utopian possibilities from the realities of the Soviet communism through a negative imaginative identification with O'Brien. *1984* redescribes the Soviet bureaucracy's use of the language of equality as making possible a state-sponsored monster like O'Brien.

> [In the last third of *1984*] he [Orwell] sketched an alternative scenario, one which led the *wrong* direction. He convinced us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible...he convinced us that all the intellectual and poetic gifts which had made Greek philosophy, modern science, and Romantic poetry possible might someday find employment in the Ministry of Truth. (*CIS* 175-76)
>
> ...
>
> What Orwell helps us see is that it may have *just happened* that Europe began to prize benevolent sentiments and the idea of a common humanity, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind

up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments and any such moralities (*CIS* 185).

Orwell redescribes the metaphor of proletariat equality with that of slavery and torture. Big Brother's language of equality and love is wholly ironized. Life in *1984* presents a choice between the mental bondage of the masses, in which Winston is finally enslaved, and creativity in the form of the mind-shattering torture O'Brien relishes.

Through his redescription of the intellectual, Orwell showed that utopia does not naturally follow the adoption of a language of egalitarian idealism. Rorty concludes that Orwell's disunion of these beliefs "is better thought of as a redescription of what may happen or has been happening - to be compared, not with reality, but with alternative descriptions of the same events...what Orwell did was to give us an alternative context...from which we...could describe the political history of our century" (RORTY 173). *1984* furthered solidarity, in its specific time, by giving the plausible cruelties of Communism a monstrous human face. *Midnight's Children* furthers solidarity by redescribing the postcolonial native narrator, not as someone essentially related to the binary but as a sufferer of discursive violence that, while a source of cruelty, does not rule out his subjectivity.

Chapter III. The Redescription of the Native Speaker

To say that Rushdie's novel works for solidarity is also to say that it depicts cruelty. The story of Saleem Sinai's life offers a variety of acts that could be read as cruel: for example, his letter to Commander Sabarmati divulging Lila Sabarmati's affair with Homi Catrack. Saleem blames himself for the commander's murderous response to his disclosure. The narrator turns victim following his incestuous advances toward his sister. Jamila Singer has the newly purified Saleem banished to the Pakistani army, following their family's destruction at the hands of Indian bombs. However, these acts of cruelty are not central to the purpose of the novel in the way that O'Brien's shattering of Winston's mind is to *1984*. Instead these moments in *Midnight's Children* point to something else entirely.

Saleem is born at the precise moment of India's independence from Britain. This conspicuous birth links him "indissolubly" to the fortunes of his country and thereby the history that begins at independence. And as he claims, Saleem is passive while others determine the meaning of his birth and describe his maturation. But he desires self-determination of meaning: "I must work fast,

faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (RUSHDIE 9). *Midnight's Children* holds history, a discursive entity, as its antagonist and the freedom to create meaning as its protagonist's desire. The body of *Midnight's Children* depicts the tension between his desire for centrality and his marginalization at the hands of familial and communal history, as in the case of the Sabarmati affair, or political, as in the Sundarbans.

The Sabarmati affair follows a string of instances in which Saleem is acted upon by people or forces over which he has no control. This specific sequence begins with the confirmation of his mother's 'indirect' affair with Nadir Quasim, the former Nadir Khan, continues to Emil Zagallo's hair-ripping, followed by the loss of his finger at a school dance, which leads to the discovery that he is not Ahmed and Amina Sinai's biological son, which further leads to Saleem's banishment to the home of his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia's. Upon returning home from exile, Saleem finds more bad news. His position as favored child has been taken over by his sister, and Shiva wins Saleem's place as leader of the "Midnight's Children Conference." The narrator responds by taking the initiative in more ways than one. By admitting his role as anonymous informer in

the "Sabarmati Affair," Saleem restores some sense of agency within his own narrative and in relationship to his family and history. While his father's downfall accelerates and his mother's affair continues, he can claim responsibility in a national scandal to which he is otherwise related only by proximity. The act of cutting letters and words from political headlines to create the disclosure note allows Saleem to manipulate history. The episode of the "Sabarmati Affair" is thus a power play on the part the narrator. It is his attempt to restore himself from the margin to the center of his own story. The "Kolynos Kid" chapter, which chronicles the narrator's exile, begins with this statement:

> From ayah to Widow, I've been the sort of person *to whom things have been done*; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as a protagonist. Despite Mary's crime; setting aside typhoid and snake-venom; dismissing two accidents, in the washing-chest and circus ring; disregarding the effects of Evie's push and my mother's infidelity; in spite of losing my hair to the bitter violence of Emil Zagallo and my finger to the lip-licking goads of Masha Miovic; setting my face against all indications to the

> contrary, I shall now amplify, in the manner and with proper solemnity of a man of science, my claim to a place at the center of things (RUSHDIE 237-38).

Still, Saleem's move back to centrality must be taken with a grain of salt. His culpability in the Commander's murder is minimal; he only creates suspicion. Detective Dom Minto is employed to confirm suspicions, and Sabarmati is the one who pulls the trigger. Saleem's manipulation of history is only symbolic. Saleem's claim to be the hidden force behind public events calls into question his believability as a narrator because the action of the text is often inconsistent with his more outrageous claims of agency. Saleem's need to take credit for what occurs communicates his desire to play a central role in a public narrative, but in the narrative itself his is often impotent to consummate that desire.

Midnight's Children is Saleem Sinai's quest for subjectivity of agency. He seeks narrative self-determination in the face of competing stories of history, culture, and family that threaten to define *his* narrative as marginal, thereby limiting his discursive power. Saleem's banishment to the Pakistani army following the bombing of Karachi represents his displacement by

explicitly historical events. While Jamila Singer, whose popularity as an Islamic-Nationalist performer makes the disposal of her incestuous brother an easy move, is directly responsible for Saleem's military service, Rushdie and his narrator give the personal injury of her sisterly disgust a free pass. Instead, the significance of her repudiation lies in its further denial of agency for Saleem. Jamila's treatment of her brother is not portrayed as emotionally painful; rather it is a vehicle to get Saleem out of the matrix of competing family stories and into the political one. In addition to familial destruction and rejection, the bombing of Karachi leads to Saleem's braining by the talismanic spittoon, and his subsequent incarnation as the buddha. These two events cleanse the past and marginalize the narrator from his prolific inner voice.

> Grieve for Saleem - who, orphaned and purified, deprived of the hundred daily pin-pricks of family life, which alone could deflate the great ballooning fantasy of history and bring it down to a more manageably human scale, had been pulled up by its roots to be flung unceremoniously across the years, fated to plunge memoryless into

an adulthood whose every aspect grew daily more grotesque. (Rushdie 345)

Rushdie does not spare the grotesquerie. In Book Three's initial chapter, "The Buddha," we find the narrator's latest incarnation a striking contrast to his earlier characterizations of himself as telepathic, idealist child or promiscuous, underworld-exploring adolescent in Karachi. Saleem's existence as a "man-dog" tracker for the army illustrates his marginalization from his internal voice. After a metanarrative introduction that includes the excerpt above, Saleem refers to himself in the third person for the rest of the chapter. All the information the reader receives about the narrator comes from the observations of the three ridiculous figures of the teenage soldiers assigned as his handlers, whose independence as informants Rushdie calls into question by declining to place commas between their names, "Ayooba Shaheed Farooq." This model continues in the next chapter, "In the Sundarbans", until Saleem is begins to reunite with his past via the ever ambiguous snakebite. The orphaned and purified buddha is one who is spoken for, not one who speaks.

In addition to the suspension of Saleem's inner voice, "The Buddha" and "In the Sundarbans" communicate a

geographical and historical marginalization that gets worse as the narrative progresses. In the prior chapter, Saleem inhabits a military camp that

> will be found on no maps; it is too far from the Murree road for the barking of its dogs to heard, even by the sharpest eared of motorists…when Pakistan's vanquished Tiger Niazi was quizzed on this subject (the camp) by his old chum, India's victorious General Sam Manekshaw, the Tiger scoffed: 'Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities? Never heard of it.' (Rushdie 347)

While Saleem's biography is connected to history through his military service, this service is not a part of the official record of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. Neither the camp in which he is trained nor the unit for which he tracks is part of the sanctioned narrative of the war. Rushdie further develops this idea in the following chapter as Saleem and his handlers get lost in the Sundarbans jungle following West Pakistan's invasion of the soon-to-be-renamed East Wing. The disappearance of CUTIA unit-22 in the Bangladeshi jungle constitutes Saleem's further disconnection from a historical master narrative. Saleem does not play in the war in which he is a supposed

participant. Instead he and his young companions get lost in the dreamscape of the seemingly endless jungle. Saleem's absence from anything "official" forces him out of reality.

The cruelty in *Midnight's Children*, that which makes Saleem a fellow sufferer, does not take place between the characters in the novel, but between the narrator's desire and competing narratives, "there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors...consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (RUSHDIE 9-10). The "Sabarmati Affair" and Saleem's military service illustrate how familial and political histories oppose the narrator's attempt to maintain centrality within his own life story.

The redescription of the native narrator as one who suffers from the cruelty of discursive displacement within his identity is not a great departure from the thinking of postcolonial critics. However, Rorty allows us to reframe epistemic violence without using the binary of opposition. Reading *Midnight's Children* through Rorty contextualizes Saleem's marginalization within his own life story as symptomatic of, but not essential to, the native speaker's experience. In addition, solidarity allows the (western) reader to see Saleem not as an "other," but as a fellow

human sufferer. To read the novel in terms of a redescription of cruelty in the service of solidarity allows Rushdie's depiction of history to subvert the binary of the postcolonial critics.

If the binary remains foundational, the novel's metanarrative, the record of Saleem as an author, is wholly ironized. The tensions between the events of his life and his commentary on them from the narrator's 'present' merely become illustrations of the unfulfilled desire for native subjectivity. An example of how this would work follows Saleem's evacuation from Bangladesh in the magic basket of Parvati-the-witch. The narrator tells us:

> what my discovery of unfairness (smelling of onions) had begun, my invisible rage completed. Wrath enabled me to survive the soft siren temptations of invisibility; anger made me determined, after I was released from vanishment in the shadow of the Friday Mosque, to begin, from that moment forth, to choose my own, undestined future. (RUSHDIE 382-83)

A sentence later he shifts into metanarrative:

> Tonight, as I recall my rage, I remain perfectly calm; the Widow drained anger out of me along with everything else...now, seated hunched over

> paper in a pool of Anglepoised light, I no longer want to be anything except what, who I am. Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done to me (RUSHDIE 383).

Read together in the context of the binary of opposition, these passages hold no tension. Saleem becomes angry at his desire to cooperate with history and fulfill the expectations of his birth, so he vows to choose his own future. The second passage predicts his failure to choose that future by mentioning the widow, who will later render him object. The binary forces the subsequent claim of self-definition as a reiteration of the same unfulfilled desire for subjectivity. In terms of postcolonial theory, why should the reader believe that Saleem has appropriated discursive power when he prefaces a claim of subjectivity with the proof of the failure of his previous claim? Reading for Rortian solidarity centralizes the claim of shared humanity. The adoption of solidarity as a center point relegates the discursive violence of the binary to the symptomatic status I mention above. Once Saleem is seen as a *fellow* sufferer, but not one who is defined by his suffering, the second intervention, the staged tension

between biography and metanarrative, in Rushdie's redescription of the native speaker bears fruit for native agency.

Saleem begins *Midnight's Children* with a contradictory claim: "I had been handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter" (RUSHDIE 9). This statement betrays the obvious inconsistency in Saleem's narrative: while his biography features repeated failures to maintain centrality in his own life story, he, as the author, is the creative force behind the ever-expanding narrative. As Saleem's history as an object of history develops, so does the evidence of his subjectivity.

It is, therefore, helpful to think of *Midnight's Children* as two parallel narratives. The metanarrative features a Saleem who is fully subject, while the events that make up his biography keep him at the mercy of his family and, later, India's political history. Despite the doubtful claim to agency in the "Sabarmati affair" and his blatant victimization at the hands of his diva sister, it is difficult for the reader to forget that Saleem is in

charge of writing his biography, if not the events which constitute it. Just before the narrator recalls Aadam Aziz in 1915 Kashmir and the beginning of his own story, he declares, "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty two years before anything as obvious, as *present*, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth" (RUSHDIE 9). Saleem the writer does not let the reader forget he is one capable of redescription.

Saleem's interruptions, often humorous and idiosyncratic, allow him to explain how he wants the events of his life to be interpreted. At the beginning of the chapter entitled "All-India Radio," which introduces his ability to connect telepathically with the other children of midnight, Saleem tells us, "reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible" (RUSHDIE 165). This statement is from the metanarrative and prepares the reader for the unbelievable claim that as a child the narrator was capable of telepathy. Like the "Sabarmati Affair," the appearance of "Midnight's Children Conference" is a vehicle for recovering centrality, but the

metanarrative passages that reference it draw attention to its intended use as such.

"Nearlynine" Saleem is wracked with anxiety over the expectation that has accompanied his birth: "parents are impelled by the profit motive - nothing more, nothing less. For their attentions, they expected, from me, the immense dividend of greatness...I longed to give them what they wanted, what soothsayers and framed letters had promised them" (RUSHDIE 156). He is made fun of at school because of his ugly physical appearance. In the washing chest, he discovers Amina Sinai's affair with Nadir Khan while his "djinn-sodden" father's frozen "assets" make the atmosphere in the Sinai home less than optimal. In response to these anxieties and alternate storylines, Saleem retreats first to the washing chest and then to the clock tower. Both locations afford him escape from the outside forces that act upon his identity and push his childhood to the margin.

> There are no mirrors in a washing-chest; rude jokes do not enter, nor pointing fingers. The rage of fathers is muffled by used sheets and discarded brassieres. A washing-chest is a hole in the world, a place which civilization has put outside itself, beyond the pale; this makes it the finest of hiding places. In the washing-

> chest, I was…safe from all pressures, concealed from the demands of parents and history. (RUSHDIE 156)
>
> …
>
> Banned from washing-chests, I began, whenever possible, to creep unobserved into the tower of crippled hours…I entered my secret hideout, stretched out on the straw mat I'd stolen from the servants' quarters, closed my eyes, and let my newly-acquired inner ear rove freely around the city. (RUSHDIE 173)

Not surprisingly, these womblike retreats play key roles in the development of the narrator's telepathic powers. The sight of the "black mango" from the washing chest leads to the sniff that awakens the voices in Saleem's head. Alone in the clock-tower he mentally tours India's varied geographical, social, and cultural terrain. These fortresses of solitude silence the other stories with which Saleem's stories compete. In the quiet of washing-chest and clock tower, the narrator is not only central but can achieve the greatness predicted at his birth. It would be easy to dismiss these un-witnessed powers simply as the work of a vivid imagination. But the tension between the obvious explanation of these events and the one on which

the narrator insists leads to the next part of the redescription of the native narrator.

The second part of Rushdie's redescription of the native speaker centers on that narrator's awareness of the audience's incredulity toward his account of events. Following the introduction of the children of midnight in "My tenth birthday," Saleem interrupts:

> don't make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium or even as the insanely exaggerated fantasies of a lonely, ugly child. I have stated before that I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written (and read aloud to the stunned Padma) is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth. (RUSHDIE 200)

The fantasies of a lonely, ugly child are precisely the most realistic and most expected explanation of telepathy and the children of midnight, but Saleem insists that the voices in his head are not the offspring of his imagination.

This insistence is not because the "Midnight's Children's Conference" remains a constant presence for the rest of the novel. Saleem uses them only when he needs them. During the previously mentioned exile at the home of

his Pia and Hanif Aziz, he admits "they made all the fuss of me that children expect, and accept graciously from childless adults" (RUSHDIE 240). His time in exile represents a brief period of centrality. The sympathetic Hanif and Pia make their visitor the focal point of their attention. Not surprisingly, the narrator closes "The Kolynos Kid" with this admission: "it occurs to me that I have said nothing, in this entire piece, about the Midnight's Children Conference; but then, to tell the truth, they didn't seem very important to me in those days. I had other things on my mind" (RUSHDIE 252).

If his fellow magical children fade in importance depending on how the rest of Saleem's life is going, then why does he want them to be taken literally? Why not admit that they were simply imaginary childhood coping mechanisms? Metanarrative interruptions like the one that follows Saleem's introduction of his magic friends insist upon the validity of alternative histories. These are moments in which dominant, expected narrative elements are displaced in favor of what is useful or meaningful to the narrator. Of course, Saleem is fully aware of this: "am I so far gone in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort every thing - to rewrite the whole of history of my times purely in order to place myself in a

central role?" (RUSHDIE 166). The metanarrative of *Midnight's Children* is filled with reminders that Saleem is engaged in a redescription.

Another example of this occurs when Saleem announces that in "re-reading my work I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die on the wrong date" (RUSHDIE 166). This passage has two implications. First, it illustrates that Saleem is not only willing to interject fantasy into his family's history in order to center himself, but also ready to change matters of public record for the purposes of his narrative. Second, and more importantly, Saleem states that the Mahatma will continue to die on the wrong date. Saleem lays claim to his India, and in so doing, he claims ownership of his "remade" story, discrepancies with traditional history be damned. This moment is evidence of the subject side of the novel's parallel narratives. As language marches, Rajiv Ghandi clones, "the black mango," and a singing sister continually push Saleem to the margin, the metanarrative is constantly reminding the reader of his subjectivity as a writer by drawing attention to the unconventional ways Saleem places

himself at the center of things. The narrator cannot make himself responsible for every event that occurs within any history, whether official or rewritten. However, he can control how the story is told in order that it means something to him.

If we take the formulations of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak as descriptions of native agency, Rushdie's parallel metanarrative and biography are Rortian redescriptions of that agency. Instead of a buried native, a hybrid, or a translating informer, Rushdie creates a native who assumes not only the capability but also the necessity of achieving subjectivity. Saleem's pledge not to change the inaccurate date of Gandhi's assassination shows that subjectivity grows out of the tension between the history that marginalizes and his needs as a narrator. The metanarrative interposes itself on the biography, simultaneously calling attention to the author's puppet strings, as in the passage about the children of midnight, and his commitment to an alternative history, as with Gandhi's assassination, regardless of the possible incredulity of the audience. The redescribed native speaker, then, is one who is capable and willing to offer redescriptions himself. The ability and will to rewrite histories is evidence of a liberated subjectivity that the

theorists do not recognize in their strategies of opposition.

Rorty's concept of redescription in the service of solidarity shifts the discursive violence of the binary of opposition from defining to symptomatic. The shift allows for the tension that was absent from the successive passages cited earlier (RUSHDIE 156 and 173), had we adhered to a more traditional post-colonial reading. The second passage features a declaration of self-definition that is delivered in spite of the Widow's work and not in the ironic hope of desire. From this vantage point, the reader can see that though Saleem is still not central to the events of history, he holds the subject position in its retelling.

Chapter IV. Redescription of Postcolonial Epistemology

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity draws a distinction between novels that work for solidarity and those that model individual self-creation. The redescription of the native speaker in *Midnight's Children* works for solidarity and native agency by depicting the displacement of subjectivity or centrality as a form of cruelty. Characterizing discursive violence as a form of cruelty, instead of a basis for knowledge, allows the metanarrative to emerge as an independent form of discourse. However, the native speaker is not all that Rushdie redescribes in *Midnight's Children*. The work of the postcolonial theorists whom I discussed at the beginning of this paper cannot house *Midnight's Children* within their respective models of opposition because they take Said's orientalist binary of opposition as a genesis point for postcolonial knowledge. However, throughout *Midnight's Children* Rushdie engages in the continual subversion of binaries and stable forms of knowledge such as heredity, truth, history, and reality. These subversions create an aesthetic of instability which forms a redescription of postcolonial knowledge.

According to Rorty, "to create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind" (RORTY 27). Inventing language, in this case, does not literally mean creating new vocabularies, phonetics, and syntaxes, as Tolkien did with his fictional Elvish, but creating new metaphors that redescribe personal experience. Rorty further characterizes works of private self-creation as "the fantasies which those who attempt autonomy spend their lives reworking" (RORTY 141). "Fantasies" refers to those metaphors or groups of metaphors that encapsulate their creator's independent vision of the world. The destabilization of certain types of knowledge is Rushdie's aesthetic calling card. *Midnight's Children* debuts a style which is expanded and reworked through *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. This continuity, along with Rushdie's self-proclaimed identity as a migrant,[9] safely places his aesthetic of instability inside the bounds of Rorty's idea of private fantasy.

With that said, what does this particular type of redescription have to do with the postcolonial? The orientalist binary of opposition holds the native in object

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[9] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*. New York: Penguin, 1992, pgs. 9-22.

position because it describes him as one who does not speak. In the first part of this paper, I have shown how redescription can arrive at an independent native discourse in *Midnight's Children*. However, Rushdie's aesthetic also confronts the binary's ability to describe the postcolonial other by dismantling the knowledge the binary generates.

Rorty views the narrative of self creation as one which helps us become autonomous. According to him, "private autonomy can be gained by redescribing one's past in a way that had not occurred in the past" (RORTY 101). In the context of the postcolonial *Midnight's Children* fits this role. Rushdie's exhaustive, nonessentialist aesthetic of excess, interconnection, proliferation, and inversion redescribe *his* world, the postcolonial world, not in terms of easy binaries, constructions, and formulations, but one that exists independent of those boundaries.

The central moment in *Midnight's Children* is the simultaneous birth of narrator and nation. But Rushdie spends one hundred sixteen pages on the Aziz family backstory before Saleem and India are born. This is an early indicator that origins, heredity, and parentage are important elements of knowledge in the novel. Part of Rushdie's redescription of postcolonial knowledge is formed by staging individual and national heredities devoid of

purity. These impure beginnings illustrate the instability of knowledge in Book One and Book Two.

In Book One, Saleem's biography begins thirty years before his birth, shortly after the return of his European-educated grandfather ("who-is-not-his grandfather") to an, as yet, still undivided Kashmir. Saleem describes Aadam Aziz as he begins to pray: "'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful…' - the exordium spoken with hands joined before him like a book, comforted a part of him, made another, larger part feel uneasy - …but now Heidelberg invaded his head" (RUSHDIE 11). The tension for Dr. Aziz exists between his upbringing as a Muslim and the alternate worldview he learns from his German anarchist friends. In response to this conflict, Aziz is "knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole" (RUSHDIE 12).

Tai the boatman increases Aziz's alienation by insulting the symbol of his learning and his trade. "'Big bag, big shot. Pah! We haven't got enough bags at home that you must bring back that thing made of a pig's skin that makes one unclean just by looking at it'" (RUSHDIE 20). In response to these unsettling developments, the narrator's grandfather fills his hole of uncertainty, in true Rushdie

fashion, with what is seen through another hole: individual naked body parts of his future wife Naseem - "my grandfather had fallen in love and had come to think of the perforated sheet as something sacred and magical, because through it he had seen the things which had filled up the hole inside him which had been created when he had been hit on the nose by the tussock and insulted by the boatman Tai" (RUSHDIE 27). Not only does Aadam inhabit the tension between two forms of order, but he falls in love with his wife in pieces.

Aadam exudes uncertainty and is enamored with fragmentation. He is not a good Muslim, nor is he quite an ideological brother to his fatalist European friends. The persistent bruise Dr. Aziz receives at the Amritsar massacre becomes proof that he is not the stereotypical Babu in the spirit of his Forsterian namesake. Rushdie uses the tension between these two belief systems as the catalyst for the bizarre courting ritual and future union of the narrator's grandparents. In these early pages, Rushdie creates a patriarch, a genesis point for the family, whose world is built around an uncertainty about God and whose decisions emerge in response to that uncertain cosmology. In the sense that the family is the

source of the individual, Rushdie begins the sketch of the Aziz family with an emphasis on instability.

This trend continues with Saleem's parents, Mumtaz Aziz and Ahmed Sinai. Mumtaz, later Naseem, is a divorcee when she marries Ahmed. She is first married to Nadir Khan, the ugly poet living in subterranean splendor under the Aziz house following the assassination of the political activist and his former boss, Mian Abdullah. The wedding is never made public because of Nadir Khan's fear of assassins, nor is it consummated - both violations of Muslim norms. Afterward Mumtaz lives a double life, remaining Aadam's unmarried daughter by day and joining her husband underground in the evenings. Mumtaz Aziz, like her father, maintains a liminal existence. Whereas Aadam is not quite a Muslim, but not quite a Babu, his middle daughter is married, but not married. In Book One Rushdie creates a heritage for Saleem grounded in the uncertain identities of his predecessors.

In Book One, we learn that Ahmed Sinai is an orphan and also divorced. Like his wife, he does not come to their marriage from a situation accepted as a social norm in India. This places their marriage on the same sort of unstable footing the partitioned sheet represents for Amina's parents. Husband and wife also share the condition

of contradicting identities. Saleem acknowledges that his father's original ambition was to reorganize the Koran in chronological order, "He once told me: 'when Muhammed prophesied, people wrote down what he said on palm leave, which were kept any old way in a box. After he died Abubakr and the others tried to remember the correct sequence; but they didn't have very good memories" (RUSHDIE 82). Ahmed also falsely claims to be a descendant of India's Mughal emperors. Contrast this with his obsession with djinns, "I provoked gales of laughter when I told Sonny, Eyeslice and Hairoil, 'My father fights with djinns; he beats them; it's true!...And it was true. Ahmed Sinai, deprived of wheedles and attention, began, soon after my birth, a lifelong struggle with djinn-bottles. But I was mistaken about one thing: he didn't win" (RUSHDIE 131). Like his wife and father-in-law, Ahmed holds the position of one-who-is-and-is-not. He is the drunken, avaricious business man who fantasizes about re-writing the holy book of a religion that forbids the consumption of alcohol. And so it almost comes as no surprise that Saleem will be the son-who-is-not-the-son of Amina and Ahmed and the grandson who is not of Aadam.

At this point Saleem appears to be born of those who embody unstable positions or identities. Rushdie further

complicates his picture of heredity with Mary Pereira's baby switch. Saleem and his nemesis, Shiva, are born to parents of disparate means at the almost the exact moment. Mary, a nurse in Dr. Narlikar's maternity hospital, switches the two children as they are taken from delivery rooms to be swaddled. Saleem's biological parents appear to be the poor street musician Wee Willie Winkie and his wife, Vanita. But even a baby switch is too simple for Rushdie. Winkie is a cuckold. The narrator's true biological father is an Englishman and the purveyor of Sinai's "Buckingham Palace" property, William Methwold. Saleem gives Mary Pereira credit as a mother after she is hired as his ayah because her actions as much as any one else's have determined the world in which he lives. At the close of Book One Saleem's parents, of one sort or another, number three fathers and three mothers. This is without counting Nadir Khan, into whom Amina Sinai is trying to turn Ahmed and who becomes Saleem's father in one of her dreams. These multiple parents are Hindu, Muslim, and Christian; Kashmiri, Indian, and English; rich and poor; upper and lower class. Most importantly, Rushdie unites this diverse group with the title of "parent." Traditional notions of the parent as an idea that encompasses the individual's biological, social, material, and national

heredity explode under the pressure Rushdie places on the term. And there is more to come.

In Book Two, which chronicles the period from Saleem's infancy to young adulthood, Dr. Shaapsteker's advice just prior to the Sabarmati affair leads the narrator to claim the ability to create his own parents. "[Shaapsteker] had he, too, was one of the endless series of parents to whom I alone had the power of giving birth (RUSHDIE 258). Hanif Aziz is a father for Saleem during his exile. The narrator makes yet another claim to a father after his family's move to Pakistan, "I assisted my uncle as he made revolution. And in so doing, in earning his gratitude...I created a new father for myself; General Zulfikar became the latest in the line of men who have been willing to call me 'sonny', or 'sonny Jim', or even simply 'my son'" (RUSHDIE 290). Rushdie's creation of an unstable notion of heredity does not end with a child who gives birth to parents.

Noses illustrate yet another of Rushdie's interventions. Aadam Aziz is born with a prominent nose about which Tai, the boatman, pronounces, "there are dynasties waiting to be born in it...like snot" (RUSHDIE 14). Tai believes it is an organ of power. Saleem adopts this belief about his own nose, claiming that its power is

linked to the series of special nasal skills including his own telepathic ability.

In one sense Saleem's nose appears to be inherited from his grandfather Aadam Aziz. But, Ilse Lubin, one of Aadam's German friends, calls it a "Cyranose" in reference to Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac. During the description of William Methwold, Saleem reveals a coincidental consistency: "And his nose? What did that look like? Prominent? Yes, it must have been, the legacy of a patrician French grandmother - from Bergerac!" (RUSHDIE 95). In a sense Saleem inherits his talismanic organ from a European grandmother he never meets. Rushdie's portrayal of inheritance holds these two possibilities in loose tension in this summary of the baby-swap scene: "On the ankle of a ten-chip whopper with eyes as blue as Kashmiri sky - which were also eyes as blue as Methwold's - and a nose as dramatic as a Kashmiri grandfather's - which was also the nose of a grandmother from France - she (Mary) placed this name: *Sinai*" (RUSHDIE 117).

If the aesthetic of the novel is read as a redescription, Rushdie does not deconstruct parentage and heredity for the purposes of social comment. Rather, he changes the rules, conditions and situations to which those terms refer in a manner that breaks them down as organizers

of knowledge. He does this in so many ways, from so many angles, they cannot refer solely to traditional meanings. Instead of two parents giving birth to a son, raising him and socializing him, *Midnight's Children* portrays the identities of Saleem's parents as unstable because the rules for what sorts of relationships qualify for parent status are malleable. He turns the notion of a parent as one who gives birth or creates on its head by allowing Saleem to give birth to more parents. Finally, the author undermines inheritance by holding together the two competing sources for Saleem's conspicuous nose in apparent contradiction.

The excessive staging of parentage, heredity, and inheritance in *Midnight's Children* creates a degree of epistemic instability by upsetting the 'typical' contexts in which claims to the relationships, to which those terms refer, are made. However, the author undermines even this conclusion by subtly calling into question the very information from which it is drawn. Take, for instance, Tai the boatman's vituperative stab at Dr. Aziz's medical bag. Rushdie clearly stages Tai as an avatar of old India:

> "It was an impression [that Tai is halfwitted] the boatman fostered by his chatter, which was fantastic, grandiloquent and ceaseless, and as

> often as not addressed only to himself. Sound carries over water, and the lake people giggled at his monologues; but with undertones of awe, and even fear. Awe, because the old halfwit knew the lakes and hills better than any of his detractors; fear, because of his claim to an antiquity so immense it defied numbering, and moreover hung so lightly around his chicken's neck that it hadn't prevented him from winning a highly desirable wife and fathering four sons upon her...and a few more, the story went on other lakeside wives. The young bucks at the shikara moorings were convinced he had a pile of money hidden away somewhere - a hoard, perhaps, of priceless golden teeth, rattling in a sack like walnuts...he was the living antithesis of Oskar-Ilse-Ingrid's belief in the inevitability of change...a quirky enduring familiar spirit of the valley" (RUSHDIE 14-15).

Tai is surrounded by an air of the fantastic, like a mythological figure. He inspires laughter, awe, and fear. The "familiar spirit of the valley" contains all the wisdom, comedy, grotesquery, mystery, and timelessness of mythic India. Keeping in mind his condemnation of Aziz for

foreign influence, the passage suggests that Rushdie places him at one end of a binary represented at the other by Aziz's friends back in Heidelberg. But the passage also suggests Tai's separation from the community. Rushdie describes Tai by providing the reader with the community's ambivalent opinions of him. At the same moment that he holds Tai up as a representative of the "old way" he shows that the "old way" is alienated from the people it represents.

This development further complicates the author's redescription of postcolonial knowledge. Tai, as an idea, is a force that contributes to the development of Aadam's hole, but he does not really speak for anyone but himself. Though Rushdie cloaks him in a description aligning him with a mythic or 'old' vision of India, there is no evidence in the text that he represents the community of the boat people or the larger population of the valley. This kind of disconnect is key to comes the reader's knowledge of heredity. Tai's side of the binary that Rushdie stages is not rooted in the consensus of a community but in his own propriety, something the author betrays as quite independent. This calls into question Tai's status as a representative of any certain vision of India at all, which, in turn, calls into question his

ability to inform the reader as a foil for Aadam Aziz. In this way Rushdie undermines a source of knowledge that informs more visible interventions on behalf of instability like the simultaneous inheritance of the nose. When it becomes clear that Rushdie has staged Tai as a false trope the idea of Aadam's nose as an organ of power is upset. This, in turn, upsets Saleem's belief the he inherited a magic nose from his grandfather, a fact that is already in doubt because of Saleem's uncertain heredity.

Inheritance provides another illustration of how the legitimacy of information that forms unstable knowledge is further undermined. Recall Saleem's claim that his nose is simultaneously inherited from his French grandmother and Aadam Aziz. The reader can easily construct a plausible interpretation of this apparently ironic claim. Saleem inherits the nose biologically from his French grandmother, while the Aziz family history attributes this to Aadam. In two different senses, that statement is true. However, a closer look at the language of the passage in which Saleem mentions his French grandmother upsets the authority of his claim that his nose has two forbears. The narrator begins with rhetorical questions: "'And his (Methwold's) nose? What did it look like? Prominent?'" To these questions he replies with a certain "'yes, it must have been, the legacy

of a patrician grandmother - from Bergerac.'" By admitting 'it must have been' Saleem exposes that Methwold's big nose as well as his own French great-grandmother are creations of his own imagination. This, like Tai's disconnection from the Kashmiri valley, calls into question the authority of the very information Saleem has already given us to build an unstable vision of parentage and heredity.

In Books One and Two of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie describes the knowledge of origins as highly unstable in a fail-safe fashion. No matter what the reader tries to find as a starting point, he will arrive at ambivalence and uncertainty as the genesis point for Saleem's life story. Rushdie makes the Aziz family and Ahmed Sinai, those who socialize Saleem, victims of a variety of identity crises. Next he describes various events and people in language that connotes issues of heredity. For instance, behind Saleem's claim that Dr. Schaapsteker is another father is the possibility of calling him a mentor or simply saying he learned something from the reclusive herpetologist. The author gives everything associated with Saleem's creation this treatment, so that the reader attempting to trace origins from his inheritance meets only the ambiguity of the excess of fathers, mothers, traits, worldviews, and body parts inherited an exercise that ends in absurdity.

Simultaneously, Rushdie undermines the authority of the sources of information that deliver this multiplicity. In *Midnight's Children* there is no concrete knowledge where Saleem's origins are concerned.

For my purposes Rorty's theory of literature allows Rushdie's aesthetic to be read as a redescription of the postcolonial episteme that emanates from Said's binary of opposition. Instead of allowing origins to be retraced to find Saleem on one side of a dividing line or another, Rushdie makes his narrator's heredity unclear and inhibits any method that could deliver an essential description of that heredity. The only answers to the question: where does Saleem come from are plurality, ambiguity, and diversity. An epistemology in which these points of origin define future knowledge is a large departure from the essentialism of the native and the metropolitan.

The point of looking at heredity is to illustrate a specific way Rushdie stages unstable knowledge. However, the narrator's unknowable personal origins form only a part of Rushdie's larger intervention. "Handcuffed to history" by his conspicuous birthday, Saleem's excessive and bizarre web of parentage and inheritance is an allegory of the spectacularly diverse human and cultural elements that make up India. To say that his origins are so convoluted that

they are unknowable is to say the same thing about his country's. This departure from an essential notion of origins is part of a larger move away from an essentialist view of history. *Midnight's Children*, in its entirety, forms an alternative history, a redescription of what kinds of knowledge constitutes 'history.' Like his treatment of heredity, Rushdie's redescription of history as an unstable entity operates on a variety of levels.

One historical intervention involves Rushdie inverting the received idea that history is moved by famous and important people. In the case of the "Sabarmati affair," Saleem's note of disclosure to the navy commander sets off a chain of events that begins with the narrator's desire to exact revenge on Homi Catrack and teach his mother a lesson and ends with a national scandal. Saleem recalls, "A newspaper said of the Sabarmati affair: 'it is a theatre in which India will discover who she is, what she is, and what she might become.'...But Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet master and the nation performed my play" (RUSHDIE 262). The commander is the heir apparent to the top admiral in the Indian navy. The scandal brings out all the political tensions in the young nation. The press and public do not want to see Sabarmati convicted. After all, he murdered an unfaithful wife and her lover - a crime

to which the male chauvinist Indian culture is sympathetic. The government and admiralty want their man, but the law sees him as guilty of murder in the first degree. The central question becomes: "is India to give her approval to the rule of law, or to the ancient principle of the overriding primacy of her heroes?" (RUSHDIE 264). We arrive at this question with the knowledge that a ten-year-old boy can cause (or at least can claim to cause) the events that lead up to its asking. It is not Sabarmati, the accomplished officer, or Ismail Ibrahim, the powerful attorney, or even President Nehru, on whom the final decision to pardon the commander falls, but Saleem who forces India to decide what sort of nation she is to be.

Rushdie's staging of the Sabarmati affair depicts a young boy with the power to influence great events in a national history. The comic nature of this incident turns comically absurd when Saleem insists that he is always at the center of India's politics: "let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more or nothing less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth" (RUSHDIE 338). Saleem and his family are not the only ones who can make history move.

During a visit to his uncle Mustapha's home after his return from Bangladesh, Saleem hints again at conspiracy:

> But what can never be proved for certain is that, in the years ahead, my uncle's genealogical obsession would be placed at the service of a government which was falling increasingly beneath the twin spells of power and astrology; so that what happened at the Widows' Hostel might never have happened without his help...all I am saying is that I once saw amongst his genealogical log-books, a black leather folder labeled TOP SECRET, and titled PROJECT M.C.C. (RUSHDIE 392).

This passage alludes to the events that occur in a later chapter, "Midnight." It is important because it introduces a current of belief that runs that is picked up again in that chapter. Saleem believes the 1975-1977 Emergency is motivated by Indira Gandhi's fear of the narrator and his fellow magic children.

> "Here is the secret which has lain concealed for too long beneath the mask of those stifled days: the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight" (RUSHDIE 427).

Gandhi's abuse of power - which includes the taking of political prisoners, forced sterilizations, and the destruction of slums - is not motivated by the threats of political rivals, but a group of less than six-hundred widely scattered twenty-seven year olds whose only commonality is their shared moment of birth and possession of strange powers.

The first mention of the black folder at Mustapha's home is key because it suggests the premeditation of the actions taken toward the narrator. Saleem is so important, so entrenched as a mover of history, he cannot simply be crushed. Prime Minister Gandhi must resort to secret investigations and an enormous power play to erase him as a threat to her power. The Sabarmati affair and the Emergency portray Saleem as the prime actor and cast the great men and women of public power in the roles of reactionaries. This inversion undermines the traditional conception that the activities and policies of political and military leaders are responsible for the events organized under the idea, "history." In addition to reversing historical agency, Rushdie also undermines the contents that fall under its umbrella.

Perhaps the most pervasive epistemological intervention in *Midnight's Children* is the proliferation of

history. Rushdie overloads history's capacity to organize information by forcing content that usually is not associated with a historical record into it. One of the consequences of tying Saleem's narrative to the history of India is that everything in the novel becomes part of history. Much of this content includes types of information that do not usually get classified as part of history. For instance, Saleem mentions that astrologers were present as advisors to Jawaharlal Nehru at Independence. The presence of astrologers is not the sort of fact that often gets mentioned in the description of a momentous political moment like the birth of a new nation-state. This small fact is an expander. It adds mass to the body of history which reaches critical mass in *Midnight's Children* under the weight of such additions.

Recall that Buddha"-Saleem and his three teenage handlers get lost in the Bangladeshi "dream forest" during the West Wing's invasion of the East. The time in the Sundarbans is a personal displacement from history for the narrator. He is outside the bounds of purpose and reality: "they had all long ago forgotten the purpose of their journey; the chase, which had begun far away in the real world, acquired in the altered light of Sundarbans a quality of absurd fantasy which enabled them to dismiss it

once and for all" (RUSHDIE 363). This period is also marked by a complete disconnect from time. "None of them knew how long this period lasted, because in the Sundarbans time followed unknown laws" (RUSHDIE 367). In this setting, spittoon-brained Saleem is "jolted into unity by snake poison" (RUSHDIE 364). Reconnection includes his history: "The child-soldiers listened, spellbound, to the stories issuing from his mouth, beginning with a birth at midnight, and continuing unstoppably, because he was reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories" (RUSHDIE 364-5). This situation, in context, packages history in a complicated form. Rushdie holds three notions of history together at one time. First, there is the Indo-Pakistani war from which Saleem has been displaced. While it is never mentioned during the narrative's time in the swamps, the reader remains peripherally aware that a war is ongoing. The events of Saleem's biography, to which he reconnects, forms the second history. That *Midnight's Children* follows Saleem into the jungle during a time of war makes "In the Sundarbans" a third, alternative history to set beside the biography and political-military narrative of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war.

Rushdie makes the reader conscious of all three and puts 'official' history at the greatest distance from the

narrator and the reader. While it is relatively easy to point out that all three are present simultaneously, drawing lines between where they begin and end is almost impossible. Saleem's time in the Sundarbans is part of his biography, but the reader's awareness of this episode as 'alternative' depends on the reader's own knowledge of the 'official.' The narrator's claim to be "handcuffed to history" means that his biography and India's history are never far apart. Rushdie's juxtaposition of three histories in the Sundarbans chapter expands history's contents to include types of information normally considered insignificant to large grand narratives, such as a lost soldier's reconnection to his past. His simultaneous staging of all three illustrates the inability to actually separate them. In short, the amount of information that falls under the heading 'history' is increased while its ability to be separated for organization is decreased.

Anytime Rushdie covers a major political event, he holds multiple histories in tension with one another. The military operations in the Rann of Kutch, a precursor to the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, are another example:

> The war in the Rann lasted until July 1st. That much is fact; but everything else 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, which is substantially that told by my cousin Zafar, is as likely to be true as anything; anything that is to say, except what we were officially told" (RUSHDIE 335).

Just as he did in the Sundarbans, Rushdie makes us aware that multiple histories exist simultaneously. Saleem's account of the war in the Rann includes the superstitions of the soldiers manning the boundary line:

> so in that sorcerers' world a crazy war was fought in which each side thought it saw apparitions of devils fighting alongside its foes; but in the end the Indian forces yielded, many of them collapsed in floods of tears and wept…they told about the great blubbery things which slithered around the border posts at night, and the floating-in-air spirits of drowned men with seaweed wreaths and seashells in their navels (RUSHDIE 335).

It includes smugglers whose presence along the battle lines would certainly be something the Pakistani government would leave out of official accounts:

> The first phantom to enter the outpost had several missing teeth and a curved knife stuck in his belt; when he saw the soldiers in the hut his eyes blazed with a vermilion fury. 'God's pity!' the ghost chieftain said, 'What are you mother-sleepers here for? Didn't you get paid off?' Not ghosts; smugglers (RUSHDIE 336).

Saleem, of course, tells how this relates to the family narrative:

> "Which Punch-faced General…commanded the phantom troops?…In July, 1965, my cousin Zafar returned on leave to his father's house in Rawalpindi; and one morning he began to walk slowly toward his father's bedroom, bearing on his shoulders not only the memory of a thousand childhood humiliations and blows; not only the shame of his lifelong enuresis; but also the knowledge that his own father had been responsidbel for what-happened-in-the-Rann…My cousin found his father in his bedside bath, and slit his throat with a long smuggler's knife" (RUSHDIE 336-7).

Saleem is describing the same event in these passages. What is interesting about them is how each is connected. Rushdie makes us aware of alternative history in the first by undermining Pakistan's official account of the war in the Rann. He then begins that alternative history by focusing on the superstitious beliefs of the Indian and Pakistani soldiers. Next, he calls this account into question by inserting the smugglers whose presence only partially displaces ghosts but allows Zafar's part in the war in the Rann to connect back to his father's, General Zulfikar, business interests. In other words, instead of troop movements, political maneuvering, and skirmishes along the front, the retelling of the 1965 border dispute between India and Pakistan focuses on ghosts, smugglers, and a humiliated son's revenge on his father. The history of the war in the Rann now contains a magical narration (the strange goings-on in the Rann's green light and their effects on the soldiers are not fully explained by the smugglers), a story of corruption, family politics, and, only marginally, the 'official' tensions between India and Pakistan whose true character we cannot know because of Pakistani propaganda.

Proliferation also occurs in the Dacca episode, but what happens on the Bangladeshi capital does not just add

to the volume of history, it adds to the absurdity of it. The Sundarbans chapter is straddled by Saleem's experience in the 1973 Indo-Pakistani war. While Saleem reconnects with his past in the jungles and leaves the buddha behind, his narrative attitude toward what he witnesses in Dacca remains the same:

> And while we drove through the streets Shaheed looked out of windows and saw things that weren't-couldn't-have-been true: soldiers entering women's hostels knocking; women, dragged into the streets, were also entered, and again nobody troubled to knock...Ayooba Shaheed Farooq watched in silence through moving windows as our boys, our solders-for-Allah, our worth-ten-babus jawans held Pakistan together by turning flame-throwers machine-guns hand-genades on the city slums (RUSHDIE 356-7).

And, after leaving the Sundarbans:

> Shaheed and I saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot in side-streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was

> not true because it could not have been true, the Tiger was a decent chap, after all, and our jawans were worth ten babus, we moved through the impossible hallucination of night (RUSHDIE 375).

Again, Rushdie stages simultaneous histories and creates tension between them. Saleem references the official Pakistani line when he repeatedly claims that 'our boys' would not prosecute the atrocities that he then describes in detail. The atrocities cannot be officially true because both Pakistan and India need to be able to claim moral high ground in the war. But this does not mean they do not actually take place. This tension once again increases the load that history must bear in the novel. Saleem's claim that events can both occur and be untrue is absurd - except in a fictional narrative. And with the absurd Rushdie applies the fatal blow to history. As what occurs in the Bangladeshi capital shows, this absurd contradiction is also part of history. Two statements of equivalency, that logically should not be able to exist side by side, do. Rushdie stages the atrocities in Dacca as simultaneously things that happen and things that are not true. This treatment pushes history beyond an excess of narratives to a logically instability.

Midnight's Children places all sorts of unexpected things under the umbrella of history. Personal, alternative, and contradictory narratives all run together Throughout the novel, Saleem exclaims repeatedly "I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (RUSHDIE 9). If we think of his claim in terms of volume of information, or in the form of a proliferation of narratives, the task he places before us is impossible. It presumes a level of interconnection so immense that the presumption of complete understanding, or complete organization, is impossible. If we see this interconnection as a redescription of the postcolonial episteme, we see that history can have no discernable structure like the binary of opposition, nor can it have authentic meaning as the atrocities in Dacca illustrate. The multiple, semi-differentiable histories that co-exist in the Sundarbans and during the Indo-Pakistani stand as evidence of this. The narratives can be organized along biographical, alternative, or political notions of history. But the interplay and reliance between narratives that Rushdie creates is so deep that workable distinctions between them cannot be made. History as a concept of organization reaches critical mass in Book

Three: it includes everything, even what is simultaneously true and untrue.

The final chapter of *Midnight's Children* finds present-day Saleem back in the pickle factory. As the narrator reflects on storytelling, he introduces the metaphor of "chutneyfication." Making chutney requires all the fruits and spices to leak into one another to form a substance which is somewhere between a heterogeneous and homogeneous mixture. Individual ingredients and tastes are discernable but not autonomous. This metaphor encapsulates Rushdie's aesthetic. He uses a plurality of differing ingredients in the form of narratives that might not seem to fit together and stages the leakages into one from to another and then to another. In doing so Rushdie redefines our understanding of heredity and history as nonessential.

Conclusion

I have tried to sketch a reading of *Midnight's Children* that looks at the postcolonial themes of the novel through the lens of Rorty's redescription. In doing so, I have set the thinking of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak as representative of limited vision of postcolonial opposition and let Rushdie, through Rorty, redescribe postcolonial agency and epistemology from the starting point of their theoretical trajectory. This exercise bears fruit in that it allows the reader to see the full success of Rushdie's means of discursive opposition. Redescription in the service of solidarity recasts Saleem as a fellow sufferer instead of a native. The heretofore native speaker is freed from the binary and becomes simply a speaker with a certain set of contingent circumstances. The interplay between biography and metanarrative shows that while Saleem cannot escape the events of history he can have full subjectivity over how that history is told. And as Saleem is voicing his subjectivity, Rushdie's aesthetic simultaneously undermines the knowledge structures that support the postcolonial binary. *Midnight's Children* marks the debut of Rushdie's overwhelming vision of plurality and interconnection, a vision of the world whose expression

Rorty would characterize as a redescription in the service of self-creation. The author destabilizes heredity and history as organizers of knowledge to show the non-essentialism of origins and historical narratives, two elements that play key roles in the binary of opposition. Without stable notions of essential origins and the authority of western history, the binary, as outlined by Said, cannot hold up. Unstable origins demonstrate the constructed nature of distinctions like 'native' and 'metropolitan.' Rushdie's all encompassing history undermines the privilege of western academic study that gave birth to the body of orientalist attitudes.

Rorty's notion of redescription allows us to see *Midnight's Children* as the ultimate oppositional text. It does not explicitly confront the ideologies of postcolonial discursive oppression as an activist text would, with four-hundred pages of Emil Zagallo forcing Saleem and his classmates at John Connon Boys School to refer to themselves as animals. Instead, the simultaneous redescription of speaker and epistemology seek to dissolve the problem of native agency by undermining the knowledge that holds the native as object.

The fact that Rorty allows us to see *Midnight's Children* as two redescriptions that occur simultaneously is

ironic. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty claims that there are two sorts of writers [or, more precisely, two sorts of writing]:

> One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulated need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the conviction to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language (RORTY 14-5).

In this passage Rorty asserts that the two forms of redescription I have employed, that of suffering in the service of solidarity (public) and that in the service of

self-creation (private) cannot speak the same language. He does this because he sees the languages of private vision and public responsibility as forever incommensurable.[10] That is, narratives of private fantasy such as those which communicate how an individual orders the world around him and descriptions of cruelty that help humans get closer to one another have nothing to do with each other. Just as Rorty allows us to see Rushdie's novel in a new light, I think *Midnight's Children* has something, in return, to say about Rorty's formulation. The central conceit of Rushdie's book, the genesis point that allows both his redescription of native subjectivity and the postcolonial episteme, is that Saleem and India are one, in a sense. The power of midnight gives birth to both a nation and one-thousand-and-one magic children. The magic of the midnight hour joins India's post-independence history and Saleem's desire for centrality. Magic allows Rushdie to cross-pollinate redescriptions that fall under Rorty's notions of the public, in the form of his redescription of the native speaker's plight, and the private, the author's personal aesthetic redescription of the world.

[10] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) xv.

In her essay "Scheherazade's Children," Wendy B. Faris includes "that magical things really do happen" and that "the reader may hesitate between contradictory understandings of events"[11] as two of the attributes of "magic realism." If we apply these criteria to the moment of simultaneous birth in *Midnight's Children* it is safe to say that Saleem's and India's genesis is a magic moment. Magic happens because magic children are born at midnight. Contradiction exists in the form of the suspicion that Saleem is a wholly unreliable narrator and all his narration is fabrication. And, yet, all of the novel's alternative histories and competing narratives emanate from this auspicious moment. In a sense, *Midnight's Children* is made possible by the inclusion of magic possibility. Magic, then, proves Rorty's distinction between public and private to be a false one. Rushdie not only joins a narrative of self-creation with a description of cruelty, but makes them complement one another. In the same sentences, pages, and chapters, *Midnight's Children* demonstrates self-creation in the form of an unstable aesthetic and broadens the category of fellow sufferers in the service of solidarity by bringing our attention to the

[11] Wendy B. Faris, "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.* Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) 169-171.

cruelty of discursive violence. The author weaves this two pronged intervention together in order to enable native subjectivity.

While the purpose of this paper is not to investigate Rorty's distinction between public and private narratives, that magic bridges this gap is an important note to make. In a sense, Rorty's binary helps us dissolve Saleem's. He tells us:

> If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that not theory about the nature of Man or Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx or Heidegger with Habermas, we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being a relation between two kinds of tools - in little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars (Rorty xiv).

I think *Midnight's Children* throws a monkey wrench in this approach because the novel confronts a postcolonial world in which autonomy from the binary of opposition and justice are one. For the 'native' to achieve independence is a reversal of the discursive injustice propagated by western empire. The possibility of magic allows Rushdie to expose

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