

RUSHDIE GOES TO B(H)OLLYWOOD: CINEMA IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract: Recent criticism of the novels of Salman Rushdie has focused on issues such as the interplay between the individual and history, the questioning of established constructions of identity and of dualistic thought and the problematizing of the national space. In keeping with such readings of Rushdie's fiction, this essay will argue that in *Midnight's Children* references to cinema are scattered throughout the novel and bring about the decenterment and fragmentation of its narrator and of the founding national narrative. Informed by cinematic devices the novel evades resolution in stable, clear-cut images and history is colored with "reelness".

Keywords: Fragmentation; Cinema; Nation.

Resumo: A crítica recente aos romances de Salman Rushdie tem focado temas como a relação entre o indivíduo e a história, o questionamento de formas estabelecidas de identidade e pensamentos dualistas e a problematização do espaço nacional. Seguindo esta corrente crítica, este artigo argumentará que em *Os Filhos da Meia Noite* as referências ao cinema que permeiam o texto levam ao decentramento e à fragmentação do narrador e da narrativa fundadora da nação. Permeado por recursos cinematográficos, o romance evade a resolução em imagens estáveis e a história é contaminada por "reelness".

Palavras-chave: Fragmentação; Cinema; Nação.

Obliged to attempt some sort of "There, there," I resort to movie-trailers. (How I loved them at the old Metro Club Club! O smacking of my lips at the sight of the title NEXT ATTRACTION, superimposed on undulating blue velvet! O anticipatory salivation before screens trumpeting COMING SOON!—Because the promise of exotic futures has seemed, to my mind, the perfect antidote to the disappointments of the present.) (RUSHDIE, 1991: 398)

In a 1995 essay titled "Taking a stand while lacking a center: Rushdie's postmodern politics", Kathryn Hume lists what she thinks is Salman Rushdie's novels' basic elements: "deconstruction of dualistic thought, interplay between history and the

individual, and the problematizing of identity.” (209) Hume’s main thesis in the article claims that “Rushdie’s fiction can by this point in his career be seen to circle around a pair of intertwined and recurring concerns: the decenterment of the individual and the difficulty of getting rid of tyrants” (1995: 209). In keeping with Hume’s understanding of some very basic issues and developments of Rushdie’s fiction, this essay will argue that *Midnight’s Children* attests to Rushdie’s taste for non-cohesive beings and narratives, that the text is hybrid in its auto-bio-graphing the life of its protagonist, and that the novel’s overall fragmentation is accomplished by cinematic devices.

Rushdie’s attempts to achieve fragmentation take place within the borders of the cinematic and the cinema screen, a field in which he perceptively examines the effect of the subtle difference at play within perceptions of reality moulded by both Hollywood and Bollywood.⁴⁴ The fact of diaspora and of the trauma of migration may explain many facets of Rushdie’s reading of culture: his emphasis on the mongrelisation of lives, his delight in the chutnification of history, and the importance given to the moment when “different pictures” enter his fictional world.⁴⁵ Scattered references to cinema continually inform the narrative of *Midnight’s Children* and they seem to point out that to be de-centered is also to be fragmented; fragments are the pieces of a whole, and may bear the marks of the original unity, but in some Rushdie’s novels, *Midnight’s Children* in our case, cinema and cinematic devices bring about both fragmentation (in the pseudo-founding narrative of the nation) and decenterment (in the life being auto-bio-graphed). Indeed, some critics, like Timothy Brennan (1989), have found Rushdie’s anti-nationalist, non-foundational reading of the nation-state particularly prescient and dependent on the above.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, a novel set in the periods between the struggles for independence from the British Empire in India and the years following it, relies heavily on a particular aspect of Indian culture, its love of film. Writing his autobiography, the novel’s narrator Saleem Sinai employs references to films and cinematic techniques. Bollywood, with its specific narration characteristics, and the Hollywood traditional film genres such as the Western, make up Saleem’s characterization of the newly independent nation and of his family’s troubles, which, for Saleem, have a direct bearing on national events.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the visual medium of cinema is blended into Saleem’s narrative and, in this way, provides the narrator with a set of instruments for describing (one might say of constructing images for the reader) the events in his story. In some passages the effect is of acceleration of time; in others, the use of cinematic devices such

⁴⁴ Rushdie’s concerns throughout his fiction with fragmentation are also discussed by DURIX (1989), FLANAGAN (1992), HARRISON (1990), and NAIK (1985).

⁴⁵ The politics of Rushdie’s postmodern politics and narrative mediation are discussed by BANANERJEE (2002), CLARK (2001), CUNDY (1997), DURIX (1982), DUTHEIL DE LA ROCHÈRE (1999), and PATTAYANAK (1983).

as close-ups becomes a way for Saleem to comment on the events he narrates, such as his mother's incestuous relationship with Nadir-Qasim, which Saleem describes in terms of the intricate codes of behavior between lovers in a Bollywood production. But most importantly, *Midnight's Children* functions as a parallel to the viewing of a film, to the working of cinema itself. As Saleem moves nearer to the present in his narrative, as he tries desperately to find the meaning and truth of his life, he describes it as moving nearer to the screen in a theatre. In films, this movement makes the image blur and eventually fragment into dots, making it impossible to create a coherent whole out of its specs.

In the novel this process is repeated in the move towards its ending, which is also that of Saleem. Saleem's lack of center follows the logic of a film, in which the audience is left out with a collection of moving pictures and must be able to construct coherent wholes or images of what they have seen at their own will; at the end of Saleem's narrative, we are also presented with this kind of fragmentation. *Midnight's Children* evades closure, judgment and fixed meanings. And the more the reader and Saleem himself follow events in the story to the present, hoping to make sense of them, to discover the meaning, the form and pattern to Saleem's life and the times he describes, the more the narrative evades this attempt. The novel's closing paragraph, the end of Saleem's autobiography, is a passage in which time, reality, and truth become uncertain, present and future intertwine and the line between foreshadowing and narration of actual facts becomes blurred. The picture Saleem has been building becomes distorted as he himself fragments into an infinite number of specs.

For the author, in fact, the analogy between oneiric considerations of representability and filmic narration by images is evident. Saleem Sinai sometimes finds that his memory is like a film. Recalling how as a child, convinced that his mother was having an affair, he followed her to an assignation at a Bombay cafe, he slips easily into the analogy. He recollects watching them "through the dirty, square, glassy cinema screen of the Pioneer Cafe's window" (RUSHDIE, 1991: 248). In front of the child's cinema-trained, memory-ridden eyes, they play out their role as lovers. The whole episode seems to depend on camera movements because these displace the spectator's/reader's gaze, they move it from one scene to an *other* scene, which may serve as proof of memory's vividness or film(dream)work in process, and become a scene from a film.⁴⁶

Condensation can also be found in the novel and in film, possibly in the form of composite images, iconic motifs assembling a series of signals and meanings. Salman Rushdie pointed out that he borrowed elements from the language of film that took description beyond what an observer could plausibly see. Saleem's revisualisation of the

⁴⁶ A theoretician who explains the relation between narrative and cinema from the perspective of psychoanalysis is METZ (1982). See also MONACO (1992) for cinematic terminology.

scene includes close-ups that can only be possible in films or photography. He zooms in to record the brand of the packet of cigarettes on the table between the "lovers" and condenses an iconic image: "State Express 555". Saleem reads the manufacturer's name and, "unable to look into my mother's face, I concentrated on the cigarette-packet, cutting from two-shot of lovers to this extreme close-up of nicotine." (RUSHDIE, 1991: 248) The lens of the imagination is sharpened by repetition and overdetermination, primary elements of both filmwork and dreamwork.

The lap dissolve, for instance, is for Rushdie another elemental, cinematic device, because it is codified as a punctuation mark and is a point of passage between two images; but it is also primary, in the instant of superimposition between the two images. "I may have got all this from an old film," Saleem seems to confess at the end of each of his recollections. Cinema shapes his memories. Saleem, from the beginning of his autobiographical narrative, uses film vocabulary to describe events in his family's and India's past. Re-telling the riots that shake the nation in the years preceding independence, Saleem writes:

Close-up of my grandfather's right hand: nails knuckles fingers all somehow bigger than you'd expect. Clumps of red hair on the outside edges. Thumb and forefinger pressed together [...] In short, my grandfather was holding a pamphlet. It had been inserted into his hand (we cut to a long-shot-nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary) as he entered the hotel foyer. (RUSHDIE, 1991: 30)

Saleem makes this declaration as he cuts from a close-up description of his grandfather as a young man to a long-shot of the streets of Amritsar. Bombay is the center of cinema, and cinematic analogy is essential to *Midnight's Children* because Saleem is brought up on film, and he is tainted with "reelness".

Using film techniques such as the close-up and the long-shot panorama, Saleem introduces a break in the reading process. The above-cited description early on in the novel does more than merely point to the centrality of cinema in Indian culture. In that passage, cinema's specific codes appeal to the reader's sense of vision, to the spectator's oneiric desires, and calls attention to the importance of the details in the passage, in this case, the massacre of protestors for Indian independence and Dr. Aziz's "tie" to the nation's history, which foreshadows Saleem's.

This small scene leads up to a climactic episode in Indian history. A few days following it, the massacre of peaceful protestors at Jallianwala Bagh by the English occurs. Saleem again writes it in a way that echoes cinema

On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding through this alleyway. “It is a peaceful protest”, someone tells Doctor Aziz. Swept along by the crowds, he arrives at the mouth of the alley. A bag from Heidelberg is in his hand. (No close-up is necessary). (RUSHDIE, 1991: 33)

Saleem shifts from the past tense he had been using to the present, as if he were writing directions for a screenplay. Ushered in by the close-up of Aadam and the pamphlet handed out by the protestors, Saleem makes the reader *see* what happens at the moment it happens, although at the back of the reader’s mind lies the knowledge that Saleem writes from memory. Saleem shifts from past tense to the kind of “always present” narration that is film. Using cinematic devices, he builds the image of the massacre for the reader. After this episode ends, Saleem switches again to the past tense and to the general mode of his narration.

Saleem uses cinematic narration again in much the same way when he describes the simultaneous wanderings of his parents in Delhi, each bent on a different adventure that will have great implications for his story:

One journey began at a fort; one should have ended at a fort, and did not. One foretold the future, the other settled its geographical location [...] One at a time then... and here is Amina Sinai beneath the high walls of the Red Fort, where Mughals ruled, from whose heights the new nation will be proclaimed [...] But here, refusing to wait its turn, is another taxi, pausing outside another fort, unloading its cargo of three men in business suits, each carrying a bulky gray bag under his coat. (RUSHDIE, 1991: 87-88)

Describing his mother’s trip to see Ramram Seth, the soothsayer that predicts Saleem’s future, and his father’s trip to pay off a Hindu terrorist gang to prevent them from burning down his business, Saleem does not simply tell the reader, both events just happen simultaneously. For such narrative feat, he employs a type of cinematic narration technique, “cutting” from one part of the story to the other with increasing speed as each of his parents’ stories reaches its climax. Saleem’s narrative style shows, rather than simply tells the reader, how both episodes are connected to each other. The effect is the same as that of seeing them in a film. Narrative time is accelerated as Amina finally hears the prediction of her son’s future and Ahmed Sinai’s warehouse burns down, an omen of the kind of failures that will plague Saleem’s future.

Cinema is such an integral part of Saleem’s narrative that his life is actually foreshadowed by one of his uncle’s screenplays (this also doomed to failure). Unwittingly, Hanif Aziz, the failed Bombay film director and screenwriter,

the only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry, was writing the story of a pickle-factory created, run and worked entirely by women... It is ironic that this arch-disciple of naturalism should have been so skillfull (if unconscious) a prophet of his family's fortunes; in the indirect kisses of *The Lovers of Kashmir* he foretold my mother and her Nadir-Qasim's meetings at the Pioneer Café; and in his unfilmed chutney scenario, too, there lurked a prophecy of deadly accuracy. (RUSHDIE, 1991: 279)

Taking his cue from his uncle, Saleem, now manager of the pickle factory run by strong women, writes his mother's meetings with Nadir-Qasim in terms of the directions of a script meant for a Bollywood film. In this way, Saleem's "characters" mirror those of his uncle's and their love is expressed in the same way as in the sophisticated imagery created by Hanif for the Indian screen, in which lovers cannot kiss each other and resort to kissing symbolically by kissing objects.

Nadir-Qasim, besides acting out on the page the love scenes portrayed in the *Lovers of Kashmir* on the screen, also voices what might be taken as one of the novel's reflections on art and on the separation between "high" art and popular manifestations (such as the cinema) in its interweaving of different media. Nadir, the poet, comments on his craft (which is also Saleem's, that of the writer) saying "I do not believe in high art, Mian Sahib. Now art must be beyond categories; my poetry and -oh- the game of hit the spittoon are equals." (RUSHDIE, 1991: 45) *Midnight's Children*, intertwining as it does the popular art of film with the (usually considered) high art of literature, represents this idea.

Midnight's Children seems to refuse hierarchical categorizations and strict distinctions between art forms, using both literary and cinematic devices. And if we read it in this way, we realize that film is central to the way the novel actually works. Saleem makes an analogy between reading and watching:

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. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves-or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality... we have come from 1915 to 1956, so we are a good deal closer to the screen. (RUSHDIE, 1991: 189)

Saleem establishes here a parallel between the viewing of a film and the telling of his story. As he comes to the end, as he moves closer to the screen, the point at which the

meaning of his life should be established, Saleem finds that discovering truth and coming to a final judgment on his times is impossible, although his entire life has been a quest for these certainties. The writing of his autobiography, which should have established these certainties for Saleem, as he minutely scrutinizes his family's history, does not give him what he expects.

This analogy between the proximity to the screen and the present, the ending of the novel, causes Saleem, the authoritative voice in the text, to crack under his skin. Saleem is also fragmenting and, at the end of the novel, the domains of illusion, dream, and reality overlap giving way to "reelness". The reader cannot distinguish between Saleem's imagining, foreshadowing or factual description of his own death, of his final move and fragmentation into as many specs as the number of the Indian population, so close are we to the screen.

Throughout the novel, Saleem has persistently tried to make meaning out of his and India's history. But in the end, all he achieves is to present the "facts" and a number of possible reasons for them:

If it happened, what were the motives? Again a rash of possible explanations: the continuing anger which had been stirred up by the Rann of Kutch; the desire to settle, once-and-for-all, the old issue of who-should-possess-the-Perfect-Valley?...Or one which didn't get into the newspapers: the pressures of internal political troubles in Pakistan [...] This reason, that or the other? (RUSHDIE, 1991: 387)

As Saleem tries to cope with the events surrounding him, as he tries to explain them, only more questions present themselves. In the end, fragmentation and decenterment are what *Midnight's Children* presents to the reader. Saleem is too close to the screen, a limitation the novel imposes on the reader as well. We, including Saleem, try to grasp the novel's "meaning", but it refuses to fix into one coherent image and fragments into (im)possibilities.

And so the novel must end in an open way, with an open pickle jar and Saleem's final fragmentation into dust, into specs, into tiny dots. Whether this really happens, the reader cannot tell. We cannot define a certain closure to the novel, as it cannot impose a closure to the world it describes. *Midnight's Children* leaves the reader then with "a nose pressed up against the screen". The reader has followed Saleem in his quest for making a coherent, whole picture of his life and times: an auto-bio-graphed text hybrid in form and content. In *Midnight's Children* this search for certainties can only be equaled to the move Saleem describes towards the screen, with the same outcome. The midnight children end up being a cinematic device emphasising the continued struggle to come to terms with multiple identities within the polarities of the post-colonial. The tyranny of

meaning lap dissolves into fragmentation and decenterment, for they ensue when Rushdie goes to B(H)ollywood.

Curious enough, not only does Rushdie go to B(H)ollywood, but it seems he is also going to important television networks to have his novels adapted to the small screen. His focus now follows protracted attempts to secure a screen adaptation of *Midnight's Children*, his cinema-inspired novel on the history of modern India, which is currently being made into a film to be called *Winds of Change*. (BINGHAM, 2011) With his usual palaver, Salman Rushdie declared in a 2011 interview to *The Telegraph*: “[My agents] said to me that what I should really think about is a TV series, because what has happened in America is that the quality – or the writing quality – of movies has gone down the plughole.” (BINGHAM, 2011) Rushdie then adds the following comment as an afterthought: “I think literature is operating outside those [commercial bounds], or has the possibility of doing so in a way that television largely doesn’t.” (BINGHAM, 2011) In other words, faced with the choice between writing scripts (for movies or television) and writing novels, no hierarchy intended, Rushdie makes it very clear that he would rather stick to literature, but, we should add, never doing away with that cinematic quality and devices that are so much a constituent part of *Midnight's Children*.

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