

A SENSE OF NATION: SALMAN RUSHDIE'S SYNESTHETIC PORTRAYAL  
OF POSTCOLONIAL INDIA IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

by

Alexandria Janette McCormick

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Major Subject: English

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* creates a synesthetic narrative that parallels a diverse nation's attempt to find a national postcolonial identity, one that embraces cultural hybridity. With Rushdie's use of synesthesia in mind, I analyze the novel with the five senses as the main guiding points. In Chapter One I consider the ways in which Rushdie uses smell and taste to stand in for or compliment spoken and written narratives (sound). Using research on olfactory emotion associations, I argue that food may remind Indians of their forgotten history where words cannot. Taking a more theoretical approach, Chapter Two examines the role of film in *Midnight's Children*. Through his narrator Saleem Sinai and the novel form, Rushdie achieves the social realism for which New Indian cinema strove, as opposed to the passive viewership of popular Bombay melodramas. Just as synesthesia does not use a single sense, there is no homogenized Indian identity. I argue, as does Rushdie, India is its diversity (what he calls its "multitudes").

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express her sincerest thanks to Dr. Bonnie Roos, who showed me endless patience and who supported me above and beyond the thesis director requirements. I would not have made it through this difficult process without her. To Dr. Eric Meljac, who inspires me with his own dedication to self-education and who provided valuable feedback for my current and future research. To Dr. Monica Smith-Hart, who greets me with an encouraging smile and who is such a positive influence. To Dr. Alex Hunt, for continually working around my thesis commitments and for pushing me to see this project through. To Daniel Klaehn, who never failed to provide me honest advice these past few years. And to the rest of the English, Philosophy, and Modern Languages department, there is not a day I walked through the EPML halls without at least one faculty member cheering me on. I would also like to thank my mother, Sarah Pennington. She is the strongest person I know. No matter how many times I was overcome with self-doubt, she always made sure to express her belief in me—I guess I really could get it done, Mom—thank you. To Rigel, who has read my work as much as I have and who always gave me honest feedback, even when I did not want to hear it but needed to.

I dedicate my thesis to Michael Scott Pennington—I would not be where I am without your help—and Pat Knox Calkins—I would not be the wacky person I am without Pat Bob's influence. I hope I have made both of you proud.

Thank you all.

Approved:

---

[Chairman, Thesis Committee] [Date]

---

[Member, Thesis Committee] [Date]

---

[Department Head/Direct Supervisor] [Date]

---

[Dean, Academic College] [Date]

---

[Dean, Graduate School] [Date]

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter One .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter Two.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>66</b>

## INTRODUCTION

*“History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge.”*

-Salman Rushdie, “‘Errata’: Or, Unreliable narration in *Midnight’s Children*”

During my younger years, I lived next door to a family from India. The mother, born in Sri Lanka, cooked amazing Indian food (and still does, I imagine, although I have not had the honor of eating with them since my early teens). One of the Sri Lankan dishes she often made, Kiribath, is a mix of coconut milk and rice eaten for good luck, typically at weddings and the start of a new year. After the family moved to Kansas, she would cook it for our last day when we visited them, feeding us her wishes for a safe trip home.

I recently tried to make this dish to use for breakfast throughout the week, thinking it would be a positive way to start each day. While cooking, I found myself tearing up (no onions to blame with this dish), remembering different occasions she cooked Kiribath for us. While the physical act of cooking in this instance took me back to my childhood, it also got me thinking about the power of food—particularly smell and taste—to evoke memories and the role the senses play in this recollection.

Like others, I pair food with personal memories, placing the sensory reaction to Kiribath (the smell, taste, and texture of it) and the above memory as a reminder of her love. In his novel *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie also uses sensory responses to

## INTRODUCTION

help India's memory, but he takes the responses even further, attempting—through his narrator Saleem Sinai—to remind India of its past, a past left out of history books.

Despite its fictional grounding, the messages of *Midnight's Children* are valuable to and reflect on reality. Born on August 15, 1947—the first day of India's Independence—Saleem is among the one thousand and one children born at the exact stroke of midnight, thus their titular label, midnight's children, which highlights one of the main elements that makes this a magic realist text. The coinciding birth of the midnight's children and India's Independence parallels the real-life hope India had for its rebirth during Independence; however, as Saleem reminds and is reminded constantly, there is no escaping the past. For a country, a person, to progress, it, he, or she must embrace the past.

With such lofty goals, *Midnight's Children* is in no way a light read. I first intended to analyze the duality within the novel (alpha and omega, male and female, Shiva and Saleem—the divides are everywhere) and then look at other Indo-English novels, both inspired by or inspiring for Rushdie, to consider this dual state in which postcolonial Indians seem to exist. While that approach serves a role in some of my analysis, I became aware that Rushdie's description of the senses supports supernatural elements in the story. Tapping into this use of senses in “Fissured Skin, Inner-Ear Radio, and a Telepathic Nose: The Senses as Media in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,” Ankhi Mukherjee summarizes Aristotle to explain how “[t]he senses stand in between reason and irrationality, between the mind and material phenomena. They serve as anti-mediatory media in that they do not filter, select or refuse data” (58). Based on that explanation, Mukherjee suggests sensory responses are genuine cognitive reactions

## INTRODUCTION

untainted by the bias of perception until the conscious mind begins deciphering the sensory reaction—they are simply the stimulant sparking a reaction in the brain. She continues:

*Midnight's Children* upholds the singularity of aesthetic judgement and pits it against a rationality and mimesis that equate knowledge with the objects of knowledge. This is no sensual purism or an authentication of the autochthonous body, but Rushdie seems to use the alternative register of (sensory) perception to form an extant self that dynamically corresponds to or provides a threshold for its new historical and political realities. (58)

I believe Rushdie uses Mukherjee's "alternative register" to build a bridge between objective and subjective history. Based on this assumption, I close-read the novel, noting each significant use of one of the five senses. I observed that Rushdie did not use the senses in a straightforward, typical manner where you smell a scent and hear a sound. Instead, his narrator seems to confuse his senses. I decided this confusion was not to undermine the narrator's senses; on the contrary, this confusing of the senses marks Saleem as a supersensory being, his main super power being his abnormal sense of smell. Adding to this discussion of literary sensory devices, Mukherjee points out: "The metaphorical element in the use of a 'sensuous' word concretizes to a literal expression [...]. Metaphor becomes a catachresis, a virtual double that fills in for the original, undermining it with imitation, till it is supplanted" (59). To break Mukherjee's statement down: by using accepted understandings and meanings to explain the senses we, basically, dumb down the sensory reaction. If something "smells *like* vanilla," the scent is no longer its own entity but something forever comparative to vanilla, an echo of this



## INTRODUCTION

descriptor it is like. But, Mukherjee believes Rushdie “recuperates the sensorium from the metaphorical nature of figurative language itself [...] [and] hijacks the sensorium to represent nonsensical structures of feeling” (59). As she indicates, Rushdie takes the senses beyond their stereotypical metaphors. Furthermore, Rushdie has Saleem’s senses not just heightened but also constantly cross-wired: colors to describe smells, emotions to describe taste. This crossing of the senses creates a synesthetic narrative and what Mukherjee calls the “nonsensical structures of feeling,” that, I contend, parallels a diverse nation’s attempt to find a national postcolonial identity. To drastically simplify and replace identifying characteristics with senses, we could have taste stand in for Buddhist Indians, sight for English-speaking Indians, touch for Indian farmers—these traits can mix but they can also disagree with each other (just as the senses may conflict when something does not taste like it smells); however, with India as the body containing these sensory identities, they must find some kind of symbiosis for the body to continue functioning. There is no homogenized Indian identity, just as synesthesia does not use a single sense. I argue, as does Rushdie, India is its diversity (what he calls its “multitudes” [Niven 54]).

In short, synesthesia occurs when one sensory stimulus evokes a reaction through one of the other senses. For example, the scent of gasoline may make a person taste marinara sauce. Or the color blue may make a person hear a flag rippling in the wind. In her book *Brain Sense: The Science of the Senses and How We Process the World Around Us*, Faith Hickman Brynie calls synesthesia a “combin[ing] [of] the senses” and offers other examples: “Some people see sounds as color. Others get taste sensations from musical sounds. [...] Some people perceive numbers as shapes, words as tastes, or odors

## INTRODUCTION

as tactile sensations in the hands” (183). Importantly, this mixing of senses is not simply sensory associations—although associations do play a part as we learn things with multiple senses, and thus we later have multiple sensory recalls in response to a stimulus. Moreover, M. H. Gendle discovered in a 2005 study that for his subject, “synesthesia is strongly influenced by prior life experiences/interactions with words and the concepts that these words represent” (502). So, even though Mukherjee claims sensory responses are a more subconscious act, Gendle and Brynie suggest that those responses can still be influenced by life experiences and other senses. According to Brynie,

Studies suggest we may all be synesthetes of a sort [...] [b]ecause the senses influence each other in the “first-stop,” stimulus-processing region of the brain, as well as “higher up,” where sensory information is integrated. [...] Information exchange occurs between and among those multisensory areas and the primary-processing regions. (187)

In other words, a stimulated response may travel through multiple sensory processing regions before settling on the standard sensory response; through that journey, the response will evoke degrees of other sensory reactions, or those reactions will piggyback onto the primary reaction, providing a sort of sensory echo. But the primary sensory experience is the true basis for synesthesia. This phenomenon may seem like a handicap or confusion of the senses, but in some it is an enhancement (both Gendle and Brynie’s subjects admitted to using their synesthesia to help memory recall). Likewise, Rushdie’s character Saleem views his synesthesia as a positive, something that gives him abilities others do not have.

## INTRODUCTION

Considering how metaphors must be used to describe sensory experience brings into discussion how authors use the senses. Literature, to a degree, lends itself to synesthesia. The author must use words to describe sounds, tastes, smells, feelings, and, of course, sights, and then the audience has to pair the words with visuals. We cannot hear the sound being described, and, except in special cases like onomatopoeias (and even that is not an exact correlation), the author cannot write and the reader cannot hear the actual sound; instead, signs stand in to signify the sensory responses (or signs stand in to signify letters, which combine to make words, which then pair with learned associations). In this case, associations are typically used to imitate a synesthetic response. For example, a foul smell would be described through an unpleasant visual: *the air smelled like a rotting corpse*. We do not read that description and smell decay<sup>1</sup> but have a negative response to the vision of a rotting corpse, or even just the idea of a rotting corpse, and thus associate the smell as a negative experience. To understand how synesthesia could parallel national identity, an overview of Indian history is required.

For many, midcentury and the start of Independence marks the divide of Indian identity. From the 1858 until 1947, India was under British rule. The British Empire not only controlled the country's government, but it created and instilled new values in the citizens of India. Possibly the most notable "gift" the colonizers brought, English became a lingua franca within India, a country with numerous languages and subjective conflict embedded within those languages; the same could be said for religion, but Christianity did not take root in the way English did, and India is still vastly divided by religious views.

---

<sup>1</sup> See my discussion in Chapter One for more on the rare ability to "image" scents.

## INTRODUCTION

With Jawaharlal Nehru (who would become India's first prime minister) and Mahatma Gandhi<sup>2</sup> (who led the peaceful protest of anti-cooperation against imperialism) at the helm, India entered Independence at midnight on April 15, 1947. As India discovered, the declaration of India's Independence did not immediately create (and arguably still has not created) a united country. Many of the pre-Independence issues still existed; it was just Indian government opposed to British government handling them. One of these issues was (is) the religious conflict between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. Attempting to resolve this conflict, a condition of India's Independence was the partitioning of Pakistan and India. Unfortunately, this abrupt division resulted in many citizens finding themselves on the wrong side of the border: Muslims trapped in the now Hindu- and Sikh-dominant India, and vice versa.

Narrating from a pickle factory in the late 1970s-early 80s, Saleem Sinai marries his life to major events that occurred throughout the century, the largest being India's establishment of Independence in 1947 and the subsequent partitioning of India and Pakistan, placing himself or one of his family members as a part of each. Making the story even more fantastical, various characters have supernatural abilities. Our narrator, naturally, is one of these supernatural beings. Saleem's nose has given him various powers throughout his life. First, his nose allowed him to hear—and later speak—mentally with others. Second, after losing his telepathy, he gains the ability to smell beyond the norm and to decipher emotions (and more) within scents. This use of the unbelievable makes his story slightly easier to accept; he admittedly confuses historical dates, but, as the supernatural reminds us, this is a work of fiction that requires a certain

---

<sup>2</sup> Out of respect for Gandhi, I am deliberately using the honorific *Mahatma*. He was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

## INTRODUCTION

suspension of disbelief. Rushdie uses this passive acceptance to expose his audience to historical truths that do not make it into popular retellings of India's past. Through this commingling of the senses, Rushdie depicts a postcolonial India inhabited by a hybridized body of people searching for their postcolonial identity. While all are influenced by imperialism, Indians faced the challenge of determining what aspects of imperialism to do away with.

Considering Rushdie's use of synesthesia, then, I analyze the novel with the five senses as the main guiding point. My first chapter incorporates smell, taste, and sound; the second chapter, sight and touch; and the third, sound. This analysis is not exhaustive but is instead narrowed down to limit the examination of senses into certain themes. Rushdie's use of the senses goes beyond simple descriptors, and examining the ways in which he uses sight, smell, taste, sound, and touch provides a lens through which to read his work that demonstrates the synesthetic-like state of postcolonial Indians searching for national identity.

In Chapter One I consider the ways in which Rushdie uses smell and taste to stand in for or compliment speech (sound). Saleem narrates from the pickle factory, where he pairs each written chapter with a jar of chutney—smell and taste. He also speaks each chapter to his illiterate lover Padma while encouraging her to eat his favorite chutney. Using research on olfactory emotion associations, I argue that food may remind Indians of their forgotten history where words cannot.

Taking a more theoretical approach, Chapter Two examines the role of film in *Midnight's Children*. Through female characters in particular, Rushdie—deliberately or not—exemplifies the concepts of scopophilia (directing the gaze, particularly in a way

## INTRODUCTION

that fetishizes parts of a person, objectifying him or her) and suturing (the piecing together of fragmented scenes and subsequent acceptance from the viewer as a passive viewing subject). These concepts pair with Indian film's trend of the "phantom touch," where, to keep audiences pure, actors were not allowed to touch; instead, the actors would touch objects that stood in for a body part of the other character. Despite using techniques that inspire passive viewership (readership), Rushdie challenges these concepts, manipulating them in a way that requires active viewer-reader participation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INDEPENDENCE AND IMPOTENCE: HOW SALEEM SINAI RECLAIMS HIS MANHOOD THROUGH THE “IMPREGNATION OF FOOD WITH EMOTIONS”

*“And now I must tell you about the smell.”*

–Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*

*“I was told by one of the tourists that India was indeed a truly wonderful country with many remarkable traditions, and would be just fine and perfect if one did not constantly have to eat Indian food.”*

–Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*

What do smell, taste, sound, and postcolonial India have in common? As demonstrated in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, food has the power to spark memories through smell and taste. Taking this idea further, Rushdie’s narrator Saleem uses food as a way to communicate with postcolonial India about nationalism. Published in 1981, Rushdie retells the history of twentieth century India, specifically the events pre- and post-Independence, with Saleem as the focal point. Through Saleem, Rushdie accomplishes a mindboggling metacommentary of his views on Indian hybridity and how Indian identity requires an embracing of this hybridity. Even Independent India carries the sway of imperialism as colonization is still embedded within society and government, shaping the way people act. At the same time, however, traces of colonization do not mean Indian heritage must be tossed away. Instead, colonized subjects must look within to find the essence of their heritage. For Saleem, this essence is found through food and

## CHAPTER ONE

cooking. Working at a pickle factory, Saleem combines speech with taste and smell as he matches each chapter he writes with a jar of chutney. Through gustatory and olfactory associations, Saleem can reach his audience through more than words. His methods record an honest, authentic history that even though flawed in places, embraces hybrid identity and includes or at least signifies and sparks recollection of the whole of India's past.

Rather than purely factual, Saleem tells an emotionally driven history. Taking pages from the books of women in his life (Reverend Mother, Alia, and Mary Pereira), Saleem cooks emotions into each chapter's jar of chutney, preserving them. This preservation works through both taste and smell. For Saleem's family, food is more than just something to be eaten for nutrients. When Reverend Mother (Saleem's grandmother), Aadam (his grandfather), and Amina (his mother) are discussing Ahmed's (Saleem's father's) depression-induced sickness,<sup>3</sup> the first concern Reverend Mother has is, "What food are you giving?" (157). From there, Reverend Mother and Mary Pereira begin cooking all the meals, and "restored to the status of daughter in her own home, Amina began to feel the emotions of other people's food seeping into her—because Reverend Mother doled out the curries and meatballs of intransigence [...]; Amina ate the fish salans of stubbornness and the birianis of determination"; and Mary "stirred into [her dishes] the guilt of her heart, and the fear of discovery" (158). Amina, emotionally overwhelmed, loses her patience, exclaiming: "I'm fed up" (158). Amina's word choice here supports Saleem's belief that emotions can be cooked into food and that others can then consume and adopt those emotions—Amina, "fed up," becomes too full of the

---

<sup>3</sup> The government just froze Ahmed's assets, which subsequently freezes his testicles, unmanning him as husband twofold: he cannot provide for his family and he cannot produce any more children.



## CHAPTER ONE

others' emotions so carelessly dumped into food. Even more, Rushdie's characters use food to combat Ahmed's government-caused illness. But, despite Reverend Mother and Mary trying to help, they take away Amina's only power: her place as ruler of the domestic duties, leaving her feeling helpless.

Like his father during the previous scene, Saleem too is unmanned. Unlike his father, who wallows in his emasculation, Saleem, after a time, embraces the abilities he realizes come with his unmaning. At fifteen, Saleem loses his nasal telepathy. His parents, tired of Saleem's over congested nose, trick him into attending a sinus doctor to have his sinuses cleared. Even though Saleem admits, "my parents ruined me for love" (345), at first he feels "ruined" and as though they had "properly finished [him] off" (336). For Saleem, who could never truly smell out of his clogged sinuses, his nose equaled something else, his telepathic ear to hear the midnight's children. While panicking as he is being anesthetized, he remembers "how nasal passages had started everything in [his] head, how nasal fluid had been sniffed upupup into somewhere-that-nosefluid-shouldn't-go, how the connection had been made which released [his] voices" (347).

When he wakes up post-operation, the emptiness of his sinuses causes him to blend smell and sound. He mourns:

Silence inside me. A connection broken (for ever). Can't hear anything  
(nothing there to hear).

Silence, like a desert. And a clear, free nose (nasal passages full of  
air). Air, like a vandal, invading my private places.

Drained. I have been drained. (348)

## CHAPTER ONE

Interestingly, the parenthetical notes seem to contradict the extravagant story he so desperately wants Padma and Mary to believe. It seems not only did this draining cut him off from the voices in his head, it opened up the way for voices of doubt.

Throughout the chapter, there is the unmistakable parallel between nasal drainage and reproductive drainage. This parallel, of course, foreshadows the drainage he will undergo at the Widow's hand. This foreshadowing is also seen as Saleem contemplates the history of his name, Sinai, coming to the ultimate meaning, for him: "it is a name of the desert—of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end" (349). Like the later draining cutting him off from the possibility of biological children, the draining of his sinuses "banish[es] him from the possibility of midnight children" (348). On the other hand, it allows him to smell and gives him the power to tell his scent-laden story.

Saleem, empowered with this same ability to infuse food with emotions, attempts to do so deliberately, as opposed to Revered Mother's and Mary's seemingly careless dumping of emotions that overflow Amina. Illuminating his frame narration, Saleem explains his goal:

Rising from my pages comes the unmistakable whiff of chutney. So let me obfuscate no further: I, Saleem Sinai, possessor of the most delicately-gifted olfactory organ in history, have dedicated my latter days to the large-scale preparation of condiments. [...] And my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribbles—by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (37)

## CHAPTER ONE

Fearing his skin is cracking apart and that nothing will be left of him, this preservation is the only hope he feels he has left; although he wants his story to be more than just words on pages, he wants his son to find meaning in Saleem's story after Saleem dies.

For Saleem, one of the ultimate emotions he receives from food is comfort (specifically green chutney). He seeks this comfort when he, as present day narrator Saleem, gets sick and his fever leads him to dream of the horrors he experienced while at the mercy, or lack thereof, of the Widow's (Indira Gandhi's) hand—the woman overseeing forced sterilizations, an attempt at population control. Saleem flashes back and forth between his present self and his also fevered ten-year-old self, dropping clues as to the identity of Mary, who he keeps anonymous at this time. His clues suggest she is trying to sneak her way into the story:

We are not alone. [...] Someone (never mind who) stands beside Padma at my bedside [...]. Someone speaks anxiously, trying to force her way into my story ahead of time [...]. Someone will just have to step back and remain cloaked in anonymity until it's her turn; and that won't be until the very end. (239)

Mary's identity is further hinted at as someone who cared for Saleem during a childhood fever. The importance of this caring, the secret of Mary's hidden identity, is kept within food. To complete his comfort, Saleem demands, "'Green chutney' [...]. And someone who cannot be named remembers and tells Padma [...] 'I know what he means'" (240). At this point, Saleem is about to narrate traumatic life events and needs the security of this childhood chutney. He explains, "I intended to defend myself; but I required the assistance of chutney..." (240). As he convinces Padma and Mary that his story is true,

## CHAPTER ONE

he uses the green chutney to persuade them: “[...] with a little smile I say, ‘Here: everybody: take some chutney. I must tell you some important things.’ [...] And while chutney [...] carried them back into the world of my past, while chutney mellowed them and made them receptive, I spoke to them [...]” (241).

In the above passages, the green chutney serves multiple purposes. When he is scared, the familiar food item can transport him to a time when the exact food, and the love with which Mary administered it, makes him feel safe. He then tries to pass on this comfort to his own audience as he encourages them to eat the chutney. At the same time, he pairs the food with his urging of them to believe his story, making it work to lower their defenses against the difficult to believe parts of his narrative—his speech is woven within the smell and taste of food.

The condiment also has the power to reveal secrets and reconnect separated individuals. At one of the lowest points in Saleem’s life (there are many, and I think it’s a matter of interpretation to choose *the* lowest)—he has lost all of his family, whether through death or excommunication; Parvati the witch just died, and he has been forcefully vasectomized—Saleem finds himself at an exclusive club as his friend Picture Singh competes for the title of “Most Charming Man In The World.” While waiting for Picture Singh to recover from fainting after the contest, Saleem has the ultimate gustatory association. He remembers:

[...] one of the blind waitresses brought us a congratulatory, reviving meal. On the thali of victory: samosas, pakoras, rice, dal, puris; and green chutney. Yes, a little aluminum bowl of chutney, green, my God, green as grasshoppers [...] and then I had tasted it, and almost imitated the fainting

## CHAPTER ONE

act of Picture Singh, because it had carried me back to a day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz, and was given the best chutney in the world...the taste of the chutney was more than just an echo of that long-ago taste—it was the old taste itself, the very same, with the power of bringing back the past as if it had never been away. (525)

Saleem's description of the chutney gives it supernatural powers; it can "revive" and "bring back." Of course, not any chutney would do. Variations may spark a degree of recall, but in this case "it was the old taste itself, the very same" (525), and that flavor is the most potent.

And the most beautiful, emotional moment of the story is when Saleem finds the chutney cook after leaving the club:

[...] there was a cry from the catwalk [...] the catwalk from which someone whom I have not been willing to name until now was looking down, across gigantic picklevats and simmering chutneys [...] Just as I had guessed, the Manager Begum of Braganza Pickles (Private) Ltd., who called herself Mrs. Braganza, was of course my erstwhile ayah, the criminal of midnight, Miss Mary Pereira, the only mother I had left in the world. (526)

Naturally, this scene takes place within the pickle factory from which the story begins, bringing it full cycle. As Mary's sister Alice boasts, "nobody makes achar-chutney like our Mary [...] because she puts her feelings inside them" (528). This unique recipe takes

## CHAPTER ONE

Saleem back to his childhood home both through the smell- and taste-fueled emotional recall and through his reconnection with Mary Pereira.

Smells can also reveal darker truths, Saleem discovers. As his sister Jamila Singer becomes the image of purity and the voice of Pakistan nationalism; Saleem slinks off to the comfort of prostitutes where he discovers how low he has fallen: he is in love with his sister. His chosen prostitute, “the whore of whores [...] [t]he richest spoor he, Saleem, had ever sniffed” he “nosed out” (364). The draw he feels towards her—Tai Bibi—he finds, is that she “possessed a mastery over her glands so total that she could alter her bodily odors to match those of anyone on earth” (365). It is “during trial-and-error the most unspeakable fragrance on earth wafts out of the cracked wrinkled leather-ancient body”—the scent of Jamila Singer (365-66). It is here, with the choice term “unspeakable,” that Saleem truly demonstrates how scents can reveal suppressed truths: smell has the power to expose the truth when the conscious person does not want to admit it. He emphasizes again the “unspeakableness” of this secret: “I learned the unspeakable secret of my love for Jamila Singer from the mouth and scent-glands of that most exceptional of whores” (366; “mouth” as she sees Saleem’s arousal to her scent and while guessing who it could be speaks the “unspeakable” through her mouth, Saleem gives himself away by expressing anger and shame when Tai Bibi asks, “Your sister?” [366]). This discovery leads to the falling out between Jamila Singer and Saleem and the subsequent low points Saleem hits.

While on his downward spiral, Saleem shows the power of smell to both remind and forget (through distraction), and the challenges of learning scents so late in life (not much earlier he had been tricked into having an operation that opened his sinuses and

## CHAPTER ONE

sense of smell). In the midst of mourning his grandfather's death, Saleem escapes and "explore[s] the olfactory avenues of my new city [...] [and becomes] even more determined to drown out the past in the thick, bubbling scent-stew of the present" (362). Finally able to smell, Saleem attempts to gorge himself to the point he can no longer think beyond the scent associations, allowing the emotions to hit but not the memories. This binge, though, even reaches a stopping point: "I was, for a time, like a drugged person, my head reeling beneath the complexities of smell; but then my overpowering desire for form asserted itself, and I survived" (363).

After indulging in the hypersensual chaos of the yet undocumented scents, Saleem embarks on cataloging each smell. Rather than a simple pairing between scent and object, Saleem struggles at first as he "trie[s] to classify smells by color" and then shapes (363-64). When he succeeds, however, he discovers an abnormality in his ability to smell when he "move[s] on to those other aromas which only [he] could smell: the perfumes of emotions and all the thousand and one drives which make us human: love and death, greed and humility, have and have-not were labeled and placed in neat compartments of my mind" (363). When narrating his story between chutney jars and sheets of paper, Saleem then tries to access these compartments of his mind, and pass on these "perfumes of emotions" to his audience, in hopes of using smell to remind them of forgotten truths.

Fantastical as they may seem within the novel, the emotional associations to food have been backed by scientific research. In the chapter "Odor Memory and the Special Role of Associative Learning," from the book *Olfactory Cognition: From Perception and Memory to Environmental Odours and Neuroscience*, Rachel Herz updates Trygg Egen's research on the way the brain processes odors and the effect that has on memory. Herz

## CHAPTER ONE

finds that while the ability to mentally smell a scent that is signified (the ability to *image* scents) is rare, the capability of scents to spark emotional responses is quite common. Olfactory memory associations are not typically overwritten throughout a person's life (Herz). While the memory itself will likely be distorted, scent memories sparked even half a century later can recall exact emotions from the first experience with that odor (Herz). Saleem's reunion with Mary exemplifies this recall: the smell and taste make him emotionally respond, and then his conscious brain connects the emotional response to his memories of Mary.

Even though chaotic at times, Saleem's culinary narrative follows certain rules and styles. First, there are the requirements and potential ingredients of his process:

What is required for chutnification? [...] above all a nose capable of discerning the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humor and messages and emotions [...] I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans...believe don't believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation. (530)

In this passage, Saleem again notes the rarity of his ability to "write" in food, but that he does so shows his belief that anyone can "read" through food. Then, there are the rules he breaks, rules of both family privacy and sense associations:

Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the



## CHAPTER ONE

stories less juicy; so I am about to become the first and only member of my family to flout the laws of halal. Letting no blood escape from the body of the tale, I arrive at the unspeakable part; and, undaunted, press on.

(62)

The dirty dish Saleem is about to serve up is the reveal that Aadam's daughter Mumtaz (later Amina, Saleem's mother) and her then husband Nadir never consummated their marriage in their two years together (followed by the trickle down of events that leads to Nadir divorcing Mumtaz, and Mumtaz's sister, Emerald, marrying the man hunting down Nadir, Major Zulfikar). During the two years Mumtaz and Nadir are married, plus one from when Nadir first arrives, Reverend Mother refuses to speak; the news breaks her silence: "The silence, which had been hanging in the corners of the house like a torn cobweb, was finally blown away [...] Three years of words poured out of her (but her body, stretched by the exigencies of storing them, did not diminish)" (64). In this scene, Saleem portrays his beliefs that one can feed stories, like food, but like food, certain foods have appropriate times to serve them. Additionally, through Reverend Mother, he shows how one can eat sound, or in her case, become constipated by words not spoken. Even more, Saleem blurs the traditional sensory scopes of sound, taste, and smell. We can "smell [...] silence" and "swallow and digest" stories.

Although Saleem bends and breaks the rules of historical accounts (and senses), he does make use of traditional methods. As demonstrated by David Price, in "Salman Rushdie's 'Use and Abuse of History' in 'Midnight's Children,'" Saleem, intentionally or not, aligns Nietzsche's three modes of history—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—with characters from *Midnight's Children*—respectively, Indira Gandhi, Methwold, and

## CHAPTER ONE

Saleem—to argue that Rushdie (in the voice of Saleem, I contend) tears apart history and pieces it back together in a way that tells a critical story of India's independence.

Price claims India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1966-77, 1980-84), as described by Saleem, demonstrates a desire for *monumental* history through her careless destruction of lives, and the possibility of lives, for her ideal of the greater good. This influence puts her on a godly pedestal for her followers, which cements her family's legacy (Price). Saleem's self-appointed placing of himself in history similarly places him as a historical monument, but that self-aggrandizement does not appear to be his main intent.

Methwold, the European man who sells an estate in his community to Saleem's parents, tries to preserve an *antiquarian* history by imbedding imperialism in the physical objects of the estate community, hoping the objects will inspire colonial mannerism after he leaves and will maintain imperialism (Price).<sup>4</sup> While Methwold's properties come at a low monetary cost, they exact a large cultural cost. For example, Methwold requires all residents to meet for evening cocktails, which begins Ahmed's alcoholism. These traditions support Price's argument as the material estate persuades the inhabitants to continue a certain way of life. Oddly enough, Saleem uses antiquarian methods in his narrative; he pairs each story with chutney—a “material” object—that will influence consumers to think in the way he wants them to. Again, however, this sort of brainwashing via the influence of material objects is likely not Saleem's main intent; he wants India to act, not to blindly follow.

---

<sup>4</sup> With this attempt, we can see how Rushdie has paralleled (to a lesser degree) fictional Methwold with Thomas Babington Macaulay, who served on the Supreme Council of India in the 1830s and pushed for English education in India (Shefftz). Macaulay's “aim was to create a new class of Indian who, moulded by Western culture and ideas, would lead the way in developing India” (Tammita-Delgoda 163).

## CHAPTER ONE

Lastly, and most importantly for my argument, Price summarizes how the *critical* historian deconstructs the cyclical monumental and antiquarian histories and reconstructs them in a new story, as seen with Saleem. Of course, Saleem is piecing together his critical history from scraps of monumental and antiquarian histories—using their techniques in places—and even though Saleem’s “story is not history, [...] it plays with historical shapes” (Rushdie, “‘Errata’” 25). Comparing Saleem’s task to his own, Rushdie uses a metaphor about a fragmented mirror to discuss his role reporting India as “the Indian writer who writes from outside India” (“Imaginary Homelands” 10-11). He warns how this writer “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11). While the metaphor is used to discuss immigrants, the same can be said of anyone writing in the present about the past. But through creative gap filling, the author can reclaim his own self from what was lost in migration, in history. Rushdie expands: “it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*” (“Imaginary Homelands” 12). In other words, despite the decay of time, the narrator was able to preserve certain aspects of his story from what was left behind. Furthermore, this individual can help others reclaim lost pieces of their culture. For Indians who have been under British rule for over four hundred years, it is likely difficult to parse out “pure” Indian culture from “tainted” colonized Indian culture. Rushdie provides hope that nationalism can still be built from the fragments remaining.

Beyond fragmentation, Saleem’s methods are deeply multilayered and experimental. He writes his stories through the night, pairs them with jars of chutney he

## CHAPTER ONE

cooks during the day, orally tells the story to his illiterate lover Padma, and merges his present and past narratives all the while. Reminding that every molecule of Saleem's chutneys carries its own signification, Sara Upstone, in "You are What you Eat: Postcolonial Eating in the Novels of Salman Rushdie," explains, "In the novel's famous chutneys, too, the history presented is diverse: the chutneys embody a vast range of spices and ingredients, a plethora of potential combinations" (124). The cook deliberately selects spice combinations that, when blended together, signify the cook's intended messages.

Of course, the history Rushdie records is admittedly biased and tainted by memory's inaccuracies, deviations he has Saleem embrace. Objective attempts at history, however, still contain a degree of bias by what they choose to or not to include. For instance, by leaving out subjective testimonies, historians omit an essential characteristic of a particular culture. Rushdie noted in 1983,

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. ("Errata" 25)

Saleem, it seems, feels India has conceded to an "ignorant" reality, and it is his mission to return to the conceptual fork in the road and correct the path his people take. As the popular saying goes, "History is written by the victors," or written by the educated, who in India would be the English-speaking elite. Sadly, as Saleem demonstrates, historical accounts (which I would say could encapsulate any form of media that preserves a representation of history) can alter the memories of those who lived through the actual

## CHAPTER ONE

events. For instance, a European historian records Indian history. What happens, then, when a high school Indian student reads this Westernized textbook in the classroom? Even more, what happens when this student is studying abroad? The student then has two battling histories: the history s/he learns from family and society versus what s/he learns from the textbook. Rushdie's story, on the hand, revolves around Eastern testimonies.

Through Saleem, Rushdie tries to bring the subject to the forefront of history, making Saleem the axis around which major events revolve—often factually distorting events for his purposes. Saleem calls this distortion his “special blend” and admits:

Every pickle-jar [...] contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! [...] in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfection. (529)

Even the more honest emotions of taste and smell are not foolproof. Subjectivity alters perception; Emotionally, a universal truth does not seem possible in such a diverse country where emotional responses will vary from person to person. Saleem remarks on this notion when he combines his culinary narrative with commentary on the subjectivity of memory:

“I told you the truth,” I say yet again, “Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, [...] and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.” (242)

## CHAPTER ONE

Instead of trying to make his audience *believe* his reality, he tries to make them *feel* it, and he does this by feeding them chutney. In the middle of one chapter, he pauses to urge Padma and Mary: “Have some more chutney” (242), a sign he is reading his audience and noting when they may be slipping out of his spell.

Further mixing up new combinations of old recipes, *Midnight’s Children* is not a linear, objective history book but proposes new sequences and perceptions. Nor does Saleem take the role of trustworthy historian. Even Rushdie draws attention to this when discussing *Midnight’s Children*, “It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight’s Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India” (“Errata” 22-23). This lack of authority, if anything, creates a bond between Saleem and his audience—he is someone the audience could converse with in the market. Rushdie explains that he shaped Saleem this way intentionally to mimic “the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool” (“Errata” 24). As Saleem declares constantly throughout the book, his purpose—Rushdie’s as well—is to restore memory, and as he is using fragmented memories for this restoration, his anachronisms and inconsistencies are unsurprising. Combining Upstone’s and Price’s readings, when monumental and antiquarian historians monopolize traditional means, the critical historian—Saleem, in this case—must find a new mode of storytelling. Rushdie agrees:

[...] redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it...[and in this redescription] the making of the alternative realities of art, including the novel of memory, becomes politicized. [...] And the novel is

## CHAPTER ONE

one way of denying the official, politicians' version of truth. ("Imaginary Homelands" 14)

Even though it is flawed, Saleem finds purpose in narrating his story. Rushdie's culinary devices, according to Upstone, "offer[] the opportunity for the colonial or postcolonial subject to reclaim control over their sense of self" (117). These flaws humanize him as narrator and offer a level of verisimilitude.

Of course, Saleem admits to his own degree of altering the truth—"Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. [...] in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (190). Rushdie explains this altering, saying he approached Saleem's narrative knowing it would carry Rushdie's "imaginative truth" ("Imaginary Homelands," 10). Rushdie admits: "This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration; his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary" ("Imaginary Homelands," 10). While *Midnight's Children* is a uniting story of India's independence, it is also Saleem's attempt to separate his story from the national narrative, a narrative he fears is false. Tobias Wachinger, in "Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India's Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption," worries Saleem's narrations softens an unbearable past:

While to pickle means on the one hand to increase the shelf-life of perishable products (or events subject to forgetting), on the other hand the spices and vinegars used for preservation alter and intensify the flavor of what is pickled, and so manage, as Michael Gorra points out, to "transform otherwise quite unpalatable things—an unripe mango, a

## CHAPTER ONE

massacre in Bangladesh—and thus make them bearable.” (Wachinger 76;  
qtd. in Wachinger 76)

But does Rushdie want to make his novel palatable? I think he does have Saleem desensationalize the stories to a degree to be able to tell them as Saleem is too close to the events.<sup>5</sup> One example is when Saleem is about to relate his force vasectomy. He argues with himself, trying to be brave and recount the events: “No!—But I must. I don’t want to tell it!—But I swore to tell it all. [...] I can’t won’t musn’t won’t can’t no! [...] About the dream, then? I might be able to tell it as a dream” (485). Here, by distancing himself from what actually happened and pretending it was a dream—a nightmare, really—Saleem is finally able to tell his story. But Rushdie amends Saleem’s disassociation by *sensesationalizing* the narrative. Rushdie has Saleem try to evoke the emotions that have been lost, the unpalatable horrors these people suffered and the responses to the horrors. When the bare facts are too painful for him, when his voice fails him, Saleem uses smell as a descriptor—he does not sugarcoat these atrocities; these are not pleasant odors. Instead, these smells depict some of the most horrific events of the story, events Saleem has trouble recounting are events Rushdie feels are being left out of historical accounts. Even though Saleem’s story is humanly erroneous, through smells Saleem attempts to remind India of its emotionally honest history. One of these, for instance, is the recollection of the forced procedures of The Emergency:

What Saleem smelled in the evening of January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1977: something  
frying in an iron skillet, soft unspeakable somethings spiced with turmeric

---

<sup>5</sup> Conveniently, this argument that to see the whole, one needs to step back from the zoomed-in fragment in which one is personally invested defends Rushdie’s own anxieties over displacement (his time in England, he feels, allows him to distance himself enough from India to tell this story).



## CHAPTER ONE

coriander cumin and fenugreek...the pungent inescapable fumes of what-had-been-excised, cooking over a low, slow fire.

When four-hundred-and-twenty suffered ectomies, an avenging Goddess ensured that certain ectomized parts were curried with onions and green chillies, and fed to the pie-dogs of Benares. (505-6)

Even though we cannot mentally smell his description, the elements are so brutal, we cringe at what would have to be a foul scent. Wachinger questions, “as the jars are to be released upon the world, the readers wonder if the customers, who will buy and consume the product of his work, will be able to bear what is delivered to their tables” (74). The answer to Wachinger’s question likely resides in the consumer’s coping abilities. Will the Indian reader crack at the seams as his/her historical foundation is challenged, or will s/he gather the pieces and rebuild an authentic idea of self, no matter how contradictory that idea may seem?

One difficulty with Saleem’s and Rushdie’s stories, though, is the intended audiences. While Rushdie writes for English-speaking literati, Saleem writes for both literate and illiterate, anyone who can consume the story through its words, smells, or tastes. Complicating things, Saleem’s audience only exists within the world of the novel. Even more, Saleem’s supernatural nose seemingly makes Saleem one of the few humans who can, returning to Herz’s term, “image” odors. As the majority of people cannot image odors, Saleem’s written account of smells is actually ineffective; however, I feel it gives his olfactory recall credence: we (“we” in this case being the “we” of Saleem’s fictional world) may not be able to image the smell he describes, but his examples throughout have made him a reliable “smeller.” These smells are also given negative

## CHAPTER ONE

visual associations, allowing us to “image” scents as a visual; we see negative imagery and therefore associate the smell as “bad.” As we cannot read the description of a smell and mentally *smell* it, Saleem's chutney steps in to fill any deficit. The smell-taste combination of his chutneys will evoke the emotions experienced during the now-forgotten horrors; the written story will pair the ingested emotions with the real-life events, translating them and matching honesty with fact. As mentioned, he has passed his own bias into his food and story, but an Indian audience can still have genuine responses, responses they then self-mediate either by accepting Saleem's account, the monumental or antiquarian accounts, their own account, or a combination of all or a few of the above.

A primary historical source for Rushdie was Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*. David Lipscomb, in “Caught in a Strange Middle Ground: Contesting Histories in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,” close reads Wolpert, comparing this close reading to Rushdie's *borrowing* of passages from Wolpert that are subjectively adapted for the *Midnight's Children* narrative. By revising in this way, argues Lipscomb, Rushdie challenges Western audiences to read as Indians think. Additionally, Lipscomb believes the use of magical realism creates a “middle ground” of uncertainty, where both textbooks (which he notes tend to leave out stories of the marginalized) and fiction (*Midnight's Children*) cause the reader to speculate on the authenticity of both. By interweaving historical truths into fictional accounts, Rushdie through Saleem uses grains of truth to make his fantastical narrative easier to swallow (Lipscomb).

On the one hand, Wachinger believes Rushdie makes his story tasty for a Western audience; on the other, Lipscomb shows how Rushdie pushes on this audience's comfort zone. I, however, contest that Rushdie/Saleem attempts a combination of both for an

## CHAPTER ONE

Indian audience: comforting familiar flavors that evoke uncomfortable memories but memories with which they need to come to terms.

While Saleem's goal of preserving the past appears to be noble, some critics question whether or not he (or Rushdie) does so selflessly. For example, Wachinger claims Rushdie's pickling of his postcolonial India narrative makes it palatable for the West (and here I do not think the line is quite as blurred between Saleem and Rushdie), an audience who wants to taste India in "manageable, swallowable, mouthfuls" (qtd. in Wachinger 90), commodifying his work for a Western audience. While I agree to an extent, I also think Wachinger oversimplifies what he calls Rushdie's "ebullient, blatantly ironic, deliberately exoticized type of literary representation of India" (72). Could Rushdie not be codifying postcolonial Indian English? Easternizing English can truly make it India's English rather than an echo of colonial English. Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands" offers a similar argument:

[...] we [British Indian authors] can't simply use the language in the way the British did; [...] it needs remaking for our own purposes. [...] we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place [...] between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (17)

In other words, a culture cannot simply be adopted; it must be remade for those within it to truly claim it as their own.

Taking this audience conundrum into account, it is interesting that the cooks (story-emotion tellers) are all female, or impotent males (Saleem), suggesting that these

## CHAPTER ONE

stereotypical subordinates gain power through words and food. This gendering could be commentary on what woman's role should be, but I do not think that was Rushdie's purpose. Instead, I think this culinary device comments on the power women have through their cooking, and powers other subordinated people can find through reappropriation. If a woman is relegated to the kitchen, she—in Saleem's world—influences her husband's emotions through food. The colonized subject, then, could decolonize through tools imported from the colonizers.

And maybe it being a power is wishful thinking on Saleem's part. Having been forcefully vasectomized, Saleem undoubtedly feels unmanned. We generally think of legacies being passed down through children. Saleem now has one (non-biological) child to carry on his lineage, but finds solace knowing he can share his story through food as well. He calls this “art-form: the impregnation of food with emotions” (378), placing the female (or unmanned) cooks and storytellers in the dominate place of one who impregnates others, through the surrogate of food in this case.

For Saleem, his nose draining actually resets the cycle of rebirth. Pre-draining is “the last day of my old life” (and as they are on the cusp of moving from Bombay to Pakistan, this is true in many ways) (345). Despite the depressing atmosphere of this chapter, Saleem ends by admitting the new life born: “[...] although I had been drained—although no voices spoke in my head, and never would again—there was one compensation: namely that, for the first time in my life, I was discovering the astonishing delights of possessing a sense of smell” (350). Saleem finds power in his disability.

Considering India's hybridity, Rushdie likely wants Indians to consider what powers colonization provided India (English being one of them, which, ironically,

## CHAPTER ONE

Rushdie tremendously profited). Instead, those who have been subordinated can take what their dominators taught them and use it as a tool against the suppressors. Rushdie's acceptance of hybridity shows through when Aadam and Naseem are discussing Gandhi's order of *Hartal*—a day “[t]o mourn, in peace, the continuing presence of the British” (31) in retaliation to the Rowlatt Act, which took a censorship, no leniency approach to prevent revolutions. While considering Gandhi's order, Aadam claims, “the Indians have fought for the British; so many of them have seen the world by now, and been tainted by Abroad. They will not easily go back to the old world. The British are wrong to try and turn back the clock” (31). Here, it seems, Rushdie feels Indians must reappropriate what they have learned from the colonizers rather than letting the British treat them as third world subjects, naïve of imperial ways like when the colonizers first arrived.

Through Saleem's storytelling methods, Rushdie shows how Independent India can take the power of the English language and merge it with special blends of Indian culture to create something authentically postcolonial Indian. A large component of this reappropriation is remembering. Saleem and Rushdie embark to remind the nation of its identity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NOVEL OR SOCIAL REALIST SCREENPLAY? THE USE OF FRAGMENTATION

#### AND PHANTOM TOUCH IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

*“The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.”*

-Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Trends in Western cinematography, that are then emulated by the East, create a gaze that objectifies women. In the novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie portrays this filmic sexism. The following excerpt, taking from the novel, describes the actress Pia as no more than hips, eyes, and breasts:

Deprived of film roles, Pia had turned her life into a feature picture [...].

Pia in petticoats, soft hips rounding towards my desperately-averted eyes,

giggling while her eyes, bright with antimony, flashed imperiously [...]. I

listened to the nostalgic soliloquy of my aunt, trying to keep my eyes away

from two impossible orbs, spherical as melons, golden as mangoes: I refer,

you will have guessed, to the adorable breasts of Pia mumani. (276-77)

The above scene, taken from *Midnight's Children*, represents the way in which film creates a gaze that objectifies women. Rushdie's use of cinematic elements, such as this crossover of film into reality where the character Pia “turn[s] her life into a feature picture,” and together with Rushdie's use of filmic devices, hybridizes film and prose by

## CHAPTER TWO

giving a text the visual qualities of film. While the elite use of English within the novel suggests he intended his work for an educated Western audience, the vernacular within that language feels quintessentially Indian (such as his liberties with grammar, the use of cinematography, and the inclusion of Indian history, geography, and society that is not watered down for Westerners). As such, his narrative calls attention to the influential Western power in India, particularly that of classic Hollywood film. Two film genres compete within *Midnight's Children*: popular Bombay cinema (which emulates Hollywood cinema and is a visual feast) and New Indian cinema (which attempts to incorporate social realism within the film industry instead of the popular melodrama): the first encourages a passive audience; the latter, an active one. For analysis, these levels of participation pair well with two popular film theory concepts from the 1980s, “scopophilia” and “suturing.” These concepts paired with Rushdie’s techniques take Hollywood trends criticized by the theories and challenge the way these trends shape perception, attempting to create a more responsibly aware filmgoer (reader). With scopophilia, the passive audience’s gaze is directed to the object of their desire. With suturing, fragments—shots—are sutured together in a way that soothes castration anxiety,<sup>6</sup> the fear that the voyeuristic need created in one shot will not be met in the next, or the fear that after the directing devices build certain expectations in the passive viewer, those expectations will not be fulfilled; the viewer will be cut off. Rushdie’s male narrator, Saleem, however, challenges these two concepts. During his objective fragmentation (the reduction of a character to fragments of his/her person), Saleem makes

---

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Saleem essentially suffers from the castration the male gaze fears as he was sterilized by Indira Gandhi’s population control efforts. This impotence puts Saleem in a female role, arguably active and subjective, the role that metaphorically castrates the subjective male from his active participation and makes him passive.

## CHAPTER TWO

the spectator hyperaware of the objectification occurring and does not ease the castration anxiety created but instead challenges his audience to actively participate in the suturing. In other words, the viewer must put the pieces together. By leaving this piecing together to the reader, Rushdie, through Saleem and the novel form, achieves the social realism for which New Indian cinema strove.

Rushdie, born in 1947, experienced the attempted film reformation. In the novel, the cinematic significance revolves, or spawns from at least, Hanif and Pia. These two characters reflect both sides of the Indian film industry dichotomy: Pia, mere entertainment; Hanif, social reform. Rushdie personifies New Indian cinema struggles in the character Hanif. Like feminist film theorists, Tejaswini Ganti, in her book *Producing Bollywood*, explains that the film industry is “a site of social practice and a domain of meaning-making” (6), especially in a country with such a large percentage of illiteracy.

Each year, India produces 1,500 to 2,000 films (Cain). Ganti attributes the volume of films produced to India’s place in the global economy. Resulting from attempts at responsible filmmaking, newly Independent India saw a rise of social realist filmmakers, such as Saleem’s filmmaker Uncle Hanif. In “A Brief History of Cinema from Bombay to ‘Bollywood,’” Kaushik Bhaumik describes this movement as “the embodiment of the Nehruvian ideology of reform through the creation of the ideal Indian citizen” (2). Despite the presence of social realism, Bhaumik claims Indian cinema eludes scholarship because the majority of the films produced have a narrative that is simplistic to keep it easily engrossing and the true depth comes from the “sonic structures,” making the culmination of Indian film “a sensual social history of modern India” (3). In other words, Indian film is meant to be experienced with the senses rather than processed and



## CHAPTER TWO

analyzed, which Bhaumik claims “is the secret of why Bombay cinema continues to affect Indians in such profound ways even today” (3). Even though praising Bombay cinema, in the essay “Taking on the Tone of a Bombay Talkie” Deepa P. Chordiya supports Bhaumik’s statements, “the narration of a relatively coherent storyline is frequently punctuated by seemingly irrelevant song-and-dance sequences, spectacular fights and tangential digressions, in short the *masala* that attracts audiences and that holds the attention of viewers more than the story itself” (99). What is later labeled *Bollywood* overshadowed the attempts to create realist Indian film as those who flocked to the cinema did not attend for the story but the visual and auditory stimulation.

Fragmentation throughout the novel creates a scopophilic objectification of parts in place of and then signifying the now absent whole. Explaining her theories on scopophilia in film, Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” defines “scopophilia” as “pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object” (756). Mulvey proposes this voyeuristic gaze is a “split between active/male and passive/female,” where the male is the active subject and the female “displayed as sexual object” (750). When in the role of passive object, the female becomes “[o]ne part of a fragmented body” (Mulvey 751) directed by the male subject as “he articulates the look and creates the action” (753). Basically, the spectator watches and vicariously acts through the male character on screen. This male character (acting as a stand-in for the directional work behind the screens, what Mulvey calls a “screen surrogate” [751]), takes a dominant role, which, through film devices such as zooming in on specific body parts, controls where and how the spectator looks.

## CHAPTER TWO

We especially see this hyper-focused, scopophilic gaze and the damage that can result from it during Rushdie's "The Perforated Sheet" chapter. Recently returned from living in Germany, Aadam Aziz—Saleem's grandfather—is lured into being a young woman's physician by her father, Ghani. Over a span of three years Ghani reveals fragments of the woman's—Naseem's—body to Aadam under the guise of various ailments Aadam needs to treat. As a result, Aadam's imagination takes over, piecing together a woman out of the fragments he has seen:

So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. Glued together by his imagination, she accompanied him on all his rounds [...] but she was headless, because he had never seen her face. (22)

Through his piecing together Aadam creates his ideal woman, an ideal Naseem can never actualize. Aadam does not seek pleasure in Naseem as a subject, an equal, but instead he indulges in and obsesses over the pieces of her—the objects—that Ghani offers up ("a very slightly twisted right ankle, an ingrowing toenail [...], a tiny cut on the lower left calf [...], her stiff right knee"—it continues for over a page [21]).

Through creating his female collage, his grandfather—Saleem claims—"had fallen in love" (23). After pages describing the parts of Naseem, a single line accompanies the reveal of her entire person: "'At last,' said Aadam Aziz, 'I see you whole at last. But I must go now'" (27). During her full reveal, Naseem does not speak and Aadam flees before she has the chance to engage in discussion; she is still a passive object, directed by her father and spoken to by Aadam, not an active participant in the

## CHAPTER TWO

discussion. Then, after their marriage, as they depart Kashmiri, a different sort of vertigo hits Aadam, “Doctor Aziz felt, in the pit of his stomach, a sensation akin to weightlessness. / Or falling” (28). Here, it seems, Aadam succumbs to castration anxiety as the director of the gaze, Ghani, is no longer in charge and Aadam’s description of “falling” shows his fear of losing his dominance. Simply put for the purpose of this paper, castration anxiety occurs when the male gaze (be it the audience member or the character who is anxious) fears being emasculated by the female object or the lack of scopophilic fulfillment. In the case of Aadam and Naseem, the separation of Naseem from her father, who had previously controlled the look by physically controlling what the small opening of the sheet would show, leaves Aadam with the whole of Naseem, challenging her previous role as objective part as she now is free to act (and, as Reverend Mother, Naseem attempts to shed her passive, objectified skin).

In a sort of reverse scopophilia—both through gender reversal and through trying to reduce an already known whole into manageable parts—Amina Sinai, Saleem’s mother/Aadam and Naseem’s daughter, tries to relearn her husband Ahmed in parts and learn to love each of those. Holding Ahmed up to the standards of her first husband and true love, Nadir Khan, Amina struggles to love Ahmed. Her solution is to objectify him, to try and force herself to find pleasure in his parts with the hopes of it blossoming into love for the whole:

[...] she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioral, compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal tics and prejudices and likes...in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated

## CHAPTER TWO

sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit. (73)

While this technique does not seem to make her fall in love with him, it helps her manage a semblance of control in a situation where she is otherwise powerless.

These pieces, however, are held together by a fragile thread, which Nadir—now Qasim—severs when he reappears in Amina's life. Young Saleem, in denial of his mother having an affair, completely fictionalizes the evidence by describing it as no more than a melodramatic film:

[...] through the dirty, square, glassy cinema-screen of the Pioneer Café's window, I watched Amina Sinai and the no-longer Nadir play out their love scene; they performed with the ineptitude of genuine amateurs [...]. But now hands enter the frame [...] hands flickering like candle flames, creeping forward across reccine, then jerking back [...] hands longing for touch [...] but always at last jerking back [...] because what I'm watching here on my dirty glass cinema-screen is, after all, an Indian movie, in which physical contact is forbidden lest it corrupt the watching flower of Indian youth. (248-49)

Saleem's description of the scene reduces the whole of Amina and Nadir-Qasim to a part, their hands, hands that long to touch. The absence of touch, or *phantom touch*, in which Saleem refers to is described earlier in the novel when Saleem's family attends one of his screenwriter uncle's movies, which stars Saleem's Aunt Pia:

In those days it was not permitted for lover-boys and their leading ladies to touch one another on screen, for fear that their osculations might

## CHAPTER TWO

corrupt the nation's youth...but thirty-three minutes after the beginning of *The Lovers*, the premiere audience began to give off a low buzz of shock, because Pia and Nayyar had begun to kiss—not one another—but *things*.  
(162)

This phantom touch caters to scopophilia. A specific example of one of the *things* includes an apple, “Pia kissed an apple, sensuously, with all the rich fullness of her painted lips; then passed it to Nayyar; who planted, upon its opposite face, a virilely passionate mouth” (162). The difference between the kiss types and lips defines the place of each gender. Pia is not a woman but “painted lips” that kiss “sensuously”—there is no depth to her kiss; she is merely dressed up, “painted,” to appeal to the senses, an object of pleasure. Nayyar, on the other hand, returns the phantom kiss with “a virilely passionate mouth,” a sexually powerful, domineering kiss. Even though he seconds the phantom kiss, he takes charge of the action, giving the audience satisfaction as he exhibits his strength over Pia's delicate, female lips. Not only are the actors reduced to their lips, the apple, the actual object in the scene, signifies the action.<sup>7</sup>

When Saleem spies on the meeting between Amina and Nadir-Qasim, he parallels the experience to the above viewing, demonstrating the influence film has had on his understanding of reality:

[...] my mother's lips pressing gently, nostalgically against the mottled glass; my mother's hands handing the glass to her Nadir-Qasim; who also applied, to the opposite side of the glass, his own, poetic mouth. So it was that life imitated *bad art*, and my uncle Hanif's sister brought the

---

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the apple also alludes to Genesis and the forbidden fruit, the scene ending with the arrival of “The Serpent”—the man who announces Gandhi's death and riles up the audience.

## CHAPTER TWO

eroticism of the indirect kiss into the green neon dinginess of the Pioneer Café. (249, italics mine)

Again, we see the reduction of a female to lips (and hands), but Nadir-Qasim is not the dominating subject Nayyar represented; instead, Nadir-Qasim “applied [...] his own, poetic mouth” to the glass. He is as objectified and passive as Amina, directed by some unseen power. This loss of control of the gaze—the male surrogate, Nadir-Qasim, does not drive the scene—builds castration anxiety within Saleem as the “actors” are no longer playing by the rules established in film, and he fears what the actors will do. Would Saleem still consider the scene before him “bad art” if he did not have the personal connection? Rather than the personal connection upsetting Saleem, it is possible the lack of sexual fulfillment makes the scene “bad art.” Saleem, unable to face the scene unraveling before his eyes, flees to the trunk of the car.

While the scopophilic fragmentation in *Midnight's Children* demonstrates the gaze's power to objectify, the *suturing* of fragments, scenes, or film shots creates a tension in the spectator as rather than completing the suture, Saleem exaggerates and draws attention to the gaps or fictionalization taking place. In an excerpt from her book *The Subject of Semiotics*, as published in *Film Theory* (1992), Kaja Silverman explains the delicate balance of needs created and needs met within shot transitions, which leads to successful suturing. When “the viewing subject”—the spectator, what I will also call the *reading subject*—“becomes aware of the limitations of what it sees—aware, that is, of an absent field,” the current shot then “becomes a signifier of that absent field” (Silverman 201); it creates a need for the viewing subject to see the chain of signification complete. The threat of this chain breaking creates castration anxiety in the viewing

## CHAPTER TWO

subject; the follow through of this chain eases the anxiety, “suturing over the wound of castration with narrative” (202). But, Silverman follows up, this anxiety insures engagement from the viewing subject, an investment in what happens next. She simplifies, “We must be shown only enough to know that there is more, and to want that ‘more’ to be disclosed” (Silverman 203). Through fragmentation, Rushdie and Saleem constantly create that need for more. Saleem does this fragmentation likely because his own memory is fragmented. Rushdie, while possibly only using fragmentation to make Saleem more realistic, is too aware of social realities not to be commenting on real-world issues. Accepting that analysis, we see that Rushdie challenges his audience to question when media steps in as the speaking subject, and, more importantly, when we allow that voice to turn us into the passive viewing subject, letting, say, news stories create an expectation—a need—that we then return to the news station to have met as the cycle begins anew.

The chapter transition between the end of “Alpha and Omega” to the beginning of “The Kolynos Kid” serves as a tidy example of the suture. While in the hospital to have a finger reattached, young Saleem needs a blood transfusion, leading to the discovery that his parents—Amina and Ahmed—are not his biological parents. Upset over this news, they send Saleem to live with his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia. Building the signification, present Saleem uses stage direction to explain the traumatic moment:

I leave you with the image of a ten-year-old boy with a bandaged finger, sitting in a hospital bed [...] zooming out slowly into long shot, I allow the sound-track music to drown my words, because Tony Brent is reaching the end of his medley, and his finale, too, is the same as Winkie’s: “Good

## CHAPTER TWO

Night, Ladies” is the name of the song. Merrily it rolls along, rolls along,  
rolls along...

(Fade-out.) (271)<sup>8</sup>

When sent into what he deems exile with his cinema-centric aunt and uncle, Saleem feels as if he moves into a Bombay talkie. The cinematic direction of the hospital scene sets the stage for the next chapter, and the viewing subject’s fear that Saleem—the controller of the gaze—will be abandoned is soothed in the next chapter either by the stand-in parents or the absurdity and entertainment of Aunt Pia. Additionally, the objectification of past Saleem by present Saleem (here he is not an object of desire but objective in that present Saleem removes his subjective attachment to past Saleem) complicates the gendered assumptions of scopophilia and suturing.

Even though this transition soothes the mid-signification chain anxiety, Saleem tears down the fourth wall, a wall vital to the process of the passive acceptance required for successful suturing.<sup>9</sup> Eliminating any illusion of a flat character, he discusses the speaking subject’s (everything at work beyond the scope of the screen) methods of manipulation, “[...] And now I, Saleem Sinai, intend to briefly endow myself-then with the benefits of hindsight; destroying the unities and conventions of fine writing, I make [past Saleem] cognizant of what was to come” (270). Explaining this requirement of

---

<sup>8</sup> Winkie is one of the contenders for Saleem’s biological father (nearly tied with Methwold). When Winkie first enters the story, Saleem hints at this paternity, “Ex-conjurors and peepshow-men and singers...even before I was born, the mold was set. Entertainers would orchestrate my life” (112), and present Saleem paired with past Saleem complicate this orchestrated web as Saleem becomes an entertainer himself. In other words, Saleem fills both male (speaking subject) and female roles—the dominate narrator directs the passive “actor”—a passive past Saleem whose life has been altered for entertainment’s sake, even if, as I argue, that entertainment serves an active purpose.

<sup>9</sup> The constant drawing of attention to Saleem as narrator attempts to hide Rushdie’s role behind the scenes. We are simply too busy keeping up with Saleem to think about Rushdie. When that distraction is true, Rushdie’s use of these cinematic devices—the very ones he is commenting on—is successful.



## CHAPTER TWO

“forgetting” the direction beyond the scope of what’s visible on screen, Silverman notes, “cinematic organization depends upon the [viewing] subject’s willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to ‘stand in’ for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees” (203). In other words, the passive viewing subject is satisfied with the need created through signification in one shot, if the speaking subject delivers on those needs by completing the chain of signification in the next shot. The viewing subject does not need to actively participate in the unfolding narrative but will be guided through it by the speaking subject, making the viewing subject passive. Silverman claims “suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ or ‘That’s what I see’” (203). So, yes, the tidy shot transition between chapters completes a successful suture, but it is an uncomfortable one as the viewing subject has been ripped from his or her passivity.

Throughout the novel, the reading subject is bounced around and given plentitudes of signifiers, having to later decode what the subsequent signification was. Chordiya responds more positively to Bombay cinema than most critics, calling it “a distinct ethic and style” that “synthesizes a fragmentary and generically-mixed narrative structure” (98). Seemingly paradoxical, Chordiya claims “it is indeed melodrama that holds the various fragments of the Bollywood movie together” (100). On the other hand, Chordiya argues, “By acting as a parody of a ‘realist’ depiction of the same emotion the hyperbolic nature of melodrama emphasizes the staged quality of the film and highlights the fact that filmic ‘reality’ is in fact an illusion” (101). Instead of this understanding creating a thoughtful response to film, however, I feel it does the opposite. Not only does the reminder that the film is an illusion remove the viewing subject from the chain of

## CHAPTER TWO

signification, the entertainment is utterly superficial—if what Chordiya says is correct, the viewing subject does not invest in the narrative, but only the stimulation of the current shot.

In novel form, Rushdie's attention to the illusion serves a much different role. Like melodramas, his work is fantastical, but he does not use melodrama merely for superficial stimulation. Further removing the viewing subject from its passive role, Saleem continually reminds that he guides the gaze (acting as Rushdie's surrogate who, in a film, would have drawn attention away from the speaking subject rather than towards it). Instead of forgetting what happens beyond the scope of the screen, as Silverman discussed, Rushdie having Saleem interrupt his narrative reminds the audience that someone is narrating—directing—the story. Past and present Saleems' realities are often in conflict with one another. The inserts of cinematography seem to hint at liberties taken by present Saleem, but it is never fully explained;<sup>10</sup> the reading subject must decide what is reality (within the world of the novel) and whether or not it matters.

Hybridizing his story even more, Rushdie pieces together fragments from real-life and history books with Saleem's story, both his embellished and experienced past. Through his use of fragmentation, Saleem demonstrates the flaws of being too close to history, especially one's personal history, and not being able to see the whole. He explains: "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" (189). Best of all, he uses a cinema metaphor to clarify his

---

<sup>10</sup> Worth considering, Chordiya proposes, "Rushdie uses the vocabulary and techniques of cinema to allow Saleem to splice together fragments" (107). If we accept that explanation, then rather than neatly suturing shots together, Rushdie binds them together by signifying the simplistic plot lines of Bombay cinema.

## CHAPTER TWO

point, drawing meta-attention to how we perceive and whether or not we perceive reality or illusion:

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 [...] the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (189)

Here, it seems, Saleem encourages looking within the illusion—fiction—for reality. Considering the scopophilic gaze, we can see how illusion shapes the way we perceive reality. Boys taught to view a movie star's legs as a symbol for who she is (or *what*, objectively speaking) will then use that mode to perceive reality. So maybe illusion is not reality but instead shapes reality.

Conflicted by the reality of his aunt paired with her movie star illusion, Saleem develops an unhealthy idolatry of the star. Saleem comments on the ludicrousness of his aunt's divahood—"the divine Pia Aziz: to live with her was to exist in the hot sticky heart of a Bombay talkie" (276)—but is still pulled into that hot sticky heart. In contrast to the Indian cinema's prohibition of touch, Saleem confuses Pia's touch as he sees her as both family member and, as he has been trained through cinema, as a sexual object. His puberty-fueled confusion results in an incestuous encounter between the two, which leads to Pia and Hanif evicting him. But what a word choice! On the surface, "sword for purity" puts Jamila's work on par with that of a soldier's; she is part of Ayub's army against depravity. Undoubtedly Rushdie's true purpose with this phrase, "sword" is also a symbol for the phallus; thus, Ayub's army is also this oxymoronic symbolic translation:

## CHAPTER TWO

“male genitalia for purity.” This oxymoron is quite fitting as the male-enforced ideals of purity are being fetishized through an innocent young girl.

As seen with Saleem’s confusion towards Aunt Pia, theaters train people how to act while also creating a sense of belonging as they function as imagined communities. In “Halluci-nation: Mental Illness, Modernity, and Metaphoricity in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” Andrew Gaedtke discusses how radio became a version of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” as it “enables one to hear exactly what others are hearing at exactly the same moment, forging a nationally unified sensorium” (713). While Gaedtke does not apply this concept to film, it undoubtedly occurs at multiplexes where viewing subjects experience a film and a shared gaze. The audience, even when in separate places, is united through this experience. Rushdie’s hyper sensual novel-film hybrid, too, could be classified as a “unified sensorium.”

Unfortunately, this shared experience also trains a shared mode of perception that objectifies women. In summarizing feminist film theorists’ take on film (such as Mulvey), Mary Devereaux states,

Movies promote a way of seeing which takes man as subject, women as object. [...] In both its high and low forms, feminist theorists argue, art inscribes “a masculine discourse” which we learn to reproduce in our everyday lives. [...] Both men and women have learned to see the world through male eyes. (652-54)

Saleem’s conflicted responses to Pia, for example, embody this influence of the male gaze. Of course, film is not the only medium that shapes this “way of seeing.” For

## CHAPTER TWO

example, despite living in a quiet Indian village at the beginning of the twentieth century, yet untouched by the rise of film, Ghani objectifies Naseem for Aadam.

But, Ghani, despite being blind, has been trained by art in other ways. He lines the walls of their dark, dusty home with colonial art: “a blind man who claimed to appreciate European paintings [...] the enigma of the blind art-lover” (17). The depicted blindness is twofold. One, Ghani cannot see the art, and two, real-life Indians who mimic this practice do not see the artistic quality but rather appreciate them as a colonial symbol of wealth. As discussed in Chapter One, colonization influenced India through material objects even after Independence. Even when he cannot see the art, Ghani has been trained to value a certain kind of art, an art that puts Europeans in the role of male controller of the gaze (directs the look of a passive audience), and colonized Indians, while not the subject of the gaze, contribute to their own loss of power as they support the imperialization that puts them in the subordinate female role.

On a more bizarre scale, it seems Saleem’s passive viewing subject stance has escalated to the point his uncle’s screenplay actually directs Saleem’s life. His uncle, fed up with the vacuousness of Indian film, longs to write a screenplay of substance. Pia bemoans,

“your uncle, writing his boring-boring scripts! O my God, I tell him, put in dances, or exotic locations...that is what the Public is wanting!” Her eyes were brimming with tears. “So you know what he is writing now? About...” she looked as if her heart would break “...the Ordinary Life of a Pickle-Factory!” (277)

## CHAPTER TWO

This “ordinary life” Pia laments, embodies the social realism New Indian cinema of the 1960s promoted. Gaedtke explains, “Hanif casts his realist mode as a more mature aesthetic vision; his work is motivated by a desire to force an immature India finally to face ‘reality’” (Gaedtke 717). Sadly, it is not until Hanif’s death that Pia faces this reality. Hanif wants to transform the passive viewing subject into an active one. Having previously produced socially irresponsible films and unable to make a living on his substantial films, Hanif enters depression, a depression that results in his death. He dies without seeing his screenplay succeed.

Considering the unreliability of Saleem as narrator and how closely his life mirrors the plot of Hanif’s screenplay, one has to wonder if Saleem’s life has gone beyond “imitating bad art” and become bad art. The parallels between Hanif’s screenplay and Saleem’s narrative raise the question of what truly belongs to Saleem’s history:

Hanif Aziz, the only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry, was writing the story of a pickle-factory created, run and worked in entirely by women [...]. It is ironic that this arch-disciple of naturalism should have been so skillful (if unconscious) a prophet of his own 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. (279)

Prophecy, or has Saleem altered his own narrative to adopt element of his uncle’s screenplay? With the clear influences film had on Saleem’s life, the latter seems quite

## CHAPTER TWO

possible. Elsewhere in the story, Saleem even explains his tendency to gather parts of other's lives.

Inheriting the fragmentation gene (like his non-biologically inherited nose), Saleem collects stories from infancy, piecing himself together from them. As Amina and Mary fought for baby Saleem's affection, he "fed on their emotions, using it to accelerate his growth, expanding and swallowing infinite hugs kisses chucks-under-the-chin, charging towards the moment when he would acquire the essential characteristic of human beings" (144). This quote suggests there is no original Saleem but Saleem grows out of the combination of others' fragments he consumes. He warns from the second page, "I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well." From the outermost "frame," it appears Rushdie comments on how human identity is no more than a collection of observations we gather to shape our own person and we must be careful to do so consciously.

Without a doubt, the narration of *Midnight's Children* is full of frenetic energy, a whirlwind of fragments. In a biographical interview with Alastair Niven, Rushdie explains this frenzied style:

[...] when I wrote *Midnight's Children*, one of the ideas I had about it was that [...] India is its multitude, its crowd [...]. One strategy that was deliberately adopted in that book was deliberately to tell, as it were, too many stories, so that there was a jostle of stories in the novel and that your main narration, your main storyline, had to kind of force its way through the crowd. (54)

## CHAPTER TWO

Applying Rushdie's explanation of his "deliberate" crowding to Saleem's fear that his skin is cracking apart, one can imagine he is so full of stories that he is bursting at the seams, fed up. By telling these stories, does he relieve some of the pressure of holding so many lives—stores—within him? Saleem's storytelling could be an attempt to transfer pieces of himself to others; however, he also fears that the very masses he once grew out of by swallowing their lives will consume him until there is nothing left: "[...] watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd [...] no Mercurochrome, only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons [...]" (533). The very fragments he sutured together to create "Saleem" lose the substance holding them together as Saleem becomes aware of the illusion of Saleem. Like the viewer getting to close to the cinema screen, Saleem has hyper-analyzed his existence to the point that he can no longer see the whole of his person but only the fragments he pieced together, the fragments that, without the illusion, break apart, leaving nothing.<sup>11</sup>

We do not see Saleem's obliteration; we do, however, see his Uncle Hanif die from the burden of the cinema. Hanif and Pia, the most cinematically bound characters, both seek to escape from the industry. Hanif, escapes through his suicide: "Deprived of a livelihood by spurning the cheap-thrill style of the Bombay cinema, my uncle strolled off the edge of a roof; melodrama inspired (and perhaps tainted) his final dive to earth" (312). After hounding from Reverend Mother for not weeping like a wife should, Pia snaps, "'Always melodrama,' she said, flatly, 'In his family members, in his work. He

---

<sup>11</sup> Again, Chordiya proposes an alternative argument, claiming that Rushdie's fragmentation of Saleem creates a more realistic novel: "Through his narration, Saleem comes to understand that discourse cannot reproduce the real world in any way that can be considered to be verisimilar because any appearance of coherent reality is actually an illusory amalgamation of fragmentary perceptions. [...] For Rushdie, Indian reality is neither coherent nor unified but reflective of a multiplicity of cultures and experiences" (109).



## CHAPTER TWO

died for his hate of melodrama; it is why I would not cry.’ [...] Pia’s refusal to weep was in honor of his memory” (312-13). As a result of his death, Pia second guesses the melodrama of her life and shows a final anti-dramatic act of love for Hanif. While mourning, it seems Pia becomes aware of the objectified, passive role film placed her in, even outside of film. To honor her husband, Pia takes charge of her life and refuses to *act* how society has trained her to or does not appear as society expects.

Of course, *Midnight’s Children* is a work of fiction that still uses the techniques it criticizes. Chordiya considers these techniques as “an integral role in *Midnight’s Children* in the form of heightened emotion, coincidences, hyperbole, repetitions, exaggerations, and fantastic elements” (110). That said, rather than serving “an integral role,” I think it simply exhibits Rushdie’s attempts to capture the essence of the multitudes. Regardless, it manages to create an active reading subject instead of a passive one. He does not use the techniques to entertain and distract (although it does those as well); Rushdie wants his audience to *think*, and one very important topic his novel considers is the role of film. India’s illiteracy “signals to government functionaries that [...] the ‘masses,’ are easily influenced—or incited by—onscreen images” (Ganti 48). Around India’s Independence, state leaders considered the role this form of entertainment played for the nation. On one side of the spectrum, “[...] the Indian state had officially treated commercial filmmaking as an activity akin to vices like gambling and horseracing” (Ganti 41). Mahatma Gandhi was of this mindset, viewing film as a medium that distracted the masses away from active participation in their country.<sup>12</sup> But social realist and government officials believed

---

<sup>12</sup> Rushdie’s wit possibly gives a subtle nod to Gandhi’s stance on film, having his death literally halt a melodramatic film (of course, Saleem later reveals that he incorrectly places the year of Gandhi’s death but chooses to keep the error for the sake of his story’s flow). During the viewing of *The Lovers of Kashmir*

## CHAPTER TWO

“film [could] be something more than ‘mere’ entertainment” (Ganti 47). Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister (1947-64), for instance, believed film had the potential to educate the masses and support his nationalist goals (Ganti). These films would educate the public on how to be a responsible citizen, focusing on realistic issues and challenging the viewing subject to connect the viewed film to his or her everyday life. Unfortunately, this method, when fueled by government motives, seemed like a way of training the masses to think in the way Nehru wanted them to rather than educating them on *how* to think.

While Nehru likely wanted to use film “training” to help his people, not all filmmakers applaud the trend his efforts started. B. R. Chopra, a producer Ganti interviewed, vents: “the film industry has not been able to get the favor of the government, except when it serves the government’s purpose” (51). Chopra’s frustration pinpoints a scary potential of the industry. Considering the high illiteracy rates and large population of uneducated persons, film, in the hands of the government, has the power to brainwash the masses, educate them to serve the state’s purposes. Sounds a lot like imperialism.

Regardless the reception of film, it is an influential medium. Despite the negatives, the industry “has played a significant role in state discourse about development, nationhood, and modernity in India since Independence” (Ganti 42). Rushdie has called his own writing a “decolonizing of the English language” (Parameswaran 34), and his hybrid use of film and literature certainly challenges the

---

and the introduction of the phantom touch, the film is interrupted for the announcement of Mahatma Gandhi’s death.

## CHAPTER TWO

norms of English novels. Furthermore, when applied to all media, the warning of *Midnight's Children* has the power to change perception.

## CONCLUSION

*“One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth...that they are, despite everything, acts of love”*

-Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

Every time I open *Midnight's Children* I discover something new. My close reading of Salman Rushdie's use of the five senses provided a somewhat narrow lens through which I could delve deeply into a focused topic; however, even that narrowing down was too broad at times. Overall, each chapter touched on issues that I need to expand on, leading me to conclude that I need to divide what are currently three chapters into more chapters. That said, my research introduced me to new ways to analyze literature, encouraged me to further my interdisciplinary studies to enhance my analysis skills, and exposed me to various issues postcolonial Indians face. Through this research, I learned that Rushdie's use of synesthesia does, indeed, parallel his stance on postcolonial national identity, showing that India's national narrative may reside in hybridity.

In Chapter One I explored how Rushdie's narrator Saleem uses food to help restore memory. I started my search by looking for articles on food and memory. This path led me to studies on olfactory cognition—that remembered emotions are linked to scents. Going back and reading significant scenes where Saleem speaks of smell or food, mainly his work in the chutney factory and the idea of cooking emotions into food, I

## CONCLUSION

realized that Rushdie was hitting on this idea of olfactory cognition, whether or not he was aware of the science behind the concept. Every person I have mentioned olfactory cognition to has been able to tell me about a scent that makes them feel a certain way, most of these being positive, which also brings nostalgia into discussion (for future research). I also researched Rushdie's manipulation of history, which led me to believe he is challenging India's past as told by history books. As such, I concluded that in the world of the novel, Saleem used food to restore national memory where history books had altered it.

In Chapter Two I began my research by trying to learn more about Indian cinema. I read various articles and the sections of Tejaswini Ganti's book *Producing Bollywood* that aligned with the time period in *Midnight's Children* and around the time Rushdie wrote it (1979-81). I discovered that, like in Western cinema, the masses prefer escapist film—film that does not require active participation from the viewer. Like we also see with Western independent films and some big budget films, New Indian Cinema tried to change this viewership, but Bollywood cinema still accounts for the majority of films made in India. After meeting with my thesis director, I began researching film theory to see how Rushdie used and manipulated popular cinematic trends. This research introduced me to “scopophilia” and “suturing,” which I then used to explain Rushdie's and Saleem's use of fragmentation. I came to the conclusion that their use of film techniques made *Midnight's Children* the literary equivalent of the stories New Indian Cinema tried to tell, stories that required viewers (readers) to actively participate and consider the real-life social implications of the work.

## CONCLUSION

Aatish Taseer's article "How English Ruined Indian Literature" inspired my focus for Chapter Three. As an Anglo-American, I am biased about the English language; I am also aware of its role as a global language. My research for this chapter began by educating myself on the role of English in India, and then I shifted into researching what types of Indian fiction are written in English (not translated to English). I was surprised to learn about the role of Indo English commercial fiction and about how some feel Indians assume the role of colonizer when they become an elite English speaker. I am still undecided on my stance of Indo English literature versus commercial fiction, but I fully support the Easternization of the language and feel authors such as Rushdie are succeeding in making Indo English an Indian language and not just an echo of imperial English.

Throughout my research, I became more familiar with twentieth century India, olfactory cognition, film theory concepts, Indian cinema, and Indian literature. With such a list of research topics, I was only able to scratch the surface of each. About India's history, I learned what political circumstances brought about and followed India's Independence as well as the religious and linguistic controversy that accompanied these aspects. My film theory readings taught me new ways to consider power dynamics (particularly in terms of active and passive participation) and taught me to be conscious of shot and scene transitions in both film and in literature. My research on Indian media was also enlightening. It feels ignorant to say, but I was surprised at how much the role of Eastern media is similar to that in the West; that popular media is so often that which inspires passivity.

## CONCLUSION

This project is in no way a criticism of India, Indian Culture, or India's people; instead, I hope that my work encourages others to reflect on the similarities between India and other cultures. For instance, the novel shows how many binaries (British rule versus Indian, Hindu versus Sikh, Pakistan versus India) lead to violence and hold India back; in America, one of many similar parallels is the division between political parties and the increasing aggression from this division. Saleem constantly comments on being too close to events to see them objectively; the same likely applies for those of us in America. By looking at another country's history, we can step back from the "screen," see the whole, and then, hopefully, consider implications a little more clearly in relation to our own issues.

Additionally, I hope my work inspires new approaches to literary analysis. I am a strong supporter of interdisciplinary research. While it is just the start, so far I have looked into neuroscience, film theory, cultural studies, religion studies, and political science. Despite being works of fiction, literature reflects society and often requires looking beyond the text to fully appreciate the work, especially when reading works based outside our own cultures.

Unfortunately, the interdisciplinary research was also the hardest part. With my college focus on journalism, English, and education, I have had little experience with many of the fields I used to support my research for this project. As such, topics such as olfactory cognition required I start from the basics to teach myself about cognition, and I would not claim to be an expert in any of these other fields, but I did build a basic background understanding to help me understand the sources I found.

## CONCLUSION

For my future research, I will expand on many topics I did not get a chance to touch on in my M. A. thesis. The sense of feeling, in particular, requires much more research as many of the times Rushdie uses touch, it is in relation to Islam and that women should not be touched by those outside their family (Saleem's mother, Amina, is touched on the stomach by a fortuneteller when she is pregnant with Shiva, and Saleem inappropriately touches Jamila Singer's hand when he should still see her as a sister—both events play significant roles in Saleem's life). In addition, I need to become much more familiar with Indian history, regions, languages, and politics. For theory, I plan to read more on national narratives, imagined communities; the differences between truth, honesty, and nostalgia; and the role media play on the marginalized. Additionally, I need to build my store of primary Indo English texts, and I will begin this building with Raja Rao's *The Serpent & The Rope*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This research will sharpen my literary analysis lens, allowing me to write a section on each sense and fully show how synesthesia parallels the need for postcolonial hybridity.

From there, I hope my research will support me as a teacher. When reading works from another country or culture, we tend to read a few pages of historical context and then the text. As has been shown in studies about primary education, kinesthetic learning—hands on learning, movement in the classroom—helps students internalize the material being learned. When teaching texts such as *Midnight's Children*, I will supplement class discussions and lectures with sensory culture kits. For instance, with *Midnight's Children* students could research Bollywood films and each bring a clip to show their classmates (sight and sound—even more exciting would be to have them learn



## CONCLUSION

a Bollywood dance, but this activity would not be as universal in all classrooms); we could wrap up the unit by trying our hand at making Mary Pereira's infamous green chutney (taste, smell, touch). There are, of course, numerous variations of these activities, and university-sponsored or local events could supplement them (for example, WT's office of diversity hosts many events to introduce students to other cultures, and, somewhat locally, a temple in Oklahoma City just hosted a "Taste of Sri Lanka" fundraiser). In academic, we often applaud the humanities for teaching empathy; we must not restrict this empathy to the West.

## WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, edited by Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp. 327-43.
- Bhaumik, Kaushik. "A Brief History of Cinema from Bombay to 'Bollywood.'" *History Compass*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-4, <http://history-compass.com>
- Brynie, Faith Hickman. "Synesthesia." *Brain Sense: The Science of the Senses and How we Process the World Around Us*, AMACOM, 2009, 183-89.
- Cain, Rob. "India's Film Industry—A \$10 Billion Business Trapped in a \$2 Billion Body." *Forbes*, 23 Oct. 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robcairn/2015/10/23/indias-film-industry-a-10-billion-business-trapped-in-a-2-billion-body/#1f09e64b70d2>. Accessed 18 April 2017.
- Chordiya, Deepa P. "'Taking on the Tone of a Bombay Talkie': The Function of Bombay Cinema in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *ARIEL*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2007, pp. 97-121.
- Devereaux, Mary. "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator: The 'New' Aesthetics." *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, edited by Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp. 651-63.

## WORKS CITED

- Gaedtke, Andrew. "Halluci-nation: Mental Illness, Modernity, and Metaphoricity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2014, pp. 701-25,  
[https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary\\_literature/v055/55.4.gaedtke.html](https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contemporary_literature/v055/55.4.gaedtke.html)
- Ganti, Tejaswini. *Producing Bollywood*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Gendle, Mathew H. "Word-Gustatory Synesthesia: A Case Study." *Perception*, vol. 36, 2007, pp. 495-507.
- Herz, Rachel S. "Odor Memory and the Special Role of Associative Learning." *Olfactory Cognition: From Perception and Memory to Environmental Odours and Neuroscience*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012, Advances in Consciousness Research, vol. 85.
- Lipscomb, David. "Caught in a Strange Middle Ground: Contesting History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1991, pp. 163-89, doi: 10.1353/dsp.1991.0003
- Mukherjee, Ankhi. "Fissured Skin, Inner-Ear Radio, and a Telepathic Nose: The Senses as Media in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *Paragraph*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2006, pp. 55-76.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th ed., 1974, pp. 746-57.
- Niven, Alastair. "Salman Rushdie talks to Alastair Niven." *Wasafiri*, vol. 13, no. 26, 1997, pp. 52-57, doi: 10.1080/02690059708589567

## WORKS CITED

- Parameswaran, Uma. "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art." *ARIEL*, vol. 14, 1983, pp. 34-45.
- Price, David W. "Salman Rushdie's 'Use and Abuse of History' in *Midnight's Children*." *ARIEL*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1994, pp. 91-107.
- Rushdie, Salman. "'Errata'; or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*." *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, 1991, pp. 22-25.
- . "Imaginary Homelands." *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, 1991, pp. 9-21.
- . *Midnight's Children*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006.
- Upstone, Sara. "You are What You Eat: Postcolonial Eating in the Novels of Salman Rushdie." *South Asian Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2009, pp. 117-31.
- Silverman, Kaja. "[On Suture]," *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th ed., 1974, pp. 199-209.
- Wachinger, Tobias A. "Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India's Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption." *ARIEL*, vol. 34, no. 2-3, 2003, pp. 71-94.