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Mnemory and the ‘Chutney of Memory’ in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

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Abstract:

The focus of this study is mainly to address the role of memory in Salman Rushdie’s second novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) in revisioning post-partition national history of India. This article seeks to analyse how memory in the form of ‘mininarrative’ can challenge the official version of story/ history and the concept of homogeneous empty time. This study attempts to understand how in the process of remembrance an individual and a community influence and complement each other; how memory creates its own version of history by pushing the ‘excess’ or ‘remains’ of history to the ‘foreground’ of a novel; and how the shared memories of an alternative social/imagined group fosters a sense of collectivity by resisting and ‘performing’ the concept of the nation.

Keywords: Memory, history, mininarrative, nation, community, time, body.

“We are a nation of forgetters” (*Midnight’s Children*, 43)

“In words and pickles, I have immortalised my memories” (*Midnight’s Children*, 642)

This study seeks to understand how issues like time, history, body and nation are crucial in the process of the narrator’s recollections in Salman Rushdie’s second novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and how the inter-relationships among these issues have influenced and contributed to Rushdie’s project of the ‘chutnification of memory’. In *Midnight’s Children* (1981) we encounter Rushdie as a historian, or rather as Walter Benjamin’s privileged historian, who seizes “hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (*Illuminations* 225). Rushdie’s “nocturnal scribbling” (*MC* 38) is for him a necessary narrative, and one with critical and cultural functions: it reminds nations of their odd beginnings, their tenuous existence, even their impulse to forget. The autobiographical imperative of *Midnight’s Children* serves such a function, as the narrator says that – “this is why I resolved to confide in papers before I forget” (37). *Midnight’s Children* charts a nation’s difficulties in negotiating with what to remember, what to forget, what to elide, what to fictionise, and Rushdie’s narrator faces the problem of reconstructing his life story; for communities, in the process of nation building what is remembered, what is forgot and what is transmitted — by whom, for whom, and towards what ends – remains a critical component of this imagined narrative. Rushdie’s ‘memory project’ here in this novel can be described as an attempt to give shape to the Lyotardian ideal. In Rushdie’s vision of a plethora of ‘small’ stories, set in opposition to the ‘grand mythology’ of nation, there is an echo of Lyotard’s famous distinction between *petites recits* and metenarratives in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Lyotard 82). Whereas Lyotard’s vision of competing

narratives remains at the level of metaphysical generality, Rushdie's allegorical revision of Lyotard's attack on the Platonic tradition has a more specific focus. Rushdie's aim, here in this novel, is to reimagine a form of social and communal interaction in order to represent the lost and forgotten voices of history.

Walter Benjamin's most compelling account of collective memory is the essay "The storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in which he links the flourishing of the storytelling tradition to two conditions – first is the link between the story and lived experience, which always has its roots in the past; and the second condition for storytelling is the epic wisdom, which, once again, is based on tacitly accepted moral assumptions. In both cases the stories told are fed by collective memory. He says in that essay:

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening from generation to generation . . . It is, in other words, remembrance which, as the Muse derived element of the novel, is added to reminiscence, the corresponding element of the story. . . (*Illuminations*, 98).

While discussing the inter-relation of time and memory, he aptly quotes George Lukacs from *Theory of the Novel*:

Time can become constitutive only when connection with the transcendental home has been lost . . . the whole inner action of the novel is nothing else but a *struggle against the power of time* . . . And from this . . . arise the genuinely *epic experience of time: hope and memory* . . . only in the novel . . . does there occur a creative memory which transfixes the object and transforms it . . . (99, emphasis mine).

Here in this novel also the narrative's convoluted structure speaks to the difficulty of recuperating and representing history and 'struggle(s) against the power of time' while describing the events through the filters of memory; and undergoes 'the epic experience of time' through the acts of remembrances and recollections. The narrator is less participants in history than an onlooker, but he is an onlooker whose subjectivity and memory are constitutive of the history that he is attempting to narrate. Being Benjaminian story-tellers, a continual yearning runs through the retelling of the past in the "possibility of reproducing the story" (Benjamin 97), but in a sort of creative tension between 'memory and hope', between nostalgia and utopianism.

In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Michel Foucault proposes to eschew traditional history and recognises the events of history, not as a linear progression, but rather as "fragment" (Rabinow 76-100). In the same essay Foucault defines genealogy as an analysis of descent opposed to the evolutionary model of history whose main force is in the search for origin: genealogy liberates what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history and what has been set aside as accidents or errors in the imposed order of historical necessity. The genealogical approach with its task of tracing "passing events in their dispersions" questions a "suprahistorical perspective" that assumes a "teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time" (Rabinow 81). In the study of this novel I will seek to understand how the characters by the methods of genealogical approach attempt to find out gaps, dispersions of past events that can question the broad or grand conception of history; how characters like Saleem and Padma can resist the 'teleological movement of events in the homogenised form of time' through the act of memorising.

Paul Ricoeur in his essay “The Interweaving of History and Fiction” has expanded the Freudian notion of memory-distortion at the individual level, to embrace the concept of memory-clarification and distortion at the social level (*Time and Narrative*, 180-192). In the case of Saleem Sinai, these concepts of memory-distortion and memory-clarification are very crucial. His narrative makes it clear that what it seeks in retelling the personal and national history is ‘memory’s truth’. Saleem notes that:

I told you the truth . . . Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies, and vilifies also, but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events, and no same human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own (211).

This constant movement and displacement in the interaction between Saleem and India’s history is what helps the novel to avoid a singular fictional or historical frame, thus making its ‘heteroglossia’ serve representational purpose. Saleem’s constant recalling his past stories makes his voice polyphonic and “permits a multiplicity of social voices” and a “wide variety” of “links and interrelationship” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263). To my mind, Saleem’s memory helps him to attain this wide variety of ‘links and interrelationships’ and it gives the novel a ‘multiplicity of social voices’.

With “consumed multitudes . . . jostling and shoving inside” and guided “only by the memory of a large white bedsheet” Saleem “commence(s) the business of remaking” his life “from the point at which it really begins” (4). Saleem tells not only his personal story, but also the story of a generation of one thousand and one children, who were born during the first hour of August 15th 1947. Born during the hour “somehow outside time”, the midnight’s children with special gifts represent possibilities for the newly-born nation, but as Saleem add in a foreshadowing aside, they are “also the children of the time; fathered . . . by history” (159). Saleem says that:

I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively . . . This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world (330-31).

With his desire for a place at the centre of nation’s history, Saleem’s desire is to convert the ‘passive-literal’ mode to the mode of the ‘active-metaphorical’, which “grouped together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of the public affairs”, and his “private experience was shown to be symbolically at one with history” (331). These hyphens, to my mind, symbolise Saleem’s memory which connects his “private experience” with “the public affairs”, his inner self (“individual”, 331) with the history of the nation (“the grander scale of history”, 331). That is why Saleem’s narrative is heavily marked and ruptured by gaps and scraps of memory. Here I want to draw attention to Rushdie’s essay “Imaginary Homelands” (1991) where he says that our memory is faulty and he compares it with the broken mirror. In this text Rushdie transforms his narrative into a broken mirror of memory that reflects that lost and fragmented spaces in-between. As a mirror helps us to see our own images, memories also help us to recognise the lost images of our selves by unfolding the events of the past. Both mirror and memory need the physical

presence of a present time frame. Only memory can reveal the gap or the 'missing bits' of official history. The space that the narrative focuses upon is transformed into a hyphenated 'over-there'.

After opening his memoir with story of a strange conjunction of biological and political nativity, Saleem recommences his story thirty two years back at a point where his grandfather Aadam aziz who returned home with an "altered vision" and "travelled eyes" (5), after five years of medical training abroad, hits his nose against a tussock in his attempt to pray. From his recollections we come to know about the story of a hole, "the vacancy in a vital inner chamber" of his grandfather, the stories of the boatman Tai, the stories of the perforated sheet, his grandmother Naseem, the Reverend Mother, the poet Nadir Khan, the departing colonial master William Methold, Mr. Zagallo, djinn-sodden reality of his father Ahmed Sinai, her mother Amina Sinai at the red fort, of Buddha, the story of his sister Jamila Singer with whom Pakistan falls in love, story of General Zulfikar, uncle Mustapha, Hanif, Emerald, a dominant Widow, Picture Sing, Rani of Cooch Nahi, Parvati and shiva. With these stories are linked several memories of some unforgettable incidents such as an accident in a washing chest, memories of a silver spittoon, a public announcement, many-headed monsters, memory of Pioneer cafe, "memories of invisibility" (532), "cracking memory" of May 1974 (568), memory of the Emergency in 1975, of a fine Kashmiri morning, movements performed by pepperpots and loss of memory at Sundarbans. The novel is also centered around the memory of Saleem's childhood days than on his life as an adult. Saleem's growing-up into adolescence and adulthood is a process of being drained of hope and possibilities along with the disintegration of India and the subsequent India- Pakistan war in 1965. In the act of looking back to find some meaning before an imminent end, Saleem's narrative moves from his childhood in Bombay to his failed adulthood in Karachi. However, Saleem remembers the city of Bombay as a lost place of his childhood, full of possibilities. In Saleem's imaginary map of the subcontinent, recreated through his memory, the two places, Bombay and Karachi, stand opposed to each other as 'representational spaces' through associated images and symbols. Almost all the key historical events of war and violence feature in Saleem's memory: the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919, the Indian-Pakistan Partition of 1947, the First Five-Year plan in 1956, Ayub Khan's coup in Pakistan in 1965, the Indian-China war of 1962, the India-Pakistan war of 1965, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Indian emergency of 1975. Saleem's power of telepathy, communication and the voices speaking inside his head enable him to provide the missing link in the narrative; to revive "most of the matters in our lives" that "take place in our absence" (17) through his memory; and to maintain the continuity of the story. He tries to fill in the "fadings, and gaps", and to "improvise on occasion" before "memory cracks beyond hope of reassembly" (536).

Rushdie's narrator Saleem Sinai is constantly interrupted, and distracted from his task of narrating the history of India and himself, entering into all kinds of dialogue between himself and Padma, the embodiment of the traditional linear reader, the person who wants to hear what happens next and loathes digressions. Saleem says that "here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-

next” (44). Saleem’s autobiographical memoir is constantly interrupted with questions and remarks by the listener Padma, ‘the lotus goddess of the present’. Listening to Saleem, Padma helps him somewhat distinguish between traditional historiography and total nonsense. Saleem’s memoir is therefore peppered with sidelong glances to see if she’s accepting his tale. Hence Padma is a kind of co-creator of Saleem’s life, since, to a large extent, the tension between Padma’s “what happened- nextism” (45) and Saleem’s need to conceal propels shapes the entire narrative. Hence, to my opinion, the main narrative force of the novel is created out of a conflict between pickle (pickling of memories) and Padma (homogeneous time) – between, as Saleem tells, “twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus-goddess of the present . . .” (206).

Repeated references to several body parts such as hair, leg, spitting, blood, finger, especially nose and genitals serve as cultural metonymy and cultural signifier that provide the protagonist of the novel to access not only his family memory but also national memory. Rushdie uses the important imageries of leaking and dripping in *Midnight’s Children*. Leaking leads to transformation, creation, and newness to a productive impurity. Saleem says that “the past has dripped into me” (44-45) and it allows him to perform the creative act of narration. Saleem goes through a series of draining, beginning with the loss of his finger. At the end of his life Saleem’s body, “buffeted by too much history” begins unnaturally to crack and crumble as a result of being “subjected to drainage above and below” (43). Saleem links the theme of leakage not only with body but also with his memory. He laments that “as my memories return to leak out me, this old fever has come back . . .” (289). When, Saleem is drained of semen by a ‘dominant Widow’, he begins to die, and India irrevocably enters into a period of darkness. Saleem musters his remaining powers to narrate his story, although even the power of imagination that serves him so well throughout begin to fail him as his disintegration becomes acute. Hence Saleem’s memory is directly or indirectly linked with the layered pasts of his body. Deprived of memory, Saleem seems incapable of questioning authority. Here Saleem is amnesiac; constructing the past, to him, is always a process of forgetting. Saleem philosophises, “Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation” (643). Saleem’s memory, in a postmodern way, is fragmented, provisional, openly subjective, plural, unimpressive, a construct, a reading. What he begins with is an autobiography-cum history of India; what he finishes with is an exploration of his own memory. Several critics criticise Rushdie for his untruthful depiction of some major historical and mythical facts such as the story of the elephant-headed god Ganesha, Bombay’s patron-goddess Mumbadevi, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, singing performance by Lata Mangeskar in 1946. Rushdie himself emphasises Saleem’s role within the novel as that of an unreliable narrator. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie explains that *Midnight’s Children* was conceived as an attempt to “unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory” (10). In the essay “Errata”: Or the Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie directly responds to those who find fault in his depiction of India’s past, and explains the importance of narration and memory to his conception of history. Rushdie explains clearly in “Errata” that “Saleem Sinai is not an oracle; he is only adopting a kind of oracular language. His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes” (*IH* 25). To my mind, the use of the word ‘play’ is very important.

Saleem's memory that contains multiple stories of several lives, I think, is a kind of fictional form that helps him to 'play' with many 'historical shapes'. Thus Saleem's memory is, in a deconstructive sense, 'open' and it leads to endless series of signifiers ('historical shapes'). In a Derridian sense Saleem's memory is a kind of sign that is incomplete and requires other shapes to complete its sense. His memory is a kind of supplement that is extra. It is both Saleem's necessity and excess or remains.

In "Between memory and history: Les lieux de memoire" Pierre Nora argues that history does not merely confirm, complicate or challenge memory; rather it threatens to snuff out real memory altogether. She explains:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in *permanent evolution*; open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformation, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being lying dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a *perpetually actual phenomenon*, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past (8, emphasis mine).

In the novel under discussion, we see that history is always 'problematic and incomplete' and in the constant processes of 'reconstruction' and reformation through the memories of the characters. On the explicit level, here in this novel the protagonist Saleem is always in the process of remaking his past life. But on the deeper level he is actually remaking and reconstructing the past lives of other as well from his never-fading memory. For Saleem and other major as well as minor characters, spreading through the nation and beyond, memory is a 'perpetually actual phenomena' and a part of 'an undifferentiated eternal present'¹ and always in the process of 'permanent evolution'. It is quite noteworthy that most of the characters, whom Saleem remembers, are absent or dead in the present time frame of the novel. We only met their afterlives through the cultural memorizing of the protagonist and hence the boundary line between pre-lives and afterlives has been demolished. To invoke Ranajit Guha from his book *History at the Limit of World-History*:

. . . the role assigned to it [memory] is protective rather than nurturing. In other words, it is not for memory to hold the past in its womb and let time work on it slowly and creatively until it is ready to be born again in repetition . . . Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, has the doors of her temple open to all that survives time's ravages (Guha 70).

Two important words in the above quotation, in my view, are 'protecting' and 'nurturing'. Salman Rushdie's narrators are, I think, truly interested not only in nurturing their memory but also in protecting them. An almost similar politics of memory is set forth when in the "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin links the relation of our utopian imagination to the redemptive aspect of memory: "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (*Illuminations*, 254). In this study we have seen that Rushdie's narrators are truly interested in redeeming and preserving their memory.

Homi K. Bhabha in his essay “Dissemi Nation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern nation” writes that: “Scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (*The Location of Culture*, 209). In the light of this interpretation we can reread the inherent conflicts in this novel as the collision between conceptions of nationhood identified by Bhabha as the *pedagogical* and the *performative*. Whereas the imaginary community of the midnight’s children, by contrast represent the idea of a nation that is redefined in each moment of its existence and is able to incorporate new strands into the national narrative as they become part of the ongoing performance of national life. The conference of the midnight’s children, to my view, is a kind of ‘imagined community’, where various kinds of imagined channels, thought-forms, images, signs, telepathic communications, the power of “conjuration and sorcery, transmutation, flight, prophesy and wizardry” (277), “an entire micropolitics of desire, of impasses and escapes, of submissions and rectifications” (Deleuze and Guattari 10) and “the dynamics of the mutual recognition” (Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* 16) have been achieved by the well-chutnification of the shared memories of one thousand and one children. According to some contemporary critics the allegory in postmodern narratives of memory is a mode of facing a break between a disappearing past and a present by assembling stories of the past in dispersion to form a constellation. What holds them together is the will to remember. Before telling the climactic story of what happened when he was a captive in the Widows’ Hostel, Saleem mediates on the fragmentation of his memory:

Scraps of memory: this is not how a climax should be written. A climax should surge towards its Himalayan peak; but I am left with shreds, and must jerk towards my crisis like a puppet with broken strings. This is not what I had planned; but perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin . . . if I began again, would I, too, end in a different place? Well then: I must content myself with shreds and scraps: as I wrote centuries ago, the trick is to fill in the gaps, guided by the few clues one is given (596).

Saleem Sinai declares a shift in both occupation and narration, announcing that the words he writes will be accompanied – even eclipsed – by the chutneys and pickles he preserves in the Braganza factory. ‘I, Saleem Sinai’, he states,

and my chutneys and kasundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribbling –by day amongst the pickle vats, by night within sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well a fruit is being saved from the corruption of the clock (44).

Why does Saleem add a second mode of ‘preservation’ against the ‘corruption of the clock’? Saleem pickles the story of his life and, with it, the story of the nation, providing a subversive, even potentially corrective, version of events. As pickle can change the original taste of fruits or vegetable used, Saleem’s memory also changes the original version of history. Saleem doesn’t abandon his verbal account of history, but adds to it another historiography of chutney and pickles. Chutneys provide Rushdie with an occasion to position the human body and mind as that which mediates memory and history, a testing ground demonstrating why “reality can have metaphorical content” and still be real (240). What is required for chutnification? Saleem says:

. . . thanks to the powers of my drained nasal passages, 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 Sunderbans . . . believe don't believe but it's true (643).

The urge for retrospective readings of the past at the dusk of the twentieth century manifests itself as increasingly obsessions with memory what Andreas Huyssen (1995) calls *twilight memories*. The 'twilight' status of memory as the act of remembering, according to Andreas Huyssen, is concerned with a fissure between the past and the present— "the fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering its representations" (1-9). The tension between 'narrating I' and 'experiencing I' – the 'experiencing' of events and 'remembering' their representations is always central to the narrative structure of this novel. Rushdie's characters are always in the process of remaking their past lives. The essence of *Midnight's Children*, to my mind, is the underlying duality between narrating I and experiencing I. Whether several historical incidents in Saleem's life is related to 'experiencing I', the recollections of his past life is linked with 'narrating I'.

In this study 'cultural memory' plays a vital role as it influences the characters in the novel under discussion. Eminent memory-theorist Jan Assmann posits that humans unlike animals have to find an implement to maintain their nature over generations and culture memory serves as such an implement. It is a concept for saving the knowledge that directs behavior and experience in social context that lasts over generations. Assmann formulates that 'mnemohistory' is "the reception theory applied to history" that the proper way of dealing with the "working of cultural memory is mnemohistory" (Assmann 128). Here in this novel Saleem fall in a tension between the duality of discovery and invention while reviving his memories. Hence, all the stories he tell from his memory are not true. To my mind, they can be called *mnemostory*². By 'mnemostory' I mean to say the stories that are sustained and nourished by memory and the memories that are, like stories fluid and changeable. They cannot be separated. In his climatic story Saleem is concerned not only with his own destiny but with multiple destinies. Although he is watchful of 'the heart of nostalgia' (630), Saleem indeed expresses a longing for "the most exalted of possibilities" and "the grand hope of pickling time" (642) as his telling comes near the end. Saleem reaches the end of his "long-winded autobiography" (642) through these 'mnemostories', and has 'immortalised' his "impossible chutney of memory" "in words and pickles" (642). Now my question is – will Saleem's son believe in and taste the story and the memory Saleem preserves for his him? Or the man of his next generation will pickle his own version of story? To my mind, Saleem is modern and open enough to leave a jar empty at the end. The jar is for his son as he is writing this story for him: "I am telling my story for him, so that afterwards, when I've lost my struggle against cracks, he will know. Morality, judgment, character . . . it all starts with memory . . ." (292). Saleem tells us his stories which are not his own (I mean, it is Shiva's logically) and tries to preserve it for his posterity which is not his own (again Shiva is his son's biological father). The storytellers of his next generation will fill in the gaps with separate versions of stories and create their own memory.

Gyanendra Pandey in his book *Memory, History and the Question of Violence* succinctly describes ‘memory’ as to “accommodate the malleable, contextual, fuzzy, lived community and to recognize how the community (the subject of history) is forged in the very construction of the past” (49). Here in this novel, in reconstructing the afterlives of the people, Saleem’s memory-chutney accommodates the ‘malleable, fuzzy’ and fluid lives of community. Ultimately he celebrates his fall through his memory – “Once again an abracadabra, an open-sesame; words printed on a chutney jar, opening the last door of my life . . . I was by an irresistible determination to track down the maker of *that impossible chutney of memory* . . .” (638, emphasis mine). Hence, we can conclude this discussion by formulating that the ‘chutnification of memory’ with the dual devices of discovery and invention can transform ‘mnemohistories’ to ‘mnemostories’; and thus the rediscovered and reinvented memories, with their epic ‘struggle against the power of time’, are ‘saved from the corruption of the clock’.

Notes:

¹ Pandey quotes from David Lowenthal’s work *The Past is a foreign Country. The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

² I use the term ‘mnemostory’ with some alteration of Jan Assmann’s (1995) famous term ‘mnemohistory’. Assmann, Jan. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” See bibliography

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