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Historical Truth in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: A Question of Perspective

In the post-modern literary tradition, an absence of universal truth replaces prior notions of one absolute truth, in terms of history as well as such notions as identity and society. Just as post-modernism dismantles the concept of absolute truth, Linda Hutcheon's concept of the "narcissistic narrative" exemplifies the postmodern undermining of prior traditions: "The origins of the self-reflecting structure that governs many modern novels might well lie in that parodic intent basic to the genre as it began in *Don Quijote*, an intent to unmask dead conventions by challenging, by mirroring" (18). Narcissistic narrative exhibits a narratorial awareness that invites the reader to participate in stripping prior conventions and traditions. Hutcheon argues that "What narcissistic narrative does do in flaunting, in baring its fictional and linguistic systems to the reader's view, is to transform the process of making, of *poiesis*, into part of the shared pleasure of reading. [...] it is the human imaginative *process* that is explicitly called into action, in both the author and the reader" (20). Those novels that exhibit characteristics of narcissistic narrative emphasize the creative process and do so with an awareness of that process, breaking down old conventions and proposing replacements for those conventions. Salman Rushdie writes at the moment when new theories of history undermine recorded historical facts as the individual's sole tie to history (as evinced by Collingwood, Foucault, and others). The need for a new way of looking at older historical forms makes *Midnight's Children* a prime candidate for analysis in terms of narcissistic narrative, providing an example that explores new views of history. Ultimately, Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, exemplifies narcissistic narrative, inviting the reader to participate in creating and discovering an alternative to the typical historical traditions of historical truth as merely recorded facts: memory and the process of recalling memories produces individual histories that overlap some aspects of recorded history yet remain unique, individual versions of history.

Rushdie employs the use of narcissistic narrative in undermining the concept of historical truth as recorded fact. Hutcheon defines narcissistic narrative as the "textual self-awareness" that pervades metafiction, or "fiction that includes within itself commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be confined to three aspects of narcissistic narrative: the self-aware narratorial style, the reader participation invited by the text, and the new rules of literature invoked with the employment of narcissistic narrative. The three-pronged significance of the selected points of narcissistic narrative and the resulting explications of *Midnight's Children* will demonstrate that Rushdie undermines the conventional ideas of history and posits a multiplicity of histories that are comprised of a chutnified mixture of memory and recorded fact.

Rushdie's ability to undermine the notion of absolute historical truth as recorded fact gains strength from Saleem's awareness of being a self-aware narrator. Hutcheon classifies this type of narcissistic narration as overt as opposed to the covert form, in which self-conscious narration is more internalized and structural. Saleem's narration in *Midnight's Children* falls into the category of overt, which Hutcheon defines as "texts in which the self-consciousness and self-

reflection are clearly evident, usually explicitly thematized or even allegorized within the 'fiction'" (23). Rushdie's narration adheres to this form of self-aware narration as Saleem, the narrator, continually draws attention to the act of writing. In fact, Saleem baldly informs the reader of his self-aware narrative state. Using Padma as a tool used to communicate this awareness to the audience, Saleem states that "Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings [...]" (72). Saleem demonstrates awareness of his narrative self-consciousness and, in doing so, reflects the narcissism that permeates the narrative of *Midnight's Children*.

The narcissism of the text extends through the fictive world created by Rushdie and encourages - in fact relies upon - the reader to participate in the creation of new ideas. Hutcheon notes that, "This productive labor is no longer the explicit subject of overt teachings to the reader; the text now forces him to read with his imaginative and ordering faculties alert and at work" (82). Narcissistic narratives not only engage the reader on the level of plot and story but also force the reader to delve beyond the surface of the text, aiding the author in discovering alternative forms to archaic absolute truths. Hutcheon attributes a "freedom" to this manner of writing in which the author entreats his audience to join in the process of interpreting and creating. For Rushdie, there is no question about intended reader participation: Saleem's invitation to the reader lacks subtly. He directly affirms that he expects "my audience to be capable of *joining in*; of imagining for themselves what I have been unable to re-imagine [...]" (352). By directly addressing the audience, Rushdie uses Saleem to implore the reader to accept an alternative to traditional notions of historical truth and also to entreat the reader to explore those alternatives, as will be outlined further.

The desire for reader participation by authors who use narcissistic narrative, such as Rushdie, points to the new rules of such literature. Hutcheon discusses these rules within her discussion on narcissistic narrative and notes that, "Since fiction is not a way of viewing reality, but a reality in its own right, the fictive heterocosm will have its own rules or codes of which the reader becomes gradually aware as he proceeds. As well as being ordered and fictional, the heterocosm is constructed in and through language, and both author and reader share the responsibility for this work" (90). For Rushdie, these new rules simulate the function of memory and make a statement about history and how it is approached, viewed, and interpreted. In addition to the extreme narratorial self-awareness and reliance on reader participation, Rushdie inaugurates a strong historical basis in recorded fact while intentionally introducing errors into the framework. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie discusses the writing of *Midnight's Children* and how he "went to some trouble to get things wrong" (23). Introducing these errors into the story, Rushdie mimics the workings of memory and how a person's memory creates a reality that may not conform to recorded facts, yet is as valid for that person as those recorded facts.

The following passage from *Midnight's Children* captures not only Saleem's self-awareness of narcissistic narrative but also invokes one of the many intentional errors in the text, bringing it to the foreground and imploring the reader to situate this error in the realm of a reality created by human memory:

Reality is a question of perspective [...]. Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these

pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others (198).

Saleem invokes his own memory of events, Gandhi's death in this instance, as a true and valid account of his life regardless of that which is recorded as fact and is considered the one "true" history. Thus, Rushdie's narcissistic narration enables and invokes new rules of literature to describe (while avoiding prescription) an alternate way of approaching history: memory becomes a viable historical alternative to recorded fact. Michael Reder observes that "When Rushdie speaks of 'memory,' he is speaking not of cultural memory or national consciousness but of individual memory, [...] the history in *Midnight's Children* is seen through the eyes of an individual: it is not the dominant, official 'History' but a history that is personalized and therefore given life, significance, and meaning" (226). The individual nature of history as highlighted by a narcissistic narration that relies on memory undermines traditional forms of history as a unity of recorded fact.

In *Origin and Originality in Rushdie's Fiction*, Martine Hennard Dutheil points to the central idea of *Midnight's Children* as "the power of fiction to capture — and invent — a new reality" (10). In the afore-cited passage, Saleem reminds the reader that individual perception as created by memory is an illusion that ultimately comprises a truth for that individual. In a discussion between Gunter Grass and Salman Rushdie, Grass observes that "We have many realities. Our problem is that we don't accept that there are many realities" (76). Both Rushdie and the novel concur with Grass in questioning traditional beliefs about the reality of history and memory, exemplary of narcissistic narrative, which also seeks to undermine traditional forms. Rushdie presents this new reality as a reality created by memory, in which one holds on to that which creates meaning. Re-imagining history fills in the gaps of a person's memory, in a manner that may or may not concur with recorded fact. Saleem describes the inevitable gaps and errors in memory and proceeds to re-imagine his history in a manner that provides meaning to him. To emphasize this point, Rushdie enables Saleem's narration to catalog the history of Saleem's grandparents through memories that cannot possibly exist due to his forthcoming birth, 32 years in the future. In his narcissistic style of narrative, Saleem reminds the reader that "Most of what matters in your life takes place in your absence" (282). Although not present for the early lives of his grandparents, he "remembers" their life stories, often by accessing his sense of smell (smell being the sense with the strongest link to memory). Saleem consistently reminds the reader of the necessity of re-imagining history in order to have a concept of one's own past and even re-imagines the points from which he was absent.

Saleem consciously remarks on several of his historical "errors" to emphasize the re-imagining of individual histories that comprise a new reality, which serves as an alternate to historical fact. Rushdie himself likens the process of memory to archaeology in an interview conducted by Jean-Pierre Durix: "because they [memories] were fragments of the past, they became somehow much more powerful, as though they were bits of archaeological remains one had discovered and from which one was trying to reconstruct what the vanished civilization was like" (12). By using

narcissistic narrative to draw attention to discrepancies, Rushdie points to the nature of memory as partial and incomplete: an individual remembers that which provides the most meaning for that individual. From these glimpses, the individual rebuilds his history to form a reality that is just as valid as that known as “historical truth.” Rushdie’s use of overt narcissistic narrative calls traditional views of history into question and proposes that memory creates individual perception: the extreme narratorial awareness proposes rather than imposes. Further, the narcissistic narration presenting the idea of memory as creating a new reality encourages the reader to participate in forming his own conclusions rather than encouraging a blind acceptance of the presented conclusions.

In proposing memory as a method of creating a new reality of history for the individual as an alternative to or elaboration of recorded fact, Rushdie does give limited credence to the use of recorded fact. When comparing the process of creating history to archaeology, Rushdie notes that fragments comprise memories. To have a concept of one’s own past, one must be able to re-imagine that history from the available fragments of memories. However, by invoking memory alongside recorded fact, Saleem re-imagines his past to compile a new reality from fragments of memory. In relating the history of Bombay, Saleem acknowledges the destruction of rice by the development of tenements and continues, conveying the historic value of rice: “But still, in the city, we are great rice eaters. Patna rice, Basmati, Kashmiri rice travels to the metropolis daily; so the original, ur-rice has left its mark upon us all, and cannot be said to have died in vain” (107). Just as ur-rice leaves its mark on Bombay, ur-history – the historical truth of recorded fact – leaves its mark on the new history of a new reality created by perception and memory. By invoking “ur-rice,” Rushdie plays with language in a manner similar to the way he plays with history, reality, and memory. He shows that something from ur-history lives on in the new reality of individual perception; however, on the whole, memory supercedes ur-history in this same new reality. The mixing of these two historical modes finds symbolic expression in the many chutney jars Saleem has created and labeled at the end of the novel. Here, Rushdie advocates a termination of the ideal, unified view of history. Keith Wilson applauds this acknowledgement of partiality: “When he [Saleem] reviews the end-product of his dealings with the god of memory who has supported him, a product lined up in the thirty yearly pickle-jars of his experience, he accepts with resignation the partialness of his success [...]” (61). The partialness of memory leaks into individual history, while the new reality remains a chutnified-mixture of ur-history and memory, merged through re-imagination and encouraged by narcissistic narrative. In this manner, Rushdie shows that recorded fact functions for the individual as a point of reference rather than as an absolute truth.

Through Saleem, Rushdie describes the necessity of accepting the partialness of memory. While re-imagination aids the mixing of memory and ur-history, a strict adherence and reliance to ur-history results in cracks. Saleem embarks on a desperate search for meaning as he attempts to link his own history with that of the nation. As noted in the above passage, Saleem wonders if he is “prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?” (198). In response to his declared search for meaning against absurdity, Saleem actively and admittedly attempts to link himself with the nation. Doing so results in cracking: an ultimate unity remains impossible. The narrator fails to see what the story tells, which Reder articulates: “*Midnight’s Children* is out to show that history does have meaning; in fact, history has *many* meanings. For Rushdie, history is individual, and history’s

meaning is determined by the present. The message is, to a great extent, that history is not logical, it is not scientific or even objective—but it still can have meaning” (240). By searching for one unified meaning rather than accepting a multiplicity of meanings, Saleem physically “cracks” as Rushdie portrays the disintegration of one unified historical viewpoint with a unity of meaning.

Rushdie further expounds on the disintegration of traditional forms in the way he creates a narcissistic narrative that “disintegrates” from “proper” narrative qualities. His narrative makes extensive use of uncommon forms of punctuation and also manipulates language, creating new words. In a similar manner to narcissistic narrative’s ability to undermine conventional forms, Rushdie’s literary style destabilizes the traditional use of language, invoking new rules. In an interview conducted by Jean-Pierre Durix, Rushdie discusses this manipulation of language: “The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together a different way...I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language...That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let others into it” (10). Within the narcissistic narrative, Rushdie’s narrative style undermines the traditional conventions of a unified history. The breaking of the language emphasizes, at a textual level, the disintegration of Saleem as he strives to find meaning from ur-history while partially struggling to meld memory with ur-history. Although he demonstrates this mixture throughout the text, the narrator never fully reconciles himself to the rift between individual history and ur-history. However, Rushdie characterizes Saleem in this manner to posit the idea of a chutnified, multiplicity of history to the reader, leaving the final analysis to that reader. Wilson confirms that “...Rushdie makes the ‘meaning’ that Saleem can only, frenetically, hope to find” (59). Rushdie’s “meaning” arises from the unconventional narrative style that consciously creates new rules of language and thereby elevates Saleem’s failure to reconcile his chutnified mixture of history with ur-history. While Saleem’s attempt to find meaning fails, the narratorial language addresses the audience and provides this meaning through the reader, who represents a new generation that can choose to apply this chutnification of history to their lives.

Rushdie’s narrative not only contains textual aberrations from typical narrative but also houses oral narrative within the narcissistic narrative. The self-aware narrative process that addresses the audience and creates new rules while undermining conventional forms reflects the process of oral story telling. Rushdie acknowledges that “Padma enabled the book to become an oral narrative, some kind of stylization of such a narrative, if you like” (Durix 14). By creating a character who acts as a catalyzer for the telling, encouraging the continuation of the tale and interacting with the teller of that tale, Rushdie allows Saleem’s narration to embody qualities of the oral narrative. As with such a narrative style, Saleem often interrupts his own story, addresses the reader, and speaks in circles before returning to his main point. As Saleem tells the story, he constantly digresses when some element of his tale reminds him of something else. At one point he rails against these digressions: “Interruptions, nothing but interruptions! The different parts of my somewhat complicated life refuse, with a wholly unreasonable obstinacy, to stay neatly in their separate compartments” (224). By narcissistically pointing to the orality of the text, Saleem draws attention to that orality and the nature of the narrative itself to emphasize the function of memory.

The elements of oral narrative overlap and work with the elements of narcissistic narrative and simulate the function of memory in history: both the narrative style and memory undermine traditional forms. Just as a person's memory jumps from one event to the next, without chronological sequence in many cases, Rushdie's narrative also leaps from one memory to the next, often interrupting itself in order to make room for a certain memory. Wilson also observes the narrative connection with memory, as elicited by the narcissistic and oral elements of the narrative: "Thus the reader/listener, deity of the narrator's present to whom he offers up narrative, has equal status with memory, the past out of which narrative is made and to which the narrator also owes service if he is to have meaning" (59). The shared status of memory and narrative in *Midnight's Children* indicates the significance of each elements: both memory and oral, narcissistic narrative provide alternatives to the conventional forms of literature and history. As the narrative style simulates the function of memory, Rushdie exemplifies one of Hutcheon's arguments in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: "The important contemporary debate about the margins and the boundaries of social and artistic conventions is also the result of a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits" (9). Rushdie transcends traditional limits in his use of narcissistic and oral narrative. These artistic conventions not only relate a story but also mimic the function of memory and thereby help redefine history as individual rather than a single historical viewpoint shared by all. Focusing on memory throughout and through his narrative, Rushdie undermines the conventional ideas of history and posits a multiplicity of histories that are comprised of a chutnified mixture of ur-history and memory.

By communicating his tale with the use of oral narrative, the narrator tells the story in the same manner in which history is told and written. Saleem reinforces the emphasis on communication as he announces that "As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences" (359). The correspondence between people, whether written or oral, involves distortions: no single truth stands out (except, perhaps, the inevitability of multiple truths, which could in and of itself comprise a unity of truth). Unavoidable distortion occurs due to the very process of enmeshing "facts" in a framework of subjects, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. Even minute differences between synonyms distort meaning and alter the manner in which this ur-history of recorded facts is conveyed and received. Thus, history necessarily emphasizes certain aspects over others by the manner in which a person communicates this history. Rushdie dramatizes this point as Saleem relates that "Mary heard all sorts of rumours and tittle-tattle, which she relayed to me as matters of absolute fact" (293). The rumours that Mary conveys as fact illustrate the manner in which presentation of history and historical events receives emphasis and coloring from the person relating the information. Different aspects gain emphasis from different tellers; thus, history parallels the function of memory since a person's memory grasps events that have a particular meaning or significance to that person. Because of communication, history necessarily lacks objectivity and thus embraces subjectivity, through which many versions of historical truth and many realities may be accepted. Reder observes that Rushdie "attacks the notion of the existence of objective 'facts.' History is ambiguous because reality is ambiguous. If Rushdie believes that our everyday 'reality' is built not upon fact but upon opinion, then by extension, the act of creating history must be equally unreliable" (227).

As noted by Reder, Rushdie portrays history as unreliable when one searches for a single unified historical truth. To emphasize this point, Saleem's narration is equally unreliable, a point the narrator himself acknowledges at several instances. The most memorable of these instances

occurs when Saleem admits to lying: “To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva’s death” (529). By perpetrating a bald falsification of the “truth,” Rushdie creates limits for the working of memory as a creator of alternate realities that replace a unity of historical truth. In this scene, his unreliability as a narrator emphasizes the need for a chutnified combination of memory and ur-history to create a viable alternative to ur-history alone. However, this limit by no means undercuts his proposition for replacing conventional forms of history. On the contrary, this unreliability serves to address the reader, shocking the audience into forming its own views on history. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon expounds upon the *impossibility of narrative reliability*: “If the speaking subject is constituted in and by language, s/he cannot be totally autonomous and in control of her or his own subjectivity, for discourse is constrained by the rules of language and open to multiple connotations of anonymous cultural codes” (168). Hutcheon continues several pages later, voicing her analysis of Rushdie and other authors of postmodern fiction: “they make their readers *question* their own (and by implication others’) interpretations” (180). The impossibility of reliable narration encourages Rushdie to play with the conventional techniques of narrative, providing a narcissistic narrative with elements of oral narrative that ultimately simulates the function of memory and advocates memory in combination with ur-history as a manner of undermining the traditional acceptance of and adherence to the traditional form of history seen as historical fact.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie articulates the utility of the necessarily unreliable narration as mimicking memory: “History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. [...] The reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believe, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to ‘read’ the world” (25). As Rushdie notes, people “read” and internalize the world and its events in different ways from one another, based on individual perspective. The truth-value of an individual’s perception of history retains a validity independent of the recorded “facts” of history. Reder argues that “truth is contained in the creative act [...]. After all, beyond the cold, vacant ‘truth’ preserved by the pure logic in philosophy and mathematics, truth is no more than memory. Memory mimics the artistic process [...]” (240). The artistic process of creating a narcissistic narrative that is necessarily unreliable both mimics the function of memory and also comprises a truth in and of itself. Narcissistic, oral narratives such as Saleem’s both utilize and mimic memory, conveying a historical account that proves to be just as valid as the recorded history that it may (or may not) contradict. Rushdie’s text (as interpreted by the reader and the reader’s participation) introduces a post-modern view of truth that accepts multiple truths and realities as valid forms of history.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie undermines conventional forms of history, narrative, and truth. The validity of memory as a truthful account of history is offered as an alternative to ur-history. Rushdie presents a fragmented view of history that stems from the imperfect and partial nature of memory, as evinced in Saleem’s narcissistic narration. The fragmentary history gains emphasis from a narcissistic narration that mimics memory through its orality and destabilizes not only language but also the idea of recorded history as the one true history. Inviting the reader to participate in the discovery of alternative truths, the narration exemplifies Hutcheon’s concept of the narcissistic narrative as it undermines conventional forms and suggests memory and individual perception as a means of grasping a reality. The individual’s reality may differ from recorded historical reality yet remains valid. The limit of the idea of alternate truths resides in memory and how one manipulates that memory. One may choose to alter memory by the

definition of others or one may retain that which provides the most meaning to that person. Because memory is alterable, both inwardly and outwardly, it is imperfect. Inwardly, one may “misremember” an event yet the sense of reality memory gives to that “false” event makes it as valid as the recorded truth. Outwardly, one may alter memory according to that recorded truth of ur-history. However, individual perception and participation allows Saleem, as well as the individual, to accept that which makes the most meaning to that person. Rushdie invites the reader to analyze the function of memory and the definition of historical truth. In doing so, he concludes and encourages the reader to conclude that “It is memory’s truth, he [Saleem] insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else’s version to his own” (*Imaginary* 25).

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