



## GIVING VOICE TO MULTIPLE REALITIES: POLYPHONY AND MAGIC REALISM IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

FARKLI GERÇEKLİKLERİ DİLE GETİRMEK: *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*'DA ÇOK SESLİLİK VE BÜYÜLÜ GERÇEKÇİLİK

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### Abstract

*Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) presents the autobiographical account of its unreliable narrator that forms a parallel to the history of India. To give an account of his past, the narrator reimagines historical events with a combination of his memories and recorded facts. This paper will discuss the role of polyphony and magic realism in establishing various realities and in undermining the conceptions of the totalising power founded on monologic view of the world. In the novel, cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent is threatened by the totalising power of the state. Through the magical elements and the polyphonic narrative, which reflects the consciousness of the others, the novel presents subjective versions of reality suggesting that reality is a matter of perception. Thus it takes polyphony one step further by the use of magical elements in giving voice to various possibilities. In this study it is argued that through its polyphonic narrative and magical realist elements, *Midnight's Children* not only undermines official accounts of history and essentialist conceptions of identity and nation but also provides a critique of realism. By encompassing cultural diversity of the multicultural Indian community, the novel demonstrates the multiplicity of reality and undermines systems of authority replacing the totalising version of reality with a multitude of perspectives.*

### Öz

*Salman Rushdie'nin Geceyarısı Çocukları (1981) başlıklı romanında anlatıcı kendi hayat öyküsünü Hindistan tarihindeki önemli olaylara atflarda bulunup bu olayları anlarıyla yorumlayarak anlatır. Bu makalede romanda farklı gerçeklikleri yansıtmaya ve baskıcı güçlerin gücünü azaltmada çok sesliliğin ve büyümlü gerçekçiliğin rolü incelenecektir. Romanda, Hindistan'da çok kültürlülüğün totaliter devlet tarafından tehdit edilmiş anlatılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda anlatı büyümlü gerçekçilik ve çok seslilik gibi yöntemlerle baskıcı yönetimin temsil ettiğinden farklı olan gerçeklikler sunmakta ve gerçeğin bireyin algısına göre değişiklik gösterebileceğini örneklemeaktadır. Eserde büyümlü gerçekçilik öğeleri sayesinde çok seslilik daha geniş bir boyut kazanmıştır. Bu çalışma, büyümlü gerçekçilik ve çok seslilik aracılığıyla Geceyarısı Çocukları'nın bir realizm eleştirisi sunduğunu; kimlik, ulus gibi kavramların değişmez olduğu düşüncesini ve resmi tarih anlatılarının güveni zayıflattığını öne sürmektedir. Romanda çok kültürlü Hint toplumunun farklı bakış açıları yansıtılarak gerçeklik kavramının değişkenliği gösterilmekte ve baskıcı güçlerin dayattığı gerçekliğe bir alternatif sunulmaktadır.*

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Is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 75)

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), the winner of the special Booker of Bookers prize in 1993, features a polyphonic narrative that demonstrates the above-mentioned "urge" to capture various modes of reality represented by the Indian subcontinent. Its first-person narrator Saleem Sinai's autobiographical narrative provides an imaginative version of the historical events of his time that subverts official accounts of history and creates an alternative to the totalitarian and unifying understanding of truth. The novel mainly deals with the historical events in India after its independence from British rule. Saleem, switched at birth with Shiva, and other

midnight's children, who were born at midnight on August 15, 1947, when India officially became independent of Britain, have magical powers hinting at the multiple possibilities of India, but they are hunted by the state and most of them are sterilised or murdered. The repressive power of the state, represented by the rule of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, referred to as the Widow in the novel, attempts to eliminate cultural differences that constitute the Indian population in order to create a unified, totalising version of reality. However, what is not represented by the totalising version of reality can be given voice by the multiplicity of voices representing other realities. The monologic, authoritative voice of the government that restricts the multifaceted representation of the community is subverted by the voices of the midnight's children and the unreliable narration that depends on memory, magic, and multicultural values of the people whose beliefs, ideas, and lifestyles are different from what the state envisions. Thus, the novel's way of narrating is in accord with Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia. Focusing on the novel's engagement with the individualised version of historical events, this paper aims to discuss the role of polyphony and magic realism in establishing various realities and undermining the conceptions of the totalising power founded on a monologic view of the world. By combining magic realism with polyphony, which reflects the consciousness of the others, the novel presents subjective versions of reality suggesting that reality is a matter of perception. Thus it takes polyphony one step further by the use of magical elements in giving voice to various possibilities. In this study it is argued that through its polyphonic narrative and magical realist elements, *Midnight's Children* not only undermines the official accounts of history and the essentialist conceptions of identity and nation but also provides a critique of realism. By encompassing cultural diversity of the multicultural Indian community and replacing the totalising version of reality with a multitude of perspectives, the novel demonstrates the multiplicity of reality and undermines systems of authority.

Since the novel is concerned with Indian history after the Independence, it needs to be contextualised within certain historical events. After a long struggle, India gained independence from British rule in 1947 but the transformation of the country was not easy. The first Prime Minister Nehru "sought to create a 'modern' free India" but within the period from 1966 to 1977, when his daughter Indira Gandhi served as Prime Minister, all efforts were frustrated (Metcalf 232). As Metcalf maintains, Gandhi "...was determined to be her own master...This new political style...inaugurated a populist authoritarianism, or what might be called a

*plebiscitary democracy, in which the figure of Indira Gandhi alone mattered. The slogan 'Indira is India, and India is Indira' effectively captured this focus on the person of the leader"* (254). Under her rule, problems such as food shortages and increasing unemployment got worse and the oppositions to her government grew stronger. Then she *"proclaimed an extraordinary state of emergency. Under the emergency regulations all civil liberties...were suspended; rigorous press censorship was brought into force; opposition political parties were banned; tens of thousands of Mrs Gandhi's opponents were unceremoniously thrown into jail"* (255). The state enforced the regulations with "contempt for the poor" and her son Sanjay Gandhi, who wielded power during the emergency, *"took up the cause of population control with enthusiasm...the poor and the vulnerable were often dragged off by the police and forcibly sterilized"* (256). Thus, due to her totalising tendencies and corruption of the government, Gandhi was regarded as an authoritarian leader, a dictator. Likewise, in the novel her rule stands for a homogenising power which tends towards absolutism.

In his essay "Riddle of the Midnight" Rushdie mentions the characteristics of India: *"multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity,"* and he further states that *"the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once"* (*Imaginary Homelands Essays...* 32). It is a quality celebrated in the novel that presents cultural diversity and multiplicity of reality. In the novel, he depicts a scene *"where people lead their invisible lives...Under the pressure of these streets which are growing narrower by the minute, more crowded by the inch...cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging"* (*Midnight's Children* 57). On the one hand there are poverty-stricken masses, on the other hand there are wealthy families like the Sinais; all from different layers of society. Likewise, India also consists of a remarkably heterogeneous population in terms of its cultural and ethnic hybridity. As the novel also depicts, there is a variety of belief systems and ethnic groups in India. *"Kashmiris, Punjabis, Bombayites, and Calcuttans have very little in common with regard to culture and history; Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians barely get along... Speakers of Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, and Malayam cannot communicate except in the colonizers' English language"* (Schürer 52). The experiences of significant social, cultural, and political struggles, such as the introduction of western culture, colonialism, independence, and partition, have had great effects on the Indian subcontinent that incorporates elements, rendering it culturally diverse. In the novel one can see that this multiplicity is under the threat

of the state's policy of oppressing the cultural heterogeneity and totalising the construction of meaning.

Demonstrating these social and historical events in a fictional context, *Midnight's Children* celebrates multiculturalism as an enriching quality. Rushdie reflects the multifaceted nature of the country in the novel by giving voice to various segments of the society. In order to represent cultural diversity, the novel deals with Indian history by presenting it as a part of the individualised version of the protagonist-narrator Saleem Sinai, who has telepathic powers enabling him to read the minds of the people. Saleem's birth at midnight on August 15, 1947, the day that India gained independence, makes him "handcuffed to [the] history" of his country (*Midnight's Children* 3). Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, wrote a letter to his parents celebrating his birth: "*Dear Baby Saleem... We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own*" (87). Thus, Saleem interprets the historical events in relation to his autobiographical account, according to which, for instance, the declaration of the state of emergency is an attempt to destroy Saleem and the people he cares about. Major historical events coincide with what happens to him in crucial moments, so he blames himself for some unfortunate events. For example, when he was ten, his teacher pulled Saleem's hair so hard that a clump of hair came out leaving his head in blood. Meanwhile, the ten-year-old India was hit by "*storms, floods, hailstones*" which "*managed to wreck the second Five Year Plan*" (149). Similarly, when he has an operation and his sinuses are drained, India loses the war with China and "*PUBLIC MORALE DRAINS AWAY*" (219). Besides, to reflect the multiplicity in Indian society, he feels his body will disintegrate into six hundred million pieces, the number of Indians at the time of his writing. In this sense, Saleem embodies the diverse and multiple realities of his country, which makes him a target of the authoritarian rule of Gandhi. As Kuchta states, Gandhi's "*State of Emergency...brought about India's most serious political crisis in almost 30 years of independence. Facing widespread discontent over the nation's economic instability...Gandhi revoked civil liberties...and imprisoned approximately 100.000 political enemies*" (208). Likewise, in the novel, the state targets and eliminates whatever it sees as a threat to its ideology. Against this totalising attitude of the authority, the novel attempts to represent the suppressed, silenced multitudes of the country. Throughout the novel, characters from different sections of the society and points of view embodying the various sensibilities of a multicultural population

are given voice by means of the polyphonic nature of the novel, which is a quality conceptualised by Bakhtin.

Bakhtin emphasises that language cannot be handled as a complete mechanical entity; it is rather an organic body. There is always a social aspect of language (*Speech Genres and...* 65-66). To him, the social and linguistic realms are linked and therefore language resists the dominance of a single voice. Polyphony is a musical term that Bakhtin borrows and expands for literary criticism. In his influential study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he argues that Dostoevsky's works have a polyphonic quality which allows the coexistence of diverse voices and points of view. This diversity includes individual voices belonging to the author, narrators and characters; distinct personalities with different beliefs, contradicting ideas, and positions. The diverse elements are in contact creating a dialogic quality. For Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is the most polyphonic of forms because it is inherently dialogic and associated with pluralism without the totality of a single dominant voice. As he points out, the novel involves "several heterogeneous stylistic unities" and offers a wide variety of different viewpoints and attitudes (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 290). The novel is dialogical and heteroglot, expressive of a multiplicity of point of view that includes but is not limited to the author's. In short, as Bakhtin puts it, the novel is "*multiform in style and variform in speech and voice*" (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 261). This characteristic of the novel as an artistic form comes from the diversity of languages, social speech types, individual voices, viewpoints and philosophies that the novel presents. It is through this diversity of voices and speech types that heteroglossia enters the novel (263).

Heteroglossia, meaning "variety of languages," refers to "[t]he internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups," and so on (263). Heteroglossia is a mode of resistance to monology in both language and the social sphere, which Bakhtin considers inseparable. Furthermore, according to Bakhtin, "[o]ur speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,' varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (*Speech Genres and...* 89). Accordingly, language is appropriated by the intention of the speakers, who join other languages through their own use of it. The interaction among these different languages creates

dialogue and provides a social sphere to novel. Bakhtin's argument poses a criticism of the monologic perception of language:

Language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These "languages" of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying languages (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 291).

According to Bakhtin, the novelist more easily allows the existence of the conflict of a variety of voices, the convergence of consciousnesses, and a variety of consciousnesses to speak and act for themselves. In a polyphonic novel, the lack of narrative authority prevents the subordination of the voices of the characters to the voice of the author. Thus, there is no one single reality that is unproblematic in polyphonic novels.

*Midnight's Children* fits Bakhtin's definition of the polyphonic novel in many respects. It has an open-ended plot, and the characters are in continuous dialogical relations. Rushdie employs polyphony in his fiction to reflect a variety of points of view and interpretations. Beside a variety of characters from different social classes, beliefs, nationalities and ethnicities, the novel also encompasses the consciousnesses of political and cultural contexts from the past. None of the voices is privileged; all merge into each other and do not yield to the authority of a single voice. In the novel, the state targets the midnight's children who represent the multiculturalism of a new, independent country. Gandhi's dictatorial policies attempt to establish a single reality, which is monologic. With regard to totalitarianism and its use of language, Holquist argues that "[t]otalitarian government always seeks the (utopian) condition of absolute monologue" (33) because such government aims to suppress what it determines as "other" and to dominate the definition of reality, which depends on monoglossia. On the contrary, heteroglossia is associated with diversity and subversion of monologic views because it is "intransigently pluralist" (Holquist 33). The totalising ideology of Indira Gandhi, or the Widow, as her state policy "Indira is India" also indicates, attempts to divest the Indian society of its multiculturalism. The midnight's children, on the other hand, hold the alternative realities of a multicultural society; therefore, they are seen as a threat by the powers that totalise the understanding of reality.

The undermining of the narrative authority by virtue of polyphony is parallel to the undermining of the notion of truth as a fixed category. Through its polyphonic quality, *Midnight's Children* demonstrates that the notion of truth is culturally constructed; reality is built on individual perception, and it also emphasises the constructed nature of nation, identity, and history. When he speaks of India, Saleem says that *"although it had five thousand years of history... quite imaginary... a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream"* (80). He emphasizes the role of imagination in the construction of nation as a unified category. This collective will seek a common characteristic like religion or ethnicity to create an imaginary land just as Pakistanis hold on to religion to create Pakistan. The novel suggests a non-essentialist attitude towards nation construction; there is no essence about being a nation since it is constituted by the multiplicity of consciousness. The language riots of 1957 and the partition of Pakistan into Bangladesh, which also depends on Islam, interrogates nationalism and demonstrates the constructedness of such ideals. The multicultural nature of the country can only be defined in plural terms without totalising any sensibilities of truth into a single voice.

Apart from nation, the understanding of identity as a stable category is also called into question. The novel's subversion of taken for granted ideas, such as racial and ethnic purity that categorises individuals into types, is embodied by the narrator himself. Saleem's lineage is a significant factor that contributes to the multiplicity he embodies. He is born into a wealthy Muslim household, the Sinais, but his biological parents are Methwold, an English coloniser, and Vanita, a poor Hindu woman. With regard to this, Wilson states that Saleem *"encapsulates in his equivocal personal heritage the ambiguous identity of India itself"* (60). In addition to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian influences, Saleem has various father figures such as Winkie, Methwold, and Ahmed Sinai, and mother figures Vanita, Mary, and Amina Sinai. Although he is not the biological grandson of Adam Aziz, Saleem's claim of resemblance to him undermines the dominant notions of purity in terms of lineage and ethnicity. His cultural upbringing also gives him a hybrid identity. His family is Indian but, living on a British estate, his father has taken on British habits, and his grandfather studied in Germany where he has adopted western culture. Besides, Shiva and Parvati's son Adam is adopted by Saleem and Padma. The lineage of the child, repeating that of Saleem, includes father figures such as Shiva and Saleem; mother figures such as Parvati, Padma, and Mary. His cultural hybridity also

reveals a multicultural community, since he incorporates diverse values in himself. On the other hand, Shiva, another midnight child, who is brought up by Winkie and bears a Hindu name, is the true heir of the Sinais. Raised in very different conditions from that of his biological parents and Saleem, Shiva becomes a radicalised figure who chooses destruction and totalising unity over peace and multiplicity. Neither child bears the characteristics of their family. Saleem's resemblance to his grandfather Dr. Aziz is not genetically based, it is just a coincidence; he belongs in neither Britain nor India. Yet, he is Indian as well as English. Therefore, the notion of the homogeneity of categories like East and West is also subverted. Shiva is not a Muslim like his biological parents; he does not feel he is an Indian either because he aligns himself with the power holders rather than having an emotional or cultural attachment to any specific place. All the categories that are allegedly fixed and definite have porous borders between them. As Saleem states, "*things - even people - have a way of leaking into each other*" (*Midnight's Children* 25). Therefore, through the switching of the children at birth, Rushdie offers an undermining of the traditional notions of purity of nation, identity and culture. Since the totalising power is promoting homogeneity within the society, it attempts to destroy the porous borders among differences. Thus, this kind of undermining requires a polyphonic narrative to illustrate the multiple reality and embody different segments of the society.

In the novel, polyphony is essential, since it juxtaposes the most contradictory and conflicting viewpoints and makes them respond to each other. Bakhtin highlights that polyphony enables the readers to recognize that each speech of the characters stands on the border of someone else's thought or speech (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 30). In this sense, the role of magic realism in establishing polyphony is also important in *Midnight's Children* since the narrative includes others' consciousness by using magical realist elements. Magic realism, which is often associated with Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, is a literary mode that portrays magical elements as a part of a realist setting. In other words, what can be regarded as unreal is normalised within a magical realist mode; it is presented as an ordinary part of everyday life. With regard to the attitude of magic realism towards reality, Leal claims that "*[i]n magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it*" (121). Similarly, Rogers mentions the culturally constructed nature of reality that magic realism untangles. As he states, magic realism "*is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. [It] is a kind of realism, but*



*one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences*" (1). Thus, it is a device that can be used in political criticism and especially in postcolonial writing to offer alternative versions to official truths and to give voice to silenced populations in their attempt to reclaim their cultures, beliefs, and identities.

Magic realism undermines totalising voices established by the official representations which keep the control of rational explanations. Rushdie's use of magic realism in the novel creates a hybrid reality out of the mundane and the magic and presents a different perception of the world. In the novel, Tai the boatman's claim that he is hundreds or thousands of years old, Saleem's possibility of dissolving into six million pieces, and the supernatural gifts of the children all embody different versions of reality embraced by the characters. Each child born between midnight and one o'clock on the day of Independence has special gifts such as flying, stepping through mirrors, turning into werewolves. Saleem's status as a representation of the multicultural identity of India is reflected by his gift of telepathy. He hears the voices *"deafening manytongued terrifying, inside his head!"* (*Midnight's Children* 117). Here the novel refers to the diverse cultures expressing themselves in different languages. Saleem mentions the multitude of persons he has been all at once: *"I have been so-many too-many persons"* (263); *"... I am the sum total of everything"* (383). When juxtaposed with the state's attempt to create one single nation by eliminating opponents, his supernatural power can be considered as an undermining of absolutes by giving voice to a variety of consciousness. He can invite other midnight's children to The Midnight's Children Conference to have a conversation in his mind. This conference, reminiscent of the Indian parliament with its five hundred and eighty-one members, is parallel to the expectations of a new democratic, multicultural community. The conference introduces dialogues and inner voices of the children from all over the country. In this sense, magic realism is a part of the polyphony of the novel because thanks to his gift, Saleem can empathise with other consciousnesses. Reflecting on his experience, he says: *"I won't deny I was disappointed. I shouldn't have been; there was nothing unusual about the children except for their gifts; their heads were full of all the usual things, fathers mothers money food land possessions fame power God"* (166). They represent the ordinary people of India. Therefore, the Midnight's Children Conference provides a ground for each different reality of the country to represent itself. The children assemble and can talk to each other through Saleem, as he states: *"by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through me"* (164). They are

full of new ideas, hopes, disappointments, sympathy and they can have discussions about subjects ranging from religion to capitalism. Besides, Saleem is not an authority figure among them, as he states: *“the children of midnight launched a concerted assault on me, I had no defence”* (217). Their voices are not subordinated to an authorial voice; rather they can agree or disagree with any voices. They are able to criticise and abandon Saleem anytime. This plurality of conflicting consciousness renders the novel open-ended by not allowing anyone to have the last word.

Complexity, diversity, and multiplicity have been celebrated in opposition to the unifying voice of oppression in the novel. While the totalising reality of the state represses the voice of alternative realities, in *Midnight’s Children Conference*, the voices that represent different views are in clash as in the case of Saleem and Shiva. Hogan describes the conflict between Shiva and Saleem as a clash between “authoritarian imagination” and the “pluralistic imagination” (512). Although it is Saleem that recounts the past, his voice does not function as an agent of oppression. Instead, he rewrites the history of his nation through the voices of the “others.” As Saleem himself states *“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. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me”* (*Midnight’s Children* 3). He himself stands for the multitudes as he is able to hear the thoughts and the inner monologues of people. On the other hand, Shiva who takes his name from the god of destruction, as an archenemy of Saleem, joins Gandhi’s army to carry out her orders of sterilisation of the midnight’s children. Having grown up with hatred for Saleem, Shiva becomes a leader of a criminal gang of Bombay, and threatens the children: *“Everybody does what I say or I squeeze the shit outa them with my knees”* (220) because he wants to take the control of the other children in the conference but Saleem does not allow him to do that.

The use of magical realist elements offers a different perspective towards the reality presented by the authorities. These elements help capturing the multiplicity of truth that depends on the perception of various sensibilities. The narrator refers to the reality created by magical elements as follows:

Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at

one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends.

Midnight's children can be made to represent many things (145).

In the novel the abilities of the children are regarded as real because reality is a matter of perception. For Rushdie his use of magic realism is a way to interpret reality: *"I think of fantasy as a method of producing intensified images of reality...one thing that is valuable in fiction is to find techniques for making actuality more intense, so that you experience it more intensely in the writing than you do outside the writing"* (Reder, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie* 43). The burden of colonialism, political upheavals, and the chaotic atmosphere of Indian history can only be represented by virtue of fantasy. Thus it is the liberation effect of the imagination that furnishes magical occurrences with the power to transcend the limits. While the authoritative voice represented by the official history sets its rules by recorded facts and its constructed reality, the voice of those invisible realities of the "others" are heard by the use of myth, fantasy and folk tales that subvert the authority's version of reality by creating an alternative version to it. In this regard, Rushdie's use of magic realism and polyphonic narrative in a postmodern novel that undermines the notion of stable categories like identity, nation, and ethnicity takes Bakhtin's concept of polyphony even further. Bakhtin studied Dostoevsky's novels when he was theorising polyphony and he distinguished the realist novel from other forms such as epic by its polyphonic quality. In Bakhtin's conception, consciousness is revealed only in relation to others' consciousnesses. Rushdie, in a way, expands this plurality of consciousness by adding a magical dimension to reality to encapsulate the voice of the others. He not only obliterates the familiar structure of the realist novel by using an unreliable narrator and non-linear narrative but also adds a critique of realism by using magical elements and subverting the totalising discourse that realism depends on. Thus, his work exemplifies a use of polyphony that is even stronger and multidimensional.

Bakhtin contends that *"[t]he importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous"* (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 348). In the novel, the narrator struggles with the voice of the totalising power. In his struggle, rather than totality, Saleem's narrative is marked by inclusiveness: *"To understand just one life, you have to swallow the World"* (*Midnight's Children* 77). Saleem's world is about to disintegrate just as India is torn into pieces. This integration is caused by the state's fierce attack on cultural diversity. Kuchta states that "both Rushdie and Saleem attempt to subvert Gandhi's authoritarian rule and her mythical status in

the Indian political imagery by allegorizing personal and national history within the context of the Emergency's repressive practices (Kuchta 205). The repression stemming from the monologic centralising representation of the authority is replaced by a multivoiced perspective of the narrative. To expose the disorder that is brought about by the political figures and to satirise the monologic view of the world they establish, Rushdie describes Gandhi as a monster:

the Widow's arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children the walls are green the Widow's arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow's arm is hunting see the children run and scream the Widow's hand curls round them green and black (*Midnight's Children* 150).

She is depicted like a nocturnal creature feeding upon the children. In the novel, with the declaration of emergency, a majority of the population are robbed of their rights to be represented in the parliament. Saleem and many other midnight's children are subjected to sterilisation. Swann argues that the totalitarian regime of Gandhi attempts "to destroy the balance of nature, supplanting it with the ideal of unilinear progress" therefore "the absolutism which arrogates to itself a supreme knowledge is arraigned against the many gifts of midnight's children; transcendence is arraigned against immanence, unity against multiplicity" (358). Therefore, Saleem's interpretation of the major historical events as reflections of what happens in his life demonstrates the novel's engagement with the idea that all the official representations depend on the perception of the individual. In this regard, the novel questions the way reality is constructed.

Emphasizing the heteroglossia inherent in the genre, Bakhtin states that "the novel orchestrates all its themes... by means of the social diversity of speech types" (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 263). *Midnight's Children*, in accord with Bakhtin's description of the novel, has heteroglossia in its nature. It holds a wide range of characters from different social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, and many languages, dialects, voices that stand for different regions, races, classes and ages, enabling each voice to speak. The children represent the diversity of beliefs and cultures in India. In his experience of holding the Midnight Children's Conference, Saleem describes this situation as follows: "the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head...The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil" (*Midnight's Children* 200). Each of

these voices has its own chance to present their ideas without Saleem's authoritative voice. Therefore, in the novel, heteroglossia is also a defence against the threat of totality.

Bakhtin claims that a unitary language, which is opposed to heteroglossia, seeks to "make its real presence felt" as the form of "correct language" (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 270-271). Therefore, within a process of centralization, language has always been the medium of ideological forces (490). Through presenting a heteroglot world, *Midnight's Children* challenges the unitary language of English, which belongs to the colonizers. Rushdie employs a rich variety of use of language and style to achieve the effect of heteroglossia. As Gorra points out "[t]he inventive impurity of Rushdie's heteroglot style provides a challenge to the idea of proper English, the King's English and therefore to British colonialism" (195). Similarly, Ghosh argues that Rushdie's use of language "records a new vision of India, a global-local postmodern nation whose set of cultural references no longer constitutes a stable and homogenous national register" (130). Through the use of multiple languages and dialects, Rushdie seeks to rediscover the long-forgotten, silenced voice and history of the people. To reflect the multiculturalism in the society, the novel challenges the authenticity of English and makes up countless combinations of words in the English language such as "downdown" (60), "godknowswhat" (123). Sometimes making spelling mistakes such as "unquestionabel" (194) and "lifelines" (225) the narrator subverts the historically received standards of the English language. To this end, Rushdie abundantly makes use of a great number of Hindu, Urdu, and Arabic words and expressions without providing a glossary or explanation for any of them such as "nasbani," "phutt," "baba" (311; 315; 333). These local expressions enrich the credibility of a genuine representation of cultural diversity of the decentred communities.

The use of English in non-standardised ways can be taken as Rushdie's effort to "chutnify" the language, which is a term coined by Rushdie himself. Accordingly, just like certain spices and flavours are added to vegetables in the process of making chutney, which is an Indian dish, elements of Indian culture and language are combined with English language. Likewise, as Fletcher puts it, "*Rushdie's taking control of English and bending it to his purposes not only makes it more flexible and expressive: it also explodes post-colonial stereotypes about the formerly colonized country that seem to have become embedded in the language itself*" (4). It defies the purity of English by making it chutnified by cultural

diversity. Rushdie himself points out that “those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it -assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers” (*Imaginary Homelands Essays...* 64). Thus, through the hybridity of language the heterogeneous culture of the society replaces the monologic discourses of religion, nationalism, and totalitarianism.

The polyphonic nature of the narrative is also supported by the idea of fragmentation throughout the novel. As Rushdie admits in his interview, “[o]ne of the things that has happened in the twentieth century is a colossal fragmentation of reality” (Reeder, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie* 50). Fragmentation enables polyphony since it defies the authority of the notion of purity and wholeness. Rushdie states that “there never was such a creature as a united India” (*Imaginary Homelands Essays...* 27). The idea of a homogenous Indian nation is just an imagined concept created by the colonisers and the totalising rule of Indian politicians. Even when India becomes officially independent of British rule, Indians do not become a unified nation. In this respect, the disintegration of the Indian subcontinent is represented by Saleem, since he is also falling apart. Embodying the history of a post-colonial and multicultural land, and a dubious lineage, Saleem feels that he becomes fragmented both physically and mentally. He continues to tell his story struggling against this danger of fragmentation of his own body: “I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust” (*Midnight’s Children* 24). Also, he is physically deteriorating; he loses one finger, a clump of his hair, and his skin is cracking. He says he is falling apart, cracking into pieces, which also diminishes his reliability: “I am rushing ahead at breakneck speed; errors are possible... I’m racing the cracks, but I remain conscious that errors have already been made, and that, as my decay accelerates (my writing speed is having trouble keeping up), the risk of unreliability grows” (325). He holds himself responsible for the course of history but this very act of attaching personal meanings to events and claiming responsibility become self-destructive. Saleem’s fragmented identity refers to his many different names and roles in his story. Throughout the novel, he is called piece of the moon, snotnose, baldy, buddha according to his position and physical characteristics. His fragmented identity also embodies different versions of him with various sets of

values, beliefs and interpretations of reality. The Sinais's moving to Pakistan, "the land of the pure," where another interpretation of reality comes to the foreground, leads Saleem to become a misfit because "*his head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah's*" (310). Pakistan is a more conservative and non-secular place for Saleem, so he feels he will never be a part of it. He studies history at a college in Pakistan but he says that "*not even learning could make me feel a part of this country devoid of midnight children, in which my fellow-students took out processions to demand a stricter, more Islamic society -proving that they had contrived to become the antitheses*" (226). As the surrounding conditions vary, Saleem's interpretation changes as well. The novel reflects these various beliefs and lifestyles through Saleem's point of view but he does not impose his own beliefs on the other characters; the narrator's voice does not dominate the others' voices.

Another factor that contributes to the multiplicity of reality is the novel's undermining of the allegedly objective history by highlighting the misleading role of memory in the perception of reality. Saleem's story depends on his fragmented memories. In relation to the importance of these fragments of memory, through which reality can be appropriated, Rushdie states that

...human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death (*Imaginary Homelands Essays... 12*).

By playing tricks on the mind, memory subverts reality. Therefore, what is known as official and objective history can be a subverted reality or a product of memory. The novel invites the reader to recognise the imperfect and unreliable nature of history. As Rushdie states, "*[f]acts 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*" (*Imaginary Homelands Essays... 25*). All diversity cannot be contained by a coherent narrative, thus Saleem disrupts the linearity of the narrative by his digressions, distortions, and intentional mistakes which depend on the unreliability of memory. Rege points out that "*for Rushdie, as for Saleem, fragmentation presents both the terrifying prospects of chaos and the productive possibilities unleashed by the breakdown of the controlling centre*" (269).

In this sense, the terrifying aspect is represented by the partition of India and Saleem's disintegration; the productive part refers to the porous borders that obliterate the homogeneity of the categories and objectivity of official history. Saleem uses the expression "in my India" referring to the possibility of multiple realities in the perception of historical occurrences. Through his fragmented memories, he appropriates history to fit his version of the world. In his attempt to rewrite history, he states that

...in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence - that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disorientated, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies (*Midnight's Children* 350).

Against the ideological construction of history by the colonisers and Indian authorities, he needs to construct a counter-history to give voice to the oppressed people. To this end, he questions the authority: "*India is Indira and Indira is India? Were we competitors for centrality - was she gripped by a lust for meaning*" (305). For Saleem, India means multiplicity, therefore the state's totalising tendencies cannot represent cultural diversity. He challenges the forces that legitimize certain ideologies by reflecting the individual perception of reality. In his account of the past his mistakes give a sense of his withholding information. He confesses: "*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*" (198). Obviously he accepts his mistake as his own version of reality. In doing this, he suggests the fact that what he tells is just his perception of reality, not an absolute truth. Unlike the totalising discourses through which the individual is silenced, in the novel, the totalising version of history is replaced by an individualised perception of reality.

Beside the perception of reality by various social classes and religious communities, another element that contributes to the multiplicity of voices is the use of myth. The use of myth can be a device to privilege and liberate the native culture from the predominance of the colonizer force and its rational tendencies. The characters such as Shiva and Parvati, taking names from Hindu gods, repeat



the myths. Saleem uses fantasy and magic to embellish reality and tells their story as an interpretation of the myths of gods Shiva and Parvati who have a son, Ganesh. Shiva has destructive qualities, and Parvati stands for fertility and devotion just like the characters in the novel. Likewise, their son Adam has big ears like Ganesh. Reder asserts that Saleem's mythology is personal because he suggests a new mode "*which is the creation of a personal mythology that resonates in relation to, but independent of, the national culture from which it emerges*" (*Rewriting History and Identity...* 229). In line with this, for Saleem, "[s]ometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts" (*Midnight's Children* 47). Further Saleem affirms that "*Picture Singh and the magicians were people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was*" (385). The magicians in the magician's ghetto are communists, led by Picture Singh, the snake charmer. They stand for the suppressed and marginalised classes of India. The state regards them as a threat, and during the destruction of the slums, they all die. The intermingling of myth and magic, then, provides liberty and an opportunity to give voice to unofficial reality. Reder points out that Saleem's story "*challenges the powerful but potentially oppressive notions of national mythology, a version of official history that often overshadows the lives of the individuals who populate a nation*" (*Rewriting History and Identity...* 226). This "overshadowing" issue is what makes the official historical accounts monologic. Hence, the novel demonstrates the questionability of all narratives that seem to represent truth.

Another factor that challenges the authority's claim for truth is Saleem's audience Padma. Right from the beginning of the novel, Saleem addresses an audience; he sometimes tries to make his tale more credible and linear by appropriating details and dates to satisfy her. The novel juxtaposes an educated narrator with an illiterate audience; Saleem is an educated man coming from a wealthy family but his illiterate narratee Padma questions the validity of what he tells. He exclaims: "*but here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next*" (*Midnight's Children* 25). Padma, Saleem's co-worker in the pickle factory, serves as a critique of Saleem's story which is non-linear and full of flashbacks and digressions. She represents the working class, and her doubts and questions about Saleem's story can be taken as another factor contributing to the heteroglossia and dialogism of the novel. Coming from a lower social class, she is a superstitious and ignorant woman who regards

Saleem's storytelling as "writing-shiting" (13). This is important in terms of the polyphony of the narrative because as a character from lower class she has the right to contribute to the construction of reality with her comments and demands. Saleem is not the privileged figure because his narrative is shaped by the reactions of Padma, representing the majority of masses: "...and certainly Padma is leaking into me. As history pours out of my fissured body, my lotus is quietly dripping in, with her down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous" (25). Padma's reaction to the magical events is also significant in terms of determining the position of the narrator as an unreliable one. The midnight's children's magical skills, and the events happening in the magician's ghetto like Parvati's making people disappear, jugglers' keeping one thousand and one balls in the air at a time raise doubts in Padma's mind. She believes some improbable events without criticism; however, sometimes she questions Saleem's claims: "What nonsense ...How can a picture talk?" (47). Yet, Saleem, who thinks that "reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real" (240), finds a way to reassure her.

Padma wants Saleem to continue the story in a linear way without digressing, but Saleem shatters her traditional understanding of the continuity of the narration. Unlike her expectations, there is no final word to end the story since it ends with the disintegration of the narrator. With regard to Padma's "what-happened-nextism," Fenwick maintains that "it is the goal of fulfilling this desire — which is the desire of the reader — that both prompts Saleem to write his story and that guides him during the narration" (54). She may not be the ideal listener for him, but Saleem needs her as a critic; at one point what keeps him going is Padma. In Padma's temporary absence during his narration, he confesses that it is her "earthiness of spirit, which keeps — kept? — my feet on the ground...must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line" (*Midnight's Children* 177). Represented by Padma, the reader is engaged with the narrative and participates in the polyphony of the novel. Thus, in a way, Padma provides a multi-dimensionality and polyphony to the narrative and Saleem considers Padma's responses as his guide to reveal the constructed nature of reality and to disperse the totality of meaning.

To conclude, in keeping with Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and by the use of magical realist elements, in *Midnight's Children*, reality is constituted by the co-existence of various meanings which depend on a variety of consciousness. The

novel demonstrates the fluidity of concepts such as identity, nation, lineage, and the questionability of all narratives that seem to represent truth because there can be millions of version of reality which is vulnerable to distortion. Therefore, reality cannot be finalised but partially perceived. In this sense, what the novel achieves is similar to “chutnification,” the term the narrator uses to describe the analogy he draws between history writing and pickling process. Incorporating Bakhtinian elements with magical realism, the novel takes polyphony one step further to represent the subjective realities. In the novel, the polyphonic narrative serves to subvert any discourse that seeks to exclude alternative versions of truth and reality that are mostly reflected by magical realist elements. In its celebration of pluralism, the narrative undermines the authoritative voice to present the multiple perspectives which establish reality. Thus, reflecting the continent’s fate, in his challenging absolutes Saleem’s attempts to encapsulate the whole of reality lead to his disintegration because reality is diverse and cannot be contained in a whole.

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