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MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: IT'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Midnight's Children says R. S. Pathak, "incorporates the stupendous Indian past with its pantheon, its epics, and its wealth of folklores and fairy tales, while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present."

This novel virtually presents whole of the twentieth century Indian history : the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Quit India movement, Cabinet Mission, Freedom movement, Muslim League and its role, riots and bloodshed subsequent to the independence, Five Year Plans, reorganization of Indian states and language riots, Chinese aggression, the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal mosque, Pakistan war, liberation of Bangladesh, the Emergency and other historically important events. In *Midnight's Children* Salman Rushdie "has attempted to restore the Indian past and its values to himself by making his narrative run alongwith the period of Indian history from the freedom struggle to the Emergency and its end." In this novel, Rushdie's chief aim was to relate private life to public events and to explore the limits of individuality in a country as big, as populous and culturally variegated as India.

Rushdie first achieved fame with his second novel, 'Midnight's Children' (1980), which won the prestigious Booker Prize. *Midnight's Children* is a novel about struggle of independence, the partition and their repercussions. This is a loose allegory for events in India both before and primarily, after the independence and partition of India, which took place at midnight on 15th August 1947. "In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's chief aim was to relate private life to public events and to explore the limits of individuality in a country as big, as populous and culturally variegated as India."¹

Rushdie evinces a mature historical sense. He has used Indian historical events as a literary device to present and expose the human predicament in Indian society. He presents the common rhythm of life through the various aspects of Indian life. His themes, characters, dialogues and straightforward statements are able to carry the feeling and atmosphere of Indian society. He uses common Indian English idioms without bringing any change in their structure. Most of his fiction is set on the sub-continent of India.

This novel is also an expression of the author's own childhood, his affection for the city of Bombay (Now Mumbai) in those times, and the tumultuous variety of the Indian sub-continent. Recognized for its remarkable flexible and innovative use of English language, with a liberal mix of native Indian language, this

novel represents a departure from conventional Indian English Writing. Compressing Indian cultural history, “these were Radha and Krishna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu; also Romes and Juliet, and Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn,” *Midnight’s Children* chronologically entwines characters from India’s cultural history with characters from Western Culture, and the devices that they signify—Indian culture, religion and storytelling, Western drama and cinema all are present in Rushdie’s text with post-colonial Indian history to examine both the effect of these indigenous and non-indigenous culture on the Indian mind in the light of Indian Independence.

Rushdie himself considers it as “a book that discusses the relationship between history and private lives.”² Dieter Reimenschneider also considers *Midnight’s Children* “...is essentially concerned with man’s quest for his identity.”³ This novel is called as “autobiographical” as the hero Saleem and Rushdie were born in the same part of the city Bombay and at the same time. In the novel, there is a direct collision of the individual with history. It is the moment in Indian history in which Saleem spent his childhood claiming that he, in some way, can influence great historical events. The Bangladesh liberation movement and Emergency in India have greatly influenced the theme of the novel.

In this novel, *Midnight’s Children*, “Rushdie had claimed to narrate not only the story of his hero but also the history of the nation, and his claim was granted only too readily in the West. The reviewers from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called the book ‘a fascinating history lesson as well as an engrossing story.’ Rushdie had ‘altered our vision of the Indian sub-continent’, to the extent that all the previous literary accounts of India such as those by Kipling, Forster, Raja Rao, and R. K. Narayan had ‘been simultaneously subsumed into, and surpassed by, Rushdie’s passionate evocation of the recent history of India and Pakistan.’”⁴

Rushdie gives description of the great leader Mahatma Gandhi. Everyone obeyed him. He sacrificed a lot to get freedom. He did a number of ‘Aandolans’ and declared many things against Britishers :

But this is India in the heyday of the Mahatma, when even language obeys the instructions of Gandhiji, and the word has acquired, under his influence, new resonances. Hartal—April 7, agree mosque newspaper wall and pamphlet, because Gandhi has decreed that the whole of India shall, on that day, come to a halt. To mourn, in peace, the continuing presence of the British.

Then he describes about Jallianwala Bagh. This place has a great role in the struggle for freedom. Indians fought against Britishers and a dreadful event had taken place at Jallianwala Bagh :

...A compound can be anything from a wasteland to a park. The largest compound in Amritsar is called Jallianwala Bagh. It is not grassy. Stones cans glass and other things are everywhere. To get into it, you must walk down a very narrow alleyway between two buildings. On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding through this alleyway. ‘It is peaceful protest’, someone tells Doctor Azia. Swept along by the crowds, he arrives the mouth of the alley. A bag from Heidelberg is in his right hand.

History obviously provides the central axis of narrative because the dates of important public events in the Indian sub-continent from the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh to the period of Emergency are meticulously enumerated and linked with the crucial turns in the Sinai family saga and the personal story of Saleem in innovative ways.⁵

At the time of freedom movement so many meetings were held. These meetings had taken place at different places and cities. In these meetings, people planned for freedom. “That was the first convocation, in Lahore; Agra would see the second.” We are told about the struggle of Subhash Chandra Bose in the following lines—“...the army of Subhash Chandra Bose, which was fighting on the Japanese side, were drenched by the returning rains. Satyagraha demonstrators in Jullundur, lying non-violently across railway lines, were soaked to the skin.”

Indian intervention in Bangladesh has also been referred to—“A third reason for Indian intervention was the fear that the disturbances in Bangladesh would, if they were not quickly curtailed, spread across the frontiers into West Bengal.”

Further he describes about Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru's work for his assembly. He was in favour of togetherness. He loved children a lot and did a lot for the welfare of our country and children. He gave a lot of honour to his national flag. He did not like violence. He wanted peace and happiness everywhere. "... 'This is no time for petty or destructive criticism,' Jawaharlal Nehru told the Assembly. 'No time for ill will. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where are her children may dwell.'"

Rushdie gives description of India's independence. He tells us how India got freedom from the Britishers. He describes that India got freedom on August 15th 1947. Indians did a lot for the welfare of Indians and got victory over them :

I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th 1947. And the time ? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.

Rushdie tells about the events when baby Saleem got birth on Independence Day. In India, everywhere, there was a celebration of his birth. Jawaharlal Nehru gave Saleem's birth as much attention as if it was his own birthday. He said, we have to see our future in their hands. We have to took after them :

Newspapers celebrated me; politicians, ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote : 'Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of the ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.'

Nehru's words at the moment of independence were as follows—"A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of the nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."⁶

When Saleem Sinai got birth on the Independence Day, there were one thousand and one children in all who got birth. This day was the most popular and joyful day in the history of India—"...during the first hour of August 15th, 1947—between midnight and one a.m.—no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India."

During this period, a number of political news also find place in this novel. A number of committees were formed in India for the welfare of Indian society. That very time Nehruji had given his resignation and Indira Gandhi was Congress president. There was a lot of politics discussed everywhere at that time :

From GOAN LIBERATION COMMITTEE LAUNCHES SATYAGRAHA CAMPAIGN I extracted the letter 'COM'; SPEAKER OF E-PAK ASSEMBLY DECLARED MANIAC gave me my second syllable, 'MAN'. I found 'DER' concealed in NEHRU CONSIDERS RESIGNATION AT CONGRESS ASSEMBLY; into my second word now, I excised 'SAB' from RIOTS, MASS ARRESTS IN RED-RUN KERALA : SABOTEURS RUN AMOK : GHOSH ACCUSES CONGRESS GOONDAS, and got 'ARM' from CHINESE ARMED FORCES....'

India and Pakistan of Rushdie's novel is somewhat fantastic and extravagant—"...the history of India and Pakistan is jettisoned with such grotesque characters and episodes. Matching the Indian scene, one can mention some instances of Rushdie's grotesquery in people and episodes in his treatment of the history of Pakistan, which he cynically describes as the Land of the Pure,...."⁷

He shows the post-independence relationship between India and Pakistan. There were a number of political events happening in India. People were ready to do anything for their Mother India. He shows us the scenes and results of the elections held in 1962 :

...in the elections of 1962, the All-India-congress won 361 out of 494 seats in the Lok Sabha, and over 61 per cent of all State Assembly seats. Not even in this could my unseen hand be said to have moved; except, perhaps, metaphorically : the *status quo* was preserved in India; in my life, nothing changed either.

Then, he describes about the attacks that had taken place on India. China attacked on India and the Indians did a lot to save themselves. Chinese were ready to attack on India from every direction : “On October 20th, the Indian forces were defeated-thrashed-by the Chinese at Thag La ridge. An official Peking statement announced: In self-defence, Chinese frontier guards were compelled to strike back resolutely.”

In the way of Chinese, there were people of different religion who joined this army. They created a lot of quarrel gave injury and became selfish and never thought about anything—“In the high Himalayas, Gurkhas and Rajput fled in disarray from the Chinese army; and in the upper reaches of my mind, another army was also destroyed by things— bickering, prejudices, boredom, selfishness—which I had believed too small, too pretty to have touched them.”

Pandit Nehru claimed—“We promise that force will be met with force, and aggression against us will never be allowed to succeed!’... ‘The Indian aggressors will be utterly overthrown ! We are a race of warriors! One” Pathan; one Punjabi Muslim is worth ten of those babus-in-arms!”

After that, on the seventy-third birthday of Nehru, Indian army too was ready to attack on Chinese. Indians were eager to take revenge upon them :

The day of November 20th was a terrible day; the night was a terrible night... six day earlier, on Nehru’s seventy-third birthday, the great confrontation with the Chinese forces had begun; the Indian army-JAWANS SWING INTO ACTION!—had attacked the Chinese at Walong. News of the disaster of Walong, and the rout of General Kaul and four battalions, reached Nehru on Saturday 18th; on Monday 20th, it flooded through radio and press and arrived at Methwold’s Estate. ULTIMATE PANIC IN NEW DELHI! INDIAN IN TATTERS!

We also find a glimpse of the social conditions of India at that time in this novel. In India, being a democratic country, everyone-whether rich or poor, has the equal right to elect the rulers of the country—“That’s what elections get you—latrine cleaners and cheap tailors must vote to elect a ruler?”

Rushdie gives the description of that time’s political leaders. All leaders of that time did a lot to get freedom from the establishment of a Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. They were united with one another to concentrate on their work:

Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister, and Jagjivan Ram, most powerful of the untouchables united in their determination to prevent the establishment of a Nehru dynasty; so Indira Gandhi was denied the leadership. The new Prime Minister was Lal Bahadur Shastri, another member of that generation of politicians who seemed to have been pickled in immortality; in the case of Shastri, however, this was only maya, illusion. Nehru and Shastri have both fully proved their mortality; but there are still plenty of the other left, Clutching Time in their mummified fingers and refusing to let it move...in Pakistan, however, the clocks ticked and tocked.

Rushdie describes about the political rumours of that time. There was only leadership everywhere. People said one thing and found reality another. They did not accept the situation:

Divorce between news and reality: newspapers quoted foreign economists- PAKISTAN A MODEL FOR EMERGING NATIONS-while peasants (unreported) cursed the so-called ‘green revolution,’ claiming that most of the newly- drilled water-wells had been useless, poisoned, and in the wrong places anyway; while editorials praised the probity of the nation’s leadership, rumours, thick as flies, mentioned Swiss bank accounts and the new American motor-cars of the President’s son. The Karachi *Dawn* spoke of another dawn-GOOD INDO-PAK RELATIONS JUST AROUND THE CORNER?

Further, he gives description about the war between India in Pakistan. Pakistanis dreamed to get Kashmir back at any cost. That’s why they fought with Indian:

On the morning of September 23rd, the United Nations announced the end of the hostilities between India and Pakistan. India has occupied less than 500 square miles of Pakistani soil; Pakistan had conquered just 340 square miles of its Kashmir dream. It was said that the ceasefire came before both

sides had run out of ammunition, more or less simultaneously; thus the exigencies of international diplomacy, and the politically-motivated manipulations of arms suppliers, prevented the wholesale annihilation of my family. Some of us survived, because nobody sold our would-be assassins the bombs bullets aircraft necessary for the completion of our destruction.

Further, he describes about the battle which happened in Lahore:

Great sacrifices: for instance, at the battle for Lahore? —On September 6th, Indian troops crossed the Wagah border, thus hugely broadening the front of the war, which was no longer limited to Kashmir, and did great sacrifices take place, or not? Was it true that the city was virtually defenseless, because the Pak Army and Air force were all in the Kashmir sector? O memorable day! O unarguable lesson in the fatality of delay! The Indians, confident of capturing the city, stopped for breakfast. All India Radio announced the fall of Lahore.

There were a number of political parties in India. People celebrated a lot when their party won the election with high margin. That very time they had different slogans to impress public. People and great poets sang a number of patriotic songs to encourage people. When Indira Gandhi's New Congress Party, had won a landslide victory-350 out of a possible 515 seats in the Lok Sabha there was celebration all over the country. "...we were unable to avoid hearing a snatch of song, issuing from some unseen gramophone. The song was called 'Amar Sonar Bangla' ('Our Golden Bengal', author: R. Tagore) and ran, in part: 'During spring the fragrance of your mango-groves maddens my heart with delight.'"

During war, many people fled here and there in India. A number of refugees came to India and lived here. Because of many differences and comparisons they did not get help from Indians:

...during 1971, ten million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan-Bangladesh into India— but ten million (like all number larger than one thousand and one) refuses to be understood. Comparisons do not help: 'the biggest migration in the history of the human race'- meaningless. Bigger than Exodus, larger than the Partition crowds, the many headed monster poured into India. On the border, Indian soldiers trained the guerrillas known as Mukti Bahini; in Dacca, Tiger Niazi ruled the roost.

In the words of Tariq Rahman: "Rushdie is concerned with the pain caused to human being irrespective of the side they happen to be on in 1965 and 1971 Wars between India and Pakistan. The descriptions of these wars, indeed, are supreme examples of his non-partition then government of India and Pakistan are exposed as lies."⁸

Indians are much patriotic and faithful about India. Every year on Independence Day, they feel same happiness and honour as they celebrated it just first time. They feel greenery and golden colour everywhere. In the praise of Independence Day women sing songs and get delight :

Once, long ago, on another independence day, the world had been saffron and green. This morning, the colours were green, red and gold. And in the cities, cries of 'Jai Bangla!' And voices of women singing 'Our Golden Bengal', maddening their heart with delight... in the centre of the city, on the podium of his defeat, General Tiger Niazi awaited General Manekshaw... And amid green and red and gold, the buddha in his shapeless anonymous garment was jostled by crowds; and then India came. :

In India, people give importance to their national festivals. Like Independence Day, people celebrate Republic Day with full joy. On that day, people gather and have many programmes on this day. "January 26th, Republic Day, is a good time for illusionists. When the huge, crowds gather to watch elephants and fireworks, the city's tricksters go out to earn their living. For me, however, the day holds another meaning; it was on Republic Day that my conjugal fate was sealed."

Further, Rushdie describes about the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. When she came actively on the political scene of India, she was full of glory. People felt that this was the new birth of politics itself. She made her own political party, called 'Congress Party' and did a lot through its support "...On December 16th,

1971, I tumbled out of a basket into an India in which Mrs. Gandhi's New Congress Party held a more-than-two-thirds majority in the National Assembly."

When Indira Gandhi took the charge of India as Prime Minister, she had a number of responsibilities in her government. She took suggestions from everyone to have achievements in the world—"The end is near, and cannot be escaped much longer; but while the Indira Sarkar, like her father's administration, consults daily with purveyors of occult lore; while Benarsi seers help to shape the history of India, I must digress into painful, personal recollections,..."

Further he describes how Indira Gandhi maintained her 'Sarkar' in India. She made many rules to solve many problems of India. She worked hard to improve the condition of people. People were very happy and relax—"Our country is in safe hands. Already Indiraji is making radical reforms- land reforms, tax structures, education, birth control-you can leave it to her and her sarkar."

Rushdie is concerned with the dark side of Emergency, though its brighter aspects have also been mentioned. "All sorts of things happen during an Emergency: trains run on time, black- money hoarders are frightened into paying taxes, even the weather is brought to heel, and bumper harvests are reaped: there is, I repeat, a white part as well as black."

In treating the Emergency, his focus is mainly in bringing out its spirit and the means how the desired result was obtained. The core of the Emergency consisted in what Indira Gandhi did and allowed Sanjay or her lieutenants to do. The main thrust of the Emergency was on beautification by demolition, sterilization and imprisonment under MISA. Saleem describes all of them with irony. The infamous bulldozers poured out people who displayed unusual physical uniformity as if they were clones. The demolitions of houses and Jhuggis were open to public gaze, but what happens in sterilizations camps was secret. Sterilizations were often castrations in disguise. In *Midnight's Children*, in the camps all the midnight's Children, already imprisoned, were operated upon in a way that they "were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves."

In this novel, he gives detailed description about Indira Gandhi. He presents everything about her from childhood to marriage, her political career, her children etc. She ruled very honestly over India:

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was born in November 1917 to Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru. Her middle name was Priyadarshini. She was not related to 'Mahatma' M.K. Gandhi; her surname was the legacy of her marriage, in 1952, to one Feroze Gandhi, who became known as 'the nation's son-in-two.' They had two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay, but in 1949 she moved back into her father's home and became his 'official hostess.' Feroze made one attempt to live there, too but it was not a success. He became a ferocious critic of the Nehru Government, exposing the Mundhra scandal and forcing the resignation of the then Finance Minister, T.T. Krishnamachari —'T.T.K.' himself. Mr. Feroze Gandhi died of a heart seizure in 1960, aged forty-seven. Sanjay Gandhi, and his ex-model wife Menaka, were prominent during the Emergency. The Sanjay Youth Movement was particularly effective in the sterilization campaign.

O.P. Mathur comments—"The Mother of Emergency is Indira Gandhi who in this novel, has been repeatedly called 'Widow' (with Capital 'W') —an appellation that often signifies the drying up of emotions, harshness, cruelty and, above all, supreme uncontrolled power over the household, i.e. the country."⁹

Indira Gandhi has been compared with India by Rushdie, in this novel. She is parallel to India. As "Indira is India and India is Indira." Then he gives description of Sanjay Gandhi and Menaka Gandhi and their life career. He tells us about her profession and what is her position in newspaper. They had different names from public:

...but then I realized no, not volunteers, because all the men had the same curly hair and lips-like-women's-labia, and the elegant ladies were all identical, too, their features corresponding precisely to those of Sanjay's Menaka, whom news – scraps had described as a 'lanky beauty', and who had once modelled nighties for mattress company... standing in the chaos of the slum clearance programmes....

Indira Gandhi's son Sanjay Gandhi was also active in politics. He worked hard to save the interests of India and lead it on the path of progress—"...Isn't it, you know Sanjay Gandhi ? But the pulverized creature was too annihilated to be capable of replying- was it wasn't it?"

Rushdie describes the corruption rampant in political parties at that time also. There were so many opposition parties in India to rule:

Dark clouds were gathering in political skies as well: in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roost, Jaya-Parkash Narayan led a coalition of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress; in Gujarat, there were riots, railway train were burned, and Morarji Desai went on a fast-unto-death to bring down the corrupt government of the Congress (under Chimanbhai Patel) in that drought-ridden state....

At that time also when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister, there had been a number of political parties—"...in late 1974, J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai formed the opposition party known as the Janata Morcha: the people's front. While Major Shiva reeled from whore, the Indira Congress was reeling too."

The reference to India's first Nuclear test is also there in this novel—"...one morning in May 1974 is it just my cracking memory, or am I right in thinking it was the 18th, perhaps at the very moment at which the deserts of Rajasthan were being shaken by India's first nuclear explosion ?"

As a Bombay book, which is to say, a big-city book, "*Midnight's Children* is coarse, knowing, comfortable with Indian pop culture and, above all, aggressive."¹⁰

Rushdie has painted a full portrait of "India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything is possible, a fable rivaled only by two other mighty fantasies: money and God."¹¹ He uses the name India for the whole subcontinent and spans the recent history, both told and untold, of both India and Pakistan as well as the birth of Bangladesh.

"*Midnight's Children* is rich in allusions to Indian history, literature, and mythology. For this and other reasons, the novel is widely viewed as a stylistic tour de force."¹² As S. Parsannrajan comments, "The novel that won the Booker of the Bookers and inspired a generation to imagine India in English is yet to be outlived."¹³

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