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Ethical Responsibility in *Midnight's Children*. Clinical Storytelling as a Form of Biological and Cultural Survival

Abstract: The present essay discusses the bioethical concern in the narration of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). The multiple Booker Prize winning novel has been acknowledged as one of the prominent literary works of the past century, and a major source of critical inquiry, especially for Postmodern and Postcolonial criticism. Yet, not much has been said about the interpretative strategies on which narration relies to convey its meanings, especially with regard to the novel's ethical and moral concern for the transmission of knowledge, be it biological or cultural. The present paper tackles this aspect of Rushdie's masterful work by discussing how the literary connection between Saleem's fictional world and the history of India represents a strategic confusion of different narrative and historical planes. Among the effects of this literary operation is the overlapping of Saleem's family with his siblings of the midnight, which results in Saleem's progressive disillusionment with the idea of familial belonging based on blood ties to embrace, in its place, an elective affiliation as theorized by Edward Said. This comes from the awareness that emotional bonding is the only true source of ethical responsibility towards one's own community and its future generations. Following Judith Butler, his biographical recount can thus be seen as metanarratively concerned with establishing a bond with the reader through what will be defined here as 'clinical storytelling', a very peculiar style based on a medical epistemology embedded in the magical realist tone of the novel, whose unreliability appears to be especially effective in raising and exploring ethical questions about literary authorship, storytelling and cultural transmission.

Keywords: *cultural transmission*, *disease*, *ethics*, *intertextuality*, *magical realism*, *remembrance*, *storytelling*

1. The Ethics of Narration: The Problem of the Origin of Responsibility

Drawing on reflections on the relationship between storytelling, ethics, and clinical medicine[1] the present article is concerned with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) as an example of bioethical narrative in that it provides purchases for reflections about the relevance of both historical and fictional narrative in moral life.[2] Through ideas of familial and elective relationships, the novel foregrounds a metaliterary, constitutive reciprocity between history and fiction, between literary characters and real circumstances. Tracing the moments where such bonds emerge within the novel,

[1] For an in-depth analysis on the subject see Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* [1936], trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 83-109; Alex M. Carson, "That's Another Story: Narrative Methods and Ethical Practice", *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 27.3 (2001), 198-202; Tod S. Chambers, "From the Ethicist's Point of View: The Literary Nature of Ethical Inquiry", in manuscript; Hester D. Micah, "Narrative as Bioethics: The 'Fact' of Social Selves and the Function of Consensus", *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 11.1 (2002), 17-26.

[2] Robert Coles, "Medical Ethics and Living a Life", *New England Journal of Medicine*, 301.8 (1979), 444-446; Augustus S. Wilkins, ed., *The Ars Poetica of Horace* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Edward M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927); Anne H. Jones, "Literature and Medicine: Narrative Ethics", *Lancet*, 349.9060 (1997), 1243-1246.

the following analysis will focus on the literary strategies and devices that reveal an authorial or narrative preoccupation with how to pass on factual, anecdotal and moral knowledge, not just through the themes and characters described, but also by virtue of the required interpretative reasoning.[3] For this purpose, Rushdie skillfully sets up a narrative context relying on the qualities of what will be called here 'clinical storytelling', a narrative method which allows its author to negotiate between the discovery of what is authentic in human experience and those concepts and expectations which, instead, are socially constructed or culturally mediated.[4] Touching upon major social events in India's history, such as continental wars, religious conflicts and, even more importantly, the Emergency of the mid-Seventies, the 'disease' which affects Saleem Sinai, the main character of *Midnight's Children*, allows the reader to act like a physician or practitioner and to imaginatively explore the limits of the meanings conveyed, as well as tackle important questions of authorship, storytelling and responsibility.

To understand the implications of this process, it is vital to describe the connection that binds Saleem to his nation. As is widely known, Saleem is a 'midnight's children', that is one of the 1001 people who were born during the hour immediately following the midnight of 15 August 1947. It was the moment India gained its long sought-after independence from Britain. As per Saleem's own account, all the children who were born right after that fateful hour were special children, endowed with supernatural powers. The closer they were born to midnight, the greater the power they possessed. Saleem's birth happened exactly at midnight (as was the case for his alter ego, Shiva). For this reason, he possesses the mightiest power of all, a sort of telepathy with which he can hear people's thoughts. Even more important than this, he can speak in their minds, make himself be heard within them, as well as bring two or many more minds together. He can act as a chat-room or web-conferencing of sorts, allowing a telepathic synchronous interaction among people who can communicate and interact with each other while being physically separated. The distance does not matter, as far as Saleem is on Indian soil. If he goes out of India, his power is lost. It is the idea or feeling of 'being in' India which allows him to bring together what he would later come to consider his extended family, the midnight's children, in meetings that are referred to in the novel as the Midnight's Children Conference. He hopes to close the gaps and the distances among them so that they can organize themselves and synergistically use their special abilities to improve the condition of their nation. From this perspective, the fact that they were born together 'with' India represents a special thread connecting all of them as siblings.

> With that immodest proposal the novel's characteristic tone of voice, comically assertive, unrelentingly garrulous, and with, I hope, a growing pathos in its narrator's increasingly tragic over-claiming, *came into being*. I even made the boy and the country identical twins.[5]

[3] Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1990).

[4] Howard Brody, *Stories of Sickness* (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P., 1987), as well as the work he published in 2002 with the same title (New York: Oxford U.P.); Tod S. Chambers, "The Bioethicist as Author: The Medical Ethics Case as Rhetorical Device", *Literature and Medicine*, 13.1 (1994), 60-78; Rita Charon, "To Render the Lives of Patients", *Literature and Medicine*, 5 (1986), 58-74; from the same author, "The Patient-Physician Relationship: Narrative Medicine. A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286.15 (2001), 1897-1902.

[5] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage Books, 1981), 10. The version consulted here is the e-book available on the Google Play Store. Emphasis mine.

The midnight's children might not be united by blood ties, but they were a family nonetheless thanks to their simultaneous birth with the nation. The historic coincidence gave them great expectations of a bright future. For example, Saleem recounts that the Bombay newspaper *The Times of India* made it known from its columns that it would give a monetary prize to any women giving birth exactly at midnight. The first Prime Minister of the new nation, Jawaharlal Nehru, saw those children as a prosperous sign of the future of the new nation, children which India would undertake to protect as a way to grant prosperity to its own destiny. The Midnight's Children were prophesied, expected and celebrated by Indian institutions, media and, more generally, by history, as the embodied manifestation of the new nation. Their future and wealth identified with the future and wealth of India. And Saleem, for one, feels all the pressures and the responsibilities that such a circumstance brings about.

The literary bond narratively established by Rushdie connects Saleem with a historical entity which is by definition plural, made of about 630 million people.[6] Rushdie's narrative plays on this special connection which history traces between Saleem and the nation understood as an imagined community[7] made up by the lived experience of the bodies inhabiting it. The author strives at all times to highlight the connection between culture and bodies, the interactions between abstract and material domains. This is true not just for *Midnight's Children*, but for four of his first major novels.[8] Rushdie's effort consists in making the reader grasp the mutual constitutive reciprocity between interfering fields of experience and knowledge, which are not hierarchically arranged on a vertical ladder of subjection or determination. While Cultural and Postcolonial Studies have engaged in an enduring battle to dispel the illusion by which cultural notions are made to appear 'natural' or 'unavoidable' by rooting them in biology and nature through repeated socially-sanctioned bodily performances, the misunderstanding by which bodies and lives may then be considered as purely the result of culture and discursive practices is still all too common.[9] From this perspective, Rushdie reveals an exceptional historical intuition in his setting up a narrative context in which characters and their bodies possess a special link to India's history and its population. In fact, from a narrative point of view, they are meant to function as more than metaphors or symbols of India.

The idea that a fictional character and a nation may be identical twins is realized in many ways in the novel and has been deeply discussed and studied.[10] Yet, it is the connections that exist between Saleem, India, the midnight's children and all of the Indian people that are at the centre of Rushdie's novel and of the present reflection, as they weave complex networks of relationships which elicit

[6] During the years following Independence and in which Saleem's story develops.

[7] To use the well-known expression employed by Benedict Anderson. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991).

[8] *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) as well as *Midnight's Children*.

[9] For an overview on this topic see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P., 2015); Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997); Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political. Conversations with Athena Athanasiou* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. by Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995); Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1991).

[10] See among others Robert Eaglestone and Martin McQuillan, *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Sabrina Hassumani, *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works* (London: Associated U.P., 2002); Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's* Midnight's Children (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's U.P., 2005).

questions of care and responsibility with profound moral and bioethical implications. What may be considered still somewhat lacking in contemporary critical accounts of the novel is an analysis of the literary processes and devices through which these connections are established. Once we acknowledge them, they also raise profound ethical questions concerning family and birth, chance and opportunity, memory and forgetting.

The first necessary step is to consider that *Midnight's Children*, as Rushdie himself would write in an introduction to the novel years later,[11] was occasioned by the necessity to give narrative form to his childhood memories of Bombay. Also, the very character of Saleem Sinai did not come from his imagination, but from his memory. In fact, the figure of Saleem was present in a draft of an earlier novel:

> I had wanted for some time to write a novel of childhood, arising from my memories of my own childhood in Bombay. Now, having drunk deeply from the well of India, I conceived a more ambitious plan. I remembered a minor character named Saleem Sinai, born at the midnight moment of Indian independence, who had appeared in the abandoned draft of a *still-born*[12] novel called *The Antagonist*. (10)

Saleem comes from Rushdie's childhood memories, but those memories refer to a fictional character, they do not belong to Rushdie himself. The memories are real, what they refer to is not. Thus, while the genesis of the novel is concerned with the memories of a child, the peculiar relationship which Rushdie establishes between himself and a fictional child, who is in turn a dead foetus in a just-imagined, "still-born" (10) literary text, produces complex echoes within the novel. This is especially true if one takes into account the fact that the child comes to somehow 'mirror' the whole of India, considered both as a newborn nation and, at the same time, as the dead project, the interrupted dream of the ex-coloniser.

Just as the main protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, his never-to-be precursor should be born at the midnight in which India stopped being a British colony. Bonds are thus created between Rushdie, as an author, and Saleem as both a product of his imagination and a shard of his memory. These, in turn, are mirrored by Saleem (as Rushdie's alter ego) and India with all its people. Taken together, they reveal Rushdie's preoccupation with the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the physical world and the realms of imagination, between an author, his characters, and the world they inhabit (both fictional and historical). Rushdie's main concern is to problematize the relationship between truth and falsehood, blurring the line separating every opposing binarism in between them. When he makes it clear that the whole of modern Indian history is Saleem's fault, his intent is to make sure the reader understands that Saleem and India are connected by a bond which is not just literary, fictional or imaginary:

> As I placed Saleem at the centre of my new scheme I understood that his time of birth would oblige me immensely to increase the size of my canvas. If he and India were to be paired, I would need to tell the story of both twins. Then Saleem, ever a striver for meaning, suggested to me that the whole of modern Indian history happened as it did because of him; that history, the life of his nation-twin, was somehow all his fault. (10)

[11] Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 9-17.
[12] Emphasis mine.

There are different questions that spring naturally from such a revelation. First of all, how is it possible that Saleem, a fictional character, can have any tangible consequences in the real world for half a billion of living and breathing bodies? By using the noun 'fault', Rushdie seems to suggest that Saleem's unsuccessful attempt to save the Indian nation in the novel could help explain the outcomes of modern India, which his author evidently deems disastrous, if not worse. Secondly, what exactly did he do wrong and how is he responsible for such mistake(s)? And, if that's the case, why should Saleem only be at fault here, and not his own author as well? Rushdie's words would imply a total loss of responsibility on his part, laying the blame on his character, as if he enjoyed total freedom of agency with respect to his author, whose role would just be that of a passive storyteller, impotently registering situations, actions and emotions. It is my contention that the ethical implications of the narrative form adopted by Rushdie may point at a possible path of inquiry in trying to cope with those questions.

Saleem confesses that his narration is determined by the 'symbiotic' relationship with his country, to which he is tied by an umbilical cord. The images he provides are especially relevant linguistic choices, as they convey the binding of the metaphorical and the biological:

> what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. (21)

He is 'handcuffed' to history by inscrutable forces which chain his biological destiny together with that of his country. The idea here is to create a bond, a 'tethering' or coupling. Also, it must not be forgotten that when India was born, recognized as a historical entity, it too had a twin sister nation from which it was parted at birth: Pakistan. As a matter of fact, the new country (which was conceived as a home for Muslims) plays a great role in the life of Saleem.

Once this connection has been established, Saleem's motivation for narrating his story derives from his awareness of imminent death. Even though he is in his early thirties, he feels he is about to die. The peculiar relationship between Saleem and India makes Saleem undergo a process of disgregation. His body shows the signs of an accelerated decay bound to lead him to inevitable demise. Saleem is "falling apart at the seams" (61) since "the cracks and always the cracks are narrowing my future towards its single inescapable full point" (555). He is literally crumbling, falling to bits, each bit or crumble representing an Indian citizen:

> Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; [...] I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug [...]. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. I ask you only to accept [...] that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust. (61)

As Raita Merivirta[13] notes, impending doom or fatal moment turns remembrance into an ethical responsibility for Saleem as a narrator. He had grown up with a will to change things for his nation,

[13] Raita Merivirta, *The Emergency and the Indian English Novel: Memory, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

influenced by the expectations grown out of the extraordinary coincidence between the birth of India and his own. He cares for his people but, as the body cracks, memory too risks cracking in an unrecoverable way. Narration thus becomes a matter of time, and remembering a responsibility for the benefit and survival of the other people within the country. The very same existence of the Midnight's Children Conference was aimed at serving the nation.

From the moment Saleem is born, the novel seems launched in a race towards another fateful moment, as important as India's independence itself. The Emergency of 1975-76 represented a collapse of Indian democratic apparatuses, which revealed the insurmountable contradictions of a social tissue heavily based on caste discriminations and prejudices. Saleem defines this period as "a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again" (604). When Saleem starts his tale, Indira Gandhi had just recently regained her power through rigged elections. This is seen as an almost cataclysmic event by both Rushdie and Saleem. At the time of Saleem's writing, the papers were talking "about the supposed political *rebirth*[14] of Mrs Indira Gandhi" (555), after being considered politically finished. The crimes she had committed during and before the Emergency, which is inevitably the last major Indian historical situation Rushdie could possibly describe in the novel, were being ignored by official historical accounts, and the country was rapidly forgetting, sinking into amnesia. The scar Indira had inflicted on India's body, while unrecoverable, was being cancelled not through healing, but simply by being erased from collective memory and forgotten. Saleem thus feels the urge to remember and write his story, since it is also the story of his country, his "twin-in-birth" or "subcontinental twin sister" (Ibid.).

After the failure of the Midnight's Children Conference during the years of the Emergency, Saleem is compelled to remember for others to know. In the words of Emile Pine, ethical remembering is thus a 'political' remembering as far as it is aimed at social justice:

> In public terms, one of the central moral elements of the act of memory is that cultural remembrance can act as a catalyst for social openness.... Memory can thus function as an ethical act, a moral duty that we exercise. Indeed, the concept of memory as an ethical act makes it our duty to remember. The goal of ethical memory is a form of justice that recognises the political nature of remembering and forgetting.[15]

Paul Ricoeur has delved into the notion of collective memory by stating that "the duty to remember consists not only in having a deep concern for the past but in transmitting the meaning of the past events to the next generation".[16] The risk is, in fact, that in passing from subject to subject, from medium to medium, from account to account, memory could be erased or distorted. Saleem himself admits that in order to remember he has to fight "past fissured blanks" (560).

The ethical concern in the novel emerges precisely out of the constant negotiations Saleem, as storyteller, carries out between reality and invention, fact and fiction. This is apparent from the beginning: Saleem asks his readers to accept an almost supernatural truth which is incompatible with a biological organism made of flesh and blood. He is cracking, he assures the reader, like an old jug or,

[14] Emphasis mine.
[15] Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13-14.
[16] Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, eds., *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.

more appropriately, like the streets of India under the scorching sun. There is this curious mixture of organic and inorganic properties in Saleem as a narrator which makes him immediately and extremely complicated to disambiguate. He is simultaneously more and less than human, contaminated with properties which come from objects and places of India making up his body literally and not only metaphorically. Saleem and India contaminate each other, exchange vital genetic heritage or defining properties: Saleem is somehow more than just a metaphorical representation of India, while India can become a character, a somehow human one, embodied in Saleem. The process is of mutual constitutive influence: a 'kinship' working on metaphorical and biological planes at one time.

By mirroring Saleem's birth with India's, Rushdie confounds the narrative unity between plot and story. It becomes much more difficult to establish a chronologicity or consequentiality in the developments of events. It is not immediately apparent what begets what, and the reader cannot trace unambiguous relations of cause and effect between events and rationales, whose developments zigzag between the imaginary planes of fiction and historical reality, making them resonate one into the other. Like the kind of disruption of linearity discussed by Paul Ricoeur,[17] narration increases the scope and complexity of the different situations described by having them unfold on numerous time planes. The characters' motivations and understanding are blended with the political history of the Indian and Pakistani nations such that any moral understanding or exploration is entangled with an almost countless number of historical, fictional, and authorial variables. It becomes almost impossible to find one's narrative bearings or unmistakeable points of origin in time. As a result, interpretation is made difficult by the way meaning is constructed and then scattered. It is from this perspective that Rushdie's narrative style could be seen as an act of ethical engagement, as it tries to cope with the kind of mutual influences literature and history exert towards each other, while posing the question of how to deal with and transmit the knowledge that is produced in the ambiguous interaction between the two.

Saleem himself admits that his memory is already lacking and that his own narration contains mistakes or gaps. Saleem wants the reader to accept that memory may also have left a space open for invention. He has no presumption of providing an absolutely accurate representation of reality, but welcomes distortions and aberrations of the mind. The admission of unreliability, of an uncertain boundary between reality and invention, far from undermining the authorial recount, gives it more strength. It reveals a storyteller who is fully aware of the power of memory and its misuses, as well as of the importance of the adoption of a proper form of narration. In the words of Jack Kugelmass: "The moral order requires memory and memory in turn demands certain narrative forms".[18] The creative act of remembrance is especially meaningful if one takes into account the fact that Saleem himself is an unborn character drawn out of Rushdie's memory. Rather than choosing a historical character to give more credibility and sense of accuracy to the account of Indian social and political developments, Rushdie chooses the memory of somebody who never lived in the first place, believing that even who or what existed still only virtually (as pure potential) has an impact in human affairs:

[17] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[18] Jack Kugelmass, "Missions to the Past: Poland in Contemporary Jewish Thought and Deed", in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 192.

> How hard to pin down the truth, especially when one is obliged to see the world in slices; snapshots conceal as much as they make plain. All stories are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been.[19]

In *Midnight's Children* there is a kind of kaleidoscopic effect whereby symmetric binarisms reflect each other and are spectrally doubled by the ghosts or phantasms of what could have been but never was. Following Allen Graham,[20] Rushdie's writing is deeply intertextual in that meaning emerges from a network where countless cultural influences and expectations, memories, discursive forms and conventions interact in such a way so as to question what it truly means to be a narrator and the kind of responsibilities storytelling brings about. That's why Rushdie constantly has Saleem undermine, by his own admission, the authenticity or reliability of his narrating voice. The hierarchical relationship between author and reader is disturbed since communication does not proceed in just one sense but also, as will be discussed in more detail, requires the reader's active participation. On the other hand, transmedial crossings and metanarrative contaminations encompass Rushdie's entire literary production. Suffice to think that this appears to be the central theme of his last novel, *Quichotte* (2019), in which he describes how the main characters, Quichotte and the woman he loved (Miss Salma R, a name with more than just a soft authorial echo), break through into the reality of the author:

> Often at the end of a working day the Author would fall asleep at his desk, his forehead resting on the wood, bowed down before the computer screen as if performing some ancient rite of worship.... That other world, which he now understood to be the one he himself had made, was a miniature universe, perhaps captured under a glass dome – a snow globe without snow – which had begun to crack, so that its minuscule inhabitants had become desperate to escape.... He saw the first minute creature enter, gasp and faint, its hope turning to despair in this new continuum inhabited by what to it were super-colossi, giant mastodons, able to crush it under their thumbs. The microscopic man, the creature of the Author's imagination, had brilliantly done the impossible and joined the two worlds, had crossed over from the world of Fancy into the Author's real world, but in this one he was unassimilable, helpless, puny, gasping for air, not finding it, choking, and so lost. Stop! cried the Author, knowing what would happen next, the thing he could not stop, for he had already written it; it had already happened, so it could not be prevented from happening. His heart pounded, feeling as if it might burst from his chest. Everything was coming to an end. The end cannot be changed after it has ended; not the end of the universe, not the death of an Author, nor the end of two precious, even if very small, human lives. (406)

All this aptly expresses Rushdie's declination of magical realism, a characteristic mixture in which history, fate, existence, imagination, irony and drama mirror one another in a prismatic play of fragments intermingling, overlapping, intersecting, and crossing at every moment during narration. When a clear-cut distinction between reality and imagination collapses, factual or historical accuracy fades to the background to give priority to the search for truth and the process of reconstruction against the fallacies of memory. Magical realism may be the most 'ethically' suitable form of narration for this

[19] Salman Rushdie, *Shame* [1988] (Vintage, 1995), 116. This bibliographical reference lacks the place of publication as it refers to the digital version available on the Google Play Store.
[20] Allen Graham, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

task due to its implicit incertitude. It forces the reader to suspend judgement to look for plausible or sustainable connections.

Since Saleem fears he is about to die, he decides to narrate his story from the beginning. Time is running out, the rapid decay his body is undergoing may not allow the possibility for a recounting for much longer:

> Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! 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; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth. (22)

The cracks and fissures appearing on his body are the result of a pressure from inside, it is history trying to break out of the limits of the fictional body in which it has been constrained (Saleem's), those very fissures from which, on another occasion, bitterness is said to come out in the streets (477). At the same time, there is a second movement contrasting the one just mentioned. Padma, the narratee to whom at a certain point in time Saleem starts to directly tell his story, is described as 'leaking' into him. That is, she, a fictional character, by desiring to know Saleem's story, appeases her "paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous" (63). There is a double, ambivalent movement from the inside to the outside and vice versa, which makes Saleem a gate, a joint or passthrough between history and invention:

> 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 – so it's appropriate that I'm about to tell the story of the death of Mian Abdullah. (63)

Saleem is a breaking point interfering in the process of writing. There are cracks and breaches between the historical and the literary, such that whatever happens in Saleem's life mirrors the history of his nation, what happens in the lives of the people in his fictional world also matters for the lives of his countrymen. Referring to life in the magicians' ghetto, he reveals that "our ancient national gift for fissiparousness had found new outlets" (575) there. This seems to be a very indicative hint about the kind of disintegration that Saleem's body is undergoing. The word 'fissiparous' first entered English in the XIX century.[21] In biology, it refers to an organism which reproduces by fission. The process of division implied to in the word is connected to life and reproduction, not destruction and death. According to the definition provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary online "by the end of the 19th century 'fissiparous' had acquired a figurative meaning, describing something that breaks into

[21] It comes from Latin *fissus,* the past participle of 'findere' ('to split'), and *parere,* 'to produce' or 'to give birth'.

parts or causes something else to break into parts".[22] Rushdie chooses a term that indicates partition, yet it is the kind of division which destroys to bring stronger and maybe bigger unity, that allows life to grow. Division thus points ambivalently towards death and birth. That's how magical realism works in Rushdie: it breaks unity to create new bonds, so that more things can interact and grow stronger connections and ties. Proceeding from the intersection between the real and the imaginary, narration appears to be a way for both of them to survive by impregnating each other, giving occasion to the story of the two families to which Saleem claims to belong: the first one is made up of his parents and sister; the second one by the midnight's children like him. It is essential to note that neither family is based on consanguinity.

In fact, Saleem is a changeling. He is not the biological son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai, the bourgeois Bombay couple who raise him as a son. Right after being born, at Dr Narlikar's Nursing Home, he was swapped with Shiva (the true biological heir of the Sinais), by Mary Pereira, a nurse working there at the time and who would later become Saleem's nanny. His biological parents are the destitute Vanita, wife of the street musician Wee Willie Winkie, and William Methwold, an old Englishman bearing the same name of the planner of the city of Bombay. The exchange allows Rushdie to achieve several remarkable outcomes. First of all, the dismantlement of the idea of family as something necessarily regulated by blood ties, one of the founding notions of the idea of modern nations. Moreover, this disruptive act is carried over in one of the main national institutions formally devoted to 'care', the hospital, and to the care of the children no less, a maternity hospital.[23] Thirdly, each of his familial ties participates in a complex play of intertextual relations which makes them readable at different levels or, in the words of Matt Kimmich: "The profusion of the literal and metaphorical, probable and possible parent figures in *Midnight's Children* ... turn each of these figures from authors into texts themselves, texts that can be reread and rewritten as is possible with all text".[24] The play on Saleem's true birth or origin makes him simultaneously the son of his biological parents, of his foster parents, of the nation, of the coloniser, and more generally of Time. Yet, two questions arise: if Saleem is the product of mixed genealogies and timelines, at one time son of chance and inevitability, who is responsible for him? And who is he responsible for?

2. Responsibility as an Imaginative Effort

Rushdie's concern consists in expressing this situation of confusion by blurring the difference between plot and story, as distinguished by French structuralism and Russian formalism.[25] The 'story' refers to the events which make up a given situation or literary account of it, while the 'plot' is given by the particular temporal sequential order in which those events are related. In the case of Saleem, Rushdie chooses to make the story begin way before his birth, with the falling in love of his grandparents. Among other things, this allows him to build a sense of ominous anxiety or threatening foreboding due to the inescapable workings of Time. In fact, he concentrates on the circumstances that would later

[22] The quote can be found following this link: *www.merriam-webster.com*.
[23] Neil Forsyth and Martine Hennard, "Mr Mustapha Aziz and Fly: Defamiliarization of 'Family' in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*", in Werner Senn, ed., *Families* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1996).
[24] Matt Kimmich, *Offspring Fictions: Salman Rushdie's Family Novels* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2008), 24.
[25] Stephen G. Post, ed., *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, Third Edition, Vol. 4 (New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2003), 1875-1879.

bring to Saleem's life being prophesied to his mother, which is reminiscent of the prophecy Oedipus' parents received before his birth. His true story, however, begins much later, when he actually finds out about his mother's infidelity and a sneeze activates the telepathic powers he would later put at the service of the nation. If familial relations in the novel represent a privileged path to Saleem's maturation and understanding of responsibility during narration, at no point are they more significant than in the months immediately preceding the Emergency, whose recounting abounds with metaphors of birth, rebirth and death.

After taking part in the Indo-Pakistani war, Parvati the Witch brings Saleem back to India inside a magic basket. This coming back on Indian soil is likened to a 'rebirth' by Saleem, and the magic basket is like a womb from which Saleem 'tumbles out'. He starts regaining his powers and decides that it is finally time to save the nation: "and now that I had given myself the right to choose a better future, I was resolved that the nation should share it, too. I think that when I tumbled out into dust, shadow and amused cheers, I had already decided to save the country" (556). He refuses to have a family with Parvati as he sees himself as sterile: not physically, but metaphorically, since he has become progressively disillusioned with the idea of family as something determined by blood. Saleem's choice to give up a traditional family and have children of his own may be hard to grasp if one does not take into account his disenchantment with blood ties, which he has learned to see as unnecessary since he was a child. The general decline or failure of the will to procreate children on Saleem's part expresses his need to establish new bonds beyond breeding. In fact, before embarking on his quest into "newness" (560) for the future of the country, he has to confront what survives of his old family.

After leaving the magicians' ghetto, Saleem feels the need to bring together what remains of his family and learn what has become of his parents and sister. He joins the surviving members of his family by going to the Civil Service bungalow off Rajpath, the city where his birth was first publicly announced, and in which his uncle Mustapha Aziz lived together with his wife, Sonia.[26] The latter despises him, and wishes to kick him out of the household. She confesses to having always thought of him as a "nasty little brat" (563), who was deluded into thinking of being destined to something great by what she considered a fake letter that Prime Minister Nehru had written for him by a "fifteenth assistant under-secretary" (Ibid.).[27] His uncle had aspirations to become head of the department in which he worked, but had always been passed over. This was cause for a frustration which he took out on his children, or vented with endless tirades about being a victim of anti-Muslim prejudice, even though he nurtured an unconditioned devotion to power and every decision of Prime Ministers such as Indira. He had forced his wife to live a life as a flatterer of the wives of powerful men, only to end up complaining about his failures. This devoted Indian family is all but in good shape in post-Independence India, deprived as it is of love and affection, where children are "pulverised" (564) by the hatred their father nurtures for being neglected by the nation, whose recognition he yearns for. Saleem admits that his cousins have been reduced to a pulp, so much so that he can not even recognize their sexes or features, while "their personalities, of course, had long since ceased to exist" (564). The description of Mustapha's family represents a strong critique of Indian political establishment, who

[26] Whose name sinisterly suggests or foretells a link to Indira, since Sonia Gandhi would be future president of the Indian National Congress party and wife of Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's eldest son.
[27] Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* (Quebec City: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004).

had failed to protect and help the very foundation of its society, the family, reducing its members to incommunicability, moral pettiness and unsubstantiated ambition.

When his aunt learns that Saleem had fought for Pakistan she refuses to feed him. She considers him a war criminal and fears that simply hosting him may cost them ending their lives up on the streets. They are in a Civil servant's household, after all, and Saleem could put their social position in jeopardy. Sonia aspires to a normal life as respectable citizens of their nation, so being publicly shamed and misrecognized by the system represents her worst fear: "Go, be a prisoner of war, why should we care, you are not even our departed sister's true-born son" (566), she admits. The reference to Saleem's being a bastard is her ultimate delegitimation of Saleem's place not just in their home, but in India as well. Contrary to his parents, the aspiration for social security and acceptance makes his aunt and uncle reject him as a member of the family, reducing him to a stranger. Saleem's family does not acknowledge any familial obligation to him in order to preserve a place in the wider Indian national community which in turn denies them an upstanding life.

Even though in the first part of narration his family tree and the delineation of relative ties had played great importance, Saleem is now ready to do without the very idea of family and familial relations. The dissolution of the idea of family as founded on blood relations had already started when it was found out that Saleem was not the biological son of Amina and Ahmed:

> when we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found that it made no difference! I was still their son: they remained my parents. In a kind of *collective failure of imagination*, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our past.[28] (176)

Sophie Ratcliff[29] points out that it is cultural notions and shared memories which create bonds, not blood or soil: Saleem could not think of himself as other than his parents' child, and his parents could not see themselves as anything other than just that. The 'truth' that Saleem was a changeling could not scratch the simple and overwhelming 'fact' or 'reality' that they were still a family in every sense of the word. That blood mixing as an originary point in time for the 'birth' of a new familial connection is just an illusion, an affective anchor to mark the beginning of a new relationship which is actually born backwards, since it is determined by time spent together. Blood relationships are secondary to family: being one is mainly a matter of imagining themselves as such. Shared experience and cultural heritage prevented their family from thinking of themselves as otherwise. The act of thinking and speaking of themselves as a family had actually made them a family. What creates familial bonds is not blood. Blood is just the occasion which sets up the context to speak about oneself and other relatives as a family, and it is the latter operation that is constitutive, that creates long-standing bonds. The creative power of language has always been one of Rushdie's reiterated literary concerns, which is often disregarded in favour of its descriptive properties.[30] That's why Rachel Trousdale[31] focuses on Saleem's observation that it is the act of not loving a child, or a parent, that is monstrous, not physical monstrosity. Responsibility does not depend on something physical, on the condition of having a body or finding oneself in a given place. Responsibility derives from an emotional bond. The familial

[28] Emphasis mine.
[29] Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008).
[30] See, for example, Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).
[31] Rachel Trousdale, *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

relationship between Saleem and his parents is rooted in the act of imagining themselves as a family: only if they can imagine themselves as such, responsibility can follow. The bond uniting Saleem to his family is consequently not so different from the one that unites him to the Midnight's Children: it's just the product of a shared fantasy which precedes and determines them as a community.

Matt Kimmich[32] points out that Saleem's family parable would allow one to trace many connections with Freud's notion of the 'family romance'.[33] He is of course aware that applying Freud's theories to an Anglo-Indian novel is problematic, especially after feminism criticism has highlighted many contradictions inherent in Freud's underlying gender bias and the fact that many of his observations may be pertinent to late XIX Vienna more than twentieth century India. Yet, it appears to be absolutely relevant in the fact that Saleem, just like the young boy for Freud, cannot maintain the idealized image of their parents. Their faults and shortcomings become soon apparent, making them unworthy of being considered the sole and absolute authority in his eyes. And just like the Freudian male child, who imagines to be adopted as a reaction, Saleem too has his parents turned into stepparents. He witnesses his mother's love for another man, and it is that circumstance which activates his telepathic powers. In another indirect reference to Freudian concepts, Saleem's love for his sister Jamila could be seen as the result of his attempt at compensating the inequalities in the degree of certainty between the parents' status[34] through his mother's infidelities. In Freud, such fantasy allows a male child to see himself as the only legitimate child, while others could be illegitimate. Love towards a sister could thus become legit, since it would be seen no longer as incestuous. Such fantasy would permit the child to correct the situation and return to the initial idealized state in which the parents' authority is absolute and worthy of his efforts to become the ideal parent of his sex. In a final referencing to the Oedipal complex, whereas in Freud rivalry with the father results in anxiety of castration, in the novel Saleem too is castrated during the Emergency which, as anticipated earlier in the essay, constitutes the arrival destination of his storytelling.

Postcolonial critic Edward Said's distinction between 'filiation' and 'affiliation' represents a powerful critical tool to read into Saleem's actions and circumstances. The former refers to a biological, and consequently deterministic, relation. The latter is freely chosen, adopted willingly:

> Thus if a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority – involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict – the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms.... The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of "life," whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society.[35]

Having already refused to set up a family with Parvati, Saleem's hopes of establishing a biological bond with future generations are destroyed when his uncles tell him of the death of his sister Jamila, with whom he is secretly in love. The rejection and betrayal of his uncle Mustapha and the contempt of his aunt Sonia totally deprive Saleem of any sense of belonging to a family. This situation creates an involuntary mutual hostility which prompts Saleem to look for new relationships. Only at that

[32] Kimmich, *Offspring Fictions*.
[33] Sigmund Freud, "Family Romances" [1908], in Otto Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero", *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 41.1 (January 1914).
[34] That is, if there can be no doubt about the mother, one cannot be absolutely sure about the father.
[35] Edward Said, *The Text, the World, the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1983), 20.

moment is Saleem fully prepared to try and save India, and his brothers and sisters of the Midnight's Children Conference are no less important since he sees them as his only remaining family. Following Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia,[36] in a context where patterns of filiation become increasingly hard to maintain or respect, Saleem resorts to patterns of affiliation to emancipate himself from parental authority to look for new relationships and, in doing so, keep alive the sense of responsibility towards the future that had been instilled in him since his birth:

> Childless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths, and unregenerately celibate men and women populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence, all of them suggesting the difficulties of filiation. But no less important in my opinion is the second part of the pattern, which is immediately consequent upon the first, the pressure to produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships. For if biological reproduction is either too difficult or too unpleasant, is there some other way by which men and women create social bonds between each other that would substitute for those ties that connect members of the same family across generations? (17)

Affiliation to the midnight's children allows wannabe hero Saleem to overcome the exclusivity of the idea of purity, which legitimises familial belonging only on a biological basis, as well as to overturn the passive hierarchization of filiation, by virtue of which fathers remain fathers and children remain subordinated offspring no matter what. By challenging Indira Gandhi's nefarious stronghold on the country, Saleem thus pursues a new opportunity to gain power and agency, to take on responsibility towards his people by using his extraordinary faculties to the benefit of the national community. When that is made impossible due to the mutilations inflicted by Indira Gandhi, his only means to connect with the future will be writing and storytelling.

3. Clinical Storytelling: Narration and Disease

Considering all the above, Matt Kimmich would be right in observing that the trope of family as used by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* has not received sufficient critical inquiry, especially in light of the ambiguous relationship he establishes with his metaphorical and literal kinship, from his imaginative parentage to "his midnight siblings [who] are in the end destroyed by their quasi-maternal nemesis"[37] during the Emergency.

The Emergency was officially declared on 25 June 1975 and lasted for a total of twenty-one months. Apparently, the internal equilibrium and political stability of the nation was threatened by political turmoil. For this reason, Indira Gandhi deemed extreme political measures as the only possible solution to contrast the situation. In reality, the Emergency was just an excuse to confer upon herself an almost absolute power, gain military and media control, and silence or annihilate opposition. Indira's twenty-point programme was made public shortly after the declaration of the Emergency, but it was the five points that were added to it by her son Sanjay that truly revealed the ethos of that period. Among those, there are two of the utmost importance: a new agenda for family planning and the 'beautification' of the environment, two necessary countermeasures for respectively an overcrowded country which had somehow overgrown itself, and the problem of the slums which

[36] Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (London: Routledge, 1999).
[37] Kimmich, *Offspring Fictions*, 15.

disfigured cities and the landscape in general. In simpler terms, the country's population had to be forcibly reduced, while buildings or other architectural heritage which 'stained' India's beauty had to be destroyed. This meant enforced castrations as a measure of birth control and the eradication of ghettos, shanty towns or slums, even though thousands of people were 'accidentally' killed during such cleansings. In fact, one of the political ambitions of the Indian Emergency was preventing the poor from having a family, destroying their homes and the possibility for them to have children by taking their reproductive capabilities away from them. Among the hidden rationales behind this conduct there was the arms race which India had been pursuing for some years. Decimating the population plagued by poverty would be seen, internationally, as a demonstration of responsibility on the part of the Indian government, especially in the eyes of the United States and the administrations of Nixon and Johnson. Pursuing nuclear weapons was seen as irresponsible by those administrations, in light of the exponential growth of poverty. This had resulted in a decline of the relationship between India and the United States. Reducing poverty was an action taken to prove that India was a credible international force, a worthy interlocutor on the global political scene both for its strong military power and sustainable internal economic model.

To Saleem and the midnight's children, however, the Emergency months were ones of captivity, torture and, above all, sterilization. They had to be made infertile so that they could not represent a menace for Indira Gandhi's control over the country. Men were made to undergo vasectomies, women tubectomies. Saleem plays on the etymology of those words to forge a neologism, 'sperectomy'.[38] That is, with the mutilation of the reproductive organs of the children of midnight the nation had been de facto drained out of hope:

> But what I learned from the Widow's Hand is that those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities; and that, that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hated feared destroyed by the Widow, ... And that was how I learned my meaning in the crumbling palace of the bruised-breasted women. Who am I? Who were we? ... They were good doctors: they left nothing to chance.... testicles were removed from sacs, and wombs vanished for ever. Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves ... but that was only a side-effect, because they were truly extraordinary doctors, and they drained us of more than that: hope, too, was excised, ... children who had lost their magic: ... now fishes could not be multiplied nor base metals transmuted; gone forever, the possibilities of flight and lycanthropy and the originally-one-thousand-and-one marvellous promises of a numinous midnight. Who were we? Broken promises; made to be broken. (631-632)

That's when Saleem's storytelling becomes a bioethical effort: when, through narration and writing, he takes on responsibility for the 'idea' of India as can be imagined both inside and outside the fictional world. His story is metanarratively concerned with its own responsibility to protect the life of a community and its environment from threats coming from political action or technological adoption, assure its continued existence. It masterfully plays with ideas of family, health, fertility and

[38] "O insidious nostalgia for times of greater possibility, before history narrowed down to this final full point! Ectomy (from, I suppose, the Greek): a cutting out. To which medical science adds a number of prefixes: appendectomy tonsillectomy mastectomy tubectomy vasectomy testectomy hysterectomy. Saleem would like to donate one further item, free gratis and for nothing, to this catalogue of excisions; it is, however, a term which properly belongs to history, although medical science is, was involved: Sperectomy: the draining-out of hope" (629).

reproduction as a way to transmit one's own biological and cultural heritage and grant historical continuity and sustenance. Storytelling may be his final chance on destiny.

Rushdie's emphasis on affiliation and the body is essential to understand the intricacies and resonances within his own narration. Because narrative is the primary way of organizing and communicating what sense human beings make of the world, Rushdie recognizes that it is the interpretive process integral to shaping and understanding a story that is the true heart of human knowledge. The blending and confusion of narrative planes is directly connected to the investigation of narrative forms that are useful in understanding how knowledge is acquired and transmitted. As discussed earlier in the essay, the strict relationship existing between Saleem and India creates a double exposure, simultaneously of Saleem's body and India's social tissue, which makes circumstances not precisely and unambiguously narratable. Life is seen as the unpredictable interaction of time and social norms, regulated by variables which defy human control and make any narration enter into a dialogue with many other narratives and countless interpretations. Moral understanding and knowledge are intimately relative, subject to personal and progressive elaboration and reinterpretation, and always open to scrutiny and questioning.

Once we accept that his 'diseased', crumbling body puts Saleem not just in a hurry, but endows him with a greater sense of responsibility matured after his disillusionment with the idea of familial belonging, the kind of account Saleem gives of his life becomes especially meaningful. If Walter Benjamin[39] deemed the certainty of death the required conclusion of narrative meaning, Saleem's narrative reveals a "hunger for meaning in the face of death".[40] By recognizing that he resorts to writing as an ethical attempt at passing on knowledge and looking for meaning in light of the imminent demise of his existence, narration can also be compared to the sort of medical account that a patient gives of one's own illness to a practitioner. In Saleem's words, there seems to be implied a listener disposed to hear and interpret his story. His account does not take place outside of a structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified. The reader is an Other that acts as "a placeholder for an infinite ethical relation".[41]

The bioethical effort of narration proceeds insomuch as it assumes a clinical epistemology demanding the participation of storyteller and readers, be them real or imaginary, as both become progressively aware of the relativity of the human comprehension of individual and social experience. This way, just like in clinical medicine (where underlying uncertainty makes narration vital), Rushdie makes Saleem's narration a radically ambiguous, or uncertain, field of literary knowledge. His health problems are the result of interaction of physiological processes occurring within a socially and culturally constructed situation.[42] Saleem's 'disease' is not just, or not simply, rooted in human biology, so it is impossible to consider it by applying scientific knowledge alone. Rushdie places his diseased character at the crossroads between history and fantasy, where complex and unpredictable interactions make his account oscillate constantly between certainty and uncertainty, between truths put into doubt and false claims disguised as objective facts. One could refer to Judith Butler's drawing

[39] Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays: Tales out of Loneliness*, ed. by Sam Dolbear et al. (London and New York: Verso Books, 2016).
[40] Stephen G. Post, *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 1876.
[41] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2005), x.
[42] Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1991).

on the philosophy of Lévinas and his ideas of ethics, to recognize in Saleem's narration an authorial opacity through which he can establish its most important ethical bond, the one with the reader.[43] As Butler notes, authorial opacity, as an acknowledgement of one's own limits represents "a self-limiting act and [...] to experience the limits of knowing itself. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves" (28).[44]

Saleem makes mistakes in circumstances where his narration seems to be as objective as possible, as close to the truth as it could be, but later nonchalantly admits that what had earlier been presented as truth was (or could) be a mistake, a trick of his memory or imagination. Far from regretting or being sorry for those false impressions, he demands the reader acknowledge such false claims as essential to his narration, as they were 'symptomatic' of the circumstances. Fallacies and incongruities are inevitable outcomes of the act of remembering and of transcribing what is remembered. Sometimes, the most appalling truths emerge in the most improbable and unrealistic situations, which makes them all the more fearful in the mind of the reader. At other times, Saleem even stops to consider plausible diagnostic plots, taking into consideration life-threatening options and then proceeding to eliminate the least likely. Saleem as narrator is even caught having a battle with himself, surrendering his authorial agency to the necessities of narration itself:

> I don't want to tell it! – But I swore to tell it all. – No, I renounce, not that, surely some things are better left ...? – That won't wash; what can't be cured, must be endured! ... But how can I, look at me, I'm tearing-myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more! – But I mustn't presume to judge; must simply continue (having once begun) until the end; sense-and-nonsense is no longer (perhaps never was) for me to evaluate. (607)

However, Saleem's goal is not healing or recovery. Following Judith Butler, the confusion of allegorical, metaphorical and symbolic references abounding in Saleem's recounting are Rushdie's way of raising the reader's attention to the disease affecting its author, who tries "to give a sequential account for [what the storyteller know] cannot, finally, be grasped in sequential terms, for that which has a temporality or a spatiality that can only be denied or displaced or transmuted when it assumes narrative form".[45] Even more importantly, India would be a referent that "works as a constant threat to narrative authority even when it functions as the paradoxical condition for a narrative, a narrative that gives provisional and fictive sequence to that which necessarily eludes that construction" (Ibid.). With his admissions, clarifications and corrections, not only does Saleem have his audience understand the limitedness of his own knowledge, but also that what can be known or extracted from narration is.[46] Such uncertainty about narrative and human knowledge in general brings about a new sense of ethics itself as it makes both narrator and readers aware of their own limits. By making the two enter a dialogue, Saleem's account is a negotiation of story and teller, story and listener, not aimed at a

[43] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.
[44] Ibid., 28.
[45] Ibid., 27.
[46] Montgomery Kathryn Hunter, "The Whole Story", *Second Opinion*, 19 (1993), 97-103; from the same author, "Narrative, Literature, and the Clinical Exercise of Practical Reason", *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 21.3 (1996), 303-320.

definitive conclusion, but aimed at making narration an effort to turn ethics into a practical knowledge based on a healthy scepticism about answers. The paradoxical outcome, if any, is a contained representation of incommensurability. Narration, paraphrasing Saleem's own description of both his physical and historical condition in the novel,[47] can't be helped or cured. It can only be endured.

[47] Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 629.