

**Indian Fiction in English**  
**Dr. Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology – Madras**

**Lecture - 16A**  
**Reading Midnight's Children**

I am happy to welcome you to yet another session of this NPTEL course title Indian Fiction in English. In today's session also we are continuing to look at various ways of reading this spectacular work written by Salman Rushdie Midnight's Children. You by now know how significant this work is in the (()) (00:37) of Indian writing in English, how this has been seen as a watershed event.

This has also received multiple accolades at the national and international level even elevating this to the status of Booker of all bookers. In this context, if one would try to read Midnight's Children, if I could describe this process, the experience of reading Midnight's Children in a single word, it is essentially difficult.

**(Refer Slide Time: 01:05)**



This is a fairly huge novel; it is a humongous task to finish this novel. You all would agree with me by now and it is a non-linear kind of narration and it is said that officially Rushdie inaugurated both the postcolonial as well as the postmodern moment in Indian writing in English. So, all of these things put together and a multiple intertextual references and the

personal references, the historical references, all of these make the reading of *Midnight's Children* a rather difficult experience.

But, of course there is a certain kind of a pleasure hidden within this experience you would begin to realize as you begin to read the novel there is no other way to get through this other than engaging with the novel in a first hand way. You would also come across multiple kinds of aids and some re-switch which are widely available these days, but I would strongly encourage you to refrain from reading just the summaries and come into approach this novel directly.

What I am trying to do in this lecture is to make this process a little more palatable to you, make the process of reading, make this process of enjoying and understanding this text slightly easier and better for you. Before we again begin talking about reading and approaching *Midnight's Children* as an academic text, it is important for us to know the various ways in which this work has been critiqued as well as appreciated while it remains a best known thing that Rushdie has acknowledged as the inaugurator of particular kind of writing and a particular kind of experience in Indian writing in English.

**(Refer Slide Time: 02:53)**

- o Richard Cronin: Rushdie as an outsider who thinks in English
  - o Harish Trivedi: resentful of how Western critics and academics treat Rushdie as if he invented India or gave the continent a voice
  - o Timothy Brennan: Rushdie's popularity is on account of his critique of nationalist ideology
- Orientalist depiction of India

He has also faced a lot of criticism for the orientalist depiction of India. Richard Cronin talks about Rushdie as an outsider who thinks in English and this he thinks is a problem of major fallacy when one is talking about primarily the experiences within India and then Rushdie's

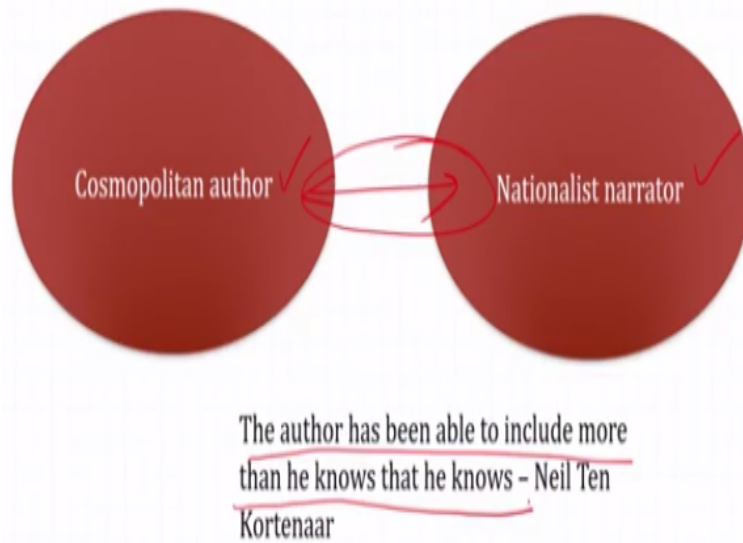
inability to access and articulate these experiences in any of the vernacular languages that Cronin thinks is a major limitation.

Harish Trivedi, one of the Indian postcolonial critics. He is extremely resentful of how western critics and academics treat Rushdie as if he invented India or gave the continent a voice. We have also noticed how various critics and various other writers have acknowledged and given this elevated status to Rushdie even to the extent of arguing and even to the extent of pointing out that Rushdie was the one who enabled all of us post-colonials to tell our own stories.

At the same time, there are also positive ways in which Rushdie has been talked about in the international academic critical scene. Timothy Brennan, he indicates that Rushdie's popularity is mostly on account of his critique of nationalist ideology and this is something precisely that one needs at this critical juncture when the nation is moving away from many of its secularist Nehruvian ideas and approaching a newer kind of nationalism, which obviously needs to be critiqued at some point or the other.

So, Rushdie is possible to say that he inaugurated this kind of fiction which is critically looking at the nationalist ideology, which was in circulation and this also needs to be seen in stark contrast with the other major writers of the nation, say Raja Rao or R.K. Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand who wrote about the nation in rather different ways. This different kind of articulation is extremely visible. It becomes more pertinent when we look at Rushdie in two different ways.

**(Refer Slide Time: 05:04)**

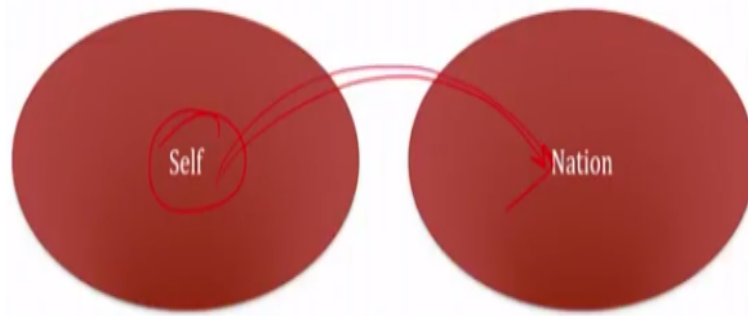


One as the cosmopolitan author and as a nationalist narrator. We find *Midnight's Children* habiting a space, which brings together both these elements in various ways. We find Rushdie being a cosmopolitan author assuming the status of a nationalist narrator to tell the story of a nation into which he was born. But, about which he perhaps knows very little because after certain point, he spends most of his adult life in nations abroad, which is what provokes one of the commentators of Rushdie, Neil Ten Kortenaar to say that the author has been able to include more than he knows that he knows.

Rushdie himself also is aware of this dichotomy and this ambivalence in this process of narration and there are also multiple instances where Rushdie distances himself from the nationalist narrator, the protagonist named Saleem Sinai and attributes some of the errors and some of the feelings and some flaws in chronology to the memory of the narrator Saleem Sinai.

This distancing between the author and the narrator, between the cosmopolitan figure and the nationalist figure, it gives a very interesting flavor and the multiple certain nuances to the winning experience. While you are reading this it is hard to miss this, because you come across a narrator who is entirely Indian, but you also know that this narrator is being produced, this narrator is being constructed by an author who has got a cosmopolitan experience and exposure as well.

**(Refer Slide Time: 06:54)**



Interplay of :  
personal and national histories  
Public and private strands  
Historical and individual forces

At the same time, it is difficult to ignore the connection between the self and the nation, which this novel again explores rather succinctly in some points and certain instances this relationship, this exploration is very direct, very clear, but it is also subtle in certain other ways. Right at the outset, when the protagonist is introduced was, the protagonist could be an extension of the author figure or the narrator and in that sense the self could be that of Rushdie or of Saleem Sinai and which will be the case, the relation that this self has with the nation is quite undeniable.

We find that physically also the protagonist Saleem Sinai shares much with the nation. He grows with the nation. He disintegrates with the nation and anything that happens at the national level seems to have a bearing on his personal stories as well. Throughout this novel we will find this interplay of personal and national histories, the public and private strands coming together in certain points it is even difficult to dislocate one from the other.

It is so intertwined that the personal histories become a reflection of the national histories and the public articulations become an extension of the private selves. We find in this form the historical and individual forces coming together at work. Here it is again important to notice how history slides not just into fiction, but also into personal narratives.

This coming together of the fictional and the historical, the personal and the national, the private and the public, this is something that Rushdie is also very conscious of, he has written about this

in his work *Imaginary Homelands* a series of essays, where he talks about how sometimes his memory seems to play certain tricks with him.

For instance, he recounts an instance from the novel where he seems to talk about the Indo-China war, but in reality he was not in India at that time, but his memory is playing tricks with him, almost forcing him to believe that he was one among those affected while in reality he was away in Britain, far away geographically and emotionally as well. So, there are these layers of connections between the self and the nation that this novel explores and whenever we are reading about Saleem Sinai, it is important for us to know that it is also about the nation.

Saleem Sinai himself says after a while India becomes his own story and he becomes the nation's story. It is difficult to disconnect one from the other. This allegory is something which should be there at the back of a mind to be able to better appreciate the series of events that unfold or the various ways in which the plot or the absence of plot progresses. One thing which accentuates the level of difficulty in *Midnight's Children* that it is not just one point.

**(Refer Slide Time: 09:51)**



Not just one point!

o "You're going to say the whole book is the point from the beginning to the end, aren't you?"

I want you to recall the introductory essay that Rushdie wrote for his book of Indian writing which he co-edited with Elizabeth West. In that controversial introduction he begins by narrating an anecdote about certain student from Delhi University who asked him a question after a reading of *Midnight's Children* at a public event, so the Delhi University student asked him what

fundamentally is the point. I do know that this is a very long novel, still I have read it, but what fundamentally is the point.

Rushdie finds himself wondering is it necessary to have one fundamental point and this girl asks him “you are going to say the whole book is the point from the beginning to the end, are not you?” and Rushdie responds in the affirmatives “yes, I was about to say that.” She insists on having this one point which unfortunately cannot be elicited from this novel, because it is not just about one point at all. It is about many, many points. It is about the overall experience of bringing together these seemingly disconnected points to a single fulcrum, which is the nation.

Again, you may find certain strands which continued to be disconnected and that perhaps is the beauty of this entire experience of writing and reading this work. If you try to summarize this work in any different way, we would also realize that there is not just one point.

**(Refer Slide Time: 11:28)**

**Plot summary?**

- o Too many characters, themes, side plots
- o The autobiography of Saleem Sinai - a man with a huge nose (power to read minds - loses it later) - believes that he controls the fate of the nation.
- o Family dies during the Indo-Pak war - loses his memory (returns during the 2<sup>nd</sup> war)
- o Lives in slums with magicians - takes up making pickles at a pickle factory

Is this a sensible summary?

In fact, we will find too many characters, themes and side plots sometimes contributing and feeding into the main structure of the plot and sometimes even in a very disconnected way. In a nutshell, it can be said that this is the autobiography of Saleem Sinai. He is a man with a huge nose and he has got the power to read minds and he also loses it later after a certain surgery that he undergoes for a treatment for sinusitis and Saleem Sinai believes that he controls the fate of the nation that his self is integrally connected with the fate and future of the nation.

If you are trying to look at some of the important events, we find that his family dies during the Indo-Pak war. He loses his memory which also returns to him during the second Indo-Pak war and then we find him living in the slums with the magicians. He takes up making pickles at a pickle factory, it is during this time that he decides to narrate his entire life story to Padma, to whom this entire story is being narrated.

It is difficult to make sense out of this summary and certainly *Midnight's Children* is not just about this, it is much more than the story, an autobiography of Saleem Sinai and the many things that happened to them. This again is not to say that this is a novel written without any rhyme or reason. In spite of these many layered difficulties, there are certain things which would help us to bring the story together. It will be useful for you to realize right at the beginning that there is a very significant organizing plot device being used here.

**(Refer Slide Time: 13:09)**

- o A significant organizing plot device: the autobiography of the first 30 years in the life of Saleem Sinai - sitting in a pickle factory in Bombay - talking to his partner/muse Padma
- o "handcuffed to history"
- o 30 chapters - not numbered
- o 30 years before and after independence

The novel moves in the way of the autobiography of the first 30 years in the life of Saleem Sinai. If you go through the contents of this book, the chapters which are listed you will find that there are 30 different chapters, which are not numbered interestingly and this is also a very postmodern technique to show us that you could perhaps begin anywhere and move in any different directions.



There is an order, but that need not be a structured chronological order as one would expect usually from these kinds of narration. This character, Saleem Sinai whose autobiography is being narrated, we understand right at the beginning that he is a character who is handcuffed to history. That makes his life story extremely important for understanding the story of the nation as well. We also find that there is a way in which the years are organized.

We are introduced to 30 years before and 30 years after independence and in that sense the story also begins much before Saleem Sinai, the protagonist is born. This plot device is useful to serve as a working framework, as a kind of a guideline which will take you through this maze of a story. In spite of the many gaps, the many absences, and many things which are left out, there are significant cues which are being given to the reader at every point right from the beginning.

**(Refer Slide Time: 14:47)**

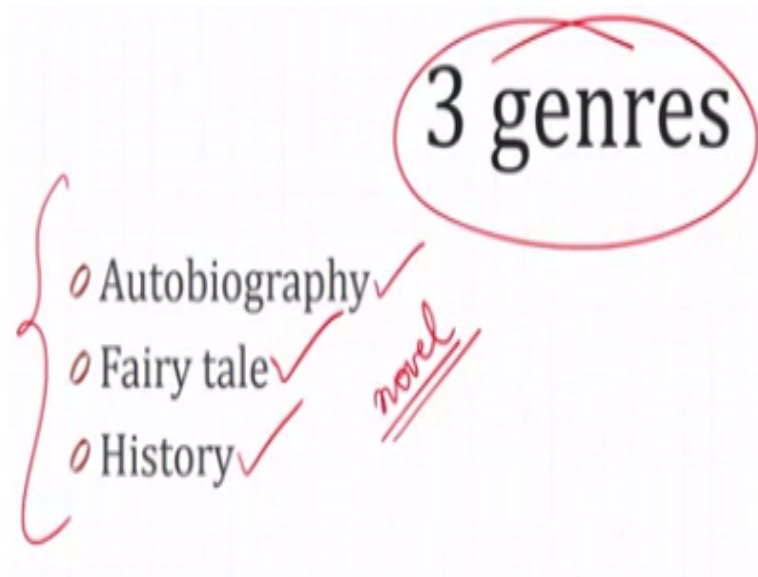
## The beginning

I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: 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 (1/3).

This is how the novel begins, “I was born in the city of Bombay, once upon a time. No, that would not do, there is no getting away from the date, I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15, 1947 and the time? the matters too. Well then, at night, no it is important to be more, on the stroke of midnight as a matter of fact. Clock hands joint 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.”

In this very scattered kind of an introduction, we are being introduced to many things. There is a sense of place, a sense of date and time, and we also get to know the significance in terms of the historical context.

**(Refer Slide Time: 15:42)**



If we do a deeper analysis of this, we get to know that there are three genres which come together. In this single passage, there is a sense of an autobiography and there is an exaggerated fairy tale way of narration about how the clock hands join palms in respectful greeting about once upon a time, which is the opening lines of every fairy tale. We also have a sense of history.

At the outset itself, significant cues are being given to the reader to let us know that you are about to enjoy something, which is conventionally known as a novel, but it is an autobiography, a fairy tale and history all rolled into one. So, the audience is prepared right at the outset to be prepared to the intermixing of these different genres to expect the unexpected, to also lower down the expectations of certain genres or certain frameworks.

**(Refer Slide Time: 16:45)**

## The year 1915

- o Aadam Aziz (Saleem's grandfather) returns from Europe to Kashmir
- o He hits his nose - the world was new again
- o Two moderate leaders died - Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Pherozeshah Mehra - towards more radical leadership
- o Mahatma Gandhi returned to India
- o First World War

The narration also begins in the year 1915, which is about 30 years before the moment of independence and this is precisely the year when Aadam Aziz, who is Saleem's grandfather, he returns from Europe to Kashmir. This is undivided Kashmir and Kashmir as we know continues to be our contested geographical space. For a long time, it continues to be a contested space and Rushdie also makes it a point to make Kashmir a significant setting in the story telling.

There is an instance in the beginning where Aadam Aziz hits his nose during a prayer time, the world becomes new for him. There is a drop of blood which comes out because he had hit his nose on the ground and he loses his faith at that moment. There are many dramatic things, which happen one after the other here in this moment which just situate the 1915. It happens to Aadam Aziz and we find that magic realism.

The aspects of fairy tales, the context of history all of those things are used simultaneously to enhance the dramatic effect and also to give a different kind of a flavour to this narration of history. This year was important in the national history for a different reason as well. Two moderate leaders died in 1915, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Pherozshah Mehra and we find the nationalist movement moving towards more radical leadership.

1915 is also the year when Mahatma Gandhi returned to India. This is also the time of the First World War. So, we get to know that Rushdie, while he seems to be using language very playfully

with an intermix of irreverence, hybridity, mimicry, humour, we also get to know that things are being done very deliberately. The introduction of the year 1915 as the starting point of the novel is no accident. It has been designed in that way to bring together all of these layered things, which are hidden and embedded in this nationalist history.

The irreverence and the distancing is also one way of rejecting the dominant nationalist history which has been told and which has been handed out. The readers of *Midnight's Children* from the beginning, they have not missed out on these.

**(Refer Slide Time: 19:06)**

The story willfully defies description. Roughly speaking, it's the biography of Saleem Sinai, a child with unusual psychic and (later) olfactory powers, born on the stroke of midnight on August 15 1947. His destiny is inextricably linked with that of India, the country that came into independent being at the exact same time as he did. But the narrative is so jammed with contradictions, digressions, deliberate false steps and allegorical insinuations, that it's impossible to do it justice in the space of a short blog. Suffice to say that it's a heady ride through the first 31 years of Indian nationhood, taking in religious divisions, linguistic battles, Indira Gandhi's repression, the tragedies of partition, the painful birth of Bangladesh, the colourful career of the unique-yet-everyman narrator, as well as verrucas, jungles, chutneys, spices, snot, "soo-soos", 15-inch turds, eccentric Aunts, indulgent uncles, slums, palaces, snake charmers, werewolves, soldiers, cripples and more than 100 other variously mad, bad, dangerous and delightful characters.

This is an excerpt from one of the reviews that appear in the guardian. This was after *Midnight's Children* was again acknowledged as the Booker of Bookers. This is how the review reads. The story willfully defies description. Roughly speaking it is a biography of Saleem Sinai, a child with unusual psychic and later olfactory powers born on the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. His destiny is inextricably linked with that of India, the country that came into independent being at the exact time as he did.

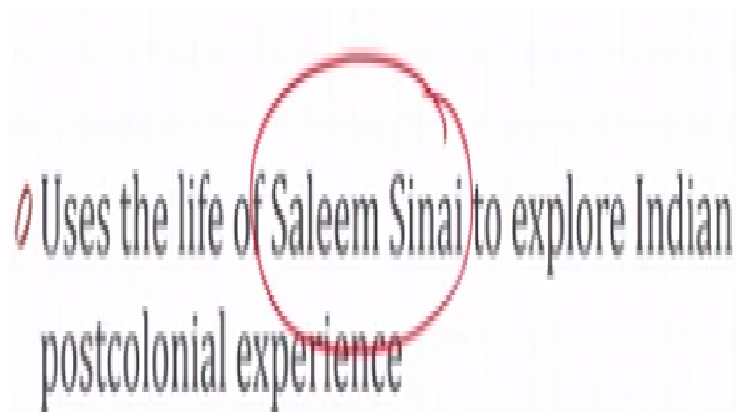
But the narrative is so jammed with contradictions, digressions, deliberate false steps and allegorical insinuations, that it is impossible to do it justice in the space of a short blog. Suffice to say that it is a heady ride through the first 31 years of Indian nationhood, taking in religious divisions, linguistic battles, Indira Gandhi's repression, the tragedies of partition, the painful

birth of Bangladesh, the colourful career of the unique yet everyman narrator as well as verrucas, jungles, chutneys, spices, snot, “soo-soos”, 15-inch turds, eccentric aunts, indulgent uncles, slums, palaces, snake charmers, werewolves, soldiers, cripples and more than 100 other variously mad, bad, dangerous and delightful characters.

It is a very fitting description to this wonderfully crafted novel. We find that there are very, very serious things like the story of the nation. There are serious issues being encased with like religion, the linguistic battle, the tragedies of partition. We also deal with in this novel with very, very trivial things like chutneys, snot. We deal with gossip. We deal with things which are part of a family struggle. We deal with trivial details about individuals.

This is a heady mixture of as we pointed out in the beginning. It is a heady mixture of history, of autobiography and of magical realism. This is the way in which Rushdie had deliberately designed this novel. This is not an inadvertent thing which comes to him. A careful kind of planning has gone at every point we would realize integrating all of these aspects in the right form.

**(Refer Slide Time: 21:30)**



Uses the life of Saleem Sinai to explore Indian postcolonial experience

In spite of these varied heady things which come together, we find that Saleem Sinai continues to remain at the center of discourse and Rushdie uses the life of Saleem Sinai to very masterfully explore Indian postcolonial experience. In this lecture, our focus is also on trying to understand

how this narrative space is being used very cleverly, very masterfully to talk about the postcolonial experience to depict it, to critique it, to reject it, and also to look at it in a very irreverent and playful manner.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:05)

## Saleem Sinai

- Combines the story of his childhood with that of the nation
- "to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world"
- Personal farce + political realism
- The physical form of the narrator - grotesque - bulbous temples, a bald spot, an enormous nose, a bit of a finger missing = refracted and distorted approach to narrative

If you look at Saleem Sinai, there is a way in which the story of his childhood shares and get connection with the nation to quote Saleem Sinai himself to understand just one life you have to swallow the world and that is incredible statement to make. Rustom Bharucha, one of the critics and writers, he talks about how Rushdie swallowed many postcolonial citizens (( )) (22:28) for us to be able to see this new world which was being opened up.

We find way in which personal farce and political realism come together in this single life of Saleem Sinai and one way in which he enables this to happen, the personal farce and the political realism to come together is by focusing on the physical form of the narrator. The narrator, Saleem Sinai is present, there is a very grotesque figure. He has got bulbous temples, he has got a bald spot and enormous nose, which is very hard to miss and a bit of his finger is missing.

This in fact can also be seen as a way in which the refracted and distorted approach to narrative gets justified. So, there is this fragmented history of the nation. There is refracted and distorted approach to narrative and to compliment this we find a grotesque depiction of the physical form of the narrator as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:36)

## Fiction, fantasy and reinvention

- o Orientalist conception of India being a 'myth', 'a dream'
- o The impossibility of creating a definitive version of the past
- o "although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events' }
- o No linear structure

Through this what Rushdie perhaps attempts to achieve is a reinvention of everything which he sees around him. A reinvention of all the ordinary things through the element of fiction and fantasy and this includes the orientalist conception of India being a myth or a dream. While there have been critiques about how Rushdie also plays along through these orientalist tendencies by looking at India as an exotic as a dream, as a myth.

We find that the very conception of India is an orientalist myth is being reinvented. This being played with, in Rushdie's narratives. He is doing this in order to show to the readers that it is impossible to create a definitive version of the past that all that we have with us is figment of fantasy, some construction of fiction and some sense of reinvented past. Here we find Saleem Sinai being made to say that "although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses stubbornly to alter the sequence of events."

So, there is no way in which one could get to know the exact sequence of events, the exact chronology in which certain things happen in the past because that is an impossible task. It is for the same reason that this novel also rejects any kind of linear structure.

There is a beginning, middle and the end in this book, the way it has been organized and bound, but in terms of the story it is difficult to find a linear structure through which the beginning,



middle and the end is being showcased because right at the beginning we begin in the middle of the narration and then we also know that there are certain events in the past, which needs to be accessed to make sense of the present.

It is the same thing which he is extending to make sense of the story of this nation that is India. To understand contemporary India, you need to go back to that moment even before India was born, the unified India which also had Pakistan and Bangladesh and some colonial past. Only if you begin there, Rushdie is trying to tell is that you can make sense of contemporary India which apparently looks independent and free from all those other extra elements which were part of it before this moment of independence.

**(Refer Slide Time: 25:59)**

**Aftermath of colonialism**

- Year 1947 - 'a soldier's knife . . . cut a subcontinent in three'
- Saleem's family moves from pre-partition Kashmir valley to Amritsar, Agra, Delhi, Bombay, Pakistan and back - violence, suffering and callousness
- Internalisation of colonial racism - dislike of darker skin, symbolic increase in vitiligo after independence etc
- Methwold's estate

Rightfully, he takes us through the aftermath of colonialism in the year 1947. It is being referred to as the soldier's knife which cut a subcontinent into three, India, Pakistan and then later Bangladesh. Saleem's family is shown to be moving from pre-partition Kashmir valley to Amritsar, Agra, Delhi, Bombay, Pakistan, and then back again to India. In this process we find Saleem and his family encountering violence, undergoing suffering and also facing a lot of callousness.

This is due to their different kinds of positioning. It is due to their identity as Muslims due to their identity as Indians or as Pakistanis. So, we find them inhabiting certain vulnerable



positions, rather they are being made to inhabit certain vulnerable position so as to present this experience of postcolonialism in a very different way. Again, it is interesting to show how Rushdie continues to harp on this geographical space, Kashmir, precisely because of the many contesting reasons.

In a very interesting way, Rushdie shows Saleem Sinai and his family and the many other characters in this story not just as victims of colonialism, but there is a way in which they also have internalized some kind of colonial races. For example, the dislike of darker skin or the symbolic increase in vitiligo after independence, because the people inherently they have some kind of an affinity for lighter skin. So, he uses the magic realist elements to talk about how the skin continues to get lighter in the aftermath of colonialism.

Also, the retention of the Methwold's estate, the retention of the name and different ways in which the possessions are being handled, etc. They all showcase the aftermath of colonialism in a very effective way. There are some English literary references which are very hard to miss.

**(Refer Slide Time: 28:10)**

## English literary references

- o Recall Sterne and Richardson - deliberate or unconscious? Internalised colonisation?
- o Victorian Gothic trope - the changeling child, the twin
  - o Saleem is not narrating the story of his own family - switched at birth with another baby
- o Dickensian birth accident
- o Freudian patriarchal terror - a boy presented to a man as his son is not really his own

Many critics have spoken about how Rushdie leads us to recall Sterne and Richardson, who were the earliest English novelist. Whether this is a deliberate or an unconscious strategy, it is difficult to say and whether this is the result of internalized colonization as many have accused Rushdie

of which is again I will leave that to your judgement. But, it is important to note that we find an undeniable Victorian Gothic trope at work.

Throughout this narration the idea of the changeling child, the twin, it is all an extension of this Victorian Gothic trope with which Rushdie himself has acknowledged that he has been endlessly fascinated with. Very interestingly, Saleem even when he is in this autobiographical mode, he is actually not narrating the story of his own family, it is not the family which is related to him by birth because he was switched at birth with another baby who was now growing up in less privilege conditions as you would get to know from the novel.

There is this Dickensian birth accident that Rushdie plays with. In that sense we get to know that the tradition that he seems to follow, the references that he continuously eludes it, they have been borrowed mostly from English literary critical tradition, mostly from the European tradition than from the native Indian traditions. In his introduction to the vintage book of Indian writing, he himself has acknowledged that there is an absence of any kind of literary critical tradition that he thinks he should be acknowledging, especially when he is talking about the native scene.

Coming back to these references, there is also this very European tendency to talk about a Freudian patriarchal terror, which is this boy presented at birth to a man as his son, but it is not really his own son. This interplay of the Dickensian birth accident, the Victorian Gothic trope and the use of the narrative elements influenced by Sterne and Richardson, we find all of these coming together to enrich the postcolonial experience, not essentially always in a very reverential systematic way, but also in a mocking way so as to talk about a very skewed kind of a postcolonial experience.

**(Refer Slide Time: 30:33)**

# Storytelling: magic and realism

- Blend of European, Middle Eastern and South Asian roots + cinematic and literary inspirations = potent chutney
- Multiple story telling traditions
- All Indian children born at midnight - imbued with magical gifts - children who can enter a mirror and emerge through a mirror, power of healing, prophecy or time travel, change appearance etc
- Fairy tale or hard social realism
- People rise and fall randomly - recurring image of a game of snake and ladders

In this process of storytelling, we find Rushdie using magic as well as realism. Needless to say magic realism is one term, which is continually being associated with Rushdie and the kind of postcolonialism and postmodernism that he practices. We find a blend of European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian roots in his tradition of storytelling. We also find him employing cinematic and literary inspirations and this results in a very potent chutney, which is *Midnight's Children* which narrates the story of a nation through all of these interesting elements.

By focusing all multiple story telling traditions, Rushdie is in some way trying to tell us that it is impossible to locate a single tradition or to follow one linear structure while you are trying to narrate this story of this exciting nation, which is why he is using these many techniques of magic and of realism and he is employing them together in a very interesting way.

For instance, he has this idea within this novel, where all Indian children born at the stroke of midnight. They are all imbued with magical gifts. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, he has the power to read minds and there are a lot of children who can enter a mirror and emerge through a mirror in a different place. Children with the power of healing, with the power of prophecy of travelling across time, some of them can change their appearance.

They all may sound very magical, but they are presented in a realist setting and the significance and the relevance of those are also politically and nationalistically intricate and related as well.

This is how he also brings together these seemingly desperate two things, the fairy tale and the hard social realism. It is a hard hitting political novel, but it also employs techniques of a fairy tale.

We noted in the beginning itself, he begins by talking about the birth of Saleem Sinai as something which happened once upon a time. We find these expressions rather frequently throughout this narration. There is also the use of seemingly trivial things, seemingly silly things to talk about very profound ideas and very profound thoughts. There is a recurring image of the game of snake and ladder to show how people rise and fall randomly in the economic spectrum or in this political spectrum.

This is also significant in the postcolonial independent state because there is a rise and fall of fortunes and there is a rise and fall of possessions depending on your identity and how this identity of a majoritarian or a minoritarian sits well with the current politics of the nation.

All said and done, as we begin to wrap of this session, we also need to be alert to the depressingly limited and stereotype depiction of female characters in this novel, which is why many feminist writers and many women writers, they have felt increasingly disappointed about the depiction of some conventional elements in Rushdie's novel. This has said to be liberating for the nation.

This is seen as a kind of a fresh whiff of air as far as the stories about nation are concerned, but when we talk about the women in this novel, we do not find any radical experimentation being done. We do not find any liberating narrative being employed.

**(Refer Slide Time: 34:29)**

# Female characters

- Depressingly limited and stereotyped
- Cheats, prudes, gossip mongers, shrews, nags, temptresses, superstitious, fanatics, stubborn, irrational and petty
- Flirty cousin Zohra, Vanita the cheating wife, Mary the narry - 'a fisherwoman whose sari was as tight as her morals were loose'
- Padma - written about with warmth - but nothing more than a stereotype - narrator's devoted servant - makes full use of her cooking, housekeeping and sexual labour - 'I recount, she is recounted to; she ministers and I accept her ministrations'

Most women in this novel they are shown as cheats, or as prudes, as gossip mongers, as shrews, nags, temptresses, superstitious, fanatics, stubborn, irrational and petty. We do not find an encouraging positive figure of a female character in this entire novel. There are particular instances of the flirty cousin, Zohra or Vanita, the cheating wife, Mary the nanny who also is an Anglo-Indian and switches the children at birth.

There is a very subtle reference to a fisherwoman whose sari was as tight as her morals were loose, which also shows that sadly Rushdie is also the victim of the many stereotypical depictions, which are being floated around. He makes little effort to come out of those and use his radical libratory potential for the portrayal of his women characters as well.

Padma is one significant character. Padma is the one to whom Saleem Sinai is narrating the story of his life and she is being referred to with a lot of warmth. But, unfortunately she is nothing more than a stereotype in this novel. There is no active role that she is being made to perform. She is presented as the narrator's devoted servant and there are various instances in the novel which tell us that Saleem Sinai is making full use of her cooking, housekeeping, and also using her as a sexual labour. In his own words, "I recount, she is recounted to, she ministers and I accept her ministrations."

It is a very passive role that she is forced to perform in this narration and the presence of Padma does not really make much of a difference in alleviating the many others exists comments and references that Rushdie makes in this work. This is not to say that this single element takes away the charm of this fantastic work and it continues to impress, it continues to bring out newer ways of looking at it.

In fact, one interesting thing is that right from the beginning till the end it continues to be a very engaging read and I particularly like the way in which the chapters are titled. They sound very unconventional and extremely interesting. I read out some of the chapter titles to you. The first one is called the Perforated Sheet, which also refers to the nation which needs to be seen through the many perforations. Another title is Tick Tock, referring to the moving time.

One chapter is titled Fisherman's Pointing Finger. There is one which is called the All India Radio, there is Love in Bombay, the Kolynos Kid, referring to the popular toothpaste advertisement of those times. Revelations, which is a very religious sort of a reference, but it does not really talk about anything related to that. There is The Buddha, Sam and the Tiger, A Wedding, A Midnight and the final chapter is titled Aabra Ka Daabra, bringing in the element of magic in a very real and a very direct sense.

The book is also dedicated for Zafar Rushdie, who contrary to all expectations was born in the afternoon. There are these many, many interesting things, many, many spectacular things, which are being brought together to weave into the story of the nation in a wonderful way. There are multiple ways in which you can continue to read this novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 38:14)**

# Themes and concerns

- o A national allegory ✓
- o A literary marker of the post-Emergency crisis ✓
- o A Nehruvian epic ✓
- o Magic realism ✓
- o Postcolonialism ✓
- o Postmodernism ✓

Some of the other important themes and concerns include, reading this work as a national allegory, which is what we had been doing mostly in our discussions of this work. This work has been seen as a particular literary marker of the post-emergency crisis. It is seen as a Nehruvian epic by some. The magic realist elements can be focused more upon. It could be read within the frameworks of postcolonialism and postmodernism as well.

These are some of the approaches and some of the ways in which you can begin to read and appreciate this work. I hope this will continue to be an enjoying experience for you to read and enjoy the novel *Midnight's Children*. Thank you for listening this. I look forward to seeing you in the next session.