

SALMAN RUSHDIE

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

By V. S. Pritchett

In Salman Rushdie, the author of *Midnight's Children* (Jonathan Cape, 1981), India has produced a great novelist—one with startling imaginative and intellectual resources, a master of perpetual storytelling. Like Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he weaves a whole people's capacity for carrying its inherited myths—and new ones that it goes on generating—into a kind of magic carpet. The human swarm swarms in every man and woman as they make their bid for life and vanish into the passion or hallucination that hangs about them like the smell of India itself. Yet at the same time there are Western echoes, particularly of the irony of Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*—that early non-linear writer—in Rushdie's readiness to tease by breaking off or digressing in the gravest moments. This is very odd in an Indian novel. The book is really about the mystery of being born. Rushdie's realism is that of the conjuror who, in a flash, draws an incident out of the air and then makes it vanish and laughs at his cleverness. A pregnant woman, the narrator's mother, goes to a fortune-teller in the Delhi slum:

And my mother's face, rabbit-startled, watching the prophet in the check shirt as he began to circle, his eyes still egglike in the softness of his face; and suddenly a shudder passing through him and again that strange high voice as the words issued through his lips (I must describe those lips, too—but later, because now ... } 'A son.'

Silent cousins—monkeys on leashes, ceasing their chatter—cobras coiled in baskets—and the circling fortune-teller, finding history speaking through his lips. And the fortune-teller goes on, sing-songing:

'Washing will hide him—voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him—blood will betray him ... jungle will claim him ... tyrants will fry him ... He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! *And he will die ... before he is dead.*'

Outside the room, monkeys are throwing down stones on the street from a ruined building.

This is pure *Arabian Nights* intrigue—for that son, Saleem Sinai, now thirty-one, is writing about what he is making up about his birth; he is dramatising his past life as a prophecy, even universalising his history as a mingling of farce and horror and matching it with thirty years of the Indian crowd's collective political history. The strength of a book that might otherwise be a string of picaresque tales lies in its strong sense of design. Saleem claims that it is he who has created modern India in the years that followed Indian independence—has dreamed into being the civil strife and the wars—as a teller of stories, true or untrue, conniving at events and united with them. Central to this is the fantasy that the children born at midnight on the day of liberation, as he was, have a destiny. The Prime Minister himself pronounces this: 'They are the seed of a future that would genuinely differ from anything that the world had seen at that time.' Children born a few seconds before the hour of what Saleem calls Mountbatten's 'tick-tock' are likely to join the revelling band of conjurors and circus freaks and street singers; those born a few seconds after midnight, like Parvati, the witch, whom Saleem eventually marries, will be genuine sorcerers. Saleem himself, born on the stroke of the hour, will be amazingly gifted but will also embody the disasters of the country. The novel is an autobiography, dictated by a ruined man to a simple but shrewd working girl in a pickle factory—to this Saleem's fortunes have fallen. (She is addressed from time to time as if she were Sterne's 'dear Eliza'.) The fortune-teller's words 'washing will hide him' point to Fate. The prophecy was not a joke.

The rich Delhi Muslims who raise him are not his parents: he is a changeling, and not their son. The wrong ticket has been tied to his toe by a poor Goanese nurse, who, demented by the infidelity of her husband, a common street singer, had allowed herself to be seduced by a departing English sahib. Saleem is ugly, dwarfish, with a huge snotty nose, and is brought up rich; the real son is Shiva, brought up poor. Years will pass before the nurse confesses. The point of the political allegory becomes clear. Shiva, like the god, will become the man of action, riot, and war—the bully, cunning in getting to the top. Saleem's gift will be the passive intellectual's who claims the artist's powers of travelling into the minds of people. The rival traits will show in their school days. Proud of being midnight's children, the boys form a privileged gang. Saleem sees the gang as a gathering of equals in which every one has the right to his own voice. Shiva, brought up on the streets and refusing to be a whining beggar, rejects Saleem's democratic dream:

Yah, little rich boy: one rule. Everybody does what I say or I squeeze the shit out of them ... Rich kid, you don't know one damn thing!... Where's the reason in starving, man? ... You got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die.

The effect of Indian independence on the rich family is to give them the opportunity to buy up the property of the departing British cheaply, and speculation drives Saleem's 'father' to delusion. When he ages, he shuts himself up to fret about getting the words of the Koran in the right order. Then the riots of partition begin; there is the war in Kashmir; identifying himself with mass-consciousness, Saleem declares the war occurred because he dreamed it; Gandhi is assassinated; there is the war between India and Pakistan. In Bombay, where Saleem's family have migrated to make money, the bombing smashes their houses and kills off several of them. These events are evoked in parodies of news-flashes from All India Radio. Saleem, indeed, sees himself as a private radio sending out his satirical reports; once they are issued, the narrative returns to his story. He has a strange sister—a delightfully mischievous girl, known as the Brass Monkey, whose main sport is setting fire to the family's shoes. When Saleem discovers the truth about his birth, he falls in love with her; she turns him down and becomes pious, and Saleem henceforth believes all his failures in love are due to the sin of a metaphysical incest. The girl eventually becomes a superb cold-hearted singer and is 'the darling of the troops' in the war. Failure in sexual love haunts all the family. The more his 'parents' disappoint each other sexually, the more they apply themselves to loving each other. Saleem grows up to be something of a voyeur or vicarious lover.

In his attitude to love, Saleem is very much the ever wilful, inventive, teasing Scheherazade, prolonging the dreams of his people and puncturing them at the point of success. For example, his Aunt Pia, notorious for making emotional scenes, may be seen wantonly going through the motions of seducing Saleem—who is only ten at the time—but the act is physical charade: her extreme sexual provocation is put on as a 'scene' in which she rids herself of a private grief. Love is a need and custom, sexuality is play-acting. Towards the end of the book, Saleem will refuse to consummate his marriage to the witch Parvati (who has saved his life and who loves him), but not because she is pregnant by another man—in fact, his brother and opposite, the womanising Shiva. Saleem pretends he is impotent. Why this self-love? Is it possible that—too entranced by his fantastic powers of invention—he is the artist in love with storytelling itself? Or do such episodes spring from a fundamental sense that India is a chaos in which no norm can be realised? What a Westerner would call Saleem's self-pity is the egoist's devious and somehow energising passivity and resignation. It is, at any rate, the obverse of Shiva's grossly self-seeking attitude to life. Shiva is not a man to spend himself in a breathless stream of words.

All this is brought to life by Rushdie's delight in ironies of detail, which is entirely beguiling, because the smallest things, comic or horrible, are made phenomenal. But when we come to the war in East Pakistan the narrative takes on a new kind of visionary power. Saleem is a soldier, and in defeat and flight he leads a tiny group of men into the jungle—see the sorcerer's prophecy!—where he sometimes calls himself 'I', sometimes 'he' or 'buddha', and maybe also Ayooba, as if desperation had become a fever that burns out his identity. The soldiers are diminished by the rain forest, which has become a phantom personage who arouses in them all the guilt they have hidden, and punishes them for the horrors they have committed.

But one night Ayooba awoke in the dark to find the translucent figure of a peasant with a bullet-hole in his heart and a scythe in his hand staring mournfully down at him ... After this first apparition, they fell into a state of mind in which they would have believed the forest capable of anything; each night it sent them new punishments, the accusing eyes of the wives of men they had tracked down and seized, the screaming and gibbering of children left fatherless by their work—and in this first time, the time of punishment, even the impassive buddha with his citified voice was obliged to confess that he, too, had taken to waking up at night to find the forest closing in upon him like a vice, so that he felt unable to breathe.

The forest permitted a 'double-edged' nostalgia for childhood, strange visions of mothers and fathers; Ayooba, for example, sees his mother offering her breasts, when she suddenly turns into a white monkey swinging by her tail high up in a tree. Another lad hears his father telling his brother that their father had sold his soul for a loan from his landlord, who charged three hundred per cent—'so it seemed that the magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them by the hand towards a new adulthood'. But there are worse tests to come: in a ruined temple the soldiers are deluded by lascivious dreams of houris, evoked by a statue of a savage multi-limbed Kali. The men wake up discovering the meaninglessness of life, the pointless boredom of the desire to survive.

The experience of these very ordinary men is a purgation but not a salvation. As in an opera—and perhaps that is what *Midnight's Children* really is—the next grand scene is of comic magic. The conquering armies enter Dacca, led by a vast company of ghetto minstrels, conjurers, magic men. Marching with the troops come the entertainers:

... There were acrobats forming human pyramids on moving carts drawn by white bullocks; there were extraordinary female contortionists who could swallow their legs up to their knees; there were jugglers who operated outside the laws of gravity, so that they could draw oohs and aahs from the delighted crowd as they juggled with toy grenades, keeping four hundred and twenty in the air at a time ... And there was Picture Singh himself, a seven-foot giant who weighed two hundred and forty pounds and was known as the Most Charming Man In The World because of his unsurpassable skills as a snake charmer ... he strode through the happily shrieking crowds, twined from head to foot with deadly cobras, mambas and kraits, all with their poison-sacs intact ... Picture Singh, who would be the last in the line of men who have been willing to become my fathers ... and immediately behind him came Parvati-the-witch.

She was rolling her magic basket along as she marched, and—would you believe it?—eventually helped Saleem to escape by popping him into it. After her magic, the allegory: it is Shiva who seduces Parvati and deserts her, and Picture Singh who makes Saleem marry her, in the ghetto where Picture Singh draws the crowd with his snakes while Saleem, the man of conscience, shouts political propaganda. (Mr Rushdie has already told us that the magicians are all Communists of every known hue and schism.) This episode, like so many others in the book, is almost delicately touching, but, of course, there is disaster in the next act. Back in India, Saleem is a political prisoner and is forced to submit to vasectomy. The man who lied to Parvati when he said he was impotent is now truly impotent as he dictates this long story to Padma, the working girl, who has got him a job in the pickle factory. He loves inventing chutneys—they have the power of bringing back memories.

The novel is, in part, a powerful political satire in its savaging of both political and military leaders. The narrator's hatred of Mrs Gandhi—the Widow (that is to say, the guillotine)—is deep. But I think that as satire the novel is at variance with Mr Rushdie's self-absorption and his pursuit of poetic symbols: the magic basket in which one can hide secret thoughts, and so save oneself, is an example; another is 'the hole', which recurs, and suggests that we see experience falsely, because in a little over-excited peep at a time. These symbols are rather too knowing; he is playing tricks with free association. Padma, the not-so-simple factory girl to whom the ruined Saleem dictates the book, pities his wretchedness but often suggests that he is piling it on, and is suspicious of his evasiveness. So much conjuring going on in Saleem's imagination *does* bewilder us. But as a *tour de force* his fantasy is irresistible.