FEARING ABSURDITY:
The Style of Humour in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

I declare that this dissertation is original and entirely my own work. Works consulted during my dissertation have been indicated in the List of Works Cited.

____________________  __________________
Christine Caruana  Date
Dedication

To my parents and my kind sister Antoinette
Acknowledgments

Dr Mario Aquilina and Dr Odette Vassallo

for their style of constant patience, guidance and encouragement

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for his counsel during the proposal stage of this dissertation
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**Abstract**

Salman Rushdie’s unique brand of humour manifests itself in the style of his first major work – *Midnight’s Children*. Hence, even with its ineffable qualities, Rushdie’s style in this epic novel narrating India’s coming-of-age is a presence which cannot be ignored. Being inherently more identifiable through its worldliness, politics rooted in history is a useful starting point from which a discussion of both style and humour can proceed. This dissertation attempts to do just that by taking as its constant point of reference Rushdie’s central plot device: the symbiotic relationship between the microcosm embodied by the narrator – Saleem – and the macrocosm reified in India. A question which is immediately raised in view of the importance of politics and history in this novel regards the authenticity of the text which presents itself as a postmodern narrative. This issue is exacerbated in *Midnight’s Children* because Saleem is physically and mentally disintegrating. Hence, Chapter I focuses on memory and dementia in the novel. The irony present in this paradox of the decaying narrator who insists on writing his life is intimately connected with the absurdity that pervades the novel on various levels, alongside the grotesque. Hence, Chapter II explores the absurd and the grotesque through the lens of tradition: a perspective which explains the humour inherent in these concepts in terms of the politics of literature itself. Finally, Chapter III investigates the relation of all this to Rushdie’s reader so as to discover how (in yet another symbiotic relationship) the identity of that reader also influences the style of the text. All along the collusion between the micro- and the macrocosms remains a consistent thread, as in the very novel. Therefore, at the coming together of all these aspects an insight into the style in which style itself colludes with humour and politics can be garnered.
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Introduction

The desire to tell a story – be it immersed in a political context or otherwise – is a problematic one to justify. Saleem Sinai, the funny and eccentric narrator of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, offers ‘fear[ing] absurdity’ as his personal reason: storytelling, then, as an attempt to create ‘meaning’ where there is none.\(^1\) Since politics is ultimately a worldly endeavour concerned with the practicalities of living, the implication that the world is devoid of such meaning and truths already paints politics in a negative light. Cold absurdity of this sort easily transforms politics into a way of controlling people – directly contrasting with that warm, procreative style of linguistic contingency capable of generating laughter and meaning.

Hence, to speak of the style of humour in seemingly politically motivated writing may appear to be a contradiction in terms. Yet, even the individual terms are problematic: “style” and “humour” are notoriously elusive and historically ineffable concepts. An acute awareness of the former’s aversion towards categorisation is manifest in the works of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer (to name but three theorists). Moreover, the same characteristic present in humour is perhaps best encapsulated in E.B. White’s famous one-liner: ‘[h]umor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind’.\(^2\) In view of this semantic minefield, this dissertation will not attempt to provide its own definitions for these concepts but, rather, it will provide an exposition of how the intermingling of style and humour relate to the more identifiable political elements in *Midnight’s Children*.

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Within the many conceptions of style, a consistent thread presents it as something pertaining to the singularity of the literary work. Indeed, writing in the New Aestheticist mode and drawing on Walter Benjamin’s theory of the aura, Timothy Clark argues that texts have an individual quality that makes them what they are. In contrast to Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, Clark elevates the texts which speak “for their own sake” rather than those speaking for the multitude. In his discussion of the context-imbued writing of Heidegger, for example, Clark remarks that ‘the inherent logic of singularization must lead to the reader’s own rejection both of any lingering nationalism in Heidegger but also of studies of his thought that are too hasty to explicate it in terms of the cultural categories it thoroughly undermines’. Style, then, is presented as something which seeks to escape politicisation – it occupying, as it were, a more elevated place on the literary “Chain of Being”.

Indeed, it is such recognisability in the style of Midnight’s Children which contributes to its iconicity and which probably played a part in its selection for the Booker Prize and, later, the Booker of Bookers. This is particularly evident in the poetic nature of the text wherein the whole plot line revolving around the birth ‘on the stroke of midnight’ of the narrator, Saleem Sinai, is presented as an extended metaphor of the birth of the country’s independence (MC, 4). There is also tenderness inherent in the narrative itself which is lovingly presented in the motif of the pickled food in the jars: a reflection of the ‘chutnification of history’ (MC, 642). This laborious process is also related to the thematic concern with Time in the novel, not just in narrative terms but also in the actual reading of the text. The wordiness and indulgent garrulousness of it, coupled with Saleem’s ludic

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meanderings and digressions, make the text stand out on a postmodern shelf where concise ‘fast literature’ corresponding to postmodern life is more easily digested.4

Even so, however, Clark remains aware of how this very singularisation exists at the threshold between resistance to absolute generalisation and openness towards generalisability. Derrida is likewise particularly wary of caging the meaning of style and the same idea of singularity surfaces through his idea of ‘idiomaticity – if there’s any’.5 He considers this as an ‘aporia’ in view of the fact that ‘what is proper can’t be appropriated’.6 Here he also makes a startling but understandable claim: ‘In other words, I would be the last one to be able to see my style, in a way’.7 The underlying suggestion seems to be, then, that style is always reaching out to the other – and, hence, subverting constrained singularity – through its inherent différance and iterability.

Hence, already in talking of the “idiom”, Derrida seems to allow for the co-existence of the plurality within this singularity so that the word acquires a paradoxical edge. Significantly, an ‘idiom’ can relate to both ‘a distinctive style and convention in music, art, architecture, writing, etc.’ and to ‘a form of language limited to or distinctive of a particular area, category of people, period of time, or context’.8 Thus, the gap between the idiosyncratic and the general is bridged within the ambiguity of the term. This, too, is evident in Midnight’s Children wherein the same singular metaphor of the birth of the narrator is endowed with a more general relevance to society.

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6 Ibid., p. 201.
7 Ibid., p. 201.
Indeed, the link between the autobiography of the individual and the history of the nation is paramount to the way in which Rushdie’s style delicately fluctuates between the idiosyncratic and the general. Significantly, this can be read as a literal interpretation of Hannah Arendt’s theory of natality which presents texts as performing constant rebirths. In fact, Arendt speaks of natality as a concept wherein ‘the faculty of action is ontologically rooted’ and as being ‘[t]he miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin’. Like Arendt, Rushdie connects natality with the concepts of freedom and plurality because it is through freedom from British rule that the plurality of Indian culture can proceed to be born – rendering both concepts interchangeable.

Out of this political twist, therefore, Rushdie’s style becomes simultaneously monologic and dialogic. A narrative of this kind, seeking to imitate the Homerian epic, is founded on the 0-1 logic of this genre and the discourse of history wherein ‘the rule of I’ is ‘God’. However, there is also plenitude in the flamboyancy with which this is done as the narrative not only concerns itself with Saleem, but the entire group of the children of midnight. Furthermore, Saleem himself is only half of the double persona created by the special circumstances of his birth – his counterpart existing in the form of Shiva, the rightful owner of Saleem’s relatively comfortable life. There is, then, a singularity in the plurality of the narrative which recurs on various levels. As Saleem himself suggests, using the idiosyncratically hyperbolic metaphor of the ‘[s]ymbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon’ (MC, 642). The multifarious, then, proves to be ineluctable for Rushdie, but it exists in a harmonious relationship with the singular.

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This singular-plural relationship problematises the autonomy of both the individual and the state. On the one hand, it endows the citizens with more freedom because the state reflects them; on the other hand, the characters themselves are influenced – “written” – by the context in which they live. This is perhaps best exemplified by the episode in which Reverend Mother takes a vow of silence – the smell of which ‘overpowers everything else’ and ‘possesses the earth’ (MC, 66). Here, the power of the matriarch stretches over the wider community in the same way that ‘the legacy of a patrician French grandmother pervades Methwold’s physiognomy – his nose – like ‘some sweet murderous shade of absinthe’ (MC, 126). True to the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the state, however, Reverend Mother starts ‘swelling, month by month’ because the unspoken words inside her were blowing her up’ (MC, 74). She does not remain, then, merely an individual, but becomes one who encapsulates multiple discourses – to become the embodiment, like Rushdie’s very style – of the microcosm and the macrocosm. Hence, the first chapter of this dissertation will focus on this desire to write life and assert authorial authority – to figuratively break the vow of silence – when aided (yet also hindered) by memory and dementia.

In accordance with the spirit of the carnivalesque there is a strong element of subversion in this novel – not least because the novel’s hyperrealist style is linked to magic and the latter, in turn, is linked to absurd anarchy. Indeed, the magicians’ slum is the land where Parvati-the-witch had grown up, ‘amid […] fire-eaters who exhaled flames from their arseholes and tragic clowns who could extract glass tears from the corners of their eyes’ (MC, 276). This simultaneously “vulgar” and poignant description immerses the reader in the realm of ‘anarchy and confusion’ whose contingency was considered a threat to the very foundations of
“wholesome” English culture. Yet, to concern one’s narrative with the ‘lower stratum’ of society like slum dwellers is also to, once again, concern oneself with ‘the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth’. This does not only imply “natality” but also the grotesqueness of it. As Bakthin explains, ‘[g]rotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving’.

In *Midnight’s Children* this idea of grotesqueness is brought to life through the significance of noses and the implied relationship they have with the reproductive organs alluded to above. Such is the significance of this that it is mentioned immediately at the opening as Saleem introduces himself by his mocking nickname of ‘Snotface’ (MC, 1). In a great feat of subversion, this facial grotesqueness ironically becomes Saleem’s greatest asset because it transforms into the medium whereby he can communicate with the other children of midnight to scheme against tyranny – paradoxically “giving birth” to polyphony whilst literally rendering him impotent. Hence, the humour derived out of this grotesqueness is politically tinged. As Umberto Eco explains, there is a historical belief – evident most explicitly in phrenology – that ‘virtue embellishes where vice deforms’. Yet, the leap from these notions to the “ugly” Jew’ of anti-Semitism is a worryingly brief one which exposes the amenability to politicisation that humour based on such foundations holds. Therefore, the second chapter of this dissertation will attempt to explore the nature of this grotesqueness in the novel, alongside that of absurdity with which it can be closely associated.

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To counteract the negative undertones of this kind of humour, Rushdie employs satire throughout: nothing is deemed too elevated or downtrodden to escape this, as everything and anyone from Indira Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru to ‘saffron laddoo-balls’ to the narrator himself is lampooned (MC, 155). As Roger Scruton remarks, satire holds ‘the quality of accuracy’ and its ‘equivalent’ lies in ‘everyday life, when a character acts true to himself’.  
Hence, ‘[w]hat amuses us, it could be said, is the total congruence between the idea of the man and his action’. This theory bridges, once again, the microcosmic with the macrocosmic because through satire the mundane and the real are compared with the ideal and the paradigmatic. ‘We might be enraged or hurt by [the real]: but I do not see why we might not also be amused’, Scruton points out. Indeed, this is a very useful creed in view of the satire in Midnight’s Children because whilst the razor sharp edge to it seems consciously present, the style is subsumed within this atmosphere and it almost demands to entertain. To paraphrase E.M. Forster, ‘yes – oh dear, yes – [this] novel tells a story’.

In effect, the reader is not merely drawn to the story in this case, but actually inhabits it through the role Padma – Saleem’s carer and soon-to-be wife – plays in the narrative. In a way she is the personification of the diegetic reader who, because of the verbosity of the novel already discussed, often loses patience with the narrator, gets ‘irritated whenever [his] narration becomes self-conscious’ (MC, 83) and even makes him yearn for a ‘more discerning audience’ (MC, 135). This endows the novel with a subversive meaning because when the actor mingles with the spectator to the extent that they are inseparable the reader is drawn into the realm of the carnivalesque. It is this polyphony inherent in the characters and the narrative which is conducive to humour in the novel. True to Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the

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17 Ibid., p. 162.
18 Ibid., p. 162.
carnivalesque, then, Saleem’s ‘spectacle’ is not merely ‘seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people’.\textsuperscript{20} In view of the importance Padma acquires in this context, the final third chapter of this dissertation will focus on the novel’s relationship to the reader.

Hence, the following chapters will attempt to explore the intermingling of these three interpolations of politics, style and humour to demonstrate how they relate to memory and dementia, the grotesque and the absurd, and their relation to the reader respectively. Brought together, these concepts will also try to elucidate widespread claims labelling \textit{Midnight’s Children} as the sound of a ‘continent finding its voice’ – thus questioning how this novel can truly be read as a \textit{bildungsroman} for an entire civilisation.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Bakhtin, p. 7.
Chapter I: Memory and Dementia

The epic nature of Saleem’s story is rooted in the idea that the microcosmic reality of a single child exists in a two-way communicative relationship with the reality of the child’s nation as a whole. The delicate interplay between the idiosyncratic and the general not only contributes to a constant reconfiguration of the lens through which the reader is immersed into the narrative, but it also problematises the tradition of storytelling itself as it compromises the authenticity of the text. To speak of such a contentious topic as the latter within the realm of postmodern fiction is an uneasy move, primarily due to the seemingly distinct paradigms within which fiction and fact operate. However, given precisely the political grounding of the novel, the move is also an ineluctable one. Is it possible to speak of this novel’s literary and historical value when it is ironically characterised by – perhaps based on – Saleem’s style of dementia?

In a sense, what Saleem says at the beginning regarding his decay is given credence because the image of his deterioration is the one the reader is left with, leading to a questioning of the rational purpose of the narrative sandwiched in between. Indeed, the unreliable narrator’s ‘crumbling, over-used body’ (MC, 3) of the first chapter mutates into the ‘bomb in Bombay’ by the final one where it lays ‘cracking’ and ‘about to explode’ (MC, 647). Saleem’s tone, however, discloses an element of surprise as, close to the end of the novel, he reflects: ‘This is not what I had planned; but perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin’ (MC, 596). Not only, then, is the seemingly definite political objective of the narrative at odds with the ambiguous genre of the novel, but the narrator susceptible to being diagnosed with early-onset dementia paradoxically attempts to write life. Linda Hutcheon perceives the latter process as a two-way system as well, with Saleem’s body being affected by the narrative (not just *vice versa*): ‘nothing, not even the self’s physical body,
survives the instability caused by the re-thinking of the past in non-development, non-continuous terms’. 22

Saleem’s proclivity to autobiographise history – even in his forgetful condition – is made sense of by the metaphor he lifts from Hinduism in which Vishnu, being ‘the first one of the skies and everything thereon’, devours everything at the end of a cosmic cycle. 23 In Saleem’s reworking of it he states that ‘[t]o understand just one life, you have to swallow the world’ (MC, 145). Seemingly ignorant of the history and intertextuality inherent in language itself, Saleem immediately tries to take ownership of the phrase by stating ‘I told you that’ (MC, 145). This can be read as both a parody of Western modes of capitalist thinking about art (in terms of ownership) and as Saleem’s usage of the collective first person in a bona fide attempt to “write back” and assert Indian identity based on its own cultural and religious discourses. 24 Either way, the passage is significant because of the ambiguity it creates around the reliability of the whole text.

Nevertheless, even without Saleem’s apparent dementia, this “swallowing” metaphor also raises questions regarding the possibility of anyone ever being able to document the contents of that ‘world’ in verisimilitude (MC, 145). Saleem reluctantly claims that ‘[w]e must live […] with the shadows of imperfection’ – the shadows, possibly, of the signifiers about which Kristeva writes (MC, 642). But Saleem had been using a metaphorical discourse all along, and so it is unsurprising to see him do away with scientific linearity and structure in his narrative. The very conception of the latter which he presents rejects this: ‘chutnification’ both preserves and transforms the food (MC, 642). ‘Saleem is no longer obsessed with purity’ and, in any case, as Rushdie argues in an interview, there is no single correct version of

history (MC, 644). Hence, what is being transformed is already fiction to begin with: this is the process of intertextuality, not “simple” storytelling.

The imminence of Saleem’s disintegration, however, generates an atmosphere of uncertainty in the novel that creates an element of tension. This is part of the reason why Padma keeps ‘bullying [him] into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next’ (MC, 44). Even so, as the story progresses, Saleem notes that she too has succumbed to the magic of his narrative as ‘despite all her protestations’ she is actually ‘hooked’ (MC, 44).

This ballooning of tension is conducive to humour because, as the ‘Incongruity Theory’ of laughter explains, humour can be derived from conflicting discourses.\(^{25}\) Such discourses are present in *Midnight’s Children* partly due to Saleem’s dementia itself which creates instability and conflict in the narrator that seem to hinder his ability to act (other than through speech). Indeed, the novel appears to conform to Immanuel Kant’s theory describing how ‘the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing’ is a source of laughter.\(^{26}\) Nevertheless, not all instances of incongruity are conducive to humour because, as John Morreall explains, they can even lead to opposite emotions like fear and anxiety.\(^{27}\) Therefore, the sophistication behind the way in which humour is pitched is key to the reaction it is meant to induce, especially given how the conflicting discourses through which it must operate risk confusing the reader further.

The instances when the balloon is punctured can also be funny in the sudden release of tension itself that biologically spasms muscles into laughter – an application, then, of the


‘Relief Theory’ of laughter.\textsuperscript{28} The ludic nature of the text contributes a lot to this idea and it is corroborated by the value that Morreall places on the playfulness in the generation of humour.\textsuperscript{29} Plot twists, then, are the ideal domain in which this tension is released – and Rushdie regales his reader with plenty of opportunity for this. Perhaps one of the biggest of these is the divulging of Mary Pereira’s ‘secret which has been hidden for over eleven years’: the biological parents of Saleem are Winkie and Vanita (MC, 389). The moment of ‘gabbling’ is constituted by the ayah ‘pulling us all out of the dream-world she invented when she changed name-tags’ (MC, 389). Presented in this way, the “gabbling” is comparable to writing itself: the desire to divulge a narrative (or “secret”) to a reader who, upon receiving it, enters into a special style of conspiracy with the writer.

The forgetful narrator who persists on “gabbling” secrets (which might be nothing more than secrets – devoid of verifiable truths behind them) ingrains the style with humour so as to render it grotesque. The very notion of having a decaying narrator is cruelly bizarre in itself and Saleem is acutely aware of this. Indeed, it is only in the inconspicuous shelter of the washing-chest that he ‘could forget, for a time, [his] ugliness’ (MC, 213). Ugliness is a bane to Saleem, like the curse is to his “father” Ahmed Sinai. Ironically, however, Ahmed struggles to ‘remember [the] curse which he had dreamed up one evening’ to impress Methwold whilst Saleem struggles to forget the curse he “faces” everyday (MC, 148). Hence, the subjectivity of the secret is tied to that of memory.

In this context, the idea of a memory hole fits in very well with the leitmotif of the ‘perforated sheet’ in Midnight’s Children (MC, 3) because whilst the nose is a protruding presence, the hole in the sheet implies a framed absence. The perforated sheet is presented as a symbol of voyeurism in the first chapter, but it becomes the source of Aadam Aziz’s ‘wild

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 136.
nostalgic rage’ when he discovers that time had rendered it ‘moth-eaten’ (MC, 149). Voyagerism recurs when Jamila Singer starts using the sheet as a veil during her performances; although, here, the scenario is imbued with ‘patriotism’ (MC, 438).

In this sense, memory itself acquires a subversive quality because it is precisely a sense of patriotism akin to Jamila’s which colonialism attempts to regulate. Not all pickled food goes well with English dishes and, as in Italo Calvino’s ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’, pickled food seems to necessitate memory of ‘the harmony of the elements achieved through sacrifice – a terrible harmony, flaming, incandescent’ for the ‘mystery’ of the flavour to be appreciated.  

Although in its unashamed literariness Midnight’s Children seems to dispense easily with historical – even logical – accuracy, it seems to retain a strong memory of a pre-colonial time in its style and mode of narration which hearkens the ‘thousand nights and a night’ of Scheherazade: a case of “remembering the music, forgetting the words” (MC, 4). Viewed in this way, even the moments of historical ambiguity become part of memory because the memory of the East is traditionally connected with this elasticity. Thus, as in mathematical multiplication (rather than the polyphonic kind), memory functions as the product of the absence of an absence (forgetting): a presence.

This memory of presence is significant because if Edward Said’s claim concerning the construction of imperialism via the discourses of literature holds true, then it appears that Rushdie is fighting back oppression with the same weapon of literature.  

Nevertheless, because of Rushdie’s singular liminal and socio-political context the situation is more complex. In ‘Outside the Whale’ Rushdie presents himself as a writer situated on the exterior of the creature where it:

becomes necessary, and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by
the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy and
sometimes [...] both at once. Outside the whale the writer is obliged to accept that he (or she)
is part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm, so that objectivity becomes a great
dream, like perfection, an unattainable goal for which one must struggle in spite of the
impossibility of success.32

Nevertheless, by writing in English, using an allegedly English genre and concerning
himself with parts of English history, Rushdie – like William Butler Yeats – ‘belongs to a
tradition not usually considered his, that of the colonial world ruled by European
imperialism’.33 Hence, the reader is forced to question whose memory is at work in the novel,
and memory (or the attempt at reconstruction) becomes subversive in its ambiguous identity:
through a pastiche-like style, the reader is presented with a polyphony of memories and –
interestingly – what is memory to one is fiction for the other. Memory is subversive because
it rejects stasis – hence, it is contentiously located both inside and “outside” the text. It is no
wonder that Saleem’s ‘stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that’s how it
happened’ is his only disclaimer (MC, 644). It encapsulates dialogism through dictatorialness
and mysticism.

To understand better, then, the workings of memory in the novel it is perhaps wiser to
look at the onset of forgetfulness. Post-colonial theorists have long argued that historical
amnesia is an integral part of the colonial experience because, as Homi Bhabha writes,
remembering ‘is never quite an act of introspection or retrospection’.34 On the contrary, ‘[i]t
is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the

33 Edward Said, ‘Yeats and Decolonization’, in Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature, ed. by Terry Eagleton,
Fredric Jameson and Edward Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 69-98 (p. 69).
trauma of the present’. If the past is already “dismembered”, it makes logical sense that Saleem would be ‘brained (just as prophesied) by [his] mother’s silver spittoon’ (MC, 477). This encapsulates Rushdie’s oxymoronic vision because a prediction in the past describes how – in the future – the past will be forgotten. Leela Gandhi equates this with ‘Lacan’s ironic reversal of the Cartesian cogito’.

Significantly, this corresponds with Saleem’s insistence on the importance of absence in the narrative when he says that ‘[m]ost of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence’ (MC, 17). He continues: ‘but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail, such as the way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air’ (MC, 17).

The silver spittoon is symbolic because – much like Winston Smith’s paperweight in Nineteen Eighty-Four – it is a non-utilitarian anachronism and, hence, it acquires an inexplicable value that is purely aesthetic and emotionally-charged. As Saleem suffers from both the Freudian Verdrängung and Verwerfung, the ‘wondrously-carved, lapis-inlaid, gemstone-crusted silver spittoon’ becomes the object from which subaltern energy emanates (MC, 72). The spittoon is a container of saliva – that most trivial yet vital detail of human existence (and storytelling) – and also the location of the ‘hit-the-spittoon’ game (MC, 43). In being a container, however, it is simultaneously an absence. Moreover, the spittoon seems to function in the novel in much the same way another container – ‘a Grecian Urn’ – functions for Keats: as a source of desire to escape the mundanity of the world and immerse oneself into the artistic world of that object.

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Ironically, Saleem loses his memory by being hit in the head with the spittoon. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily a wholly terrible thing for Saleem because the incident is ‘what-purifies-and-sets-[him]-free’ (MC, 476-477). In his memoir, Rushdie narrates how ‘[h]is mother had survived decades of marriage to his angry, disappointed, alcoholic father by developing what she called a “forgettery” instead of a memory. She woke up every day and forgot the day before.’39 This seems to encapsulate the dialectical tensions with which Saleem’s web of narration is stretched.

This forgetfulness serves a dual purpose in that it also functions as an effective narrative device. Behind the veil of innocence that this casts, the satirisation of politics is eased since the narrator’s verbosity can be excused as feverish – but ‘all-licensed’– drivel.40 Hence, it is unsurprising that the passage immediately following the hit by the spittoon incident is a description of ‘the end of hostilities between India and Pakistan’ which took place ‘[o]n the morning of September 23rd’ – a strikingly accurate (albeit short) excerpt written in historical mode, with a characteristically Sinai-esque twist at the end (MC, 477).

Significantly, then, when Saleem narrates the forced sterilization campaign Indira Gandhi took up against the Muslims living in the slums, he replaces the latter with the children of midnight – creatively sacrificing his own procreativity by representing these marginalised people. Ironically, he opens this section by banishing dreams and oxymoronically saying he will be presenting ‘[f]acts, as remembered’ and ‘[t]o the best of one’s ability’ (MC, 589). What follows is a lengthy digression that retraces his own history once again until ‘vans and bulldozers’ jolt him from his slumber as part of the Widow’s ‘civic-beautification and vasectomy programmes’ (MC, 599). In the same tone of mourning, he remarks that he ‘lost something else that day, besides [his] freedom: bulldozers swallowed

a silver spittoon’ (MC, 604). This broke him from ‘the last object connecting [him] to his more tangible, historically-verifiable past’ (MC, 604).

Similar digressions and repetitions necessarily recur throughout the novel due to Saleem’s dementia and hence become an intrinsic part of his narrative style. Notions of the latter, then, have to be rethought because style does not remain merely an aspect of the text pertaining (above all) to its singularity, but also a logical consequence of the narrative content. Having said this, a chicken-and-egg situation is created because it is difficult to determine whether the novel’s characters or structures where developed first, particularly given the intricacy of the work.

The effect that this repetition has is almost akin to that of a mantra which contributes to the unreadability of the text and almost sends the reader into a daze. Saleem himself uses mantras handed down to him from older characters like Amina Sinai (‘What can’t be cured must be endured’ [MC, 192]) and even capitalist advertisements, like that for Kolynos Toothpaste (‘Keep Teeth Kleen and Keep Teeth Brite! Keep Teeth Kolynos Super White!’ [MC, 212]). The very repetition of these mantras endows both with a deeper layer of meaning; the former becomes a motto applicable to the whole struggle of India whilst the racist undertones of the Kolynos advert reverberate all too loudly.

This added hurdle in the reading process, however, contributes to the unreadability of the style which not only upsets Padma but also the actual readers. As Derrida explains: unreadability does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of an opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The unreadable is
not the opposite of the readable, but rather the ridge that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On’, in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. by Harold Bloom et al. and trans. by James Hulbert (London and New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 62-142 (p. 95).}

It does not seem, however, that this holds true for everyone because these results of dementia – a big contributor to the novel’s epic length – has deterred many a reader and critic from appreciating the book.\footnote{Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, p. 185.} One is better off speaking then, of Jonathan Culler’s ‘competent reader’ in this context because the novel clearly calls for a patient reader who is acutely sensitive to otherness.\footnote{Jonathan D. Culler, Structuralist Poetics (London: Routledge, [1975] 2002), p. 141.}

Indeed, the reader must be particularly attuned to this singularity because the novel asserts this continually. In this sense, to speak of “collective amnesia” is rather inappropriate and ineffective because – although Saleem is “many” and not “one” – he retains an eccentric individuality. While this is heightened by the special circumstances of his birth, it is not just present in the children of midnight but within all the characters in the novel. Saleem’s forgetting, then, is different to that of the others – and not just because the individual characters need to cope with different things. In fact, whilst all the children of midnight are endowed with special gifts, these talents are all different and, moreover, they are more pronounced in those born closer to the hour.

Clearly, Midnight's Children is a novel which attempts to bridge the discourses of history and literature together and to give credence to Hutcheon’s view that ‘[w]hat postmodern discourses – fictive and historiographic – ask is: how do we know and come to terms with such a complex “thing”?’\footnote{Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 123.} Of course, Saleem’s style of dementia does not – cannot – provide any clear-cut answer to this.
However, in his characteristically humorous and politically engaged mode, he seems to suggest that the adverbs and adjectives linked to the “thing” are necessarily and significantly hyphenated: ‘actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally’ (MC, 330-331). Thus, the individual exists within the Lyotardian hyphen – punctuated linguistically between juxtapositions and in permanent (albeit paradoxical) certainty of his/her nomadic nature.
Chapter II: The Grotesque and the Absurd (in view of Tradition)

A central aspect of Rushdie’s style in *Midnight’s Children* is the presence of the grotesque and absurd elements in the narrative. This contributes to the unique strand of magical realism in the text as both the grotesque and the absurd constantly defamiliarise the reader even further from the mundanity of the real world in which the event of reading is performed. However, the grotesque and the absurd do not merely individualise Rushdie’s text – they also connect him to a tradition of writing emergent out of this mood. Hence, the symbiotic relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm functions on a fictitious level, but it can even be traced in the very style.

In this context, memory, as discussed in Chapter I, acquires even more significance as it becomes the force tying seemingly disparate literary events together. T.S. Eliot provides an eloquent argument for this activity in his seminal essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. Here he writes that great artists create with a strong ‘historical sense’ which also ‘involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’; the point being that this makes the artist simultaneously ‘traditional’ and contemporary. Memory, then, plays a crucial role in canon formation because it is through its activity that great literature itself can take place. Paradoxically, however, Eliot concurrently underlines the importance of forgetting, the intensity of which exists in a directly proportional relationship with remembrance. Like that of the deteriorating Saleem, the writer’s progress is ‘a continual self-sacrifice’ and ‘a continual extinction of personality’: a ‘process of depersonalization’. Although Eliot understandably presents this as a noble and necessary endeavour, the experience – like the Mallarméan ‘elocutionary disappearance’ of the poet during the act of

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46 Ibid., p. 154.
writing – is tinged with some morbid undertones. Through this thanatic element, the grotesque and the absurd seem to pervade even the style of literary production.

The grotesqueness of literary production also clarifies the definition of the very word “grotesque” – which is useful, given the elusiveness that surrounds abstract terms like it and “style”. Indeed, the etymology of the word ‘grotesque’ connects it to the Italian ‘grotta’, meaning ‘cave’. Moreover, one of the definitions of ‘grotesque’ in the OED describes it as a ‘style [...] characterized by comic distortion or exaggeration’. The same connection resurfaces in Blanchot’s discussion of the Lascaux drawings when he remarks that the cave is the ‘location of the real birth of art’. The creatures depicted on the walls of the caves instil a ‘strange feeling of “presence” made up of certainty and instability’ and it ‘scintillates at the edge of appearances while remaining more certain than any other visible thing’. In this way, the constant metamorphoses brought about by the interplay of the ‘torches’ glow’ has the power to evoke motion in the static and to exaggerate features which are already present.

No wonder, then, given the intriguing relationship of caves with the grotesque, that another Indian Dr Aziz – E.M. Forster’s, not Rushdie’s – is embroiled in an incident revolving on ‘what, if anything, was extraordinary about the Marabar Caves’. Episodes like this demonstrate how new narratives are created over each other like a palimpsest. Seen from this perspective, the grotesque is intimately connected with realms hidden behind earth and rock because both grotesqueness and such realms are traditionally conducive to the style of exaggeration.

49 Ibid.  
51 Ibid., p. 7.  
52 Ibid., p. 7.  
Indeed, such reworking – the style of this intertextuality – is what ultimately subverts ancient narrative patterns and endows them with a different grotesque and absurd meaning. In this way, Rushdie works within a pre-existing Western tradition but he also manipulates with an Eastern twist. Therefore, perceptions become crucial in the understanding of the text because it is by skewing these that what is plain in collectively endorsed simplicity and adherence to rehearsed plot lines becomes heightened and taken to a hyperbolic extreme by Rushdie. Morreall’s preference to think of humour as ‘psychological “shifts”’, then, becomes even more significant.\footnote{Morreall, \textit{Taking Laughter Seriously}, p. 39.} Indeed, in a grotesque and absurd fashion, the Sundarbans provide ample opportunity for humour, in that ‘turbid, miasmic state of mind which the jungle induced’ (MC, 505). It is here and with ‘a quality of absurd fantasy’ (MC, 506), for instance, that Saleem’s group prepares its first meal: ‘a combination of nipa-fruits and mashed earthworms, which inflicted on them all a diarrhoea so violent that they forced themselves to examine the excrement in case their intestines had fallen out in the mess’ (MC, 505).

Saleem’s journey to the Sundarbans allegorises this concept of stylistic landscaping as it is through his journey to a realm hidden from the eyes of the mainstream that Saleem recovers his memory. Like the caves, the Sundarbans jungles are presented in a similarly mystical atmosphere as ‘the rightful home of monsters and phantasms’ (MC, 275). Indeed, even non-human things – leaves and trees – seem to acquire a life of their own which makes them grow more grotesque so that the Buddha (Saleem) and the child-soldiers ‘would have believed the forest capable of anything’ (MC, 507). In a phrase reminiscent of Kristeva’s writings on monopo- and dialogism, Saleem describes how these characters ‘were already beginning to succumb to the logic of the jungle’ (MC, 503). This is revealing because it is an element pertaining to this logic – indicative of the carnivalesque in its subversive independence – which gives Saleem his memory back: ‘snake-poison’ from a bite (MC, 508).
Ironically, this stops the “depersonalization” which Saleem had previously experienced as the third person singular of ‘the buddha’ (MC, 508) is replaced again by the first person (singular and plural) “I” in the narrative. The subversion of the objective of the journey is ironic because whilst Saleem and his cohort venture to the Sundarbans in an attempt to escape the politics of the outside world it is within this grotesque and absurd landscape that he regains his memory and a connection with those outside events.

In fact, this whole episode is imbued in memory and tradition because it can be read as a reworking of the journey of Aeneas into the Underworld. The connection with Aeneas is brought about not only through the epic style of a journey, but also through a series of motifs. An example of the latter is the image of the pomegranate which is first introduced as a figment of Shaheed’s dreams and immediately associated with ‘death’ (MC, 491). Reverberations of the ancient Mediterranean myth of Prosperina are strong here because, like her, Shaheed has his fate dictated by the fruit. However, this image too is subverted via the style of magical realism which renders it, not only a symbol, but a veritable lethal weapon. Shaheed imagines the pomegranate getting ‘bigger an’ brighter than ever before’, at which instant it is reified into ‘the grenade of his dreams [...] blowing his legs away to some other part of the city’ (MC, 525). There is no spring, as it were, for Shaheed – although the element of redemption is found in the snake-bite. The latter is what kills Eurydice in Virgil; however, given Saleem’s jungle-like logic of ‘snakes and ladders’, it ends up being the antidote for Saleem’s memory loss and his connection with tradition (MC, 187). Hence, that which in the Western imagination symbolises evil acquires a healing power through a different reworking.

Another reworking exists in Saleem’s parodic ‘brief paean to Dung’ (MC, 35) which he writes for Padma – ‘the One Who Possesses Dung’ (MC, 24) and who keeps interrupting him in her unignorable style. The duplicity of this eulogy embodies the ludic tendency of the postmodern because this excerpt is as deriding as it is genuinely elevating the most basic,
earthly matter. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin elicits a distinction between what he calls ‘Renaissance grotesque’ and ‘Romantic grotesque’: the former derives humour from the terror of monsters whilst the latter derives it from the terror in the mundane and the humdrum.\(^{55}\) Hence, this excerpt also encapsulates the carnivalesque via what Bakhtin refers to as ‘the constant combination of falsehood and truth, of darkness and light, of anger and gentleness, of life and death’ in the very style.\(^{56}\)

This style of paradoxical hyphenation referred to in the Introduction not only underlines the dialogism in the text but also the idea that death never lurks far in Saleem’s narrative, even if it is interlinked with the natality of life. It is precisely this tangible imminence of death which endows the grotesque and the absurd in the novel – ironically responsible for many a humorous passage – with an underlying danger and violence. If one endorses the value of perceptions alluded to above and understands how manifestations of death are dependent on divergent perceptions of ugliness, the political dimension to the grotesque and the absurd becomes clear. It is significant to note in this context that Saleem narrates how it is Picture Singh – ‘the Most Charming Man In The World’ (MC, 528) – who exposed him to how ‘the country’s corrupt, “black” economy had grown as large as the official, “white” variety, […] by showing [him] a newspaper photograph of Mrs Gandhi’ (MC, 558). Echoing Methwold’s nose, Saleem arrives at truths through semiotics as he views the ‘economy as an analogue of a Prime Ministerial hairstyle’ (MC, 558). Hence, the physical appearance of the Widow who demands the annihilation of the children of midnight is didactic to the same politically-charged children.

Saleem’s ‘[c]ucumber-nose’ is particularly significant in this context of semiotic truths since it partly explains the reason behind Saleem’s dementia through a strikingly

\(^{55}\) Bakhtin, p. 38.  
grotesque motif (MC, 213). As Laura Quinney explains, the grotesque represents ‘the shadowy remnants of consciousness, wavering presences that become uncanny because their residualized subjectivity appears as otherness’.\(^{57}\) Saleem’s “remnants of consciousness” lie in the ‘dream-world’ (MC, 389) out of which he was born whilst his “otherness” is personified in Shiva with whom he fulfils the image of ‘knees and a nose, a nose and knees’ (MC, 114). In being “many”, thus, Saleem is truly ‘Ganesh-nosed’ because ‘like Sin the moon’ he is ‘lord and progenitor of all creatures on the earth’ (MC, 270). Moreover, since the elephant as an animal is biologically thought to have a peculiarly brilliant memory, Saleem’s nose acts as a constant reminder of his prophesied origin and history.\(^{58}\) Indeed, it is somewhat funny (in its coincidentally brilliant way) how the sense of the word “nose” in this context bridges together so many different connotations.

As Tzvetan Todorov points out in his discussion on Nikolai Gogol’s ‘The Nose’ – a story which strongly reverberates in Midnight’s Children - the seemingly fantastic elements concerning the nasal organ are in actual fact allegoric manifestations.\(^{59}\) In Rushdie, too, ‘the supernatural elements are […] not here to evoke a universe different from our own’ because the monster of midnight is not the Other, it comprises everyone – and that is the reason for Saleem’s biologically mixed heritage.\(^{60}\) Indeed, ‘the distinction between audience and exhibit, we and them, normal and Freak, is revealed as an illusion, desperately, perhaps even necessarily defended, but untenable till the end’.\(^{61}\)


\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 72.

Bakhtin’s idea that this grotesqueness is naturally conducive to humour can be contested, particularly because there is certainly a dualism inherent in the style of humour in *Midnight’s Children* which endows it with a certain darkness. Strangely enough, however, this darkness veils familial politics more than it does national ones. One reason for this is that the reader becomes more attached to the eclectic range of personalities which fill Saleem’s life because when important historical events happen they are usually summarised and condensed in seemingly “filler” passages by Saleem. It is no wonder, then, that Saleem speaks of employing the ‘warming over all this cold history, these old dead struggles’ (MC, 262). In a sense, Saleem exalts the signifier of the ‘fisherman’s pointing finger’ – that ‘unforgettable focal point of the picture which hung on a sky-blue wall in Buckingham Villa’ (MC, 167) – more than he does the inexpressible, easily forgettable signified ‘what?’ (MC, 167) at which the finger strains.

Since both the grotesque and the absurd feast on the element of death (closely linked to politics in general), the value of nothingness in *Midnight’s Children* becomes evident. The unknowability surrounding death is made sense of in the novel through, one suspects, the style of magical realism. Magical realism endows Rushdie with the power to literalise events like Nehru’s cordial message – coated in political rhetoric – to Saleem at his birth. This ‘verbal message’ provides a ‘closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience’. Hence, there is an attempt to eradicate the very ambiguity which dwells within these lacunae. This can be read as symptomatic of the Indian proclivity towards extravagance in response to *horror vacui* (fear of emptiness), often mistakenly ascribed exclusively to ‘preconquest Indian art’.

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Saleem’s claim, hence, that ‘above all things, [he] fears absurdity’ is an acutely revealing one in terms of identity (MC, 4). Such aggressive overcompensation could be interpreted as a revolt against a nihilism which exists uncomfortably within the desire to narrate and to strengthen self-assertive literature. An element of irony is present here given that the major exponents of nihilism in Europe, like Friedrich Nietzsche, were hugely influenced by the teachings of Buddhism and Indian culture on the topic. Therefore, the absurdity of the overcompensation is twofold: there is the attempt at annihilating nihilism (as it were) through grotesque language use, and also the annihilating attack which is ultimately directed at India itself.

Nevertheless, these arguments are problematic because they concern the subjects of nihilism and absurdity which, in their very “emptiness”, seem to resist politicisation. Indeed, one could argue that it would be rather reductive to interpret Rushdie’s multi-faceted style as being merely a tool for the creation of a political suasion. As Milan Kundera argues in an interview, art is not necessarily there to be anatomised and deciphered – there is a value in aesthetics which exists beyond the immediate and the practical. He attacks Kafka’s critics who ‘look for allegories and come up with nothing but clichés: life is absurd (or it is not absurd), God is beyond reach (or within reach), et cetera’: ‘you can understand nothing about art, particularly modern art, if you do not understand that imagination is a value in itself’.

Such sentiments pertain to an ancient tradition invested in the sacredness of art, as upheld by writers like Blanchot. He believed in the terror of art as the force which paradoxically allows literature to reject the world so as to recreate it as a fictional and linguistic locus to ‘be seen

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in its entirety’. Hence, literature does not operate to counteract political forces because it operates outside the political dimension – and herein lays the sacred, messianic essence of it.

Arguably, however, Rushdie’s grotesque and absurd style uses what T.S. Eliot dubbed as the ‘mythical method’ – a Joycean tradition – as a way of ‘controlling [...] the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’. In view of this, then, one cannot truthfully state that Rushdie endorses the apolitical perspective advocated by Blanchot. Indeed, Rushdie launches a powerful criticism of colonialism and Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule in the novel (among other historical and political episodes). Even so, it is significant that the sentence in *Midnight’s Children* for which Gandhi threatened to sue Rushdie concerned her motherly relationship with her son – not the detailed atrocities committed with political expedience (*MC*, xvii-xviii). Even that which presents itself as apolitical, then, can be politicised – not only in terms of context as controlled by the author, but also in terms of readerly interpretation.

This demonstrates that politics seem to be inseparable from Rushdie’s style; but regardless of this one cannot disregard the presence of, at least, a desire for it to not be so. When Mary Pereira switches the babies’ name-tags, the spirit of the carnivalesque rules because in a world of infinite contingency, ‘the least expected eventuality’ – hence the most absurd one – is the one performed, ‘out of a bewitched idealism that wants to see change, no matter the cost’. In Carlos Fuentes’ novel *The Campaign*, the same incident occurs as a white and a black baby are switched at birth in an attempt at social justice so that ‘now this son of an expensive whore will live the life of a cheap whore’. Yet, the switch in *Midnight’s

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Children is not presented as politically as this because Mary Pereira does it out of love for Joseph D’Costa who, she believes, would be attracted to her for doing it (given his socialist creed). This seems to encapsulate Rushdie’s stylistic paradox because whilst politics may be the root of some of his features, the soil within which this is planted is as ineffably grotesque and absurd as Mary Pereira’s love.

Such an ambiguously liminal position endows Rushdie’s work with an element of comic subversion. This is not only the case because he does not present himself as an outwardly political writer (hence automatically countering the monologism inherent in ideology) but also because this same monologic perspective can grotesquely be found within literature itself. This is evidenced in the degree of snobbery with which comic literature is often treated, as if by not exuding tragic seriousness it is perforce not serious literature – a point which is creatively challenged in Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose. However, this has not deterred many a “defective” writer from producing literary work in this humorous mode through the usage of the grotesque and the absurd. Indeed, Rushdie feels a certain pride in belonging to this ‘rival “Great Tradition” to set against the Leavisite canon’.  

He views this rival tradition as consisting of writers who understood the unreality of “reality” and the reality of the word’s working nightmare, the monstrous mutability of the everyday, the irruption of the extreme and improbable into the humdrum of the quotidian. Rather disturbingly, however, he ends this passage by noting that the episodes like the fatwa make one inhabit ‘the Gogolian, the Rabelaisian, [and] the Kafkaesque’ as grotesque and absurd fantasy seems to transpose itself to “reality” and, in doing so, to mutate into horror. Hence, the grotesqueness of writing in such styles seems to redeem one of the terror of inhabiting the literalisation of these styles.

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70 Rushdie, Joseph Anton, p. 342.
71 Ibid., p. 342.
72 Ibid., p. 342.
Indeed, it is perhaps this quick-as-lightning ability of humour to metamorphose into something twisted and perverse which deters many from embracing this style. The connection, here, between literature, humour and the first “fall” is significant because it explains the first two in association with the demonic. To speak of literature as demonic, one risks being anachronistically Romantic – Blakeian. Nevertheless, it is a tradition which has persisted and sentiments of the kind are also expressed by Blanchot who speaks of an ‘eternal fall’ – grotesquely suggesting that at the moment when vertiginous terror sets in, the self splits and becomes double (like Saleem and Shiva).\(^{73}\) It is at this moment that, given a ‘true companion’ in this Other, ‘our discourse becomes the modest abyss into which we also fall, ironically’\(^{74}\). Presented in this ineluctable way, to negate the necessity of the fall becomes tantamount to psychological, ethical and physical repression – as evidenced by the huge narrative repercussions of the single-sentenced paragraph, ‘Or falling.’, in *Midnight’s Children* (MC, 34). Hence, when the grotesque and the absurd are attacked as if they are “Other”, the attack is grotesquely and absurdly directed at the self (from which the Other emerges).

Paradoxically, what seems to redeem this “demonic” fall in Midnight’s Children is the constant presence of the absurd ‘optimism epidemic’, as ‘caused by one single human being’: Mian Abdullah, alias ‘Hummingbird’ (MC, 46). True to the ambiguity discussed above, the Hummingbird is the political ‘hope of India’s hundred million Muslims’ whose origins lie in the magicians’ slum (MC, 47). In the typical yin-yang narrative style, his political campaign is financed by the Rani of Cooch Naheen, whose name translates as Queen of ‘nothing’\(^{75}\). Here, nihilism is viewed sceptically as Saleem implicitly accuses her, through his often

sophisticatedly figurative style, of becoming more Anglo-affiliated by ‘going white in blotches’ post-Independence (MC, 53).

In contrast to the initial postulation of “optimism as redemption”, then, optimism itself starts to acquire an absurd quality and its heightened persistence to the extent of physical fever becomes grotesque. Hence, through these seeming incongruencies, one is led to believe that Saleem is applying the Incongruity Theory of laughter alluded to in the previous chapter to the very narrative in order to elicit – if not laughter – what one might perceive as a self-conscious linguistic acknowledgement of the literary devices being used. This not only contributes to Saleem’s multiphrenic style but also serves to highlight the polyphonic styles of absurdity and grotesqueness that can exist.

As demonstrated, manifestations of the grotesque and the absurd in Midnight’s Children imbue the narrative to the extent that they become entrenched as part of its very style. This creates one of the many paradoxes in the novel in that by subverting Tradition it places itself as part of another tradition which also aims to subvert. The microcosmic qualities of a singular novel, then, shed light on a macrocosmic literary genre which – because it deals with the grotesque and the absurd – is in itself concerned with exaggeration and the empty ‘perforations’ that this stretching automatically generates (MC, 383).
Chapter III: The Text’s Relation to the Reader

The attempt to pin down the hyperactive style of *Midnight’s Children* which makes the text come alive with each reading is, as has already been argued, riddled with problems because it is the same style which seems to demand contingency through its ambivalence. Hence, it is problematic to make any claims on something like the style of the novel in any kind of critical post-mortem. Rather, it is during the act of reading itself – when the reader is both performing and experiencing the textual encounter – that such reflections can surface. At this point, in the midst of a reading, concepts like those of memory and the grotesque combine with other elements in the style to affect the readers’ experience of *Midnight’s Children*.

In this manner, a literal re-presentation of the novel’s central plot device – the microcosmic and macrocosmic overlap – appears to be set in motion with the act of reading. As a singular, microcosmic entity the reader is drawn to the threshold of the literary. Here the reader exists as a recluse in self-imposed exile from the commonness and mundanity of the world – but, of course, not quite fully reified in fiction either. An epic-styled polyphonic text like *Midnight’s Children*, then, acts as the macrocosm within which the reader seeks immersion. The reader is transformed by the experience of the novel, not least because of the politically-laced style with which it is written. However, it shall be argued that the novel, too, is transformed through its own encounter with the reader because it feeds off the reader’s presence and the responses it faithfully knows it will induce in this Other. The symbiotic relationship of the microcosm and the macrocosm, then, lies at the heart of every level at which *Midnight’s Children* operates.

A kind of “prime unmoved mover” can be thought of setting this process into action: narratorial seduction. There are various indications throughout the novel which project this, not least the comparison with the legendary Scheherazade (as elicited by Saleem himself). He
writes that ‘if [he] is to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something’ he ‘must work faster than Scheherazade’ because he fears ‘absurdity’ above all else (MC, 4). Scheherazade famously saved her life by storytelling and Saleem desires to save his life too. However, mortality wins at the end of the novel, even if his narration is his attempt at stretching his life out.

Due to the “perforations” which this stretching creates, Saleem ironically does not ‘mean’ as much as he would like to; indeed, as demonstrated earlier, his narrative is rife with absurdity. More than arriving at any ultimate meaning, his poetically-styled narrative “is”; just like ‘[a] poem can be only through its meaning – since its medium is words – yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant’. 76 Hence, Saleem’s narrative style is one ‘hanging in mid-air’ (MC, 24) and even when he tries to save it from this stasis – ‘just as Scheherazade, depending for her very survival on leaving Prince Shahryar eaten up by curiosity, used to do night after night!’ (MC, 24-25) – it seems to linger afloat on a poetic level for the reader’s delectation.

Rushdie’s humour plays an important role in this style of lingering presences because, apart from being one aspect of style that elicits an actual physical response from the reader (in the form of laughter) as a reminder of this, it is also a tool of seduction in the hands of Saleem. By amusing his reader in this way Saleem turns the tables on the Scheherzade fable; hence in presenting himself as the captive, he actually holds his reader in captivity. This subversion gives a slightly macabre tinge – what Ronald de Souza might identify as ‘phthonos’ in its ‘malicious envy’ – to the writer-reader relationship in Midnight’s Children. 77 This phthonos ‘connotes both the involvement of something evil, and the ambiguity between identification and alienation that characterizes jealousy’, and it does not

76 W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Verbal Icon (Louisville, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 4.
seem to be present in the original tale of Scheherazade – ending, as it does, in blissful marriage.  

Narrative seduction, then, also acts as a kind of impish trick – to the extent that one might link it to the demonic “fall” discussed in Chapter II. As Teresa de Lauretis explains, the figure of the trickster (which recurs in Rushdie’s literary oeuvre) exists in an ‘excessive critical position [...] attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses, by what [she] like[s] to call the “eccentric subject’”. This grotesquely-styled shape-shifting – reminiscent of the (alcohol-induced) djinns which tormented Ahmed Sinai – is intimately connected to humour, given how the latter’s etymology lies in ‘fluid’ and ‘moisture’.

Since one of the definitions of “humour” concerns the ‘[c]haracter, style, “vein”; sentiment, spirit (of a writing, musical composition, etc.)’ it can also be argued that it is the shape-shifting trickery of Rushdie’s “humour”, in both senses of the word, which mesmerises the reader into thinking that – like Ahmed Sinai – s/he ‘fights with djinns’ and ‘beats them’ (MC, 180). Indeed, even the phonetic sameness of “djinn” and “gin” – both pronounced /dʒɪn/ - hints at similarities between the two; moreover, even though they belong to different cultures, the reader can draw on the menacing connotations which coat both. Ahmed Sinai, however, was ‘mistaken about one thing: he didn’t win’ (MC, 180). Hence, the reader is also forced to re-examine the ultimate score.

Nevertheless, the same ease of access to (ironically) “meaning” cannot be noted in the majority of the text. It is always difficult, if not pointless, to claim what the author of a text

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78 Ibid., p. 238-239.
81 Ibid.
intended and the true nature of its ‘ideal reader’. Even so, the temptation is there – particularly since the text acrobatically shape-shifts from passages with intense immersion into Eastern culture to others which appear more “Anglo-poised” (rather than ‘Anglepoised’ [MC, 230]). Hence, passages dense with references to aspects of Indian culture – attempting a response like that to ‘where are they now, the first inhabitants?’ (MC, 123) – contrast heavily with the sections speaking of the English.

The repercussions of this can be varied. Indeed, the high level of affinity with Indian culture required to understand the book in its “entirety” dangerously creates a situation comparable to that explored by John Carey in The Intellectuals and the Masses, wherein the high-flying Modernist style of literature is seen as a covert way of excluding the uneducated masses from cultural engagement. On the other hand, other passages more attuned to a Western reader – not least through the language with which the novel is written – can be read as indicative of the neo-colonialist proclivity to advance oneself by cosying up to the ex-colonising power, at the expense of one’s own people. Contrary to the djinn/gin scenario, however, the “where are they now” segment warns how language may also be a trickster for the reader because whilst ‘the goddess Mumbadevi’, ‘Mumbabai’, and ‘Mumbai’ (MC, 121) share phonetic similarities the name of the city which hosts the cult of Mumbadevi and Ganesh is actually derived from the name its Portuguese colonisers gave it: ‘Bom Bahia’, ‘for its harbour’ (MC, 122). The possibility, hence, that even the differently-attuned passages considered above may be a subversively satirical ploy attacking the varied modes of postcolonial behaviour surfaces.

Viewed in this sense, the repercussions of having a particular reader over another are less dramatic because the risk of what Umberto Eco calls ‘aberrant decoding’ are

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82 Culler, p. 144.
Aberrant decoding, according to Eco, is what happens when a message written in a particular code is read (or decoded) using another. During such practice the text is susceptible to misinterpretation which is “aberrant” and not desired. Nevertheless, *Midnight’s Children* seems to imply that it is what the reader makes of that message which garners importance. Whilst it is useful, then, for the reader to be equipped with some kind of map for the reading journey the reader would only be enjoying the illusion of control over the understanding of the narrative. Yet, in truth, it is the reader who has to devise the maps in the first place; Saleem has to rest on the fact that his seduction is operating to the extent that the reader is motivated enough to search for background information (if the desire to understand the Other runs deep enough).

To insist on discerning upon the identity of the reader in this way is to persist in politicising literature, especially in view of the argument surrounding the apolitical nature of literariness expanded in Chapter II. However, even ‘the ghetto of the magicians disbelieved, with the absolute certainty of illusionists-by-trade, in the possibility of magic’ (MC, 539). This implies that people who belong to a certain group rarely believe in their own ideology – leading one to question whether it is possible for writers too to write with little faith in the magic of their own literariness. Theorists like Gramsci and Althusser – if not ‘Communists, almost to a man’, like the magicians – were also highly politically-engaged and Marxist in their approach (MC, 554). Similar political readings of *Midnight’s Children* would work were it not for the novel’s style of magic which uncovers the absurdity of this situation.

Indeed, in Rushdie’s novel, the magic does actually work when Parvati vanishes Saleem ‘[I]ike a djinn: poof, like so’ (MC, 531). Moreover, this episode presents the possibility of the coexistence of different styles of magic; principally because whilst all

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magic might have the same “startling” effect, it is the style which differentiates between the
various strands of magic. The magic of the coloniser – Methwold’s words taken as dogma by
the Indians – is arguably what Octave Mannoni identified as “Prospero’s magic” and the
source of cargo cults. Mannoni describes how the Malagasy sorcerer is one who
‘spontaneously forms an image of evil’ which fascinates him to the extent that he ‘identifies
himself with that image’.\textsuperscript{84} Worded in this way, it all sounds uncomfortably similar to the
experience of the writer – and this is unsurprising giving the Traditional association with the
two elicited by, for instance, Mallarmé and his interest in the occult. It is due to this
definition, also, that native people sometimes viewed the seemingly more technologically
advanced colonisers as sorcerers in their midst.

The magic of Parvati-the-witch, on the other hand, is of the ‘really-truly’ (MC, 531) kind and its startling effect is accompanied by genuine actions which effect the lives of the
people in a positive way, even if the style is tinged with darkness (as discussed earlier). It
differs from Prospero’s style of smokes-and-mirrors – technology disguised as magic – in
that it is also endemic and innate to the person, not taught. It is comparable, then, to that of a
shaman whose journey towards ecstasy is bodily manifested in Saleem, literally becoming
‘stiff as a board, with bubbles around [his] mouth’ as well as a ‘delirium’ conducive to
babbling (MC, 268). In the Sinai-esque style of problematisation, however, these extreme
physical effects are revealed as the side-effects of ‘Padma’s potion’ – supposedly made of
‘the herbs of virility’ - of which she secretly added to his food, rendering the process
simultaneously and ambiguously artificial as well (MC, 268).

In a sense, the very act of writing can be perceived as technology. The ambiguity
between literature and technology is encapsulated in the etymology of the latter, from the

\textsuperscript{84} Octave Mannoni, \textit{Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization} (Michigan: The University of
Greek ‘techne’ (meaning ‘art’, ‘craft’ and ‘technique’).\(^{85}\) Hence, when Padma is jealous of Saleem’s readers she is actually jealous of technology and art: the distinction between the latter two being distinctively Western and not wholly unrelated to imperialism. In her dismissal of Saleem’s narrative act as ‘foolish writery’ (MC, 267), the illiterate Padma demonstrates how, in figurative response to Saleem’s questions, ‘it is possible to be jealous of written words’ and ‘to resent nocturnal scribbling as though they were the very flesh and blood of a sexual rival’ (MC, 165). Saleem’s tone here is one of gentle mockery and it divulges a certain flattery at the thought of having a listener who is ‘unaccountably, more interested in [him] than [his] tales’ (MC, 375). Ultimately, however, writing proves ineluctable to existence because Padma’s very body “writes” signals for Saleem which he uses to perfect his art of storytelling and she is set to become the parchment over which ‘henna-tracery’ is designed on the wedding day (MC, 645).

Although the reading process is one which supposedly instils empathy in the reader, the reader is thrust into a seemingly uncomfortable situation when confronted by encouragement on Saleem’s part to laugh at the expense of the underprivileged like Padma. Arguably, however, the situation should not be uncomfortable at all given that one of the major aspects of the carnivalesque includes the debasement of that which is sacred and normally perceived as being outside the realm of ridicule. In the Middle Ages, this kind of reverence was allotted to the Church and, as Bakhtin explains, there is a strong medieval tradition of ‘parodia sacra’ and the ‘risus paschalis’\(^{86}\) – developed by the very clergy – to prove this natural proclivity towards self-mockery. He continues to note, with dismay, that

\(^{86}\) Bakhtin, p. 134.
critics completely ignored the unadulterated anarchy of humour in a writer like Rabelais to keep imposing a “serious” reading of him.\(^\text{87}\)

In the realm of twenty-first-century postcolonial studies, the “untouchable sacred” – pun intended – appears to be located in the colonised underprivileged like Padma. To create another segment of society which is immune to the satire and humour is, however, counterproductive to the postcolonial desire of establishing freedom from the colonial. In trying to develop an ethics of laughter, Roland de Souza identifies three ways in which laughing at the morally questionable can be justified. The first of these is the maxim that ‘Laughter is Involuntary’ and, hence, to charge anyone for something over which control is a non-issue would be absurd.\(^\text{88}\) Secondly, the ‘Triviality’ of humour is contested in view of the seriousness of humour (which many tend to overlook).\(^\text{89}\) It is here that de Souza writes how ‘[a] partial guide to the nature of the true object is the character of the laughter itself, its actual sound, considered in isolation from its occasion’; hence demonstrating a concern towards style.\(^\text{90}\) The final reason de Souza offers revolves around the idea that ‘The Funny is Merely Aesthetic’, backed up by ‘the variety of our reactions [to the funny] and by the difficulty of articulating them in terms of general principles’ – the difficulty in providing a stylistic analysis of humour.\(^\text{91}\)

The idea that one is ridiculing the serious by laughing at its perceived expense is also loaded with the assumption that the comic somehow detracts from the seriousness of the subject alluded to earlier; as if the comic and the tragic are somehow mutually exclusive. Here, de Souza gives the example of ‘Waiting for Godot’ – which is striking because it demonstrates the staunchness with which audience members refuse to join in the laughter as a

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 135.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 228.
\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 229.
\(^{90}\) Ibid., p. 229.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., p. 230.
response to the humorously-executed absurdity on stage, as though to do so would be to miss the tragedy of it all. Undercurrents of de Souza’s argument can be found in Slavoj Žižek’s when he says that to take issue with laughing and ridiculing immigrants is to keep insisting on treating the Other with bizarre political correctness – hence propagating, one might add, the aura of the tragic around them. This enables the holier-than-thou style of pity – emblematic of imperialistic projects like the *mission civilisatrice* – to be justified.

Since Saleem, however, insists that in order to narrate his own life he must ‘swallow the world’ the implication is that one cannot merely speak of points of view as being the device whereby elements of life are rendered grotesque (MC, 146). Through his narrative style Saleem forces his reader to think in terms of multiple points of view simultaneously. Hence, it is not just Saleem who is forced to swallow the world but his reader too, if the latter truly wants the emerging dialectic between meaning and absurdity to exist. Indeed, to borrow from Derrida in ‘Telepathy’, the reader has ‘to swallow a new metrics of time (of the multiplicity of systems, etc.) as well as another reading of the transcendental imagination’ during the ‘tele-analysis’ of the reading process.

To think otherwise – that the reader is somehow exempt from partaking in the style of full immersion – is to propagate a certain kind of colonial mentality. The idea that one can somehow access and exploit resources – be they natural or literary – without actually attempting to engage with the totality of the people who have their roots in those resources is damaging and counter-productive to Saleem’s aim. In following Saleem the reader would also be working against the distancing and alienating effect of colonialisation which humour works against. To heed Saleem’s intermittent encouragements to keep on reading (and

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thereby overcoming the obstacle of the style’s unreadability) is to, like Saleem, swallow a
cure disguised as snake-poison.

These encouragements on Saleem’s part are significant because they are emblematic
of the fact that Saleem does not assume – in the arrogant style of the coloniser – that the
reader’s presence is a given. This value on presence is arguably the greatest respect with
which Saleem gifts his reader and which is a redeeming factor of Saleem’s. Indeed, the
fragmentation in the style, the narrative and the country which the reader has to overcome is
the result of defective memory – Saleem’s and his people. The text is, then, pieced together
by both Saleem and the reader. In this manner, the reader is invited to take part in a telepathic
relationship with Saleem. Even when Saleem’s olfactory medium of communication stops
working, then, the telepathy continues since literature is his saving grace.

The complex intermingling of the above reflections are only part of the story of the
readerly experience of Midnight’s Children; primarily because there is a singularity to each
individual reading that would require many – ‘one thousand and one’ (MC, 271) – different
interpretations. The Barthesian death of the author propels the birth of the reader – who is
forced to acknowledge, in this case, that the author is not “really-truly” dead to begin with.
Rather, the fluidity of the narrative and its style suggest that every participating reader
becomes a member of the Midnight’s Children Conference through literary engagement and a
telepathic relationship with – not just Saleem – but the entire literary canon(s) which Rushdie
intertextualises, subverts and embraces, in typical Rushdie-styled extravagance.
Conclusion

As shown above, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a palimpsest of different styles coming together to produce poignant parody as well as comic tragedy. Through this process of perpetual “coming togetherness” the novel operates on a variety of different layers. The central concept of the collusion between the microcosm and the macrocosm is testament to this process – especially given the presence of the collusion, not just on the thematic level, but also on the narrative and stylistic planes.

However, the previous chapters also showed how even Saleem’s ‘meaning’ (and, hence, of traditional “coming togetherness” in singular understanding) falls short of its aim (MC, 587). Saleem discovers, together with his reader, that meaning too can be plural and composed of paradoxical multiple singularities. These singularities are, in turn, dependent on the readers as Saleem himself declares, ‘[t]here are as many versions of India as Indians’ (MC, 373). Whilst these microcosmic readings are valuable in their own right, the suggestion of the novel’s all-embracing style seems to be that it is at the “coming togetherness” of these readings – in its present continuous form – that art can be performed.

In view of this dialectic between singularity and plurality, the subject of memory and dementia explored in Chapter I is key to the understanding of the style in which the narrative itself comes together. The issue of whether a medically-impaired (and, hence, doubly unreliable) narrator like Saleem has it in him to narrate creatively and authentically is central to the novel’s style because it is partly responsible for the atmosphere of mounting tension generated by the narrated events. This tension – not least encapsulated in the ‘tick tock’ (MC, 584) of the clocks (but also of the ‘bomb in Bombay’ himself [MC, 647]) – is conducive to the unreadability of the style, and it is mercifully diffused through the humour inherent within the same style as well.
Humour of the sort is predominantly present through elements of the grotesque and the absurd, as discussed in Chapter II. These cannot be grasped without a grounding in literary traditions, particularly that of comedy. Otherwise, the subversive (quasi-demonic) effects of the humorous would not be appropriately decoded, because it is through the familiarity with the monolithic (0-1 authority) that responsiveness towards the humorous style can be developed. This is one of the ways, in fact, in which the identity and baggage of the reader plays an important part in the moulding of the interpretation of the text, since failure to “receive” this style is liable to inflate the aforementioned tension.

However, as Chapter III attempted to demonstrate, even such seeming misinterpretations of the style and the content of the narrative are not to be wholly rejected or negatively criticised. This is because the ambivalence of the text itself appears to telepathically predict a polyphony of characters – both fictional and real (actual readers). Indeed, it is the style of absent presences – grotesque and absurd in their own right – which permeates the novel at every level, be it in motifs of corporeal holes or the distilled poetic style which emanates even through the massiveness of the novel’s form. Arguably it is in the startling effect of such paradoxes that the novel can be identified as an enchantment in itself (with all the musical and polyphonic connotations that “enchantment” suggests).

Nevertheless, although the novel suggests that these paradoxes constitute the style of life itself, Saleem exhibits – perhaps in the ultimate paradox of all – a desire for some solid ‘control’ (MC, 645) as he too ruminates on ‘how to end’ (MC, 644). “Happiness” will not suffice, and neither will ‘questions’ or ‘dreams’ (MC, 645). What he desires most ardently is the ability to make it all come together – ‘to write the future as [he] has written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of the prophet’ (MC, 645). In this way Saleem seems to be advocating a style of certainty in a world of ambivalence – only forgetting (if not secretly
refusing to remember) how the past, to quote William Faulkner’s famous line, is ‘not even past’. 

Perhaps, then, it is not “happiness”, but the style of happiness; not ‘questions’, but the style of questions; and not ‘dreams’, but the style of dreams with which Saleem departs (MC, 645). At this end-point, ineluctably reduced to ‘specks of voiceless dust’, it is the contingency of his language (not even language itself) which paradoxically lingers: ‘because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace’ (MC, 645).

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