Writing Home: The Presence of Autobiography in Midnight's Children

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INTRODUCTION

The history of literary theory is permeated by certain debates which seem to have served as keystones to the building of its established body of concepts and methods. One of these fundamental discussions is that which seeks to treat the presence of the writer within his or her text. The figure of the "author" has been both extolled and savaged, convicted and acquitted, foregrounded and effaced, by different theoreticians at different periods of the literary studies.

This article analyses certain autobiographical effects of writing fiction from the perspective of the migrant or diasporic experience. In order to do so, the concept of *autofiction*, as it is theorised by Vincent Colonna, will be of use in the reading of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Published in the early eighties, this book is narrated by a young man who claims the narrative to be his autobiography. Because the text is purely fictional, one must choose very carefully the instruments with which to read it. And this is where the concept of *autofiction* becomes convenient, since it presupposes that the author's subjectivity may be translated into the text without precluding the features of fiction.

"ONE IS NOT BORN EVERYDAY"

Saleem Sinai is the owner of a pickle factory in Bombay, India, who cohabits with Padma, one of the women labourers of his business. Born to an affluent, Muslim Indian family in

1947, Sinai was orphaned during the 1965 war with Pakistan. In the midst of the violence of war, Saleem was hit on the head by shrapnel and, having lost his memory, was eventually enlisted in the Pakistani army to serve at the battlefront. Brutalized by the debasing conditions in barracks, Saleem manages to escape and works his way back to the home of some relations. From there, returns to his beloved Bombay, where he is apprenticed as a pickle maker at the factory he manages at the time narrating his tale.

Saleem is a man of powers, which does not mean he is a man of power. The date of his birth is August 15, 1947, which was when the British Raj came to an end in India. As for the time of his birth, by a quirk of fate, Saleem was born at the very stroke of midnight. In the whole of the country, only a second boy was born at exactly the same time as Saleem Sinai.

The convergence of such factors endowed the boy with phenomenal telepathic abilities, which allow him to "fumble" through people's minds and learn their secrets. Initially, he gave himself a good time of it. The passage of time, however, brought home to him the pain of memory, as he attempted to reach deeper into people's motives. But the climax to his all-encompassing talents was only to come when he discovered that he was able to "congregate" inside his brain all the other kids born within the first hour of August 15, 1947, who, oddly enough, were equally gifted, albeit with different specialities.

Saleem is the narrator in Salman Rushdie's highly-acclaimed masterpiece *Midnight's Children*, a book which is purportedly Saleem's autobiography.

An autobiography is a well-established genre in both the writing and the publishing fields. A quick search through a bookshop website under the heading "autobiography" will call up a plethora of publications, old and new. Interestingly, the genre is one of the favourites with ghostwriters, especially in cases where the subject of the autobiography is not a professional

writer. But at the bottom of all this diversity, there lies a quasi-universal expectation on the part of the reader: "the truth, nothing but the truth". So why would a writer of fiction, especially one not indifferent to the fantastical, employ the trope of an autobiography as a key structural element in one of his major novels?

Despite the risks it entails, it is important to lay Saleem and Rushdie side by side. Like Saleem, Rushdie, too, was born in Bombay in 1947. Besides, Rushdie's ancestors come from Kashmir, one of the most fundamental spatial tropes in *Midnight's Children*. Another interesting point to make is that Salman Rushdie, again like the narrator of his book, went to live in Pakistan at the age of 17. Finally, websites specialised in anthroponymy will point to a strong synonymy between "Salman" and "Saleem". One source[1] translates the former as "safe" and the latter as "safe, whole, flawless". A second source[2] adds that "Saleem", like "Salman", stems from the Arabic verb "*salima*" or "to be safe".

The above will allow us to return to the territory of the autobiography, bearing in mind, however, that the narrative under scrutiny here is a novel that shares a good deal with the technique of the so-called magic-realists. Nevertheless, Saleem resolves this apparent contradiction by stating that "… in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe".[3]

In his recent book on autofiction, entitled *Autofiction & Autres Mythomanies Littéraires*, Colonna draws from the Latin Antiquity the driving force for his thesis. His passionate analysis of the works by Lucian of Samosata (c.125- c.180), particularly the tales from *True*

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[1] www.louchensaustralia.com/names/middleeast.htm

[2] www.behindthename.com

[3] RUSHDIE. *Midnight's Children*. p.310.

Story, will serve as the prototype for any subsequent autofiction. *True Story* can arguably be categorised as a travel book. As the narrator describes how he and other sailors departed on their long voyage, he claims that he "will then say things [he has] never seen or heard, or even more, things that are not and cannot be; this is why one should hold one's guard before believing them".[4] Lucian states clearly that his model is Ulysses-turned-narrator in the *Odyssey*, and the descriptions of sirens and cyclops and hippogryphs, along with all that pertains to the realm of "the monstrous, the terrible, the terrifying, the unbearable, within every domain, be it corporeal, intersubjective, sexual, or social; the inhuman, to sum it up".[5] A third feature of autofiction, as established by Vincent Colonna, is the identification, at differing levels of literalness, between the author and the narrator. This identification is normally made clear by the narrator sharing his/her name with the author, which need not be exactly the same name but one that points to its "counterpart". Finally, it is most important to say that, in Colonna's view of autofiction, it does not constitute a genre, but rather a "nebula whose incandescent heart is the fantastical fabulation".[6]

Later in his book, Colonna identifies four basic types of such self-fabulation. The first one is called *fantastical autofiction* and it is defined as a narrative where "the writer is at the centre of the text (like in an autobiography), but he transfigures his existence and identity into an unreal story, regardless of the constraints of verisimilitude". As for this "projected double" of

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[4] COLONNA, *Autofiction*. p.26.

[5] Id. p.29-30.

[6] Id. p.34.

the writer, Vincent Colonna claims it "becomes 'out of the norm' [in its most literal sense], a pure hero of fiction nobody would ever bother to read as an image of the writer".[7]

Secondly, the author identifies what he calls *biographical autofiction*, where "the writer is always the hero of his story, the centre around which the narrative matter gravitates, but he fictionalises his existence from real facts [and] remains as near as possible to verisimilitude". Colonna posits that, in biographical autofiction, writers "remain plausible, avoid the fantastical [so that] the reader will understand that they are faced with 'true-lying', a twist at the service of veracity".[8] This type is associated to a rather narcissistic "mythology of the self".

The third type of autofiction is the *specular* one, in which the mirror metaphor is justified by the presence of "the book within the book". In more ways than one, this attitude is described as "reflecting/reflective" and implies that "the text's realism (…) takes a secondary role and the author ceases to occupy the central position in the book (…) and places himself on a corner of the work, which reflects his presence like a mirror".[9] The author mentions Velásquez's *The Maids of Honour* as the classic reference to this type of autofiction.

Finally, Vincent Colonna chooses the adjectives *intrusive* or *authorial* to designate his fourth type of autofiction, which he explains in the following terms:

> In such a posture, if it may be thus considered, the writer's transformation does not take place by means of a character, their interpreter does not belong in the intrigue as such. The writer's avatar is a reciter, a storyteller or a commentator, that is, an "author/narrator" on the margins of the intrigue. (…) [This posture] presupposes a third-person novel with a voice external to the subject, (…) a solitary, disembodied voice, running parallel to the story.[10]

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[7] Id. p.75.

[8] Id. p.93.

[9] Id. p.119.

[10] Id. p. 135.

From this typology, which Colonna himself, faithful to his approach to autofiction as a nebula instead of a genre, guards from being taken too strictly as impregnable conceits, one can gather that, much as Saleem Sinai wants the reader to regard him as the writer of an autobiography, *Midnight's Children* may be viewed as autofiction if one concentrates on the position of Salman Rushdie, the writer, before his work. *The novel* is a first-person narrative which opens its doors freely to the fantastical and the inhuman and whose narrator holds both biographical and identitarian resemblances to his author.

In order to elaborate on the above, an investigation is needed into the nature and structure of the narrative process in the book. To start with, the mirror metaphor can be of further use here. Saleem as Rushdie's specular image has been posited already, but a second *reflecting/reflective* relationship must be studied. *Midnight's Children* must be approached by the reader as if s/he were actually witnessing its very writing, as if it were an incomplete book, one that might actually not be completed, given the narrator's constant insistence that he is rushing against time, against his very body's bursting at the seams. And how does Rushdie create this feeling for the reader? By means of a listening character, who is no other than Padma, Saleem's lover-cum-nurse-cum-employee. The writing of the novel intends to enact Saleem's telling of the story to Padma and gives it an orality character typical of Indian storytelling. And Padma interferes with the telling of the tale, by insisting on being given details before the right time, by passing increasingly judgemental remarks on the events described to her, and even by walking out on Saleem in a moment of fury, which renders him feverish and delirious, unable to keep control over his own narrative. In this respect, Padma has apparently enabled Rushdie to construct a powerful mirror for the reader. Michael Gorra, in his *After Empire*, prefers to see in Padma a reflection of Rushdie's impossible audience: the

Indian masses to whom English is inaccessible, although the tone and style of the narrative, which borrows much from the Bollywood ethos, would be dear to the Indian population. In fact, nothing precludes a reading of Padma as a reflected image of the reader along with Gorra's interpretation of her, for one can safely assert that Rushdie's insertion of Padma in the story obliges the educated Western reader, arguably Rushdie's major audience, to metamorphose, through the act of reading the novel, into the Indian reader ever so distant from the intellectual formation required by such complex, at times evasive, writing machines as Salman Rushdie's. In other words, the very reading of *Midnight's Children* belongs in the realm of fiction, or the performative acts, for that matter.

A second element in this assessment of the narrative technique employed by the author is the prevalence of the future tense over the past, the latter being the verb tense of choice for classical autobiography. An illuminating moment in the novel is that when Padma, still uninformed about Saleem's father's identity, and turning ever more confused about the emergence of more and more characters in the narration, asks him, in the most savoury ignorance of technique or form: "Is that him? (…) That fat, soft, cowardly plumpie? *Is he going to be your father*?".[11] What is revealed by this fragment is that Padma's reception of Saleem's "autobiography" is tinted by a feeling that Saleem has absolute control over his tale, which is not too far away from common-sense views on authorship. In reality, Saleem does attempt to keep at the helm of his narration, and he even compares himself to an "incompetent puppeteer (…) [who] reveal[s] the hands holding the strings".[12] Nevertheless, this is no more than an act of self-delusion, since the tragedy in *Midnight's Children* resides in the fact that

[11] RUSHDIE. *Midnight's Children*. p.52. (emphasis mine)

[12] Id. p.70.

Saleem Sinai was born, in his own words, “mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country”.[13]

This language of imprisonment, along with the narrator’s insistence that himself and India are but mirrors of each other, has led many critics to approach this novel as an allegory to the history of post-independence India. This is a perfectly plausible interpretation, one that has, in fact, gained textbook status in the literary world. In this essay, however, my utilisation of the concept of *autofiction*, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, reveals my search through the pages of this mind-boggling novel for traces of the condition of the subject in a state of diaspora.

The term *diaspora* is a tempting one, but like all temptations, it is not without risks. The body of theory and critical thinking around this concept is just too large to be duly acknowledged in an article of such a limited scope as this one. To compound the difficulty, *diaspora* is used, more often than not, as a synonym for *exile*, even in very serious, long-researched texts. To help me steer clear of this risk, I shall refer to an illustrative article by John Durham Peters entitled “Exile, Nomadism and Diaspora”, whose distinction between the two concepts is of use here.

> The key contrast with exile lies in diaspora’s emphasis on lateral and decentered relationships among the dispersed. *Exile* suggests pining for home; *diaspora* suggests networks among compatriots. Exile may be solitary, but diaspora is always collective. Diaspora suggests real or imagined relationships among scattered fellows, whose sense of community is sustained by forms of communication and contact such as kinship, pilgrimage, trade, travel, and scattered culture (language, ritual, scripture, or print and electronic media). Some communities in diaspora may agitate for return, but the normative force that return is desirable or even possible is not a necessary part of diaspora today (…).[14]

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[13] Id. p.3.

[14] PETERS. p.20.

One of the most poignant passages in *Midnight's Children* is Saleem's realization that "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence", which is also one of the moments when he most vocally suspects the writing of his story has not been faithful to his history. This may be what he confesses at by writing that "perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin"?[15]

Salman Rushdie has been living away from his native India since the mid-1960's and is currently a New York City resident, which means he has written the bulk of his work away from his country of birth. This fact leads one to categorise him as an Indian diasporic writer, at least if one is to give credit to Peters's formulation above, which postulates the diaspora, as a characteristic state of "the dispersed", is more strongly defined as a set of "lateral and decentered relationships" between those. And Rushdie's instrument for relating with the dispersed is naturally his writing. As we have seen above, most of Rushdie's readers are Western-based, but not precisely Western-born. Like him, many face the daily conflicts and incongruences of a life that seeks to take root in a foreign land. The use of the "centred" phrase "to take root" is not a slip but, rather, a premeditated way of pointing to what constitutes the conflicts – but also the gains – of diaspora: in the impossibility of actually "rehoming" oneself, one resorts to the symbolic in order to constitute a collective sense of self in territories that cannot always be described as welcoming to the foreign-born. And the work of such pre-eminent figures as Rushdie and a myriad others is fundamental in the establishment of this sense of belonging. Besides, these writers' works represent a conscious effort to counterbalance biased articulations of the non-Western, and they prove invaluable at

[15] RUSHDIE. *Midnight's Children*. p.491.

these times of increasing animosity and misunderstanding between clashing community values.

Now returning to Saleem's assertion that "what matters takes place in our absence", we cannot help associating the narrator's claim with Rushdie's own condition as a deracinated citizen and artist. This is not to say that Rushdie sounds at all despondent by his state. In fact, Peters's conceptualisation of diaspora has been chosen here precisely for the optimistic colours he paints it in. The point being made is that one's home country cannot be "lived out", and writing fiction is the way many have chosen to come to terms with that. Take Rushdie himself in the introduction to his famous *Imaginary Homelands*:

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge (…) that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.[16]

The point being made here is that these "Indias of the mind" are Rushdie's filling in the void created by those things that matter but take place away from us. Besides, by stating that most things that matter take place in our absence, Rushdie endorses Saleem's resigned conclusion, as he nears the end of his "search for meaning", that "I am the sum total of everything that went before me (…)".[17]

By way of a conclusion, a return is necessary to Vincent Colonna's formulations on autofiction. Of the four types compiled by the author, *Midnight's Children* cosily exemplifies at least two of them, namely the *fantastical* and the *specular* variants. Indeed, the novel

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[16] RUSHDIE. *Imaginary Homelands*. p.10.

[17] RUSHDIE. *Midnight's Children*. p.440. (The first person sounds inappropriate in the sentence above as a whole, but there is no escaping it. It is a powerful utterance by the "I".)

belongs to the field of the fantastical. The implausibility of its plot is justified by Rushdie[18] as a direct consequence of the kind of mindset he and his fellow countrymen grew up in, surrounded by India's millennia-old tradition of storytelling and religious mythology. It is also explained by Saleem, who, in his insistence that what he has written "is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth",[19] feels baffled that anyone might disbelieve his account of facts and accept the State's version of reality, which, to him, sounds no less fantastical. (Saleem/Salman's bitterness towards the Indian State, in particular of Indira Ghandi, is a remarkable undercurrent in the book, which requires special treatment elsewhere.)

The reason why the *biographical* and the *authorial* types are not quite fruitful to analyse this novel is given, predominantly, by the fact that Rushdie, like all writers, unable to avoid writing himself into his book, does so in such a way as to make the book feel like a mirror hall, where each new entrant has his sight now distorted, now set right, according to the angles they place themselves at with the array of mirrors at their disposal. In his autofiction, Rushdie is superbly successful at writing himself into his India, as well as at speaking to/for a multitude of other people who seek to read themselves out of his books, albeit in the least obtrusive way. Thus, his biography and his *author*ity are sidelined.

Secondly, one cannot neglect to see in the following passage the deep respect Rushdie has for his audience along with his acceptance that, as a writer, he will not make himself without a readership. The passage in question reads: "human beings, like nations and fictional characters, can simply run out of steam, and then there's nothing for it but to finish with

[18] See GORRA, 1997.

[19] RUSHDIE. *Midnight's Children*. p.230.

them”.[20] After reading this, there is no room for surprise or disappointment that Saleem Sinai is destroyed at the end of the novel – in fact, he dies, but the novel refuses to make even this quite clear – and this “writing off” of the narrator passes on to the reader or the critic the responsibility of bringing “fresh air” to him (Saleem) and what he has been/will be infinitely made to represent in the literary world.

Midnight’s Children is one of those frustratingly unforgettable experiences. A book you can never read enough, but one that may be read too much.

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[20] RUSHDIE. *Midnight’s Children*. p.376.