

Polyphony of midnight's children: dispersion of voices and genres in *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the aspect of polyphony in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). The essence of polyphony in a novel, following Mikhail Bakhtin, is the presence or use of different independent voices that are not merged into one dominant voice. The author, the protagonist, the narrator, the various other characters, the reader, the form and the content of the text, and even the voices from the world outside the text, all these participate in the polyphony. We are invited to explore multiple, co-existing meanings rather than to find a single, finalized meaning. In our age of rapid changes in concepts, styles, modes of representation, and technology, it is more profitable to direct our attention to multiple realities rather than to look for one definitive, unchanging meaning. Since the entities engaged in the polyphony take on different roles and voices in different contexts of time, space, and culture, the voices we hear in the polyphony multiply. We come to see that reality can have different meanings. Reading a novel such as *Midnight's Children* as a polyphony or dialogue among different voices can serve as an analogy for a mode that we can adopt in our attempts to understand reality.

Key words: Rushdie, Bakhtin, indian novel, polyphony, voices.

RESUMO. Polifonia dos filhos de meia-noite: dispersão de vozes e gêneros em *Midnight's Children*. Este ensaio analisa a polifonia no romance *Midnight's Children* (1981), de Salman Rushdie. De acordo como Mikhail Bakhtin, a essência da polifonia é a presença ou o uso de vozes diferentes e independentes que não se misturam numa única voz dominante. O autor, o protagonista, o narrador, os vários personagens, o leitor, a forma e o contexto do texto e até as vozes de fora do texto participam nesta polifonia. Exploram-se, portanto, os sentidos múltiplos e coexistentes; rechaça-se a procura de um significado unívoco e definitivo. Numa época de grandes mudanças em conceitos, estilos, modos de representação e tecnologia, seria muito melhor direcionar nossa atenção às múltiplas realidades do que procurar um sentido imutável. Já que os personagens na polifonia assumem papéis e vozes diferentes em diferentes contextos de tempo, espaço e cultura, multiplicam-se as vozes ouvidas na polifonia. A realidade assume vários sentidos e a leitura de *Midnight's Children* como um romance polifônico ou como diálogo entre vozes diferentes servirá como analogia para uma modalidade que podemos adotar para entender a realidade.

Palavras-chave: Rushdie, Bakhtin, romance indiano, polifonia, vozes.

Introduction

This paper aims to look at Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, from the point of the literary concept of polyphony. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin adopted and adapted the concept of polyphony from music, and expanded it for literary theory and criticism. In music, polyphony refers to a piece that has more than one voice, melody, or theme. The different voices or melodies have relatively equivalent importance and explore a complementary theme. What is significant for the literary critic is that the different voices or melodies in polyphony are independent, fully valid and unmerged. There is no single dominant voice.

In Bakhtin's theory of the novel, polyphony becomes a very inclusive concept. It encompasses not only the transcribed dialogues among the various characters, but also the implicit voices of the characters. That is, the thoughts and consciousnesses of the different characters, the explicit or implicit voices of the author, and even the voice of the reader(s) who engage in a dialogue with the novel. Plurality is the defining characteristic of polyphony. The concept of polyphony is related to Bakhtin's other literary concepts such as dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival, and grotesque realism. While Bakhtin elaborated the concept of polyphony in his readings of the works of Dostoevsky, I try to see

Salman Rushdie's technique in *Midnight's Children* as a supreme example of polyphony.

A polyphonic novel avoids the presentation of one dominant voice (or point of view), or consciousness. A traditional, old-fashioned novel is usually slanted to indicate one voice predominating over all the others even while presenting various points of view. To use Bakhtin's words, the author of a polyphonic novel.

Excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single extreme of life or thought, to be absolutized. All one-sidedness [...] is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who causes them all to collide in the 'great dialogue' of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and leaves no finalizing period at the end (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 165).

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* exemplifies literary polyphony. We hear many explicit and implicit voices in this novel. Because of the similarity in the biographic details of Rushdie and his hero Saleem (such as the place and year of birth, the religious and general family background, early schooling, migration from India to Pakistan etc., to mention a few), we even tend to think that we hear Rushdie's voice behind Saleem's.

I see the different genres used and parodied in the novel as additional voices that contribute to the polyphony. Similarly, the different modes of narrative such as realism, naturalism, fantasy, postmodernism, magic realism etc., encountered in this novel each lends its own voice to the overall polyphony. The different languages of various classes, sects, and periods in the polyglot India (a multiplicity that Bakhtin would term as 'heteroglossia') also enhance the polyphonic aspect. The form and content of the novel also serve as two different voices that engage in a dialogue, sometimes agreeing with one another, sometimes contradicting each other. Rushdie himself has commented on the contrast between the form and content of *Midnight's Children* (RUSHDIE, 1992; REDER, 2000). The form is exuberant while the content is often seen as pessimistic.

Not only the different voices from *within* the novel, but also the voices from the external world contribute to the polyphony in the novel. The external voices come from the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which the novel was written, published, promoted, advertised, given awards, reviewed, critiqued, distributed, and consumed by the readers. In other words, the polyphony of these contextual voices tells us how the novel is transformed into a consumer product.

To sum up, polyphony is heard on different levels in *Midnight's Children*. The overall polyphony of all the different voices affects and influences our expectations and understanding of the novel.

Before I explore the novel *Midnight's Children* using such a widely inclusive view of polyphony it is useful to have an overview of the narrative itself. The novel is written in the form of an autobiography, and we hear Saleem Sinai telling his life-story which is intertwined with the story of his nation, India. As Saleem himself says in the very first page, it is not a single story but a fusion of many stories:

[...] there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 9).

To make it possible for Saleem to narrate and comment on all the events in the history of India from the early nineteenth-century up to the late 1970s, Rushdie gives him a miraculous telepathic power. Saleem's amazing telepathic gift enables him to enter the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of a wide variety of people all over India and Pakistan. Through this device we hear a multitude of voices in his autobiography where normally one would expect hear only the narrator's voice and thoughts. What Saleem accidentally achieves is something that is "more than telepathy" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 168). In addition to being able to listen to the "inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 168), he later develops the ability to hold a dialogue with the other 581 surviving midnight children. The 'midnight children' are the 1001 infants who were 'born during the first hour of August 15th, 1947, between midnight and one a.m. within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India' (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 195). Of these 420 failed to survive, so, including Saleem there were 581 midnight children when Saleem discovers his telepathy. Each one of the midnight children "was [...] endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 195). Saleem's gift was the ability to enter the minds of other people, not only in their waking hours but also in their dreams.

The first time he hears many voices inside his head happens due to an accident inside a washing-chest. Though the incident is very interesting, I have to eschew the temptation to describe it. Suffice to say that he hears a multitude of voices "deafening manytongued terrifying, inside his head!"

(RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 162). He hears voices from all over India, inside his head. Seeking solitude, Saleem lets his 'newly-awakened inner ear,' which is connected, like all ears, to his nose, "to rove freely around the city [of Bombay] – and further, north and south, east and west – listening in to all manner of things" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 173). He rejoices in his new-found ability: "'Look at me!' I exulted silently. 'I can go any place I want!'" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 174). Through this strategy Saleem and his creator Rushdie present the reader with a multiplicity of voices from all over India, from the southern tip to the northern Himalayas, from the eastern frontier to the western border of the nation. Saleem is able to divine the thoughts of his family members, neighbors, servants, friends, classmates, teachers, strangers in the street, movie stars, playback singers, sportsmen, high-level politicians, ministers and so on. Such extraordinary power makes him feel smug. He boasts triumphantly, "There isn't a thing I cannot know!" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 174). Because of this miraculous telepathy of the protagonist we hear the thoughts and views of a multitude of characters. The number of speaking characters in this novel is too numerous to count. Engblom (1994) declares that there are at least 115 speaking voices in *Midnight's Children*. This is a huge polyphony indeed.

Dispersion of voices in the genre of the novel

The scattering of different voices in *Midnight's Children* or in any novel is to be expected to some extent, since the novel, of all the various narrative genres, has a special tendency to disperse voices. Long ago, Henry James recognized the pull exerted on the novel from opposite directions, one centripetal and the other centrifugal. He realized that the novel genre treats social reality in a very complex and multifarious manner. In his view, the novel serves as a "capacious vessel" that can be filled to the brim with a multiplicity of voices (JAMES, 1987, p. 404). Though the point of view of a central character gives some control and equilibrium, it is practically impossible to keep the point of view (or, the voice) limited to one in a novel which is usually a fairly long narrative.

Even when the novel is apparently written from the point of view of (or, in the voice of) a single character or a narrator, other characters become the objects of attention for this voice, and these objects invariably become subjects with their own characteristic voices, rather than remaining simply as voiceless objects; these new subjects in turn will have other objects of attention, which will also become subjects with their own voices, and so on.

So, the original central voice becomes dispersed. The original point of view or voice shifts its attention to each of the objects of attention and we get to hear the various other voices. Even to the reader is invited to participate in this dialogue among the different voices.

The novel has to balance this force of dispersion with a centripetal force in order to prevent loss of all control and focus. However, as Miner (1990) points out, it is an illusion to believe that a lengthy work such as a novel can maintain a single point of view or a single voice. Miner (1990) reminds us that we have to take into account not only the seeing or speaking subject, but also the object(s) of the subject's attention. Miner (1990, p. 188) calls the various objects of the narrating voice (or the viewing eyes) as the "narrative points of attention or simply point(s) of attention".

James (1987) was aware of the near-impossible task of maintaining a single point of view in a novel. He describes this difficulty poignantly:

[...] again and again, perversely, incurably, the centre of my structure would insist on placing itself 'not', so to speak, in the middle . . . I urge myself to the candid confession that in very few of my productions, to my eye, 'has' the organic centre succeeded in getting into proper position [...] These productions have in fact [...] specious and spurious centres altogether, to make up for the failure of the true (JAMES, 1987, p. 516-517).

A character or a narrator may serve as a window or center of consciousness through which everything could be seen and felt, but the house of fiction has "not one window, but a million" and therefore, there are countless versions of the same story (JAMES, 1987, p. 485). The novel, in James words, has for its subject "the whole of human consciousness" and it will "stretch anywhere—it will take in absolutely anything" (JAMES, 1987, p. 337-338).

Matching this dispersion of voices, there is also a multiplicity of genres in the novel. Raymond Williams in *Marxism* has noted that actual writing as a cultural practice has a multiplicity of styles, genres, and types of discourses. Hence a narrative such as the novel cannot strictly observe the dichotomies such as 'fact' and 'fiction' (WILLIAMS, 1977). The divisions into specific genres and the divisions within the genres are done mainly for the convenience of the literary theory and criticism. Rushdie has commented on this need for plurality:

What I was trying to do in *Midnight's Children* was to make a plural form, since it seemed to me that I was writing about a world as manifold as it's possible for a world to be. If you were to reflect that plurality,

you would have to use as many different kinds of form as were available to you—fable, political novel, surrealism, kitchen sink, everything—and try to find an architecture which would allow all those different kinds of writing to co-exist (REDER, 2000, p. 45).

Multiplicity of genres in the novel

The novel genre is known to use, exploit, and even parody various other genres. Bakhtin (1984) has described this in his theory of the novel. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, in *The Nature of Narrative*, describe the inevitable mixing of different genres in narratives in general, and particularly in the epic and the novel:

[...] in general, narrative artists have sensed the dangers of purity in their art and shied away from it, consciously or not. The narratives which men have admired most are those which have combined powerfully and copiously the various strands of narrative: the epic and the novel. The epic, dominated by its mythic and traditional heritage, nevertheless included fictional, historical, and mimetic materials in its powerful amalgam. The novel, dominated by its growing realistic conception of the individual in an actual society, nevertheless has drawn upon mythic, historical and romantic patterns for its narrative articulation [...] Myth, mimesis, history, romance, and fable all function so as to enhance one another and reward the narrative artist whose mind and art are so powerful that he can contain and control the richest combination of narrative possibilities (SCHOLES; KELLOGG, 1966, p. 232-233).

Scholes and Kellogg (1966) point out that before the written narratives, the oral narratives such as the Homeric epic combined religious, historical, and social narratives and shaped them into a unity. But later as written narratives developed, myth and history came to be distinguished as two separate types of narration. However, there was a reversal when the novel came into being and grew to be an important mode of narration. The two streams, namely history and fiction, once again merged in the novel (just as they were united in the oral narrative and the epic). Myth, epic, history, realistic fiction, allegory, romance, fable—all can be amalgamated in a novel. Bakhtin points out that almost any genre could be included in the novel, and that it would be actually difficult to find any genre that has not been incorporated into a novel by someone at some point (BAKHTIN, 1981).

Fitting the above remarks, *Midnight's Children* uses and parodies many different genres such as autobiography, history, documentary, myth, epic, fable, fairy tale, legend, and so on. I see this eclectic nature of

the narrative in *Midnight's Children* as another aspect of the general polyphony in the novel.

Midnight's Children defies the attempts to confine it to any one particular type of narrative. It fits many labels. For instance, it can be seen as a historical novel about twentieth-century India. It narrates many of the major events in India's history, such as the famous Hartal or national strike by Indians as a protest against British rule on April 7, 1919 under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi; the infamous massacre of peacefully protesting Indians by the order of the British Brigadier R.E. Dyer in Jallianwala Bagh on April 19, 1919 in the Indian city of Amritsar (RUSHDIE, 1982); also the 'Quit India' resolution by the leaders of the Indian Congress Party to make the British leave India in the early 1940s; the demand by the Muslim League to partition the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan so that the former would have a predominantly Hindu population and the latter a predominantly Muslim population (RUSHDIE, 1982); the events in the Burmese jungle during World War II in 1945 when a nationalist army of Indians led by Subhas Chandra Bose fought *against* the Allies on the Japanese side (RUSHDIE, 1982); the bombing of Japan by the Allies (RUSHDIE, 1982); the preparation by the British government to give Independence to India and to partition India (RUSHDIE, 1982); the first Independence Day celebrations of free India on August 15, 1947 (RUSHDIE, 1982); the horrors attending the partition of the subcontinent (RUSHDIE, 1982); the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 (RUSHDIE, 1982); the 1956 language riots in the polyglot India (RUSHDIE, 1982); the sensational trial of a high-ranking navy commander for killing his wife's lover and for attempting to murder of his wife; the subsequent frenzy of media covering of the event in 1958 (RUSHDIE, 1982); the overthrow of the Pakistani President and government by a military coup by the Pakistani General Ayub Khan in Pakistan in 1958 (RUSHDIE, 1982); India's war with China in 1962 (RUSHDIE, 1982); the 1965 war between India and Pakistan (RUSHDIE, 1982); the overthrow of the President of East Pakistan by the army of West Pakistan in 1970, and the 1971 war with India (RUSHDIE, 1982); the creation of the new nation of Bangladesh out of the old East Pakistan in 1971 with the help of the Indian army and government (RUSHDIE, 1982); the autocratic rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the mid 1970s (RUSHDIE, 1982); the infamous 'Emergency' rule enforced in 1975 by Indira Gandhi (RUSHDIE, 1982); the forced sterilization of poor Indian youths by the efforts of Indira Gandhi's son

Sanjay Gandhi (RUSHDIE, 1982); the subsequent general election in 1977 (RUSHDIE, 1982). Thus we get a veritable view of the history of the nation in the twentieth-century up to 1977. It is to be noted that each one of these national events has a parallel in Saleem's history, and the two histories are intertwined so that in telling one the other is also narrated. We hear the voices of many different persons who tell their views, interpretations, and explanations of all these events. We hear histories rather than *a* history or *the* history. National history is heard distinctly in the polyphony of *Midnight Children*.

Rushdie practically lifts passages out of a history book on modern India, *A New History of India*, written by the American historian Wolpert (1977). He also uses various sources such as newspaper headings and reports, official governmental reports, rumors, hearsays, legends, gossip, and so on. History, in Saleem's narration, becomes a complex melody, and not a univocal presentation. David Lipcomb, in his article 'Caught in a Strange Middle Ground: Contesting History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*' compares Saleem's narrative and Wolpert's account, side by side, pointing out Rushdie's exploitation and parody of the historian's text. "Rushdie has fun with the inadequacy of the official, documented sources" (LIPCOMB, 1991, p. 179). Rushdie (1982) also uses the ploy of making Saleem admit of his lapses in memory, uncertainties, some mistakes about dates and details, and some exaggeration, and so on. This strategy hints to us that we are not to take Saleem's narrative as completely reliable. Rushdie parodies the features of historical texts and highlights the partial and imperfect nature of historical texts, and the contradictions that we often find in them. We are thus encouraged to read with skepticism historical narratives, newspaper reports, official or governmental press releases, and so on. We are persuaded to listen to the different voices in the polyphony rather than take one voice as the final, authoritative voice of truth.

Voices of other genres

Though history speaks loudly in the polyphony of *Midnight's Children*, we hear the voices of other narrative genres as well. For instance, the novel strikes us as a modern allegory (such as a national or political allegory). Saleem's history practically coincides with India's history. To begin with, Saleem and the modern nation of India are born at the same moment, that is, on the stroke of midnight or zero hour of August 15, 1947. For almost every significant event in the social and political history of

India, there is a parallel event in Saleem's private history. Often Rushdie uses comic and bizarre events in Saleem's life which coincide with major events in the history of the nation. Saleem often insists that he was the cause (or the trigger) of many major events in the history of the nation, and blames himself for many of the catastrophes. He takes great trouble to make the point that he stands for the nation; that he and the nation are twins whose fates are joined: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 9). Towards the end of the novel Saleem describes his feelings toward his country as an 'adoration', "a vaulting, all-encompassing love of country" and affirms that India is his 'true birth-sister' (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 385). The first Prime Minister, of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru, sends a congratulatory letter to the one-week-old baby Saleem declaring that Saleem's life "will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own [the nation's]" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 122). These words from the highest official of the new government of free India corroborate the idea that Saleem's life and the nation's life mirror each other.

As an example of the mirroring of Saleem and the nation, one can study their origins, and connection to the British, and the various religious and social communities found in India. Saleem is the illegitimate offspring of a British man (and the Hindu woman Vanita who is married to a poor street-entertainer); the modern nation of India is also, in a sense, an illegitimate creation of the British. In a sense the British seduced the Indians as the Britisher William Methwold seduced Vanita and left them holding a symbolic illegitimate baby, the divided nation. Saleem's biological parents, and the couple who raise him under the belief that he is their own son for eleven years, are made up of a well-to-do British man, a poor Hindu woman, and an affluent Muslim couple (of Kashmiri origin) respectively. Saleem's ayah is a Christian. The nation is also made up of all these different religious and national communities and different classes, namely the British, the Hindus, the Muslims, Christians, the rich, and the poor.

There are many other explicit similarities between Saleem and the nation. Saleem has a face that is very much like the map of the Indian subcontinent (RUSHDIE, 1982). Saleem's ill-tempered (and possibly mad) history teacher Emil Zagallo compares Saleem's huge nose to the Deccan peninsula in the map of India; he likens the birthmarks on Saleem's face to the map of Pakistan: the birthmark on the right ear standing for the East wing and the horribly "stained left cheek" for West

Pakistan (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 232). In addition to this physical similarity, Saleem and the nation of India (and Pakistan) share many misfortunes. For instance, ten-year-old Saleem is left with a bleeding head when Zagallo seizes the boy's hair and pulls him up with such force that a clump of hair comes out of Saleem's scalp (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 232); the ten-year-old nation also suffers from catastrophes: the second Five Year Plan is wrecked by storms, floods, and hailstones; the government is forced "to announce to the world that it could accept no more development loans unless the lenders were willing to wait indefinitely for repayment". Despite improvement in the production of iron ore, power capacity, cotton, bicycles, and electrical appliances, "the number of landless and unemployed masses actually increased, so that it was greater than it had ever been under the British Raj [...] illiteracy survived unscathed; the population continued to mushroom" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 205-206).

Saleem lists the events that happened on his tenth birthday (RUSHDIE, 1982), and in the list the misfortunes outweigh the small gains. For the nation the situation is the same. During the same year, Saleem loses the tip of a finger during a fight with classmates. The nation also suffers symbolic mutilations. In 1962, his parents trick him with the idea of a picnic and take him instead to a clinic for a surgery on his nose to clear his sinuses. While his sinuses are drained, the nation also experiences a drain. It is the time of war with China. The newspaper headings finally admit defeat of the Indian army and announce: "Public Morale Drains Away" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 301).

Significant events in Saleem's life coincide with significant dates in the nation's history. Saleem's wedding to Parvati takes place on the nation's Republic Day, January 26th. His wife Parvati's labor starts on June 12, 1975, when Prime Minister of the nation, Indira Gandhi, is found guilty by the Allahabad High Court of two counts of campaign malpractice during the previous election campaign. Parvati's child emerges from her womb at the stroke of midnight on June 25, 1975, "at the precise instant of India's arrival at Emergency" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 419). During the period of Emergency, in the winter of 1975-6, Saleem's son Aadam falls ill with tuberculosis. Saleem sees a connection between the nation's condition and his son's illness: "I suspected, from the first, something darkly metaphorical in this illness-believing that [...] our private emergency was not unconnected with the larger, macrocosmic disease, under whose influence the sun had become as pallid and diseased as our son" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 422). He insists to his wife that "while the

Emergency lasts, he [his son] will never become well" (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 423). On New Year's Day in 1977 Saleem undergoes forced sterilization (RUSHDIE, 1982). The nation also is rendered impotent by the undemocratic practices of the Prime Minister and her supporters.

The above analogies between Saleem's private life and India's history form the voice of allegory in the polyphony of genres in *Midnight's Children*. Similarly, a case can be made out for the voices of other genres such as postmodern fiction, epic, myth, fairy tale, satire, picaresque and so on. To discuss and describe each case would take too much space and time. Instead, we can look at a sample of the comments of some critics in response to the reading of *Midnight's Children*. Hutcheon (1993), for instance, sees *Midnight's Children* as a historiographic metafiction or postmodernist fiction. We find in it elements of many other genres such as epic, myth, legend, folklore, folk tales, fairy tales, mimesis, romance, melodrama, family saga, picaresque novel, Menippean satire and so on, in addition to those mentioned before, namely, history, allegory, and autobiography.

Naik and Shyamala's description of *Midnight's Children* as "a multi-faceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical *bildungsroman*, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory, a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy, and a daring experiment in form and style" gives an idea of the multiplicity and variety that the novel manifests (NAIK; SHYAMALA, 2001, p. 39). John Haffenden calls it a "fecund, dynamic, baroque, transformative fable of memory and politics—'a commingling of the improbable and the mundane'", borrowing the last phrase from the novel itself (REDER, 2000, p. 30; RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 9). Al-'Azm (1994, p. 260) notes that in addition to being "socially charged to the utmost, Rushdie's novels draw copiously on politics, history, mythology, religion, theology, philosophy, fiction, poetry, folklore, anecdotes and all the varieties of life's quotidian experiences in the contemporary First and Third Worlds".

Dialogism and the inclusion of the voice of the 'other'

Midnight's Children exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Bakhtin (1984), like Socrates, believed that truth and understanding are born in a dialogue, not in the mind of an isolated self. We find a striking passage which echoes the extended concept of dialogue as polyphony in *Midnight's Children* after Saleem discovers his magical telepathy. As already mentioned, his power eventually develops into more than telepathy, especially in his relation with the other 580 midnight-children. Saleem's initial

voyeuristic telepathy evolves into a genuine dialogue with the midnight-children. Saleem describes this polyphony in his characteristic style:

It was possible [...] to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through me. So, in the early days of 1958, the five hundred and eighty-one children would assemble, for one hour, between midnight and one a.m., in the lok sabha or parliament of my brain (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 227).

We hear “the views of a typical selection of the Conference members” and the dialogue between different and often conflicting philosophies and aims. The children espouse various beliefs such as collectivism, individualism, filial duty, infant revolution, capitalism, altruism, science, religion, courage, cowardice, rights for We actually hear the polyphony of the various midnight-children, including the views of Saleem’s arch rival Shiva (RUSHDIE, 1982). Though Saleem is accepted as the leader in the Midnight Children’s Conference, his voice is not the dominating voice in the dialogue. We hear the various theories of the midnight-children as to the meaning of their miraculous powers and the purpose of their life. It is unfortunate that to the detriment of a possible, continuing polyphony of the midnight children, Saleem discontinues participating in the Midnight Children Conference because of his fear that his rival Shiva would discover the switching of the babies in the hospital where both Saleem and Shiva were born at the same time. He is afraid that once Shiva knows the truth, he will take Saleem’s place in the Sinai family and he, Saleem would be turned out as a homeless boy among the poor of Bombay. Saleem’s fear and actions show that people would want to suppress polyphony in order to have their own say and to protect their own interests.

Another example of dialogism in *Midnight's Children* is found in the interaction between Saleem and the illiterate Padma, who listens to his reading of his life story. Padma is not a passive, silent audience. She interrupts Saleem, asks questions, chides him, makes fun of his improbable accounts, and succeeds at times in making Saleem comply with her demands for a more linear narration.

Saleem voices the importance of the input and interaction of reader/audience at various points in the novel. His dialogic relation with Padma-the-audience, is of immense importance to him. He sees her as his “necessary ear” (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 149). He describes their relative positions as the two corners of an isosceles triangle. The third corner of

the triangle is his memory. When Padma leaves him temporarily, Saleem muses: “I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus-goddess [Padma] of the present [...] but must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line?” (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 150). In other words, without the participation of the ‘other,’ the narrative will become one-dimensional or monologicistic. Saleem sees Padma’s views as the ‘necessary counterweights’ to his own. It is Padma’s interaction with him that keeps his feet ‘on the ground’ (RUSHDIE, 1982). Without her he is likely to digress and go off the tangent to a greater extent. He admits to adjusting his narrative, to some extent, according to Padma’s demands and expectations, using her responses as his guide (RUSHDIE, 1982). To use one of Saleem’s phrases, Padma ‘leaks’ into him by her interaction with him (RUSHDIE, 1982). In fact, Saleem at one point tells us that the audience becomes a co-author: “I have not, I think, been good at describing emotions—believing my audience to be capable of *joining in*; of imagining for themselves what I have been unable to re-imagine, so that my story becomes yours as well” (RUSHDIE, 1982, p. 293; Rushdie’s emphasis). In other words, the reader’s voice participates in the general polyphony in the novel. Saleem, in the manner of the author of a genuine polyphonic novel, refuses to assume a privileged place among the different characters. He is willing to give the reader also a role in the construction of meaning in the novel.

The dialogue between the author, characters and reader is an ongoing activity. The characters participate, not as mere objects of the author’s consciousness but as free people, capable of standing alongside, agreeing or disagreeing with, even rebelling against their creator. They are not merely the objects of authorial discourse, but subjects of their own directly-signifying discourse. The reader also, like the characters, is not subordinated to the author.

Bakhtin’s theories of the novel, polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival, grotesque realism etc. demonstrate that the variety and multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view in a polyphonic novel cannot be reduced to a homogeneous discourse. Dialogism takes place between different entities at various levels simultaneously. The narrative becomes a dialogue between many participants and evolves into a search for meaning and truth.

Multiplicity is seen even within the same character, since a person has a different voice and

point of view at different times, in different situations and contexts. Further, a character can see himself or herself not only as 'I' but also as an object of his or her own attention, as an 'other' (as 'he' or 'she'). Saleem shows this capacity to be both 'self' and 'other,' to be both the subject and the object at various points in the novel. He refers to himself in the third person frequently, looking at his own earlier self from a later stage.

Sometimes he uses both 'I' and 'He,' in the same sentence to refer to himself (RUSHDIE, 1982). We hear the polyphony of the different selves of Saleem.

Bakhtin reminds us that the novel took shape precisely at the point when the epic with its absolutized, definitive account of the distant past was disintegrating. When the novel was born, both the world and man were assuming a degree of comic familiarity; the object of artistic representation was becoming degraded to the level of contemporary reality. It was no longer a static, fixed, finalized entity. It became inconclusive, fluid, decentered, and open-ended.

The novel uses as well as parodies many other genres. These different genres used and parodied in the novel, as Bakhtin (2000, p. 323) explains,

Become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving, contemporary reality (the openended present)'.

We see this openendedness in the polyphony and dialogism of *Midnight's Children*. Though the novel opens with the appearance of a simple autobiographical novel where one normally expects a kind of unity—one hero, one voice, one genre, etc., in the very first page it gives us a hint of a multitude of stories and voices. The supposed unity of the autobiography deconstructs itself into a growing knowledge of ever-increasing difference and variety that cannot be overcome in any simple, unifying synthesis. *Midnight's Children* exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic novel in which truth is not a finalized, unchanging product but an ongoing process in a dialogue that is left open, with no finalizing period. Instead of emphasizing a unified whole, this novel highlights the inevitable fragmentation of our perception and our partial knowledge of reality.

In keeping with Bakhtin's idea of the unfinalizability of meaning, and Rushdie's inclusive

literary art, I believe that it is more profitable to explore the possibilities of different meanings rather than search for a final, definitive meaning. We are likely to find new meanings from each subsequent reading. This happens because we change with time; our understanding of the world and our knowledge of the world changes with time. Our reading is likely to be colored by the social, political milieu in which we read the narrative. In other words, one becomes a new reader at each subsequent reading. And there are countless readers and countless readings.

Midnight's Children exemplifies the dialogic interpretations embedded in a polyphonic novel. Summing up his discussion of the carnivalization, dialogism, and openendedness in Rushdie's novels, Engblom (1994) declares that these features are the means by which Rushdie breaks out of the patterns of the novels of the West. In postcolonial readings, conventional novels of the West are seen as imperialistic, metropolitan, and monologic, serving the dominant, official stand by using containment strategies. Dissenting voices are usually suppressed or given only scant attention and space.

The widely different receptions and interpretations of *Midnight's Children* demonstrate that the readers also participate in the construction of meaning, and the meaning changes according to the social and historical context of reading. Though this is true of any text, *Midnight's Children* aids this process to a remarkable extent because of its polyphonic features.

Rushdie's comments and Bakhtin's concept of polyphony indicate that the narrator's version reflects only one view, while the novel as a whole is the site of contesting voices. Saleem, the protagonist/narrator in *Midnight's Children* often reminds us that his narrative is only one version among the hundreds of thousands of possible versions. He often gives us other versions such as those from gossip, rumors, folktales, superstitions, fantasy, and so on.

The dialogic or polyphonic aspect of *Midnight's Children* is also highlighted by the use of a mixture of different literary traditions. Rushdie uses both the Western literary tradition and the Eastern traditions including the oral way of telling stories. In order to include as much as possible the variety of life in general, and life in India in particular, Rushdie had to choose a commensurable, hybrid form:

What I was trying to do in *Midnight's Children* was to make a plural form, since it seemed to me that I was writing about a world as manifold as it's possible for a world to be. If you were to reflect that plurality,

you would have to use as many different kinds of form as were available to you—fable, political novel, surrealism, kitchen sink, everything—and try to find an architecture which would allow all those different kinds of writing to co-exist (REDER, 2000, p. 45).

The unreliability and uncertainty in Saleem's narrative is a ploy to make the readers more skeptical about what they are told, and to wean them away from the habit of relying too much on the author in their search for meaning and truth.

I have included Rushdie-the-author's own comments about his novel, as they constitute one of the voices that contribute to the polyphony from the world outside the text. However, we do not have to take his explanations and comments as the final word, as he himself has said in an interview (with David Brooks) that despite being the author of the novel, he does not have and does not assume any special authority in interpreting his work (Reder, 2000). Rushdie suggests that the reading of Saleem's unreliable narration could serve as a useful analogy for the way we all "read" the world" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 25). And the 'world' includes his novel. No single reading, including the author's, is to be taken as the final meaning. Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic novel emphasizes unequivocally that the great dialogue of the novel is left open-ended, with "no finalizing period at the end" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 165).

As Stephane Tyssens observes, Rushdie's brand of uncertainty may be a device "precisely to deflate the myth of the genius at work and to discourage the reader from swallowing indiscriminately anything he is told" (TYSENS, 1989, p. 28). For this, the polyphony in *Midnight's Children* serves as an excellent device.

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