

**OF BEGINNINGS AND DISPLACEMENTS- MEMORY AS NARRATIVE IN  
RUSHDIE'S "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN" AND ONDAATJE'S "THE ENGLISH  
PATIENT"**

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**Abstract**

Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje are not just two postmodernist writers with ties to the subcontinent who have won Bookers. They share a much less tangible similarity: their fascination with memories. While *Midnight's Children* is itself a story of the narrator trying to recollect memories from his past and pen them down, *The English Patient*, while narrated mostly by an omniscient narrator, runs entirely on the memories of the four prominent characters, majorly the patient himself. This paper attempts to identify, understand and possibly compare the effects of memory on the narrative in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The paper also deals with the questions of fractured identity and displaced selfhood experienced by the postcolonial subject in the two novels, while looking at the truth of memory as desire. The struggle of public versus private history is taken up and the problematizing of authenticity of narratives is also examined.

**Keywords**

Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, memory as narrative, postcolonial writing, identity and selfhood, *Midnight's Children*, *The English Patient*

**Introduction**

"...what I was actually writing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: my India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration: his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary"

-Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

"he whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died"

-Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

Memory and history in both novels begin as a consequence of a fundamental alienation from one's source of origin. This is true of both the authors themselves as well; Rushdie, who left India when he was just fourteen, wrote *Midnight's Children* after living for many years in Pakistan, and then England. It is essentially a book of his retrospective view of India comprising largely of his personal memories. Ondaatje, on the other hand, was born to a Sinhalese father and a Dutch mother, and lived with his extended family on an estate in Kegalle, only to leave for England nine years later after his parents' divorce. Both authors feel a sense of belonging to as well as isolation from their points of origin, and this sense creeps into their characters as well.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a novel of remembrance, a book that attempts an imaginary reconstitution of the writer's lost home. It begins with the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, sitting down to chronicle his life for posterity, for his son, for his body is disintegrating rapidly. The relationship between historical fact and fiction, collective nationality and personal identity occupies a central position in the novel. But more importantly, it is a novel about memory. It raises important questions on the nature of memory; the possibility of remembering, and still more significantly, what does one remember and how remembering constitutes a sense of identity. The book comprises of Rushdie's memories of India but it is also a book about remembering and forgetting. Heidegger, in *What Is Called Thinking?* saw remembering as 're-remembering' that which has already been dismembered. For it to be possible to remember, one therefore has to locate the source of separation to identify what has ceased to be a member. Memory is an attempt to go back, to trace the mother, the source of all beginnings. *Midnight's Children* takes up the concept of beginning so radically that the novel at one level appears to be a book about beginning. Rushdie begins first with his protagonist's birth, then almost immediately, realizing the inadequacy of that vantage point as a beginning, moves on to sixty-two years ago, to his grandfather in Kashmir. After a while, he rockets back to his birth, to his country's birth, and keeps coming back to the beginning of him as a writer writing this story. Saleem Sinai begins his story many times and each time, he comes to realize later that every single one of them is only a beginning which had already begun elsewhere: that the 'true beginning' which he desires to begin with can never be positively traced.

The way in which the novel is written, the literary techniques employed by Rushdie ensure that the ambiguity of the text's meaning is retained. The main elements in the novel are the conflicting coexistence of individual and national identity and the ability or lack thereof of an individual to reconstitute a unique history by remembering and writing. For Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, remembering goes hand in hand with writing, as the protagonist writes what he remembers. The entire novel is narrated by Saleem Sinai relying on his personal memories to construct a narrative for the reader, their manifestation in the novel that is Padma, and for his son to read, someday after he himself has disappeared, and will no longer be present to pass on his story himself.

As to the question of memory being possible, Saleem certainly thinks it is, for he starts writing with absolute certainty. He can remember what happened, and reproduce those events with absolute accuracy in writing. He writes about himself, replicating his memory and claiming absolute authenticity regarding them. His claims for absolute authenticity derive their legitimacy from the fact that he can see the story to its end as well, and not just as he is writing it. His death has been foretold, and he has no qualms accepting it. He has to chronicle his authentic unique self himself before he dies because after he passes away, no one else can claim such absolute authenticity.

“I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget (we are a nation of forgetters).” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

In Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, memory, identity and self- and nationhood play out slightly differently. The setting of the majority of the past in a desert is no coincidence either. Vast expanses of monotonous dry elements whose relation to one another keeps shifting geographically as well as temporally are not exclusive to the desert. They represent contemporary notions of memory on a subtler level: fluid, malleable, perpetually in motion.

### **Splintered memories and scrambled narratives**

As pointed out by Amy Novak, it is the patient's conjuring of memory that organizes the narrative of the text. This is done in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, as "he whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died". This passage shows the dynamics of the text's narrative, as the patient calls for everyone to be pushed into the 'well of memory' through his act of remembering. Thus, his remembering performs two functions: structuring his character's own discourse in the story, as well as steering the narrative of the entire novel. The text is pushed forward by memory, drawing in other players in the story around him, leading to a further unfolding of his own memories, as well as theirs.

Like how Aadam Aziz views his wife through a perforated sheet, part by part, we too see the narrative piece by piece in both texts: through splintered memories of Saleem Sinai and the patient. But unlike Aziz, who retains his agency in the end by ultimately being able to view his love in her entirety, without the sheet to hide, we as readers have no such respite. The texts hide things from us, and they show that they hide.

“When I went back into the desert, I took with me the evenings of dancing to the 78 of “Souvenirs” in the bars, the women pacing like greyhounds, leaning against you while you uttered into their shoulders during “My Sweet.” Courtesy of the Societe Ultraphone of the Francaise record company. 1938. 1939. There was the

whispering of love in a booth. There was war around the corner” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

This recollection of the patient is not a fluid, accurate representation of events as they actually played out in the past but is rather a staggered, disjointed montage of instances of dancing, encounters with women and faint music possibly heard somewhere in the background. Perhaps in 1938, or 39, these obviously separate incidents have been stitched together to form a single account. While the patient is able to produce the names of geographical locations and people without hesitation, he seems to have trouble attaching his self to any of the personages he remembers. Hence the frequent switches between first and third person in his narratives - while the patient knows that he did participate in the events he is describing, his damaged memory keeps him on the outskirts of these scenes, as a textual ghost. Re-plotting his story, recovering it from the ruins left by the great upheavals of public history and personal passion, the patient is simultaneously trying to recover his identity as a teller and a character in the stories. The Villa San Girolamo may be seen as a metaphor of the patient's condition: though it is "a gorge" from the outside, it still contains the magical painted garden, the dangerously mined library with the dormant books waiting to be recovered mirroring the latent memories in the mind of the patient, entwined with dangerous information about his alliances and betrayals.

Both Saleem Sinai and the patient are searching for their lost self. But they both fail for different reasons: Sinai tries to think of himself *as* the nation, “handcuffed to history”, while the patient rejects all notions of nationhood and ownership and thus, all notions of belonging. While Saleem puts himself at the center of much larger happenings, taking agency and putting himself (wittingly or unwittingly) in a position of being an active member in the process of nation-building, the patient wishes to endlessly explore, lost but not lost among the ravages of the desert, but never to mark as discovered the territory of his past. A common factor in the failing of them both could be that the 'self' that they are looking for no longer exists: whatever the patient used to be before the plane crash changed before the period of his stay at the villa, and continues to change with the advancement of the story. Similarly, Saleem as the Buddha in the Pakistan canine unit is no longer the Saleem who hid in a washing chest, neither will he be the one who falls in love and fathers a child with Parvati the Witch. The notion of self as not stable, but as an illusory concept, continually evolving and regressing- an essentially postmodernist view of identity- seems to be implicit in both the novels.

### **The Unreliability of History**

Memory, like the narrative in both novels, is not infallible. There are multiple instances of the account being presented to us being ambiguous, flaky, and sometimes downright treacherous. In *The English Patient*, the dates are most likely mixed up, and events that probably occurred over a period of time are clubbed into a single temporal frame. Take for instance, the patient describing his falling in love with Katherine. There are three

clearly distinct accounts of the same incident, all of which have the same setting: the campfire site during an expedition, when his senses are ensnared by Katherine's voice while she was reading something aloud. The first instance, which Hana finds in a diary entry pasted in his copy of Herodotus, the campfire was in May 1936, and Katherine was reading a poem by Stephen Crane. However, just a few days later, when he is describing the event to Hana, he claims that it was *Paradise Lost* which was being recited by Katherine, and this he remembers as taking place during the initial days of the Cliftons' stay with the expedition before returning to Cairo. In yet another instance repeated to Caravaggio, the patient seems to remember the incident differently: the campfire takes place roughly a month later, and the piece that Katherine decides to read is the story of Candaules and his queen.

Saleem on the other hand, remembers grand, macroscopic historical events through events that happen to him, or to the people around him. The death of Mahatma Gandhi, the introduction of Five Year Plans, the general elections, consolidation of power by the Congress Government, the division of States on linguistic basis are some of the major events in the history of independent India put on record in the novel. The rampant social, political and economic unrest appeared in different parts in different shapes leading to "Language Marches" in Maharashtra/Gujarat and Dravidian chauvinism in Tamil Nadu. Whereas history records these happenings in a connected way, the novel rearranges the historical details to suit its own kind of truth. Thus the Chinese aggression is remembered in connection with a personal accident in Saleem's life in which his finger was cut. And Nehru's deliberations on the future of the country parallel another juvenile adventure of Saleem.

"At the same time Jawaharlal Nehru was consulting astrologers about the country's Five Year Plan, in order to avoid another Karamstan; and while the world combined aggression and the occult, I lay concealed in a washing-chest which wasn't really big enough for comfort anymore; and Amina Sinai became filled with guilt." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

The novel seems to suggest that these historical details as chronicled in the official versions of history present only a one-sided view of reality. Indira Gandhi's consolidation and subsequent corruption of power and Indian politics, the formation of Bangladesh as an independent nation and the final nail in the coffin of Indian democracy, the Emergency, are all retold in a completely reversed manner. The novel attempts to reconstitute these details from different perspectives. Memory becomes a device which connects the personal to the historical. Thus, Saleem remembers a crucial date in the history of Modern India.

"History books, newspapers, radio-programmes tell us that at two p.m. on June 12th, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty, by Judge Jag Mohan Lai Sinha of the Allahabad High Court, of the two counts of campaign malpractice during the election campaign of 1971; what has never previously been revealed is that it was at'

precisely two p.m. that Parvati - the witch (now Laylah Sinai) became sure that she had entered labour." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

Rushdie suggests that all historical events have individual effects on people's personal histories as well, affecting their days and shaping their destinies. But he also claims the reverse as true: that individuals shape a larger grand history by their actions. Saleem was born at the same time as India and hence the history of one is mixed up with the history of the other. The reader is invited to read the history of India in the history of Saleem and vice versa. Most of the time, an individual understands the meaning of history only when he has become a victim of it. The metanarrative of history unfolds itself making individuals merely a part of it, rendering them bereft of their agency and dignity. But an individual's disappointment with such a history, even his role as a victim of it does not make him go outside history, simply because history is all encompassing. Given this, one of the ways of resisting the over powering history while being within it is to personalize it.

When historical narratives are taken and mixed with incidents in one's own life, history becomes too personalized. In place of an established traditional public history, the individual presents their private history as a series of memories. In so doing, the individual claims greater authenticity to their own account, reclaiming their agency as they cannot be wrong in saying what happened to them.

"Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were mine, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow making them happen... which is to say I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. "I can find out any damn thing." I triumphed, "There isn't a thing I cannot know!" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

In *The English Patient* as well, every character is in some sense displaced. They are either not attached to any culture in particular, and when they are, it is an artificial sort of attachment, to a culture that is foreign to them, that is not their own. Caravaggio, for instance, uses morphine to keep himself from himself, undergoing a process of self-deletion. Hana herself is a fugitive from history, choosing to isolate herself with the patient in a villa that is significantly more dangerous when she had the option of leaving with the rest of the armed forces. Kip, possessing the "ability to become invisible through silence", is renamed by an alien culture, one that has oppressed and ruled over his people for roughly 200 years now.

The one thing that unites all four inhabitants of the Villa San Girolamo is the fact that all of them suffer from a lost identity, a trauma resulting from whatever fire is ravaging their surroundings- war, the death of a father, human savagery, betrayal. All four are characterized by what Irena Książkowska terms 'cultural amnesia'- deliberate or

subconscious detachment from one's culture. This sabbatical from their memory forms a Utopian niche where they all take refuge. "They long for and temporarily achieve existence outside of time, race and history, becoming spectral beings, not quite saints, and not angels, but four ghosts in the garden of the partially destroyed Eden." (Ondaatje, *The English Patient*)

However, under this deliberate willingness to forget, there is a repressed yet constant need to remember and be remembered, like Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. Their amnesia therefore, according to Książopolska, is a re-channeled nostalgia, a desire to return to their lost selves, in a time where they actually did belong to some place or someone, to some culture. This is, of course, mythical, as when any one of them attempts to deconstruct the past, there is bound to be the recurring image of failure, of difference, of otherness. She argues that their inability or refusal to remember is a characteristic feature of those whose past is, or at least seems to be, irrecoverable. Hana and Kip, at the end, manage to leave their bastion of timelessness and slide back into their cultures even though they cannot go back to being exact versions of their pre-war selves. This is because they have been changed not just by the agony of their experience with war and death, but their period of living without memory, through their attachment to each other.

Caravaggio, however, mirrors the patient in that he too is severely mutilated, not just physically but mentally, and has no conceivable past to return to. A thief without fully functional nimble hands is no thief, after all. Thus, he too disappears in the novel's ending, ropewalking towards the next villa, and as Hana ceases to look at him, simply dissolves into the rain. His disappearance, like the patient's, can be read as them successfully achieving their goal of self-deletion from life as a narrative, while simultaneously avoiding death as the end to their means.

### **Displaced Authority and Selfhood**

Both novels proceed on series of displacements. The narrator Saleem displaces the author. However, Saleem as we know was displaced at birth by Mary Pereira. Saleem in his own way replaces historical events and justifies it on the ground that whatever happened to him also happened to the country. Thus, Saleem starts writing his own story and towards the end, as readers we realize that, in fact, he has been writing more about others than about himself. The narrator says that what he writes is an autobiography, stories as they truly happened to him. Nevertheless, the claim that he makes about the authenticity of the story cannot be verified by any other character in the novel. All other *Midnight's Children* who shared a certain past with him are dead and hence there is no one who can verify the truth claims he makes. This precisely is the uniqueness of his story, a story which is absolutely his, a story whose single custodian is the narrator. The reader (confidant) has to remain satisfied with what the narrator says.

"I supervise the production of Mary's legendary recipes; but there are also my special blends, in which thanks to the powers of my drained nasal passage, I am able to

include memories, dreams ideals, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sunderbans ... believe, don't believe, but it's true. Thirty jars stand up on a shelf waiting to be unleashed up on the amnesiac nation.” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

Similarly, if the story of the patient's constructed selfhood in the narrative is false, he embodies what Książopolska calls a 'double-recycled phenomenon- as a man who adopts another's story, already containing recycled versions of culture'. Paradoxically, the patient at the same time also embodies originality at its extreme. Undeciphered and unnamed, remaining thus throughout the story, the patient is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, an empty space with no value, much like the desert he endeavored to map. Thus by deleting himself out of existence, by replacing his story with another's, the patient seems to achieve absolute originality. At the same time, as he well knows, there is no such thing as emptiness - the desert is never actually empty - it is full of silenced histories, lost nations, unrecorded passions, secrethiding places and enchanted wells. The diversity underneath the sand dunes is invisible only as long as its spectators are unaware of it, unable to decode it. The English patient's blank originality is merely a mask for the entangled public and private pasts, furtively revising themselves, endlessly recycling the bits of culture surrounding him - passages from books, his own writings, paintings, sculpture, architecture, historical figures and their ghosts, real or fictional characters, "interesting geographical problems" of the earth's surface.

### **Broken history and fractured identity**

Every being is invariably part of a continuous narrative which we call history. History, then, is the collective memory of a race which perpetuates its own myths which in turn render intelligibility to individual actions and control them. This can be seen in the names of characters. A name appropriates one to a past which strictly speaking is not one's own; one has no control over one's name. But in naming one, one has already been called into a social role. Thus, the father whose scepticism drives him out of the "innocent garden" of Kashmir is called Adam. Adam's wife is so meaningfully called Reverend Mother-a mother to all! The names of other characters like Sinai, Amina, Hanif also suggest religious parallels. In *The English Patient*, the patient is unnamed, and his identity is only speculated to be that of Almasy. Although no alternative would make sense in the macroscopic view of the narrative, it is nevertheless never mentioned explicitly that the patient is in fact, Almasy. Hana's surname is never mentioned, giving her a sort of spectral nature. As a colonial subject, Kip resides in the margins between competing cultures and ways of knowing. Arriving in Britain to train for the war, Kip's Indian name is taken from him and something foreign, something alien is thrust upon him, to be a substitute identity for the entirety of his stay in the Western world.



The re-confrontation of two characters with their past occurs almost instantaneously, by respective singular events in the novels: the Buddha, after being on the verge of death after a near-fatal snakebite, wakes with a sudden gush of memories, remembering his entire life's story, with the exception of his name. For Kip, the momentous event is when he hears the American use of the atomic bomb on Japan. In this moment, the colonial voices repressed in the patient's narrative and the narrative of the text are drawn forth into the present of the novel. The shift about to take place in the narrative is announced by a disordering of temporality: "Wherever Hana is now, in the future, she is aware of the line of movement Kip's body followed out of her life. Her mind repeats it. The path he slammed through among them. When he turned into a stone of silence in their midst. She recalls everything of that August day" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient*), in the present tense, creating an urgency and momentum for what transpires. The dropping of the bombs is first registered within the narrative present by a scream that Hana hears erupt from Kip's body "which had never raised its voice among them". With this scream, the repressed voices of the colonial past that the patient has invoked, of "Indian soldiers [who] wasted their lives as heroes so they could bepukkah" come into the narrative. In this instance, Kip's voice comes forth at the same time as he becomes a "stone of silence" in their midst.

Throughout the narrative, Kip has sought to remain untouched by memories of the past. However, this apocalyptic moment dislodges the past that he, like the other characters, has attempted to clearly order. Instantly, the past is drawn into the present as Kip sees "everything, all those around him, in a different light." The repressed and erased moments of colonial history are revealed as Kip "sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom". Whereas, before he could penetrate the fixed borders of the colonial world by "being able to hide in silent places," now he feels "condemned, separate from the world" and can no longer find a way to translate himself within that world. He is unable to construct a linear narrative to understand how he came to be where he is. Thrust out of this world that he has inhabited, he realizes "[h]is name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here". With his scream the past returns, but because this past remains untranslatable within the Western worldview of the other characters, it transforms him into "a stone of silence." The inner logic of this Western culture which he has adopted is suddenly revealed to Kip as he comes to understand how the power to write and construct history has been the foundation of a process of colonization. With this event, the novel presents an attack on Western civilization and the structures of history that support it. Kip turns accusingly to the patient:

"I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong

kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses?" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient*)

## Conclusion

A disintegrating narrator cannot create a continuous narrative because, the narrative continuously decomposes the narrator. The wish to constitute a personal identity is constantly undermined by the narrative because the narrative puts into question the credibility of what is narrated. Thus the description of what happened in the rainforest of Bangladesh or Saleem's miraculous escape from Bangladesh to India in the invisible basket of Parvati-the-witch remains uncertain and unverifiable as facts, as do the patient's claims of the exact moment of his falling in love with Katherine, or the true events that transpired in the desert. Within the narrative there is nobody who can verify the truth of what is narrated. Discontented with different versions of public history, Saleem writes his private history, but the very mode of its writing cancels out any possibility of verifying its authenticity, as does the patient's retelling of his life. The public history as it is available today may be written on the basis of gross generalisations and hence inauthentic, but the private history of Saleem remains more inauthentic than any public history. Then, the difference would be that whereas a particular version of public history claims certain amount of authenticity, the private history of Saleem absolutely discards the question of authenticity.

Memory is possible as Saleem and the patient could remember so many things which happened in their life with admirable attention and minute details. But, is memory reliable at all is - the question which the novels ask in different ways. Indeed, memory is true as a desire, it is a desire to repeat, but what it repeats is never the unique (of what happened), but only a series of fantasies. It only stages the impossibility of absolute remembering, it becomes a kind of active forgetfulness. Thus instead of narrating what actually was, the narrators take recourse to their own fantasies which constitute the narrative. In a sense, the novels can be seen as critiques of memory. They do not hide the fact that what they present as memory is inseparable from the narrator's fantasy. The magic of memory transcends the logic of representation and affirms its own truth as one among many other truths. The novels suggest that history as it is written and understood is based on an essential forgetfulness in that it forgets a large number of crucial details. They try to remember those details but admit that memory can never be completely separated from fantasy and that perhaps even the most "authentic" version of history contains elements of fantasy which it can never fully escape.

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