

Spring Board of Subversion: The Grotesque and the Polyphonic Voices in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Abhra Dutta

SACT, English, M.U.C. Women's College

Abstract:

Midnight's children, the 'Booker of Bookers' prize winning novel of Salman Rushdie, unfolds lots of surprises before us. This novel allows us to mingle with it from a variety of angles, such as postmodernism, post-colonialism, historicism, Bakhtinian study and so on. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the application of Bakhtinian concept to *Midnight's Children*. His primary concern regarding the presence of different voices, the social backdrop of every voice and of course the reversal in status of each voice in a particular moment – more clearly it is the “self” and the “other” whose presence he wanted to find out in novels.. Through Sinai's own narration, Rushdie very clearly and confidently includes the voices of different people belonging to different social backdrops. And not only that, it is very clearly evident while reading the text that the author, the narrator and other voices- all very strongly put their own statements, own perceptions without being dominated by one another. This quality allows us to apply Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism and Polyphony to the text. Rushdie's novel Celebrates the midnight – the midnight which brings the independence and the partition as well – that midnight which blessed the newly born babies of that night with magical powers and grotesque organs – that midnight which is no less than a festival for the two countries. And this quality of Rushdie's text brings forth the Carnavalesque element in the text. So, this paper is an attempt to re-read Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* from Bakhtinian point of view.

Introduction:

Bakhtin's Dialogism indicates multiplicity in human perception which he first noticed in Dostoevsky's novels. Its main ambition is to find out the relationship between 'central' voice and 'other' voices presented in a novel. But, dialogism does not merely mean dialogues between the characters, or just a mere opposition of binaries. Here 'self' is not given a higher place than 'other'. (Web) Not even the author is allowed to dominate the voices in his novel. Author's perception of 'truth' is not the ultimate one. All voices equally participate and they are collectively searching for 'truth' in a dialogic interaction. Bakhtin explains that the meaning or truth of a polyphonic novel is positioned within multiple and various consciousness rather than in a single consciousness. Raman Selden in his book writes:

The consciousness of the various, Characters do not merge with the author's nor do they become subordinated to the author's viewpoint; they retain an integrity and independence, and are 'not only objects of the author's word, but subjects of their own directly significant word as well.'(50)

This is the model that Bakhtin prefers and he finds it in the novels of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin's term for such novel is “polyphonic”. Polyphony in music refers to a piece that has two or more different voices or

melodies which are independent, fully valid and unmerged. Mikhail Bakhtin intended this concept of polyphony to literature, in his study of Dostoevsky's novel which he called a "polyphonic" novel. So, polyphony in a novel refers to the plurality of multiplicity of voices, points of view, consciousness, meanings etc. (Web) Jeremy Hawthorn in his book *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* points out this feature of polyphony in this way:

Bakhtin uses the word voice in a special way, To include not just matters unguis tic but also matters. Relating to IDEOLOGY and power in society. Voice for Dostoevsky refers not just to an originating person, but to a network of beliefs and power relationships which Attempt to place and situate the listener in certain ways. (267)

Midnight's Children includes not only the transcribed dialogues between the various characters, but also the implicit or explicit voices of the narrator, author and even the reader. A notable passage from *Midnight's Children*, in the voice of the protagonist narrator Saleem while discovering his magical telepathy, echoes the extended concept of dialogue as Polyphony. Saleem finds that It was possible..... to act as a sort of National network, so that by opening myTransformed 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. (314)

Saleem's power becomes more than telepathy in his relation with the children of midnight because it allows conversations among them, it allows them to put forward their own perceptions as can be seen in a parliamentary session. This 'Loksabha' in his brain indicates the independence of every voice. Saleem describes "the views of a typical selection of the conference members" (316) and a veritable dialogue can be seen between different philosophies and aims such as collectivism, individualism, filial duty, capitalism, religion, courage, right for marginalized groups of society, fantasies of power, and so on.

Born at the stroke of midnight on August 14/15, 1947 and named after Hindu god of destruction, Shiva, represents the alternative side of India: poor Hindu and as aggressive as Saleem is passive. As a child, he is the leader of a street gang and possibly a murderer. He is driven by a determinedly individual perspective and grows up unable to form any human attachments. An example of Shiva's own strong views about the rich boys of the society, while having an argument between Saleem and him regarding the leadership of the midnight's children, brings out Shiva's voice as an individual, independent voice in the novel. Shiva says, "Forget all that, man. That club shub stuff is only for you rich boys!" (315) Saleem's own opinion about Shiva helps in building up Shiva's individuality:

To be honest: I didn't like Shive. I disliked the roughness of his tongue, the crudity of his ideas; and I was beginning to suspect him of a string of terrible crimes although I found it impossible to find any evidence in his thoughts, because he, alone of the children of midnight, could close off from me any part of his thoughts he chose to keep to himself(314)

Tai, the Kashmiri boatman, although belongs to the poor class of society, have his own strong opinions about the grave matters of state, strongly presents himself as the voice of "Other" in the text. Although most of the local people attribute his seemingly nonsensical statements to delirium, or insanity, or stupidity, Tai ultimately demonstrates great wisdom. He says:

Kashmiris are different. Cowards, for instance. Put a gun in a Kashmiri's hand and it will have to go off by itself he'll never dare to pull the trigger. We are not like Indians, always, making battles. (37-38)

Regarding Aadam Aziz's prominent nose, Tai alludes to the important role noses will play not only in Aadam's life but in future generations of his family as well. Tai's comments also introduce the idea that

sensory experience and instinctual behaviour are link entities. He says: That's a nose to start a family on, my princeling. There'd be no mistaking whose broods, they were (...). There are dynasties waiting inside it, (...) 'like snot.'(9-10)

A polyphonic novel also celebrates the participation of both author and reader. Talking about the author first, protagonist Saleem Sinai is Rushdie's alter-ego. One instance from the text shows how the narrator Saleem is engaged in a conversation with his audience just like Rushdie, the author. As follows:

You ask: these are ten-year-olds? I reply: yes, but. You say:

did ten- years-olds, or even almost-elevens, discuss the role of the individual in society? And the rivalry of capital and labour? Wear the internal stresses of agrarian and industrialized zones made explicit? And conflicts in socio-cultural heritages? Did children of less than four thousand days discuss identity, and the inherent conflicts of capitalism?

Having got through fewer than one hundred thousand hours, did they Contrast Gandhi and Marxlenin, power and importance? Was collectively Opposed to singularity? Was God killed by children? Even allowing for the truth of the supposed miracles, can we now believe that urchins spoke like old men with beards?

I say: maybe not in these words; may be not in words at all, but in the purer language of thought... because children are the vessels into which adults pour their poison. (355)

The use of "You ask", and "I say", highlights the dialogue between the narrator and the audience that means Rushdie articulates the antiipated disbelief and questions of the audience who would find it difficult to swallow the idea that ten-year-olds discuss mighty questions of political, economic, social and cultural domains. Another instance from the text shows how Saleem / Rushdie is desperate to explain the concept of truth:

'I told you the truth,' I say yet again, 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects ,eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trust someone else's version more than his own .' (292)

Saleem indicates the importance of the reader / audience at various points in the novel. Padma is Saleem's one and only patient, often skeptical audience. Padma's continuous interruption can be treated as the doubtful questionings of the reader to his author. And Saleem's solemn answering to Padma is just like the humble appeal of the author to his reader. In this regard we can remember Jean Paul Sartre's essay "Why Write?" where he clearly states that the author and the reader are dependent on each other. While mentioning the role of a reader's consciousness as a 'revealer' of the meaning he says: Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a "revealer", that is, it is through human reality that "there is"being, (...) man is the means by which things are manifested.(Web)

In *Midnight's Children*, no doubt Padma plays the role of the revealer or the reader. Padma's participation is important for Saleem as her curiosity regarding Saleem's life story gives Saleem the pleasure of explaining – that pleasure which an author enjoys while communicating with his reader. Some examples of Padma's curiosity or rather doubtful questionings from the text are "what nonsense, How can a picture talk?",(55) "What date was it?"(308)"In the head? You mean in the upper story?"(382) "What are you saying? You, mister: are you telling that you also What nameless thing can eat up any man's bones? Is it"(382), "What happened to her?" "How" (390) etc.

The dialogic relation with Padma who is his audience is of immense importance to him. He calls her his "necessary ear" (206).He compares the interrelation between himself as the author/narrator and Padma as

the audience. When Padma leaves him temporarily Saleem misses the dialogic input of Padma's reactions, critique and questions. He says: "our Padma has gone, and I miss her. Yes, that's it" (207). Without the participation of Padma, the narrative will become one dimensional. It is Padma, his audience within the novel, who connects him to the present and keeps his feet on the ground. To him, the criticism of his audience is the "necessary counter weights" (206) to his own and it keeps his feet "on the ground" (206) and finally Saleem, to show the influence of audience admits also that Padma, his audience is "leaking" into him. (45)

In his book *Literary Theory and Criticism* Patricia Waugh talked about another Bakhtinian Concept – which has been most widely invoked, engaged, and reconfigured is carnival, or the carnivalesque, as he says:

Originating in Bakhtin's literary – historical research on medieval festivals for his book on Rabelais, 'Carnival' is a term that has been extensively plundered by contemporary literary and cultural theorists to help explain texts and events in which the world is 'temporarily turned upside down'. (230)

As Bakhtin himself writes in the Introduction to *Rabelais and His World* that 'carnival time' is special precisely because it gives license to the prevailing social hierarchies to be reversed. The carnivalesque literary mode subverts and liberates the assumptions of the traditional literary genres and canons, through humor and chaos. Like the activities that take place in the carnivals of popular culture, the carnivalesque in the novel lampoons and overturns traditional hierarchies and values. "High culture" mingles with "low culture," the sacred with the profane, among other such misalliances. (Web)

In his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* Pramod k. Nayar shows how Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* presents the serious discourses and political themes of nationalism, patriotism and identity. Rushdie invents their significance by showing how these nations are accidental, highly personal and often limited. In *Midnight's Children*, for example, Rushdie's Saleem believes that the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 happened because he imagined it. Here Rushdie is reducing a massive event to a single individual's fantasy. There is nothing remarkable in the situation of war- it all exists in the person's mind. This is carnivalesque because it subverts a so-called national event and transforms it into a mundane act of day dreaming and adolescent fantasy.

Despite the pangs of partition, the biggest festival ever which the two countries India and Pakistan celebrated at the midnight while they were relishing their much awaited independence opens the path of applying carnivalesque in the text. *Midnight's Children* were blessed with magical powers irrespective of family background. Saleem Sinai who is actually Wee Willie Winky and Vanita's biological son was blessed with the most beautiful magical power ever. Shiva, Parvati and all others do have different backgrounds, but they were put into same status through the gift of midnight. Another example of subversion from the text is when the nurse Mary Pereira changed Vanita's biological son Saleem with Amina's. In this way the rich baby came to poor family and vice-versa and there by giving the poor baby a life of privilege and the rich baby a life of poverty. In this way somehow the social positions are reversed. The description of the situation from the text as follows, "...While Mary Pereira, in the name of love, changed the baby-tags of history and became a second mother to me..." (566)

Another important fact regarding subversion is that all the details presented by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* are not reliable. This is not that he was not aware of the important historical dates, but it is done intentionally. Inaccuracy in presenting history is done deliberately for the purpose of subverting the so called grand narration. Here we may cite the example of putting the inaccurate date for Gandhiji's death or presenting India as "India is Indira and Indira is India?" (587), avoiding Mahatma Gandhi. The leading

notion is that Gandhi represents India's national identity. But Rushdie, wanted to show us Indian history is not only the history of the politically powerful heroes, it also includes many histories or mini- narratives, which are very much related to our nation India or Indian history.

While discussing 'Carnavalesque' in his Rabelais's and his world, Bakhtin elaborates another concept of Rabelais related to 'grotesque body'. Rabelais used this concept as a weapon for relating political events of his time to human anatomy. To Bakhtin this 'grotesque body' is a 'trope', which allows him to breakdown the Renaissance concept of 'beautiful body'. From the time of Renaissance, human beings became the centre of attraction. His / her physical beauty became the inspiration of creating beautiful paintings, sonnets etc. Beautiful body, which is nothing but a material feature, started to be linked with something spiritual and something which is the only quality to be in a higher social position. Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque body' or rather 'grotesque realism' is the onslaughts of reality which breaks down the dream like concept of spirituality. By degrading the physical beauty of human being Bakhtin goes against the tradition. It is a kind of subversion of the official notion of beauty. The passage below shows what purpose the 'grotesque body' plays in Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism':

The grotesque body is a concept, or literary trope, but forward by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Francois Rabelais' work. The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material level. Through the use of the grotesque body in his novels, Rabelais related political conflicts to human anatomy (...) Bakhtin pinpoints two important subtexts: the first is carnival (carnavalesque) and the second is grotesque realism (grotesque body). Thus, in Rabelais and his world Bakhtin studies the interaction between the socio and the literary, as well as the meaning of the body. (Web)

Midnight's Children describes various examples that oppose the traditional ideals of beautiful bodies, such as: Saleem's gargantuan nose; Padma's plumpness, hairy-arms, and strong muscles; the enormous moles on Naseem's face that look like witch's nipples; Adam Aziz's nose, Shiva's knees It can be found that each character of the novel has some lacks in his/her physical beauty as if all together they are challenging the norms of acceptable appearance and behaviour in a society. This is part of the carnivalistic opposition to official norms and the creation of an atmosphere in which 'other' views can be heard. In a Carnival or Festival, people wear masks, ignore the hierarchical beliefs, and enjoy everything with great laughter. In this novel also, it can be found that Saleem's or Aadam Aziz's large nose evokes laughter in people. So somehow the grotesque organs create the atmosphere of laughter in the novel. One instance from the text shows how Saleem's nose caused surprise in Zagallo, in Saleem's own voice is given below:

And now it is possible to observe a joke descending on Zagallo, a joke pulling his face apart into the simulacrum of a smile; it is possible to watch his hand darting forward, thumb-and-forefinger extended; to note how thumb-and-forefinger close around the tip of my nose and pull downwards...where the nose leads, the head must follow .(320)

Another example from the text which arouses laughter in us is when Saleem describes the grotesque ears of his son Aadam Sinai "He was born with ears which flapped so high and wide that they must have heard the shootings in Bihar and the screams of lathi-charged dock-workers in in Bombay..."(587)

Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism' is not limited only within the sphere of breaking norms and evoking laughter and all. To Bakhtin, the 'grotesque body' parts are not something private to a person. It is not his own private property rather it is a medium to be in connection with the outer world. It is the place through which the inner world meets the outer and vice-versa. So, the grotesque body part becomes something universal, representing all people. There is a kind of positive approach on Bakhtin's part as he

presents the grotesque body parts as having something more valuable qualities than cancelling only hierarchical norms. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie also presents the 'grotesque body parts' of the characters as universal organs. As Saleem says:

It was possible not only to pick up the children's transmission; not only to broadcast my own messages; but also (since I seem to be stuck with this radio metaphor) 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.(314)

Another example is Saleem's long nose – his nose, in the novel, doesn't belong to him as his own private organ. The universal purpose of his nose connects him with other people's feelings, emotions etc. One example from the text, "Saleem's nose (you can't have forgotten) could smell stranger things than horse-dung. The perfumes of emotions and ideas, the odour of how-things-were: all these were and are nosed out by me with ease."(592) Saleem's grandpa Aadam Aziz's long nose was also a universal one through which the inner world of him meets with the outer world. Here, what boatman Tai said about Aziz's nose is important. Tai said to Aziz about his nostril, "It's the place where the outside world meets the world inside you."(15) In case of Saleem it also happens. He says:

New Delhi smells assailed me in Connaught place – the biscuity perfume of the J.B.Mangharam advertisement, the mournful chalkiness of crumbling plaster(...)green-grass-smells from the circular park in the middle of the whirling traffic, mingled with the fragrance of con-men persuading foreigners to change money on the black market in shadowy archways. From the India Coffee House (...) three came the less pleasant aroma of new stories beginning: intrigues marriages quarrels whose smells were all mixed up with those of tea and chilli –pakoras(...).(627)

So, in this way also Bakhtinian concept of 'grotesque realism' can be applied to *Midnight's Children*.

Bakhtin further extended the concept of this universality of the grotesque organs as something unfinished and always growing. Death is not at all allowed to stop this growth. These grotesque organs are always renewing themselves, regenerating themselves through the birth of new life, new generation. It is always something becoming, something unfinished and incomplete. To describe it more clearly, a passage has been given below:

The notion of ambivalence is also very important in Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque. According to him, grotesque image is something which represents an unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth of growth and becoming.

It is frightening and humorous at the same time. It is incomplete, and this aspect challenges Renaissance perception of body. (Web)

In *Midnight's Children*, the grotesque body parts can be seen as possessing all the necessary qualities like incompleteness, continuous growth and power of regenerating life. In the text, Tai once pointed out Aadam Aziz's grotesque nose as having some connections with his future generations. Aadam commented regarding his own nose, "Yes, yes, it is a remarkable specimen. They tell me there are dynasties waiting in it..." (29) And Aadam Sinai, who is the successor of Aadam Aziz, was born with grotesque ears. The birth of Ganesh with big ears shows the unfinished process of creation. Aadam Aziz's grotesque qualities renewed itself, regenerated itself through Aadam Sinai (Ganesh). "He was the true great-grandson of his great grandfather, but elephantiasis attacked him in the ears instead of the nose-because he was also true son of Shiva-and-Parvati; he was elephant-headed Ganesh;"(587) And Shiva and Parvati's magical qualities also get restored through the creation of new life. So, it is always growing, always becoming new. The purpose of this grotesque organ in *Midnight's Children* leads to the celebration of new life, new

generation. Saleem says, “Saleem-and-Shiva, nose-and-knees...we shared just three things: the moment(and its consequences)of our birth; the guilt of treachery; and our son Aadam, our synthesis, unsmiling, grave,with omni-audient ears.”(593) So, in this way Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* proves itself totally on the grounds of Bakhtinian concept of ‘Grotesque Realism’ rather ‘Carnavalesque’.

Conclusion : It is mentioned at the very first that this paper provides a re-reading of Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, polyphony and carnivalesque to *Midnight’s Children*, so at the end, now its time to evaluate how much the application of Bakhtinian philosophy has been justified throughout this paper. No doubt that *Midnight’s Children* celebrates the presence of many voices by giving importance to both ‘self’ and ‘other’. *Midnight’s Children* maintains throughout the story the atmosphere of carnival by introducing grotesque figures from upper and lower section of society. So, Bakhtinian concept goes hand in hand with *Midnight’s Children*. This paper enriches the appliance of Bakhtinian philosophy on *Midnight’s Children* with lots of examples from and deep analysis of the novel. And this purpose is thought to be quite well achieved throughout the discussions about the novel. One more thing about this paper is that, it is still open for more other new examples from the text to support the Bakhtinian philosophy as an important part of *Midnight’s Children*. In an interview with T.Vijay Kumar, Rushdie shared his experience of writing this novel. Rushdie said, “Yeah, I thought I would do something very dangerous. It was a big gamble; that’s all. A gamble with, apart from anything else; it was a gamble with five years of my life!”. (212-227) So, it is not an easy task to analyze critically Rushdie’s five years of gamble from Bakhtinian point of view. It can be hoped that this paper has contributed at least a bit to fulfill this purpose.

Works Cited

1. “Grotesque body”. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org.Web](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/Web). 6 July 2015.
2. Hawthorn, Jeremy. *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. 4th ed. London: Arnold, 2000. Print.
3. Nayar.Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2011. Print.
4. On Bakhtin’s “Carnival” and “Grotesque.” <http://zenfloyd.blogspot.in/2008/11/some-note-on-bakhtins-carnival-and.html?m=1>. Web.24 June 2015.
5. Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight’s Children*. London: Vintage Books, 2013. Print.
6. Sartre, Jean Paul. “Why Write?.” teaching.thenoiseofthestreet.net. Web. 6 July 2015.
7. Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker. *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 5th ed. New Delhi: Pearson Education, Ltd, 2007. Print.
8. Vijay, Kumar T. “Doing the Dangerous Thing: An Interview with Salman Rushdie. *Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children: A Book of Readings*. Ed.Meenakshi 9.Mukherjee. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003. 212-227. Print.
9. Viswanathan,Uma. Polyphony of *Midnight’s Children*. <http://gandhiviswanathan.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/amma-thesis-merged.pdf>. Web. 18 June 2015.
10. Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.