

## **Major Themes of *Midnight's Children*/ CC-12**

### ***Bildungsroman***

*Midnight's Children* is regarded as a *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, that takes the form of a fictional biography as the main character, Saleem Sinai, tries to make sense of his life, his convictions, and his contributions to Indian history. The main character's attempt at ordering his life is typical of the *bildungsroman*.

The term *bildungsroman*, is used to justify a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age) in which character change is important.

With this novel, Rushdie makes two great contributions to the *bildungsroman* genre. On one hand, he writes a narrative that pairs public affairs with the main character's private life. On the other, he brilliantly employs the world of the senses to show how his characters experience the world. Sensory phenomena actively propel the narrative. For example, a bump on the nose causes the character Aadam Aziz to reject religion, while a warning tickle in his nose saves his life during a massacre.

### **Partition and Histories of Violence**

*Midnight's Children* begins in 1919 with the Amritsar Massacre. This event sets up the bloodshed and violence that come to dominate Indian history. The Amritsar Massacre (also called the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre) was a British attack on an unarmed, protesting crowd on April 13, 1919.

The birth of the protagonist on 15 August, 1947 is the date on which India won its independence from British rule and was partitioned or divided into two countries along religious lines: India, made up primarily of Hindus; and Pakistan, made up primarily of Muslims. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, which involves the worship of various deities and a belief in reincarnation.

The secession of Bangladesh in 1971 further fragmented the Indian subcontinent. In an attempt to diminish political and population inequalities among the varying regions of Pakistan, Pakistan had been divided into East Pakistan (formerly East Bengal) and West Pakistan. However, a shared religion was not enough to hold the two regions together. Pakistan fractured when the East wing—Bangladesh—declared itself independent.

The declaration of Emergency from 1975-77 gave Mrs. Gandhi the power to rule by decree, removing citizens' civil liberties, banning various religious and political parties, and jailing thousands of dissidents. This period of 21 months was the period of trauma for Indian citizens.

### **Elements of Magic Realism**

In this novel, through the eyes of Saleem Sinai, individual experiences are reflected. Saleem was born at the very moment of India's independence; his life is interlinked with the political, national, and religious events of his time, which gives him a strong desire to restore his past identity to himself. Realism plays a dominant role in terms of describing the significant events. It goes as detailed as Sinai himself and his family members, especially the experiences of his grandfather, provides a unique perspective for the readers to view what happened during the period of Indian independence. Without the magic realism, the novel, *Midnight's Children* could have been ended up as another historical documentary. The use of magic realism not only makes the novel more appealing, but also exposes another level of importance in terms of the narrator himself as well as the Indian history as a whole.

### **Diction and Trauma**

*Midnight's Children* is a history told in sensory terms. The author's diction, or word choice, captures the physical effects of trauma, hostility, and threats to the body. For example, bodies "crumble"; "blood plop[s]"; mountains "snarl" like "angry jaws"; a valley is circled "by giant teeth"; and a story does not end but is "put out of its misery." The births of a nation and of a suffering boy are histories of catastrophic danger told with graphic attention to physical detail.

### **Saleem and Empathy**

In *Midnight's Children* the main male character, Saleem Sinai, is impotent, as is Nadir Khan, the poet-lover of Amina Sinai. Saleem cannot fulfill what is, in the eyes of his culture, his mature, masculine function. Yet he rejects Padma's wish to find a doctor to cure his impotence. His sterilization during the Emergency guarantees his inability to father a child.

In 1947 the young nation did not hold a vote to confirm the Kashmiri border. Subsequently, India was not able to resolve internal conflicts by redrawing state lines, which left Kashmir open to claims by China and Pakistan.

## Symbols

### **Indira Gandhi**

Indira Gandhi, the green and black Widow, symbolizes the duality of India after its independence. She originates in Saleem's recurring dream and returns in a daydream or a nightmare, riding—not a broomstick—but a stream of memories and a wave of accusations at the close of the Emergency. Her face is as green as agricultural India, the Indian flag, and the chutney Saleem Sinai loves, a staple of the Indian diet. (*Indira is India; India is Indira* was her slogan.)

The part in her hair separates black hair from white. It is this division in her judgment that costs her reelection in 1977: her black deeds and her white resolutions. Black represents the torture, the sterilization, and the destruction of the slums, which place responsibility for improvement and modernization at the feet of the most helpless and impoverished citizens. Black is also the color of the darkest citizens, most often a sign of identity at the lowest end of the caste ladder.

### **Red and Yellow Colours**

A world seen through green and yellow lenses represents a world of united vision, communal purpose. The dream at the birth of India is colored by hope as innocent as the midnight babies. This hope is represented in a world of unified colors, a cinematic trick, a matter of lighting, an homage to Bombay and to Bollywood (film empire located in Bombay, now Mumbai), and to technical triumph.

### **Perspective and Narrator**

*Midnight's Children* is told in the first and third person by an unreliable narrator.

### **Tense**

*Midnight's Children* shifts between present and past tenses as the narrative moves back and forth in time. While the frame tale is told in the present tense, the main character Saleem's memories of the circumstances surrounding his birth and his adolescence are cast in the past tense.

### **Justification of the Title**

The title *Midnight's Children* refers to the 581 surviving children—from an initial group of 1,001—born in India at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment India became independent of British rule.

**Courtesy : Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam**

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## **Prayer Before Birth *by Louis MacNeice***

I am not yet born; O hear me.  
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the  
club-footed ghoul come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.  
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me  
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words  
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,  
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,  
my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me  
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses  
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,  
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God  
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
one face, a thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.