

**Introduction to World Literature**  
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**Errata in MC**

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**'ERRATA': OR, UNRELIABLE**  
**NARRATION IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN***

**A**ccording to Hindu tradition, the elephant-headed god Ganesha is very fond of literature; so fond that he agrees to sit at the feet of the bard Vyasa and take down the entire text of the *Mahabharata*, from start to finish, in an unparalleled act of stenographic love.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai makes a reference, at one point, to this old tradition. But his version is a little different. According to Saleem, Ganesha sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and took down the *Ramayana*. Saleem is wrong. It is not his only mistake. During his account of the evolution of the city of Bombay, he tells us that the city's patron-goddess Mumbadevi has fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombayites: 'The calendar of festivals reveals her decline... Where is Mumbadevi's day?' As a matter of fact, the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi Day, or at least it does in all versions of India except Saleem's.

And how could Lata Mangeshkar have been heard singing on All-India Radio as early as 1946? And does Saleem not know that it was not General Sam Manekshaw who accepted the surrender of the Pakistan Army at the end of the Bangladesh War—the Indian officer who was Tiger Viraat's old chum being, of course, Jagjit Singh Arora? And why does Saleem allege that the brand of cigarettes, State Express 555, is manufactured by W. D. & H. O. Wills?

I could continue. Concrete tetrapods have never been used in Bombay as part of any land reclamation scheme, but only to show up and protect the sea wall along the Marine Drive promenade. Nor could the train that brings Picture Singh and Saleem from Delhi to Bombay possibly have passed through Kuria, which is on a different line.

Excuse me. It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far

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Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course, titled 'Introduction to world literature'. Today we are looking at a short prose piece, a short essay written by Salman Rushdie. It is titled 'Errata' or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*. This is an essay that he published 10 years after the publication of *Midnight's Children* which is 1991. This was part of a collection titled *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism, 1981 till 1991*. This is not really a collection of literary essays. This is a collection, it is an assortment of a various range of things that he talks about, literary and nonliterary, about history, about imagination, about his connection with the nation.

So it is an assortment of various thing that he talks about and this work particularly talks about the process of writing *Midnight's Children* and not perhaps a process of writing *Midnight's Children*, it is more like a meta work which is looking back at the work and trying to see and almost trying to help the reader to give some clues as to how to read the book. And this cannot be approached from a theoretical perspective and there is a way in which this work tries to undercut some of the ways in which *Midnight's Children* is being read across the decade and as we know

the instant success that *Midnight's children* enjoyed and the kind of international reception and the national recognition that this work got as soon as it was published.

And it also tells us about the massive way in which the work was taken on by Academy, by the critics. So this work, I find this especially useful in the context of discussing *Midnight's children* because this also offers an intervention, it also offers a view where the author himself, a paradigm, a vantage point from which the author himself steps back a little and then takes a look at that work from a different, an entire different point of view altogether. So this work if I may say, this is an attempt. This essay is an attempt to call into question the act of remembering.

And it also examines the filters, there are various filters through which memory passes through. And *midnight's children* is seen as a text which talks about the nation, it is a story of the nation, it is the story of the nation retold from a very different perspective. It is a minority perspective but it is also a very political personal perspective. At the same time, it is a perspective which is at the same time attached to history and detached from history and it is difficult to situate. If you are familiar with the text, the context, the setting, we also know that it is difficult to situate the text. It is neither in the new nation, it is not entirely in the old nation either.

It starts from the story of the undivided nation and it moves on to tell the story of the new nation but not necessarily seen 1947 as a split, not necessarily seen 1947 as the year which had cut the 2 provinces into 2 nations. So at some level,, *Midnight's children* is a text which encourages us to see the seamless ways in which these stories have got entwined and the accident of birth that we notice at the beginning of Saleem Sinai's birth, the way the breathings get switched at birth and it just tells us about how certain things are accidental and how that becomes a part of a very deliberate national collective memory.

So coming back to this essay, Errata or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's children*, I often find this text as a useful entry point to start talking about *Midnight's children*. The many things which make *Midnight's children*, the text that it is, it also begins to make sense when we look at the text and the minute ordinary and sometimes forgettable details which are part of the sequence of events. And *Midnight's children* has been seen as Saleem Sinai's. Saleem Sinai is a protagonist as we know. *Midnight's children* has been seen as Saleem Sinai's attempt to put his tale, put his story in a proper historical perspective.

And we can come across a number of works, a number of critical works which also try to situate this text as a work which is which can be read against the grain of national historiography as something which questions the dominant ways in which the nation stories have been told but we also know that there is another way in which this became a pattern, a standardised way in which stories get told about the nation, particularly within this space of Indian English fiction. So looking at this text, Errata or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's children*, we begin to also notice that this draws our attention to the personal nature of historical reminiscences.

Rushdie begins by highlighting a Hindu tradition and this beginning, the situation of his work *Midnight's children* as well as this meta process of him analysing the work in that respect, it is situated within a mythical tradition and this I find very interesting because he is not really drawing upon a western tradition, neither is he drawing our attention to a proper Indian tradition, an Indian literary critical tradition. He is on the contrary, drawing our attention to a mythical tradition which could be seen as Indian and also universal at multiple levels.

There is a way in which he situates this in the specificity of Hindu tradition but not really committed himself to any particular tangible tradition. So I will read out to you the excerpt, the opening sentences. According to Hindu tradition, the elephant headed God Ganesha is very fond of literature. So fond that he agrees to sit at the feet of the bard Vyasa and take down the entire text of the *Mahabharata* from start to finish in an unparalleled act of stenographic love. Look at the way in which he uses words and images and how the registers shift in a very typical post-modern way that Rushdie's works also signify.

And coming into the details, he begins talking about the mistakes and how does he begin talking about the mistakes? It is by drawing our attention firstly to the two references that Saleem Sinai makes. Look at the way in which he distances, look at the way in which the author distances himself from the protagonist which is obviously his own creation and this distancing serves very well we realise and also at a later point. This is a very short essay, in 4 pages, in less than a few paragraphs. We find that Rushdie is able to make an entry into this argument by distancing himself from the protagonist and also finally take on that position as his own.

And this is the journey that I want to take you through in the process of reading this essay closely along with you. And in the beginning, he tells us about how Saleem Sinai makes a reference and

it is according to this old tradition but his versions are a little different and he says, Salim is wrong and that is the starting point. And this I would say, it also takes immense confidence from Rushdie as a writer to acknowledge that he is going to talk about the mistakes and there is no attempt to justify it.

On the contrary, on the other hand we find how Rushdie very cleverly uses these strokes to talk about how it actually had helped the narration and even helped the success of *Midnight's children*. And this is how he qualifies that mistake. Saleem Sinai did, Saleem Sinai of course was wrong. It is not only his mistake, during his account of the evolution of the city of Bombay, he tells us that the city's patron God, this Mumbadevi has fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombay-ites.

The calendar of festival reveals her decline. Where is Mumbadevi's day. As a matter of fact, the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi's day or at least it does in all versions of India except. While drawing our attention to the mistakes, the Errata in *Midnight's children*, the mistakes, the wrong information that Saleem Sinai gives in this novel, he is also saying that this is another version. So he is initially taking the reader into confidence by talking about the wrongs, the mistakes, the errors but then he is also saying that is a different version.

And this is one of the perfect ways in which *Midnight's children* as a text and this short piece of prose writing where he is drawing our attention to the mistakes, he is trying to tell us that this is actually another version and this deliberately, it was always another version. And there are series of these errors that he is pointing out about Lata Mangeshkar, about hearing Lata Mangeshkar singing in 1946 which is almost impossible, about hearing Lata Mangeshkar singing in 1946 in the all India radio which he says is entirely wrong and also about the crucial mistake during the war, a crucial misinformation and also about the crucial thing that he gets wrong during the war and about why this Saleem that the brand of cigarettes, State Express 555 is manufactured by W.D. and H.O. Wills.

So there are a number of major and minor errors that Rushdie is pointing out here at. It could be something very trivial like getting the manufacturer's name wrong or it could be something very very serious like getting some detail about the war wrong. And he also says that he can continue and gives a series of relatively trivial errors and towards the end of the first page, Etcetera, it is

by now obvious I hope that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator. The unreliability of Saleem Sinai as a narrator is also telling us something about the unreliability of the version that he is producing before us.

Much as one is in awe with the narrative strategies adopted in *Midnight's Children* and also about the confidence that takes to talk about the errors in such explicit terms, one also wonders whether Rushdie is actually distancing himself from the particular climate of the nation and whether he is also trying to say that this is just another version which need not be taken seriously at all, this is unreliable. Just as I think, the original nationalist version is unreliable. You are perhaps free to consider this also as yet another unreliable version, no one needs to take this seriously.

And thereby, by diluting the politics, diluting the political nature of his act of writing, he is also, I would say trying to play safe in some way or the other. And then he makes this very strong compelling argument. It is by now obvious, I hope that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator and that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India. And this is a disclaimer, and a very strong one at that.

Of course the text does not claim that. It was an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India in the first place but by drawing our attention efficiently to this process of how the others got in, how the unreliability got in and how one need not take this seriously at all. There is also an attempt not to deliberately put things in any form of hierarchy. Of course that is one of his strategy, of course, that is one of the key things of the post-modern narration that *Midnight's Children* also exemplifies but when we look at it in the context of some of the details that Rushdie begins to shed towards the end of this essay, one also begins to see whether this is also a very settled political move, a settled act of distancing himself from the many things which could become controversial.

Of course, this is not to say that Rushdie loves to, of course this is not to say that Rushdie is a stranger to any kind of controversy but there is a certain kind of politics from Rushdie and by extension the entire body of writing, this entire body of writing which now we call as an English fiction prefers to stay away from. So looking at, coming back to look at the son of the other close relevance in this text, he also tells us about how unreliable narration works in this work in *Midnight's Children*. He says, unlike the other works which employ unreliable narrators, here

Saleem Sinai is neither stupid, nor unaware of what is happening. The reliability is introduced as something which would give this version certain functions and this is done deliberately. And the deliberate act of making a protagonist unreliable and not really stupid or unaware of things that is something that Rushdie begins to talk about. So then he asks this question, why is he using all these errata, why then all the errata?

One answer could be that the author has been sloppy in his research. I want you to pay attention to the word that he uses here. The register switches immediately. Research, this is not the term that one would usually associate with fictional, imaginative writing but we also if we are familiar with the body of writing, that is now called as (( ))(14:45) writing in English we realise that particularly in the work of fiction, we find the confidence of research, the confidence of the confidence of history writing. We find all of that going together and we also find most of the writers either at the beginning as a prefatory remark or as an appendix also sometimes talking about the kind of research that went into this work.

And if you are familiar with *Midnight's children*, you would also know that there is an emerging different work at work but it is also very very historical. There are many layers which the novel takes us through but fundamentally, there is history at work. And it is something that one cannot miss at all. And here when he is talking about results, he is also drawing our attention to the many small details that he had got wrong and that we know it was also a deliberate thing.

I have also received letters arguing about Bombay bus routes and informing me that certain ranks used by the Pakistan Army in the text are not used by the Pakistan Army in Pakistan. In these letters, there is always an undertone of pleasure: the reader's delight at having caught the writer out.

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I read this to you again. In these letters, there is always an undertone of pleasure: the reader's delight at having caught the writer out. Rushdie at some level has redefined the relation between the reader and writer. Here, he is very conscious, he is very aware of the delight that the reader gets when the reader finds a mistake in the text and he is willing to play along. And that is what makes Rushdie, also one of those very typical post-modern writers and what he does here is and not only is he aware of the pleasure that the writer gets and he is willing to give it more and that is something we notice as an explicit thing, not so subtle thing throughout *Midnight's Children*.

The reader is always there, the reader, there is an act of engagement that is demanded from the reader and the reader is allowed to be in a position that enables him or her to catch the writer, to catch the writer doing the wrong thing, catch the right word getting it wrong and that becomes the source of pleasure. Interestingly, the pleasure is out of not getting it right but it comes after having discovered that the writer has got it entirely wrong. And this is something that will perhaps we will dwell upon in a little bit of detail when we look at *Midnight's Children* as well.

So and now there is a very deliberate shift which is being made from identifying all the errors, from attributing all the errors to Saleem Sinai, the protagonist, from whom he also detaches himself. Now he moves on to another level. Now he says, let me confess that the novel does contain a few mistakes that are mine as well as Saleem's. So the author figure comes in. The

author figure is now trying to identify himself with the with the protagonist for 2 things I would say-one he is trying to justify the errors and the deliberate strategies employed by protagonist.

Two, he is trying to tell us, he is trying to tell the reader that I orchestrated it. Of course I would distance myself from the protagonist but I would also admit and I will also intervene at the right points of time to say that I orchestrated it. And we find the personal intervening in a very beautiful way here. One, when he is talking about the description of the Amritsar massacre and he talks about how desperate, how upset he was when he first found out that he had made an error.

One would not even know whether they should take Rushdie seriously when he is writing about this here or whether this is also another deliberate strategy to mislead the reader and give some pleasure to the reader and the ending of that paragraph makes me suspect that no, the mistake feels more and more like Salim's. Its wrongness feels right. That is what take that is what also makes this text, *Midnight's children*, a text which is part of world literature I would argue because there is a certain wrongness about that text which makes it accessible to all cultures, traditions and all historical context and there is a certain rightness in those wrongs.

And we can perhaps go into the details of some of the instances when we get a chance to look at the text itself. And then he tells us about how deliberately, how Rushdie deliberately wanted to work towards getting things right. And this subversion is very very interesting. He is not working towards getting things right, he is working to what the minute details that he could get it right, so that he could subvert it in deliberate ways. So that he could give an alternate story which he has worked upon.

He could give an alternate version and also tell us how meticulously that has been framed. This, when you read this elsewhere, though I went to some trouble to get things wrong. Originally at the passages had detained of inaccuracy introduced. Unintentional mistakes were, on being discovered, not expunged from the text but rather emphasised, given more prominence in the story. This odd behaviour requires an explanation. Now he is taking it upon himself to tell the reader why this exercise was done and why this exercise was important and why it is important now for the reader for understanding the text.



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THIRAKA' OR, UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

placed a double filter between me and my subject, and I hoped that if I could only imagine vividly enough it might be possible to see beyond those filters, to write as if the years had not passed, as if I had never left India for the West. But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool. Saleem's greatest desire is for what he calls meaning, and near the end of his broken life he sets out to write himself, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him. He is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is cutting up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati. The small errors in the text can be read as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates.

He is also remembering, of course, and one of the simplest truths about any set of memories is that many of them will be false. I myself have a clear memory of having been in India during the China War. I 'remember' how frightened we all were, I 'recall' people making nervy little jokes about needing to buy themselves a Chinese phrase book or two, because the Chinese Army was not expected to stop until it reached Delhi. I also know that I could not possibly have been in India at that time. I was interested to find that even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance. I thought that was an important lesson to learn.

Thereafter, as I wrote the novel, and whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version. This is why, even though Saleem admits that no tidal wave passed through the Sunderbans in the year of the Bangladesh War, he continues to be borne out

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As he begins to talk about it, he first tells us that his original intention was very Proustian and then it takes another drastic shift which is what I am more interested in. He is first talking on behalf of Saleem Sinai. He is telling us that Saleem has this desire to create meaning and this entire text, *Midnight's children*, *Midnight's children* as a text is about this act of creating meaning. And he also tells us about the biases, about the particular situatedness of Saleem Sinai that he is not a dispassionate or disinterested chronicler.

He wants to shape his material that the reader will be focused to concede a central role. So everything has been revamped, everything has been redefined, restructured and reshaped so that Saleem Sinai will occupy the centre stage. And this is something again that we get to know that has been done deliberately. It is not as if the story unfolds and Saleem Sinai finds himself at the centre. The entire story has been conceded in such a way that it will be narrated, it will be presented, it will be projected in a way in which only Saleem Sinai could be at the centre.

And the way in which gets told, the big generation progresses, we also know that there is no other way in which this can be wiped out and that is how very strategically, the narrative elements happen plays (22:16) point. He is getting up history to suit himself just as he did when he did cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati.

The small errors in the text can be read as clues and in a very brief way towards the end of this section, Rushdie is also telling us about offering clues to read the text, about indicating that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small and he is an interested party in the events he narrates and just when Rushdie begins to tell us how this small exercise, how this short piece, how this short exercise can also be taken as clues to read the text.

We find this short piece moving to another significant aspect. And this is where the personal, the power of the personal emerges as a powerful intervention and this is when he begins to talk about the act of remembering, how the entire work, *Midnight's children* can be seen as an act of remembering and how the political and the personal begins to intersect in a very peculiar way.

So we wrap up with today and in the next session, we will be looking at the various aspects which make *Midnight's children*, a text of remembering and how Rushdie himself draws our attention to the ways in which he himself as an author figure had remembered the many details which have now become a part of this text. I hope you will get a chance to take a look at this short essay and be more familiar with it when we come back to discuss it again. And thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.