

CONSTRUCTING A NEW INDIA:
NATION, MYTH AND SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*
CONSTRUINDO UMA NOVA ÍNDIA:
NAÇÃO, MITO E OS FILHOS DA MEIA-NOITE, DE SALMAN RUSHDIE

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ABSTRACT: National identity at its root attempts to operate as a unifying force in a society. This identity is created through a guiding narrative which is rhetorically constructed. As such, myth plays a central role in the creation of nations and their identities. India, as a relatively new nation, serves as an interesting example of this phenomenon. Nehru in his "A Tryst with Destiny" speech on the eve of independence employs many types of myth as he attempts to unify a nation of the verge of being born. In response, Salman Rushdie dissects and exposes the myths employed by the Indian nation in his novel, *Midnight's Children*.

KEYWORDS: Rhetoric. Nation. Rushdie. India. Myth.

National identity at its root attempts to operate as a unifying force in a society. The narrative which forges this identity serves as a guiding framework through which the nation is defined. Many theorists delineate the rhetorically constructed nature of the nation which often employs myth as one of its most powerful tools. India is no exception to this and employs myths in its national identity, providing an interesting case due to the recency of its establishment as an independent nation. Salman Rushdie exposes these myths in his novel *Midnight's Children* which serves as an individual narrative elucidating and reifying rhetorical and postcolonial theory with vivid, rich, and accessible detail. Yet, Rushdie's novel introduces the dilemma of whether it is advisable or not to expose these myths in the first place.

Building the Foundation

Many rhetorical and postcolonial scholars have established the notion of the nation as a rhetorical construct. Benedict Anderson explicates that, "from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community. Thus today, even the most insular nations accept the principle of *naturalization* (wonderful word!), no matter how difficult in practice they make it" (145). In other words, the nation is not something inherent, innate or biological. While it seems to be something natural or something acquired through birth, the truth is that it is something conceived in the mind and through the vehicle of language.

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Etienne Balibar clearly articulates the rhetorical nature of what he terms “fictive ethnicity.” Balibar declaratively states that, “*Every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary*, that is to say, it is based on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name and on traditions lived as the trace of an immemorial past (even when they have been fabricated and inculcated in the recent past)” (221). Balibar’s notion here is that collective identities are, in actuality, contextually situated individual identities. Individuals adopt or adhere to societal mores which, in turn, give the impression of collectivity. According to Balibar, this impression of collectivity is what is then used to identify and distinguish insiders (citizens) from outsiders (222). Expanding on this premise, Balibar states that “No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but ... represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture, and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions” (Balibar 224). Here, the narrative of national identity serves as a defining force for the both the nation as well as the individual. It is the transcendence of the concept of nation and its resultant identity that Balibar refers to that allows the narratives of nations to shape large amounts of their populations in a variety of ways.

Rhetoric is the means through which these narratives are actualized and replicated. Victor Villanueva explains rhetoric’s role in narratives such as that of national identity by stating that, “Rhetoric, after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained. Rhetoric, then, would be the means by which hegemonies could be countered” (121). Stated differently, Villanueva emphasizes the role of language and its deliberate application in the very narratives employed by nations and their leaders often in their own hegemonic best interests. Reinforcing this point is Anthony Smith who argues that, “The nation is an abstraction, a construct of the imagination; it is a community which is imagined as both sovereign and limited. It emerges when the realm of church and dynasty recede, and no longer seem to answer to mankind’s craving for immortality” (Smith 43). Smith further asserts that it is narratives and myths, among other rhetorical entities which give life and strength to the nation itself (9).

So powerful is myth in the creation and perpetuation of nations that Smith delineates the six major types of myths employed. He outlines six types of myths utilized by nations: temporal, location, ancestry, heroic age, decline, and regeneration. The first of these, what Smith terms “A Myth of Temporal Origins, *or When We Were Begotten*” is concerned with dating “the

community's origins, and so locate it in time and in relation to other relevant communities" (Smith 63). This myth is concerned with the beginning or the birth of the nation and places a premium on the time of birth or creation. The idea is that it is important to know when the nation or community emerged and is directly tied to the second category of myth, location.

Time and place are often inextricably linked and Smith discusses place in what he explicates is "A Myth of Location and Migration, or *Where We Come from and How We Got Here*" when he states, "Not all ethnic communities possess a fully elaborated myth of spatial origins, but all have some notions. Space is, after all, the other dimension necessary for a framework of self-identification, and assumes special importance where claims to territory are being pressed" (Smith 63). This myth imparts a premium on geography and argues that a certain place is a large part of the identity to be established. Smith notes that the relationship between time and place is so interrelated that myths utilizing either time or place often make reference to the other.

Related to time is "A Myth of Ancestry, or *Who Begot us and How We Developed*" which Smith denotes is "the symbolic kinship link between all members of the present generation of the community, and between this generation and all its forebears, down to the common ancestor" (Smith 64). In short, the myth of ancestry establishes a nation's citizenry as one people and is often a necessary component of any nationalistic appeal. There are a few reasons for this. The first of these has to do with the creation and the demarcation of boundaries. It is important to establish who is a citizen and who is not. Moreover, there is a need to create cohesiveness to the national identity and establishing an ancestral lineage does so in a powerful way. Ultimately, this type of myth centers on creating community and drawing communal borders.

The fourth category outlined by Smith is "A Myth of the Heroic Age, or *How We Were Freed and Became Glorious*" and it harkens back to an often magical and mystical time for the community. Smith clarifies what this category means by explaining that "While definitions of grandeur and glory vary, every nationalism requires a touch of virtue and heroism to guide and give meaning to the tasks of regeneration. The future of the ethnic community can only derive meaning and achieve its form from the pristine 'golden age' when men were 'heroes'" (Smith 65). This category is rife with nostalgia which often contains a distortion or at times a complete fabrication of the character and qualities of an earlier time. The use of this myth is to establish

the character of a nation. The nostalgic heroes that this type of myth valorizes possess and embody the qualities and characteristics to which members of the nation should aspire.

Related to nostalgia, is what Smith calls “A Myth of Decline, *or How We Fell into a State of Decay*.” He illuminates the connection between the two when he declares, “But how did that glorious age pass away, why have the heroes become the generations of the oppressed? Because, the old virtues were forgotten, moral decay set in, pleasure and vice overcame discipline and self-sacrifice, the old certainties and hierarchies dissolved, the barbarians burst through” (Smith 67). In this way, the heroic age is compared to the present and the present is found lacking. Something has gone wrong which separates the heroic age from the less than heroic present situation. He opines, “The myth of decline tells us how the community lost its anchor in a living tradition, how the old values became ossified and meaningless, and how, as a result, common sentiments and beliefs faded to give way to rampant individualism and the triumph of partisan interests over collective ideals and communal solidarity” (Smith 67). This myth clearly portrays the current state of the nation in a negative light and does so by comparing it with a utopian heroic age. In other words, the nation in its current incarnation has lost its way and fails to embody the utopian characteristics delineated in its narrative(s).

The myth of decline is often paired with the final category, “A Myth of Regeneration, *or How to Restore the Golden Age and Renew Our Community as ‘in the Days of Old’*” where there is movement from “an idealized, epic history to an account of ‘requires actions’, or rationale of collective mobilization” and that the myth operates toward goals that “can only represent ideal states, unattainable in an imperfect world; given that nature of social and geopolitical relations, they must always remain unfulfilled” (Smith 67-68). This final category is the call to action which fixes the problems articulated in the decline myth. It is important to note that the last three categories represent a pattern of nostalgic idealism to harsh and overstated pessimism to unattainable idealized end states of what the nation should be.

Constructing the Façade

The national identity of India is no different from the rhetorical constructs of nation scholars like Balibar and Smith theorize. As Balibar articulates, national boundaries are an important part of defining the nation. They serve to determine the spatial perimeter of the nation as well as its citizenry. In the case of India, Partition is used to arbitrarily determine national

borders on the basis of the religious affiliations of the people living in different geographical areas. As such, Partition as defining the physical confines of the Indian nation and the people within it. The main concern is the split between Muslim and Hindu inhabitants in the region. Yohanan Friedmann explains that “In India’s history, Hinduism was always the enemy of Islam.... Islam and Hinduism are, therefore, two different cultures; the Muslims and the Hindus are two distinct nations, which are no more similar to each other than the various nations of Europe, and can not possibly be united in one political framework” (Friedmann 157). Essentially, Friedmann argues that the two populations in colonial India are so culturally different that they cannot be incorporated into one cohesive nation. That is, in Smith’s framework, for these two groups, it is impossible for the nation to construct myths of ancestry uniting them as one Indian people.

Resultantly, two nations are actually formed, Pakistan and India. India is established as a secular state with a Hindu majority and Pakistan as a Muslim state. What follows this drawing of borders (borders which are so haphazardly drawn that Pakistan is literally cut into two halves, one of which later becoming Bangladesh) is the massive movement of people to the proper side of the newly drawn borders. In describing the chaos that ensues, Ian Talbot explains that Muslim leader Muhammed Ali Jinnah, who advocated vehemently for the separate Muslim state of Pakistan, “never seriously suspected that massive demographic adjustments would accompany partition. No plans were made to cope with the permanent migration of Muslims to Pakistan or the reverse migrations of Hindus and Sikhs to India” (11). The results of this action are not merely the uprooting of large sections of the population to either side of the border, but also unspeakable acts of violence and atrocity that accompanied the massive migrations to and from both sides of India’s border.

It is in this situatedness that Jawaharlal Nehru is tasked with bringing a nation together. In his brilliant speech “A Tryst with Destiny,” on the eve of Independence, Nehru employs many, but not all, of the myths that Smith outlines in his attempt to speak to his new nation and people. While the myths he does employ are important, the type of myth that he fails to use is equally significant, if not more so. Nehru uses all but one of Smith’s myth classifications and the one he fails to use is that of Location or Migration. Seen in conjunction with the ugliness of Partition, it is not difficult to see why he avoids this one. He cannot make use of the

location/migration myth because there is such a heinous reality with regard to that theme and additionally, the people well aware of the atrocities occurring will not buy into such a myth.

Strategically, Nehru's use of the other five myth categories displays his rhetorical acumen and understanding of the moment in which he and India find themselves. With regard to the temporal myth, Nehru states, "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance" (Nehru 3). He clearly pronounces the birth of the nation of India which just so happens to be occurring almost as he is speaking. Additionally, his characterization of the soul of the nation is powerful, but blatantly mythical. Prior to colonization by the British, India was not unified as one state but rather many individual principalities. This fact inspires the question of whether a Indian national soul could have existed and then later been "suppressed" by the British occupation when a cohesive state of India did not even exist itself.

Related to this question of the birth of a nation is Nehru's use of the myth of ancestry as he declares, "Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for any one of them to imagine that it can live apart" (Nehru 4). Nehru with this inspirational line explains his dream of not only a united India, which is clearly a prevalent ancestry myth, but also of a united world. Nehru's vision is that there is "One world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments" (Nehru 4). This not only relies on Smith's ancestry myth concept but, in actuality, expands it to include the entire world. However, its attempt clearly reflects a desire to weave together the Indian citizenry into a people bonded together by more than that which separates them.

Despite India being on the verge of its birth at the time of Nehru's speech, Nehru still manages to utilize Smith heroic age myth. He proclaims, "At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her success and failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength" (Nehru 3). Even though India as a nation is new, Nehru still attempts to inject nostalgia into his call to his nation and harkens back to a mythical time of Indian grandeur presumably occurring at a time before the British Empire when India was not even joined into one collective entity. Nehru couples this reference to a prior time of

greatness with a utilization of a myth of decline. He pronounces, “Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now” (Nehru 3). This reference to pains and sorrow unspoken represents an attempt to give the impression of a societal decline which must be reversed. This invocation of negative events and sentiments is directly reflective of Smith’s articulation of a myth of decline.

The final myth, regeneration, is also employed. Nehru utters, “The future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfill the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity” (Nehru 3). Hence, Nehru combines the uses the decline myth as a preamble to his use of the regeneration myth. This echoes Smith’s linking of the two. The myth of decline often leads to the myth of regeneration in that the myth of decline is painting a negative portrait and the myth of regeneration is essentially a national call to action. Stated otherwise, decline can be seen as the definition of the problem and regeneration is its solution.

Stripping the Floors

In large measure, in his novel *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie attempts to disband the myths of the Indian nation. In fact, he in refuting all six types of national myths with differing levels of effectiveness. With regard to the temporal myth of India through is mirroring of Saleem’s birth with that of the nation. Rushdie writes, “The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No it’s important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clockhands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world” (Rushdie 3). Here he introduces Saleem’s birth (as well as India’s) as a critical even of which all should take notice. Then, he employs the character of Padma who states, “Everyone gets born, it’s not such a big big thing” (Rushdie 133). While she is referring to Saleem’s birth, Rushdie has intertwined that with the birth of India as a nation. So, to have a character calling into question the importance of the birth calls invites skepticism of the importance of the moment of India’s birth. In short, he is destroying the temporal myth by asserting that a country’s birth is not the all important event it is made out to be.

Rushdie also uses the novel to challenge the myth of location employed in India's newly formed national identity. With regard to location he uses Dr. Aziz's return as the narrator laments:

Instead of the beauty of the tiny valley circled by giant teeth, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon; and felt sad, to be at home and feel so utterly enclosed. He also felt—inexplicably—as though the old place resented his educated, stethoscoped return. Beneath the winter ice, it had been coldly neutral, but now there was no doubt; the years in Germany had returned him to a hostile environment. (Rushdie 5)

This is vital because it both undermines and reaffirms the importance of location in the life of Aziz. If where one comes from is so important, Aziz's time in Germany should not have any effect on his relationship to his homeland. Yet, Rushdie makes it clear that Aziz's relationship to his birthplace has been altered. Although conversely it can be argued that location is so vital that the time spent in another place has interfered with that bond and ultimately altered it. However, taken with the spirit of Smith's denotation of the location myth, Rushdie clearly seems to be dispelling location as a myth particularly through the character of Dr. Aadam Aziz.

With regard to the myth of ancestry, Rushdie uses the novel and many of its characters to clearly dispel this myth. First, he explains that "Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams" (Rushdie 22). This is clearly aimed at the notion of India as one people. Moreover, he is blatantly making reference to Partition as the one thing that makes this notion laughable. He reinforces this point through the character of Amina and her relationship with her husband Ahmed. He describes that "she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts... in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit" (Rushdie 73). Again, Rushdie presents a fragmented picture of a character, in this case Ahmed, which highlights the fragmented nature of India. However, Rushdie does not limit his attack on ancestry to fragmentation. He also invokes the question of parentage through the Saleem who explains, "my inheritance includes this gift, the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary" (Rushdie 120). With this he thoroughly dispels the myth of ancestry with an attack on two

fronts: The citizens of India are not one people, because they are so diverse and fragmented and they cannot be one people because of their diverse, muddled, and nonlinear heritage and ancestry.

Additionally, Rushdie also addresses the triumvirate of heroic age, decline, and regeneration myths. First with regard to a heroic age, Rushdie positions Nehru writing to Saleem and exclaiming “Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young” (Rushdie 139). This seems to be harkening back to a golden age but how can something that is just born and “eternally young” have a golden age? This seems a direct indictment of Nehru’s rhetoric in his momentous speech harkening back to a heroic age for India which since India was consolidated through the oppressive force of colonization, any conceivable golden age would have had to exist prior to there even being an India. With regard to decline one notable instance is the description of Shiva feeling responsible for his father’s decline (Rushdie 146). It is of note that Wee Willie Winkie “sang songs filled with nostalgia, and nobody had the heart to turn him away” (Rushdie 145). He is nostalgic (like the heroic age myth) and that leads to decline. Literally, Rushdie asserts that he dies of a broken heart. In other words, he dies of the sentimentality that often constitutes nostalgia. Also important is that decline is not followed by regeneration but by further decline. Wee Willie Winkie’s decline does not make his son a better person but rather incites violence and vengeance in him. Rushdie does attack the myth of regeneration directly though. In discussing Nadir Khan, he writes “Nadir had one thing in common with my grandfather, and it was enough. He, too, suffered from the optimism disease” (Rushdie 46). Normally, regeneration can be thought of as healing and in this vein, the notions of opportunity and optimism are usually the province of regeneration. Nevertheless, in *Midnight’s Children* optimism is crushed which is seen in the fate of the children. Rushdie emphasizes this point further as he makes optimism the opposite of healing and equates it with disease and demise.

Renovating

Rushdie’s work in dispelling the myths of India which Nehru himself in large part introduces on the eve of independence is thorough and cleverly done. In spite of that, this work does beg the question of whether this is an advisable endeavor. Older more established nations

have trouble adhering to their narratives and myths but do not face the threat of instability. Postcolonial nations such as India have autonomous democratic traditions that are shallower and less rooted in society due to their recent establishment. Consequently, challenging these myths that are used to adhere a nation can become a destabilizing activity which can result in unintended and often violent consequences. Also, undermining the myths in use assumes that the myths are harmful to society. The myths employed by nations for their preservation can, of course, always be misused and abused, and in these situations myths should be dispelled and refuted. However, for the most part, national myths are employed to create a sense of belonging and oneness and are utilized, ultimately, to join people together and form communities. These myths and the narratives that convey them are constructed through and display the immense power of language and its use. Cherrie Moraga expresses this powerfully with her mantra of “Bravest in my writing. But that’s not the same as action, only that writing can force action in yourself and others. Sometimes. Sometimes you read or write words you got to live up to” (185). Hence, the job at hand is not to simply dismantle and disassemble myths which often have a positive impact on a nation but, rather, to enhance those myths in such a way that they operate for the best interests of the nation and its people alike. In order to do this, national myths in narratives need to be edited, revised and reconstituted. In Morraga’s words, nations need to undertake this critical revision work, write words, and live up to them.

RESUMO: A identidade nacional, em sua essência, ambiciona agir como uma força unificadora na sociedade. Tal identidade é criada através de narrativas retoricamente construídas. Assim, o mito ocupa um lugar central na criação das nações e em suas identidades. A Índia, como uma nação relativamente nova, serve como um interessante exemplo desse fenômeno. No seu discurso “Um encontro com o destino,” na véspera da independência, Nehru emprega muitos tipos de mito, em sua tentativa de unificar a nação às vésperas de seu nascimento. Em resposta, Salman Rushdie dissecou e expôs os mitos empregados pela nação indiana em seu romance Os filhos da meia-noite.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Retórica. Nação. Rushdie. Índia. Mito.*

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