

Salman Rushdie's  
"Use and Abuse of History"  
in "Midnight's Children"

DAVID W. PRICE

THE POPULARIZED POLITICAL controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* (1989) has largely obscured one of the most important aspects of Salman Rushdie's work, namely, his philosophical examination of history. In each of his major novels, Rushdie explores various philosophies of history and holds them up to his readers for scrutiny. In *Midnight's Children* (1980), for example, Rushdie presents his readers with a fabulous tale narrated by Saleem Sinai, who, by virtue of being born in Bombay on 15 August 1947 at the stroke of midnight, is the first child born in independent India. Saleem offers us his autobiography, but his story is also the *history* of twentieth-century India; every personal event in the life of Saleem and his family is inextricably linked to the historical and political events that unfold in India. As Saleem puts it, he "had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (3). As we read Saleem's account, we are expected to believe, among other things, that Saleem was responsible for the language riots that occurred in the 1950s, that he played a pivotal role in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, and that in 1975, Indira Gandhi imprisoned political opponents and suspended democratic rights during her self-proclaimed "Emergency" in direct response to the activities of Saleem and his Conference of Midnight's Children (that is, the children who were born during India's first hour of independence and who possessed magical powers).

Saleem's account of India's development (as well as his own) strains our sense of credibility. At the end of the novel we, as readers, ask ourselves: What precisely is Rushdie saying about

history? Does Rushdie present us with a particular philosophy of history? If so, is Rushdie expressing views that other philosophers of history have discussed?

Many critics focus attention on the status of history in Rushdie's works. Uma Parameswaran and Dieter Riemenschneider, for example, discuss how Rushdie transforms history by incorporating recurrent metaphors, myth, and Indian philosophy in his novels. Very few critics, however, examine Rushdie's works in conjunction with particular philosophers of history. Aruna Srivastava, in "The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*," is the first critic to examine Nietzschean and Foucauldian dimensions of two of Rushdie's novels. Her purpose is to show how Mahatma Gandhi's "mythical view of history" is superior to the views of both Nietzsche and Foucault and how all three of these views are expressed in Rushdie's writings. With respect to *Midnight's Children*, Srivastava establishes a link between Rushdie's writings and Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." I would like to add to this link and re-examine *Midnight's Children* by using Nietzsche's essay as an interpretive grid because it not only provides us with an explanation of how Rushdie constructed his novel but also offers us a means to understand Rushdie's own philosophy of history.<sup>1</sup>

The three modes of history (the antiquarian, the monumental, and the critical) that Nietzsche discusses in his second *Untimely Meditation* are practised by three specific characters that Rushdie creates in *Midnight's Children*. In Rushdie's fictional world, William Methwold employs a form of antiquarian history; the Widow is a proponent of monumental history; and Saleem Sinai is a critical historian. Nietzsche firmly believes that moments exist when antiquarian and monumental as well as critical history can further the cause of life. He is at pains to point out, however, that "each of the three species of history which exist belongs to a certain soil and climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed" (72).

In his novel, Rushdie depicts both the antiquarian and the monumental modes of history as devastating weeds—monstrous growths that choke out the living foliage on the Indian sub-

continent. In India, only the third mode, critical history, appears to have the potential to contribute to life. Observed from this perspective, *Midnight's Children* records Saleem's struggle to present his critical history as a counter-narrative to the "official" history of Indira Gandhi's government and the nostalgic histories of apologists for British imperialism. Saleem presents his history as a performance of narration, as opposed to a representation of events that took place in the past. To perceive this *in the narrative*, we must read Rushdie's novel and Nietzsche's essay together.

In the final paragraph of his essay, Nietzsche writes: "This is a parable for each of us: he must organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs" (123). Nietzsche argues that we can make sense of human experience and make that experience useful "for life" only if we organize the disparate and ephemeral events that comprise human experience in accordance with one of three particular modes that he believes serve specific purposes. As Nietzsche conceives of it, the person who "wants to do something great" will appeal to monumental history; the person who wants to preserve tradition will espouse an antiquarian history; and "only he who is oppressed . . . and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history" (72). All three of these approaches allow the practitioner to "organize the chaos," and it is this drive to configure with an eye toward coherence that connects Nietzsche's philosophy with three main characters in *Midnight's Children*.

Antiquarian history, according to Nietzsche, seeks to preserve traditions and pass them on to those that follow. William Methwold, the last scion of the Methwold family and proprietor of the Methwold Estate, is an antiquarian historian *par excellence*. He expresses antiquarian desire, the desire "to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence" (73), most clearly through the perverse conditions under which he sells his enormous estate to Ahmed Sinai, Homi Catrack, the Ibrahims, the Dubashes, the Sabarmatis, and Dr. Narlikar. "Methwold's Estate," Saleem informs us,

was sold on two conditions: that the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the

new owners; and that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15th. (109)

By transferring his entire estate, a veritable *europa intacta*, Methwold "preserves" and "reveres" the past and looks back with piety on the Raj.

According to Nietzsche, the antiquarian looks about himself and says: "Here we lived." "[W]ith the aid of this 'we'," writes Nietzsche, "he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city" (73). Nietzsche continues: "The antiquarian sense of a man, a community, a whole people, always possesses an extremely restricted field of vision" (74). As Methwold expresses it to Ahmed Sinai, "You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things" (109-10). Methwold's "we" is necessarily restrictive; he views the British as the quintessentially civilizing influence on the Indian subcontinent. Methwold is simply unable to acknowledge the existence of any culture other than his own, including one that predates his by a few millennia. There is nothing on the estate that would even suggest that anything other than European culture exists. The architecture of the buildings, "durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats," and their very names, "Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci" (108), signal simultaneously a repudiation of indigenous architectural traditions as well as a desire to superimpose historical European paradigms on the Indian landscape and consciousness. "The history of [the antiquarian's] city," writes Nietzsche,

becomes for him the history of himself; he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations, its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth and in all this he finds again himself, his force, his industry, his joy, his judgement, his folly and his vices. (73)

As Methwold confesses to the incredulous Ahmed Sinai, "you'll permit a departing colonial his little game? We don't have much left to do, we British, except to play our games" (109).

As we have seen, the game that Methwold plays concerns not only objects but names as well. The names of the houses on his

estate are, of course, the names of famous European palaces either built at the height of absolute monarchism in Europe or expressive of a nostalgia for that same absolutist power. These names carry a history, an entire tradition of the rights of kings and centralized authority. The preservation of tradition through naming appears most pointedly, however, in Methwold's own name. Saleem indicates that Methwold is named after William Methwold, the East India Company Officer who, in 1633, was the first to envision Bombay as a British stronghold and a future city. The word "Methwold" itself signifies the conceptualization of British colonial expansion—a *myth* world of projected desire.<sup>2</sup> Both, things and words, therefore, are at play in Methwold's game, but the words are not enough. Methwold seeks to preserve the traditions of the British Raj through the very materiality of his estate. His hope is that the objects will affect the new occupants in such a way that the traditions of the past will be preserved. "My notion," he tells Ahmed Sinai, is to "[s]elect suitable persons . . . hand everything over absolutely intact: in tiptop working order" (111). Methwold presumably assumes that the order will continue to work long after he has departed.

Methwold adopts a method (and it should not be overlooked that his very name contains the word "method"), described in detail in Nietzsche's essay. In his discussion of the antiquarian, Nietzsche explains how the "possession of ancestral goods" changes the antiquarian soul (73). But this "possession" results from a dynamic relation between the antiquarian soul and the revered objects. The ancestral goods "acquire their own dignity and inviolability" because "the preserving and revering soul of the antiquarian man has emigrated [*übersiedelt*] into them and there made its home" (73). The emigration of which Nietzsche speaks, therefore, is reciprocal; the antiquarian man imbues the objects with dignity, and these objects, in turn, possess the antiquarian man. The word Nietzsche uses for emigrate, *übersiedeln*, which literally means "to settle over," accurately conveys the very process Methwold and the British have enacted in India. The British names and architecture have *settled over* India, and it is antiquarians such as Methwold who want to ensure that this reciprocal emigration between cultural objects and conscious-

ness continues. Methwold trusts that the material substance of the past that he has revered and preserved with such fetishistic fastidiousness will effect a reciprocal emigration on the new owners. In this case, Methwold's antiquarian ethos would "emigrate" and possess Ahmed Sinai and his compatriots thereby preserving the Imperial traditions of the British Raj. At first, such a tactic seems to work, inasmuch as Saleem admits that "Methwold's estate is changing them" (that is, the soon-to-be owners). We learn that the Indians "slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford draws" (113) when Methwold joins them at the cocktail hour. But Methwold's influence will not endure. As Saleem indicates, it is Methwold's presence more than anything else that elicits the imitative response among Ahmed and his friends. Once Methwold leaves the scene, the traditions he hopes will endure slowly crumble to dust.

The second Nietzschean mode of history that Rushdie recreates in his novel is monumental history, a mode that Nietzsche claims responds to the "demand that greatness shall be everlasting" (68). The character in *Midnight's Children* that openly embraces the monumental approach to history is the Widow—Indira Gandhi. The Widow is a member of what Saleem terms "the ruling dynasty of India" (512); she is the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India (1947-64), and herself a prime minister (1966-77 and 1980-84) and the mother of two sons—Sanjay, the leader of the Youth Congress during the "Emergency" (1975-77) and as such "the second most powerful figure in India" at that time (Wolpert 401), and Rajiv, a future prime minister (1984-89). It is Indira who seeks to make herself and her family larger than life.

In an introduction to Tariq Ali's *An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family* (1985), Rushdie describes how that family "has set about self-mythification with a will" (xiii). The will to myth reached its height in 1975 when Indira Gandhi's campaign slogan was "India is Indira and Indira is India," a historical "fact" Rushdie includes in the pages of his own novel, and one that clearly exposes Indira Gandhi's political manoeuvres as being part of a monumentalizing strategy with respect to history.

According to Nietzsche, the past can suffer harm if any of the three modes prevails. When the monumental mode predomi-

nates, writes Nietzsche, "whole segments of [the past] are forgotten, despised and flow away in an uninterrupted colourless flood, and only individual embellished facts rise out of it like islands," (71). As Rushdie indicates in his introduction to Ali's book, the island facts that have arisen about the Emergency that Indira Gandhi declared in 1975 are those that Gandhi herself proclaimed to a Western audience that wanted to believe her and "saw that a rehabilitated Mrs Gandhi would be of great use" (xv). These island facts ignore the suffering and hardship inflicted on those who endured the Emergency. As Inder Malhotra, former correspondent of *The Statesman* and editor of *The Times of India*, points out, "[a]ccording to Amnesty International, 140,000 Indians were detained without trial in 1975-76" (178). Zareer Masani, a biographer of Indira Gandhi, believes that she resorted "to measures more Draconian than those used by the British Raj" (305). And in the words of *The Shah Commission Report on the Emergency*, "[t]housands were detained and a series of totally illegal and unwarranted actions followed involving untold human misery and suffering" (qtd. in Ali 186). These forgotten segments of history were swept away by the flood of monumentalism that Indira Gandhi released in her quest to retain power.

As Nietzsche points out, the monumentalist seeks "to exhibit the *effectus* monumentally, that is to say as something exemplary and worthy of imitation, at the expense of the *causae*" (70). In other words, the sacrifices, losses, and suffering that may have occurred and brought about a particular effect are all but denied by the monumentalist. In the case of Indira Gandhi, the illegal activities and the human suffering described above are precisely those *causae* that were ignored when she pursued her monumentalist strategy.

The descriptions that Saleem offers of the Widow also underscore her monumentalism. The Widow first appears in a terrifying dream that Saleem has during a bout with fever. Here she takes the form of a huge, voracious monster who gathers children in her hands, rips them apart, and rolls them into little green balls that she hurls into the night. Saleem describes her as having green and black hair; her "arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black"; and the

"children torn in two in Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of children roll them into little balls" (249). The Widow, in this guise, most closely resembles the goddess Kali the black, who represents "Death and the Destroyer." In pictures, Kali the black, "with protruding tongue, garland of skulls and hands holding weapons and severed heads, stands stark naked upon the prostrate body of—her beloved consort Shiva" (Hinnels and Sharpe 52-53).<sup>3</sup>

Rushdie, through his narrator Saleem, clearly indicates how the Widow, Indira Gandhi, conflates her own image with that of the traditional Mother goddess. At the same time, however, Rushdie wants to show the consequences of performing just such an act. The Widow, Saleem declares, "was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods" (522). By seeking possession of the *shakti*, or spiritual power of the Divine Mother, the Widow enacts a monumentalist strategy through which she constructs what Nietzsche describes as a deceptive analogy that uses "seductive similarities" to inspire "foolhardiness" and "fanaticism" (71). Saleem's characterization might at first seem extreme; surely Indira Gandhi did not conceive of herself literally as a mother goddess. Irrespective of her own self-perceptions, however, it is clear that she *was* perceived in this fashion by many Indians. Dom Moraes, for example, in his flattering and apologetic biography of Indira Gandhi, relates how the famous Indian artist M. F. Husain painted a triptych of her during the Emergency that depicts her as "Durga or Kali, the goddess of death and renewal, riding bloodily across India" (224). Inder Malhotra confirms this story (175). The point to be made here is not that Indira Gandhi went about proclaiming herself as Devi the Mother goddess, but rather that her swift and cruel actions during the Emergency were perceived to be analogous with the actions of Devi, and this was a role that "Mother Indira" did not repudiate.

In addition to fostering analogies to mythic figures, Indira Gandhi, through her very family lineage, conjures up the greatness of her father Jawaharlal Nehru and her grandfather Motilal. This monumentalist association is so obvious that it is almost

always taken for granted. Saleem himself quickly summarizes the life of Indira Gandhi at the close of the chapter entitled "A Wedding," and it is assumed that everyone knows about the Nehru clan and its dynastic aura. But what is also indicated in Saleem's biographical sketch, and never omitted in any discussion of Indira Gandhi with which I am familiar, is the disclaimer that Indira is "not related to 'Mahatma' M. K. Gandhi" (501). What is interesting about this repeated refrain in writings about Indira Gandhi is that by denying her familial tie to the Mahatma, she is nevertheless associated with him and thereby elevated to his position of importance in the history of India. Thus, taken as a whole, by being Nehru's daughter Indira embodies the glory of past leadership; by a fortuitous twist, her name, Gandhi, associates her with one of the few truly deified humans in modern times; and finally, by living in a country with the long and deeply rooted traditions of Hindu iconography she is, in the minds of millions of Indians, linked with the figure of the Mother goddess. Such semiotic power, in the hands of a politician, can prove to be a very potent weapon. The appeal to the great figures of the past, as Nietzsche reminds us, implies that "the greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may be possible again" (69). Indira Gandhi, it seems, knew this quite well. At the conclusion of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, she wrote to President Richard Nixon, saying, "there are moments in history when brooding tragedy and its dark shadows can be lightened by recalling great moments of the past" (Batia 260). A more lucid expression of Nietzsche's concept of the monumental attitude would be difficult to find.

The lost opportunity of the Children of Midnight occurred because the monumentalist approach was used by the fledgling, independent Indian government to maintain and strengthen its hold on power. Rushdie's novel, in part, is an examination of the consequences of choosing such an approach. As Rushdie admitted in an interview:

If *Midnight's Children* had any purpose . . . it was an attempt to say that the thirty-two years between independence and the end of the book didn't add up to very much, that a kind of betrayal had taken place, and that the book was dealing with the nature of that betrayal.

(Haffenden 249)

One of the main traitors was, of course, Indira Gandhi. She simultaneously destroyed the democratic institutions of independent India and reinforced the notion that the repetitive cycle of destruction and regeneration that obtains in Hindu teaching can also be used to explain modern political processes. This explains why, in the novel, the generation that follows Saleem's Children of Midnight, the generation represented by Aadam Sinai, is symbolically born of the traditional gods—the great figures of the past who are part of the cycle of destruction and regeneration as expressed by the mother goddess. This also explains why Kali and Parvati, two names for the same goddess, can engage in two distinct activities in the novel. Kali the Widow drains the Children of Midnight of their hope, whereas Parvati gives birth to the next generation. Thus the cycle of destruction and regeneration, preserved in the monumental traditions of the past, continues in the present when those same traditions are called upon to justify contemporary actions. Saleem refers to this cyclic view of history when he writes:

I remain, today, half-convinced that in that time of accelerated events and diseased hours the past of India rose up to confound her present; the new-born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant . . . so that people were seized with atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices. (294)

To throw off the burden of cyclical monumentalism, Saleem employs the critical mode of history and writes a counter-narrative that expresses the "new myth of freedom." According to Nietzsche, critical historians "implant in [themselves] a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature" (76). For Saleem, the "new myth of freedom" is precisely the new habit that he hopes the Indian nation will adopt. Nietzsche succinctly describes the goal of the critical mode in his essay in these words: "It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate" (76). Nietzsche's words aptly describe Saleem's strategy in *Midnight's Children* in that Saleem sets out to narrate the history of India in the form of his autobiography, one in which he chooses a (personal) past he prefers.

The person practising the critical form of history must, in Nietzsche's words, "employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past" (75); this past must be "condemned" by the critical historian who "takes the knife to its roots" (76). In addition, as already noted, the critical historian tries to choose a past in opposition to the past from which he or she originated.

Saleem, without a doubt, practises the critical mode of history. One past that he seeks to break up and dissolve is the mythico-religious past preserved in Hindu tradition. At one point, he writes:

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15th, 1947—but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga, in which the cow of mortality has been reduced to standing, teeteringly, on a single leg! (233)

Saleem recognizes that the traditional, religious, cyclical view of history opposes his own version of events in the twentieth century. But, as we have already noted, the Widow uses this tradition as a bulwark against political opponents, and behind it she is able to construct an "official" version based on "facts" about the Emergency, a version that Saleem also opposes. Thus, Saleem's critical weapon must be turned against both a religious traditionalism that posits a repeated pattern of destruction and regeneration as well as a modern form of governmental manipulation of the cultural and political semiotic that produces objective "truth."

As Nietzsche warns, to exercise the critical mode "is always a dangerous process" (76). Saleem takes the risks implicit in using a critical approach and adopts a strategy whereby he combines the fabulous with the factual. We should be mindful that Saleem describes his narrative as "this source-book, this Hadith or Purana or *Grundrisse*" (354). He arrogates to himself the traditions of Qur'anic revelation and the utterances of the Prophet, ancient Sanskrit legends and lore as well as contemporary historiographic methodology to produce an entire counter-narrative that rejects the sterility of the antiquarian approach of Methwold and exposes the duplicity inherent in the Widow's monumentalism. Perhaps the most striking and dangerous "critical" practice that

Saleem engages in occurs when he cuts up newspaper headlines to send an anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati in order to inform him about his wife's infidelities. Saleem refers to this practice as "[c]utting up history to suit my nefarious purposes" (311). By tearing out portions of the newspaper in order to construct his own truth, Saleem wields the Nietzschean knife of critical history. Saleem takes the very material of the record of everyday life (that is, the language of newspapers) and re-arranges it so as to tell a tale about adultery. He does this to communicate (indirectly) with his mother and warn her of the consequences of being unfaithful to her husband. By sending this letter, Saleem, like Nietzsche's critical historian, sits in judgment and condemns the past (in this case his mother's love of her former husband Nadir Khan). As a result of this critical exercise, Homi Catrack is killed, Lila Sabarmati wounded, Commander Sabarmati imprisoned, and Saleem's mother terrified out of her wits.

As a critical historian of India, Saleem attempts to give himself a past that consists of three elements. First, Saleem's past is one that acknowledges the importance of the traditions of democratic and representative forms of government—one of the few positive British influences in India (Saleem is, after all, the son of Methwold). Second, his past acknowledges the teeming millions of the Indian populace that are forgotten in most histories of India that prefer to focus on the great figures of history. Third, and most important of all, Saleem's past affirms the creative power of the imagination to construct our "reality"; it is imagination, specifically metaphoric construction, that permits us to structure our world and make "true narratives."

The past Saleem constructs places great emphasis on the need for history to represent the will and desires of all the people. The true spirit of India, according to Saleem, is embodied in a person such as Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird, founder of the Free Island Convocation, an organization of Muslim splinter groups that opposes the Muslim League. The Muslim League hopes to partition India after independence and thereby obtain a separate Muslim state. The League, of course, prevails, and Pakistan becomes a separate state. Even so, in the Hummingbird, Saleem

sees the hope of organizing a widely diverse society composed of different religious groups and social classes. The murder of Mian Abdullah at the hands of League assassins marks a lost opportunity; but the hope of a religiously and socially heterogeneous Indian society reappears in the form of Picture Singh, the snake-charmer and leader of the magicians' ghetto, who "spoke of a socialism which owed nothing to foreign influences" (476). "Picture Singh," writes Saleem, "would follow in the footsteps of Mian Abdullah" (477). By focussing on the Hummingbird and Picture Singh, Saleem sees at the originary moment of India the path that was not pursued, and he selects the vision of Mian Abdullah and Picture Singh as possibilities for India's future, a future that would reject religious factionalism and dynastic rule and embrace a society that respects cultural difference and allows all points of view to be represented.

In his critical history, Saleem also acknowledges the millions of diverse groups that make up India's population. He attempts to accomplish this task by recording the many voices and perspectives that are seldom included in most historical accounts of India. "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the whole world," he states (126), and in his writing, Saleem spews out the undigested bits of human experience that are not absorbed into the body of historical writing. He avoids the historical approach that places primary emphasis on the "great" figures. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, a person one would expect to find in a novel about the making of modern India, hardly appears at all. Similarly, the members of the Nehru-Gandhi family appear only briefly and often in fantastically altered forms. Instead, Saleem records the daily activities of different "common" people and reproduces their wonderful language and idiosyncratic locutions. One of the most fascinating commoners is Tai, the boatman, whose chatter is "fantastic, grandiloquent and ceaseless" (9). Perhaps the most memorable character of all is Saleem's own grandmother, the "Reverend Mother." Her use of the term "Whatsitsname," which she inserts haphazardly into her speech, makes for some of the most comic utterances in the entire novel. The many characters in the magicians' ghetto imbue the city with a carnivalesque atmosphere and point toward the intermingling

of languages and social practices that include both "high" and "low" culture. Similarly, the war in Bangladesh is filtered through the experiences of Ayooba, Shaheed, Farooq, and Saleem—common soldiers who witness the atrocities committed by the Pakistani forces. In each of these instances, the focus is on the common, everyday experience of average people, and it is their experience, in Saleem's estimation, that comprises a more accurate history of India.

Finally, there is the element of the imagination that is the key element of Saleem's critical method. Saleem refers to his narrating process as the chutnification of history—a metaphor he uses to describe how his writing resembles the pickling process. The thirty chapters that we as readers have read are called pickle jars that contain the various delicacies that Saleem has prepared for us. He describes his "special blends," which include "memories, dreams, ideas." Chutnification involves "a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste." "The art," he writes, "is to change flavor in degree, but not in kind; and above all . . . to give it shape and form—that is to say meaning," which will produce the "taste of truth" (549-50). Saleem's description of the chutnification process emphasizes the necessity to make truths, truths that are sensed through the body. The eyes, the fingers, the nose, are sensing organs that help shape and form the very story that we narrate to ourselves and declare to be true.

Through his chutnifying process Saleem produces a work of art that stands in opposition to the historicism of Methwold and the Widow. By creating Saleem, Rushdie, like Nietzsche, places the artist in opposition to all historians—political, social, and cultural historians. As Rushdie expressed it in a 1983 interview with Una Chaudhuri, artists and politicians are "natural rivals" who "fight for the same territory." Both the writer and the politician seek to make "reality" "in their own image." In short, said Rushdie, "they're doing the same thing" (47). In the context of a history of India, Rushdie perceives an inevitable antagonism between artists like Saleem, who seek to explore the myriad dimensions of past experience, and politicians who seek to preserve the "historical truth." In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie represents the conflict between artistic and political rendering of history.

Rushdie himself has commented on this aspect of his novel; he originally conceived the novel as a Proustian project of sorts—a search for and recovery of lost time; but during the course of writing the novel, he discovered that his subject changed and became “the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool” (“Errata” 24). In this regard, Rushdie sees the novel and writing as a means to effect change, or in Nietzsche’s terms, further life. The goal of fiction, asserts Rushdie, is to “draw new and better maps of reality and make new languages with which we can understand the world” (“Outside the Whale” 100). In the essay “Outside the Whale,” Rushdie pleads for writers to abandon the current retreat from the political that characterizes so much of their writing today. The reason for this is clear to Rushdie; in a 1984 interview he complained, “I don’t think that there has ever been a time when the truth has been so manipulated, because the weapons of manipulation are now so sophisticated” (Brooks 68). The power of governments to manipulate images and information is so immense and the reservoir of the cultural semiotic so deep that the writer remains one of the few people who can construct an entire narrative in opposition to the unidimensional, simplistic, reductive, slogan-laden messages offered up by government and “free market” advertising. As Rushdie explained it in an interview recorded by Bandung File and broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation:

One of the things that a writer can do is say: Here is the way in which you’re told you’re supposed to look at the world, but actually there are also some other ways. . . . One of the reasons for writing, I believe, is to slightly increase the sum of what it’s possible to think.

(Appignanesi and Maitland 23)

Rushdie’s Saleem seems to know that what Nietzsche said of the critical historian is true for him as well. “The best we can do,” writes Nietzsche,

is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. (76)

This, then, is Saleem’s project; he wields the knife of the Nietzschean critical historian and, in Nietzsche’s words, “cruelly tram-

ples over every kind of piety" (76). Through his fabulous narrative he chooses his past (a past that acknowledges that the children of independent India are in fact the bastard offspring of British imperialism and the religious traditionalism of both Hinduism and Islam). In doing so, Saleem rejects both the monumentalist "history" constructed by Indira Gandhi and her followers—an approach that only leads to cyclical repression—and the nostalgic, antiquarian vision of British imperialism. By writing his own "critical" history, Saleem is able, in Rushdie's own words, "to slightly increase the sum of what it's possible to think."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Srivastava's understanding of Nietzsche is derived from her reading of Foucault's famous essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." She connects Rushdie and Nietzsche by reproducing the passage in which Foucault discusses the relation between the body and history when he asserts that genealogy's task is to "expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (148).

Foucault's characterization of Nietzsche's views on history rests upon his desire to see in Nietzsche's own thought a *progressive continuity* in which the three modes of history discussed in the *Untimely Meditations* become "metamorphosed" into the genealogical method of Nietzsche's treatise on morals. Such a teleological interpretation of Nietzsche's thought appears to me to be antithetical to the very spirit of Nietzsche's perspectival philosophy. I prefer to look at the three modes of history as Nietzsche defined them without recourse to a later perspective he adopted in a work he wrote more than a decade after publishing the *Untimely Meditations*.

By far the most fruitful way to argue for a genealogical method in *Midnight's Children* would involve a careful examination of the role played by Mian Abdullah, the founder of the Muslim splinter group that does *not* want an independent Islamic state. Abdullah is murdered and India is partitioned, but the spirit of Abdullah haunts Saleem's entire narrative, and his vision is a lost opportunity, a path India did not pursue, and as such constitutes one of those critical junctures Nietzsche discusses when he describes how genealogy uncovers those moments from the past that are repressed and forgotten. Unfortunately, Abdullah's role is never discussed by Srivastava.

<sup>2</sup> Parameswaran is the first critic to have noticed the connection between Methwold's name and the idea of a myth world (45).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Kali is but one manifestation of the Mother goddess in Hindu iconography. She is also known as Uma, Durga, Devi, and Parvati.

## WORKS CITED

- Ali, Tariq. *An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family*. New York: Putnam's, 1985.
- Appignanesi, Lisa, and Sara Maitland, eds. *The Rushdie File*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990.
- Batia, Krishnan. *Indira: A Biography of Prime Minister Gandhi*. New York: Praeger, 1974.

- Brooks, David. "Salman Rushdie: An Interview." *Helix* 19 (1984): 55-69.
- Chaudhuri, Una. "Imaginative Maps: Excerpts from a Conversation with Salman Rushdie." *Turnstile* 2.1 (1990): 36-47.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977. 139-64.
- Haffenden, John. *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Hinnels, John R., and Eric J. Sharpe, eds. *Hinduism*. Newcastle: Oriel Press, 1972.
- Malhotra, Inder. *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.
- Masani, Zareer. *Indira Gandhi: A Biography*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976.
- Moraes, Dom. *Indira Gandhi*. Boston: Little, 1980.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983. 59-123.
- Parameswaran, Uma. "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 14.4 (1983): 34-45.
- Riemenschneider, Dieter. "History and the Individual in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *WLWE* 23.1 (1984): 196-207.
- Rushdie, Salman. "'Errata': or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991. 22-25.
- . Introduction. *An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family*. By Tariq Ali. New York: Putnam's, 1985. xi-xv.
- . *Midnight's Children*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- . "Outside the Whale." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism: 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991. 87-101.
- . *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1989.
- Srivastava, Aruna. "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989): 62-78.
- Wolpert, Stanley. *A New History of India*. 1977. Oxford, Oxford UP, 1989.