Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

In August 1947, the British were leaving India. As Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children* sees it, this was a significant moment not only in the nation’s history but his own. And while “no dominion is everlasting,” the legacy of one dominion can enrich or poison the next (107). Saleem’s parents, in that liminal period, “entered into a curious bargain with a departing Englishman, William Methwold,” who stipulated 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), the exact moment of the transfer of power from the British to the Indians (and, as it turns out, of the birth of Saleem and of the other children of midnight). Methwold’s departing gesture is for him a perversely satisfying closure to what S. P. Mohanty has called the “strange allegory of colonial rule as possession without implication, penetration without involvement,” although at one level there is also perhaps a “contradiction between two elements of the ruling self: one tending towards the invisible, the other towards the eminently spectacular” (35). For the rest of their lives, the “new owners” of the Methwold estate would struggle to shake off the now invisible, now oppressively visible, burden of the colonial “owner.” The story told by Rushdie’s narrator is a counternarrative to that strange allegory, a rejection of debilitating anxiety about the colonizer’s influence.

Recognizing that the midnight’s children had become “a mirror of the nation,” and that “the passive-literal mode was at work,” Saleem as their representative rails against that mode. For the passive-literal mode is a “mode of connection” to history (285–86); as contrasted with the “active-metaphorical mode,” it is characterized by a feeling of powerlessness to change “fate” and a failure to rise above the merely literal so as to be able to conceive a better future and actively engage in self- and social transformation. Saleem resists that dangerous enervation of individual and national imagination and passionately appeals to the children not to let the passive-literal mode dominate, not to “permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We . . . must be a third principle” (306). He reveals himself

Samir Dayal is Assistant Professor of English at Franklin College. He is currently working on a study of contemporary Indian novelists writing in English.

College English, Volume 54, Number 4, April 1992

431
as a purveyor of complexly significant convergences and dualities, a connoisseur of heterogeneity, parody, and burlesque—of sheer creative energy. The force of this narrative lies in its rejection of simple dualistic thinking or of hegemonic configurations, particularly configurations symptomatic of the postcolonial situation, as has been remarked by critics such as M. Keith Booker ("Beauty and the Beast" 977–97). What Saleem is after ultimately is access to that tertium quid, a "third principle."

If we understand Rushdie's novel (and I believe we must) as participating in what Rushdie himself has identified as a project of "decolonization" ("The Empire Writes Back" 8), then the midnight moment of postcolonial India's birth takes on the significance of a primal scene. This was a scene of terrible innocence, which left the former colonial still infected with ambivalent feelings: feelings of victory as well as nostalgia. The contagion of nostalgia for colonial rule surfaces in Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's father, whose voice changes, in the presence of an Englishman, into "'a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl'" (110). The temptation to identify with the colonizer is as dangerous as it is seductive.

It is equally telling that the Methwold estate retains the Englishman's name. To appropriate Kimberly W. Benston's terms, the retention of the former "master's" name suggests that the formerly colonized have been unable to achieve "self-designation," that crucial phase in self-development. Benston points to the need to "restitute or displace the literal master/father by a literal act of unnam- ing" (152–53). Rushdie himself has remarked that "Saleem . . . makes use, eclectically, of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses. . . . [T]he story is told in a manner designed to echo . . . the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration" (Imaginary Homelands 16). Saleem, particularly, needs to be careful in his self-fashioning, for Methwold, as he discovers, is his biological father (although it is Ahmed Sinai who for all practical purposes is "father"). As we see repeatedly, there is no objective more pressing for midnight's children than self-fashioning, than discovering or fulfilling one's destiny. And that is also the task of the infant nation, born at midnight, August 15, 1947. "Even a baby," as we are told, "is faced with the problem of defining itself" (151).

Only a "fool" like the street performer named Wee Willie Winkie (like the character in the nursery rhyme who runs late at night through the town, checking to see whether children are asleep) is able to stay awake, alert enough to reject that degrading if ambivalent love of the colonized for the colonizer. In perfectly serious jest, he admonishes the inheritors of the Englishman's estate: "Ladies, gentlemen, how can you feel comfortable here, in the middle of Mr. Methwold sahib's long past? I tell you: it must be strange; not real; but now it is a new place here, ladies, ladahs, and no new place is real until it has seen a birth" (117). Few of the formerly colonized Indians in Rushdie's fiction appear to have grasped this warning, and therein lies Rushdie's postcolonial tale.

Homi Bhabha has drawn attention to the phenomenon of the "ambivalence" of the "colonial presence" between "the boundaries of colonial positionality—the division of self/other—and the question of colonial power—the differentiation of colonizer/colonized—different from both the Hegelian master/slave dialectic or the phenomenological projection of Otherness" ("Signs" 169). Such
divisions are significant features in the discourse of the colonized—and are self-consciously foregrounded in postcolonial writing. Thus the aim of a postcolonial marginal discourse is not simply "to invert the balance of power within an unchanged order of discourse," but "to redefine the symbolic process through which the social Imaginary—Nation, Culture, or Community—become 'subjects' of discourse and 'objects' of psychic identification" ("Difference" 200).

Rushdie’s novel is an excellent example of such a redefinition. His "decolonization" project, a search for a third principle for the "Third World," necessarily begins at the level of discourse. What is needed in the first place is a "new myth" (130) in a double-voiced vernacular, say on the model described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his discussion of African-American literary traditions. Gates seems to have in mind a self-reflexive discourse, a "meta-discourse" that is "about itself" (The Signifying Monkey xxii). Rushdie’s own attempt is to achieve a self-reflexive and organic "english." Much of the novel is in standard English, although most of the characters speak in an indigenized, Indian "english" (spiked liberally with transliterated native words). Saleem’s peculiar language entails a postcolonial gesture of reappropriation of the former colonizer’s language. For, as Rushdie himself has put it, "those peoples who were once colonized by the [colonizer’s] language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it . . . they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers" (Imaginary Homelands 64). When the narrator in Midnight’s Children asks, "Is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality?" (84), the answer, says Richard Cronin, is yes, although it is a disease "to which only those like Rushdie, who write about India in English, are vulnerable." As he says, to write about India "in any of its vernaculars . . . is inevitably to divide it. . . . [T]he Indian novel . . . can, as yet, be written only in English" (201).

The point is subtly amended by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin: "We need to distinguish," they write, "between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" (8). By opening a space for an indigenous english, Rushdie contributes to the disruption of English and its attendant cultural assumptions. In this novel, the double-voiced narration puts into question and ultimately delegitimizes a hegemonic structuration of English as the original and "english" as the derived form.

Similarly, Rushdie’s implied interpellation of the literary canon is a subversion of notions of essence, authenticity, and purity privileged by an essentialist or universalist world view. Such a view is characteristic of a colonizer wishing to ensure the economic, political, and cultural hegemony of the colonial center. The first step for the native is to recognize hegemonic structures as such, for otherwise he or she is condemned to the dilemma between self-contempt and imitation of the European. Saleem acutely remarks the curious irony of being, when a schoolboy, seated in a schoolroom beside the attractive American Evie Burns:
In India, we've always been vulnerable to Europeans... Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature... Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce... Evie was American. Same thing. (221)

By interweaving English and English into the skein of his text, by breaking out of the confines of canonical literature into a deliberately "uncouth" genre, Rushdie puts in question what James Sneed calls "the [European] practice whereby literary history or literary canons stand in for a notion of national spirit or character," as well as the companion but countervailing tendency for particular national authors to be regarded as "founding fathers" and "consummate geniuses" who somehow embody "universal truths" about all humanity. Sneed suggests that this practice stems from an always already deconstructed hope:

Despite the general use of these authorial "founding fathers" to stand for a white European cultural ideal, the actual texts they have written seem radically mixed, even syncretistic. The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Don Quixote, King Lear, or Faust would seem the last possible proof-texts for any separationist or exclusionary brand of racial or cultural hubris. It might seem a paradox, but the language of such texts—that subsequent literary canons have taken as the quintessence of "Greek," "Italian," "Spanish," "English," "German," or simply "European" genius—is radically heterogeneous and eclectic. These texts are extraordinary, not by virtue of the skill and confidence with which they exemplify a particular style or vernacular, but by the way in which their language mixes a variety of styles and vernaculars; they are not so much universal as hybrid, unifying previously scattered or dispersed dialects, colloquialisms, and oral traditions. (233–34)

In Midnight's Children, hybridity and impurity are intentionally foregrounded, and Saleem is explicit and self-reflexive about his preference for heterogeneity and baseness, a leitmotif of his deliberately uncouth narrative. It is ironic, then, that even native readers such as Uma Parameswaran can sometimes fail to notice the strategy, as they primly condemn his "flamboyant and often outrageous description of bawdiness," his "bad taste" (83).

It is against Rushdie's rejection of the grand illusions of national unity, universality, and purity that we must set the narrator's identification with and preference for the low, the base, the physical, and the visceral. Admittedly, Rushdie does not go as far in this direction as Georges Bataille, that voluptuary of baseness. But he would endorse Bataille's rejection of the hegemony of the "high" over the "low." One thinks of Bataille's symbolic recovery of the foot—and the big toe—from its lowly status:

there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the principles of evil as light and celestial space are the principles of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse—a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot. (20)

As Allan Stoekl elaborates, Bataille's argument is pitched against supposedly natural hegemonic structurations: "Death and perversion do not take place in
splendid isolation; instead, they are at the endpoint of the human. . . . At the furthest point of evolution, of absolute knowledge, elevation is the fall; humanity is animality" (xii–xiii).

Rushdie does not risk Bataille’s incendiary and essentialist assertion that “perversion” is, like death, “at the endpoint of the human.” But he does seem to share Bataille’s rejection of the presumed hegemony of the high, pure, and intellectual over its supplement—the low, impure, visceral, and so forth. His rejection has, furthermore, political and social implications. A simple privileging of the low over the formerly high would reestablish a new hegemony through inversion. Instead, the double-voiced narrative works by an interminable displacement of hegemonic configurations: high over low, colonizer over colonized, “us” over “them,” English over English. Rushdie welcomes the irreducibly heterogeneous into the fabric of the novel—in order to gain access to the “third principle.”

II

Narrating his story in retrospect, Saleem tells us on the book’s first page that “time (having no further use for me) is running out. . . . Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits” (3–4). This is no stray conceit. It is a matter of extreme narratological urgency, as though the capacity for narrative were somehow predicated on bodily health. The great danger is to “succumb[ ] to abstraction” (241). Saleem’s revalorization of the body is an instance of his general attempt to reverse the hegemony of the mental, intellectual, and the “high” over the physical, visceral, and the “low.” And he achieves this revalorization through the ingeniously polymorphous figure of the nose.

Appropriately, Saleem’s story begins with an incident of gross physicality: the incident of the nosebleed sustained by Aadam Aziz, when a Kashmir valley “punched him on the nose” (5). As his name suggests, Aadam is the “first man,” Saleem’s ancestral “origin”—his grandfather who is also not his grandfather. What is crucial about Aadam is his originary nose: a “cyranose,” “a proboscissimus.” On its wide bridge, people said, “‘You could cross a river . . .’” (8).

Aadam would not have grasped the importance of the nose, however, without the boatman Tai. Tai “set[s] history in motion” (7), and instructs Aadam that his was a nose “to start a family on . . . Mughal emperors would have given their right hands for noses like that one. There are dynasties waiting inside it . . . like snot” (8). He compares Aadam’s “big cucumber” to the “little one” in his pajamas, suggesting the conflation of sexual, narratological and other powers of the nose, some uncanny. Saleem’s father Ahmed, confusedly implying a correspondence between nose and penis, will later denounce Saleem, whom he thinks he has discovered masturbating: “Who ever got a nose like that from sleeping,” he shouts, “‘Chhi-chhi! Filthy! God punishes boys who do that! Already he’s made your nose as big as poplars. He’ll stunt your growth; he’ll make your soo-soo shrivel up!” (184).
Tai’s quasi-metaphysical disquisition to Aadam on the faculties of the nose is a lesson Saleem later finds actualized in his own life:

You know what this is, nakkoo? It’s the place where the outside world meets the world inside you. If they don’t get on, you feel it here. Then you rub your nose with embarrassment to make the itch go away. A nose like that, little idiot, is a great gift. I say: trust it. When it warns you, look out or you’ll be finished. Follow your nose and you’ll go far. (13)

When Naseem (Saleem’s grandmother) first sees Aadam’s face, the first thing she notices is his protuberant nose—as though it were a metonym for Aadam. Aadam’s life is inextricably tied to the history of his nose. His historic nosebleed in the Kashmir valley is linked, for instance, not only to the blood-red Mercuriochrome he carries in his foreign doctor’s bag (33) but to the infamous massacre, or bloodying, by the British Brigadier R. E. Dyer’s soldiers at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar (34–35). As the site of his sense of history, Aadam’s nose itches when it senses danger (34) or imminent historic events—and as Saleem writes, this is an invaluable gift, for “we are a nation of forgetters” (37).

Aadam fails to heed Tai’s advice. He does not give up the pigskin bag (for Muslims, pigs are anathema) he had bought while studying medicine in Germany, and prefers a stethoscope, that “thing like an elephant’s trunk” to his “own big nose”—symbolically rejecting Indian medicine for European. Aadam’s preference for “firangee” (foreign) women and culture disgusts Tai: “big bag, big shot. Pah! We haven’t got enough bags at home that you must bring back that thing made of a pig’s skin that makes one unclean just by looking at it? And inside, God knows what all” (15–16). Tai’s way of showing his deep distress and outrage is to adopt a corresponding extreme uncleanliness. There is no contradiction in this reproachful mimicry. His own choice to stink, unwashed for three years, is calculated as a didactic protest against Aadam’s choice: “He took to drifting past the Aziz household, releasing the dreadful fumes of his body across the small garden and into the house,” and when he is asked for a reason, Tai points to Aadam: “Ask our foreign-returned doctor, ask that nakkoo, that German Aziz.” (25).

Tai insists on the fertility and authenticity of the “uncivilized” but indigenous or native. He revalorizes the body and its emblem, the nose; his deliberate stink is an ironic corollary of his exaltation of the organ of smell. Tai “catapult[s]” Aadam willy-nilly “into his future” (8), but he is also the agent through whom Rushdie introduces, as an alternative to the rhetoric of the Other, a rhetoric of anti-European and ultimately counter-colonialist sentiment as the novel’s subtext.

It is with the greatest alacrity that Saleem appropriates the putrescent Tai as his narratological ancestor, by means of a complexly fabricated ancestry that reaches out to implicate his lover Padma and the god Ganesh, as well as Aadam—and by extension Rushdie himself. He recapitulates Tai’s valorization of the olfactory, also endowing his own nose with narratological (poetic and creative) power, as well as with generative potency (displacing sexual potency), not to mention unabashedly organic health. Similarly, he ascribes an almost cognitive faculty to the nose, sometimes as an uncanny displacement of noetic fac-
ulties. Saleem claims his nose can detect the “aroma” of failure (242), and the “stink” of political subversion (427). Like Tai, his preference for the smelly, the base, may be ascribed to reasons ultimately political, and not merely aesthetic.

As though he were an Indian amalgam of Philoctetes and Tiresias, Tai’s self-identification with the low is compensated by his gift, the ultimate boon for the storyteller: “the gift of seeing” (7). Rushdie appears to hint at a parallel with his own narrative strategy here, so that Tai emerges as a prototype of the narrator. Tai’s talk was

fantastic, grandiloquent, and ceaseless, and as often as not addressed only to himself. . . . It was magical talk, words pouring from him like fools’ money . . . soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail, Aadam’s nose for instance, to vivisect its meaning like a mouse. (9–10)

But his power is not so much an intellectual prowess as an ability to mediate between the subjective and objective. According to his own diagnosis, the nose is the place where the outside and the inside meet. Aadam’s nose was “comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh” (177). Saleem affiliates himself with Ganesh too, and not merely physically: “I’m very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh solemnly taking dictation” (177). In the Ramayana, the famous Indian epic, the sage Vyasa—prototype of the epic poet—needed a scribe to take dictation (incidentally, Saleem mistakenly calls Vyasa “Valmiki,” who is someone else entirely). Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, faithfully performed the task, even when it involved having to break off one of his own tusks, when his pen gave out, in order to avoid interrupting the dictation. If Ganesh was Vyasa’s audience, then Aadam was Tai’s (though less dutiful) and Padma is Saleem’s. Perhaps there is also an oblique hint of a similar connection between Saleem and Rushdie himself.

Saleem’s own unattractive body, like Tai’s, identifies him with the repellent and the lowly (including the proletariat of beggars, street performers, ayahs [nannies], and so on). He was born an ugly baby, with a “monstrous” nose—“and it ran” (145). In the mirror, toward the end of his story, he sees a “nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk’s tonsured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber-nosed, castrated . . . grotesque creature who had been released from the preordained destiny which had battered him until he was half senseless . . .” (534). His nose constantly “leaked nose goo”—and nose goo becomes a weapon as well as a continual embarrassment (277, 342), a mark of his marginality and freakishness as well as of his extraordinary faculties.

Saleem raises and answers a pointed question: “What’s in a nose?” His answer exalts the nose and the fertility and authenticity of everything associated with it, namely the “smelly,” the low, the base:

The usual answer: “That’s simple. A breathing apparatus; olfactory organs; hairs.” But in my case the answer was simpler still, although, I’m bound to admit, somewhat repellent: what was in my nose was snot. . . . My nose: elephantine as the trunk of Ganesh, it should. I thought, have been a superlative breather; a smeller without an answer, as we say; instead, it was permanently bunged up. . . . (183–84)
Repellent though this nose may be, it indicates in the first place a "healthy metabolism," for "waste matter was evacuated copiously from the appropriate orifices; from my nose there flowed a shining cascade of goo" and "rubbish" was shed "from various apertures" (145). Crowded with "a curious melange of odours, filled with unease, the whiff of things concealed mingling with the odours of burgeoning romance and the sharp stink of my grandmother's curiosity and strength" (56), Saleem's nose becomes a narratological guide. He calls his mode of storytelling "[u]sing my nose" (56). Stupidity or insensitivity is described frequently as an inability to "follow [one's] nose," or to "see what's under [one's] nose" (23, 72, 81, 129).

As the possessor of the "the most delicately-gifted olfactory organ in history," Saleem has "dedicated my latter days to the large-scale preparation of condiments," particularly pickles (38). Thus "pickling" is inextricably linked to "using his nose" as a narrator. In Rushdie's book, then, pickles are not mere food. Pickling is transformed into a metaphor for the act of narration. Saleem's uncle, Hanif Aziz, aspires to write a "pickle epic" (289, 292). Pickling is narrative and history:

mastery over the multiple gifts of cookery and language is rare indeed; yet I possess it . . . my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings . . . Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks. (38)

In his most extravagant narratological description of pickling, Saleem calls it an act of embalming, of immortalization, and "an act of love" (549). In other words, Saleem's story is his "preserve." It is here that Saleem wonders parenthetically, "[i]s this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate [that is, to preserve] the whole of reality? Worse: am I infected too?" (84).

Pickling denotes the act of transforming something into something that is at once same and different. It enables an object to mature as mere vine ripening does not, and makes it somehow more itself, as it were isolating its essence. Mary Pereira, the maid who switches baby Saleem with baby Shiva, altering and transforming—pickling—their histories, offers an example: Mary was "my ayah who was both more and less than a mother; Mary who knew everything about all of us" (90). It is Mary in whose "intestines" the truth about Muslim Saleem and his primordial Hindu antiparticle Shiva are "pickled by time" (170), a protected political secret (for she had switched babies to please her politically radical—and Christian—lover, Joe D'Costa). In a sense, she possesses the essential truth about midnight's children—is even responsible for it, although she stirs the secret into her pickles (208).

The pickler always contributes something of herself to the pickle; in idiomatic
Talking Dirty 439

Since the pickler always lends something of herself or himself to the pickle, there is always the question of mediation: Saleem cautions us that, on a more general level, there are "as many Indias as Indians" (323), the arrogant slogan of the Widow Indira Gandhi that "India is Indira and Indira is India" notwithstanding (501). In other words, memory, as pickling, has its "own special kind" of truth. It is not, in the first place, an objective recalling of past events. It "eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality . . . and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (253). Furthermore, "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems—but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible" (197). Saleem illustrates with the example of an observer getting too close to a large cinema screen, when it becomes clear that the illusion cast by dots on the screen is the actuality. Only from a distance can the illusion seem plausible. In narratological terms, time admits a perspective, just as pickling alters the pickled object while seeming to preserve its essential flavor.

Saleem is not above delivering metaphysical lectures to Padma on the nature of truth and illusion ("Maya")—and half humorously characterizing narration as illusion-production and chutnification:

Maya . . . may be defined as all that is illusory. . . . If I say that certain things took place which you, lost in Brahma's dream, find hard to believe, then which of us is right? Have some more chutney. (253)

Saleem chutnifies, or re-members his own story, his own birth and growth, in a linguistic metaphor, as a progress from a "full stop" to an encyclopaedia—even a whole language (115). But his narrative also has political designs, exploiting the subversive force of pickling as history/narrative, and indigenizing and thus recuperating his own story or postcolonial history. Booker's description of this aspect of Rushdie's style takes up the trace of the pickling metaphor, in a discussion of The Satanic Verses. Rushdie's language, Booker observes, is "spiced" with an idiom peculiar to Indian speakers of "English" ("Finnegans Wake" 202). Several other observers have drawn attention to this feature of Rushdie's method, and some have remarked that this exuberant sprawl of language away from the colonialist's "pure" English is always intended to return us to the concrete present from which English springs. Gerald Marzorati, writing about The Satanic Verses, says that "the lustrous, alloyed English [Rushdie has] fused from street slang, Great Books, rock songs, and jingles, immigrant patois, everything has a way of keeping us in the crowded, gritty here and now, even in the book's most phantasmagoric pages" (25). Maria Couto also observes that

Rushdie uses phonemes and word patterns to suggest the vigor and liveliness of folk culture, the pace and variety of Indian life, the mythology of Bombay films, the brash exuberance of affluence, the violence simmering. . . . His prose, liberally sprinkled with Urdu, Hindi, and Sanskrit names, the deliberately uncontrolled flow of sentence with repetition and sonorous content, suggests the chant of Indian traditional texts. (63)
Whether it be a matter of language or sensibility, of behavior or metaphysics, Saleem the master-pickler has little use for or interest in upholding "purity" as an ideal or telos. Unlike his father Ahmed Sinai, whose doomed impulse to purity and cleanliness prompted him to found a (briefly successful) towel factory (372), Saleem confesses to the "ugly truth" that "the sacred, or good, hold little interest for me, even when such aromas surrounded my sister as she sang; while the pungency of the gutter seemed to possess a fatally irresistible attraction." Jamila sings in a pure voice, "a sword for purity" (376), and she sang frequently of purity. Saleem prefers profanity, lust, filth, life. This preference has had a long history for him, ranging from Tai to the prostitute Tai Bibi; it is manifest, at its most extreme, as lust for his sister, and as coprolalia and coprophilia.

At one point, he even launches into "a brief paean to Dung"—that which "fertilizes and causes the crops to grow! . . . On April 6th, 1919, the holy city of Amritsar smelled (gloriously, Padma, celestially!) of excrement" (30). The association of Padma with dung—she "had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst the village folk is 'The One Who Possesses Dung'" (21)—is not merely adventitious scatology. If Tai is associated with excremental stench, Padma is associated with the triumphantly low. "Strong, jolly," not to mention "[t]hick of waist, somewhat hairy of forearm," Padma is cast as the sometimes feeble literalist ("'What nonsense. . . . How can a picture talk'"). But she is also a robust, skeptical, and earthy listener who interrupts Saleem's flights of fancy, and thus keeps him on track. "But what is so precious," she asks, "to need all this writing-shiting?" (21). Although she "can't read," she has the sense to know that body should not be starved to pleasure soul: "Eat, na, food is spoiling" (21).

Padma is his necessary, and necessarily impure, audience and companion, as indispensable as Tai, his obscene narratological forebear. Saleem's reflection on the conundrum of his need for his imperfect muse is cast appropriately as a riddle: "'How to dispense with Padma?' he muses, 'How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps my feet on the ground?'" (177).

In fact she is a narratological spur for Saleem. He writes as if to make up for being unmanned—although his nose leaks, he can't "leak into" Padma (39). Fittingly, Padma teases Saleem about his impotence, about his compulsion to seek compensation by his pencil for his sexual incompetence: "So now that the writing is done, let's see if we can make your other pencil work." Saleem reflects that "I vouchsafe daily glimpses of myself—while she, my squatting glimpses, is captivated, helpless as a mongoose frozen into immobility by the swaying, blinkless eyes of a hooded snake, paralyzed—yes!—by love!" (141-42). Appropriately, she asks Saleem to marry her, although not without mocking him:

"'Love you?" our Padma piped scornfully, "'What for, my God? What use are you, little princeling,'”—and now came her attempted coup de grace—"'as a lover?'' Arms extended, its hairs glowing in the lamplight, she jabbed a contemptuous index finger in the direction of my admittedly non-functional loins; a long, thick digit,
rigid with jealousy, which unfortunately served only to remind me of another, long-
lost finger . . . (142)

Saleem tries to affect unconcern about her sexual/textual gibes by attributing
them to jealousy, but his sexist, phallic (and Eliotesque) rhetoric gives the lie to
his pose of being no longer “vulnerable to words” (142).

Padma’s sensuality is necessary for Saleem as narrator (if no longer as lover),
as he remarks in another paean to her physicality:

How I admire the leg-muscles of my solicitous Padma! . . . I am learning to use my
Padma’s muscles as my guides. When she’s bored, I can detect in her fibres the rip-
iples of uninterest; when she’s unconvinced there is a tic, which gets going in her
cheek. The dance of her musculature helps to keep me on the rails; because in auto-
biography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what
the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe . . . [Padma] gives me
the courage to speed on. (324–52)

III

Women, for Saleem, are the necessary supplement to “pure textuality,” just as
the physical and the base are the inevitable supplements to the intellectual and
the high. Women supplement his textual fecundity not only in being sexually de-
sired (Saleem was not always sexually impotent) or in being reminders of his
sexual inability. They have also made Saleem’s story what it is, have made his
narrative possible:

Women have always been the ones to change my life. Mary Pereira, Evie Burns,
Jamila Singer, Parvati-the-Witch must answer for who I am; and the Widow who
I’m keeping for the end; and after the end, Padma, my goddess of dung. . . . (229)

Even “the Widow,” later revealed to be Indira Gandhi, with her egregious pro-
gram of forced vasectomies, was a goad to Saleem, and thus narratologically
useful. But this catalog of women is not exhaustive. It leaves out not only Sal-
eem’s biological mother (Vanita, Wee Willie Winkie’s wife) and his virtual moth-
er (Amina Sinai), but, more significantly, it also leaves out Tai Bibi, lexical and
existential reincarnation of the malodorous boatman Tai.

Tai Bibi’s “gifts,” Saleem declares significantly, were “a mirror for my
own.” And “[t]hough she never hinted at any connection with a Kashmiri boat-
man, her name exerted the strongest of pulls” (381). In the figure of this “oldest
whore in the world” (381) occurs the most striking inspissation of Saleem’s poly-
morphously perverse preference for the base. For Tai Bibi is rivalled only by her
namesake Tai in sheer smelly impurity: “But her smell! The richest spoor he,
Saleem, had ever sniffed; he felt bewitched by something in it, some air of his-
toric majesty . . .” (381). Tai Bibi is “irresistible” because, as Saleem puts it,
she has a “gift for control” that “put other whores to shame.” As he explains to
his immediate audience, “Padma: my ancient prostitute possessed a mastery
over her glands so total that she could alter her bodily odours to match those of
anyone on earth. Eccrines and endocrines obeyed the instructions of her anti-
quated will . . .” (381).
Tai Bibi’s chameleon concubinage is the entelechy of everything Tai the boatman sought and taught. The narratological analogue for Tai Bibi’s expertise would be nothing less than the absolute control over one’s narrative universe. Once again, this power is ascribed not to intellectual ability but to sheer glandular, physical power, reinforcing the impression that this incident is coherent with the strategy of revalorizing the base.

There is no satisfactory way of drawing his narrative to a tidy end: “How to end?” Saleem worries. As if to underscore the impossibility of neat closure to such a lively farrago, Saleem most appropriately delivers a final accolade to the irresistibility and resplendent fecundity of the base. In what is almost an aside, he mentions the “turd maker,” whom he encounters in the street and whose magnificent production, Saleem notes, might have become the fertilizer of another story:

Once, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I’d have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times... (545–46)

Some readers may find Rushdie’s ribald celebration of the low, or his embrace of the impure, lugubrious. As we know, this former secularist and unbeliever’s (for he now claims to believe) elevation of the antithetical in The Satanic Verses has given offense in certain quarters. One should not, however, let a solemn or monological reading of the “dirty talk,” the scatology, and the preference for the base obscure the richness of Rushdie’s novelistic ambition.

The scope and consistency of that ambition is borne out in The Satanic Verses, which is in part an exploration of the ambivalence of the expatriate native, suggestively named Salahuddin Chamchawalla, or, more pithily, Saladin Chamcha. Here, as Srinivas Aravamudan has suggested, the sensibility is once again deliberately and “profoundly” Indian (8) and, one might add, somewhat more breezily postcolonialist. If the colonizer is faced with the dilemma, in Abdul R. JanMohamed’s terms, of “reconciling the notions of political freedom cherished by his home country with the actual political suppression and disfranchisement [sic] of the colonized people,” the “indigenous person,” like Saladin, also confronts a contradiction. As JanMohamed writes,

The superiority complex of the European creates a corresponding sense of inferiority in the native, who attempts to overcome this feeling by espousing Western values and social customs only to discover in the end that although the colonial system offers the European as a model for emulation it also effectively blocks the means to education, assimilation, and equality. (5)

Even modeling his identity after the European traps the native in a “double bind”:

if he chooses conservatively and remains loyal to his indigenous culture, then he opts to stay in a calcified society whose developmental momentum has been checked by colonization. If, however, the colonized person chooses assimilation, then he is trapped in a form of historical catalepsy because colonial education severs him from his own past and replaces it with the study of the colonizer’s past. (5)
The Satanic Verses is continuous with Midnight’s Children then, at least to the extent that it rearticulates certain postcolonialist strategies. One might think Verses is about “[j]ust two brown men, falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun. . . .” But this is an inadequate description. As the narrative voice cautions, “That’s not it. Listen” (Verses 5).

Gibreel Farishta, the lapsed Indian Muslim film star who plays Hindu gods on the screen, is a kind of popular representative, an embodiment of the mass audience’s ideal of masculinity. He is a fallen god (his name is a multiple pun: not only is “Gibreel” a version of the archangel Gabriel’s name, but “farishta” means both “angel” and “film star”). Perhaps more interesting is Chamcha, whose name means “spoon,” slang for “sycophant.” He is a type of the native who wishes to remake himself after the model of the European. Even as a child he had dreamed of going to “Proper London,” the fabled “Vilayet” (Verses 35). The thirteen-year-old Chamcha refuses to believe his mother who attempts to disillusion him about the English, observing that in their toilet habits they disappoint her son’s idealized image of them (39). In England at last, he had “constructed his face with care—it had taken him several years to get it just right—and for many more years now he had thought of it simply as his own—indeed, he had forgotten what he had looked like before it” (33). He had fashioned a voice to match the face. Returning as an eighteen-year-old, he criticized everything. As his father tells his mother, “if he went abroad to learn contempt for his own kind, then his own kind can feel nothing but scorn for him. What is he? A fauntleroy, a grand panjandrum?” (45). On a visit to Bombay with an acting troupe (what else?), his accent begins to slip like a false mustache: “On stage, he tailored his voice to the requirements of the part [of the Indian doctor in The Millionairess by George Bernard Shaw] but those long-suppressed locutions, those discarded vowels and consonants, began to leak out of his mouth out of the theatre as well” (49). India threatens constantly to reclaim him. Chamcha’s transgressive self-fashioning is cast as a complex allegory:

A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk: not all mutants survive. Or, consider him sociopolitically: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves. (49)

Chamcha bravely maintains that migrant Indians deserve to be celebrated for their ability to be assimilated:

we get everywhere, we become tinkers in Australia and our heads end up in Idi Amin’s fridge, Columbus was right, maybe; the world’s made up of Indies, East, West, North. Damn it, you should be proud of us, our enterprise, the way we push against frontiers. (54)

But the supremely self-confident Zeeny Vakil mocks Chamcha, mercilessly exposing the contradictions of his position. Zeeny is an art critic who has written a book archly entitled The Only Good Indian and based on the “confining myth of
authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket,' which "she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?" (52). Zeeny, in brief, is a champion of the eclectic impure bricolage artist. What she tries to teach Chamcha—the sycophant—is the "active-metaphorical" postcolonial modality, the "third principle," that haunts so much of Rushdie's work, but is nowhere so triumphant as in Midnight's Children.

Works Cited


