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HISTORY THROUGH CINEMA: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE INDIAN EMERGENCY IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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Abstract

Midnight's Children, written by Salman Rushdie and filmed by Deepa Mehta, is a fascinating depiction of the Indian Emergency (1975-1977) in the context of magical realism and political allegory. The present essay explores Saleem Sinai's personal journey and the constitutional and political history of post-Independent India, including the suspension of civil liberties during the Emergency. It looks at the symbolic representation of the *Midnight's Children* as democracy, freedom of expression and national identity and examines the legal and historical background of Article 352 of the Constitution, preventive detention, press censorship and forced sterilisation campaigns. The article, based on literary criticism and constitutional history and judicial developments, contends that *Midnight's Children* is a film version as well as an effective critique of authoritarianism. It illustrates the potential of cinema to sustain the constitutional memory and to further the debate about democracy, individual liberty and rule of law in India.

Introduction

The award-winning novel by Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, which director Deepa Mehta adapted into a film, is a masterwork of cinema that skilfully combines the lives of its protagonists with the turbulent time of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The 2012 movie has a gripping story that goes right to the heart of a country that is enduring social change and political upheaval. Saleem's quest for identity is central to the story. He grapples with his unique birthright and his sense of belonging in a rapidly changing India. "*Midnight's Children*" provides a historical perspective on the partition of India and the subsequent political events that shaped the nation. The film incorporates elements of magical realism, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, to convey the surreal nature of India's post-independence journey. *Midnight's Children*, in the opinion of Timothy Brennan, is a

Defence of liberal principles of civil liberties and human rights. It is an appeal for a secular state to serve as the sole political haven for the Individual⁴⁷⁸.

Historical Context of the Emergency

"I was mysteriously hand-cuffed to history". Set against the backdrop of India's political landscape in the 1970s, *Midnight's Children* introduces us to Saleem Sinai, born precisely at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the very moment India gained independence from British rule. Saleem Sinai was the first person to be born in India after the British left the country. He shares this birthright with 1,001 other children who were all born within an hour of independence and who each have special supernatural skills, bestowing upon them all unique powers. There are several metaphors in the book, but the one that stands out the most is how Salim's birth at the stroke of

⁴⁷⁸ Brennan, Timothy, Salman Rushdie and The Third World: Myths of The Nation. New York: St. Martin, 1989

midnight and the years that followed it personifies the nation of India. At exactly midnight on August 15, 1947, India was born. This is personified in the birth of Saleem, who represents India. The movie, based on a novel by Salman Rushdie, takes the reader through the notion of India having a stable identity. Timothy Brennan first proposed the idea of a personification of the country when he wrote that Saleem Sinai's life is "just an extended metaphor of the literal narrative of history."⁴⁷⁹ The use of metaphor is especially evident in Aadam Aziz's presence at the Amritsar massacre, where he sustains a severe wound that won't go away till his death, which is a literal representation of the effect of the slaughter on those who witnessed it. Nadir Khan, a proponent of a secular society distinguished by religious tolerance, was shoved beneath the rug and kept in the basement as a further literal depiction of individuals who participated in Indian history. The metaphor represents those who supported the idea of a secular after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, whose stories were swept under the rug⁴⁸⁰. Fredric Jameson highlights the use of metaphors in the novel, that makes the history of India literal, one of them being the idea of India being born on August 15th, 1947⁴⁸¹. This metaphor is further strengthened by the birth of Parvati's child, "while Parvati pushed in the ghetto J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push push push the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister, so in a sense, they were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push, and as the night darkened towards the midnight hour because nothing ever happens at any other time, triplets began to screech it's coming coming, and elsewhere the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own". The progression of Parvati's pregnancy mirrors what is happening on the political front. When

the judgment against the Prime Minister was given at 2 p.m. on June 12th, 1975, the breaking point was reached as the conflict between the people's front, a coalition of different political groups, intensified⁴⁸². In the State of Uttar Pradesh v. Raj Narain, Justice Sinha found Indira Gandhi guilty of several election-related offenses, including using government resources for election purposes and engaging in corrupt practices. He declared Indira Gandhi's election to the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareilly in 1971 void and unseated her as a Member of Parliament. He also disqualified her from holding any public office for six years. During the pendency of the appeal to this case, in 1975, Indira Gandhi's government imposed a state of Emergency, citing "internal disturbances" as the reason⁴⁸³, hence, the phrase "Indira Gandhi giving birth to her child while Parvati was giving birth to Her's" is used in the book.

Allegory and Nationhood

"The President has proclaimed Emergency. This is nothing to panic about" (Indira Gandhi, 26th June 1975)⁴⁸⁴. A dark period in India's history characterized by an authoritarian government, censorship, and the repression of civil liberties, the rise of Indira Gandhi's Emergency is strongly reflected in the film's plot. The personification of a nation, by the author, also makes it possible to invoke a coming-of-age metaphor, as emphasized by Stanley Wolpert, "there comes a time in the life of the nation when hard decisions have to be taken"⁴⁸⁵. In demonstrating how the destinies of these Midnight's Children mirror the turbulent events taking place in the country, the director and the author skilfully weave together Saleem's journey with the larger political setting. As the movie follows Saleem's life, we witness the profound impact of the Emergency on his existence and the lives of those around him. The Emergency symbolizes the suppression of individuality and the stifling of voices, mirroring

⁴⁷⁹ Brennan, Timothy, Salman Rushdie and The Third World: Myths of The Nation. New York: St. Martin, 1989

⁴⁸⁰ Ten Kortenaar, Neil. "Midnight's Children and the Allegory of History." ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 26.2 (1995).

⁴⁸¹ Jameson, Fredric. The geopolitical Aesthetic. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.

⁴⁸² Mathur, Om Prakash. Indira Gandhi and the emergency as viewed in the Indian novel. Sarup & Sons, 2004.

⁴⁸³ "State of Uttar Pradesh v. Raj Narain." AIR 1975 SC 865.

⁴⁸⁴ Prashad, Vijay. "Emergency assessments." *Social Scientist* (1996): 36-68.

⁴⁸⁵ Wolpert, Stanley. A New History of India. 1977. New York: Oxford UP, 1989

the loss of Saleem's telepathic connection with his fellow Midnight's Children. The parallel narratives serve as a poignant commentary on the loss of freedom, identity, and hope experienced by millions during this period. The children of Midnight, born within one hour of freedom, represent freedom of speech and discussion⁴⁸⁶. This freedom is taken away during the imposition of Emergency in the country when the Midnight's Children are imprisoned, a personification of the fundamental rights being suspended. As established in a split decision by the Supreme Court, in *Additional District Magistrate, Jabalpur v. S. S. Shukla*, 1976 AIR 1207, (four out of five) ruled in Favor of the government's position, holding that the right to personal liberty stood suspended during the Emergency. They held that the government's actions during this period were beyond the scope of judicial review. The majority judgment, authored by Justice A.N. Ray, stated that during the Emergency, even if a person's detention was illegal or mala fide (in bad faith), the court would not interfere, and individuals could not seek relief through habeas corpus petitions⁴⁸⁷. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, and her son, Sanjay, advised Mrs. Gandhi to declare an emergency under Article 352(1) and imprison all political opponents. Her courtiers, including Bansi Lai and R. K. Dhawan, a close confidant and special assistant, informed her of the plot. On the advice of her son Sanjay and Siddhartha Shankar Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of emergency under Article 352(1) and imprisoned all of her political rivals⁴⁸⁸.

Constitutional Dimensions of the Emergency

Article 352(1) of the Constitution of India "If the President is satisfied that a grave emergency exists whereby the security of India or any part of the territory thereof is threatened, whether by war or external aggression or armed rebellion, he may, by Proclamation, made a declaration to

that effect in respect of the whole of India or of such part of the territory thereof as may be specified in the Proclamation Explanation A Proclamation of Emergency declaring that the security of India or any part of the territory thereof is threatened by war or by external aggression or by armed rebellion may be made before the actual occurrence of war or any such aggression or rebellion, if the President is satisfied that there is imminent danger thereof⁴⁸⁹". The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, and her son, Sanjay, both advised Mrs. Gandhi to declare an emergency under Article 352(1) and imprison all political opponents. The Prime Minister had unrestricted power after declaring an emergency, which she first exploited to crush the opposition. Om Mehta, the state minister for home affairs, gave orders to the police and the judiciary to detain all opposition leaders in their current locations. On June 26, in the early morning hours, the majority of this work was completed. Approximately One Lakh Fifty Thousand (1,50,000) persons were detained under the MISA and DIR from all over the country as "Operation Arrest" progressed. Even a few Congress leaders, including Chandrashekhar, Ram Dhan, and Krishnakant, who spoke against Mrs. Gandhi, were not spared. The widespread application of arbitrary rules and regulations like the Defence of India Rules (DIR) and the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) was a key aspect of the declared emergency. The first MISA passed in 1971, mandated that a detainee be informed of the reasons for his incarceration within five days of his arrest and that the detention period could be up to six months. However, the length of the incarceration was initially raised to a year in the first case and then to two years by amending MISA. The modified MISA further stated that the reasons for detention were to be kept private and not shared with the people who were arrested. The act was also

⁴⁸⁶ Mathur, Om Prakash. *Indira Gandhi and the emergency as viewed in the Indian novel*. Sarup & Sons, 2004.

⁴⁸⁷ "Additional District Magistrate, Jabalpur v. S. S. Shukla." 1976 AIR 1207.

⁴⁸⁸ Desai, Tasneem M. "The portrayal of emergency in Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." (2006)

⁴⁸⁹ "Constitution of India." Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 1950.

rendered unjustifiable, which eliminated the detainee's ability to petition the courts for protection against unjustified arrest or abuse of the act. The reasons for the detention could also not be brought up in court because neither the detainees nor the courts were informed of them. Similarly, DIR was changed in June 1975 to apply to "internal security" and "internal disturbance" as opposed to just "defence in India" and "external aggression." The daily newspapers and news magazines served as a major medium for presenting the opposition's point of view to the public, while All India Radio and Television were run by government organisations. Press censorship was implemented on the day the Emergency was declared as part of the rule of the Defence and Upkeep of Internal Security Act of 1971⁴⁹⁰. The 20-point plan represented yet another ruse to get people to believe the long-awaited millennium had arrived. The poor people who live in jhuggi-jhonpri settlements across the nation were the first to be affected by the victimization operation. In the name of beautifying the city, hundreds of these colonies that the government had built and spent thousands of rupees on as a means of political sway for the Congress Party were uprooted quickly without giving the residents enough time to remove their possessions. Bulldozers also crushed valuables into dust in addition to demolishing houses. The justification offered for this victimization of innocent people was that the 19 unkempt locations had to be removed to develop and beautify the city⁴⁹¹. One such incident is the Turkman gate incident. The day of April 19, 1976, which turned out to be the worst day and the pinnacle of the mayhem leaves a somber mark on Delhi's history. Bulldozers from the DDA demolition teams arrived at Turkman Gate. The DDA officials gave the people only five minutes to leave with any possessions they might gather. The locals became very anxious and tense as a result of this. After opening fire

heavily, the police used tear gas to scatter the throng. The terrified folks fled for their lives. People sat paralyzed as they observed the demolition. According to eyewitness accounts, a mother feeding her newborn infant was murdered by a bulldozer. Likewise, those who did not manage to quit in time, met with the same fate, while policemen looted valuables from the demolished scrab⁴⁹². In *Midnight's Children*, when the slum, where Saleem and Parvati live, is destroyed on Shiva's command during the two years of darkness during which the sun did not rise, a similar demolition is depicted. Without warning, there comes an abrupt demolition. While others flee in an attempt to save their lives and avoid being run over by a bulldozer, Havok triumphs, and Parvati succumbs to her unavoidable demise while still trying to save her child. Saleem is dragged away by Shiva to a sterilization camp where the other *Midnight's* children are already detained.

Sanjay Gandhi proposed the idea to start the sterilization campaign when he presented his 4-point agenda at a special meeting of the newly elected Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee at the beginning of 1976. This program, later known as the five-point, emphasized the importance of small families. The family planning program in India experienced a painful era in 1976–1977 as a result of the country's proclamation of a State of Emergency. During this time, a national goal of 4.3 million sterilizations was established for the months of April 1976–March 1977. Particularly in the northern states where achievement in earlier years was generally poor, illiterate, lower castes, scheduled castes, and Muslims were the minority, the sterilizing policy was undertaken with pressure. According to reports, the individuals were picked up from marketplaces, eateries, hotels, buses, parks, theatres, and train stations and transported to the sterilizing camps⁴⁹³. Shiva, the biological son of Ahmed and

⁴⁹⁰ Prashad, Vijay. "Emergency assessments." *Social Scientist* (1996): 36–68.

⁴⁹¹ Desai, Tasneem M. "The portrayal of emergency in Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* Nayantara Sahgals *Rich Like Us* Shashi Tharoor *The Great Indian Novel* and Rohinton Mistry *A Fine Balance*." (2006).

⁴⁹² Desai, Tasneem M. "The portrayal of emergency in Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* Nayantara Sahgals *Rich Like Us* Shashi Tharoor *The Great Indian Novel* and Rohinton Mistry *A Fine Balance*." (2006).

⁴⁹³ Hazarika, Violet. "RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE AND NATIONAL EMERGENCY (1975-77): A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A DEBATABLE

Amina Sinai, represents the forces of chaos because he was brought up in abject poverty and harbors animosity towards the wealthy. When Shiva joins the ranks of Indira Gandhi's henchmen, the personification of chaos connects with tyranny. Under Shiva's orders, Saleem is sterilized in a sterilization camp in Banaras. The atmosphere of the internment camp, where the children of the Midnight are already detained and undergoing medical procedures, is characterized as unsettling. The widow herself gave the directive to ensure that this vasectomy marks the end of the Midnight's Children race⁴⁹⁴. The Midnight's children, as they are a representation of freedom of speech, expression, and liberty, were a threat to the widow and her absolute control over the nation, and in the movie, the children contributed to the reason for the proclamation of emergency by the Widow.

In *Midnight's Children*, Indira Gandhi is referred to as the widow. The usage of the widow is typically linked with harshness, brutality, and most importantly, absolute, unchecked power over the family, or in this case the nation⁴⁹⁵. Rushdie in "*Midnight's Children and Shame*" discusses the symbolic representation of a widow in a book, which is used to depict the dark period in India's history from independence to emergency. This period, marked by a shift from optimism to pessimism, is ironically led by Nehru's daughter, who undermines her father's work. The author uses a personal nightmare to illustrate this period, and the term "widow" emerges from this. The term also coincidentally aligns with Indira Gandhi's status as a widow, making it a fitting symbol. Rushdie expresses satisfaction in seeing the term used in public discourse as if it predated his usage⁴⁹⁶.

The Midnight's Children as a Metaphor for Civil Liberties

"With the declaration of Emergency and the birth of a new unfree India, a dark night fell"

While Saleem's traits reflect a flourishing democracy, those of his child are seen through the lens of the emergency. Aadam suffers from tuberculosis, a deadly disease that is cured by itself after the emergency has been lifted. As Saleem insists, "While the emergency lasts, he will never become well"⁴⁹⁷. The magical realism element of the film further strengthens the metaphor of the restoration of democratic order. When the emergency is declared, the country is enveloped in everlasting nightfall and darkness. This darkness only disappears after the state of emergency is lifted. Rushdie says that by the time he started writing the book, there was no seeming end to the period of emergency. Rushdie expresses his gratitude when Mrs. Gandhi calls her election and loses and the period of emergency is, thus, over⁴⁹⁸. The newly elected Janata Government formally repealed the state of emergency on March 21, 1977. But even before that, the surprise declaration of the general election by the then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on January 19, 1977, rendered some of the emergency restrictions meaningless. The declaration coincided with the release of political prisoners and detainees under MISA and DIR who were still in custody; several of them ran for office in the 1977 general election and prevailed⁴⁹⁹.

Conclusion

In *Midnight's Children*, the historical with the magical is woven together to look at the connection between the individual and the values enshrined in the constitution and state power during the Indian Emergency. The characters of Saleem Sinai and the Midnight's Children symbolically illustrate the clampdown

ERA OF INDIAN POLITICS." *International Journal of Management (IJM)* 11.11 (2020)

⁴⁹⁴ Mathur, Om Prakash. *Indira Gandhi and the emergency as viewed in the Indian novel*. Sarup & Sons, 2004.

⁴⁹⁵ Mathur, Om Prakash. *Indira Gandhi and the emergency as viewed in the Indian novel*. Sarup & Sons, 2004.

⁴⁹⁶ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children and Shame*. Kunapipi 7.1 (1985): 3.

⁴⁹⁷ Ten Kortenaar, Neil. "Midnight's Children" and the Allegory of History." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.2 (1995).

⁴⁹⁸ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children and Shame*. Kunapipi 7.1 (1985): 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Hazarika, Violet. "RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE AND NATIONAL EMERGENCY (1975-77): A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A DEBATABLE ERA OF INDIAN POLITICS." *International Journal of Management (IJM)* 11.11 (2020).

on civil liberties, censorship and political repression that marked one of the darkest chapters in India's democratic history. It's an allegorical story, and it's an indictment of authoritarianism, and a reminder of how to protect fundamental rights and democratic institutions. The linkage of personal history with national history in the film, and the hope it evokes that the art of cinema will help to remember the constitution and prompt attention to the dangers of arbitrary government. It is not just a film about the novel by Salman Rushdie, it is also an important cultural and legal essay, an alert to the fact that freedom, the rule of law, and the democratic process must be guarded at all times.





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