

From Conrad's Colonial Archetypes to Postcolonial Hybridity: Reimagining Heroism in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981)

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Abstract:

This article examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) as a subversion of the Western heroic tropes entrenched in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Central to this analysis is the argument that *Midnight's Children* rediscovers heroism by rejecting the Eurocentric discourse embedded in Conrad's colonial narrative. It aims to achieve two main objectives. First, it juxtaposes Saleem Sinai's fractured postcolonial anti-heroism with the imperialist archetypes of Kurtz and Marlow. Second, the study investigates how Saleem's biological, historical, and narrative hybridity undermines the colonial model of heroic purity and coherence. This essay draws on Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Bakhtin's notion of

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the grotesque to decode Saleem's mixed cultural and biological heritage, as well as his deformed physicality, as a refutation of colonial binaries and a deliberate inversion of colonial heroism.

Keywords: Postcolonial Heroism, hybridity, grotesque realism, *Midnight's Children*. *Heart of Darkness*.

1-Introduction:

This article reads Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) against the hero archetype of nineteenth-century imperial romance and the colonial ideology that underlay it. From ancient European epics to late nineteenth-century novels, the hero stood as the epitome of society's highest values: bravery, strength, purpose, and moral clarity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities." As an archetype, it represents "a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability." Within the imperial literary context, heroism was weaponised to prolong racial hierarchy, conquest, and the so-called "civilising mission". In those colonial narratives, the hero is an enlightened European who ventures into the 'dark unknown', bringing order to chaos and meaning to 'the meaningless void' represented by native society and culture. This imperial vision of heroism, wrapped in a noble rhetoric, empowered a binary worldview through which colonised peoples were systematically silenced and misrepresented. To study how Rushdie challenges the imperial hero from a postcolonial perspective, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is posited as the "arch-text" of British and wider European Imperialism, because it offers two imbricated

representations of heroic authority, the ambivalent rationalism of Marlow and the tragic megalomania of Kurtz. Throughout his career, Rushdie has made no mystery of his admiration of Conrad, as, for example, in his adoption of the Joseph Anton pseudonym during Khomeini's fatwa, which decreed his death. But this does not mean that his earlier novel did not gesture to contest the colonial ideology that informs Conrad's literary discourse. In fact, by portraying his main character, Saleem Sinai, as a hybrid, fractured, and profoundly postcolonial figure, Rushdie challenges the heroic paradigm grounded in imperial authority and individual grandeur. While Conrad's characters are designed to enforce European moral authority, Saleem's imagined liminality and bodily disintegration exemplify what Neil ten Kortenaar calls the "mutual imbrication of inside and out" (2004: 11), turning hybridity from a colonial pathology into a mode of resistance. *Midnight Children*, thus, proposes a postcolonial revision of heroism that embraces contradiction, common experience, and the instability of identity.

Rushdie's rewriting of Conrad's archetypal figures is evident in many aspects of his novel, not the least in the polyphony of his discourse, which restores the voices of the silenced natives in *Heart of Darkness*. In addition, Saleem's narrative unreliability reworks Marlow's to underline the fragmentation of the postcolonial subject, in the same way the grotesqueness of the former's body recalls Kurtz's incarnation of the monstrosity of imperialism. These revisions, far from being incidental, operate structurally, marking Rushdie's text as one that grapples with colonial heroism from a postcolonial, contestatory perspective.

It is within the framework of counter discourse that theoretical perspectives on postcolonial hybridity and grotesque realism become essential for understanding how Rushdie's antihero undermines the Western

canon represented by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. To demonstrate how his novel undermines the moral and political authority embedded within it, this study begins by reviewing Chinua Achebe's (1975) and Edward Said's (1993) critical assessments, in which Conrad's novella is seen to critique yet ultimately reinforce colonial heroism. Next to this, Saleem's fragmented identity and narrative unreliability are analysed to show how they are wielded to dismantle the moral integrity of Conrad's protagonists. Finally, the analysis is extended to show how grotesque realist discourse is deployed in *Midnight Children* to invert the "colonial sublime" conveyed by Kurtz's tragic downfall and Marlow's moral ambivalence.

2-Review of the literature:

Heart of Darkness occupies a controversial place in postcolonial discourse. While it reads like a critique of empire, its depiction of Marlow and Kurtz, as flawed yet central characters, ultimately reinforces the myth of colonial heroism, revealing the profound ambivalence and complicity within imperial narratives. In his review of the novella, Achebe (1975) criticises Conrad's aestheticisation of colonialism, contending that Kurtz's descent into madness is romanticised rather than condemned—a portrayal of a "hollow man" whose final cry, "The horror! The horror!", is framed as a moment of tragic, sublime grandeur rather than one of moral accountability. For Achebe, this standpoint reflects Conrad's racist attitude and, more significantly, his failure to give Africa and its people moral and narrative autonomy. Conrad's poetics of depoliticising violence reinforces, according to Aimé Césaire (1950: 9), Africans' "thingification", turning Africa into a metaphysical setting for European self-examination. This critique is expanded upon in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which situates *Heart of Darkness* within the "imperial archive" as a work that both

challenges and reproduces the colonial system of dominance. According to Said, this narrative aligns with Conrad's approach of 'distilling' and 'simplifying' the complexities of imperialism, shaped by 'a set of choices', fitting within an 'imaginative geography' that views the non-European through a racialised lens. Marlow's depiction of the African continent, in Said's view (1993: 154), reflects an imperialist view that validates the European mission as one of bringing civilisation and order, even as he becomes disillusioned by the atrocities of colonialism.

This postcolonial critical convergence situates *Heart of Darkness* as an enactment of the Manichean allegory of colonial literature, in which heroism is inextricably linked to contrasting racial and cultural aesthetics and worldviews. Against this backdrop, Salman Rushdie's narrative stands as a purposeful counter-narrative, with Saleem Sinai, the protagonist, embodying the postcolonial refusal of Conrad's archetypes through elements that directly undermine the cohesion of imperial narratives, such as hybridity, narrative unreliability, and grotesque physicality.

Although rarely compared directly to *Heart of Darkness*, the scholarship on *Midnight's Children* has extensively examined Salman Rushdie's inversion of the colonial paradigm and Eurocentric narrative structures. Thus, critics present the novel as a rewriting of narrative authority that dismantles the epistemic assumptions underlying nationalist and colonial historiography. According to Edward Said, while Rushdie "represents the East to the West using Orientalist clichés" and mediates his Muslim heritage through the prism of the Other, he is nevertheless "one of the most remarkable postcolonial writers of our time" (quoted in Appignanesi & Maitland, 1989: 176). For him, Rushdie's literature is "self-consciously written against the cultural stereotypes and representations

commanding the field" (1989: 89). In the same regard, Timothy Brennan presents Rushdie as an important postcolonial author whose work challenges Western literary traditions by celebrating "in-betweenness" (1989: viii). Rushdie's portrayal of Saleem Sinai as a symbol of "familiar strangeness" (viii) uses his dual identities as "alien" and "familiar" (xiii) to mediate the Third World for Western audiences, Brennan argues, not by exoticising difference but by undermining the very structures that call for such exoticism.

Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) places Rushdie as a significant postcolonial writer, framing *Midnight's Children* as a paradigmatic example of literature that attacks colonial discourse through hybrid narrative forms and linguistic innovation; a project mirroring Rushdie's call to 'rewrite' colonial paradigms as dictated in his 1982 essay, *The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance*. Central to this project is the overturning of colonial heroism, exemplified by Kurtz and Marlow, and its reclamation through the perspective of hybridity as a key mode of postcolonial subversion. This transformation is vividly staged in Saleem's liminal presence as a 'swapped' child of midnight.

Another line of scholarship places Rushdie within a larger literary genealogy that predates postcolonial theory. According to this perspective, Rushdie's approach is both postcolonial and heavily influenced by the grotesque realism tradition, which is best represented by François Rabelais. As Sadik Jalal al-'Azam observes, Rushdie's fiction restores to the body its natural, often abject functions, foregrounding eating, defecating, copulating, and other material processes that unsettle official narratives of propriety and purity (1994, 260). According to al-'Azam, Rushdie's emphasis on the body's apertures and appendages can be decoded as a form of cultural

and political subversion, resonating with Bakhtin's idea that grotesque realism "unmasks and dethrones" the sanitised ideals dictated by religious or ideological authorities. In Rushdie's aesthetics, as in Rabelais's, the grotesque body subverts official narratives of purity, order, and propriety, whether these stem from colonial discourse or from nationalist mythologies that impose a homogenised identity on the Indian nation.

While critics such as Al-Azm (1994) have studied the Rabelaisian and Bakhtinian aspects of Rushdie's narrative, and others have emphasised his postcolonial concerns (Said 1993; Brennan 1989; Ashcroft et al. 1989), most of this scholarship treats these aspects in isolation—either as matters of style and grotesque aesthetics or as expressions of hybridity and resistance. This article, however, brings these strands together by examining how Rushdie's grotesque realism operates within an intertextual relationship with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, transforming high modernist motifs into postcolonial tools of resistance.

3-Theoretical Perspectives:

This analysis hinges on two key concepts: Homi Bhabha's hybridity and Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque realism. For Bhabha (1994), hybridity disrupts colonial binaries by occupying the "third space" between self/other, parodying imperial authority through mimicry and ambivalence. Saleem Sinai epitomises this "third space"; his "swapped" identity and plural ancestry destabilise the racial and cultural hierarchies upheld by Conrad's European characters and the colonised Africans. Bakhtin's grotesque realism further illuminates Rushdie's subversion. Where Conrad's colonial sublime (Kurtz's "horror") elevates European tragedy, Saleem's fragmenting body, with its cracking skin and oversized nose,

embodies Bakhtin's "material bodily lower stratum," mocking the hyper-masculine heroism of empire.

3-Heart of Darkness and Imperial Heroism.

3-1.Marlow as a Colonial Heroic Archetype:

Marlow and Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are emblematic of Western heroic ideology, exemplifying the contradictions and idealised self-image of the colonial enterprise. Postcolonial theorists identify figures like the "heroes of Empire" as white European men who entered colonised territories under the guise of civilisation, conquest, and moral duty, only to be profoundly altered by their encounters. This heroic delusion often masks the violence of imperialism. Elleke Boehmer, for instance, notes that late 19th-century British imperialists "cherished an unambiguously heroic image of themselves as conquerors and civilisers of the world" (2005: 24), an illusion *Heart of Darkness* exposes and perpetuates.

Marlow's journey exemplifies the Western colonial hero within the framework of Joseph Campbell's monomyth or hero's journey, which consists of separation, initiation, and return (2004: 28). He enters the chaotic, "dark" realm of the interior of Africa after leaving Europe, symbolically separating himself from the 'known' world. He faces the atrocities of imperialism and the moral decay symbolised by Kurtz, his shadow figure, whose spiral into madness functions as a warning against the unchecked power and hypocrisy of colonial ambition. In Campbell's outline, this is the initiation phase. Ultimately, Marlow is changed by his silent, ambiguous return to Europe, but not in the way that conventional heroic narratives suggest. Though not in the redemptive or liberating way conventional heroic models imply, Marlow is changed by his return to

Europe, which is characterised by silence and ambiguity. He returns instead with a knowledge and an awareness of imperial cruelty and the delusions that support it.

As we learn from the beginning of Conrad's narrative, Marlow's colonial vocation appears predestined, stemming from his early fascination with maps and the allure of the "blank spaces" (1994: 11) on them, spaces to be explored, subjugated, and endowed with imperial significance. Becker's understanding of heroism as overcoming difficulties to "bring real benefits to mankind" (1975, pp. 149–151) amplifies Marlow's deterministic 'early fascination', normalizing imperialism as a noble, self-fulfilling, almost romantic destiny. "At the back of it," Marlow reflects, "not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to"(1994: 10). This devotion and belief in an abstract idea of empire is a prime example of what Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), refers to as the rhetoric of "anti-conquest narratives", which is the European strategy of disguising dominance by claims of goodness, inevitable progress, and moral purpose. Marlow's justification for his decision to go to the Congo supports this logic: it is presented as an overwhelming urge rather than a logical one, "the snake had charmed me"(1994: 12). Marlow is therefore shown as a destined participant in a civilizing mission, tempted by imperial ideology and shrouded in moral uncertainty, rather than as a vicious conqueror.

However, Marlow's 'sacred mission' ends in profound disillusionment rather than victory. His journey to find Kurtz reverberates, as Terence N. Bowers (2004) believes, with Dante's descent into hell in *The Divine Comedy*, where the protagonist (Dante) confronts existential and

moral truths by venturing into the unknown. Marlow passes through a 'threshold' (the Congo), goes through hardships (the atrocities of colonialism), and returns with hard-won wisdom (Kurtz's final revelation: "The horror! The horror!" (1994: 100), much like legendary warriors. Far from personifying imperial grandeur, Marlow's encounter with Kurtz forces a Jungian reckoning with the 'shadow self', the suppressed, darker aspects of the psyche that the conscious ego denies, leading to an 'uncomfortable' self-awareness (Coupe, 2003: 141).

Marlow abandons the alleged light of European civilisation to face the truth, "all the truth" (101), in a setting where contrast is necessary rather than incidental. Nagy notes that "a bright light needs a background of darkness" (1999: 30), implying that the construction of Western heroism and selfhood involves the othering of the non-Western. As such, Marlow completes his 'sacred mission' not through conquest, but through existential insight; self-knowledge becomes his Holy Grail. As Campbell (2004) affirms, the mythic quest is ultimately "the journey of the soul" (pp. lvii-lviii). When Marlow returns to Europe as 'a changed and more knowing man', he fulfils Campbell's model of the hero returning with life-changing insights (2004: 28). Yet, as revealed in his final encounter with Kurtz's Intended, where he chooses to lie about Kurtz's final words, the knowledge Marlow gains revolves around an intimate awareness of the moral void at the heart of imperialism, a truth too unbearable for polite society to admit, as Allan Hunter writes, Marlow has entered "a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for human beings to understand" (1983: 53).

3-2.Kurtz as a Colonial Hero:

In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is portrayed as a highly nuanced character who embodies the ideal of the colonial hero and its collapse. Kurtz, the pinnacle of imperial ambition, was dispatched to Africa on a 'sacred mission' to bring 'light' to the alleged heart of darkness and 'civilise' the Africans. A man of books, politics, music, art, and rhetoric, he is first characterised as a "universal genius" (1994: 103) who personifies the Enlightenment ideal of the civilising European subject. Eduard Valls (2018) writes that Kurtz personifies Nietzsche's Overman or the Titanic Man, as he achieves a form of meta-awareness through which he perceives deeper truths. However, as the narrative progresses, Kurtz is revealed as the darkness he was meant to destroy, not as the empire's saviour but as its scapegoat. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is a tragic, corrupted version of Campbell's mythological hero, completing the archetypal cycle with an existential collapse rather than enlightenment.

If Marlow performs the triad of separation, initiation, and return and emerges changed, then Kurtz enacts a darker inversion. He, too, crosses a threshold into the unknown (the Congo), undergoes drastic changes, but never returns. Instead, he is engulfed by the tumult of the allegorical underworld and dies there. He thus fits the description of what Campbell refers to as the 'tragic hero' or the 'failed redeemer', a character who ventures deeply into the shadow, fails to return, and is annihilated by it. His idealised image breaks apart when he loses touch with European frameworks, descending into madness, hubris, and a divine sense of self. Echoing Campbell's idea that the hero who yields to the temptation of absolute power becomes a monster rather than a mythic figure (2004: 53), his transformation from an enlightened emissary to a demigod ruler illustrates what happens when Western ideals are implemented without restraint.

The knowledge Kurtz gains is not enlightening, but profoundly disturbing, a “disturbing truth” about man’s innate barbarism. Haughviews Kurtz as “a hero who had shown [Marlow] the limits of the moral spirit” (Haugh, 1963: 167). He becomes Marlow’s ‘dark mirror’, a person through whom Marlow confronts the horrifying reality of human nature and the imperial project. As such, Kurtz serves a revelatory purpose: he is a “sacrificial hero,” as Guerin suggests, who must die to “restore the land to fruitfulness,” rather than just a fallen man. What is “resorted” in this case is a form of consciousness, a dark moral awakening. Kurtz’s death doesn’t alter the outside world; it forces Marlow—and possibly the reader—to confront the moral emptiness and hypocrisy inherent in the empire. In this role, Kurtz also embodies the sacrificial hero, who confronts the intolerable realities that society suppresses and either dies or descends into insanity. Unlike Marlow, who conceals the horror by lying to Kurtz’s Intended, Kurtz does not moderate or alleviate. He turns into ‘the monster’. His last words, “The horror! The horror!” (1994: 100) acknowledge the moral void within himself and the imperial enterprise he represents, as well as a denunciation of the society around him. Exemplifying what Becker refers to as ‘tragic lucidity,’ Kurtz experiences an epiphany that reveals the moral void at the heart of colonialism: a world based on dominance, greed, and violence.

Instead of bringing civilisation to the jungle, Kurtz loses the self-constructed European image he has built and is overcome by the impulses, desires, and illusions that the imperial self seeks to repress. He adopts the characteristics of the colonial ‘unconscious’, which Europe denies but cannot escape. The thin line separating civilisation and savagery is revealed by his transformation from an “emissary of light” (1994: 18) to a hideous god-figure revered by the African natives, with severed heads bordering his property.

Marlow even acknowledges Kurtz's grandeur, describing him as "remarkable". In this sense, Kurtz becomes more than just a 'fallen man' but an imperial hero par excellence, a man who completes the tragic arc of the colonial epic, not as a saviour but as a hollow, disillusioned martyr of the empire (Taghizadeh, 2015: 1209). In this sense, both Marlow and Kurtz serve as embodiments of a dying heroic ideal.

While Marlow and Kurtz are interpreted as imperial heroes, Saleem Sinai, the protagonist-narrator of *Midnight's Children*, emerges as their postcolonial antithesis. Unlike Marlow, whose journey and ambivalence perpetuate the myth of logical dominance, or Kurtz, whose madness reveals the decay of imperialism, Saleem relies on excess, irony, and fragmentation to reinterpret the concept of heroism. His deformed physicality and untrustworthy narration ridicule the authority and coherence usually associated with Western heroic ideals, personifying hybridity and narrative discontinuity. By doing this, Saleem offers a plural, contingent, and highly politicized reworking of the heroic figure, dismantling both the colonial binaries of 'superior'/'inferior' and 'active/passive', as well as the notion of the singular, exceptional individual that supports colonial heroism.

4. *Midnight's Children*: Postcolonial Heroism.

4-1. Saleem's Hybridity:

In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, it is easily noticeable that Saleem, through his complex persona and subversive force, enacts what Bhabha calls "the Third Space", which is a transitional area where cultures meet, collide, and forge new identities outside of strict colonial dichotomies, emerging as a site of hybridity. The power of colonial discourse is challenged here, enabling the formerly oppressed to express new ways of being. Because of his hybridity, which operates on three interconnected levels — biological,

historical, and narratological — Rushdie's protagonist can be appropriately decoded as a literal and symbolic rewriting of the colonial heroism exemplified by Marlow and Kurtz's authoritative voices.

To begin with, Saleem's biological hybridity challenges the colonial logic that values purity and binary distinctions (coloniser/colonised, East/West, Self/Other). He is the 'illegitimate' offspring of Methwold, a wealthy Christian British coloniser, and Vanita, a poor Hindu Indian woman, a hybrid origin that already distorts racial, class, and religious delimitations. Yet his identity is additionally intricated when Mary Pereira swapped him at birth with Shiva, the biological son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai. As such, Saleem was raised in a Muslim household without knowing who his real parents were. The fixed identities represented by Conrad's Marlow and Kurtz, whose power is based on racial purity, imperial coherence, and ontological and epistemological distinctions between the coloniser and the colonised, are undermined by Saleem's liminality and multi-layered, fragile heritage. He thus appears as a direct challenge to the imperial, monolithic hero who stands for singularity and mastery. In addition, Saleem's biological hybridity prefigures a broader political, cultural, and linguistic hybridity, as his body serves as a metaphor for postcolonial India's complex and nuanced identity, enabling him to hold a range of cultural, religious, and intellectual positions. Saleem's diverse heritage, encompassing Hindu, Muslim, and British ancestry, endows him with a versatile personality that transcends strict political or ideological categorisations. Saleem speaks from a perspective of multiplicity, in contrast to colonial figures such as Marlow or Kurtz, who operate under rigid dichotomies of empire and the Other.

Unlike the singular, authoritative tone of colonial discourse, Saleem's hybrid stance allows him to depict the complexities of postcolonial India in a multifaceted and inclusive way, concretizing Rushdie's belief that "the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once" (1992: 32). "To understand me," as Saleem writes, "you'll have to swallow the world." (2006: 535) Like Bhabha's third space, the act of swallowing — both painful and nourishing — represents India's complex integration of colonial legacies, religious plurality, and splintered histories. Epitomised through Saleem's cracking and 'spittoon' memories, India becomes a site of contested digestion. Echoing Bhabha's assertion that cultural significance arises in the 'in-between' of the unresolved contradictions, what is 'swallowed' by Saleem is never dissolved, but endures as palimpsestic remnants, confessing that he crumbles into "six hundred and thirty million particles." (Rushdie, 2006: 43)

In addition, Saleem's hybridity is also evident at the historical and national levels, where the lines separating the individual from the collective are blurred. He declares: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history" (ibid.3). Unlike Marlow, who chooses to be a mere observer and a witness to the horrors of colonialism, Saleem is "indissolubly chained" (ibid.) to India's national events, personifying Frederic Jameson's idea of national allegory. Being born at the exact time when India gained its independence is a figurative 'crowning'. His life reflects the critical events of contemporary Indian history, including the Emergency, Indo-Pakistani wars, and the Partition. The line between nation and self dissolves, becoming the locus through which the reader understands India's tumultuous history. The Prime Minister's declaration that Saleem is "the mirror of the nation" (354) highlights this metaphoric role. Agnes Gyorke declares in *Allegories of*

Nation in Midnight's Children (2001) that Saleem “is destined to occupy the position of the midnight’s child, and thus to become the vehicle of a metaphor that had existed long before his birth” (172). In this context, Marlow’s fascination with the “blank spaces” (1992: 11) and maps, which represent what Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), considers the imperial “geographical appetite,” is countered by Saleem’s body, which bears the map of India on his face. Unlike Marlow’s romantic obsession with maps, Saleem’s body/face becomes the map itself, intimate and real. Beyond a mere act of reclaiming cartography, this physical marking adds further insights into how Saleem’s personal fate and national destiny are mixed, becoming postcolonial narrative strategies.

In other words, Marlow's portrayal of Africa in Conrad's narrative is firmly rooted in what Dipesh Chakrabarty terms History 1; he makes Africa a symbolic, abstract region, “a blank space of delightful mystery” (1994: 12), and its people into ghostly, silent characters. Following Marlow’s abstraction, the African land loses its human and historical complexity and is transformed into a blank space to be filled with European meaning. This form of history, as Chakrabarty posits, treats “the past as gone and reified into an object of investigation” (2006: 243), reducing the colonised people to a subaltern position. In stark contrast, by stressing the physical and the personal, Saleem Sinai’s body inresists imperial abstraction and becomes a living map of the nation. History is not merely symbolised but inscribed on Saleem’s body through his mapped face, an embodiment rather than a metaphor. His narrative aligns with Chakrabarty’s concept of History 2, as the nation’s supposedly secular, objective time is invaded by Saleem’s subjective, mythical, and sensory perception of history. By privileging a form of storytelling that integrates myth, memory, and physical suffering, Saleem

refuses to narrate India through Marlow's abstraction or distance; instead, he 'provincialises' History 1 (Marlow's history) and offers a counter-narrative. This disrupts the homogeneity of colonial history and enacts the kind of historical counter-practice Chakrabarty calls for.

On a narratological level, Saleem's employment of magical realism, in which truth intertwines with fiction, serves as a pivotal locus where his hybridity challenges and reinterprets Western conventional forms of knowledge and narrative authority. In refusing to separate myth from history, Saleem repudiates the Western epistemological paradigm. Unlike Marlow's narrative, which adheres to the rational facade of the imperial mission even as it disintegrates, Saleem's storytelling celebrates variety, doubt, and contradiction. While Marlow's narrative unreliability, as Achebe (1975) and Said (1993) believe, reflects Conrad's inability to denounce the racist imperialist project, Saleem's narrative unreliability may be decoded as a thoughtful postcolonial strategy, one that destabilises monolithic historiography and accepts fragmentation.

Marlow's narrative unreliability enacts what Wayne Booth terms a "dramatic irony," in which his blind spots —his Orientalist depictions of Africa as "prehistoric" and his mythologizing of Kurtz — expose the limitations of his narrative. On the other hand, operating as a weaponised tool, Saleem's narrative unreliability overlaps with Booth's categories of "self-deceived narrator" and "unintentional gaps," thereby refuting the foundations of Western historiography. Unlike Marlow's 'unconscious' unreliability, Saleem's is performative, as he is aware of it, and explicitly acknowledges selecting, altering, exaggerating, minimising, glorifying, and vilifying history (2006: 292). These 'unintentional' and, more importantly, 'admitted' errors stand for Saleem's self-awareness, which helps explain why

Bran Nicol argues that, in the absence of reliable histories of oppressed or colonised peoples, “even an alternative, personalised, and fictionalised story like Saleem’s nevertheless has historical validity” (2009: 126).

Booth's notion of "distance" can be appropriately used to elucidate how Rushdie, the implied author, manipulates Saleem's inaccuracies (e.g., misdating Gandhi's death) to emphasise the subjectivity inherent in all narratives, particularly those of colonised populations. In contrast to Marlow, whose unreliability perpetuates the colonial myth, Saleem's unreliability is redeployed as a means of liberation, deflating “the myth of the genius at work and discourages the reader from swallowing indiscriminately anything he is told” (Tyssens, 1989: 28). By encouraging scepticism, Rushdie's approach transforms Saleem's narrative into an act of sovereignty, enabling him to retell history from an inclusive postcolonial perspective. This aligns with Bakhtin's understanding of the polyphonic novel, in which multiple voices and perspectives coexist without a single authoritative narrative (1984: 165).

Saleem's narrative hybridity empowers Rushdie to reconceptualise heroism not as mastery or coherence, but as the capacity to embody fragmented identities and different truths. One concrete example in this context is when Rushdie satirises Western archetypes of heroism via Saleem's sarcastic self-representation, notably by contrasting the Superman/Clark Kent persona with Pinocchio. Saleem admits that he resembles Pinocchio, revealing his identity not as a heroic saviour akin to Superman but as a puppet-like entity, imperfect, ludicrous, and perpetually influenced by external circumstances beyond his control. His ironic comment, “No act of heroism. I did not battle Homi on horseback, with fiery eyes and flaming sword” (2006: 360), enacts what Bhabha calls “an

enunciative split”, in which the postcolonial subject speaks the colonizer’s language but fractures it from inside. This mimics the romanticised diction of Western epic heroism, subverts its core features, and substitutes it with banal, mundane actions, such as cutting newspaper clippings “like a snake” (ibid.). As such, Saleem’s narrative hybridity enables this split: he speaks as a fragmented subject who employs Indian history, myth, and magical realism to dismantle the coherence of the colonial hero. Cutting out newspaper clippings is rewriting history from the margins, unheroic, inglorious, and fundamentally political. Rushdie uses such moments to redefine heroism as diversity, doubt, and the hybridity of postcolonial identity, rather than conquest and purity.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Magical realism functions as an appropriate vehicle for Rushdie’s re-examination of history, identity, and heroism within the postcolonial framework. This aesthetic corresponds with the disjointed realities and hybrid identities emerging from the brutality and ambiguity of colonialism and its consequences. Rushdie merges the fantastical with the historical, challenging linear, factual narrative styles grounded in Western knowledge systems and adopting a narrative structure that articulates the contradictions and ambiguities of postcolonial experience. In this context, Bowers (2004) asserts that Rushdie is “the best-known magic realist writer in the English language” (45), and his employment of unreality is intentional and tactical, “the only weapon with which reality can be smashed,” as Rushdie states (1992: 122). This amalgamation of myth, imagination, memory, and historical reality allows him to contend that truth within a postcolonial context is neither unitary nor objective, but rather heterogeneous, contradictory, and frequently surreal. Saleem’s existence is intricately linked to India’s past, narrated through a lens in which telepathy,

prophetic noses, and symbolic births hold equal significance with political events. Rushdie redefines the hero not as a rational, self-sufficient entity but as one who personifies chaos, multiplicity, and the disintegration of absolute truths. In alignment with Arun Mukherjee's assertion that non-Western cultures prioritise collective narratives over individual heroism (1986: 348), Saleem asserts: "I am not a countable, separate individual; I am thousands, I am a nation" (2006: 535).

4-2. Saleem as a Grotesque Hero

Having examined how Saleem Sinai's hybridity contests and ultimately deconstructs the Western heroic ideal represented by Conrad's Marlow and Kurtz, it is imperative to explore how Rushdie further reinterprets postcolonial heroism through his protagonist's grotesque physicality. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's body is symbolic, hideous, malleable, and political. In contrast to the classical, heroic physique associated with Western tradition, Saleem's body is disjointed, permeable, and continually redefined by historical forces. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body provides an essential perspective: the grotesque embraces incompleteness, degradation, and the body's relationship with the collective and the material realm. Through this aesthetic, Rushdie subverts the Enlightenment ideal of the heroic individual, identifying heroism in vulnerability, permeability, and continual metamorphosis. Saleem's grotesque body becomes the site of inscription and resistance to colonial legacies, further intensifying the novel's postcolonial reconfiguration of the hero.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie fundamentally alters the notion of heroism by presenting Saleem Sinai as a grotesque character whose physical and ethical drawbacks undermine the Western heroic archetype. In contrast

to the imperial hero, who is generally strong, logical, and aesthetically idealised, Saleem is a self-proclaimed “monster,” plagued by deformities and degrading vulnerabilities. His physical disintegration — impotence, baldness, and a deformed nose — sharply contrasts with the Western physique that symbolizes dominance and power. The imagery of ‘monster’, however, becomes a suitable concretisation of Michel Foucault’s theorisation of the monster and the abnormal body, one that destabilises the established norms and redefines what is legal, natural, and acceptable.

As Foucault writes in *"Society Must Be Defended"* (1975-76), the monster is not simply a physical aberration but a symbol that jeopardizes the established order, residing at the liminal intersections of nature, law, reason, and insanity. Rushdie’s protagonist reiterates this Foucauldian understanding, as his grotesque physicality, far from being a mere medical case, is ideologically charged, laying bare the contradictions of colonialist and nationalist mythmaking. When Saleem confesses that “what I did was no act of heroism. I did not battle Homi on horseback, with fiery eyes and flaming sword” (2006: 360), he engages simultaneously in self-critique and parodying Western conceptions of chivalric heroism. By conjuring the picture of noble duels and mythological courage only to discard it, Saleem subverts the romanticised, Eurocentric archetype of the heroic individual. As such, his admission embodies a postcolonial perspective that scrutinises the validity of big narratives, revealing their incongruity with the disordered, fractured reality of newly independent nations.

In Rushdie’s narrative, it is essential to understand that Saleem acquires narrative authority via his fragmented, deteriorating body. Rushdie employed grotesque realism to challenge the coherence, purity, and supremacy of Western archetypes, advocating for a fragmented, hybrid hero

that encapsulates the complexities of postcolonial history. This depiction of Saleem aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body, which emphasises excess, imperfection, and transformation rather than wholeness and finality. Bakhtin posits that the grotesque body is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits (1984: 317), a characterisation that profoundly aligns with Saleem, who is “cracking like ice floes” and “slowly disintegrating.” This disintegration is not merely deterioration; it is a metamorphosis which leads to renewal, resulting in the coexistence of different “Saleems”. Truly, while Kurtz dies uttering a mysterious, monologic “The horror! The horror” (1994: 100), signalling the imminent destruction of civilisation, Saleem Sinai explodes “into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust” (2006: 43). This regenerative “explosion” resonates with Bakhtin’s idea that degradation “digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one...” (1984: 20), and subscribes to the logic of carnival which celebrates “the process of replaceability” (ibid., 124).

Saleem’s disintegration is not tragic, but productive, as it becomes synonymous with rebirth and continuity. This is best suggested when Rushdie writes: “Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born” (2006: 534). In contrast to Kurtz, whose physical and psychological collapse ultimately represents the decline of moral authority and imperial aspirations, Saleem Sinai's degradation serves a contrary function. His decline is cyclical and persistent, rather than definitive or irreversible. Even his madness transcends that of Kurtz, becoming a site of resistance and a deliberate means to accommodate the cacophony of subaltern voices.

While Kurtz's madness epitomises the breakdown of colonial logic, Saleem's leads to political and cultural resistance, survival, and the emergence of alternative epistemologies. Indeed, labelled "insane" by multiple characters, including his mother, Parvati, and Padma, on multiple occasions (2006: 122, 165), it is clear that Saleem's authority is not diminished. On the contrary, these accusations highlight the contrast between the official historical discourse and Saleem's rebellious and carnivalesque universe. Echoing with Bakhtin's understanding of madness as deferral of hierarchical thinking, Saleem's 'madness' becomes his gift through which he channels voices, rewrites history, and fuses the demarcation between the nation and the individual. His interaction with Toxy Catrack, dismissed by society as a "gibbering half-wit" (2006: 178), highlights how his so-called "madness" enables him to discern an intuitive, deeper reality that is obscured by society's narratives. In contrast to 'normal' others, Saleem sees in Toxy's madness, appreciating her unrestrained imagination. For Saleem, Toxy's unconventional communication opens a "door in his mind" (2006: 178) and reinforces his own visionary perspectives. Madness, as such, is not a deficiency but a subversive force.

Despite his continuous physical, emotional, and narrative disintegration, Saleem remains alive, present, and recounting his story. Saleem's narration, though from a fragmented, grotesque body, becomes a form of resistance, *per se*. Further demonstrating Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body as concentrating on the lower stratum of the body: the bowels, the belly, and the genitals (1984: 26), Rushdie makes his protagonist a site where these 'deformities' collide. In this context, Saleem, with his gargantuan nose precisely like that of Rabelais's John Friar, repeatedly emphasizes bodily fluids, digestion, defecation, and sexual 'grotesquery',

confessing that he: “must say that I had a healthy metabolism. Waste matter was evacuated copiously from the appropriate orifices; from my nose there flowed a shining cascade of goo.”(2006: 170)

Bakhtin's claim that the grotesque body represents "a body in the act of becoming" reverberates significantly with the constant metamorphosis Saleem undergoes. The latter's identity is repeatedly fractured, particularly when he becomes amnesiac during the Sundarbans incident. Being switched with Shiva, his antagonist, by Mary Pereira's revolutionary act (2006: 157), Saleem's identity undergoes a transformation from the novel's beginning to an ongoing process. Probably, his confession that he is “the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine” (ibid., 535) encapsulates how he views his identity as fluid and changing. Saleem is not a static, heroic figure like Kurtz or Marlow; instead, he is a fluid, dynamic character whose grotesqueness enables him to comprehend and express the intricate, chaotic reality of postcolonial India. As an utter act of carnivalizing imperial heroism and rewriting Kurtz's mythic aura, we read in *Midnight's Children* that Saleem is drafted into the Pakistani army in 1971 as a two-legged “man dog” (2006: 485), while Zulfikar's dog, Bonzo, is enlisted into the armed forces and celebrated as a war hero.

While Conrad's portrayal of the racialised "other" used grotesque distortion for dehumanisation, Rushdie utilises corporeal exaggeration to signify perception, connectedness, and political resistance. Saleem's prominent nose, rather than a cause for marginalization and subalternity, becomes a source of empowerment, enabling him to access the memories, ideas, and tragedies of other *Midnight's Children*. When Marlow cynically

encapsulates imperialism as "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (1994: 10), he distils colonial domination to a brutal affirmation of racial and physiological disparity, where the "flatter nose" serves as a signifier of inferiority that legitimises exploitation. This logic, however, is reversed in *Midnight's Children*, where it becomes a symbol of power. More significantly, the nose in Rushdie's narrative is often elevated over the phallus, defined in *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* as the "symbol of the powers of procreation, the wellspring and channel of semen" (1996: 751). This hierarchy is inverted, making the nose the genuine arbiter of destiny. Saleem Sinai's enormous nose establishes his position within the Sinai family despite his lack of biological connections and also designates him as the legendary historian of postcolonial India. Fusing the nose with the themes of fertility and legitimacy, Saleem declares:

I wish to place on record my gratitude to this mighty organ — if not for it, who would ever have believed me to be truly my mother's son, my grandfather's grandson? — this colossal apparatus which was to be my birthright, too. Doctor Aziz's nose — comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh. (2006: 9)

5. Conclusion:

Midnight's Children presents a potent counter-narrative to the imperialist constructs of heroism typified by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, reworking the postcolonial hero through the character of Saleem Sinai. Salman Rushdie forges a new heroic paradigm that is neither singular nor pure, but rather profoundly embodied, hybrid, and fractured, by countering

and destabilising the Eurocentric ideals exemplified in Marlow and Kurtz. The limitations of colonial narratives that strive for coherence, linearity, and domination are revealed by Saleem's grotesque body, narrative unreliability, and narrative agency.

This article argues that Saleem's physical and psychological fragmentation serves as a postcolonial strategy of resistance, drawing on Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism. His carnivalesque form and unstable identity subvert the colonial archetype of the noble, enlightened hero, substituting it with a figure characterised by his embodied history, ambiguity, and multiplicity. In this manner, *Midnight's Children* not only undermines the imperial mythos that underpins *Heart of Darkness* but also establishes a sovereign storytelling style that prioritises heteroglossia, contradiction, and the previously silenced voices of the colonised.

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