

Joel Kuortti, ed. *Critical Insights: Midnight's Children*. Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2014. 272 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1619253896.

Salman Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children* appeared in 1981 and changed the way in which the world looked at Indian writing in English for ever. It won the Booker Prize that year, the Booker of Bookers prize in 1993 and the award for the best all time Booker prize winners in 2008. In 2012, the Indo-Canadian film-maker Deepa Mehta made a film version of the book. Rushdie reportedly signed over the rights for the film for just one dollar. This book which re-wrote the recent history of nationalist and independent India in a magic realistic mode and in an unapologetically Indian variant of English, is thus still in readers' and now viewers' memories; so it's not surprising that yet another collection of essays on this postcolonial classic should have been published, under the editorship of Joel Kuortti.

This anthology is prefaced not just by the usual editorial preamble about the essays it contains, but also has a section called "The Book and Author" by Kuortti, that includes even a short biography of Rushdie beginning with his birth in Bombay, now called Mumbai, which was as we all have known for some time now, not on the stroke of the midnight hour of August 14, 1947. Rushdie's early undistinguished career followed by the astounding success of *Midnight's Children*, the books that followed and then the troubled years of the *fatwa* find a mention here as do his marriages, divorces and children.

However, going by the fact that such information is easily available online in the digital age, one wonders why it was included in this volume. Even more surprising, or not so surprising, is the fact that in the tradition of the "unreliable narrator" that Rushdie had called himself with reference to some of the historical events he had narrated in *Midnight's Children* ("Errata" 1992), Kuortti too distinguishes himself with at least three rather obvious errors. The first one is when he calls Rushdie an "NRI," in the context of his not being eligible for a Sahitya Akademi Award as he was "no longer residing in India – although he was still an NRI" (4-5). Rushdie was and is a British citizen and only those Indians who live and work abroad but continue to retain their Indian passports are NRIs (Non Resident Indians). Then on page 6, Kuortti refers to the All India Radio (AIR) as a "broadcasting company." AIR has been a Government of India owned organisation from 1936 onwards, although it had as its antecedent the Indian Broadcasting Company Ltd. (IBC) in 1927, which went into liquidation in 1930. However, a more crucial and unacceptable error is on pages 14-15 when Kuortti informs his readers that in *Midnight's Children*, the departing Englishman Methwold sells his eponymously named estate to Aadam Aziz, when it is to his son-in-law Ahmed Sinai (the putative father of Saleem

Sinai), with whom this transaction takes place. On page 95 of the novel it is Ahmed Sinai and not Aadam who persuades his wife Amina, the daughter of Aadam Aziz, to accept Methwold's quirky conditions attached to the sale of his Estate. Kuortti in the best "unreliable narrator" style says on page 14 of his book that Methwold "is selling the property, four villas of the Methwold Estate, inexpensively to Aadam Aziz and three others on two conditions," and then goes on to link the acceptance of the conditional sale to Aadam's education in Heidelberg, thereby dissipating the hope that the juxtaposition of names was a mere typographical error.

One wishes that the editor had taken care to get his facts right at least in his own section prefacing the volume, which might be read as an authoritative literary historical narrative by some latter day readers and scholars of Salman Rushdie's iconic text.

The other sections of this volume are "Critical Contexts" and "Critical Readings." In the former, we have four essays; the first one by John J. Su situates Rushdie in Global Modernism. There is one more essay by Kuortti himself in this section which scrutinises the novel and its critics, which is of a taxonomical nature. This is followed by Marianne Corrigan's piece on the geopolitical movement from Bombay to New York in Rushdie's fiction entitled "*America, the Great Attractor whispered in my ears*": From Bombay to New York: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts in Rushdie's Fiction," and an essay by Anuradha Marwah on the line of literary continuity from Rushdie to Arundhati Roy. The essay by Su situates Rushdie in the canons of both the postcolonial and postmodern writing and shows how his texts challenge the accepted notions of both these discourses. Marwah's essay, "From Salman Rushdie to Arundhati Roy: Issues of Continuity in Indian Fiction in English," considers both Rushdie and Roy as writer-celebrities. In the context of Rushdie, Marwah also focuses on how his "ill-informed and arrogant view" (77) on how Indian literature in English was "stronger and more important" than literature written in other Indian languages in the post-independence period (Rushdie, *Vintage Book of Indian Writing* 50), has earned him the ire and hostility of the national intelligentsia. Marwah has rightly pointed out the role that market forces have played in the success of both these writers. Corrigan's essay foregrounds the geographical and political shifts in Rushdie's texts from *Midnight's Children*, which is set in Mumbai/Bombay and engages with Indian politics, to *Ground Beneath her Feet* and *Fury*, which are more New World in their settings and concerns.

The third section called "Critical Readings" has nine essays on different aspects of *Midnight's Children*, ranging from Thomas Huttunen's intriguingly titled "Nasal Connections: The Possibility of Ethical Deconstruction in *Midnight's Children*" to Celia Wallhead's contribution on the role of women characters in the novel. In his essay, Huttunen questions the tag

“cosmopolitan” for *Midnight’s Children* in the light of the latter developments in globalisation and transnational discourses. He says that Rushdie’s novel is more nationalist in nature than cosmopolitan, focused as it is on the birthing of the new Indian nation. He also makes an interesting point linking ethics to Saleem Sinai’s nose and its extraordinary powers. Jenne Ramone’s contribution entitled “Faithful versus Free: Padma and Saleem as Competing Translators” argues that in *Midnight’s Children* these two narrate the story of Indian independence. She asserts that Padma is the faithful translator of Saleem’s dictations while Saleem’s own narrative is that of national development. In “Topographies of Nationalism in *Midnight’s Children*,” Agnes Gyorke divides the novel into tropes of the public and private domains and reads them as topographies of nationalism. She has like many other critics before her, noted the mapping of Saleem’s private life on the public domain of the new Indian nation. Raita Merivirta’s interesting essay titled “‘Collective Fiction’: The (De)Construction of Nehruvian India in *Midnight’s Children*,” attempts at placing this novel against the backdrop of Nehruvian India, starting with Saleem’s birth and Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech. This is followed by Madan Sarma’s essay on “Indian Oral Narrative in Postmodern Historiography: A Reading of *Midnight’s Children*.” The oral narratives Sarma refers to are the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which were originally transmitted in the oral form before assuming written manifestations. He has also like other critics before him, commented on the mixing and melding of the oral tradition with postmodernist magic realism in Rushdie’s text.

Lotta Strandberg’s essay is called “Bombay in *Midnight’s Children*.” She comments on the centrality of Bombay in Rushdie’s fiction from *Midnight’s Children* to *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. She also addresses other issues in the novel such as nationalism and looks at it in the context of globalisation. Rather intriguingly, Strandberg brings in Homi Bhabha’s essay “Bombay, Salman Rushdie and *Midnight’s Children* 1981,” and says that Bhabha still an Indian citizen, pledges his allegiance to the city whereas Rushdie’s Saleem is only partially of this city. This is an insightful argument as Bhabha’s connect with the city of his birth, even in his diasporic state, is more regular and immediate than that of Rushdie. However, I wish that in this volume which was published in 2014, nearly twenty years after Bombay metamorphosed into Mumbai, the author had taken some note of what this postcolonial repossession/appropriation has meant to this global city and how one might therefore look at both Rushdie’s boyish (he had left the city as a schoolboy in the 1961) memories of Bombay and also Bhabha’s more mature affiliation to the city of his birth, in which his family still lives and to which he returns annually, like many other NRIs (Non Resident Indians) in an imitation of avian migration patterns. Liani Lochner’s “Fictions of the Self: The Reader, the Subject, and the Text in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*” however

looks at *Midnight's Children* in the contemporary context as well as in the context of other works by Rushdie. Jurate Radaviciute's essay, "The Play with the Connotations of Sexuality in *Midnight's Children*," ventures into areas not usually entered into by Rushdie's critics – sexuality – despite the fact that the novel is replete with images and symbols of sexuality, beginning with the perforated sheet and the forbidden delights revealed by it. This essay focuses on noses and hair in the novel as images of sexuality, and it is definitely worth a read. The last essay in the volume by Celia Wallhead, "The Role of the Women Characters in the Nature/Nurture and the Optimism/Pessimism Questions in *Midnight's Children*," carries elaborate family tree diagrams tracing the bloodlines of Saleem and Shiva. However, one would be disappointed if one were to look for a feminist reading of the novel in this article.

Overall, one is left disappointed in this volume, beginning with the editor's own contribution and extending to most of the other essays. In a volume of this kind, which has appeared more than 30 years after *Midnight's Children* was published, one would expect a new perspective or at least a critique of the older perspectives on the novel against the backdrop of the contemporary.

### Works Cited

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