

Midnight's Children

S.Rushdie

August 18 - September 1, 2006

The novel approaches life obliquely. At least the modern novel, which is bound, like modern art, to eschew documentary realism. Life is magical, so what be more appropriate than to make the depiction of life magically realistic, just as the obvious predecessor of Rushdie, did for the Latin American novel.

In a novel you do not just want to know the events, you want to smell them, made to feel what it feels and felt like being a character in its universe, in this case you want to made to know what it is like being an Indian. This novel does not have a plot as far as the biography of any man does not have one. The idea of it is to let the history of modern independant India be reflected in the life of an individual, an individual born at the very moment that Nehru made his thyrst with destiny, at that stroke of the midnight hour when the world around was supposed to be asleep. The protagonist is indeed one of those five hundred odd children born at the birth of the new Nation, and as such they are all endowed with magical powers, the more powerful, the closer their births were to that momentous instance. The protagonist himself, a contemporary of the author, and hence one suspects a close if magically conceived self-portrait, is endowed with a huge nose, that enables him at first to read other peoples thoughts (and as we know reading people thoughts do not amount to reading their minds, because what we express in language is just a superficial manifestation of what goes on in the inaccessible deeper recesses), and later, when he is cured of his sinuses, his nose developes an incredible olfactory power, that enables him to navigate with impunity in the world. But his birth (like the birth of India?) is a ruse. He is not the child of his parents, having been (the perennial fear of every child?) at his birth exchanged by a servant. Maybe this is an allegory for the birth of India, being an issue not of its ostensible parents. Eventually the truth is revealed, because the body is one whole, and contains hidden information transcending that which we conventionally endow it with. In a more modern setting, the DNA fingerprint would have been the pointer, at the time it is the blood-group that could contradict (but never confirm) parentage. The servant relents, confesses and is dismissed.

Not very much happens, in a sense, in this novel, nothing that really grips the reader, except for the parallel story of the unfolding of India. We live through the Himalayan skirmishes with China, the death of Nehru (close to the death of the ostensible grandfather of the protagonist, whose early story emanating from Kashmir, enables the author to treat briefly late-colonial history as well, in particular the civilian massacre in Amritsar back in 1919), the rise of his daughter, war with Pakistan, the division of the latter, and the emergency decrees of Indira in the 70's. To state the bare facts in a history book is for most people too dry a bone, in a novel, with its aforementioned oblique approach, it could work, become more vivid and more liable to stick in the mud of memory, not only skitting its surface.

But what do you really expect from the novel? A sense of being Indian, of being

assaulted by the multifarious world of the senses, particularly pungent in India. You want to learn how to smell your way around, to sample cow dung, stench of urine, fragrance of flower, sting of pepper, succulence of newly-baked bread. And the protagonist is after all endowed with the most amazing olfactory organ, would that not enable you to savour vicariously his world? You also want to hear the sounds of bullocks feet on dusty road, the hollow cries from minarets, the crackling of wood in fire, the banging on metal pots. And above all you want to see, have the world made visual and manifest, because when all is said and done, in spite of valiant attempts, the novel, like the movie, first and foremost evokes pictures, moving pictures, one fading into the other. Sight is after all the most sensuous of senses, this is why the eye itself is shaped like a breast, its nipple being its pupil. (But sucking in rather than squirting out.) And besides, which the author cannot refrain from pointing out, Bombay is the city of the movie, the conjurer of alternate lives, and as such only existing as dreams, the more impossible, the better (at least commercially).

And besides? You want to be instructed and charmed by the way it is being implemented. You are looking for the 'bon mot' the well-turned phrase, the authoritative *obiter dicta*. It is true that once in a while you do hit upon something that makes your eyes brighten up and your lips curve into a smile. But basically, the prose is confusing, spreading out on the page as a torrent of water rushing down in order to inundate everything in sight. It is as if the author is being choked on words, produced too fast by his feverish thoughts to find immediate issue. You tend to read fast, to skim, to try and just get the gist; to linger and savour there is not the necessary time for. Everything is hap-dash, not finely wrought, but crudely assembled. Sentences are stapled onto each other, sometimes reduced to fragments, by the obsessive interjection of parentheses and ellipses. Maybe this is all intentional to evoke by the stuccato rhythm of the prose the very onslaught of overwhelming Indian reality. To bring home the fact that reality in India is confusing, disjointed, and above all magical. If so, the writer is close to being pretentious, but just as a skilful sailor can cruise against the wind, the master novelist can steer very close to kitsch, and yet triumph.

What is the essence of India? Its religion? If so is India at bottom a Hindu nation (many modern Indians seem to think so), and the Muslim faith, just a temporary diversion, a gossamer net thrown upon the writhing body of the genuine thing? Indeed, in spite of the protagonist being Muslim, his deeper sensibilities seem to be polytheist, Shiva, Kali, Ganesh have claimed their shares of the territories of his soul, and no matter what he pretends, those holds are never to be relinquished. Yes indeed the division and cohabitation (so often uneasy and hostile) of those two incompatible faiths provides one of the major mysteries of India, insufficiently addressed in general, and also in particular in this novel.

At the age of Thirty-one it ought to be too early to write your autobiography, although by that time, your childhood is as far from you as it ever will get, because as you get older, it will get closer to you, just as plane will eventually fuse with its shadow as it crashes on the ground.

September 2, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se