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Midnight's Children and Haroun and the Sea of Stories: How Rushdie's Storytellers

Demonstrate that History and Story Need Each Other

The link between history and literature is nearly inseparable. Though there has been controversy in the past about literature's meddling with history, nowadays it is commonly accepted that the two go hand in hand. Where we used to think that it was possible to give an objective account of history, postmodern thought teaches us that there is no such thing as objectivity; the result of which is the re-instatement of historical fiction as an important genre within literature. There are many arguments as to why the role of historical fiction is important; the major argument is that it enables us to connect to history on a personal level (Schwab 1). As such, historical fiction allows us to find our own place in the bigger picture of the history of mankind.

A critique of historical fiction could be that writing fiction about history will only spread falsities and misinterpretations of what really happened, even though quite the opposite is true. While it might be true that a work of historical fiction contains errors, it should also be noted that a work of fiction does not claim to hold the truth – contrary to traditional accounts of history, where an objective account of historical occurrences is deemed possible. As is known now, there is no such thing as objectivity where history is concerned. The rise of postcolonial writing has shown that there are always several sides to a story; the ones we hear in the West are often very different from the stories told in our ex-colonies, even though they concern the same historical events.

History, as such, turns out to be multiform and fluid rather than solid. While there is no doubt concerning the validity of historical facts (no one will doubt that Germany invaded France in 1940) there is a certain ambiguity concerning their meaning: a victory for one person always means a loss to another. This underlines the importance of literature concerning the writing of history. The telling of stories enables one to express what history means, and therefore, even though events and personae in a tale of historical fiction might be fictional, the meaning of the work is rooted in reality.

An important author concerning the relationship between history and literature is Salman Rushdie. As writer of several postcolonial works of historical fiction, he maintains a postmodern attitude towards the relationship between history and literature:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge (2010 25).

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* concerns the history of India as a nation, embodied by the protagonist Saleem Sinai who is born on the exact moment of India's independence. The novel's treatment of Indian history makes it a work of historical fiction; however, being a great admirer of Jorge Luis Borges, Rushdie chose use magical realism as a literary device, transforming his account of India's history into a fairytale containing facts – or a historical tale embellished with a little magic. It seems a peculiar choice at first to tell history as a fairytale; but by mixing the real with the surreal, Rushdie forces us to think about what history means in its multitude of forms.

Midnight's Children is not Rushdie's only work concerned with the relationship between history and story. His children's story *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* deals with the importance of stories; the book proposes the idea that no story comes from nothing, which is further shown by several allusions to history in reality in the story of Haroun. As such, it seems that stories are rooted in history, and without stories history cannot be told. When examining Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* on three particular points it can be shown that Rushdie's writing demonstrates the necessary relationship between history and story: one cannot exist without the other.

The first issue that will be addressed in this paper is Rushdie's use of Magical Realism. This writing style combines a realist representation of history with magical elements. Realism writing concerns the approximation of reality; it is therefore not strange that this mode of writing is encountered in the writing of a post-colonial writer such as Salman Rushdie, because one of the focal points of post-colonial literature is the re-interpretation of history. Because of the aforementioned ambiguity of history, a post-colonial representation of history is necessary to paint a complete picture of the truth of colonial history. The combination with magic elements is important in this respect. These magic elements are often interpreted as a representation of the exotic or an adaption of indigenous storytelling; but to do Rushdie's use of Magical Realism justice, the magic elements need to be examined as more than just that. The elements of magic are an effective tool to illustrate the ambiguous nature of history: the combination of real and surreal challenge the notion of objective truth, and unveil the writing of history as inherently subjective. The history of India as a nation is filled with subjective truths and objective lies; Magical Realism proves to be an efficient literary device to illustrate these issues.

The second matter of importance concerning the ambiguity of history is the relationship between history and memory. Rushdie himself claimed that writing *Midnight's Children* was somewhat "Proustian" (Rushdie 1991 23), after the way Marcel Proust wrote *La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-1927). Proust reconstructed his childhood memories into a novel. Similarly, Rushdie drew on childhood memories when writing about the history of India. This calls to mind the link between memory and historical fact, which is often presented as a dichotomy: memory on one side is fallible and corrupt; historical fact on the other side is objective and true. The postmodern interpretation of history aims to break down this false dichotomy: historical fact is not infallible; rather, historical facts are a collection of shared personal memories. This is illustrated by Rushdie's use of memory as a departure point

of writing history. By putting Saleem, the protagonist in *Midnight's Children*, in the position of a history writer, Rushdie shows that personal memory is inescapable when writing history. At the same time, he proves that historical facts cannot be circumvented either; not even by a band of magic children.

The third and final notion concerning the ambiguity of history in Rushdie's writing is the way he plays with the relationship between story and history. Both *Midnight's Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* feature storytellers as important characters. Saleem and Rashid serve to demonstrate how history can only be related through stories, and that similarly stories cannot evade history. At the same time, Rushdie does not fail to illustrate once again the ambiguity of history. The narrative structure of *Midnight's Children* seems to suggest that history can indeed be told as a tale, but the ending shows the opposite: where tales and stories come to an end, history never ends. Our writing of history will therefore always be limited; we will never succeed to paint the full picture.

Magical Realism and Post-Colonial India

Before embarking on an analysis of Rushdie's writing, the meaning and use of magical realism have to be discussed. Magical realism is often associated with post-colonial literature, and for the right reasons. Magical realism provides the author with the freedom to portray culture and history as hybrid and fluid, which are essential themes in post-colonial literature. This makes it a very suitable device for writing the post-colonial history of India.

Magical realism is commonly associated with writers from Latin America, most notably Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. In their movement away from European literature, they started incorporating folklore and its mystical qualities in their writing. The inspiration from and insertion of native storytelling into their stories led to the addition of fantastic, or magical, elements. This way of narrating, the combination of real and un-real, natural and supernatural, is what eventually earned these Latin American writers the label of magical realism. It is a way of writing that blurs the lines between what actually happened and how it is told, making it especially suitable for a post-colonial narrative.

To properly define magical realism, the term should first be taken apart. To begin with, there is the magical. The magical in magical realism does not refer to magic tricks used by illusionists; quite the contrary. Rather than it just being illusion, magic in magic realism concerns 'real' magic: ghosts, disappearances, miracles; occurrences that cannot be explained in any way (this is wittily illustrated by Rushdie's abundant use of "a process too complicated to explain" as an excuse in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*).

At the same time, there is the counterpart to the magical; the 'real' in realism. The origin of realism in magical realism can be traced to Descartes and Locke, who asserted that what is perceived by our five senses can be defined as real. This led to the idea of art being a realistic representation of reality (Bowers 21). While the idea of representing reality in writing

has evolved since then, it still retains its meaning in the term magical realism in this sense: regardless the insertion of magical elements as defined before in the narrative, the story is at all times narrated as real. Miracles and other magical occurrences are narrated in a dry and matter-of-fact manner, as if it is perfectly natural for them to happen. Magical realism is a miracle child, the result of the unlikely marriage of absolute fantasy and the desire to express reality.

It is exactly this combination that gives magical realism its usefulness as a literary device in post-colonial literature. Maggie Ann Bowers mentions that “by breaking down the notion of an absolute truth, and a singular version of reality, magical realism allows for the possibility of many truths to exist simultaneously” (71). Since post-colonial literature is mainly concerned with different truths (e.g. the coloniser’s and the colonised’s, respectively) existing alongside each other, magical realism lends itself particularly well to express the multitude of truths that post-colonialism is often concerned with.

A similar move from rigidity towards fluidity can be found in the field of history. In Western tradition, the writing of history has long been synonymous with the writing of facts. As such, written history was accepted as objective truth. The rise of postmodernism called for a separation between historical fact and meaning, and post-colonial writing took up the task of demonstrating the difference between these too. It became clear that one historical event could have many stories attached to it; each of them valid and truthful, but slightly altering the meaning of the event itself. It became clear that those who had been heroes and bringers of culture to the savages in the colonies to the West, were considered tyrants and usurpers in the former colonies – and all for the right reasons. History has since been recognised as ambiguous, its meaning dependent on the point of view of the reader.

It is this movement from solidity and objectivity towards hybridity, fluidity and ambiguity that fueled post-colonial writing and helped magical realism to play an important

role. In magical realism, the author finds the freedom to express both the hybridity of culture and the ambiguity of history. Considering India's position as an ex-colony of England, magical realism appears to be a useful device when writing about post-colonial India. Rushdie uses magical realism in three ways to illustrate the ambiguity of history: Firstly of all, by his use of magical realism as an allegory; secondly, the creation of a magical myth illustrates the importance of history; and thirdly, the magical elements can be seen as an appeal to the reader, forcing the reader to consider history as a construct rather than something that exists outside ourselves.

While certainly not limited to allegory, the use of magical realism often expresses a story behind a story. An allegory is a fantasy story with a plot relevant to the real world; the characters and events in an allegory only have meaning in a metaphorical sense. It has been argued that magical realism should not be perceived as allegory at all, because this would prevent the plot from having a meaning in itself (Bowers 27); however, one of the key elements of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, that is, Saleem Sinai's magical connection to his country, can most certainly be read as an allegory (note that while this is the case, the plot is not limited by its meaning as an allegory). In *Midnight's Children* then, the protagonist and narrator Saleem Sinai represents the people of India; he and the rest of the Midnight Children can be seen as a representation of India's population at the moment of its independence: a new country full of variety and promise, embodied by the different members of the Midnight Conference and their magical talents. By using a person as an embodiment of an entire country, its history can be told using a personal narrative. This brings the writing of history down to what it really is: the writing down of a person's experiences at a certain time. Instead of presenting statistics and historical facts, Rushdie writes a persona experiencing history firsthand. This is further shown by Rushdie's portrayal of the tumultuous relationship between India and its neighbour Pakistan. Both countries were formed after the dissolution of British

India, on arbitrary grounds: the piece of land containing a Muslim majority was made into Pakistan; India was conceived from the larger piece of land containing a Hindu majority. This arbitrary division of land resulted in jealousy and strife, eventually culminating in several wars between India and Pakistan. What made the partition of British India so painful is the fact that people who used to live together suddenly found themselves inhabitants of different nations and were dragged into a conflict of a largely political nature. Saleem can be seen as an example of such a case: born in India, he is eventually forced to fight for the Pakistani army in East Pakistan; after the war, he ends up in India again, where the only family he has left is hesitant to take him in because he is now a war criminal (Rushdie 1981 548). If Saleem is a metaphor for the people of India, his story shows how India the nation effectively waged war on its own (former) people, of which many fled to India after the partition and fought in the following wars.

Another element being emphasised by the allegory of Saleem as a representation of India is the ambiguity of history. Rather than history being a single story, the life of Saleem shows that the general narrative of history is composed of many smaller stories: “Things – even people – have a way of leaking into each other [...]. Likewise, [...] the past dripped into me... so we can't ignore it” (1981 44-45). It is impossible to keep a story ‘pure’; over time they will leak into each other to form new stories. This is further illustrated by Saleem’s personal history. The story of Saleem’s life begins with the story of his grandfather, illustrating how even before India came to exist as a nation, its history was already there. As the lives of his grandparents trickled into Saleem, in the same way India has a history that extends beyond its existence as a nation. The complicated story of how Saleem came to be illustrates the hybrid history of India: the biological child of a British aristocrat and a Hindu servant girl, raised by a Muslim family. India as a post-colonial nation has a similar heritage;

never a nation in the past, it was constructed from a rag-tag collection of what used to be Hindu states, Muslim states, and the strong influence of the British rulers.

Besides allegory, the use of magical realism also enables Rushdie to create a blend of myth and reality which mirrors the cultural history of a post-colonial nation. This works both ways: there are elements of myths being presented as reality, and parts of reality presented as myth.

A good example of reality turned into myth is the figure of Methwold. A British aristocrat preparing to leave India as it becomes independent; he sells his estate to Saleem's family. He is described as a "six foot Titan [...], his face the pink of roses and eternal youth" (Rushdie 1981 125). The capitalisation of the word 'Titan' marks its importance; not unlike the titans of classical myth who ruled the earth before the rise of the gods, Methwold is presented as a mythical, eternal entity. He becomes a symbol for the British Empire and its influence on India. By describing him as a titan with the power to change the course of history, Rushdie illustrates the enormous influence British rule had on India. Myths and legends are vague stories, often said to have happened in reality, but containing far too many fantastic elements to be true. On the other hand, their moralised content provides them with an inherent truth value; even though a myth may not have really happened, a lesson can still be learned from the story. The blurring of the lines between myth and reality enables Rushdie to write about history without being concerned with what really happened; rather, it allows him to describe its meaning – in this case, the effect of the relationship between Britain and India on the formation of India as an independent nation.

A final notion that proves the value of magical realism in post-colonial writing is its ambiguity about what is real and what is not, which causes the reader to wonder where the truth is. As mentioned before, post-colonial history has many forms, and events are often

described differently depending on the point of view. The ambiguity of magical realism forces the reader to think about what he or she believes is true, as described by Maggie Ann Bowers:

If we consider that the inclusion of magical realism itself in a text provokes the reader to reflect on what they are willing to believe and on their own assumptions about reality, this revelation of the constructed nature of history demands a double self-reflexivity from the reader and on the part of the narrative (Bowers 79).

In other words, the constructed re-telling of history in a magical realist story forces the reader to reflect on the nature of history as a construct. This is especially important for a post-colonial narrative, since one of the author's main aims is to evoke awareness in the reader of the multiform nature of colonial history. India is a country with many narratives; the British, the Hindu and the Muslim are major variants, but the country is immense and undoubtedly contains many more. Limiting the historical narrative to the partition of India, for practicality's sake, it becomes clear that this story cannot be told from just one point of view. Each side needs to be examined, and the magical realist narrative is suitable for this task, as proven in *Midnight's Children* where the reader is confronted with a tight embroidery of reality and magic, raising questions to which the answer remains ambiguous; as with all of history, the truth lies somewhere in the middle but is never fully known.

Magical realism, as such, proves to be an effective literary device to illustrate the post-colonial history of India. The ambiguity of its history as an ex-colony of Britain, constructed from many narratives that often contradict themselves, can be illustrated by adding a twist of magic to the historical narrative. Magical realism thus enabled Salman Rushdie to write *Midnight's Children* as a post-colonial novel exploring the ambiguity of India's history. The possibility of an allegorical reading of magical realist narratives enables Rushdie to re-tell

history as a personal experience. Furthermore, the blending of myth and reality illustrates the hybrid cultural history of India. Lastly, the ambiguity about what is real and what is magic in *Midnight's Children* forces the reader to re-examine their beliefs about history and unveils it as a man-made construction.

Personal Memory versus Historical Fact?

So far it can be seen that Rushdie's use of magical realism enables him to illustrate the history of post-colonial India in all its ambiguity. The main reason why *Midnight's Children* is successful as an illustration of India's post-colonial history is that the magical narrative challenges the notion of historical fact. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie depicts the history of a nation as the history of a single person. This illustrates how history comes into being: the experiences of people, each with their own history, is collectivised into a greater narrative. History can be seen as a collective memory, be it of an entire nation, a people, or a single person.

However, the fact that history is a collection of narratives means that it is no longer the same as the original stories experienced by different people. Instead, when history is written, choices have to be made as to which narratives will serve as the one that becomes part of the collective memory vault. This leads to faults, misinterpretation and omission of narratives; even when narratives are equally deserving of recognition. By narrating the history of India as the experience of a single person, Rushdie engages the dichotomy between personal memory and historical fact. The result is that history is deconstructed into a personal story, which shows that there is no difference between the two at all: even though Saleem tells his own story, he also narrates the history of India because the two are intertwined. The magical realist nature of *Midnight's Children* serves to further illustrate the hybrid form of history. Rushdie wrote a story about the history of India, adding many magical occurrences to embellish the narrative. However, Saleem, the narrator, presents the magical occurrences as though they were left out in the conventional history records. This is a familiar attitude often encountered towards recorded history: eyewitnesses always experienced more than what can be found in the official records afterwards, in a similar manner as our grandparents' accounts of the time

they lived in often include details that are not present in history writing. Such is the nature of history that it is too big and too detailed to be included in the cultural memory as a whole; this is illustrated by Saleem, who sets out to preserve a definite account of India's national history but ends up writing another personal story.

The dichotomy between personal memory and historical fact is therefore a false one. What we define as historical facts are collected accounts from personal memories of many people, and should be recognised as such. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie confronts the reader with an unreliable narrator who nonetheless presents his version of history as the definite one. This challenges the reader to look for meaning beyond facts, as these are proven to be unreliable. Rushdie strives to break down the false dichotomy between personal memory and historical fact by having an unreliable narrator tell an historical fairytale. This is illustrated in two ways: First of all this is done through the persona of Saleem in the role of a historian. Saleem's functioning as a historian shows that history is a narrative constructed from myth and personal experience. Secondly, no matter how he tries, Saleem cannot reconstruct history entirely; the magical powers he attributes to himself are not enough to alter the course of history. Even for him, history is inescapable. These two points show that there is no separation between personal memory and historical fact. The two are intertwined and cannot outrun each other; history may be constructed from many personal experiences, but at the same time a person's experience of history is limited by what really happened.

The role of Saleem as a historian is made obvious when he declares the purpose of his writing as preservation: "Memory, as well as fruit, is being preserved from the corruption of the clocks" (Rushdie 44). Comparing his work as a preserver of fruits to his work as a writer, Saleem strives to store his memory into a book. Saleem is no ordinary historian however; instead of basing his writing on reliable sources outside himself, he considers his own memory as the only relevant source.

“I told you the truth,” I say, yet again. “Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own” (Rushdie 1981 292).

Though aware of the limitations and weaknesses of personal memory, Saleem still advocates that his version of India’s history is the truth. Saleem as a historian is therefore a contradictory person: while he is aware of the limits of personal memory to such an extent that he admits that memory creates a reality of its own, he still pertains to the idea that it is his task to preserve this memory. The preservation of a personal reality seems illogical, because if every person maintains a personal reality constructed from their own experiences, there would be no necessity of sharing these personal truths as they mean something only to the person who created them in the first place. However, it might also be the case that Saleem understands the true nature of history, and makes it his sacred duty to take his place in the legion of history-writers that make up a nation.

It can be said that Saleem presents himself as a writer of history who, because of his magical connection to India, brings out the full truth of India’s history; but the blatant absurdity of his magical life story makes it painfully obvious that he is not being objective at all. Rather, he puts himself at the center of events as an almost god-like being whose coming was prophesied and for whom wars are fought: “Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth” (Rushdie 1981 469). This passage illustrates the way in which history is experienced. Even though

history consists of grand narratives about countless lives, grand-scale happenings such as the Indo-Pakistani war are experienced on a personal level by the individual; and the individual is often lost in statistics of casualties and survivors. Saleem, by writing history from a personal account, brings the individual experience back to the foreground. His claim that the hidden reason for the war was to destroy his family is questionable; but the truth of the matter is that many Pakistanis have experienced the bombings as an attack on their person. The 'hidden' truth about war is that it is always about the tearing apart of families and killing of people. The important lessons to be learned from history are all relevant on a personal level; by placing oneself in the situation of a person who went through the atrocities of war, one can learn that war is something no human being should have to go through. This is what Saleem teaches us: history is a collection of personal memories, and to learn from history we should accept and treat it as such.

A bit more needs to be said about the magical nature of Saleem's history writing. Through Saleem, Rushdie introduces the reader to a paradox: Saleem claims to tell the truth, but tells an unbelievable story. This is not just the paradox of Saleem, however; this is the paradox of history in its entirety. Saleem continues to play with this notion of truth when he talks about his experiences in Pakistan:

[...] in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything else becomes possible except what we are told is the case [...] (Rushdie 1981 453).

The truth is presented as something that is imposed by an authority rather than something that exists outside of society. Saleem claims that when truth has to be instructed, reality ceases to exist; because, when a reality is imposed upon people, they experience an artificial reality.

This demonstrates the consequences of claiming that the truth is in a single story: when only one side of a case is instructed as the truth, an artificial reality is imposed on people. History writing as such is a way to gain political power.

Similarly, in post-colonial theory, truth is often linked to power: “Truth is what counts as true within the system of rules for a particular discourse; power is that which annexes, determines, and verifies truth” (Ashcroft 167). In other words; the so-called truth is the history taught by authorities. By creating a personal, magical truth that defies all existent historical accounts, Saleem positions himself outside of the system and challenges this imposed truth. Rushdie’s own position in this matter is comparable to Saleem’s, according to what he writes in *Imaginary Homelands*: “So literature can, and perhaps must, give the lie to official facts” (14). Rushdie explains that the ‘State truth’ denies the atrocities committed in former East Pakistan, and that it is the job of the writer to challenge this superimposed truth. Comparable to the way Rushdie defends the writer of historical fiction in *Imaginary Homelands*, Saleem as a historian is an ode to those who accept and value their personal memories above the imposed cultural narrative, be it Western or native, and recognise history as a collection of these personal experiences. Historic fiction thus becomes a way to negate the domination of people through one-sided historical narratives.

Having established the necessity of regarding history as a personal narrative, attention must now be drawn to the collective function of history. As established in the beginning of this chapter, the dichotomy between historical fact and personal memory is false; but this does not mean that history is entirely subjective. This is because historical fact is inescapable. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a children’s novel dealing with the relationship between story and history, Rushdie has Iff the Water Genie explain that no story stands on its own:

Nothing comes from nothing, Thieflet; no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old – it is the new combinations that make them new (86).

In a similar way, Saleem is limited to re-writing history. There is no escaping the fact that a war occurred, or that the Emergency happened – so these events have to be included in Saleem's story, and likewise they cannot be excluded from the collective memory of the nation. The inescapability of historical fact is most effectively illustrated by the magical abilities of the Midnight's Children. The group of children born close to midnight are granted magical powers; a reflection of the optimism and potential present at the hour of India's independence. However, over the course of the story, even powerful magicians the likes of Parvati the Witch prove to be mere actors on the grand stage of history. No matter what their powers might be, the Midnight's Children's capture proves inevitable and the optimism is made undone by a procedure Saleem refers to as "[s]perectomy: the draining-out of hope" (Rushdie 1981 611). The fact that Saleem writes history from his personal memory still binds him to historical fact; he can only embellish reality so much. History, as described by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, can thus be seen as ambiguous only up to a certain point. There are limits to the storyteller's freedom, but these limits are there for a reason. After all, the job of the storyteller (or writer of literature) is not to run away from history, but to uncover the hidden truth of history. As Saleem explains, his re-telling of history serves the purpose of teaching the coming generations:

My son will understand. As much as for any living being, I'm telling my story for him, so that afterwards, when I've lost my struggle against the cracks, he will know (Rushdie 1981 292).

The ambiguous nature of history is thus further illustrated by the evident incorrectness of the dichotomy between personal memory and historical fact. The fluidity of history is aptly illustrated by Rushdie's use of Saleem as a historian, which shows that in the writing of history personal memory cannot be evaded, and that at the same time historical fact is inescapable. The division between the two is nonexistent; rather, they are intertwined and together make up what we recognise as history.

Stories are Indispensable: The Necessity of Historical Fiction

Thus far, historical fiction has proven to be a valuable asset to the writing of history; first of all because fiction enables writing about history with a certain ambiguity, allowing the expression of meaning rather than fact as was shown in the first chapter of this paper; and secondly because even though the storyteller can take liberties with what is accepted as historical fact, history is ultimately inescapable in story and therefore continually expressed even in fiction writing, as shown in chapter two. The final chapter will concern not just the functionality of literature when writing history; this chapter will define the necessity of story when telling history. The relationship between history and literature is not merely a convenience; to the contrary, one cannot exist without the other.

As has been discussed before, the relationship between history and literature is intimate. Narrative and history are intertwined and cannot escape each other, as has been shown previously; for history to be preserved it has to be written down – and at the very moment when history is written down, it is turned into a narrative. This once again stresses the multiform character of history: the way we know history is determined by the amount of historical narratives we have heard. History is therefore dependent on literature; without turning history into narrative it cannot be preserved. At the same time, this means that history is never objectively stored.

Understanding the limitations of the narrative for representing history is an important part of postmodern and post-colonial theory because it is directly related to the multiform nature of history. As has been said before, an historical event can generate a multitude of narratives, all different stories but none of them wrong – even if there are conflicting accounts between these stories, it only emphasises how history is perceived differently by different

people. It can be said therefore that despite its limitations, imposing a narrative upon history is the only way to make history part of our shared consciousness.

In his writing, Rushdie shows his awareness of the inescapable relationship between history and story. This is apparent first of all in the narrative mode in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem functions as a traditional Indian storyteller who would conserve history in his stories, but was allowed the freedom to improvise at the same time. A second example is the interrelationship of history and story in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, where stories are shown to have the power to influence history. Thirdly, there is the character of the narrative in *Midnight's Children*: a plot, a beginning and an ending are imposed upon history, illustrating the limitations of a single narrative to convey the history of a country. Rushdie thus illustrates the relationship between narrative and history in his writing, both employing narrative as a means to conserve history as well as demonstrating the limitations of a single narrative to express history in its entirety.

The character of Saleem in *Midnight's Children* has been influenced by the Indian tradition of storytelling, known as *kuttiyattam*, according to Rushdie himself (Ashcroft et al. 183). An obvious analysis of Rushdie's use of this indigenous mode of narration is that it expresses independence and a return to the native identity by retaining an Indian sense of storytelling rather than conforming to Western standards of writing. While this is certainly not untrue, there are deeper and more profound reasons why the use of *kuttiyattam* is important. Saleem's function as a *Vidushaka*, the harlequinesque *kuttiyattam* storyteller, gives him a lot of freedom: "He can indulge in any kind of extravagance, provided he can come back to the main thread of the narrative without getting lost in his own elaborations" (Paniker, quoted in Ashcroft et al. 184). Additionally, the *Vidushaka* would comment on history with humour and criticism; this makes him a complicated figure, as the *Vidushaka* serves both to preserve history but also to interpret and comment on it. This means that the *Vidushaka's* account of

history will not always be factually correct. This trait can be observed in Saleem as well; many of the facts he shares in his account are disputed, even by Saleem himself. A good example is time of the elections in 1957: “And then it occurs to me that I have made another error – that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events” (Rushdie 1981 308). Padma’s reaction to these mistakes however is mild: “What are you long for in your face? Everybody forgets some small things, all the time!” (Rushdie 1981 308) This exchange can serve as an example of the relationship between the Vidushaka and his audience. The Vidushaka has a serious position, as he is the conservator of history. This seriousness is expressed through Saleem’s worry about him being wrong about a fact. Padma’s mild reaction however shows that the factual correctness of the Vidushaka is not what is important; rather, it is his story that matters. This is illustrated by Padma’s emotional reaction to certain plot twists; for example, the departure of Mary Pereira (Rushdie 1981 390-391). This demonstrates the power of the storyteller over the audience; by playing on emotions the storyteller can create a link between the audience and the history he is narrating.

The relationship between the storyteller and his audience works two ways; the audience holds power over the storyteller as well. While telling his story, Saleem constantly monitors Padma’s reaction to it to make sure she still believes what he is telling her (Rushdie 1984 376). This exposes the way we want history to be told. The audience demands that the account of history makes sense to them; something that can be achieved by molding history into a narrative. The narrative has the power to link unrelated events together; and this is necessary to make sense out of the world, as Saleem explains: “It is a sort of national longing for form – or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality” (Rushdie 1984 417). The task of the Vidushaka is to connect events and shape history into a narrative people can relate to; true history is incomprehensible and without meaning, a

storyteller is needed for it to make sense to the audience. The relationship between Saleem and Padma, or the Vidushka and his audience, are a vessel in which Rushdie demonstrates the way history is preserved and how it should be treated: writing history is not about conserving facts; rather, it is about preserving stories, for they contain the essence of history.

Rushdie's style of writing Saleem's narrative demonstrates another dimension of the *kuttiyattam*-style of relating history. Saleem's account of history is highly stylised. Even though it is the story of his own life, Saleem tells it with a certain detachment; at the same time, the story is brought as close as possible to the audience by Saleem's eclectic and vivid storytelling. He is prone to exaggerate, as is shown in the episode where he loses the top of his finger: "My finger has become a fountain: red liquid spurts out to the rhythm of my heart-beat" (Rushdie 1981 325); he also uses imaginative similes to describe people and environments, as can be seen in his description of his uncle: "Hanif Aziz boomed like the horns of ships in the harbour and smelled like an old tobacco factory" (Rushdie 1981 332). These devices make Saleem's storytelling highly entertaining. Entertainment thus becomes a way to share history; Saleem uses a lot of humour as well, perhaps to make history bearable. The way Saleem narrates the lead-up to the war between India and China manages to capture the bizarreness of the situation; describing the Indian optimism as a disease, he comments sarcastically on the bad decisions that were made in the past. Saleem's injection of magical elements into his story serves to further illustrate the bizarre nature of history. The way he links real events together with magic illustrates that the form the audience longs for in the historical tale is just like that – magic, non-existing. Saleem's vivid storytelling and use of humour and the bizarre again demonstrate how history has many shapes and narratives. By giving a bizarre account of history that might be factually wrong Saleem might still be more right than historical accounts made purely on the basis of facts, because in Saleem's case it is clear that the narrative is artificial; it is a story told by a jester.

In addition to the story being a way of expressing history, Rushdie also shows that the story can influence history at times. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rashid is an exceptionally talented storyteller who is able to sway the minds of groups of people with his stories. A corrupt politician named Snooty Buttoo hires him to convince a crowd to vote for him; but when Rashid in the end of the book regains his talent and tells a fantastic story, the crowd is convinced to do the opposite thing: Buttoo is chased out of their valley. The story Rashid told is the story of Haroun's adventures on the moon Kahani. This shows the interrelationship between story and history: Rashid as a storyteller recounts Haroun's adventures, and thus sparks a revolution in the valley of K (Rushdie 1991 206). This demonstrates the power of stories to influence the course of history and events. At the same time however, history is what creates the stories in the first place. Haroun's adventures serve as an example for a generation of people, who are inspired by his deeds to dispose of their corrupt leader. History retold in a story can serve as an inspiration. However, history being interpreted and retold by a storyteller also makes it subjective; as Saleem admits, the storyteller "[cuts] up history to suit [his] own nefarious purposes" (Rushdie 1984 360). Some nuance needs to be added, however; as Saleem's cautiousness to make sure Padma believes him shows, the storyteller needs to operate within certain boundaries for his audience to believe him. Padma is aware of the other stories that have been told about the history of India; Saleem's account is familiar to her, because it relates to her personal history as well. This means that the influence of the storyteller on the audience is largely self-regulating; the audience is generally speaking not ignorant of other narratives, which ensures that the storyteller cannot get away with blatant lies.

Besides illustrating the importance of narrative to express history, Rushdie also demonstrates the limitations of a story as a vessel for history. The narrative that is imposed on history by Saleem takes the form of a story; the plot is the history of India as a nation, and its

structure knows a beginning and a chronological chain of events as Saleem weaves various parts of India's history together in one story. In the last chapter of the book however, Saleem gets in trouble; his story is nearing the present, but there is no ending. This is the fundamental problem of the narrative in history. History knows no end; it flows over into the present, which continues to generate new history. The ending of *Midnight's Children* is chaotic, because it ends in the present and the present is flowing into the unwritten future; multitudes of possibilities are converging into new narratives. This is not the terrain of the history writer, because he distills his stories from surviving narratives from the past; he vows to write the future as well, like a prophet, but realises that "one jar must remain empty" (Rushdie 1981 645). Saleem suffers from helplessness and claustrophobia in the 'now'. He tries to tell the future, but as he does so his writing becomes rambling as the narrative takes the shape of a stream of consciousness (Rushdie 1981 646). Characters from his past appear, but there is no cohesion; events that have not yet passed cannot be woven into each other:

[...] I see familiar faces in the crowd, they are all here, my grandfather Aadam and his wife Nassem, and Alia and Mustapha and Hanif and Emerald, and Amina who was Mumtaz, and Nadir who became Qasim, and Pia and Zafar who wet his bed and also General Zulfikar, they throng around me pushing shoving crushing [...] (Rushdie 1981 646).

People who died suddenly are alive again, suffocating Saleem. The past shows up in the future, but as these personae, each a representative of a narrative, are unguided, they huddle around the storyteller for guidance. However, Saleem is ultimately trampled by the mob (Rushdie 1981 647), illustrating that the multitude of narratives is too large for one storyteller to conserve. This also shows that there is no real ending at all; only an infinite amount of lives

with mysteries still ahead of them. The narrative of history, it turns out, is limited and needs to be continually rewritten and retold because the ending is never reached.

As such, Rushdie illustrates both the necessity of storytelling to conserve history as well as the power of the storyteller, which confirms the idea that history told as a story is necessary but should be read carefully, because a single narrative is only one story and thus one-sided and subjective. Additionally, the ending of *Midnight's Children* shows the artificiality of the narrative as an expression of history.

To reiterate what has been said in this paper: history is multiform because of its many meanings, and therefore needs stories to be expressed. In the first chapter, Rushdie's magical realist fiction is found to be a suitable device to express history. The second chapter demonstrated how Rushdie illustrates the relationship between personal memory and history. The third chapter discussed the necessity of what has been demonstrated by the former chapters; namely that history needs fictional narratives for it to be comprehensible, even though a multitude of narratives would not be enough to express history in its entirety. It would be interesting to further examine the link between history and literature; further research could for instance concern the way history is present in works that are not explicitly historical. The full complexity of this relationship has not by far been examined to a satisfactory level in this paper; so far however it seems history is not unlike a hybrid, multiform eel that keeps slipping away from the net of the narrative. Unfortunately, the net is all we have; and so to truly know history, even though we can only catch a glimpse at a time, it needs to be told and retold in stories continually.

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