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Lit Crit

**Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981, India)**

**Basic Plot**

The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is born in India at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, which was the exact instant India became a free country after British rule. He is the illegitimate son of a wealthy Englishman and an Indian woman. He was switched at birth with another child born at the same moment: Shiva. Saleem was raised as the child of Shiva's parents, a prominent and wealthy Indian family.

All 1,001 children born in India between midnight and 1:00 am were born with special powers. For example. One such child could travel through time, another was a werewolf, and two twin girls could cause men to fall in love with them. Shiva was born with knobby knees that he excelled at killing people with by squeezing people between his legs. Saleem initially had the power to read people's minds and to communicate with all the "Midnight's Children." After an operation on his sinuses, he lost his mental powers but gained unparalleled ability to smell.

The story follows Saleem through his life, which shares a mystical connection to the fate of India as a whole. Events in Saleem's life parallel events in the newly independent India. Saleem's life, like India after its independence, is troubled by conflict. Over the course of the novel, Saleem loses the hair off the top of his head, the tip of a finger, and becomes deaf in one ear. His family suffers numerous setbacks, including the suicide of Saleem's favorite uncle, the patricide of another uncle by Saleem's cousin, the growing ill health of his parents and grandparents, and repeated moves back and forth across the newly created Pakistan-India border in search of a home. Once the family learns that Saleem is a changeling, Saleem's role in the family becomes strained. Eventually, nearly everyone in his family dies during India's war with Pakistan.

Saleem initially hopes to use his powers to connect with the other Midnight's Children, including Shiva, in order to together become a force to change India for the better. However, the children are all victims of their individual circumstances. Many die, many are poor, some are deliberately disfigured by their parents to make them better beggars, and all of them are steeped in the ideologies of their parents and families. A divided India, populated with rivaling religions and political movements, finds a mirror in the Midnight's Children. The promise that they had dissolves as the Midnight's Children dissolve, as a group, through infighting and disagreement about what to do. Eventually, Shiva betrays all of them by helping the Indian government, which feels threatened by these powerful children. The government rounds up as many of the children left that it could find (420) and sterilizes all of them. The government also operates on all of them in order to remove their powers. The Midnight's Children, possessing such wonderful powers and potential, never fulfill that potential. Saleem in particular, like the newly independent India, struggles with his sense of identity, his sense of purpose, and his unfulfilled potential.

**Ties to Postcolonial Themes**

This novel is filled with countless small details that add up to an intriguing account of a nation struggling to find its identity and purpose in the wake of the British withdrawal. For instance, Saleem's family bought his childhood home from a wealthy British man (Saleem's biological

father) who had strange conditions for the sale: (1) he postponed the closing until months after Saleem's family and other families moved into their homes, (2) he required every item to remain in these houses furnished with British items and decoration, (3) and he required everyone to take up certain British customs, such as a cocktail hour at 6:00. He then approvingly lived among them for a time and watched all the newly arrived Indian families live in British homes and following British customs. Satisfied that everything was going to be fine now that the Indians were living as the British, he left just as the India gained its independence.

Afterward, however, India (like Saleem and the *Midnight Children*) was torn by a crisis of identity and purpose. Moreover, the British left a legacy through a hastily drawn border defining Pakistan. Saleem's family was caught up in what the book calls the largest migration in human history. The line the British drew seemed to take little account of where cultural groups actually existed, causing massive shifts as individuals moved to matched British lines, causing continual political and armed conflict. Throughout the story, the reader is reminded again and again of the legacy the British left behind and how that legacy is stamped on the fate of Saleem and on the country as a whole.