

## *Midnight's Children: From Communalism to Community* Adnan Mahmutovic

Salman Rushdie's work has epitomised diasporic writing since the publication of *Midnight's Children* (1981). It is arguable that the question of what constitutes the identity of an immigrant in an already existing diaspora is first fully articulated in *The Satanic Verses* (1988). However, Rushdie tackles the questions typical for diasporic individuals and communities already in *Midnight's Children*. The novel indeed takes place in the subcontinent, but it was written at the time when Rushdie was concertedly negotiating the terms of his own identity in relation to his double cultural heritage. His character, Saleem Sinai, is something of an immigrant when he moves to Pakistan, but then when he goes back to Bombay, the sense of being-out-of-place remains. The most pertinent question for him seems to be that of authentic identity. At the same time, as a writer in diaspora, Rushdie seems influenced by variegated European philosophies on selfhood and identity, in particular some Existentialist thought that constituted a part of a certain Zeitgeist in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> *Midnight's Children* indeed explores the issue of authenticity in the culturally and historically specific setting of post-Partition Bombay, but the influences from European culture are hardly negligible. The novel puts in dialogue subcontinental nativism or communalism and Existentialism's discourse on authenticity. The nativist drive in his social sphere defines authenticity in terms of untarnished cultural identity located in the past. Existentialist thought on authenticity, which is of course out-of-place in India but nevertheless present in the novel, starts with the individual and stresses the importance of a divorce from inherited identities that are crucial for communalists. Accepting neither of these in their entirety, Saleem produces an understanding of authentic identity that is in part a divorce from the past, but he also takes a direction away from individualism. Authenticity becomes the process of individual change within heterogeneous communities.

### **Perplexed by Purpose**

The historical crises of the postcolonial Indian nation in part make Saleem anguished, fearing 'above all things ... absurdity'.<sup>2</sup> As a way of coping with his angst, he tries to look for authentic meaning in the past. He recounts over sixty years of family and national history as if the redeemed past will heal his shattered sense of purpose. At the same time as he tries to historicise himself, he struggles to articulate and communicate his individual freedom and authenticity. While he seeks historical validation, he writes in retrospect with an ironic sting, which seems to suggest to his intended readers (his son Aadam, Padma, and indeed the entire India) that no such validation is possible, and that he is trying to articulate

1 Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

2 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* [1981] (London: Everyman's Library, 1995) 7. Further references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text.

a more authentic meaning in the Existentialist sense of the word, as something new, something acquired rather than inherited.

Being thrown or having-fallen into the complex history of post-Independence India, Saleem and his midnight's children reflect the 'conflict in socio-cultural heritages' (325) of India. Indeed, 'their heads were full of all the usual things, fathers mothers money food land possessions fame power God' (290). Despite their extraordinary abilities, they remain ingrained in what Sartre called bad faith: 'urchins spoke like old men with beards ... yes, certainly ... because children are the vessels into which adults pour their poison' (325). Taking a negative stance against inherited cultural determinants of identity, Saleem structures his story in a certain way to show he can do something about what he has been made of: 'From ayah to Widow, I've been the sort of person to whom things have been done, but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist' (301). While the notion of a 'protagonist' predicates Saleem on a literary discourse – the metanarrative points out that he is a character in a story – it appears to mean someone who is the main player in his life, who is active and not merely reactive. Being-a-protagonist for Saleem entails an active-literal mode of being: 'all actions of mine which directly – literally – affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events' (302). Initially, he shows how he builds up his identity by internalising certain institutions and experiences (family, class, nation etc.). Then he comes to exteriorise and re-exteriorise what has been put into him, until he bites the hands that have been spoon-feeding him and rewrites family history. The revision of family history is most important because ancestry is frequently also the metaphor for political oppression of the fathers/mothers of the nation. According to Matt Kimmich, what Saleem challenges is not the existence of parents/authors/originators, but rather the 'naturalized notion that meaning flows unidirectionally' from such authors.<sup>3</sup> Saleem opposes the idea that one is 'authentic only due to purity of descent,' and that 'authenticity is ... an inherent quality'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, upon hearing that Saleem's mother is a Hindu, and his father an Englishman, Padma bursts out, 'An Anglo? ... What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?' (148). Rather than speaking of Methwold and Vanita, Padma immediately jumps to the abstract terms, evoking the conflict between the English and the Hindu (symbolic of the colonial authority and the exploited native land). She sees Saleem as the traitor to his 'true' filial ties, which he reverses by claiming, 'I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents – a form of reverse fertility beyond the control of contraception' (308). The plurality of mothers and fathers signals his aversion to filial ties, but also to other models of affiliation as a marker of authenticity, such as nation. Saleem's plural (a)filiation is contrasted to Ahmed's invention of ancestry, which Neil ten Kortenaar finds 'harmful because it is nostalgic and self-glorifying and serves to "obliterate all traces of reality"'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Matt Kimmich, *Offspring Fictions: Salman Rushdie's Family Novels* (Amsterdam: Routledge, 2008) 11.

<sup>4</sup> Kimmich 32.

<sup>5</sup> Neil ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004) 110.

Saleem's genealogy too contorts reality, but it opposes the legitimating of status through genealogy (as when he produces the simulacra of blood).

### **To Conform or not to Conform, that is the Question**

Saleem first distinguishes between two possible courses of action, conformity (bad faith) and non-conformity. Saleem is mostly intent on qualifying different religious (and also to an extent secular) faiths in terms of bad faith, which is a way of living in an unreflective manner, doing things because one does so. As an infant, Saleem was unable to open and close his eyes instinctively, and had to be instructed by his 'two-headed mother,' Amina/Mary (158). Mary said, 'He is a good obedient child and he will get the hang of it for sure' (159).<sup>6</sup> When in Pakistan, he says, 'my new fellow citizens [in Karachi] exuded the flat boiled odours of acquiescence, which were depressing to a nose which had smelt ... the highly-spiced nonconformity of Bombay' (391). By pitting the acquiescence of the Karachi population against the non-conformity of Bombay, Saleem foregrounds his conflict with the need which Rushdie himself calls 'communalism',<sup>7</sup> and which arose, as Gareth Griffiths explains, in response to the colonisers' dominance. Indeed, communalism employed the rhetoric of authenticity to give substance to its politics of resistance. As a strategy of resistance, it was a gesture of non-conformity, but speaking from a postcolonial context, Saleem objects to the authoritative qualification of this authenticity, which strongly informs other politicised ideas such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, nation and class. While postcolonial nativism can be understood as a re-assertion of non-Western meanings, values and cultural practices as the means of decolonization, the novel deviates from the coloniser/colonised binary, and focuses on variegated communalist conflicts. Advocated as immanent or intrinsic to the given community, communalist essentialism is a political product without a real communal consensus, just as Saleem's individual meaning is determined by political and religious figures: 'Soothsayers have prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without say in the matter' (7). For this reason Saleem loves Bombay's ever-hybridising crowd, the people who barter both beliefs and everyday practices.

Since he eventually articulates authenticity in terms of non-conformity, Saleem has an anxiety attack when his sister, Brass Monkey, starts 'learning prayers in Arabic and saying them at prescribed times' and becomes a 'public property,' "'Pakistan's Angel", "The Voice of the Nation", the "Bulbul-e-Din" or nightingale-of-the-faith ... the whole country's favourite daughter' (398). Even Bombay, which is first presented as a plural place, is threatened by conformity during the state of Emergency: 'Sanjay volunteers, doing their bit for society ... but then I realized no, not volunteers, because all the men had the same curly hair and lips-like-women's-labia, and the elegant ladies were all identical, too, their

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<sup>6</sup> He echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's discourse on totalitarianism: 'When an infant first opens his eyes he ought to see the fatherland, and up to the day of his death he should see nothing else.... When he is solitary, he is nothing; when he has ceased to have a fatherland, he no longer exists; and if he isn't dead, he's worse than dead' (*The Government of Poland* IV trans. Willmoore Kendall [Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1985] 966).

<sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 27.

features corresponding precisely to those of Sanjay's Menaka ... the ruling dynasty of India had learned how to replicate itself' (546). The cloning of bodies is suggestive of an embodiment of ideology. It is like a modern version of incarnation only each soul is the same, or rather, there is none. While the cloning may seem exaggerated, it reflects Saleem's fears of anything that leads to individual appropriation: 'I am the sum total of everything that went before me of all I have been seen done, of anything done-to-me' (488).<sup>8</sup>

Saleem's enemy Shiva – who indeed cuts himself loose from his circumstances of birth – helps the government eliminate all those deviant, marginal, hybrid elements that either directly oppose the power, or whose very existence poses a symbolic threat. Although these powers put him in his untoward situation in the first place, he still plays in their court. Saleem, on the other hand, may not be as powerful, but his sense of authenticity drives him to at least try and think beyond the given frameworks. An interesting gesture is that of his production of fathers and mothers. He is affected by all of them and he affects them and changes them, and in the end he leaves them all. What seems to be an inability to commit to any political and religious paradigms is actually a refusal to opt for and fully commit to anything that has been offered to him. He stays with his family in Pakistan and has contact with Zia-ul-Haqq, he lives with the Communists for a while, he marries a witch, and he works as a dog during the war. He always acknowledges all the given choices, but desires a third option, a third pill, to use an image from *The Matrix*. While Saleem often laments that he has no choice, he keeps confirming and articulating his freedom by moving between fathers and rulers. Shiva, on the other hand, exercises his freedom by choosing between given alternatives, the blue or the red pill.

By manically insisting on the plethora of incompatible determinisms (for instance, fate versus history), Saleem shows that he cannot really refer to either fate, or biology, or social and historical factors as the ultimate excuse for his actions. Since he seldom does anything that truly shapes grand historical movements, his basic action is reduced to his wielding of irony and mimicry, which produce comic absurdity that is supposed to work against conscious and unconscious conformity. The comic aspects of his self-reflexive narrative serve to heighten the reader's awareness of the mechanisms that conspire in the regulation of life. This self-reflexivity constitutes the beginning of a search for authenticity.

Saleem's autobiographical writing is an exercise in self-reflexivity, which in turn seems always to be oriented towards self-formation. Jung Su calls Saleem's basic strategy 'cultural eclecticism',<sup>9</sup> which she qualifies as an intentional 'mockery of the idea of authenticity'.<sup>10</sup> An eclectic selects from the world-repository of culture whatever appears usable for the immediate gain, a gesture that Rushdie claims to be 'a hallmark of the Indian tradition'.<sup>11</sup> Saleem's

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<sup>8</sup> This argument resembles Sartre's claim, 'a man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and ... the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises'. (*Existentialism is a Humanism* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007] 38).

<sup>9</sup> Jung Su, 'Saleem's Quest for Origin: Authenticity and Nation in *Midnight's Children*' *Proc. Natl. Sci. Counc. ROC(C)*, X/1 (January 2000) 65.

<sup>10</sup> Jung Su 61.

<sup>11</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary* 68.

is a far more ironic eclecticism, the collecting in order to refute and transform, rather than endorse and preserve. When he uses cultural references, and tries to fit modern individuals into mythical narratives, and creates ties to several political and religious movements, he makes an immense hodgepodge of everything without committing to anything. He behaves like that which Søren Kierkegaard calls a 'fuiimus',<sup>12</sup> someone who looks back at the past as an old man lying about it or inventing it in order to overcome surging existential anguish. Saleem expresses his freedom in exaggerated mimicry/mockery of different beliefs, filiations and political affiliations. Take his hearing-voices for an example, which he interprets in terms of his Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage: 'like Musa or Moses, like Muhammad the Penultimate, I heard voices on a hill' (207). Yet, the voices turn out to be more mundane. His mimicry of the religious discourse seems an act of conformity, but it turns to be more mockery than imitation. This mockery seems aimed at his parents' (and readers') assumed bad faith. When he then reinterprets his mind as the radio, he draws attention to the ways in which radio has had a specific function for the ideological constitution of the nation. The nation is too large and too diverse to produce a kind of communion and intimacy of its members that we ascribe to smaller traditional communities. In a large state, as Theodor Adorno has argued, the radio serves to

reach the people at large in such a way that they notice none of the innumerable technical intermediations; the voice that announces resounds in the home, as though he were present and knew each individual.<sup>13</sup>

A national consciousness is a false consciousness. When Saleem claims he actually brings all the singular voices to presence for each other in a communion or at least a perfect parliament, he shows that the one who commands the communal space is also the mediator. His mediation is even viler than the radio propaganda during the Indo-Pakistani war, because the children are given the false impression that they are actually present rather than represented. In a sense, he qualifies his brain as the crystallised space of bad faith, but he breaks the illusion and reveals that he has been manipulating the mental forum to exclude Shiva, control dialogue and barter thought. He told them he wanted them to be free, but his liberalism turned out to be authoritative.

Theoretically speaking, although mimicry has been Homi Bhabha's hallmark, it seems fruitful to remember Sartre's figure of a waiter who does everything too much in order to conform to a certain stereotype or a role.<sup>14</sup> Assuming that the waiter is aware he is acting in bad faith, then for Sartre he is even more inauthentic because he denies the facticity of his freedom. However, by accentuating every gesture of waiter-ness, the man draws attention to this particular social behaviour. The exaggerated conformity breaks the transparency of this role. Sartre's image captures social action in bad faith, which is akin to the behaviour of postcolonial subjects such as Saleem's family in their practice of

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<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 89.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003) 62.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1993) 167-9.

English customs. The question is, is mimicry honest conformity, or mockery? In *Midnight's Children*, it is especially the histrionic aspects of Saleem's behaviour that alert the readers that his mimicry is anything but serious conformity. For Bhabha, any 'desire to emerge as "authentic" through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation.'<sup>15</sup> Since 'authentic' here has its essentialist valence, Bhabha means to say that the irony implied in mimicry shows that the imitation does not constitute authenticity, and that it does not hide another true self that is only obscured by the mask of imitation. In order to better understand Saleem's mimicry, we can compare it to colonial mimetic desire, the kind of imitation or copycatting that nationalism denies in the name of authenticity. The implied paradox here is that the nation itself is a foreign model, always 'imperso-nation,' as Sumita S. Chakravarty has argued.<sup>16</sup> Saleem's family become ersatz Englishmen to the point that his father turns white. Just as for a nationalist such imitation entails a betrayal of the true self, Existential authenticity too stands in conflict with role-playing, imitation, parroting (as in Aadam's Mecca-turned parroting, and Ahmed's ersatz bulbul which is in fact a parrot). For Kortenaar, Saleem seems to produce an 'irreverent twist on Marx's bitter phrase from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* [that mimicry is the inevitable fate of the middle-classes]' in order to 'deflate the vaunted power of the European original.'<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Saleem says, 'it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce' (235).

The key to Saleem's stance is his thematisation and exaggeration of mimicry, which allow 'the mimic to stand outside his performance'.<sup>18</sup> Everything he does may only be a performance, but it is possible to understand performance as a creative impulse, rather than mere copycatting. Saleem's mimicry is not only ambiguous mimesis, but also poiesis. Such gestures, comparable to the famous scene from *The Satanic Verses* where Jibreel is not sure whether he is an angel or a devil, is practically a dramatisation of Sartre's claim about the responsibility in singular choices: 'If a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel.'<sup>19</sup> Although the voice of an angel or a god seems binding, the individual must take responsibility for his or her belief. Kortenaar suggests, although 'the mere fact of choice is not truly action, the self-awareness induced by the recognition that one has, in fact, chosen, is the kind of experience which underpins action.'<sup>20</sup> The reader too must choose, and even use creativity.

### **Desire for Community**

Emphasising the anti-individualist effects of communalism, *Midnight's Children* seems to endorse introspection as the primary option for individuals caught up in violent historical circumstances. However, after the exhaustion of paradigms of

<sup>15</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Classics, 2004) 126.

<sup>16</sup> Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993) 4.

<sup>17</sup> Kortenaar 170.

<sup>18</sup> Kortenaar 171.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 26.

<sup>20</sup> Kortenaar 45.

filiation and affiliation, as well as individualism, Saleem's narrative pushes us into a rethinking of both individuality and community. There are at least three instances in which Saleem is isolated and focused on his selfhood: his solitary writing in the factory, his seclusion in the tower, and his amnesiac existence during the war. Yet it is in these instances that he foregrounds the importance of community.

To begin with, Saleem assumes the posture of a loner whose social ties have been severed and who confines himself to his writing. Even though he is writing his memoir, he shares his authorship (of his selfhood), with Padma, who forms with him a community of two (unorthodox) lovers. The very articulation of his authentic selfhood becomes open to negotiation with this one-woman audience who is not subordinated to him, but the essential interlocutor. She joins in, as Kimmich has argued, 'the creation of meaning, becoming a co-author ... of Saleem himself.'<sup>21</sup> She leaks into him. She breaks his artistic illusions of grandeur and brings him down to the facticity of life.

The emphasis on both the negativity of communalism and the necessity of community is obvious in his comic treatment of Buddha-hood in the passages about his amnesia:

I am stripped of past present memory time and love ... I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me ... free now ... restored to innocence and purity by a tumbling piece of the moon, wiped clean as a wooden washing-chest, brained (just as prophesied) by my mother's silver spittoon. (436)

Here, the point of Buddhist struggle is reduced to a quite de-spiritualised experience of worldlessness. While 'free', 'pure', and 'innocent' seem to point towards some form of Romantic shedding of social skins, the problem is that in this mode zero Saleem is not quite free, or pure, or innocent. He becomes a dehumanised being, a dog that lends his nose to the service of the army. He is 'a brinjal ... a vegetable' (446). He is totally cut from his past history, and his heritage can give him no status. If this is an extreme purity then it deprives him of both personality and community. The amnesia is devastating for his sense of self. The constant slippage between 'I' and 'he' shows his trouble with placing himself in the world: 'he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business ... I, or he, accepted the fate ... emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan' (445). As I stressed earlier, a model citizen of Pakistan is for him someone who acts in bad faith. Even the ultra-obedient soldiers find him extreme. While the army were 'dedicated to "rooting out"' the 'rejection of past-and-family,' which was 'subversive behaviour' (447), Saleem's detachment from past-and-family is not subversive at all. They rename him 'buddha' (Urdu for old man). In other words, he does not resemble Buddha, 'he-who-achieved-enlightenment-under-the-bodhi-tree,' and was capable of 'not-living-in-the-world as well as living in it' (445). Buddha's act of being-dead-to-the-world could be an

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<sup>21</sup> Kimmich 82.

example of authentic action that shaped history, whereas Saleem is a victim of an accident (a melodramatic gimmick from Bombay talkies). Eventually, snakebite cures Saleem's amnesia, 'reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man' (464). Then, he says, 'my old life was waiting to reclaim me. ... What you were is forever who you are' (468). This pessimistic statement sounds as if he is giving in to the enormous pressure of his complex past. Yet, while this burden is not desirable, the total opposite is even less so, because he loses all sense of being, freedom, action, and articulation.

As a child, Saleem withdraws to the privacy in the womblike space of a washing-chest, where he is 'concealed from the demands of parents and history' (198). Since a total cut from the world does not elicit authenticity, such an isolated character, as Maurice Blanchot claimed, 'is the individual, and the individual is only an abstraction, existence as it is represented by the weak minded conception of everyday liberalism.'<sup>22</sup> It is in the tower that Saleem enters the minds of all Indians and meets the other children. His movement inward eventually becomes an ecstasy of his self. By this I mean that his selfhood, albeit seemingly introspective, arise through community, through exposing himself to others, through sharing himself with others and letting them 'enter' him. His communication with the children gives him a sense of sharing and bonding. Their dispersion and vast variety of abnormalities (or supra-normality) make him think about a new kind of community. With an out-of-character awareness of European individualism, he wonders whether 'collectivity [must be] opposed to singularity' (325). He envisions a 'sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression' (280), and everyone is allowed his or her abnormality, which becomes the ground for their community.

Saleem sees the M.C.C. as the potential third principle that is supposed to stand against old ideological principles:

Do not let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We ... must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma, for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfil the promise of our birth. (323)

Besides the immediate echo of Nehru's 'Speech to Bandung Conference Political Committee' from 1955, Saleem comes to desire the third principle, but not in terms of national alliances.<sup>23</sup> Instead, he seeks a principle that is also not a principle. The 'loose federation' suggests a community that does not formulate a fixed set of principles that will be the glue to its unity.<sup>24</sup> Such a community seems

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988) 18. As Charles Taylor points out, individualism can result in 'new modes of conformity' (Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992] 15).

<sup>23</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Speech to Bandung Conference Political Committee, 1955' <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1955nehru-bandung2.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie quotes Robi Chatterjee as saying, 'We don't need glue ... India isn't going to fall apart.... It is this nationalism business that is the danger' (*Imaginary* 32).

idealistic, but as Kimmich points out it only starts to ‘fall apart when Saleem denies Shiva a voice’ and thus ‘silences an unwanted, uncomfortable, potentially disruptive voice and enforces a certain hierarchy’,<sup>25</sup> when he starts disregarding the children’s differences and wants to find their common essence. The very failure of M.C.C. draws attention to the ways in which older understandings of both individuality and community contribute to this dissolution. Saleem wants them to be a third thing, but his understanding of community is based on both local communitarian models and the new national ideals with a prominent allegorical leader at the top. Without creative reworking of the old forms of communing, the visionary childhood is nipped in the bud. The MCC community never takes the next step. Saleem, as aware of the potential and the promise of his MCC, becomes a migrant in search for community, but he never manages to attach himself to any given social formation, especially not the nation (the community of all communities).

Another problem may be, to use Blanchot’s argument, ‘theoretically and historically there are only communities of small numbers.’<sup>26</sup> Small communities seem to imply communion and even the fusion of the individuals into ‘a supra-individuality’.<sup>27</sup> It becomes hard to conceive of a community without the immanence of its members to each other. Nation practically implies the lack of such immanence of equal and connected minds. The midnight’s children can have that through the parliament of Saleem’s brain, but they remain disembodied in an abstract space, reduced to minds without materiality. Indeed, as Blanchot put it, even

the community of equals, which puts its members to the test of an unknown inequality, is such that it does not subordinate the one to the other, but makes them accessible to what is inaccessible in this new relationship of responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

This equality, as an aspect of community, is not here a matter of social law, a constitution. It is not merely the equality in the distribution of wealth, rights and obligations, but an equal taking of responsibility for the inequality that may be the other face of equality itself, and of freedom.

By entering and leaving several already defined communities, Saleem seems to propose the possibility of bonding and sharing across any number of lines, the possibility of coming together on several plains, of intersecting communities that are articulated through migration. He undermines, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s discourse on community, all attempts at objectifying and producing a common being that can be traced in ‘sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols; in short, in subjects’.<sup>29</sup> The dissolutions of new forms of community in the novel seem to suggest that communities shaped with singular

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<sup>25</sup> Kimmich 53.

<sup>26</sup> Blanchot 6.

<sup>27</sup> Blanchot 7.

<sup>28</sup> Blanchot 17.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 31.

authenticity in view cannot persist, because any struggle for communal or national life entails an inevitable loss of singularity. Alternative communities – based in a more dynamic, fluid, heterogeneous understanding – form and dissolve. Each individual participates in, gives form and allegiances to several communities rather than reducing communal bonding to one race, nation, leader, bloodline or class. Participation in multiple communities can elicit growth of both responsibility and common good though neither of these becomes dogmatised within the parameters of traditional alignments. There is value in dissoluble communities. I do not mean unstable or fragmentary. To deem a certain community unstable is to posit it against supposedly stable traditional communities, which is an illusion in itself. Dissolution is not necessarily negative. Communal bonding that rejects traditional models can indeed develop in ways hard to anticipate because the processes of personal becoming imply choices and creativity, and also because this creativity takes place in varied social contexts.

In a sense, it is possible to imagine community as a resistance to the common substance and immanence, and towards the kind of sharing and caring that leaves community open to its alterity and plurality. Indeed, as Nancy put it, it is ‘the immanence of man to man, or it is man, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community’.<sup>30</sup> The appropriation into communal essence is death. Yet, there must be community because any ‘fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person’.<sup>31</sup> To be dead here is to be appropriated into the immanent life of the community-as-society, whereas the loss of such immanence and communion in/of death opens community to its alterity. The loss of communion vis-à-vis a common being gives rise to relation, plural singularity, communication, and sharing. To rethink community does not only entail dismissal of the communalist models, the fascist dream of absolute communion, or even wholesale abandoning of modern individualism. It is in part to see how community escapes becoming an object or even a subject, and how it tries out our thinking and acting.

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy 3.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy 13.