Conspicuous Bodies

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Like *Dubliners*, *Midnight’s Children* uses nativist illness to reimagine a national-spiritual body as the basis of a minority personhood. But while Joyce, through his narrative point of view, detaches from “the” Irish-Catholic subject, Rushdie incorporates himself into an absorptive and fissiparous Hindu-Muslim subcontinent. If Joyce aimed to show his cosmopolitan credentials by scrutinizing the Irish-Catholic body from an outsider vantage, Rushdie asserted his insider status as a provincial—his authority to speak not only about, but also for India. The British author relied less on religion than on the modern concept of traditional “Indian myth” to guarantee his nativist credentials. Protagonist Saleem Sinai’s Vedic embodiment allows for an authorial locus within the national body, depicted as quintessentially corporate and permeable. Pitting Indian spirituality against imperial empiricism, *Midnight’s Children* artfully and comically dismantles the authority of European hermeneutics while using Vedic protocols to disrupt a singular religious, regional, or even subcontinental identity for the traumatized nation-state. Yet this version of the subaltern subject also enforces its inevitable, actual dissolution. Rushdie’s strategy obscured the author’s distance from older national Indian literatures while privileging an “imaginary” textual and spiritual India.

*Midnight’s Children* imitates the construction of “Indian myth” as a national project as well as an Orientalist one, and uses spiritual identity to continue a modernist project as well as to initiate a postcolonial disruption. In contrast to the central evocation of religion, myth can establish a tran-
scendental realm without the burden of worship or doctrinal assent. Located outside the time, and often the space, of a fragmented or evacuated modernity, myth often signifies cultural totality, particularly an aesthetic one. This approach “takes for granted that nations, ‘cultures,’ and or Völker are primordial, bounded, unproblematic entities and that myth is the equally primordial voice, essence, and heritage of the group,” Bruce Lincoln observes. Romantic, Herderian myth, which Asad calls “a secular discourse of Enlightenment,” negotiated the shift away from sensuous and bodily engagement with the sacred in Christianity and thus contributed to the assumption of an a priori, modern “secular self.” “Mystical” texts, formerly understood to contain obscured spiritual and eschatological content, similarly came to denote a literary genre and style; interpretive emphasis moved from an interest in miracles to a focus on subjective states disconnected from regulated practices or belief. Midnight’s Children, like many subsequent “postcolonial” and “transnational” novels, partakes of Herderian romanticism: the narrative lumps together various genres and disciplines of Sanskrit texts as a Nationalliteratur at times indistinguishable from an Orientalist imaginary. Notably, the novel’s consolidation of disparate identities through myth has roots in Indian nationalism as well as in Western stereotype. The formulation of a common basis of mystical-spiritual texts was deeply influential in the anticolonial and religious nationalism that developed in nineteenth-century India. Figures such as Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Vivekānanda (1863–1902) embraced the British equation of India with spirituality as a means of opposing Christian imperial power, much as the Irish used Celtic myth and sectarian allegiance. Attempting to solidify an Indian identity, anticolonialists aimed to integrate disparate Hindu regional and performative oral traditions and to incorporate empirical epistemologies into a political program. “Rational religion,” which in certain respects paralleled the move toward liberal Christianity in the West, sought to reconcile belief with a scientific epistemology thought to be contained within Hinduism as well as in the bodily discipline of yoga. Built in part on the construction of a Hindu canon, these movements accepted critical editions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana as the center of a classical Bharat, the ideal Hindu state, and privileged in particular the ancient Vedas. Gandhi later drew upon this social construction, which elevated a textual spirituality. Midnight’s Children uses an analogous strategy of consolidation. Instead of forwarding a unified Hindu identity, however, Rushdie coordinates Hindu corporeality with other religious and national identities and texts, prominently the Qu’ran and A Thousand and One Nights.

“The way I’ve always written has been shaped by the everyday fact of religious belief in India,” Rushdie said in a 1983 interview. His first two novels
highlight this interest through their use of myth and mysticism as ciphers for metaphysical belief. “The structures and metaphors of religion (Hinduism and Christianity as much as Islam) shaped his irreligious mind, and the concerns of these religions with the great questions of existence . . . were also his,” Rushdie writes of himself in *Joseph Anton* (2012). Yet the treatment of myth as a syncretic vehicle for different religions and older narratives registered quite differently in the author’s first novel. Rushdie’s use of “Indian myth” to insert himself into the corpus of the subcontinent changed him from the Oxbridge-associated author of the fantasy *Grimus* (1975) into the premier Indian author of the 1980s. At the beginning of *Midnight’s Children’s* public career, Rushdie’s relationship to the subcontinent was hesitant and attenuated, according to his own report. By 1983, with the publication of *Shame*, he was declaring in the Indian periodical *Celebrity*: “If you have to choose a nationality as a writer, I’d call myself an Indian writer.” But his claim on “insider” status as an Indian—a claim that contradicted earlier self-characterizations—vexes *Midnight’s Children*, as well as Rushdie’s subsequent work and eventually his reception. While *Shame* and later novels prominently feature a “migrant” cosmopolitan as a central figure, *Midnight’s Children* attempts to absorb the author’s “outsider” status into an indigenous protagonist. Rushdie resolves the anxiety of identity through an “authentic,” spiritually syncretic Indian agent, generated in part by the writer’s own temporal, geographic, and literary distance from the subcontinent and enshrined as the index to his aesthetic.

In rendering its dynamic and yet impaired protagonist, *Midnight’s Children* surmounts the problematic of *Dubliners*, in which distanced scrutiny and critique of the colonial corpus finally reinforce its stilling. Rushdie’s method of representation registers an acute awareness of the provisional nature of the writer’s claim to an authoritative Indian voice, a dilemma that Joyce did not share. Saleem encodes the transactions between the body of the cosmopolitan author and the body of the subcontinent, between *Midnight’s Children* and Indian literary production by nationals in majority languages. The metonymic production of an India in fact lost to the author through time and emigration produces the romance that gives birth to India as a nation-state and as a collective modern history. It is based on an eroticized lack and leads to an imaginary of wholeness satisfied in myth but not in politics. In the end, Rushdie’s relation to the subcontinent overdetermines his protagonist’s physical dissolution. Saleem’s phallogocentric metaphor for his textual production acts as a competing analogy to the incorporative model of the Vedic body that constitutes the novel’s primary conceit. The novel’s final dissolution of an actual India—or the dream of nationalism, as Saleem would have it—is inevi-
Chapter 2

Rushdie’s Rebirths

“The Empire is striking back,” Rushdie proclaimed at a 1982 conference on Indian writing in English, held at London’s Commonwealth Institute. “I suggest that the flowering of these new literatures may be the most important to occur in any language since the earlier incursions of Flann O’Brien, Beckett, and Joyce.” Rushdie spoke as a recent winner of the Booker Prize and as a rapidly emerging spokesman for minority writers in English. His remarks highlight his early and consistent identification with modernist Irish writers, and especially with Joyce, in part because of their rejection of national predecessors. In spite of the topic of the conference, Rushdie paid scant attention to other Indian writers in English, except for G. V. Desani, whose *All about H. Hatterr* (1947) modelled Indian appropriation of the imperial tongue. Rushdie observes that Desani “showed how English could be bent and kneaded until it spoke in an authentically Indian voice. . . . Desani’s triumph was to take babu-English, chamcha-English, and turn it against itself: the instrument of subservience became a weapon of liberation. It was the first great stroke of the de-colonizing pen.” In his own moment, Rushdie saw such energies expressed not by other contemporary writers in India, but rather by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Earl Lovelace, Toni Morrison, Andre Brink, and Derek Walcott, well-known metropolitan authors with other minority or postcolonial affiliations.

The address is noteworthy for Rushdie’s mention of an Indian literary history in English, though not for its neglect of Indian literatures in older subcontinental languages. As his career progressed, the writer rarely alluded to any national literary traditions, other than mythic and legendary ones, usually in orature. At times he denied that even Indian nationals writing in English bore any relationship to him at all. The Indian-born British Rushdie identified, as Joyce did, with a cosmopolitan European literature. In describing the genesis of *Midnight’s Children*, he explicitly set his work against “the literature that had been produced about India,” which he found “dated,” “dainty,” and “delicate” while the country that he had revisited was in fact “massive” and “elephantine.” Rushdie said in another interview that he had wanted to write a “big city novel,” one that captured the sensuous materiality of contemporary life in Bombay. In such remarks, the writer casts Indian literature as a subject matter rather than the product of a geographic loca-
tion or its languages, an equation that bears centrally upon his metropolitan posture as an “Indian” writer who epitomized an emerging subgenre of postcolonial literature. In his 2012 memoir, Rushdie relates that his problem was one of “authenticity”; he “worried” as he conceived of the novel that “his Indian connection had weakened” or been “lost.” It is, finally, the English language that Rushdie claimed as his province and the Indian body, produced by spiritual practices and texts, that he needed as a major source of modernist transcendence.

This Rushdie emerged at a moment open for new directions—not in “the” Indian novel, but in those written in English, by both national and migrant authors. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes that the Indian novel in English was at a “low point” in 1980, as the generation of the 1930s, while still active, had “ceased to surprise.” Though literatures in other Indian languages had been transformed by “young urban Indians of a certain class born after 1947,” their work marked by playfulness, linguistic mixture, and popular vocabularies drawn from sources such as film magazines, Indian novels in English were “musty,” overly earnest, and dualistic.

In a different vein, Amitava Kumar notes that the energies credited to *Midnight's Children* had long been evident in Indian popular culture, which the narrative highlights as a reference but which its popular and critical reception has left largely unexplored as a major hermeneutic. Kumar also questions the widespread equation of Rushdie with “Indianness, especially in light of the neglect of subcontinental literature in languages other than English.” None of these contexts registered in the quick Western recognition of the novel. The book’s critical and popular success transformed Rushdie from an obscure writer of intellectual “fantasy” to an Indian-identified political writer fully engaged with cosmopolitan experiment. By the time of the 1983 publication of *Shame*, Rushdie was touted as a significant voice of the subcontinent and a father of the new Indian literature—and not necessarily just in “in English.” At the time, Michael T. Kaufman of the *New York Times* asked Rushdie whether he was aware “in writing these India books that the clearing [he] was making was such virgin territory . . . [in] that no one had mined the myths of contemporary India.” Rushdie replied, “Yes,” and referred to his consciousness of the novelty of a “comic epic” that encompassed the reality of India.

The status of Rushdie’s Indian identity has been a consistent issue in his career since the success of *Midnight's Children*, even as the author’s own statements about his relationship to his birthplace have varied. Initially his Indian profile seemed to stem from the subject matter of *Midnight's Children* rather than from the author’s personal origins or minority status, neither of which registered in the (admittedly thin) reception of his first novel. *Grimus* is
heavily indebted to mythic motifs that absorb religious content, including central references to the mystical Sufism of Islam, but it was received as British fantasy. Popular reviews of *Grimus* concentrated on questions of genre rather than any subcontinental or Muslim religious affinities. The novel features an eponymous European magician in conflict with the Native or “Red” American Flapping Eagle. Set in the imaginary geography of Axona, the narrative syncretizes a number of world mythologies and texts in a modernist allegory of mental colonization. Critics questioned its aims, as the novel combined high literary and “global” allusions with elements of genre fiction and barely mentioned any political allegory or spiritual content. The London *Times* grouped the book with two other first novels. Peter Tinniswood describes *Grimus* as an “adventure story by terms epic and comic.”24 In the *Times Literary Supplement*, David Wilson calls the work a “fable” aligned with but not solidly belonging to science fiction or political satire, the only genres in which its aspirations to “global metaphor” could be made fashionable.25 Both readers question the ends to which these genres are put. Tinniswood cites *A Pilgrim’s Progress* and the *Odyssey*, Wilson the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as touchstones. Neither review mentions any context for the novel other than a metropolitan one. Wilson in fact concludes by placing *Grimus* in a very specific British cultural location: “If one has doubts about the world Mr[,] Rushdie has created they don’t concern his logic: the question is whether his dryly entertaining intellectual conceit is anything more than an elaborate statement of the obvious decked out in the mannerisms of Oxford philosophy.”26

*Grimus* was not a critical or a commercial success. Rushdie has subsequently called it a failure,27 from which he learned that “fantasy” must be grounded in an “observable reality” drawn from his own experience and recognizable to readers.28 He has questioned the novel’s classification as science fiction rather than literary fantasy, akin to works of Thomas Pynchon29—although elsewhere he has spoken of his interest in science fiction.30 Brian Aldiss, “the godfather of British SF” and a fan of the work, later expressed relief that the book was withdrawn from consideration for the Gollancz Science Fiction Prize. “Had it won . . . [Rushdie] would have been labeled a science fiction writer and nobody would have heard of him again,” Aldiss stated in 2007.31 Now back in print as part of a Random House series of Rushdie titles, it is housed in a “fantasy” niche linked to science fiction, its premier jacket blurb by Ursula LeGuin. Literary critics have recuperated the novel as “speculative fiction” and linked it more closely to *Midnight’s Children*. Some have questioned the hard separation of science fiction from mythic modes of fantasy in Rushdie’s work.32
As in the reviews of *Grimus*, the first notices for *Midnight’s Children*, which appeared five years later, locate the novel primarily in a Western literary context and focus on the text. Rushdie’s politics and background are treated explicitly not on newspaper book pages but in magazines, where a discussion of the text is more often combined with feature elements. *Newsweek* identifies the author as “a young Indian novelist living in London,” the *New Yorker* calls him a “glittering” production of India, and even *India West*—perhaps for different reasons—calls him “Salman Rushdie of Bombay.” Such references to the writer’s national origin, his ethnicity, and occasionally his religion, became more frequent as the novel accrued renown. *Midnight’s Children* won the Booker Prize in October 1981; *Shame*, set in Pakistan, appeared in 1983, and consolidated Rushdie’s profile as an emerging cosmopolitan writer who could be fused unproblematically with his subcontinental past.

Like Joyce, then, Rushdie became more tightly linked to his national and religious origins as he achieved professional success. The first newspaper reviews of *Midnight’s Children*, which appeared in February 1981, often characterize the author through his novel’s subject matter and through comparison to other cosmopolitan writers who revise and critique their national histories—not through his biography. What Flaubert was to *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) was to *Midnight’s Children*. Readers also frequently cite Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959) to indicate Rushdie’s conflation of personal narrative and politically charged national epic in a self-conscious and highly literary experimental prose. Surprisingly, these comments rarely employ the term “magic realism”—Bill Buford in the *New Statesman* is a notable exception—or focus unduly on the work’s alternate reality as magical, but suggest such stylistic allegiances through references to Marquez, Grass, and Milan Kundera. Elements of the “fabulous” or the fable in this way become attached less to questions of popular genre than to modes of aesthetic-historical discourse and to Indian myth.

John Leonard, in the *New York Times*, calls the novel an “epic” that, like those of Grass and Marquez, “gives us history, politics, myth, food, magic, wit and dung.” Leonard later highlights political critique as intimately related to the narrative style, expressive of the “fragmentation” of Partition and its emotional effects. Saleem’s “alternative realities” are multiple, according to Elaine Feinstein in the London *Times*, and the novel full of “confusing superstitions” as well as “pungent dialogue and wit,” but she leads her essay with a discussion of the novel’s historical base. *Newsweek*’s Charles Michener calls Rushdie an “aspirant to the ranks of V. S. Naipaul and Milan Kundera—private storytellers with public visions who cast contemporary nobodies into the whirlpool of current events.” The rarely mentioned Naipaul, paired with Kundera, sug-
gests a synthesis of two different strands of contemporary writing. Though both are political and exilic, Naipaul betokens an older, more ambivalent and distanced “diasporan” Indian and minority identity, overtly political but less formally experimental, while Kundera signifies an exemplary postmodernist whose oppositional politics fully inform his aesthetic experiment.

Readily compared with novels composed in Spanish and German, *Midnight’s Children* did not elicit much comparison to Indo-Anglian novels, much less to contemporary works in majority Indian languages such as Hindi or Bengali. Rather the rubric “writing about India,” regardless of the writer’s location, seemed to govern the paradigm that British and American literary journalists employed. Reviewers were just as likely to discuss Rushdie in relation to Paul Scott and E. M. Forster as they were to place him in the company of Marquez and Grass. Contrasting Rushdie’s vulgarity and comedy to Anita Desai’s gentility, Leonard opposes *Midnight’s Children* to Anglo-British modernism and the “Raj” revival while at the same time using these writers to establish a context for narratives about India. Leonard states that *Midnight’s Children* “is the shadow in Paul Scott’s mirror or perhaps what E. M. Forster heard in the cave, with a lot of symbolic curry added.” In *TLS*, Valerie Cunningham locates *Midnight’s Children* almost entirely within an impressive British literary tradition, but she is troubled by its combination with the object “India,” in spite of her high praise. The novel’s engagement with an ornate form seems a function of the exotic sublime in her estimation, as India is “fascinatingly particular and awingly representative of human variety.” Rushdie’s book possesses “fetching readability” as well as “literary importance”: she notes Saleem’s embodiment of Indian history and self-proclaimed obsession with correspondences while she praises the concrete sensory qualities of the narrative, its realization of the figure. But Cunningham also implies that the novel skillfully mimics its high literary predecessors, as if the “Indian text” were becoming jumped up with its pretensions. She says: “It’s a remarkably dexterous performance. But if the granting of an Indian text so high a degree of self-consciousness were all, *Midnight’s Children* might be dismissable as a smart refurbishing of bits of Sterne and James, of *Heart of Darkness* and *Finnegans Wake*, by courtesy of Deconstructionism and Wolfgang Iser.” She continues, “That would, of course, be a harsh judgment, . . . its play of signifiers, of textualities, the drama of reading and writing of India is bolted firmly into its fierce political despairs and indignations.” Anita Desai herself, in a March 1981 review that appeared in the *Washington Post*, reflects a similar division between European masters and Indian material when she states that the novel is “not a national allegory or fable” but rather is “as universal as the works of Cervantes, Swift, Kafka, or
Grass.” She does lament that the novel, which is “of major interest to Indian readers,” will probably not be “published, distributed or read” in India. She suggests that this situation obtains because of a national aversion to “the intolerable reality” of its circumstances and a preference for “maya, the shimmer of illusion” rather than because of the structures of the international literary marketplace.

The earliest responses to Rushdie’s work make a different, but related, distinction between a modernist fable, presumed “universal” temporally and geographically in spite of its generic affiliations, and the “Indian” fable, located in a specific political and literary history and intermixed with elements of Eastern myth and legend. Very few Western publications examined any more particular contexts for *Midnight’s Children*, even though many reviews emphasized its engagement with political history and critique. The few pieces that explore such topics appeared in literary journals: these, like the comments in Indian publications, do not so much revise the dominant tropes of metropolitan journalism as they articulate the object “India” in at least some detail. Robert Towers, in the September 24, 1981, *New York Review of Books*, leads with Rushdie’s “Muslim” background and orientation, which he contrasts with the “Hindu sensibility” of the novel. Maria Couto, in “*Midnight’s Children* and Parents: The Search for Indo-British Identity,” an extended analysis that appeared in *Encounter*, places Rushdie in the context of J. G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet* (1966–77), and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* (1975). After a substantial discussion of historical events, Couto analyzes Rushdie’s affinities with G. V. Desani’s *Hatterr*, noting the use of mixed languages and identities in both. Desani’s work “is a kind of testament of the self questioning of a whole layer of Indian society in the post-colonial world,” Couto observes, though *Hatterr* shows Desani’s generational difference from Rushdie’s in being “[t]he more Anglicized, the less ‘Indo,’ so to speak.”

Reviews in English-language Indian publications pay more attention to the religious and cultural content of the work but similarly concentrate on its technique in relation to an Indian subject matter rather than to any national literary milieu. Features and interviews do not treat Rushdie as a native author in any direct sense. “He does not feel like an ‘Indian novelist,’” reports the *Times of India* in a November 1981 interview. The interviewer notes that the author does not write in his “mother tongue,” Urdu, but praises the novel’s “remarkable Indian-ness.” In a review that ran in the same paper a month later, N. J. Nanporia is made somewhat uneasy by the combination of metafictional techniques and subject matter, despite his overall praise of the novel. “The technique is the hero, but what is it in aid of?” Nanporia asks.
He questions whether the narrative’s perceptual experiments “add up” to “the Indian reality,” especially when they represent large historical events, “hardly truths that demand magical perception.”

In its review feature, which, like Nanporia’s, appeared after the novel had been lauded by the New York and the London Times, India Today labels Midnight’s Children unique in “Indo-Anglian writing” and calls it “a sort of Bombay-based World according to Garp” (1978), a tragicomic novel by the American John Irving. More than many English and American reviewers, Sunil Sethi points to the “magic” that results from Saleem’s mixture of “fact, fiction, and fantasy”; the protagonist is an “Indian Scheherazade” who tells stories with the same energy that he devotes to making pickles. But Sethi also calls the novel’s conclusion, in which India disintegrates in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s 1977 declaration of Emergency, “one of the most ferocious indictments of India’s evolution since Independence.”

And a sidebar interview with Rushdie calls attention to the novel’s “Muslim soul-searching,” an affiliation rarely mentioned in any British and American articles.

One of the few comments to place Rushdie in any sort of national literary context appeared in India West. This reviewer, like Sethi, responds to Western reactions to the novel. After acknowledging Rushdie’s affinities with European writers such as Grass, Celine, and Kafka, the reviewer takes issue with the New York Times Review of Books’ proclamation that novel promises to “redraw the literary map of India.” “This may be too far-fetched,” the reviewer asserts:

The fact remains that India’s literary map has already been redrawn with masterful Indian strokes by the genius of R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Which is not to deny the strong streak of original genius that is clearly the hallmark of Midnight’s Children. I am, of course, referring only to English language writers (otherwise known as Indo-Anglian writers) whose mirror reflects only a marginal section of India.

Interestingly, the review also praises Rushdie’s prose for opposing “literary and academic conventions” with a “fierce, sputtering, brawling” work that represents “a modern India.” In doing so, the novelist aims to “burst out, to launch between the tired and tiring gestures of Indo-Anglian novelists such as Balwant Gargi, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhawala, and Anita Desai.”

The dominance of the British canon, leavened with some internationalism, is evident in Rushdie’s own descriptions of the novel at the time of its publication. Interestingly, in the interview that accompanies Sethi’s review in India Today, Rushdie himself places his book “in a very definite English tradi-
tion, that of Swift, Sterne and Dickens”; he also mentions as influences Latin American and German writers such as Grass and Thomas Mann. He refers to the novel’s commonality with “Indian literature” not through any contemporary work in other languages, but rather through “[its] interest in myth and fable and story-telling.” When the interviewer asks whether *Midnight’s Children* was aimed at this audience “exclusively,” the author admits that he expected that it would be “more popular” in the West. He is surprised, he says, that subcontinental readers have been interested in a novel that he was afraid might seem “condescending” to them in its explanations of familiar references.

The scholarship on *Midnight’s Children* that emerged rapidly and voluminously in the 1980s focused on similar topics, such as the relationship of the public and private in the recording of history, the reader response encoded in Padma’s challenges to Saleem’s story, and the narrative registers of truth. Critics were eager to put the novel in a cosmopolitan and European literary lineage as well as a mythic-legendary one, usually received as a generalized “Eastern” reference. The work’s relation to *The Tin Drum* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Tristram Shandy* dominates the decade’s scholarly reception. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the transactions of fact and figure, history and legend, the use of national allegory, and the critique of realism become central concerns. But the formalist and political-historical emphasis of most of this criticism—particularly in the 1980s—favored European literary genealogy and cultural references even as scholars asserted the narrative’s exemplary cross-cultural status, postcolonial critique of nationalism, emphasis on reader response, and use of distancing techniques. In contrast to this strain, early essays by Uma Parameswaran, Wimal Dissanayake, and John Stephens insisted on Rushdie’s links to Indian national writers in English such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. Parameswaran emphasized the relationship of *Midnight’s Children* to *Grimus* as well as to Rushdie’s earlier stories. Articles that treat myth and legend as a significant “Indian” or subcontinental connection assume this status without much acknowledgement of mediation. Nancy E. Batty, for instance, in the “The Art of Suspense: Rushdie’s 1,001 (Mid-)Nights,” concentrates on the links between the “desperate political acts” of Saleem and Scheherazade with reference to John Barth’s use of the allusion in *Chimera* (1972), but gives no contextualization of *A Thousand and One Nights*, other than reference to the Burton translation, cited as a 1923 edition; C. Kanaganayakam’s “Myth and Fabulosity in *Midnight’s Children*” draws a topical continuity between Rushdie and older Indian national writers in English while casting myth as a “backdrop of . . . timelessness” in diachronic relation to twentieth-century
fragmentation, and the fabulous as the synchronic axis of “different modes of perception.” “Magic realism” as a vehicle for politicized myth appears in a 1985 essay by Jean-Pierre Durix. In 1988, Stephen Slemon analyzes the term—coined in 1925 by Francis Roh to describe postexpressionist painting, and applied beginning in the 1940s to Latin American narratives—in relation to its then-recent use to describe literatures in English. “In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny or the marvelous,” Slemon asserts. Still he argues for its usefulness in articulating a “post-colonial context,” for “the magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle within the culture’s language” that is never resolved.

The Somatopsychic Corpus and Āyurvedic Medicine

Midnight’s Children soon came to be heralded for its Barthesian “openness” as a text. Rushdie himself has frequently noted that his subcontinental audiences tended to understand the novel as descriptive of history or reality while cosmopolitan readers responded to its technique as “fabulous.” Though the early reception does not suggest such a division, it does show that both Rushdie and his first audiences understood Midnight’s Children primarily through an Anglo-British or cosmopolitan framework, not as a bellwether of expansive reader-response or a singular emblem of Indian literary identity. Such reactions emerged more gradually, as subcontinental readers enjoyed the confident exuberance with which Rushdie commandeered English to his own ends. Even in this identification audiences cast Rushdie in a Joycean cosmopolitan mode, in which a provincial content is worked over by a metropolitan aesthetic.

To establish the cultural credentials of the novel, Rushdie, like Joyce, calls on classical tradition and other media: oral epics, originating in legend, myth, and religious texts; visual media such as painting and popular film; culinary arts. Asked about the novel’s use of the epics the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Sanskrit animal fables and aphorisms that comprise the Panchatandara (100 BC–AD 500), Rushdie replies that the oral epic seemed the “inescapable” vehicle of the Indian novel because of its flexibility and cultural ubiquity. Implicitly, these forms also accommodate “a reality in which the idea of the miraculous is all absolute truth” to the extent that “the miraculous and the everyday coexist.” Reviews as well as scholarly criticism noted or examined
but infrequently questioned the installation of “Indianness” through these quintessential signifiers, embedded in a history teeming with particulars largely unfamiliar to Western readers: Aijaz Ahmad influentially asserted that Rushdie’s captured “Indianness” through the multitudinous form of orature. As scholarly attention moved from endorsement of *Midnight’s Children* as the epitome of postcolonial literature and poststructural displacement to assertion of its “Third World cosmopolitanism,”71 hybridity, or syncretism, and finally to condemnation of its easily consumed exoticism,72 few critics paused to examine the more nuanced cultural and religious, rather than macro political and historical, contexts that inform the novel’s central conceit.73 Timothy Brennan’s configuration of a self-aware, critical cosmopolitanism provides a starting point for such an analysis. I elaborate on it by grounding the novel’s engagement with belief formations as a foundation of the novel’s insider-outsider position. In this I disagree with Brennan’s contention that Rushdie “superficial[ly] engage[s]” with “disposable genres” even as I elaborate on his observation that the author in his early fame “wrapped himself in the mantle of filiative authenticity.”74 Interpretations of *Midnight’s Children*, even those that in recent years have articulated the novel’s insider-outsider posture, have not treated the specific spiritual-somatic framework of Saleem’s materialized agency. In this vein, Kumkum Sangari has noted Rushdie’s quick appropriation by a metropolitan postmodernism: “From this decontextualizing vantage point various formal affinities can easily be abstracted from a different mode of cognition; the nonmimetic can be read as antimimetic, difference can easily be made the excuse for sameness,” she observes.75 Bishnupriya Ghosh has argued for Rushdie’s inauguration of a “new kind of Indian vernacular” that must be situated in “contextual knowledges.”76

I base my analysis on the situated practices that fund the text of *Midnight’s Children*. Though many critics have examined the truth-status of Saleem’s embodiment, its predicates have not often been questioned. Rather, they have been given, like both the postmodernity and the authenticity presumed early in the novel’s popular and academic careers. Perhaps most significantly, the “self” that the novel is imagined to displace is an individual unquestionably equated with “the” subject-agent. Clifford Geertz illuminates the cultural specificity of the universalized “self” assumed as the ground of postmodern dislocation when he separates the concept of the “individual” from other formulations of the person: “The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may
seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.” Rushdie in fact revises the individual as the axiomatic subject, agent, and bodily habitus—not merely through poststructuralist dissolution or fragmentation, but also, perhaps more fundamentally, through the techniques of materialization, porosity, and movement drawn from spiritualized medicine. Midnight’s Children sets the clinical-ethnographic gaze against the speech of the indigenous patient who insists on the bodily reality of his spiritual distress. Resistance to clinical scrutiny, a consequence of the leaden opacity of Joyce’s drunkards, is the active project of Rushdie’s first-person narrator, who claims to be dissolving as a result of an illness that does not register as an organic disease. Saleem purports to embody a country born into an analogous dilemma: though India “has five thousand years of history” it is “nevertheless quite imaginary.”

The story begins with his putative grandfather, a Kashmiri Muslim recently returned from medical training in Germany. Through Aadam Aziz, the novel immediately installs medicine as the primary discourse of historiography and offers two hermeneutics of physical distress as competing epistemologies. They in fact dramatize a dynamic of contemporary Indian subjects. The objective standard of European history, aligned with a psychologized subject who must exhibit externally measurable signs of organic disease to qualify as sick, competes with the somatized experience of chronic distress, tacitly aligned with traditional medicine. Thus while Dubliners encapsulates communal Irish illness through a chronic drunkenness that resists the external reading that would classify it, Midnight’s Children metafictionally plays with Indian illness as a possibly imagined condition, associated with mental rather than physical disease and contrasted comically with the superstitions of provincial characters. According to the Western clinical medicine that is part of Saleem’s heritage, and to which he claims to ascribe, his “illness” must be judged as highly subjective, psychosomatic, or delusional. The narrator himself equates organic disease with fact, clinical anatomy, Western history, and literary realism, and illness with figure, “psychosomatic” pain, nativist tradition, and myth at the same time that he argues for the actual, material operation of his historical-spiritual plight.

Typically, Saleem maintains this rhetorical and epistemic binary by denying it—the “literal” is “not metaphorical” but “reality” can contain “metaphor” and still be “true.” He articulates this hermeneutic when he describes the founding of the Midnight’s Children Conference, shortly after his tenth birthday. Saleem uses his newly discovered telepathy to convene an ad hoc “parliament” that represents the utopian promise of a just, democratic, and cooperative government for the young nation-state. “Don’t make the mis-
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I have stated before that I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written . . . is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother’s-head truth. Reality can have a metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight’s children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view; they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. No, illness is neither here nor there. (197)

*Midnight’s Children* supports the conflation of psychic and physical vocabularies by realizing the metaphor as substantial—a characteristic treatment of emotion in a Hindu devotional framework—and by using somatization as a legitimate, culture-bound idiom of distress, as well as a source of comedy. When, in the present-tense narrative, Dr. Baligga is summoned, the story draws attention to the invisibility of Saleem’s cracks as objectified signs rather than as narratable symptoms. Saleem calls him a “ju-ju man” and a “green-medicine wallah,” but Dr. Baligga, like Saleem’s putative grandfather, Aadam Aziz, is a clinical physician. “Believe this if you can: the fraud has pronounced me whole!” the protagonist recounts indignantly. “I see no cracks,” [the doctor] intoned mournfully. . . . Blindly, he impugned my state of mind, cast doubts on my reliability as a witness, and Godknowswhat else: ‘I see no cracks’” (66). Through the tendency to fuse what clinical medicine separates into organic and psychic distress, Vedic and other somatopsychic protocols act as the foundation of Saleem’s semiotic. The protagonist’s distress is not psychosomatic or figurative, according to these predicates. Through the conception of another epistemology of the body, his “illness” actually points to the ignored and suppressed metaphoric or culturally inflected content of an “objective” idiom of pain.

Rushdie repeatedly calls attention to the exchange of the “literal” and “metaphoric” in order to suggest their implication in one another, a relation that is transactional and catalytic. Between the stated registers of clinical and
folkloric-mythic, objective and subjective, realistic and fantastic, *Midnight’s Children* represents a substantial body in which psychic and physical states are intertwined and separations among subjects, as well as between bodies and their environments, are highly permeable. To establish this conceit, the novel draws on the conceptual framework of the Āyurveda, a traditional Hindu medicine connected to the spiritual philosophy of the Vendanta. Vedic medicine tends to understand “internal” states as substances that flow between objects and bodies. Saleem’s claims are not subjective in the individual sense, as they result from collective premises, and they are not merely psychic, as they totalize the emotional and the physical to express a chronic global distress. The “subtle” and the “gross,” or physical, bodies posited by Vedic medicine constantly encapsulate reason and sentiment in each structure: the *manas*, the mind or heart, of the subtle body, for instance, is located in the heart, regarded as the seat of judgment as well as feeling. Such vocabularies challenge not only the division of body and mind, individual and community, but also the formulation of “emotion” as a foundational category, representing events that are made rather than given and that vary culturally as much as any other phenomena.

*Midnight’s Children* parallels *Dubliners* in imagining the organic disease of the individual as the somatopsychic illness of the community, located in but not confined to the exemplary male corpus. According to Kleinman, in the somatopsychic mode, “‘feeling’ is expressed and interpreted more subtly, indirectly, globally, superficially and above all somatically” than is typical in cultures that strictly demarcate physical and mental distress. In Saleem, Rushdie combines the grotesque Rabelaisian body of Western literature with transactional and somatopsychic bodies. The oscillation between these models realizes a distinctive “Indian” conception of the person, allied with Hindu understandings, traumatized and fathered by imperial history, and applied to a singular Muslim protagonist beset with a prophetic mission. The Āyurveda, like many traditional medicines, is embedded in a somatic psychology, in which sentiment is understood primarily as physical and fluid, and in a spiritual and moral philosophy that conceives of the body-self or person as highly interactive with its social and metaphysical contexts. Based on a doctrine of humors or energies, Āyurvedic theory presents disease as a disturbance of bodily balance, exemplified by *prana*, or the life force: physical, spiritual, and mental health are indivisible, and physical well-being impossible, without spiritual harmony. Given these premises, the “mental” disturbance that Saleem experiences appears as a humoral imbalance that equally affects his physical being. His belief is not merely expressive; it is constitutive.
Unlike the autonomous, highly bounded individual that Geertz describes, the person posited in this hermeneutic is tenuously bounded and coterminal with multiple milieus. A body, which is as much a social and metaphysical as a private and organic domain, must consequently be protected through codes that govern hygiene, diet, and social interaction. McKim Marriott describes the premises of the individual, as contrasted with those of the Hindu formulation: “[Western] persons . . . are postulated as being normally self-reflexive (‘individuals,’ having identity with and being sufficient to themselves), and as symmetrical (equal), and transitive (consistent) in their relations with one another. ‘Individuals’ are indivisible, integrated, and self-developing units, not normally subject to disjunction or reconstitution. Given such units, interpersonal influences, inequalities, and changes have to be brought in as external factors or pathologies.” In contrast, “[t]he Hindu postulations of mixing, unmarking and unmatching instead assert that persons are in various degrees nonreflexive (not necessarily identical with or otherwise related only to themselves), nonsymmetrical (not necessarily equal) and nontransitive (not necessarily consistent) in their relations. They emphasize that persons are composite and divisible (what one might better call ‘dividuals’) and that interpersonal relations in the world are generally irregular and fluid.”

Intermediate processes, rather than dichotomous states, are “basic” to these experiential conceptions.

In drawing attention to these different understandings, I do not suggest that Vedic philosophy, or the person that the novel represents through it, lacks a psychology, any more than I imply that somatization does not occur in Western contexts that assume an organic, measurable basis of a true “disease,” in Kleinman’s terms. Rather I point to the historical and cultural inflection of the Western epistemology of pain, in which psychology and affect are separated discursively and experientially, as they are not in somatopsychic expression or the spiritually embedded body of the “dividual” produced by Hindu understanding. As Kleinman observes, chronic pain syndromes are less prevalent in the Western hermeneutic than they were before the Victorian middle class began to elaborate a psychological conception of pain. He notes: “It is quite possible that this psychological idiom, one of Western culture’s most powerful self-images, is the personal concomitant of the societal process of rationalization that Max Weber saw as modernism’s leading edge . . . . From the Weberian perspective, the conception and experience of ‘affect’ among the middle classes is culturally shaped as ‘deep’ psychological experience and rationalized into discretely labeled emotions (depression, anxiety, anger) that were previously categorized and felt principally as bodily experiences.” Thus, for
instance, when Saleem states that his Aunt Alia poisoned his family by serving food infused with her bitterness (395), his claim can be read as a concrete, “magical” representation of an abstracted, hostile affect, and such a reading accompanies the image. The juxtaposition calls attention to the psychological or social “climate” created by the aunt’s hostility as an equally metaphoric understanding of mind-body and social relations, whose premises resemble the rationalization Kleinman describes. In similar instances, the boatman Tai’s derisive remarks “infect” the young Aziz with “insidious venom,” filling him “with insects” (22–23); years later, his wife’s “invasion” of her daughter’s dreams discloses secret affection for a man (60). Each description exemplifies the novel’s tendency to render emotions conventionally regarded as psychic and abstract as concrete events. These depictions highlight the figurative quality of the “real” vocabulary of emotion as insubstantial and equally arbitrary. They also play upon the body’s recapitulation of the cosmos and its metaphysical principles through symbolic correlations as well as actual materials. For instance, the three corporeal energies—vayu (air or wind), pitha (fire or bile), and kapha (water or phlegm)—correspond to those that animate the universe, as well as to the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who personify creation, preservation, and destruction. Tissues, which form the physiological system and correlate with various limbs and organs, must be balanced with the humors. Such correspondences link Alia’s bitterness to bile, Tai’s anger to venom, Saleem’s body to universal matter and energy.

_Midnight’s Children_ uses Vedic protocols not only to complement and converse with the “individual” and the realist codes for representing it, but also to synthesize allusions and contexts for a diverse corporate subject. The porous and recapitulative capacities of the Vedic corpus allow the narrative to open and recode Muslim patriarchy while positing Muslim Indian centrality. Rushdie thus renders concrete the allusive tissues of _Ulysses_, by taking the syncretic capacities of bodies inflected with spiritual significance to emplot a Muslim family: its originary “Aadam” spills three drops of blood, echoing the Qu’ran, when he attempts to pray and subsequently loses his belief. Later Saleem’s telepathy, caused by the impacted phlegm that moistens his brain when he is startled by witnessing his mother’s sexuality, allows for his association not only with the capacities of an omniscient, metafictional narrator, but also with Vedic fluids and tissues, with the receptivity of the prophet Muhammad to God’s voice, and with the technological figure for linguistic transmission and exchange, All-India Radio. Midway through his chronicle, Saleem calls attention to the complex modes of interpretation that led him to see himself as a prophet-leader. “How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of the nation?” he asks. He
then responds: “I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively . . . actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world” (285–86). Each mode relates to an incident from his youth as Saleem endows metaphoric figure with concrete incident and bodily experience. His scientific “modes of connection” satirize the elaborate charts of Vedic medicine and cosmology, which replicate the multiple social and cosmic environments that comprise the discrete body, as well as his technological abilities. The modes also justify Saleem’s exegetical practice and support his understanding of leadership through the model of Muhammad.

The medical idiom for the spiritual-historical character of twentieth-century India thus attempts to encompass religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural plurality as the ultimate value of the nation-state while it points to a culturally particular depiction of the person. These ideas continue to inform representations of identity in popular culture. Christopher Pinney finds similar codes of embodiment in contemporary Indian regional photography, which shows “widespread . . . acceptance of the transience of the body and its status as a contingent receptacle for the soul.” Pinney attributes certain visual practices to the comparative weakness of cultural understandings of corporeality as expressive substance: “Because the visible is not deemed to be anchored—in most cases—by an invisible realm of character (for there is usually a distinction between the two), the external body is freed from the constraints with which it is shackled in the Western tradition of painted portraiture. What can be captured [according to the popular Indian aesthetic] is a person’s general physiognomy rather than the face as a trace of the interior character.” In Western individualism, the discounted third term—Pinney calls it “character”—globally diffuses a particular, intimate ipseity that mediates between agent and vehicle and is elided from the topography of psychic-corporeal space that visibly expresses it. In Midnight’s Children, which discounts the primacy of the visible symptom of illness, the corporate qualities of the protagonist allude to this “detachability” of the “self” from the “body” not through exchange, but rather through absorption of multiple subjectivities; not through visual, but rather through audible, registration.

Saleem absorbs others primarily as voices and as fluids, mechanisms that privilege Muslim prophecy and Vedic humors. McKim Marriott notes that Hinduism often characterizes the experiential world “as ‘that which is moving’ (jagat) and as a ‘flowing together’ (Samsāra).” As a “malleable substance,” the environment is “constantly moving in and out” of the persons it also constitutes. Rushdie’s protagonist is accordingly a “swallower of lives” who “leaks history” (11, 4). Holes in bodies function as central images of injury
and historical loss, as well as invitation and incorporation, throughout the novel. Orifices act as sites of interaction and heightened vulnerability in a form that Saleem repeatedly calls “grotesque” (57, 106, 335, 405, 431). Bodily apertures afford somatic exchange through failed sexual relations, through veiling, and through injury. In the same chapter that Aziz is begging Nas- eem to move during sex, a practice associated with discarding tradition, the fluid hole merges with the failure of clinical medicine to heal the wounds of imperial violence, represented by General Dyer’s massacre of peaceful Indian protestors at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. When Aadam Aziz returns to his lodg- ings in Amritsar on April 7, five days before the attack, he is covered in mer- curochrome, or “red medicine,” which his new wife mistakes for blood (35). The doctor has been treating victims of the unrest provoked by Gandhi’s decla- ration of hartal, a day of mourning—traditionally over a death—as a pro- test against British rule. As Saleem recounts, when Aziz again returned home covered in red on April 12, “my grandmother[,] . . . trying hard to be a mod- ern woman, to please him[,] . . . did not turn a hair at his appearance. ‘I see you’ve been spilling the Mercurochrome again, clumsy,’ she said, appeasingly. ‘It’s blood,’ he replied, and she fainted” (37). In contrast to the “green medi- cine” that signifies fraudulent potions to Saleem, “red medicine” designates the authentic, clinical antidote as a “curative” for political protest as well: Aziz uses his bag of European medicine to treat the injuries that the Raj wantonly inflicts.

Alcohol serves as similarly unstable and particularly absorptive agent of history that also dissolves entities, as Ahmed Sinai’s plot dramatizes. The required daily English cocktail hour at Methwold Estates continues after Inde- pendence, at the same time that Saleem’s father invests in a land reclamation scheme. It recalls the East India Company’s 1688 joining of the seven islands that compose Bombay, a repetition of the ancestral Methwold’s “dream of a British Bombay.” According to Saleem, Ahmed “fell . . . into the twin fantasies which were to be his undoing, into the unreal world of the djinns and of the land beneath the sea” (92). Both efforts to “reclaim” the nation through the new state result in his defeat, as liquor and water embody the emerging bour- geoisie’s fantasy of mastering the past by compulsively repeating it. Though Saleem calls Ahmed’s chronic drinking “alcoholism,” his use of the device of the djinns emphasizes the practice as a “war” with externalized agents as well as a childhood interpretation of the “bottled spirits” contained in the glass that consumes the drinker (131). Set together, the figures show the metapho- ricity of psychological struggle and conflict even as they represent the over- whelming physical grip of liquor on the drinker.
Metonymic Production and Mythic Authority

The “Indian myth” that served as an aesthetic and professional touchstone for Rushdie and as a critical one for his academic reception obscures the ingenious and complicated ways in which the novel negotiates subcontinental identity. By using bodily idioms embedded in spiritual understandings, the novel realizes a performative person from the sedimentary material of Western objectivity and the dynamism of Indian spirituality. Yet the Herderian notion of an essential myth, so deftly challenged in the depiction of the new nation-state, resists dismantling as a characterization of the author. Rushdie’s own feelings of rootlessness or multiple roots, and his description of his “migrant” identity, chime in significant respects with his textual India: “The migrated self became, inevitably, heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, belonging to more than one place, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being. . . . Was it possible to be . . . not rootless, but multiply rooted?” he asks in his memoir.

Using similar terms, Saleem asserts that the body seems “[i]ndivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will” and yet, he notes, “a human being inside himself is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichting are jumbled up inside him” (230–31). Saleem’s heterogeneous corpus conflates a historical Indian subject with the psychological and physical situation of its migrant author, making his confusions substantial. Midnight’s Children “works through” the authority of the “outsider” writer to inhabit the subcontinental body in such exchanges. Its modes of production and reproduction finally privilege a textual India over the spiritual embodiment connected to it. The holes that serve as conduits for the flow of substances and for the signification of neocolonial lack also open an insider position for the outsider author. These gaps manifest the “anxiety of Indianness” that marked Indian novels in English, according to Mukherjee, who contrasts their tone and focus to that of bhasha writers in older Indian languages.

The multivalent opening acts as a crucial element in generation because Saleem’s families are created through incorporation rather than through sex. Gaps in the “body” of history allow for these births and acquisitions. Though he recounts two generations of family history as if they composed his biological ancestry, Saleem eventually reveals that he was switched with another midnight’s child just after his birth: “[W]hen we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found out that it made no difference!” Saleem proclaims. “I was still their son: they remained my parents” (117). Such confusions allow Rushdie to claim British and Indian, rich and poor, as well as
Christian, Hindu, and Muslim “parents” for Saleem; the text imagines an affective community that does not rest on the bond of “blood” or on the phallus as the master signifier of community. Saleem’s status as a masculine embodiment of the nation-state is also constantly lampooned and vitiated through his failure to fulfill the conventional functions of national paternity. The novel’s subversion of an organic reproductive logic, like the conceit of an absorptive subject-agent, mitigates the obvious patriarchal cast of Rushdie’s embodiment of India as male and recalls the feminine grotesque as opposed to the closed and classical Western form.

The romances that produce an affective family generate totality from the metonymic fragments. Both men and women project fantasies of fulfillment and emotional completion onto “parts” of others in order to fall in love. This dynamic plays a role in the attraction of Aadam Aziz to his wife Naseem, in their daughter Mumtaz’s acceptance of her second husband, Ahmed (who renames her Amina, an allusion to the wife of Muhammad), and finally in Saleem’s incestuous love for his sister Jamila, who comes to represent Pakistan. As the founding colonial romance, the relationship of Aziz and Naseem illustrates the interpenetration of national birth and future demise that characterizes the plot of all three pairings. Aziz falls in love with Naseem through a sheet with a hole cut in the middle, an opening that allows him to inspect the part of her body that is “ill” or pained. Her father’s insistence on this modesty is belied by the constancy of his weekly summons for the doctor. Though she remains headless for most of the three years that he is treating her, “[t]his phantasm of a partitioned woman” haunts Aziz, who “come[s] to think of the perforated sheet as something sacred and magical because through it he had seen things which had filled up the hole inside him which had been created when he had been hit on the nose by a tussock and insulted by the boatman Tai” (26, 27–28). That is, the fantasy of Naseem replaces Aziz’s lost faith and his severed connection to “traditional” Kashmir. The practice of purdah suggested by the sheet describes the ambivalent effects of this metonymic projection, as the beloved inevitably fails to fulfill the lover’s desire for cohesion and wholeness.

Saleem’s “fictional” genealogy repeats the metonymic movement of romantic desire through enabling misrecognition. Midnight’s Children treats this mode of production as the spur to literary and national genesis as well as the flaw that dooms Saleem to dismemberment and disintegration. Though the author unflaggingly champions Indian pluralism as a creative, ethical, and political value, he also relentlessly illustrates its fatal consequences. Plural absorption is an absolute value in the narrative, as any “immunity” is aligned with a rigid desire for purity, located in religious and ethnic nationalisms,
and with monotheism. Not invasive disease, but rather any measure of self-protection, is cast as the true destroyer of the nation's character, through its alliance with essentialism, parochialism, dictatorship, and historical amnesia. Immunity can eradicate the idea of India, while the “illness” of decomposition obliterates only one body, one subject, in Rushdie’s gloss. “The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair,” Rushdie observes in “Imaginary Homelands.” “But the story is told in a manner designed to echo . . . the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it ‘teems.’ The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy.” In this formulation the author suppresses Saleem’s allegorical function and corporate capacities as a Vedic embodiment by separating and opposing terms that the narrative insistently joins: Saleem’s personal tragedy is precisely India’s political one. Yet here Rushdie instead relies on the vehicle of his chronicle to deliver the “optimistic counterweight” to the apocalypse suggested by the novel’s conclusion. The fecundity of artistic form, in this gloss, and the perspective of mythic time, in the narrative, substitute for an embodiment of history, placeholders for reimagining India.

Midnight’s Children departs from Vedic philosophy in refusing this permeable embodied subject any protection. Instead Rushdie portrays body-memory as the antidote to the nation’s dissolution. The anatomical basis of memory informs his use of Vedic principles, which support a corpus compromised by historical trauma. In treating memory as the privileged antidote to an annihilating destruction, the narrative draws on nativist conceptions of remembrance as anatomically encoded and intimately connected to modes of perception and knowledge. According to Dieter Riemenschneider, recollection is “the central epistemological category of the novel,” aligned with Hindu cosmology. Certain Hindu and Buddhist philosophies portray perception itself as constituted in part by memory; for instance, attention, feeling, and volition, which are among the “universal” forms of consciousness, are informed by “particular” mental acts such as memory, concentration, and wisdom, according to Vasubandhu’s Buddhist treatise, the Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi. Not only learning in the general sense, but also self-knowledge, is connected to memory. But in spite of these somatic and cultural resonances, recollection suffers from the same split that the allegory of the somatopsychic corpus does: the author abandons this foundation as well when he allows the body-memory to survive as the Indian text alone.

Though phallic reproduction is not entirely necessary to India’s genesis, the phallic pen is essential to its survival. The metonymic pen allows the author’s imaginary India to endure while the central conceit of the Vedic body
breaks down into dualisms. The pickle-phallus emphasizes Saleem’s agency as a masculine writer and a “master” of the sheet linked to metonymic desire. This compensatory but ultimately triumphant formulation is evident when Saleem speculates that his auditor Padma has grown weary of his textual power and sexual impotence. He asks:

Is it possible to be jealous of written words? To resent nocturnal scribblings as if they were the very flesh and blood of a sexual rival? I can think of no other reason for Padma’s bizarre behaviour; . . . . Distressed, perhaps, by the futility of her midnight attempts to resuscitate my ‘other pencil,’ the useless cucumber hidden in my pants, she has been waxing grouchy. (121)

Saleem claims mastery over the sheet that dominated his grandfather, Aziz, by reversing the sexual roles: Padma is “spellbound” by his tale in progress just as his grandfather was mesmerized by the vision of a partitioned woman. Shaul Bassi contends that while magic realism has served to “demystify hegemonic discourses, its metonymic relationship to the ‘fantastic’ involves a dangerous proximity to the code of romance, which . . . was a key genre in the construction of an imaginary India.” It is Rushdie’s great skill to have generated metonymic production from his own belated romance with India; its operation allows him to claim the India from which he has long been separated by time, distance, and choice. In “Imaginary Homelands,” he describes the novel’s genesis in the idiom of reclamation and discovery, rather than as an expression of a suppressed identity. On a return trip to India after the failure of *Grimus*, the author conceived of the novel about his childhood home: “Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim.” In the essay, as in the novel, metonymy acts as the primary mechanism of narrative, somatic, and political production, for India can be represented and embodied only through fragments. Just as the author, returning “almost” a foreigner to Bombay, “reclaim[s]” history without the continuing connection of residence, so does the nation-state emerge from fragmentary provinces and regions rather than from the “organic” evolution of the European political formation.

I contend that Rushdie’s personal and professional relationship to India necessitates the novel’s unilateral privileging of Saleem’s openness. The image of the migrant as a “fragment” of India corresponds to the narrative metonymy of the novel’s central conceit, produced by a fusion of multiple contexts. Migrancy appears in *Midnight’s Children* not only through the figure of Aziz,
the doctor-grandfather of the modern nation who also returns to India almost a foreigner, but most significantly through the absolute porousness of the Indian territorial “body.” Though the metonymic dynamic, the author finds a narrative locus within the body he found almost foreign. In the same essay, Rushdie notes that his distance from India as he composed the novel also shaped his choice of mode: “Writing my book in North London, looking out through my window on to a city scene totally unlike the ones I was describing, I was constantly plagued by this problem, until I felt obliged to face it in the text, to make clear that . . . what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory.” Beginning with *Shame*, the migrant becomes a prominent figure in Rushdie’s work, but *Midnight’s Children* installs migrancy in the Indian body itself, generated from parts that excite imaginative and erotic desire. The dream of India, rendered concrete in Saleem’s dissolution, dies as a result of this genesis. Though as always, the text offers other interpretations of its conclusion—the protagonist may be delusional, the nation may be reborn in the next mythical reincarnation—the conceit of the metonymically created, Vedic-inflected body as the vehicle of the nation-state bears too much weight to be resolved into mere individual fantasy or an abstracted mythic temporality.

Saleem’s phallic, “pickled” pen acts as the nexus of exchange between the Vedic national and the textual migrant. *Midnight’s Children* attempts to compensate for the premature foreclosure of the “actual” imaginary nation by preserving the text of memory as the “real” imaginary home. While Saleem’s inability to reproduce biologically fits with the metaphor of national genesis from organically unrelated parts, the survival of his phallic pen, in the preservation of the text, at the expense of the incorporative, grotesque body, points to the particular gendering of the somatopsychic body as male and the value of porosity as circumscribed not just by univocality but also by the writer’s need to assert the primacy of his textual India over the embodiment of the subcontinent and its writers. The position of migrancy that Rushdie explicitly acknowledges in subsequent novels, beginning with the justification of the distant writer’s authority over the subcontinent in *Shame*, fundamentally shapes the conceit and dynamics of *Midnight’s Children*. “Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! . . . Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority!” hostile Pakistani versions of Padma say, deriding the narrator of *Shame*. To which he replies: “[I]s history to be considered the property of the participants solely?” In *Midnight’s Children*, the religious inflection of the subcontinental body allows for authorial inclusion in the Hinduized, absorptive Muslim corpus; this figure must be sacrificed
not only to the Emergency enforced by Indira Gandhi, but also to the necessity of claiming authority for the writer who is “almost” a foreigner to the body that he imaginatively occupies.

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“[I]t has become virtually impossible to look back at Midnight’s Children from the late nineties without seeing the novel through the filter of events of the last fifteen years,” writes Josna Rege. “It is hard to remember, or even acknowledge, the enthusiasm with which its publication was greeted in India.” Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee recounts, “It seemed to me then, as it must have seemed to many, that it was a landmark novel, attempting in a dangerously adventurous manner to stretch the possibilities of narrative fiction in general and of what could be done with Indian material in the English language in particular.” Rege and Mukherjee epitomize the initial reaction of many who experienced the novel not so much as a thoroughly “Indian” one as an assertion of Indian confidence, boldness, and originality in a literary language that seemed moribund. The Satanic Verses controversy, but also Rushdie’s career and celebrity status, India’s subsequent history, and the maturing of critical reception have all contributed to the change in this assessment, at the same time that critics such as Rege acknowledge the salutary effect that the novel had on Indo-Anglian literary production.

My aim in this return to Rushdie’s “origins” in the metropolitan marketplace has been to show the ways in which his cosmopolitan location was altered through his embrace of the object “India” as a subject matter and the centrality of modern myth to his authenticity as a national insider. Harish Trivedi refers to a report that Martin Amis once asked Rushdie what he had that Amis did not; Rushdie replied, “India.” Whether one interprets such a reply cynically or not, Rushdie’s turn from the allegorical myth of Grimus—a work that he also characterized as an attempt to take “a theme out of eastern philosophy or mythology and . . . transpos[e] it into a western convention”—to an allegorical myth grounded in the subcontinental body, altered his profile and status utterly. Certainly Rushdie’s success resulted to some degree from his occupation and display of a nativist body, even though no one, either reviewers or Rushdie himself, initially installed him as an unproblematically “Indian” writer. As I have shown, this transformation took place quickly as a result of popular and literary-critical success—particularly in the West, where he came to exemplify “Indian literature,” and on the subcontinent, where he was seen as injecting the exuberance of contemporary Bombay cosmopolitanism into English language production. Uma Mahadevan-
Dasgupta recalls in a 2002 Indian Statesman: “[Midnight’s Children] showed me that it was possible to speak in English, in our own slangy, colloquial, masala-filled Indian English, about the important themes—history, pain, struggle, love, and humour.”

The sense of betrayal that accompanied Rushdie’s academic revision into a “diasporan” or even an “exoticist” writer appears as a function of a mode of reception that, as I hope I have shown, has largely failed to imagine more capacious or nuanced categories of identity: Western readers continue to prefer metonymies of provincial literatures, as they did with Joyce. Though the tension between writing “about” and writing “for” India was enormously productive for Rushdie, the structure of betrayal seems written into the script of an imaginary claim on embodiment through a Western, English-speaking literary public enchanted by the display of minority spiritual practices. Exposing such bodies repeats a modernist trajectory for the minority author that, I argue, Joyce epitomizes and that the metropolitan literary milieu continues to reward. The controversy over The Satanic Verses, which I discuss at length in chapter five, revealed a claim on a religious body that the author has made since Grimus. Its possession has been crucial to his own aesthetic, and its “myth” has acted as a critically unmediated Herderian signifier of Indian authenticity.

The shock that accompanied Rushdie’s comments in the June 23–30, 1997, issue of the New Yorker, in which he asserts the primacy of Indian literature in English over any production of the vernacular languages, reflects the permutations of his profile: these observations are only slightly more pointed than the ones he made at the Commonwealth Club in 1982, in which Rushdie barely mentioned any Indian literary tradition or contemporary context at all. In 1997 he mentions a number of writers in the “recognized” languages of the subcontinent, but concludes the list with the observation that “there is only one Indian writer in translation whom [he] would place on par with the Indo-Anglian”: the Urdu author Sadaat Hasan Manto, whom Rushdie compares with Joyce. But Rushdie precedes this somewhat measured statement—he is after all desiring the lack of English-language translations of these subcontinental authors—with the statement that the “new, and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.” Positioned by 1997 as himself the father of two generations of “Indian” writers, Rushdie here again asserts a cosmopolitan provenance. It should come as small surprise that the celebrated “Indian” novel was not translated into Hindi until that year, the fiftieth anniversary of independence.

I hope to have articulated the ways in which Midnight’s Children enacts spiritually inflected embodiment and hence depicts a person that genuinely
differs from that of the modern Western formulation of the “individual” as a subject-agent, even as this person catalyzes individualism. In the refashioning of Rushdie from a British to an Indian author, and even in the dismantling of this profile in wake of *The Satanic Verses* controversy and critical reassessments of his work, scholars have often assumed the cultural predicates of somatic representations. Early readings of the novel, dominantly Western and poststructuralist, neglected to examine the subject-agent that the narrative decenters. I have argued that the novel mobilizes at its base not just an assumed, default “individual,” but also a “person” produced through portrayal of proto-religious bodily practices and understandings. *Midnight’s Children* turns on the interplay between the conceit of a psychosomatically ill individual, fashioned as an autonomous agent funded by a deep psychic interior, and a person shaped by Vedic medicine and Hindu praxis, whose consciousness and sensations are more concrete and diffusely intermingled with internal and external contexts. The Vedic subject, with its implications for a particular somatic structure, agency, and relationship to the environment, registers presumptions about the person as material and actual and illuminates the metaphoric and relative nature of the “individual” as an historical embodiment. This argument shares the premise of cultural specificity with Alejo Carpentier’s 1949 conceptualization of the fantastic as an outgrowth of particular histories in Latin American literature. At the same time, the novel represents a specific mode of agency generated by spiritual practice and grounded in its epistemology. Finally, neither the magic realism that attached to the novel in its early academic reception nor the exoticism with which it was later charged adequately describes the text’s allegiances or the author’s professional profile. Rather than a “nativist” versus a “postmodernist,” or an authentic versus an exoticist reading, I suggest that these paradigms produce a contemporary Indian subject-agent, one in whom the tension between the national and migrant, the provincial and the cosmopolitan, Indian is less explicitly at play than they are in Rushdie’s later work. Such a procedure is not completely described as “othering,” but rather as performative. It narratively resolves the dilemma that Rushdie faced as a metropolitan writer voicing India, and that his later career brought to the forefront of his image. To designate such transnational identities, we as readers must delve beyond binaries that continue to govern the mechanisms of reception and their institutions, which have produced Rushdie himself as an anxious, metonymic body.