



Activity 2 – Language and atrocity

One characteristic of *Midnight's Children* that many readers find especially appealing is the richness of its prose, blending allusions to Bollywood film and literary and visual culture with the sound of the speaking voice – the sound of hundreds of different kinds of speaking voices. Rushdie explained in a 2006 introduction to the novel that he was trying to create 'a literary idiolect that allowed the rhythms and thought patterns of Indian languages to blend with the idiosyncrasies of "Hinglish" and "Bambaiyya", the polyglot street-slang of Bombay'.

But while one effect of the novel's special prose style is to transport the reader to another time and place, it also allows Rushdie to write about atrocity, violence and horror without plunging the narrative into political polemic. Consider the description of the massacre at Amritsar in the novel's second chapter. After a week of protests, Dr Adam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, has been busy tending to the wounded with mercurochrome (a red antiseptic solution). Hearing of a peaceful protest and fearing that 'there will be trouble', Aziz goes to see what he can do to help:

... A compound can be anything from a wasteland to a park. The largest compound in Amritsar is called Jallianwala Bagh. It is not grassy. Stones cans glass and other things are everywhere. To get into it, you must walk down a very narrow alleyway between two buildings. [...] Somebody is making a passionate speech. Hawkers move through the crowd selling channa and sweetmeats. The air is filled with dust. There do not seem to be any goondas, any troublemakers, as far as my grandfather can see. A group of Sikhs has spread a cloth on the ground and is eating, seated around it. There is still a smell of ordure in the air. Aziz penetrates the heart of the crowd, as Brigadier R. E. Dyer arrives at the entrance to the alleyway, followed by fifty crack troops. He is the Martial Law Commander of Amritsar – an important man, after all; the waxed tips of his moustache are rigid with importance. As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway a tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather's nose. The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty-five to Dyer's right and twenty-five to his left; and Adam Aziz ceases to concentrate on the events around him as the tickle mounts to unbearable intensities. As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. "Yaaaakh-thoooooo!" he sneezes and falls forward, losing his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life. His "doctori-attaché" flies open; bottles, liniment and syringes scatter in the dust. He is scrabbling furiously at people's feet, trying to save his equipment before it is crushed. There is a noise like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls on him. Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather. He becomes afraid for his back. The clasp of his bag is digging into his chest, inflicting upon it a bruise so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death, years later, on the hill of Sankara Acharya or Takht-e-Sulaiman. His nose is jammed against a bottle of red pills. The chattering stops and is replaced by the noises of people and birds. There seems to be no traffic noise whatsoever. Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machine-guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. "Good shooting," Dyer tells his men, "We have done a jolly good thing."



When my grandfather got home that night, my grandmother was trying hard to be a modern woman, to please him, and so she 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. When he brought her round with the help of a little sal volatile, she said, "Are you hurt?"

"No," he said.

"But *where* have you *been*, my God?"

"Nowhere on earth," he said, and began to shake in her arms.

You can read more about the historical Massacre of Amritsar here:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/21847/Massacre-of-Amritsar>. You'll notice that Rushdie includes key details from the historical account; while every Indian reader of *Midnight's Children* would recognise immediately the date and the names of the Jallianwala Bagh and Brigadier Dyer, Rushdie is aware that other readers aren't necessarily as well-informed about the events of Indian colonial history. The atrocity was a turning-point in attitudes towards the British in India, and Rushdie's presentation of it is suitably powerful, but its larger significance isn't immediately apparent, either to the characters living through it or to the reader. Notice, for example, the way that the first paragraph here is in the present tense; most of the novel is narrated in the past tense, but at key moments it slips into the present – one way of helping the reader experience the immediacy of the event, and of suggesting that the traumatic experience cannot be assimilated into ordinary historical time. The imagery that Rushdie employs helps create this impression, too: comparing the soldiers' machine gun fire to a 'noise like teeth chattering in winter' seems so incongruous that for a moment the reader – just like the characters – can't work out what is happening. In some small way, we are witnessing the trauma of the experience.

There are other moments in *Midnight's Children* where real historical events affect the novel's fictional characters – indicating, by implication, their impact on the non-fictional people who lived through them. The passages concerning The Widow, Rushdie's fictionalised version of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, are especially powerful. Indira Gandhi was a controversial leader who implemented a State of Emergency (thus suspending the normal rule of law) across the country in 1975 after being convicted of election fraud. Under Emergency, many laws were passed which seriously limited individual freedoms.

In the world of the novel, the 1001 magically-gifted children born at the stroke of midnight represent the hopes of a new country at the moment of independence. And the challenges they face – the trauma of Partition and the violence that accompanied the creation of Pakistan and, later, Bangladesh; divisions along language and caste lines; the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism – these challenges mirror and replicate the challenges faced by India as a nation in the thirty years after 1947. In his 2006 introduction to *Midnight's Children* Rushdie describes Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency and the 'tyrannical powers' it allowed her to assume in 1975 as 'a long period of darkness' in the history of post-independence India. In the novel, The Widow exterminates the Midnight's Children; she thereby extinguishes the hopes that independence had represented. But when we look at the way Rushdie narrates this, we see once again that his prose style means that he avoids reducing historical experience to political ranting. The art of his fiction means that the reader experiences powerfully his anger and the horror of this nightmare world, without feeling as if we are being harangued:



No colours except green and black the walls are green the sky is black (there is no roof) the stars are green the Widow is green but her hair is black as black. The Widow sits on a high high chair the chair is green the seat is black the Widow's hair has a centre-parting it is green on the left and on the right black. High as the sky the chair is green the seat is black the Widow's arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children green the walls are green the Widow's arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow's arm is hunting see the children run and scream the Widow's hand curls round them green and black. Now one by one the children mmff are stifled quiet the Widow's hand is lifting one by one the children green their blood is black unloosed by cutting fingernails it splashes black on walls (of green) as one by one the curling hand lifts children high as sky the sky is black there are no stars the Widow laughs her tongue is green but her teeth are black. And children torn in two in Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of children roll them into little balls the balls are green the night is black.

Magical realism is the name given to narratives which are mostly realistic, but which at key moments ask the reader to accept fabulous and fantastical events or situations – the children's magic, or the emotional reality of Saleem's nightmare vision, in this paragraph. There is a strong association between magical realism and writing from places which have been colonized and/or which are going through the difficult process of decolonization, which are coming to terms with the changing political realities that accompany independence. (This is often called 'post-colonialism'.) The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* explains the link like this: 'The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels—levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis—are among the means that magical realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century.' Or, as Rushdie puts it in *Midnight's Children*, 'Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible.'

There are a number of points in the novel when the world around Saleem seems to be going mad – when reality refuses to play by the ordinary rules of realism. And as Saleem insists, 'what's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same'.

Talking points

- Which other passages struck you as particularly powerful in the novel?
- How does Rushdie use language, syntax, sound-effects and imagery to exceed the ordinary limits of realism?
- How does his use of the marvellous and the magical help Rushdie to make the real-world political arguments that his novel contains more strongly?