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NEITHER SWORD NOR PEN: *PHALLACIOUS* IMPOTENCE
IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*¹

Eliana Ávila

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Abstract

This essay explores narrative crises in Salman Rushdie's postcolonial novel *Midnight's Children* by displaying the dynamics of its (re)solutionist mechanisms. The main argument is that neither narratives of textual closure nor of open-endedness can be reduced to a mimetic politics (of determinism or relativism, to give just two examples), once solipsistic control over the text has been demystified. This irreducibility is demonstrated as the narrator's discourse of authorial impotence seeks to deflect attention from the constructedness of his competing narrative of phallogocentric resolution in order to upgrade the reliability of both his identitarian and his non-identitarian politics. Among the questions the essay seeks to address are: How do the narrator's contradictory discourses suppress class and gender conflicts in the novel? How can this suppression be understood as a 'complicitous critique' (Hutcheon) of authoritarian narrativization? What are the narrative strategies used by Rushdie's narrator(s) and his characters to simulate change and dissimulate unchange, forestalling dialogic relationality with the other as self, and with the self as other?

Keywords: historiographic metafiction; authorial control; narrative impotence; irresolution; ethics.

Resumo

Este artigo explora crises narrativas no romance pós-colonial *Midnight's Children*, de Salman Rushdie, ao expor seus mecanismos de (re)solução.

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Parte-se do argumento principal de que nem as narrativas de fechamento nem as de abertura textual são redutíveis a uma política mimética (de determinismo ou relativismo, para dar apenas dois exemplos), uma vez que o texto potencializa a desmistificação de seu controle solipsista pelo autor ou pelo leitor. Essa irredutibilidade é demonstrada à medida que o discurso de impotência autoral do narrador distrai o leitor do discurso de legitimação falocêntrica de autor-idade para incrementar a confiabilidade de sua política, tanto identitária quanto não-identitária. Algumas questões discutidas são: Como os discursos contraditórios do narrador suprimem conflitos de classe e gênero em suas diversas narrativas? Em que sentido podemos perceber tal supressão como uma 'crítica implícita' (Hutcheon) de narrativização autor-itária? Quais as estratégias narrativas exploradas pelo(s) narrador(es) de Rushdie e suas personagens para simular mudança e dissimular inércia, impedindo a relacionalidade dialógica com o outro enquanto eu, e com o eu enquanto outro?

Palavras-chaves: metaficção historiográfica; controle autoral; impotência narrativa; irresolução; ética.

It may be time to ask: what kinds of exclusions and exploitations accrue in different types of border writing to underpin and undermine what are indubitably laudable goals? In what ways can literary border work be ideologically problematic? What are the costs of crossing or inhabiting borders if that is predicated upon, or achieved by, the reinforcement of other invisible borders along other lines of difference? And what are the costs of critical and pedagogical valorizations of border work that fail to recognize or question such moves?

Ambreen Háí

[T]he pleasure in cognitive victories, if understood as symptomatic, can be enabling rather than disabling. And if it is disabling, it is not a disablement that one should shy away from.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Introduction: a familiar (and uncanny) impasse

The ethical and political force of texts and theories that may undermine authorial or readerly resolution and its solipsistic reductions of reality is still urgent to emphasize, though it has been foregrounded

extensively (Derrida 1978; Hutcheon 1988; Spivak 1990; and others).² It has certainly been more often suggested—increasingly, or so it seems, since postmodernism's depthlessness was pointed out by Fredric Jameson (1984, 85)³—that irresolution effectively collapses differences to the extent that it brings about the political paralysis and impotence (or, worse, relativism)⁴ supposedly inherent in postmodern texts. To put it another way, postmodernism's rejection of resolution and coherence—or what Christopher Norris calls "its own professed terms as a radical challenge to the outworn enlightenment paradigm" (1990, 49)⁵—has been increasingly understood to *infect* political agency, like a *germ*,⁶ and thus to linger on, so to speak, in the middle of the way of the coherentist struggle to solve once and for all the exclusionary effects of cultural constraints.

Indeed, discussions on textual irresolution often stop at the apparently disabling impasse it represents, disregarding the enabling signifying processes it opens up in turn. At the cost of ignoring its stimulating potentiality, these discussions often treat irresolution as the cause of inexorable critical paralysis, political alienation or semantic dissolution threatening to empty texts of their signifying power. It is as if the author's—or else the reader's—taming of conflict were necessary in order to make the text political or at least meaningful. As if meaning amounted to a guarantee of its own 'freedom' (read: stability); or as if politics amounted to devising moments, however temporary, of critical *safety* from crisis and criticism: either a heroic *liberation* from cultural constraints, in a romantic key, or, in a high modernist key, a triumphant *control* of conflict and chaos under the aesthetic mastery of an imaginary order yet to convert reality. It would seem, from such a security-driven and missionary notion of meaning and politics, that irresolution can only be understood as a dismissal of history and progress, rather than the engagement of both towards a new perception of (a not necessarily new) reality. This essay takes issue with such assumptions of (a)political determinacy, in contexts of narrative irresolution, dissolution and ultimately impotence in Salman Rushdie's 1981 *Midnight's Children*.

The initial point I want to make is that there are several unexplored ways in which Rushdie's historiographic metafiction is important for studies of cultural mobility once irresolution, both in and on the novel, is not trivialized (I mean, made deterministic: as if it could be *inherently* profound or shallow). To name just a few, it 1) reopens the Caliban-old debate concerning non-native appropriations of the English language; 2) parodies *Eurocentrism* as a bodily conversion to *whiteness*, flaunting its socio-cultural constructedness; 3) undermines stigmatizations of physical and mental differences; and problematically 4) endorses various instances of misogynist discourse, deluding the novel's surface politics of diversity. These issues will be addressed in this paper but obliquely, for my primary purpose here is to explore the theoretical and discursive impasse which brings them up in the first place. What I want to demonstrate, mainly, is that the irresolution underlying these issues in *Midnight's Children* is not immanently depthless, nor can it determine the engagement of depth, either—though it can invite it. On the surface, irresolution may function to dissolve conflicting historical perspectives onto a flat differentialism, like a marketshelf displaying meanings and identities as equal opportunities to choose from and adopt—whether in single or hybrid fashion—as if 'freely' from history. But irresolution need not be read to *dissolve* meanings: it can also *stir* them, making way for expansions of meaning capable of producing more satisfactory accounts of experiential reality. When texts disturb authorial and readerly resolution, the reader becomes vulnerable to signifying processes that cannot be reduced to arbitrary representation. It makes sense, therefore, to conceive of irresolution not nihilistically, as meaninglessness, nor abstractly, as a formal aestheticizing routine, but as a transformational resource toward refining intelligibility itself, and the legitimacy it puts forth—the very foundations on which cultural change is engendered (Butler, 1993). On this understanding, indeterminacy implicates the reader in demystifying assumptions of unmediated closure; ultimately, it problematizes any attempt to naturalize or impose static political choices both in and on the text.

The various labels on so-called 'minorities' are telling of the arbitrariness imposed by identitarian narratives of conflict resolution and dissolution. Instead of being acknowledged for the experiential and social historicity of their trajectories, minorities are denied access to any writing which is not mimetic of the supposed biological or cultural essence they are supposed to embody or stand for. When they do gain access to broader venues, as in Rushdie's case, they are often charged with treason and silenced by both mainstream and peripheral discourses. When they are not charged with treason, their border crossings are often celebrated without transformational attention to the contradictory ways they reproduce dynamics of exclusion—often internally, spawning less visible borders within those very crossings. In this context, irresolution is not at all a 'disability' to be remediated, but an ability.⁷ It can make room, in the double move between celebration and contestation, for inhabiting, displaying and resignifying the very contradictions which otherwise work to shrink representation into stasis. Such contradictions can empower rather than reduce (however inconclusively) the emancipatory force of what Linda Hutcheon calls the "complicitous critique" of postmodern poetics, with its dynamics of "working within existing discourses and contesting them at the same time" (1988, 73).⁸ They can confront the ways postmodern culture excludes, by 'including,' *tolerating*, consuming and ultimately selling uncontainable meanings in attempts to *fix* them (in both senses) within the manageable identity hierarchies that orbit around 'normalcy'—a primarily abstract construct, since no single person embodies, at any one time, all the features and qualities of the average man (*sic*).⁹ As with scholarship on race that urges for marking whiteness as an important step in dismantling white privilege (Morrison 1992; Dyer 1997 and others),¹⁰ rethinking cultural change requires an understanding of the dynamics of resolution that sustains normalcy and its effects which are concrete, no matter how abstract its constructedness may be. As Judith Butler argues, "regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility . . . the failure of the mimetic function [thus] has its own political uses" (19). On the same note, Mutlu

Kunuk Blasing stresses that it is precisely because “the politics of any given form is unstable” (1995, 15) that narrative development is possible, as well as all change in history, politics, and poetics (1-29).

I have chosen to focus on the discourse of impotence and its implications in Rushdie’s novel because it interacts on various levels with the broader debate on the dynamics of diversity and difference proposed as the theme for this volume. In *Midnight’s Children*, I argue, this dynamics works through an ongoing subversion and reinstallation of authorial control, a sequence of rhetorical changes to mask unchange while naturalizing and safeguarding hegemonic power. This dynamics is metaphorized as a teleological narrative of identity whose origins circulate from an Adamic patriarchal lineage traced back to the narrator’s grandfather, Aadam Aziz, towards the construction of a newly powerful character in the making, the toddler Aadam Sinai. What this hegemonic power must suppress, of course, is the high maintenance of its constructed legitimacy at the price of a circular logic—the centrality of the phallus as the supreme creative force of knowledge in its metaphorical and performative aspect, the writer’s *pen*. Epitomizing the avowed refusal of victorious closure by the anti-heroic narrator, his sexual impotence—ironically associated explicitly throughout the novel with his authorial success—becomes central enough to validate his supplementary *pen-is authority* over the phallic normalcy of his rival, Shiva. I am thinking, of course, of the *pen* as an instrument of *authoritarian power* (Gilbert and Gubar 1984 [1979], 4). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar open their first chapter with the seemingly flimsy query, “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” (3)—to which they answer that in patriarchal Western culture “no sword-wielding general could rule so long or possess so vast a kingdom” (7).¹¹

With these considerations in view, this essay takes the following route: part I demonstrates the narrator’s crisis between two projects: on the one hand, to become the literary and historical representative of India’s newly-independent identity; and, on the other hand, to refuse such totalitarian representation, at odds with India’s experience of independence as the very fragmentation of its history—taking into ac-

count, for example, the incongruity of India's partition (the partition of Pakistan from India) having been imposed by the colonizer upon the very inception of the 'Independent Nation' in 1947. In this context (of coherence as its very impossibility), part II discusses narrative impotence as an ambivalent metaphor: on the one hand, for challenging the coherence of emancipatory discourses that reactively feed into hegemonic claims on the nation; on the other hand, for the fallacy of the metafictional author's narrative of open-endedness and self-critique, as he effectively reinstalls and perpetuates authorial centrality instead. My purpose is to argue for a reading of irresolution—concerning the shifting uses to which impotence is put—that can *leak* (to borrow Rushdie's term considered below), from *Midnight's Children's* postmodern and postcolonial sensitivities,¹² a 'complicitous critique' of self-perpetuating narratives of authority.

I

[I]n a narrative, as you proceed along the narrative, the narrative takes on its own impetus as it were, so that one begins to see reality as non-narrated. One begins to say that it's not a narrative, it's the way things are.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Historiographic metafiction and (some of) its disturbances

Midnight's Children highlights both autobiography and historiography as performative narrative projects in the hands of the writer, Saleem Sinai, as he reads to his illiterate lover Padma (who tries to leave him for lack of sex—a lack which neither she nor Saleem's mother, as we shall see, conflates with phallic impotence—but turns back and apparently settles provisionally for his supplementary pen) the history of his lifetime: a supposed but failed *mimesis* of the history of Independent India.¹³ The narrator is thus split from the outset into two overlapping layers of identity: *Saleem*, whose organicist narrative is

constantly threatened by the unreliability of his pretension of mimetic coherence and universality; and *Sinai*, the open-text author, whose regenerative force propels writing through the very failure of *mimesis* and closure. Notice the tension between both layers as they are overlapped in the passage below:

Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? . . . He, young-Saleem-then, was afraid of an idea—the idea that his parents' outrage might lead to a withdrawal of their love; that even if they began to believe him, they would see his gift as a kind of shameful deformity... while I, now, Padma-less, send these words into the darkness and am afraid of being disbelieved. He and I, I and he... (166-67)

What also calls attention above, though significantly unforegrounded, is the coercive effect on the reader of the discourse that builds up the narrator's victimized status beckoning for the collaborative belief Padma no longer provides. This is an effective strategy to suppress the reader's questioning of Padma's silence and of her reasons for leaving the narrator—reasons which, since she returns for her "job" (193), remain problematically, if also successfully, evaded throughout the novel as its metanarrative of phallic/authorial impotence takes center stage over class and gender concerns. But what is it that makes the narrative impotent to begin with? What follows is an outline of how the novel introduces the notion of impotence in the context of individual and national identity.

Saleem's impotence, or the failure of his historiography of national identity

Born on the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947, the exact moment when India became independent, both the writer and his metafiction

enact the incongruity of what Sinai calls “a nation which had never previously existed [and] was about to win its freedom” (112), as Saleem presumes his lifetime narrative to prove. This incongruity demystifies Saleem’s illusion that India’s history can be reduced to a coherent identity through his narration of his lifetime as that of his salvation of India—Saleem’s narration of *Midnight’s Children* itself:

By the time the rains came at the end of June, the foetus was fully formed inside her womb. . . . What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book—perhaps an encyclopaedia—even a whole language... (100)

Notice how Saleem ironically prefigures his narrative impotence (thus already prescribing his control over the reader by establishing Sinai’s necessary reliance on reader-response) by con-fusing his birth with that of India, all the more so by calling it a “nation of forgetters” (37), a “mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream” (112), while later dismissing such “optimism” as a “disease” (229) of hyperbolic blindness, a megalomania that dis-affects the community and therefore also hinders its potential for real hope and possible change. In other words, this “whole language” of which Saleem speaks as a resolution of identity is ironically a *pathos*, one which “would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood” (112). It is ironic, then, that Sinai finds Saleem’s salvationist narrative itself to be responsible for much of that blood, since his authorial pretention to possess and order history, if only through demonstrations of his self-righteous certainty, lead time and again to disaster—as when he becomes “directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay . . .” (192).

Thus Saleem's very bodily deformation is a metaphor for the perils of the "hyperbolic formula" (75) of his narrative—defining, in other words, the *master narrative* of Saleem's modernist writing which, if successful, would actually be the ultimate failure of Sinai's open-ended text. Just think of the projection embedded in his critique of such spectacular characters as Lifafa Das, the Hindu who is attacked by a Muslim mob for running a peepshow in the muhalla:

'See the whole world, come see everything!' The hyperbolic formula began, after a time, to prey upon his mind; more and more picture postcards went into his peepshow as he tried, desperately, to deliver what he promised, to put everything into his box. . . . (. . . is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I *infected*, too?) (75, my emphasis)

Ironically, the text here inverts the discourse of normalcy so that it is the absolutism of hyperbolic, master narratives, rather than their vulnerability, which becomes threatening 'like a germ'. Here, Sinai uses the metaphor of disease, the quintessential discourse justifying exclusion, to refer to Saleem's account which, as it turns out, will *not* deliver what he has promised: the narrative of his life—and, by extension, that of an Independent India to which his history has been mimetically "handcuffed"—, the totality of which would require the reader to "swallow the world" (109). Instead of producing a coherent narrative of the individual as a correlative of the nation, what *Midnight's Children* produces is thus a parody of the *illusion* of identity in its real, material *effects*: "the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality" (166). Obviously enough, Saleem's promised monocentric narrative of the nation's history has failed: "I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that's how it happened" (461). Not much of an out-come, after all.

As reality, however, though the illusion may fail to deliver a supposed truth, it does succeed in performing its specter and spectacle instead. What takes over center stage is thus the postmodern paradox of alignment and simultaneous opposition between form and content, as Sinai's incoherent narrative gains realist status over the artificiality of order: "If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance... perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque" (109). A question should thus come to mind when Sinai recalls, "I have been, in my time, the living proof of the fabulous nature of this collective dream" (112). What is "the fabulous nature of this collective dream," if not the fact that it has no nature, but parodies the constructed myth of a (*post-colonial*)¹⁴ free India—or, for that matter, of a coherent identity? It is no wonder that Saleem(/)Sinai's narrative is itself "a two-headed child" which frustrates his surrogate reader, Padma, as it shifts from a supposed recovery of Saleem's natural origins and birth (under the prophesy that his mother would deliver a "two-headed child") to the assertion that

in the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream. 'Enough,' Padma sulks. 'I don't want to listen.' Expecting one type of two-headed child, she is peeved at being offered another. (118)

The same can be said of the reader who, expecting one type of (sexual) impotence, is peeved at being offered another (authorial), regardless of all evidence that the narrator's pen just cannot do the "trick". I mean the "trick" explicitly mentioned in the novel early on, when Saleem had claimed to be apt to supply the authoritative power to supplement his lack of knowledge:

[M]ost of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the *trick* of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail . . . everything, and not just the few clues one stumbles across. (19, my emphasis)

Unable to do the “trick,” Saleem Sinai’s historiographic narrative enacts the failure of both the ‘original’ (the *phallus*) and the supplement (the *pen*)—“now that the connections between [his] life and the nation’s have broken for good and all,” and that even his writing has been “consigned to the peripheries of history” (395). This double failure can be understood as a critique of coherentist narratives that posit predeterminacy as “not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity” (Gilbert and Gubar 1984[79], 6). What this subtext foregrounds through parody is the self-perpetuating dynamics of author-ity through which what Saleem Sinai seeks to deliver is not an account of India’s processual history, but a prescription of its produced posterity: “No, that won’t do, I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet” (462). It is no wonder, then, that his narrative is haunted by the threat of failure each time the excitable outpouring of his pen gives him the relativist “illusion that . . . it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred” through “memories and words which strive vainly to encapsulate them” (Rushdie 1981, 443). Haunted by the crisis of meaning that emerges from the impossibility to create a univocal history, Saleem Sinai himself, both subject and object of the narrative, turns into a spectacle of the unnatural, which culminates in the Calibanesque monstrous:

nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk’s-tonsured, stain-faced, bow-leggd, cucumber-nosed, castrated, and now prematurely aged, I saw in the mirror of humility a human being to whom history could do no more, a grotesque creature who had been

released from the pre-ordained destiny which had battered him until he was half-senseless . . . (447)

This is a body which had been closed by the “pre-ordained” destiny of its narrative, and desired to open up through its orifices to the unpredictable meanings by which the migrant in search of establishing an authorial identity might respond to the incompatible cultural frameworks he has absorbed in translating his names, his mother’s names, his father’s names, his authorial names, his *pen* names throughout the history he selects to tell. At the same time, the disease of osteoporosis (the porousness of Saleem’s unfixable identity, which in his anxiety is rapidly causing his bones—or identity narrative—to crack) justifies his urge to rush his-story in time to achieve a coherent resolution with the outer world through the very identity of innocence which the stand of the migrant’s “double perspective,” as opposed to “whole sight” (Rushdie 1992, 19), has allowed him to concoct.

However, if this involuntary deferral of closure becomes an asset releasing the migrant self from his confinement within a single, monolithic identitarian frame, still it performs the constant risk of merely fixing him into another one, no matter how nomadic or hybrid it may be. In other words, his migrant narrative identity does not guarantee innovative, let alone innocent, meanings; rather, it can be understood as *both* a shifting signifier *and* a new central perspective in the text—both self-exempting and self-implicating, both a reproduction and a critique of its self-prescribing mechanisms. As we have seen, *Midnight’s Children* seems to invite, even to demand, a reading of diversity that resists fixity, the suppression of difference and change. Yet, the novel’s closure also turns out to delude that project in a very subtle way which the remainder of this paper should demonstrate. By delusion, in this context, I mean the power to baffle the reader into conformity, acceptance or even celebration of the self-centralizing narrative of conflict resolution which Sinai had so far seemed to resist.

II

I began to see that the world of Mary Pereira had detached
me from two worlds, not one.

Saleem Sinai

On “biceps and triceps”

When Saleem Sinai reminds the reader of his sexual impotence at what seems to be every chance he gets, he also implies that there is something special about it: it can be supplemented by his *pen-is authority*, i.e. attention to his gifted writing. Notice that this is precisely what the other impotent writer in the novel, Nadir Khan, lacks: “How did Nadir Khan run across the night town without being noticed? I put it down to his being a bad poet, and as such, a born survivor . . . as if [he] were in a cheap thriller” (49)—“a poet whose verses didn’t even rhyme” (216). What this reiterated hint posits is that Sinai’s *superior* narrative (his impotence is supplemented by a *good* pen) deserves that he be given the full attention of his surrogate reader and sexual partner, Padma—and of his entire readership, by extension. Since we, as readers, are directly interested in the out-come of Sinai’s writing (the pen’s success), the narrator’s demand that Padma supply him with what his story needs in order to be stimulated to move on—namely, our amnesia toward all the conflicting narratives (Khan’s, Mumtaz’s, Padma’s, not to mention Saleem Sinai’s own) which his supplementary phallus must covertly suppress in order to remain central—becomes ours as well. As readers we therefore tend to endorse his interpellation of Padma under the gendered (read: naturalized) hierarchy of the writer over the reader. Here is a telling exchange between Padma and the self-healing narrator:

“So then I thought, how to go back to this man who will not
love me and only does some foolish writery?”

...

Still, I am at my table once again; once again Padma sits at my feet, urging me on. I am balanced once more—the base of my isosceles triangle is secure. I hover at the apex, above present and past, and feel fluency returning to my pen. (Rushdie 1981, 193-4)

Having just mentioned his childhood days when a nuclear physicist's "beautiful marble statuette—a female nude—was used by his son to give "expert lectures on female anatomy to an audience of sniggering boys" (270), Sinai is unabashed enough to follow up on the account by objectifying his own (*sic*) female reader through anatomic description:

Strong enough to squat forever, simultaneously defying gravity and cramp, my Padma listens unhurriedly to my lengthy tale; O mighty pickle-woman! What reassuring solidity, how comforting an air of permanence, in her biceps and triceps... (270)

Thus, when Sinai interrupts Padma—conclusively, or so he pretends—in the passage below, one should not expect for a moment that he is about to suggest that she may also want to tell her story "in [her] own true way":

Padma began to cry. 'I never said I didn't believe,' she wept. 'Of course, every man must tell his story in his own true way; but...'
'But,' I interrupted conclusively, 'you also—don't you—want to know what happens?' (Rushdie 1981, 211)

Sinai's impotence manned

The construction of Khan, the other(ized) impotent writer in the novel, portrays his desolate quest for escape from right-wing political

enemies *as in a comedy*. The scene shows a cinematic portrayal of a 17-year-old rickshaw boy's fanciful journey home from the movies, where he has seen a Bollywoodian "eastern Western" in which "a one-man vigilante force" (49) saves a herd of sacred cows from the slaughterhouse. Mirroring the boy's fancy (and perhaps Rushdie's historiographic metafiction itself), Sinai's prolific description merges extravagant scenes of phallogentric fiction with the boy's familiar return home, in a fantasy which is disrupted when he literally and comically rides into a dozing Khan awakening exhausted to an encounter which may rescue him from his quasi-murderers: "'My life, [Khan] managed to say at last, 'is in danger'" (50).

It is through this stereotypical portrayal of dependency that Sinai introduces Khan, the leftist poet, to his readers. The latter's imminent rescue is set amid the fantasy-driven adventures of a male (a boy, by the way), thus genderizing his sexual (and authorial, and political) impotence as female (and again, by the way, as infantile and desolate, suggesting a homophobic representation of male same-sex desire that presupposes either the reproduction of gender-based hierarchy or narcissistic identification). This narrative move to feminize/infantilize Khan's impotence is strategic in that it not only *mans* (and *managerializes*, as we shall see) Sinai's impotence by contrast, but it also detracts the reader from the political threat which *Khan*, rather than Sinai, poses to Indira Gandhi's totalitarian regime. Likewise, regardless of what Mumtaz refers to as the overwhelming sexual pleasure her husband shares with her, Khan is accused by her family (with the narrator's naturalizing sanction) of being "not *even* a man" (60, my emphasis).¹⁵

This spurious equation of Khan's impotence with the 'feminine',¹⁶ alongside the comic tone that underpins it, lies in stark contrast against the tragic and heroic construction of impotence in Saleem's case—a difference that serves to corroborate his claimed authorial superiority over his mother's lover, Khan. For Sinai, as not for Khan, castration explains "the lie of impotence" (440) when he painfully recalls the operation of sperectomy performed on all the midnight's children. As

it turns out, his castration, *unlike representations of Khan's impotence*, is a metaphor for the "draining-out of hope" (437)—the unnamable curtailment of political and existential hope from India's post-Emergency generation of writers, artists and other cultural critics.

Castrated by the Emergency (Indira Gandhi's totalitarian regime, 1974-77), Sinai gains entrance into the women's-only pickle factory, and learns to prefer (female) "privacy . . . to all this inflated macrocosmic activity" (435), gendered as male by contrast. The relevance of the factory as the site of an encroaching uncanny event slips into an elision—the same elision which had taken place before, when Sinai had referred to the story written by his uncle Hanif: "the only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry was writing the story of a pickle-factory created, run and worked in entirely by women. . . in his unfiled chutney scenario, too, there lurked a prophecy of deadly accuracy" (244). Of course the prophecy which is left unsaid here is that Saleem, the representative of the nation, would be "unmanned" (38). Notice the parenthetical remark below, suggesting effeminacy:

Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! I, however, have pickled chapters. . . . I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography; in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. (459)

What Sinai's impotence elides is that to relinquish power is another way of keeping in control. This time, his "lie of impotence" is supplemented by what is supposed to be a conflict-free form of writing, in a discursive strategy suggesting a corresponding innocence within his new, 'impotent' form. As a discourse of innocence, the narrative of authorial impotence has the effect of allowing Sinai, the elite child of midnight (as opposed to Shiva, switched at birth into what would have been Sinai's poverty instead), to override the subtextual

history of class and gender conflict in the novel. In this light, it is no wonder that the phallogentric voice which had generated authorial conflict to begin with (personified, as mentioned earlier, by the Saleem/Sinai dichotomy) does not cease: Sinai continues to write from his position of *class* privilege, itself naturalized, thus unproblematized, as *gender* difference. He writes, as he puts it, on the “biceps and triceps” of Padma and the other women, now working below the catwalk from which, as manager, he can look “down across gigantic pickle-vats and simmering chutneys” (457) to gaze at “the strong-armed dedication of the vat-stirrers” on the factory floor (460).

On the surface, the narrator’s impotent entry into the women’s-only pickle factory enacts a subversion of the phallogentric narrative. This subversion, however, is fallacious in that it unproblematizes class and gender hierarchies by positing the innocence of the phallus (a metaphor for the ‘creative author,’ i.e., ‘the one who speaks’) over what becomes no longer the women’s-only *factory*, but the women’s-only *workforce*. To put it another way, the pickle factory preserves, rather *concocts*, just an ameliorated supplementary site of upgraded generative authority for Sinai, who now claims to *manage* the independent, revolutionary Narlikar women under his creative role in the factory: “These days, I manage the factory for Mary . . . my responsibility is for the creative aspects of our work. . . . Amid the wholly-female workforce of Braganza Pickles, beneath the saffron-and-green winking of neon Mumbadevi, I choose mangoes tomatoes limes from the women who come at dawn with baskets on their heads” (459-60).

Covertly, what has been concocted here is a new form for the old formula of naturalizing class and gender hierarchy, now newly legitimized through Sinai’s apparent cancelation (“the lie of impotence”) of patriarchal order. Now, phallus centrality is evaded so as not to hinder the perpetuation of the “hyberbolic narrative”—a parody of a “new myth of freedom reverted to [the] old ways” (245). In other words, “now that the connections between [his] life and the nation’s have broken for good and all,” and having been “consigned to the peripheries of history” (395), Sinai’s last strategy—“Control: I must retain con-

trol as long as possible" (461)—is to contrive covert control, under ambivalent hints of management of, solidarity with, and benevolence toward the supposedly subversive women, still silenced and restricted to the labor force of the factory. In sum, it is in the guise of impotent male manager that Sinai passes for a source of innocence promoting an apparently conflict-free order—that of the pickle factory, a new mode of writing providing a re-solution into the old hyperbolic, hegemonizing narrative which Sinai's purported impotence had already demystified.

Unprecedented in the novel, the convergence of minorities—here, the impotent manager and the (childless) women within the "revolutionary" factory—symbolizes an alternative alliance against Indira Gandhi's totalitarian regime whereas it effectively dissolves the very class and gender conflicts which Sinai's revisionary metafiction had struggled so far to foreground against Saleem's totalitarian narrative. At this point, what Saleem Sinai's narrative develops in retrospect, then, is an increasingly sophisticated *evasion* of historiography's recalcitrant monocentrism rather than a history of *dialogic change*. Indeed, the narrative keeps reproducing itself, but monologically: by changing its specific *ways* of avoiding structural change: "You see, Padma: I have told this story before. But what refused to return? What . . . failed to emerge from my lips? Padma: the buddha had forgotten [my] name. (To be precise: [my] first name)" (420). Indeed, as Sinai puts it, "[t]o pickle is to give immortality, after all . . . The art is to change the flavor in degree, but not in kind" (461).

Patriarchal succession

We have seen that the reinstallation of phallicentric order under the sign of conflict-free diversity in *Midnight's Children* works by a pattern of narrative splits reconstructing a supplementary phallus for the impotent narrator, culminating in his managerial move. This dynamics covers up the constructedness of its resolutions in an ongoing *salvationist* rhetoric: narrative impotence is represented both as a pa-

thology (Saleem's predicament of categorized difference)—to be necessarily healed by a supplementary phallus reassuring authorial control—and as the novel's unflinching adherence to an ethics of the open text (Sinai's talent for diversity). This dynamics traps the reader's attention to the constant threat of narrative impotence within the context of a refusal of normalcy, closure and identity, thus valorizing difference vis-à-vis its stigmatization. However, while valorizing the hardly-won failure of its master narrative, it ignores its own hidden mechanism of perpetuating it.

Once phallogocentric centrality has been demystified in the narrator's first supplementary move, as we have seen, it can only be reinstalled by a reading that is deliberately blind to its re-resolutionist mechanisms. At this point, then, if the pickle-factory is another reinstallation of phallogocentric authority, it is also a limit to Saleem's (re)resolutionist narrative. To put it another way, Sinai's reconstruction of phallogocentric authority in the guise of a *patronizing* solidarity with an other (minority) enacts the very construct of conflict-free diversity with its re-institutionalization of the phallogocentric norm. Thus the pickle-factory, as the site and outcome of Sinai's postmodern narrative, stages an innocent, upgraded version of the totalitarian text that quiets dissent through its structural analogy with the nation as "the metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial" (McClintock 1997, 91).

Doubling the (impotent) supplement: the cosmopolitan pen

The perpetuation of Saleem's phallogocentric narrative, now through Sinai's purportedly benevolent and conflict-free takeover of the women's-only workforce, reenacts the salvationist master narrative of progression towards resolution, from the archaic ('female') to the modern ('male').¹⁷ As a metanarrative of patriarchal performativity, Sinai's pickling of his-story—"I, however, have pickled chapters" (459)—again invests in the supplementary pen, rather than the phallus, to generate, now in constructionist terms, a naturalized collectivity: "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 any control of contraception . . .” (243). This collectivity is construed through a discourse of self-exemption and innocence: “I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I’m afraid, with the shadows of imperfection” (459). In this light, Saleem’s ongoing foregrounding of his sexual and narrative impotence can be understood as a strategy to dis-implicate himself from his subtextual narrative of solipsism. Indeed, Sinai’s surface narrative of impotence covers up the phallic rule which it is his project to *preserve* (to pickle):

Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon . . . Tonight, by screwing the lid firmly on to a jar bearing the legend *Special Formula No. 30: ‘Abracadabra’*, I reach the end of my long-winded autobiography . . . (459)

Significantly, however, just a few paragraphs above Sinai had implicitly undermined his own arbitrary narrative of phallogocentric resolution (the “Abracadabra”), by calling attention to the delusive optimism toward his son Aadam’s first (original) spoken word, foreshadowing the frustration of mimetic form or formula:

‘Abba...’ Father. He is calling me father. But no, he has not finished, there is strain on his face . . . ‘cadabba.’
Abacadabra! But nothing happens, we do not turn into toads, angels do not fly in through the window: the lad is just flexing his muscles... Amid Mary’s celebrations of Aadam’s achievement, I go back to Padma, and the factory; my son’s enigmatic first incursion into language has left a worrying fragrance in my nostrils.

Abracadabra: not an Indian word at all . . . 'Who,' I am wondering, not for the first time, 'does the boy imagine he is?' (459)

Neoliberal cosmopolitanism, or the perpetuation of the patriarchal nation

This close analogy built up between the father's narrative project to forestall dialogic change and its succession in the son's seminal speech suggests that what Sinai has unproblematized (admittedly, and strategically so) in his celebratory definition of the pickling process is that the rhetorics of his postmodern narrative of open-endedness is utterly delusive. Indeed, his entire autobiography relies on a series of discursive displacements and replacements reiterating the centrality of the authorial pen, the impotence of which he has constructed as a resource of innocence and therefore a legitimizing asset for his self-perpetuating narrative. Thus it morphs from a narrative of natural origins, to one of performative affiliation under constructed origins, and finally to one of the performative *preservation* of the patriarchal nation. The pickle factory can be understood, in this sense, as a miniature not only of the nation but also of the covert structure of patriarchal order which naturalizes class and gender minoritization under globalization's neoliberal discourse of identificatory choice, productive competition, and conflict-free diversity.

Thus, in his celebratory definition of the pickling project Sinai embraces when he leaves behind his lifetime ideals of leading the *Midnight's Children's* revolution, he inadvertently ventriloquizes Rushdie in his contention that, among other meanings, "Midnight's children . . . 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" (1981, 230).

It is in this context, in my view, that Leela Gandhi (1997) criticizes Rushdie and certain other postcolonial intellectuals who,

[i]n valorising a certain class of writer in the name of enlightened cosmopolitanism, . . . turn away from the creative and cultural realities of another, possibly more troubled, India. The voice of this 'other' India may not be as immediately accessible or aesthetically appealing to an international readership, but surely this is a matter of taste rather than value. In this regard then, among the writers variously canonised by Rushdie and Advani, the most interesting include those who remain suspicious of their own cultural privilege, and whose fiction is thus capable of pushing against the generic/narrative limits of its own elitism.

True, the valorization of migrancy and hybridity in the context of cosmopolitanism runs the risk of depthlessly subsuming social differences under the privilege of transit between cultures—*but only if it keeps the field of social hierarchy stable*. In other words, my point is that *Midnight's Children* (regardless of Rushdie's intentions) enacts the anxiety of cultural authority, and in doing so *does* remain suspicious of it. This is to say that the neoliberal logic of cosmopolitanism, enacted in *Midnight's Children* by such ridiculed characters as William Methwold and Ahmed Sinai, is precisely what the disturbances opened up by narrative irresolution refuse once Sinai has already exposed and demystified his hyperbolic narrative.

I refer to such disturbances, for example, as in Sinai's depiction of India's diverse religious and cultural groups. These so-called 'minorities' are *not* willing to follow defensors of cultural assimilationism rather than preserve the riches of cultural irresolution:

But I was brought up in Bombay, where Shiva Vishnu Ganesh
Ahuramazda Allah and countless others had their flocks . . .

“What about the pantheon,” I argued, “the three hundred and thirty million gods of Hinduism alone? And Islam, and Bodhisattvas . . . ?” (Rushdie 1981, 438)

Within this novel, Sinai’s words above are indeed disturbing to resolutionist narratives that disperse otherness into an expansionist order of sameness while reinstalling a coherent identity, be it individual, familial, national or cosmopolitan. Elsewhere, they also unsettle related narratives of resolution. To observe how mechanisms of power reinstallation underlie both resolutionist and irresolutionist narratives, I consider Julia Kristeva’s essay, “What of Tomorrow’s Nation?,” in her book of 1993, *Nations Without Nationalism*. In her earlier writings, such as *Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Kristeva argues against contemporary xenophobia stemming from purist assumptions of identity as fixity; she argues for an ethics of irreconcilability and self-implication in the necessary contradictions issuing from the co-existence of incommensurable religious, cultural and historical thought-systems in the modern nation-state.¹⁸ These unresolvable contradictions recall those taking place in the related contexts of India’s religious plurality, which Sinai mentions above, as contrasted against the language riots represented throughout the novel. In the context of these earlier writings, it is problematic not to find in Kristeva’s 1993 essay a development of her argument as now concerns clashing cultures brought together by refugee and working-class immigrations to France. In this latter essay, her expected defense of otherness actually elides it while defending Euro-American cosmopolitanism in the context of globalization:¹⁹

[T]he assimilation drive of new migrants emphasizes above all the desire to enjoy social benefits and does not at all involve giving up their own typical, behavioral, religious, cultural, or even linguistic features. What sort of common life and what degree of mixing remain possible under such conditions? (1993, 7-8)

This question equates cosmopolitanism with homogenization rather than with heterogeneity and relationality among mutual strangers (*to give up* is, after all, a reluctant act by definition). Furthermore, it evades the fact that migrants most often migrate out of *necessity*, not *will*. By presuming free agency for all, it assigns the responsibility of exclusion to the excluded themselves (Dimock 1989, 111). The discourse of freedom thus works to deny minorities their quest for the human right, presumably shared within democracy, to preserve historical (individual) trajectories and cultural roots, even as they may plant new, overlapping (not absolute) ones:

Thus, in a very different fashion but perhaps still *more painfully* than in European states, the United States *suffers* in its immigrations, which, from within, challenge not only the idea of a national “organism” but also the very notion of confederacy (particularly through the establishment of new immigrant islands whose *autistic withdrawal* into their originary values is *not easy to deal with*). (11, my emphases)

This quote shows clearly the intertwining discursive dynamics of exclusion and pathology which blames its own perpetuation of economic and cultural violence on the excluded themselves. It not only pathologizes their suffering but also posits it as a disease *of their own making*; worse, they are presumed to *autistically* refuse the ‘benevolence’ of a ‘more evolved’ culture, produced as *altruistic* by contrast. In sum, this is a discourse of frustrated salvationism that, in the same blow, reduces both autism and the other to burdens, transcoding both into the very own moral trophy of what thus constitutes ‘normalcy’. Verging on the tradition of “blaming the victim,” in this quote it is, astonishingly, the U.S. and France (in their *national* constructs, by the way) which are portrayed as victims to the immigrants fleeing from various political motivations at the national level (not least of which are the economic effects of *international* inequalities)—and not the other

way around. By implying that islanded immigrants are “autistic others,” Kristeva’s statement ignores the legitimacy of their quest for and successful attainment of welcome social interaction—without which they would be further ostracized, both economically and socially. More subtly still, it ignores the fact that segregation is not the *cause* of social, cultural and economic suffering, but its *effect*: a *contingent* ‘choice’ to resist exclusion and to enjoy welcome socialization with others. Diversity has once again become reduced and framed into categorized difference, a burden to be carried or repaired for ‘the good of *all*.’

By contrast, instead of promoting such assimilationist and neoliberal notions of the cosmopolis within the teleology of cultural evolutionism—in other words, the idea that *originary* roots should be “given up” as part of a subsumed (read: *inferior*) past—the postcolonial text of *Midnight’s Children* promotes the notion of *leakage* instead: “‘Things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other,’ I explain, ‘like flavours when you cook . . . the past has dripped into me... so we can’t ignore it’ (38). Instead of ignoring the past, this notion of leakage satirizes the metamorphosis of cosmopolitanism’s pseudo-crossculturality into the supposedly unmarked whiteness of its neoliberal discourse:

Naheen, who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence... ‘I am the victim,’ the Rani whispers, through photographed lips that never move, ‘the hapless victim of my cross-cultural concerns. My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit.’ (45)

Furthermore, leakage from the past foregrounds the irreducibility of the self to a generalizing identity, metaphorized in *Midnight’s Children*, as in the passage above, by whiteness: the neoliberal trend by which “what cosmopolitanism unconsciously strives for is a stasis in which the unique expression of the non-Western is Western” (Brennan 2001, 674).

In *The Power of Horror*, Kristeva defines abjection as an uncannily overlapping of interiority and exteriority, such as in the overflowing of entrails; “an *opening* toward the *new*, as an attempt to tally with the incongruous” (1982, 5; 188, first emphasis qtd.). What she does not mention in her defense of Euro-American cosmopolitanism, however, is that abjection is also an opening, on the part of the center, to *the newness of the peripheries’* perspective of modernity. By warding off such contemporaneity—mutual, by definition—in assuming the inability of most immigrants to ‘catch up’ with history (read: with global competition) from their lagging positions in a primitive past, monocentric cosmopolitanism attempts to deprive ‘third-world’ others (those who do not ‘choose’ to join the ‘first world’)²⁰ of the very contemporaneity of specific differential epistemes of modernity. That deprivation is fallacious, of course: in its unidealized form, modernity is relentlessly known, even familiar, as the codifying medium by which the socio-economic impotence of *both* the underprivileged *and* the privileged is so inexorably bound together that their differences are preemptively absorbed into the sameness of a hegemonic meaning:

How I traveled: I waited beyond the platform . . . and leaped on to the step of a first-class compartment as the mail-train pulled out, heading west. And now, at least, I knew how it felt to clutch on for dear life, while particles of soot dust ash gritted in your eyes, and you were obliged to bang on the door and yell, “Ohé, maharaj! Open up! Let me in, great sir, maharaj!” While inside, a voice uttered familiar words: “On no account is anyone to open. Just fare-dodgers, that’s all.” (Rushdie 1981, 508)

Modernity, in this light, is the medium through which the crises of clashing epistemes become reduced to a familiar resolution: the excluded alone are invariably (and uncannily) prescribed as no more than opportunists wishing to share only in the advantages of modernity while ‘dodging their fare.’

What this resolutionist version of cosmopolitanism (dis)misses, but *Midnight's Children* doesn't, is the necessary suspicion that "the 'post' of coloniality is not its aftermath but its posterity, a locus of its transmittal into the future with up-dated vigor" (Kadir 1995, 431). To dismiss this is to enforce a discourse of diversity that actually repeats the marginalization of differences. No wonder Sinai is so obsessed by the uncanny feeling of encroachment that haunts all his pretensions to represent a coherent, monocentric version of contemporary post-colonial identity.

Irresolution as non-immanence

Clearly, Sinai only succeeds in recovering his narrative through naturalizations of hierarchy that mask the violence of his continuing power. These gender constructions allow him both to reinstall his authorial reliability within the familial order of the nation, through the arbitrary equation of creativity with the 'masculine,' and, *in the same breath*, to take over the managerial position held by his 'mother' in the factory "created, run and worked in only by women," through the arbitrary equation of impotence with the 'feminine.' On the international level, the narrator comes into view as a subject of *both* hegemonic *and* minority positions that intersect each other conflictively. This layered subject constitution points to Sinai as a metafictional prototype of the postcolonial writer and intellectual—an emancipatory (if not hegemonic) voice at home, a minoritized voice abroad. By displaying the layered construction of its narrative and of its rhetorics of closure/open-endedness, *Midnight's Children* implicates its emancipatory discourse in the context of its international commodification. In this sense, Graham Huggan argues that

postcolonial writing [must] be seen in its requisite material context, as part of a wider process in which the writers' anti-imperial sentiments must contend with imperial market

forces. Postcolonial writing beguiles the line between resistance and collusion; . . . Clearly, the writers' choice is not to discover a language—an alternative kind of English—that is somehow uncontaminated by exoticist mythologies. A viable option instead is to lay bare the process by which those mythologies are constructed. (1994, 24; 27)

On this understanding, *Midnight's Children* neither proves nor demolishes authorial control conclusively; on the contrary, it explores the very impossibility of any prescription of emancipatory contents under a form or formula of intended correspondences which denies its narrative contradictions. It remains ambiguous, enacting the postcolonial and postmodern distrust of identity or *mimesis* which, in the context of disrupting narrative stability, is configured as a nationalistic "obsess[ion] with correspondences . . . a sort of national longing for form or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality" (Rege 1997, 358-59). Reading for such mimetic correspondences leads to the assumption mentioned early on in this paper, that irresolution can only be apolitical. Against this assumption, it is helpful to recall Derrida's caution that all emancipatory projects "inhabit [the structures they resist] *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it" [1976, 24]. By the same token, it helps to remember Sinai's hint that

implicit in the game is the unchanging twoness of things . . . but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity—because, as events were to show, it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake. (Rushdie 1981, 141)

Considering Sinai's climb to triumph on the pickle factory ladder, it must be said that he has proven his point, on the real power of ambiguity underlying narrative irresolution. But just so, notwithstanding his

revealed “lie of impotence,” the suspicion he has built up so far of a “pre-ordained destiny,” like a double-edged sword, *pickles*—in both senses: preserves and heals—his impotence: “But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty...” (462).

Acknowledging the power of such irresolution to delude any conclusive closure or self-perpetuating narrative of ‘newness’ (“novelty”) provided by the solipsistic author, it is no wonder that Sinai fails in his identitarian narrative just when intimations of his mortality link his impinging death to his lack of interest in effectively *new* (“emergent”) matters which might alter the narrative instead of merely perpetuating it by a sheer inversion of hierarchy or upgrading of terms.²¹ This unresolvable link, regarding a death or end of narrative which ironically perpetuates Sinai’s narrative authority, is voiced by the threatening character Durga, whom the narrator attempting closure and resolution also silences, as he “admits [her] into these pages” only “with the greatest reluctance” (512). Indeed, towards the end of his narrative Sinai admits that Durga’s

name, even before I met her, had the smell of new things; she represented novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories events complexities, and I was no longer interested in anything new. (512)

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Susana Funck, Barbara Baptista, Peônia Guedes, Ramayana Lira and Alessandra Brandão for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 I refer to the notion of *ethics* glossed by Paul de Man as “the structural interference of two distinct value systems” (1979, 205). By *politics*, I mean the rearticulation of power toward socio-cultural change through asymmetrical relations. Underlying this paper is an awareness that much of that change is put forth and/or received while perpetuating stasis on competing and intersecting levels, and that any effective politics must contend with this dynamics.

- 3 In the terms of Jameson's classic essay on the characteristic features of postmodernism, the latter is the "cultural dominant" into which contemporary writers of late capitalism must necessarily write, rather than an aesthetics and/or politics of choice: "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production—must make their way" (1984, 56). To reduce such impulses to their face value as a relativistic dead-end of meaning, however, is ironically symptomatic of the very "new depthlessness" which, as Jameson argues, characterizes postmodernism's logic of reification (see Jameson on relativism in note 6 below).
- 4 Assessments of postmodernism which demystify suppositions of its freedom from contingency often suppose that it generally holds precisely such a project. Terry Eagleton, for example, charges postmodernism (*sic*) for "urging the system, like its great mentor Friedrich Nietzsche, to forget about its metaphysical foundations, acknowledge that God is dead and simply go relativist" (1996, 133).
- 5 What Norris means by postmodernism's "own professed terms" is not clear to me, since there are various, significantly irreconcilable, accounts of postmodernism(s), many of which seek its spaces for social, cultural and political critique. Linda Hutcheon, for example, professes that "the postmodern both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" through its "aware(ness) of difference, difference *within* any grouping too, difference defined by contextualization or positioning in relation to plural others" (1988, 11, 67, *qtd. emphasis*). For other examples, see Jameson 1998 and Beverley et. al. 1995.
- 6 These eugenicist terms can be understood in the context of discourses of moral cleansing which became widespread during the Cold War period, especially in McCarthyist representations of communists (represented interchangeably as homosexuals by Cold-War official discourse aimed at guaranteeing public rejection of dissent: see Edelman 1992), portrayed as microbes contaminating democracy. These terms have been revived in war and globalization discourses today, dressing various phobias of uncontrollable *différance* in the ideologies of salvationism, resolutionism, and security.

In this context, one might question whether, or how, such discourses of 'moral cleansing' may constitutively dissuade theory itself—for in theory, as Jameson points out from a poststructuralist (and postmodern) perspective, all uses of language, including its own, are susceptible to these slippages and oilspills because there is no longer any correct way of saying it, and all truths are at best

momentary, situational, and marked by a history in the process of change and transformation. You will already have recognized deconstruction in my description, and some will wish to associate Althusserianism with it as well. . . It is a mistake to assimilate this view of theory [the coming to terms with materialist language and linguistic expression] to relativism or skepticism (leading fatally to nihilism and intellectual paralysis); on the contrary, the struggle for the “rectification” of wording is a well-nigh interminable process, which perpetually generates new problems [since] theory’s eternal enemy, reification, quickly absorbs and neutralizes [each] attempt. (Jameson 2004)

- 7 I use quotes to deflect the connotation of overall incapacity which this term implies, overriding the capability shifts that actually take place.
- 8 For Mutlu Kunuk Blasing, postmodern poetics foregrounds its rhetoricity, thus refusing modernism’s avant-gardist alignment (fixation) of form and content along a progressive evolution toward an organicist identification, as in *mimesis* (1995, 1-29). A departure from fixation (read: fetishization), this acknowledgment of rhetoricity necessarily includes a meta-critique of postmodernism itself, since it must be skeptical of its own discourse of overcoming modernism—if only because doing so would incur in the paradox of simultaneously updating rather than overcoming the credibility of modernism.
- 9 See Herbert Marcuse’s notion of “repressive tolerance” (1965), recalled by Spivak (1990, 5); see Davis 1997 on ‘normalcy’ as a eugenicist construct which produces the ailing female.
- 10 As with ‘men’s studies,’ the labeling of work engaging the problematic of whiteness under the title ‘whiteness studies’ is *both* politically effective, for marking ‘normalcy’ away from universality; *and* ineffective, for re-centralizing it. See Roediger 2001 and Dyer 1997 for important discussions of these concerns.
- 11 As pointed out by José Ortega y Gasset, “Author derives from *auctor*, he who augments. It was the title Rome bestowed upon her generals when they had conquered new territory for the City” (1956 [1925], 19). One need only recall how power has been legitimized by naming, describing and mapping, at least since colonial historiography, which defined ‘the civilized’ as those who could write on ‘the uncivilized’. For an account of literature and intellectual writers in the related postcolonial context of national identity formation in Latin America, see at least Rama 1984 and Pratt 1992.

- 12 I understand the *postcolonial* as the social and cultural scheme of colonialism as it unfolds in its legacies and challenges. Hutcheon calls attention to the intersections between postcolonialism and postmodernism, arguing that postcolonial discourse consists of an “inherent semantic and structural doubleness,” the irony of which is a “convenient trope for the paradoxical dualities of both postmodern complicitous critique and post-colonial doubled identity and history” (1991, 73).
- 13 As a failed identification, Saleem’s self-conscious rhetorics is closer to a postmodern sensitivity than has been acknowledged, for example, in the Jameson/Ahmad debate. Jameson’s contention that “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*” (1986, 69) has spurred the debate on whether it elides the heterogeneity, contemporaneity and postmodernity of so-called ‘third-world’ texts—an elision and a nomenclature taken to task by Aijaz Ahmad (1992).
- 14 I refer to the notion of the (hyphenated) *post-colonial*, critiqued by Anne McClintock for having become time- rather than power-oriented, thus “run[ing] the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power” (1992, 88).
- 15 Significantly, it is only as Khan’s wife that Mumtaz does not have to change her name, as she will have to upon her following marriage—also to an impotent man. (Renamed *Amina Sinai*, Mumtaz shall become Saleem’s mother of raising; she is also, unknowingly, Shiva’s biological mother.) The text thus suggests that Khan and Mumtaz share a nonhierarchical sexuality which marks Khan as repudiating rather than threatening to the other (impotent) characters in the novel—mainly the narrator, who constructs Khan’s impotence under the sign of an abject other in contrast to his own impotence, redeemed and normalized by his phallicentric writing. Such regulatory practices of identity mask the hegemonic subject’s own identification with the abjection of sex.

For Butler, sexuality is the threatening spectre on which the normative self depends to enjoy subject status: “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” [1993, 3] through unintelligibility. Butler, however, considers the normative imperative of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility to be *heterosexual* rather than *hierarchic*, and thus does not engage a discussion of the *hierarchic imperative* in sexuality—heterosexual and homosexual included—that reduces sexuality to such

a binary. This elision may be grounded in her argument that all sexual difference is co-opted “in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” [2]).

- 16 Both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan theorize the feminine as *lack*: whereas Freud theorizes the penis as *presence* and the vagina as *absence*, assuming their complementarity, for Lacan the feminine is not complementary, but supplementary. “In sexual supplementarity, woman is that which exceeds or escapes. Which does not mean that she speaks” (Johnson 1998, 133).

- 17 Anne McClintock argues that “the metaphorical depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial—the ‘national family,’ the global ‘family of nations,’ the colony as a ‘family of black children ruled over by a white father’—depended (*sic*) . . . on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children” (1997, 91). In such a depiction, women are figured as “the conservative repository of the national archaic . . . existing, like colonized peoples, in a permanently anterior time within the modern nation,” the potent agents of modernity thus gendered male (1997, 92-93). Indeed, the modern—from colonial times naturalized as, and naturalizing, man’s (*sic*) violation of nature—is traditionally gendered male; even recently, Ezra Pound associated the modern with cultural forms that are “scientific, hygienic, masculine” (1975, 21; 41) and “austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (1968, 12). For a discussion of Pound’s influential aesthetics of fascist masculinity and its contemporary poetic legacies and refusals, see Blasing 1995.

- 18 In short, Kristeva’s earlier essays claim that an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable is only possible if the threat or “fascinated rejection of the other” is understood as the very center of the constitution of the subject from within, as Freud demonstrates in his analysis of *unheimlich* [the uncanny]: “Delicately, analytically, Freud does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves. That is perhaps the only way not to hound it outside of us” (Kristeva 1991, 192); “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (Freud 1958 [1919]).

- 19 Globalization is understood here to feed on the “structural dialectic of imperialism [which] includes . . . the deepening penetration of all available global spaces by the working of capital *and* intensification of the nation-state form simultaneously”; in other words, the economic, political and cultural weakening of the nation-state’s apparatus to guarantee social welfare and human rights, vis-à-vis its strengthening to benefit transnational capital, mass culture and information flows, resulting in the proliferation of capitalism’s self-perpetuating ideologies (Ahmad 1995, 285, qtd. emphasis).

- 20 For Kristeva in *Nations Without Nationalism*, "the freedom of contemporary individuals may be gauged according to their ability to choose their membership, while the democratic capability of a nation and social group is revealed by the right it affords individuals to make that choice" (1993, 16). In other words, individual freedom may be gauged by the personal *ability* rather than the historical *possibility* to choose to belong to a social group that allows for that choice. This circular logic implies a natural-like distinction between two kinds of freedom: the "ability to choose" a social group (the individual's responsibility), and "the right . . . to make that choice" (the social group's responsibility).
- 21 I refer here to Raymond Williams's distinction: "emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel" (1977, 123).

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