

Games with Names in *Midnight's Children*

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In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie integrates the meanings of names into the fabric of the novel itself, overtly points out many of his games with names, and even makes bilingual jokes with the names he uses. The origins of Rushdie's hundreds of names and nicknames reflect the multicultural background of India and Pakistan.

Few contemporary authors are as fascinated by names — or, for that matter, have as much sheer fun with them — as Salman Rushdie. In his Booker Prize-winning novel, *Midnight's Children* (voted the Booker of Bookers, i.e., the best British novel of the past quarter-century in September 1993), Rushdie even interrupts his narrative for a lengthy paragraph on the importance of names in general and the significance of the name *Sinai* (his protagonist's family name) in particular:

Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also the victims of our titles. *Sinai* contains Ibn Sina,² master magician, Sufi adept; and also Sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadhramaut, with his own mode of connection, his powers of action-at-a-distance upon the tides of the world. But Sin is also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake;³ serpents lie coiled within the name. And there is also the accident of transliteration — *Sinai*, when in Roman script, though not in Nastaliq,⁴ is also the name of the place-of-revelation, of put-off-thy-shoes, of commandments and golden calves; but when all that is said and done; when Ibn Sina is forgotten and the moon has set; when snakes lie hidden and revelations end, it is the name of the desert — of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end. (364-65)

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Midnight's Children contains literally hundreds of names. I will discuss only a few dozen of the most significant. First, however, because a discussion of its names may be difficult to follow if one has not read the book, a bit of background information is in order. The story line is too complicated to summarize in detail, but essentially the book is about the birth of independent India (and Pakistan); its protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai, represents India/Pakistan. The title, *Midnight's Children*, refers to the 1001 Indian babies born between midnight and 1:00 a.m. on August 15, 1947, when India received her independence. All of the children born during this hour had special powers of some kind. For example, one boy could increase or reduce his size at will and another boy could eat metal. A sharp-tongued girl could inflict physical wounds with words, while another girl could grow crops even in the most arid desert. The closer the time of their birth to midnight, the greater the powers of the midnight's children.

The protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai, was born on the stroke of midnight and could read people's thoughts and communicate directly with their minds and hearts. Two other midnight's children central to the story are Shiva and Parvati-the-witch. Shiva, Saleem's alter ego and enemy, has the gifts of war. Parvati-the-witch has gifts of conjuration and sorcery. Saleem Sinai is (supposedly) the son of the Muslim businessman Ahmed Sinai and Amina Sinai (née Mumtaz Aziz), and Shiva is (supposedly) the son of the street entertainer Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita. However, Mary Pereira, Saleem's nurse, exchanged the babies at birth, so Ahmed and Amina Sinai are Shiva's biological parents. Further, though Wee Willie Winkie did not know this, the Englishman William Methwold had seduced Vanita and was the father of her child. Thus, Saleem's biological parents are Vanita and Methwold, though he was raised to adulthood as a Sinai. Saleem married Parvati-the-witch, but their son, Aadam Sinai, was actually fathered by Shiva.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie overtly gives the meaning or origin of a number of the scores of names he uses, sometimes even when the name or its meaning has no apparent relevance to the narrative. Thus, for example, of the historical figure Jehangir, Rushdie has the boatman Tai say, "You think of the Emperor Jehangir as a gardener only, no doubt...because he built Shalimar. Stupid! What do you know? His name meant Encompasser of the

Earth. Is that a gardener's name?" (12) Of Saleem's brother-in-law, Major Zulfikar, the narrator says, "Zulfikar is a famous name amongst Muslims. It was the name of the two-pronged sword carried by Ali, the nephew of the prophet Muhammad" (67). Of Anarkali, a dancer, we are told her "name meant 'pomegranate-bud'" (452). Of Shaheed Dar, Saleem's teammate in the CUTIA unit, "Old Dar told his son the meaning of his name, which was 'martyr' [Shaheed was later to die]," (421) and of the CUTIA unit itself, "Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities?... The acronym CUTIA, of course, means *bitch*" (415, 417). Of Mrs. Braganza (née Mary Pereira), the narrator says, "Mary...has stolen the name of poor Queen Catherine [sic] who gave these islands to the British" (547).

Sometimes characters comment on their own names. Alauddin Latif, who is to make Saleem's sister a famous singer, uses his name to persuade her father to let her sing professionally: "Contacts: that's all it takes; contacts and organization; and yours truly Major (Retired) Latif has the lot. *Alauddin* Latif,' he stressed... 'Know the story? I just rub my jolly old lamp and out pops the genie bringing fame and fortune'" (373).

In the novel people have nicknames, even multiple nicknames: "I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon" (3). Saleem's sister is nicknamed the Brass Monkey. Of the Latif family, Rushdie says, "Major Latif's daughters — Safia and Rafia and five other -afias — were dubbed, collectively, 'the Puffias'...their father was nicknamed first 'Father-Puffia' and then Uncle — a courtesy title — Puffs" (373). Most of Saleem's classmates and childhood acquaintances have nicknames: Eyeslice and Hairoil Sabarmati, Fat Perce Fishwala, Glandy Keith Colaco, Cyrus-the-Great.

Sometimes people even forget their names — Saleem himself does at one point and so does his friend Picture Singh. Other people change their names: Saleem's mother changes her name from Mumtaz to Amina after her divorce from Nadir Khan, who himself changes his name to Qasim Khan. Parvati-the-witch converts to Islam when she marries Saleem, and "she took a name which I chose for her out of the repository of my dreams, becoming Laylah, night...becoming an echo of all the other people who have been obliged to change their names" (495).

So infatuated is Rushdie with names that even the names of languages do not escape his notice: "Kerala was for speakers of Malayalam, the only palindromically-named tongue on earth" (225).⁵ Saleem's grandmother, Naseem Aziz (a.k.a. Reverend Mother) punctuates all her utterances with the verbal tic *whatsitsname*, e.g., "This, *whatsitsname*, is a very heavy pot; and if just once I catch you in here, *whatsitsname*, I'll push your head into it, add some dahi [curds], and make, *whatsitsname*, a korma [meat curry]" (42) or "Do you wonder, *whatsitsname*, that the little one calls herself Emerald? In English, *whatsitsname*?" (43)

Rushdie frequently uses names to reflect and symbolize the multiple sources and components of Indian history and culture: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and even Jewish names serve to encapsulate India's ethnic and religious diversity. The two most important Hindu names used are those of the midnight's children Shiva and Parvati. In Hindu mythology, Shiva is one member of the triad Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva; he represents both destruction and reproduction. His consort is Devi, who, like Shiva, has both benign and fierce aspects; Parvati is one of her milder aspects. According to Indian legend, Parvati created her son Ganesh from dust mixed with her own body fluids, and Ganesh acted as guardian of Parvati's gate. One day, Ganesh tried to prevent Shiva from entering, and Shiva cut his head off. When Shiva discovered his mistake, he ordered that Ganesh be given the head of the first animal to come along. This was an elephant, and Ganesh became the elephant-headed god of wisdom and learning (*Larousse* 389). In *Midnight's Children*, Shiva is a violent killer and a highly decorated war hero who impregnates hundreds of women, including Parvati, whom Saleem (not Shiva) later marries. Parvati gives birth to a son with "ears so colossally huge that...they had thought, for one bad moment, that it was the head of a tiny elephant" (500). The son is named Aadam, after Saleem's grandfather, who, like Saleem, had a huge nose, "comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh" (8). One of the fiercer aspects of Devi/Parvati is Durga; in *Midnight's Children*, Durga is a physically powerful woman with inexhaustible and colossal breasts who becomes young Aadam Sinai's wet nurse.

Another Hindu name that Rushdie uses is Soumitra, a midnight's child and a time-traveler; in Hindu mythology, Soumitra is the wife of Dasaratha and the mother of the twins Lakshmana and

Satrughna. Still another midnight's child is Markandaya/Narada, who can alter his/her sex at will. In Hindu tradition, Markandaya and Narada are different men, though both are semidivine ascetics and sages. In one legend, Narada dives into water and reemerges as a female (Zimmer 30).

A character who appears throughout the novel is Padma, Saleem's companion; she listens to Saleem's life-story as he composes it. In Indian mythology, Padma is the "tutelary deity of the rice-growing agriculture of native India" (Zimmer 91) and a goddess of all types of prosperity and happiness. Though Saleem emphasizes her role as the "dung goddess,"⁶ she is in fact more closely associated with the lotus, and, in art, is normally depicted seated on a lotus.

Saleem Sinai's family (i.e., the family in which he grows up) is Muslim, and many of the Sinais' names are significant ones in Islamic tradition. Saleem's (supposed) maternal grandfather is Aadam Aziz; Aadam is of course the progenitor of the human race for not only Islam, but also Christianity and Judaism. Although Aadam Aziz's parents are mentioned early in the story, they are, significantly, not given names: his father is simply "Doctor Aziz's father" (26) or "the gemstone merchant" (9) and his mother is "Aadam's mother" (13).

Aadam Aziz marries Naseem Ghani, and the couple have five children: Alia, Mumtaz, Hanif, Mustapha, and Emerald. Of these, the most important for the novel is Mumtaz (later Amina), who is Saleem's mother. Mumtaz is the name of the wife of Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor who built the Taj Mahal for her; indeed, the very name *Taj Mahal* is a corruption of *Mumtaz Mahab* (Netton, 242). After her divorce from Nadir Khan, Mumtaz changes her name to Amina and marries Ahmed Sinai. Amina bint Wahb was the mother of the Prophet Mohammad, just as Amina Sinai is the (supposed) mother of Saleem Sinai, whose day of birth coincides with that of modern India. Aadam is also the name of Saleem Sinai's supposed son by Parvati (as noted earlier, Shiva is his real father). Among the numerous other Muslim names in the book is that of Ibrahim Ibrahim, a name that might escape notice had Rushdie not given Ibrahim's two sons the names Ishaq and Ismail, paralleling, of course, the story from the Qur'an (and the Torah and the Old Testament) of Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael.

The most obvious onomastic Christian references in *Midnight's Children* are to the Virgin Mary and Joseph. Mary Pereira,⁷ a midwife, becomes Saleem's nurse. And, as Rushdie says, "like every Mary she had her Joseph" (119), Joseph D'Costa, her revolutionary boyfriend for whose sake she does the baby-switching so important in the story. The Portuguese surnames of Mary and Joseph reflect, of course, the Portuguese influence in India, i.e., Goa. Another Christian reference in the book is the rather disrespectful comment made by the boatman Tai: "I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir...beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head. He was old and fagged-out but he knew his manners" (11).

Rushdie includes even Jewish tradition in his games with names. Saleem's first love is Evelyn Lilith Burns, a freckled American teenager with braces on her teeth who lives near the Sinai family and is a prodigious bicycle-rider. The name Evelyn by itself could easily escape notice, but combined with Lilith it is unmistakably a reference to Eve and to the Talmudic legend that makes Lilith the wife of Adam before Eve was created. Lest the reader miss the association, Rushdie says of her, "she was our capricious, whirligig Lill-of-the-Hill. And also Eve. The Adam's-apple of my eye" (217).

Names from Asian history are ubiquitous in *Midnight's Children*. Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's father, claims descent from Aurangzeb (1618-1707), the Mughal emperor who extended Islam in his empire and was one of the sons of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal; note that Ahmed Sinai's wife's name was Mumtaz before she married Ahmed and changed her name to Amina. I have already mentioned the Emperor Jehangir and Catharine of Braganza. One of Saleem's childhood acquaintances is nicknamed Cyrus-the-Great. Early in the book, Tai the boatman mentions Iskandar the Great, and, much later, an officer in the Pakistani army is named Brigadier Iskandar — the reference is, of course, to Alexander the Great. A famous musician is named Ustad Changez Khan; Ustad is a title for a revered person, and Changez Khan is clearly Genghis Khan. Numerous contemporary or nearly contemporary figures are also mentioned — from Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Bose, Stafford Cripps, and Indira Gandhi to Aly Khan and Rita Hayworth.

In a number of instances, Rushdie indulges in games with names as much for the sheer fun of it as to contribute to the themes of the

novel as a whole. For instance, Lifafa Das, the peepshow man, includes among his pictures a "publicity still of a European actress with a mountain of fruit on her head" (84) whom he calls Carmen Verandah; he means Carmen Miranda. Superficially, this is just an amusing malapropism. However, the word *verandah* is itself a loanword into English from Hindi. Further, in earlier days, prostitutes in India danced on verandahs, and an Indian woman who performed in public was automatically assumed to be a prostitute. (Saleem's sister, Jamila Singer, sings with a veil to hide her from the public's view).

Jamila Singer was called the Brass Monkey when she was a child. Rushdie says she was called this because of her red-gold hair; the "Monkey" part of the name arose from her mischievousness; e.g., she liked to burn up people's shoes. But the collocation of "brass" and "monkey" unavoidably reminds the native speaker of English of the expression "cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey."

Some of Rushdie's jokes with names can be understood only by a reader familiar with Indian languages. For instance, the doctor who writes prescriptions for liquor for Saleem's Muslim but alcoholic father Ahmed Sinai is named Dr. Sharabi; the word *sharabi* means "drunkard" in Hindi and Urdu. Sundari is a midnight's child born so beautiful that the mere sight of her blinded those who looked at her until a great-aunt slashed her face with a kitchen-knife; *sundari* is a Bengali word meaning 'beautiful.' Another joke opaque to monolingual English speakers involves the name of a newspaper, the *Daily Jang*, mentioned in connection with the Indo-Pakistani wars: *jang* means 'war' in Urdu.

Mumtaz Sinai's first husband was Nadir Khan. Nadir is a common Indian name, and as such would attract no particular attention. However, this Nadir is hiding from the authorities, so he and his bride have to live in a cellar underneath her parents' house. After their divorce, he remains a terrorist, a member of the underground; Rushdie in fact speaks of him as Mumtaz's "underground husband." In English, the word *nadir* means, of course, 'the lowest point,' i.e., the underground.

A minor character in the novel, Dr. Schappsteker, is obsessed with the idea of discovering an anti-venom for the bite of the banded krait. He buys broken-down horses and injects them with small doses

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of the venom — though they always die. Rushdie puns on the name by referring to him as "Sharpsticker" (a good pun in southern British English).⁸

Finally, Wee Willie Winkie, a street entertainer, says of himself, "Wee Willie Winkie is my name; to sing my supper is my fame!" This refers to the English nursery rhyme "Wee Willie Winkie," of course. However, Rushdie's Wee Willie Winkie was not the father of his wife's child; is Rushdie hinting that he has a wee willie? Far-fetched though this may seem, one must remember that Saleem Sinai is Vanita's biological son (and that Saleem himself is impotent from having been forcibly castrated by the widow's sterilization program).

What does all this mean? On the one hand, Rushdie makes an obviously deliberate attempt to use highly significant names. On the other hand, for Western readers, his games with names will often pass unappreciated because they do not know the traditions behind the names or the meaning of the Hindu/Urdu words used. Yet Indian readers must be fairly fluent in English even to read the book in the first place. For whom is Rushdie writing? To an extent, Rushdie himself has addressed this question. In his essay, "Imaginary Homelands," he says, "We are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15) and later

This raises immediately the question of whom one is writing "for." My own, short, answer is that I have never had a reader in mind. I have ideas, people, events, shapes, and I write "for" these things, and hope that the completed work will be of interest to others. But which others? In the case of *Midnight's Children* I certainly felt that if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West. So I would say that I write "for" people who feel part of the things I write "about," *but also for everyone else whom I can reach.* (19-20; emphases added)

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Notes

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²Known in the West as Avicenna.

³*Sin* is the name of the (curly) character for [s] in the Arabic writing system.

⁴The cursive Persian script.

⁵Rushdie is wrong here; there are at least a score of others: Ama, Arara, Asa, Ata, Atta, Ava, Caac, Izi, Logol, Obo, Olo, Ono, Opo, Ulu, Uru, Usu, Utu, Yay, Yey, but Malayalam is surely the *longest* palindromically named language!

⁶It may or may not be significant that the Hindi word for "fart" is *pad*.

⁷Though it does mean "pear-tree," Pereira is a very common Portuguese name, so I hesitate to connect its meaning to the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas," with its repeated line "and a partridge in a pear tree."

⁸Apparently Rushdie did not notice that *Schaapsteker* looks like a Dutch name, where it would mean "sheepsticker," not "sharpsticker" or "horseticker."

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