RETELLING HISTORIES: MAGICAL REALISM IN GÜNTER GRASS’S DIE BLECHTROMMEL AND SALMAN RUSHDIE’S MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Arts in the

Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Sanjot Aroon Walawalkar, M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University
2005

Master’s Examination Committee:
Dr. Nina Berman, Advisor
Dr. Anna Grotans

Approved by

Advisor
Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures
Magical realism enjoys an important position in contemporary world literature. Its unique characteristics, such as amalgamation of the fantastic and the mundane, coexistence of diverse perspectives, and inclusion of the dichotomous aspects of everyday human experience, offer strategies by which conventional assumptions about “reality,” and “history” can be questioned and reexamined, and alternative viewpoints can be presented.

Günter Grass in *Die Blechtrommel* and Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* employ magical realism to redescribe historically specifiable events and offer fresh and alternative perspectives to dominant narratives of history. Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* explores that part of German history which includes World War I, the rise and fall of Nazism, and World War II. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* covers the part of Indian history from the struggle to free India from the imperial British rule, up until the time when democracy was suspended under Indira Gandhi. In their novels, Grass and Rushdie question the veracity and objectivity of historical writing. Both writers aim at educating their readers in hopes of preventing the repetition of tragic events.

In this thesis, I explore the various magical realist techniques used by Grass and Rushdie in their respective novels. I discuss the historical development of magical realism, the importance of retelling history in literature, and the commonalities shared by Grass and Rushdie. I further elaborate how these writers use magical realist techniques to
redescribe past events, to question the conventional views of history, and to challenge the authority of dominant structures and ideologies. In doing so, Grass and Rushdie foster a critical reserve and a reasonable approach in their readers as well as keep the past alive in the consciousness of the people.
Dedicated to my family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cordially thank my advisor, Professor Nina Berman for her intellectual support and encouragement for this project, her meticulous and thoughtful comments, and for her openness, warmth and care, which made this thesis possible.

I thank the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, for their support and assistance, especially Professors Anna Grotans, John Davidon, Kathryn Corl, and Bernd Fischer. I am grateful to Professor Amy Shuman, Doctor Chikako Cox, and Deborah Schipper for their continued support and confidence.

I fondly acknowledge the selfless efforts of Chingi, Keekar, Sandhya, Patricia, and Eve toward my project and for their unwavering love and support. I wish to thank my friends Beate, Petra, Lars, Helena, Sheila, Ning, Sharon, and Katherine for their love and generosity.

Finally I want to thank my parents Aroon and Snehelata, and my brother Sameer for their unconditional love and support, without which this thesis would not have been possible.
VITA

September 19, 1976 ..................... Born – Bombay, India

1998 ................................... B. A. English Literature, Mumbai University

2000 ..................................... M. A. English Literature, Mumbai University

2000 – 2005 ............................. Graduate Teaching and Administrative Associate, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: German Languages and Literatures
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Magical Realism: Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Magical Realism in German Context</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Magical Realism in Postcolonial Context</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Retelling Histories</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Problems Inherent in Documented History</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Importance of Retelling Histories</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Grass and Rushdie</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Role of the Writer</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Migration</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Magical Realism in Günter Grass’s <em>Die Blechtrummel</em> and Salman Rushdie’s <em>Midnight’s Children</em></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The Novels’ Narrators</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Families and Histories</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Oskar’s and Saleem’s Births and Supernatural Abilities</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Historical Events</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Historical Events in <em>Die Blechtrummel</em></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Historical Events in <em>Midnight’s Children</em></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vii
4.5  History and Fiction, Concluding Thought ..............................108

Conclusion ...........................................................................................111

Bibliography ..........................................................................................114
INTRODUCTION

Magical realism, as a literary technique, has been employed by various writers from diverse regions and has acquired an important position in contemporary world literature. It is predominantly employed by writers representing the voices of the traumatized and the marginalized who are interested in confronting political and cultural conflicts. The techniques of magical realism – such as amalgamation of the fantastic and the mundane, coexistence of diverse perspectives, inclusion of the dichotomous aspects of everyday human experience - offer strategies by which alternative or conflicting viewpoints can be presented simultaneously. These alternative viewpoints are often antithetical to widespread beliefs and opinions, and therefore, offer resistance to dominant ideologies and cultural structures while giving the writers a voice with which to confront such viewpoints.

Günter Grass and Salman Rushdie are writers who use magical realism to redescribe specific historical events with the aim of offering different and fresh perspectives and in hopes of preventing the repetition of tragic events. Both Grass and Rushdie are politically committed writers; both are intensely conscious of their role as public intellectuals and artists to improve society. Grass’s writing mainly deals with the
modern German past – the two World Wars and Nazism. Rushdie’s works are critiques of the states of India and Pakistan after Independence. Through his fictional accounts of the past events, Grass attempts to prevent such horrific events from recurring. Rushdie, on the other hand, explores the reasons for the disappointment with the fate of post-independence India and Pakistan.

Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* explores that part of German history which includes World War I, the rise and fall of Nazism, and World War II. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* covers the part of Indian history from the struggle to free India from the imperial British rule, up until the time when democracy was suspended under Indira Gandhi. Both Grass and Rushdie re-stage or re-play these historically specifiable events with the aim of offering a new perspective. Using the tools of magical realism that help create hybrid spaces, Grass and Rushdie invoke official accounts alongside their own versions with a conscious effort to highlight the fallibility of historical writing and to expose those aspects that are excluded from or overlooked in documented history.

In this thesis, I shall explore the various magical realist traits used by Grass in *Die Blechtrommel* and Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children*. My thesis adds to previous comparative discussions that focus, for example, on the narrators (see Patricia Merivales’s essay *Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Midnight’s Children, Magic Realism and The Tin Drum*) and on the novels’ literary styles (see Henrik Engel’s essay *Die Prosa von Günter Grass in Beziehung zur Englischsprachigen Literatur*). To that end, I will discuss the history and development of magical realism, the importance of retelling history in literature, and the commonalities shared by Grass and Rushdie. I then discuss how these writers use magical realist techniques to question the conventional views of history, to
challenge the authority of dominant structures and political ideologies, and to redescribe
the world with the hope of improving it.
CHAPTER 1

MAGICAL REALISM: BACKGROUND

The depiction of the “reality” of everyday life has been one of the major incentives behind art and has greatly influenced the development of the novel in literature. Such “reality” by itself, however, has no objective existence and cannot be studied or proven through scientific methods (Durix 45). What belongs to the realm of reality? Does reality relate only to the material aspects of socio-cultural interactions or also to their cultural representations? How do we characterize other aspects of human life – superstitions, hallucinations, dreams, imaginations, errors of perceptions, insanity, etc?

Durix observes that since the age of Enlightenment, Western civilization has privileged logic too much and has ignored a whole section of human experience pertaining to the imaginary or subconscious (80). In the same light, Max Weber explains this through his theory of “disenchantment”: “modernity represents a loss of the sacred sense of wholeness and reconciliation between self and the world provided by myth, magic, tradition, religion, or immanent nature” (105). A reflection of this modern mindset, the literature from the second half of nineteenth to the early twentieth century,
tends to overlook those aspects of human experiences. In contrast, magical realism, in literature, seems to have evolved as a style that facilitates the depiction of those unseen, unmeasured, intangible aspects of human life. The term *magical realism* was first coined in 1925 by German art historian, Franz Roh, in relation to pictorial art. By the 1940s, the style was popular in Latin America and became a means of expressing an authentic American mentality. After Angel Flores’s article on magical realism in 1955, it became a concept in literary criticism and was applied to texts that had certain distinctive themes and techniques. Over time, this literary style found widespread application in international literature.

Although the term ‘magical realism’ has been in use since 1925, the debate on the definition of the term and on which characteristics are essential to magical realism remains unresolved. There are, as Amaryll Chanady points out, certain traits or practices that are frequently mentioned by literary critics (18). According to Floyd Merrell, magical realism stems from “the conflict between two completely different perceptions of the world” and hence it is a “synthetic and totalizing activity” (qtd. in Chanady 19). González Echevarría believes that magical realism gives us a worldview that does not depend on scientific or physical laws, and is not based on a rational view of reality. Rather, he insists that the fictitious world is not entirely divorced from everyday life (qtd. in Chanady 19). Thus, magical realism is basically an amalgamation of the rational and the irrational aspects of human life, wherein the supernatural or anything contrary to a rational view of reality is fused with the mundane and day-to-day reality of our routine life.
In her book, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, Chanady clearly distinguishes between the fantastic, fantasy literature, and magical realism. In fantasy literature, like fairy tales, a fictitious world completely removed from our conventional view of reality is created. Nothing surprises the reader or the characters in such tales, since magic is the norm, with its own laws of verisimilitude essentially different from our accepted view of reality (3). However, in the magical realist and fantastic stories, a human protagonist in an everyday world suddenly encounters an apparently supernatural being or event (2).

Although in both texts, magical realist and the fantastic, the supernatural or the irrational is introduced into a realistic framework, Chanady views the two styles as being fundamentally different. In her view, the supernatural in the magical realist text does not disconcert the reader as it does in fantastic literature. She insists that the same phenomena, which are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative, are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the author of a magical realist text (24). While the coexistence of the supernatural and the rational in the fantastic creates an unambiguous and disturbing fictitious world, Chanady views it as an essential characteristic of a harmonious and coherent world of magical realism (101).

In his chapter entitled “Reality, Realism and Mimesis,” Durix explains that when something has not been previously experienced, human beings have to find reasons for and build a credible mental picture of what they have not seen before. This “reasoning out” of their novel experiences, he insists, closely depends on historical and geographical conditions. However, there sometimes exists what he calls an ‘experience gap’ between the author and the recipient of the work wherein the recipient has not had the experiences necessary to accurately interpret the text. For example, the author of a postcolonial
magical realist text may create a convincing worldview that is radically different from the
typical Western view.¹ In such a case, readers then need to make an effort to adapt or
imagine in order to accept the presented set of events (45-46). This is especially true for
European readers of postcolonial literature, who are confronted with unknown
environments and totally different perceptions of the world.

Magical realism should not only be viewed strictly within the manifestations of
the coexistence of the supernatural with the rational and the worldviews of the indigenous
and the colonizers (Chanady 114). As Zamora and Faris explain, it could be considered to
be an extension of realism in its concern for the nature of reality and its representation.
Here, reality refers to the observable and easily perceived day-to-day happenings. At the
same time, magical realism resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment
rationalism (such as mind body dualism) and literary realism (depiction through clinical
analysis). Rather exponents of magical realism insist that “mind and body, spirit and
matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are
boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise
fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts” (6). Thus magical realism embraces
the various dichotomous aspects of human experiences.

In the case of this thesis, it is important to review the history and the development
of the concept of magical realism in more detail.

¹ For example, Rushdie assumes a large Anglophone audience who are likely to interpret his work through
a Western lens.
1.1. MAGICAL REALISM IN GERMAN CONTEXT

Magical realism was a new style primarily in pictorial art that emerged all over Europe after World War I. In France, Fernand Léger, its noted practitioner termed it “Realisme Nouveau”, while in Italy, the new paintings were called “pittura metafisica.” The new art was identified as “Constructivism” in Russia (Guenther 45 & 60). In the German context, the new style was named twice within a very short period – “Magischer Realismus” (Magical Realism) by the German art historian Franz Roh and “Neue Sachlichkeit” (New Objectivity) by the German museum director Gustav Hartlaub. At that time, however, Hartlaub’s term gained popularity partly because of his famous Neue Sachlichkeit exhibition of 1925 (33). It was an art that reflected the turbulent period of the Weimar Republic (1919 – 33), which suffered devastating losses in World War I, the worst inflation in history and the failed hope of a better society (43). Roh’s term reappeared in the 1960s, as there was a renewed interest in the Weimar Republic and German art.

This new painting style seemed to be a return to Realism, departing considerably from the abstract Expressionist style of the preceding period. It, nevertheless, had inherited certain metaphysical elements and techniques from the previous period. Referring to this post-expressionist style, Franz Roh published Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei (1925), in which the term “Magischer Realismus” was employed in an artistic context (34). In Roh’s view, magical realist art renders reality in its completeness; it not only represents the facts and

---

3 Neue Sachlichkeit was used only in reference to the new kind of pictorial art. Magical realism, on the other hand, came to be applied to a wide range of literature.
the exterior objects but also its intangible, interior and invisible aspects. Thus, art does not remain simply a lifeless imitation of objects but also gains a spiritual quality. “To depict realistically is not to portray or copy but to build rigorously, to construct objects that exist in the world in their particular primordial shape” (Roh 24). The “spirital” or the “magic of being,” according to Roh, is essential for the construction of reality (Guenther 35).

The new pictorial style reached its peak and was already on the wane by the 1930s. Soon thereafter, in the year 1933, Hitler pronounced those artists and architects “degenerate,” who did not in some way espouse the party line through their art, whose works did not exude the “true Germanic spirit” or did not reflect aspects of the sacrosanct Nazi ideology (Guenther 53). Although there were very few Jews in the visual arts, the Nazis viewed modern painting as being a Jewish enterprise; thus painting was also subject to artistic and cultural cleansing (53-54). Jewish artists were sent to the concentration camps, gas chambers and some went into exile; many artists were denounced as “bolsheviks” and “Kunstzwerge.” Some artists, however, decided to adapt and mold their art and presented an exaggeratedly idealized and heroic realism in accordance to the Nazi “Blut und Boden” cultural doctrine (53 - 55).

With the end of World War II and the fall of the National Socialist regime, the term magical realism reappeared and came to be employed as a literary concept. It was a time, when many intellectuals felt the need for a new start in literature and in intellectual thought. The young generation, according to Alfred Andersch, “steht vor einer ‘tabula rasa’, vor der Notwendigkeit, in einem originalen Schöpfungspunkt eine Erneuerung des deutschen geistigen Lebens zu vollbringen” (qtd. in Scheffel 29). In 1947, Hans Werner
Richter wrote about the need for the concept of magical realism and the function it had to perform in post-war German literature. In his opinion, the grim experiences of the war and the Holocaust, the dubiety in intellectual thought and the spiritual confusion of the people made it imperative that realism rise above the mere depiction of ‘the objective’ into the ‘magical’ (Scheffel 31). The task of magical realism, according to Richter, is “in der unmittelbaren realistischen Aussage dennoch hinter der Wirklichkeit das Unwirkliche, hinter der Realität das Irrationale, hinter dem großen gesellschaftlichen Wandlungsprozeß die Wirklichkeit des Menschen sichtbar werden zu lassen” (qtd. in Scheffel 31).

Leonard Forster concretized his views on the importance of magical realism in a paper, ‘Über den Magischen Realismus in der heutigen deutschen Dichtung,’ which he presented in February 1949. In the conclusion of his paper, he insists that “der Mythos lebt in uns, in uns weben die Urkräfte der Natur, die wir so lange vergessen, daß wir die Atombombe zustandegebracht haben. Das ist der Sinn des magischen Realismus, der es uns überläß, die Konsequenzen zu ziehen” (qtd. in Scheffel 37).

Thus, the general feeling among the intellectual and literary community was that in an attempt to describe the horrors of the Holocaust, the systematically planned persecutions of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps and also to find an explanation for it, one can not remain in the realm of the rational. It is only by going a step beyond the rational, the logical, that one can explain the other side of reality, the reality that is beyond our typical understanding of the world. Magical realism was considered to be an apt tool that could serve this purpose of rendering reality, the irrationality and the incomprehensibility of the wars and the concentration camps. It was, as Hans Werner
Richter believed, "der Weg aus dem Vakuum unserer Zeit zu einer neuen Wirklichkeit" (qtd. in Scheffel 31). Thus, magical realism appears to be essentially a German phenomenon; its coming to existence itself seems to be entirely a need of a war-stricken, complex society for a newer and better world, for a "geistiger Neuanfang," for a clean start "tabula rasa." However, with the translation and publication of Roh's book *Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* in Spanish as early as 1928, magical realism reached South America and by the 1940s, it came became a means of "expressing the authentic American mentality" (Guenther, 53; Chandy 17).

1.2. MAGICAL REALISM IN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

With the appearance of Angel Flores's article "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" in 1955, magical realism was acknowledged as a popular technique in Latin American literature. By the 1960s, the term magical realism came to be associated with the writings of certain intellectuals and literary critics, who were involved in the issues of Third Worldism, civil rights and anti-imperialist protests (Durix 116). Talking about the commonalities between them, Rushdie observes

Those of us, who did not have our origins in the countries of the mighty West, or North, had something in common – not, certainly, anything as simplistic as a unified ‘third world’ outlook, but at least some knowledge of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel. (qtd. in Brennen 62)
The repossessing of the writers' and their people's "reality," this view from underneath is one of the central elements of postcolonial writing. To the colonized, Durix argues, the primary images of "reality" had been offered by the colonizers and it is against these images that these intellectuals were rebelling (80). Colonizers often justified their imperialism as being prompted by the 'duty' of the 'superior' or 'white' race to bring light to the uncivilized darker races (150). However, from the perspective of the colonized, instead of enlightenment, colonization brought about the destruction of the indigenous people's culture, language and traditional patterns of living (Baker 3). Thus, the "reality" of the colonial process was perceived differently by the colonizers and the colonized. In their writing, postcolonial writers offer a different perspective, another or alternative reinterpretation of historical events often to expose or acknowledge the hidden side of the colonizer's history.

Apart from the issues of history such as effects of colonization and postcolonial identity in the world, one of the major concerns of postcolonial writing is the postcolonial "doubled identity or history." The colonized cannot refrain from defining their identity in terms of the dual worlds they are forced to inhabit (Baker 2). Magical realism, by opening up hybrid spaces and facilitating the overlap of diverse worldviews, coexistence of various versions of history, and fusion of conflicting identities, encompasses very well the postcolonial double identity and experience. In postcolonial writing, magical realism offers a suitable means of expressing the dual reality of the colonized – the worldviews of the colonizers alongside, but not replacing, those of the indigenous people.

Although the European intellectual tradition is associated with the rational and the scientific worldview, myths, superstitions, belief in and reliance on the supernatural
are not completely foreign and incomprehensible to the European mind. However, unlike
the scientific and the rational that do not manifest themselves in different ways in
different cultures, indigenous myths, beliefs and superstitions do. Hence this level of
reality, that of myths and beliefs of the indigenous communities as presented in
postcolonial writing, is inexplicable to the European worldview. Thus, what is perfectly
usual for the people of non-European nations is considered to be “bizarre” and
“mysterious” for the European mind. Rushdie has noted that his works have often been
read as fantastic in the West and as wholly realistic in India and Pakistan (qtd. in Bassi
49).

The indigenous people of formerly colonized nations occupied hybrid spaces not
only during the colonial period but they have continued to do so ever since. Postcolonial
writers concerned about presenting modern realities and postcolonial histories of their
nations have to deal with diverse worldviews, identities and cultural forms. Intellectuals
and writers of postcolonial/ developing nations, who write about the current political
situations, socio-economic issues, cultures and its conflicts, societies in transition and the
people of their nation, often resort to magical realism. According to Brenda Cooper, the
reason behind the widespread emergence of magical realism in the literature of
postcolonial regions is

[...] the fact that these countries encountered Western capitalism, technology and
education haphazardly. Communications – road and rail – were set up where raw
materials required transportation; elsewhere areas remained isolated and only
indirectly transformed by new economies. Cities grew wildly from rural origins,
and families were divided between members who were Western-educated and
those who remained inserted in pre-colonial economies and ways of seeing things,
with any number of positions between these extremes. This social patchwork,
dizzying in its cacophony of design, is the cloth from which the fictional magical
carpet is cut. (15 - 16)
As Cooper's metaphor of a patchwork magical carpet suggests, magical realism is a suitable means to express the multidimensional aspects of postcolonial experience. However, magical realism is not employed in postcolonial or postwar context alone. It has been employed by several writers from different parts of the world and enjoys an important position in contemporary world literature.

Magical realism thrives amongst transitions, margins, and ambiguity (15). Such experiences of transition, exploration and transgression of boundaries and uncertainty in everyday life are not unique only to postwar and postcolonial conditions. They are especially common among the traumatized and marginalized, such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, victims of slave trade, and the disabled. Therefore the need to interpret and reinterpret current and historical events is shared by the aforementioned people. These new interpretations present an alternative viewpoint that is often contradictory to the popular beliefs and opinions, thus offering resistance to dominant ideologies and cultural structures and giving a voice with which to confront these imposed viewpoints.

The techniques of magical realism - amalgamation of the fantastic and the mundane, coexistence of diverse perspectives, use of exaggeration, heightened imagery, metaphor and the elements of the absurd – proffer strategies by which alternative or conflicting viewpoints can be presented simultaneously. Hence, magical realism is used by various writers who have interests in confronting political and cultural conflicts. Writers like Grass and Rushdie have used magical realism to retell histories with the aim of confronting the past as well as exposing those aspects, which are often overlooked, hidden, or manipulated in official accounts of history.
CHAPTER 2

RETELLING HISTORIES

History and fiction have always been notoriously porous genres, of course.
Linda Hutcheon, Metafiction 71

Magical realism not only offers the possibility of a 'dual spatiality' where the
diverse worldviews, cultures, histories and identities of peoples overlap; it also creates a
place where the essentially porous domains 'history' and 'fiction' fuse or coexist. Genres
such as popular legends, folktales, epics, historical poems, history plays, exist both in oral
and written literary traditions. In these genres, the overlap of history and fiction is not a
contemporary phenomenon and exists within, as well as outside, the realm of the magical
realist framework. Classical epics, such as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid,
Vyas Muni's Mahabharata, Valmiki's Ramayana and others are narratives that recount
the deeds of legendary or historical heroes, represent the various historical events and
celebrate the founding of certain nations or cultures. However, these epics also contain
fictional elements. Writers of such classical, historical texts were considered artists,
writers whose concerns came under the scope of literature (Juárez 73).
It was only after the industrial and social revolutions of the eighteenth and
nineteenth century that in Europe the study of history became a distinct discipline, closer
to science, setting itself apart from fictional works (73). The function of history was to
record and explain past events of communities, nations or institutions. However, in the
second half of the twentieth century, intellectuals and artists questioned the historians’
ability to represent events objectively and scientifically on various grounds. As Hayden
White articulates, “every representation of the past has certain specifiable ideological
implications (qtd. in Hutcheon 88). Critics (e.g., Anderson; Durix; Friedrichsmeyer,
Lennox and Zantop) have observed that the prevalent ideological codes or interests are
often based on imagined constructs – roots, communities, nations, nationalism, etc. On
the one hand, such ideological implications question the “objectivity” of historical
writing, on the other, the notion of “objective facts” or “reality” is itself problematic.
Intellectuals and writers, who have openly expressed their distrust of official sources of
documented history, have taken to the rewriting of past but within the literary tradition.
The difficult nature of “objective facts” and its treatment by such writers will be
discussed in the following sections.

2.1. PROBLEMS INHERENT IN DOCUMENTED HISTORY

History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance;
new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truth go to the wall … Only the
mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few
marks…. History loves only those who dominate Her: it is a relationship of
mutual enslavement.

Salman Rushdie, Shame (133-34)
The question that haunts the intellectuals and writers who distrust the authority of history writing is that of whose perspective survives in the end. History comes to existence only after historians recount past events and re-construct them. However, “what” events should be recounted and “how” they should be re-constructed is in the hands of the historians. Events and facts are essentially different: events have no meaning in themselves, while facts are given meaning to suit specifiable purposes. It is the historians who decide which events become facts (Hutcheon 90). The description of these events are further altered and manipulated in their description in favor of the dominating racial, cultural, and national powers. Thus, historical representations and media documents of events do not remain objective; they often contain elements of fictionalization.

History writing has many purposes to serve – one of them is to make past events understandable in the present context. However, those in power often appropriate this purpose of history writing to retain their dominance and to influence popular opinions. The prevalent political ideologies or interests of certain dominant classes, societies, communities and nations influence which events historians choose to recount.

The prevalent political ideologies and interests of a nation are often rooted in its perception of its national identity. Benedict Anderson argues that nationality, nation-ness and nationalism are essentially “imagined” constructs. They are, according to him, cultural artifacts (4). National identity, therefore, is derived from imagined constructs of nation-ness, national past, ethnicity and heritage, national interests and ambitions, cultural and racial hierarchy.
Similarly, Partha Chatterjee argues that nationalism is primarily a cultural phenomenon (1). Anderson and Chatterjee attribute the birth and rise of nationalism to the birth and rise of science, industrialism, and democracy after Enlightenment (Anderson 11; Chatterjee 2). Accordingly, Chatterjee opines that nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political manner the urge for liberty and progress (2). At the same time, he also points out that nationalism and liberty have on several occasions been antithetical to each other. In his opinion, nationalism has been the cause of the most destructive wars ever seen, it has justified the brutality of Nazism and Fascism; it has become the ideology of racial hatred in the colonies and has given birth to some of the most irrational revivalist movements as well as the most oppressive political regimes in the contemporary world (2).

The rationales for the wars, heinous acts, and oppression are often propagandized with promises of liberty and progress to people and are stated in noble-sounding rhetoric. On the other, the actual events and happenings are, in most cases, recorded from the perspectives of the perpetrators and victors. To that end, the concept of quantifiable time and, hence, history developed parallel to the post-Enlightenment notions discussed above. Therefore, that which has been written under the scope of "world" history has often been described from the perspective of the dominant cultures.

Referring to European colonialism, Jürgen Osterhammel suggests that the national identity of colonizers is deeply rooted in their imagined constructs of nation and nationalism (qtd. in Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop 18). These imagined constructs manifest themselves in various ways: patriotism and desire for an empire, ideas of self
worth and violent acquisition of colonies, "natural" right of the stronger over the weaker, the natural hierarchy of races, the civilizing mission, etc (Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, Zantop 18-25; Durix 150-151). Thus colonialism could be linked to the ideas of national identity, of self-worth, and of superiority of culture and nation. The history written by colonizing cultures was written in such a way as to further the construct of national identity and to justify their actions as heroic and patriotic.

However, colonialism – accession of faraway territories - was not the only outward expression of the imagined national identity. The fascist and the national socialist movements of the twentieth century could be similarly attributed to the nations’ ideas of national identity, nationalism and patriotism. These movements exalted the nation (and often race) above the individual and supported a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader. Any kind of resistance or opposition was ruthlessly suppressed and there was severe economic and social regimentation. In such political environments, media and news are strongly controlled and events are censored, manipulated or even created to influence the popular opinion and to suppress any seeds of resistance.

In response to the devastating effects of the two World Wars, fascist and Nazi regimes, steps were taken to institutionally monitor and check the crimes against humanity that occur in the name of nationalism. During the Second World War, the United Nations was established with the hope of stabilizing international relations, giving peace a secure foundation and to collectively fight against the Axis Powers. In 1960, the United Nations passed the Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the
human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom (Modern History Sourcebook, UN Declaration). Despite these efforts at resolving international conflicts, the later half of the twentieth century saw a new kind of imperialism.

This imperialism manifested itself as the control over the developing nations and ex-colonies by various emerging superpowers. This imposed control could be attributed to class or race ideologies or even to economic and monetary interests. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, coined the term neocolonialism to describe this political relationship between nations. The emerging superpowers, such as the United States, exercise control over the developing nations or former colonies economic or monetary means (Nkrumah ix-x). They – as Britain and France did in the past - use seemingly noble and inspiring rhetoric to manufacture the rationales for their imperial treatment of developing nations. These powers are depicted by their news media as acting for the well-being of the society (James Peck xi).

History is also influenced by internal powers and political ideologies. The term neo-colonialism is also attributed to the imperialistic tendencies that surface in the political relationship between the ruling local elites and the masses in the developing ex-colonies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 163). Many postcolonial elite politicians had worked closely with the colonial machinery and were educated and trained by the colonialist powers. Critics argue that these elites use inherited imperialist strategies against their own people, exploiting national loyalty. National histories of these countries often recount events from the perspective of the ruling elites rather than the masses;
actions taken for their own self-interest are explained with the noble sounding rhetoric of nationalism.

Thus, world histories and histories of individual nations are always influenced by the prevalent ideological codes of the dominating classes, races, cultures and economic superpowers. In his introduction to the book The Chomsky Reader, James Peck insists that “in every society, groups will emerge to disguise the obvious, to obfuscate the workings of power, to spin a web of mystification through transcendent goals and purposes, totally benign, that allegedly guide national policy”(xi-xii). These groups - politicians, big businesses, so-called educators, and religious leaders – influence official sources of information to attain their own interests. Peck points out that in such a society where information is so heavily controlled by the prevalent political ideologies and financial interests that even “influential” critics are obedient and submissive to the state machinery (xii).

There are, however, intellectuals and cultural critics who challenge the objectivity of the official news and historical sources and who have taken on the task of tearing down the objective façade that covers the ideologies and interests of such powerful groups. Some critics, such as Günter Grass and Salman Rushdie, have opted to rewrite the present, along with past events within the context of literature, using magical realist techniques to retell specific histories.
2.2. IMPORTANCE OF RETELLING HISTORIES

Redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it. And particularly at times when the State takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs ... Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one of denying the official, politician's version of the truth.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (14)

Challenging the authority of history, certain modern writers have sought to do away with the separation of the literary and the historical in their novels. The motivation of these novels is to challenge the validity of documented history and to lay bare the other side of history or to give alternative histories. However, they do not aim at documenting the hidden or alternative "facts." Rather they attempt to re-stage or re-play, to gain a better understanding of and to explore the "whys," "whats" and "hows" behind these events while acknowledging the different ways they were perceived by their witnesses.

The traditional historical novel is defined as a novel that sets its events and characters in a well-defined historical context and may include both fictional and real characters. (Hawthorne 31). Historical novels enact certain historical processes by presenting a microcosm from which the broader picture of historical events can be drawn. Historical novels incorporate data and introduce real figures from the past to lend a sense of veracity to their fictional worlds. Historical novels try to stay true to the observable reality and to documented historical records (Hutcheon 71-87).

However, the novels of culturally critical intellectuals are strikingly different in that they question the very authority of documented history. Their novels aim at exposing
the ideological implication of historical representation, as they question objectivity of "facts" or "reality" itself. Explaining the ambiguous nature of reality, Rushdie states: "History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of been given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as our perceptiveness and knowledge" (Rushdie, 1991: 25). These novels also acknowledge the plurality in perception of historical events and question the assumption of "absolute" or "unified reality." In his conversation with Rushdie, Günter Grass insists, "We have many realities. Our problem is that we don't accept that there are many realities. This side wants only this reality, and the other only their own reality. This is one of the reasons we still have this struggle" (qtd. in Reder 76). Thus, the writers of these novels restage historical events but they are intensely conscious of their intentions and the manner in which they do so.

Grass's Die Blechtrommel and Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children are two such novels that aim at exposing the problems inherent in documented history. While Die Blechtrommel, a post-war novel, deals with the German history of about sixty years from the end of the nineteenth century, Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, a postcolonial novel encompasses the events that took place in the history of India from about a decade after the turn of the century until the 1970s.Narrated in first person, both novels are written in an intensely self-reflective form and, at the same time, they introduce historical context in such a way as to make historical knowledge debatable.

Both Grass and Rushdie call themselves “writers” and are extremely aware of their roles as public intellectuals. In a conversation with Grass, Rushdie reiterates Grass's
view that in a time when politicians and media openly lie to influence or manufacture\textsuperscript{3} public opinion, it is the writers’ duty to tell the truth (Reder 73-74). Rushdie and Grass believe the writer should also write to prevent “the passage of time,” as Grass expresses, “ein Schriftsteller ist jemand, der gegen die verstrechende Zeit schreibt” (Schnecke 169). The role is not to let the world forget the inhuman and barbaric events of the past and ideally prevent historical events from repeating themselves.

At the same time, Rushdie questions our ability to accurately render past events and experiences in their completeness. Rushdie insists that the “pastness” of the past can never be reproduced; its essence can never be recaptured (Sanga 26). Our past experiences are not stored as they were, in their completeness, but rather in bits and pieces, scraps and fragments. Individuals who have traveled from the past into the present and will continue their journey into the future are forced to deal with the past in “broken mirrors,” excluding those fragments irretrievably lost along the way. In Rushdie’s view, such fragmentary memories occur because “human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (Rushdie, 1991: 10-12). The way we put the fragments together depends upon us, how we remake reality to suit our present purpose, and also upon the information that our memory provides. Memory, however, does not necessarily store the truth. Memory is more like a tool that selects, eliminates, filters, refines, alters, exaggerates and vilifies and in the end creates its own reality (\textit{MC} 253). Rushdie, nevertheless, insists that the fallibility of memory does not necessarily render impossible the historical projects undertaken by critics like Grass and himself (Sanga 26). He insists

\textsuperscript{3} As defined in Noam Chomsky’s “Manufacturing Consent”
that it is possible to hold the world together, to glue the multitudinous fragments of past experiences and to reconstruct the past by infusing either the element of fantasy or individual perceptions of the world.

When we try to recall the past, we often re-order and "re-member" these events so that they are comprehensible in the present context. When memories are pieced together, their fragmentary nature inevitably creates gaps. To create a cohesive unit, the fragments need to be reshaped and glued together. We use different techniques to interpret life experience that are acquired from cultural backgrounds – such as religious beliefs, collective myths and superstitions, and regional perspectives. These techniques form the basis of the process of gluing and reshaping the different fragments of memory. It allows for a resurrection of the past as a meaningful unit that incorporates both the tangible and the intangible. In this way, writers like Grass and Rushdie also attempt to resurrect past events and present them in a comprehensible way to their readers. Thus, magical realism offers a literary means to re-describe events in a way that questions documented history.
CHAPTER 3

GRASS AND RUSHDIE

Given the vast differences between Germany and India the choice of novels by a German author and an Indian author seems to be an unlikely one. However, that is not true with regard to Grass and Rushdie, as critics have often associated the two writers with one another. Additionally, Grass and Rushdie have had a supportive relationship and have publicly responded to each other's work. While Rushdie has openly acknowledged his debt to Grass in an essay entitled "Günter Grass," Grass formally resigned from the Berlin Academy of the Arts in protest against the lack of public support for Rushdie who had been condemned to death by fundamentalist Islamic religious leaders (O'Neill 9-10).

In the summer of 1967, Rushdie read Grass's The Tin Drum in Ralph Manheim's English translation. The encounter with the novel was, for him, one of his most important "passports" that gave him, as he gratefully stated, the permits he needed to write. In his essay on Grass, Rushdie writes about the role that books can play for aspiring writers.

There are books that open doors for their readers, doors in the head, doors whose existence they had not previously suspected. And then there are readers who dream of becoming writers; they are searching for the strangest door of all,
scheming up ways to travel through the page, to end up inside and also behind the writing, to lurk between the lines; while other readers, in their turn, pick up books and begin to dream. For these Alices, these would-be migrants from the World to the Book, there are (if they are lucky) books which give them the permission to travel, so to speak, permission to become the sort of writers they have it in themselves to be. A book is kind of a passport. (Rushdie, 1991: 276)

In a conversation with Grass, Rushdie states that it is the desire to tell stories that made him a writer (qtd. in Reder 75). For him, the desire to tell stories overlaps with the desire to redescribe the world in order to change it. Rushdie is compelled to write and he speaks of the influence of Grass’s The Tin Drum on his attitude toward writing.

This is what Grass’s great novel said to me in drumbeats: Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody-minded. And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things – childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves – that go on slipping, like sand through our fingers. I have tried to learn the lesson like the midget drummer. And once more, which I got from that other immense work, Dog Years: When you have done it once, start all over again and do it better. (Rushdie, 1991: 277)

Dealing with the past events and experiences, lost attachments, unhealed wounds and scars and coming to terms with them is central to the writings of both Grass and Rushdie. These are stored as dispersed fragments of memory, and writing is one way of acknowledging, understanding and coming to terms with them. In his Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke, Grass notes, “danach lebte ich längere Zeit kaum, schrieb nur und war Sammelstelle für Zerstreutes, auch für ordnungsgemäße Abgänge. [...] Ich habe alles notiert und den rechtmäßigen Besitzern zurückzuerstatten versucht” (90). It is through his writing that Grass is able to deal with the fragments and return them to their owners. The effort is to not let the past slip by in order to prevent the horrific historical events from repeating themselves.
Die Blechtrommel explores that part of German history which includes World War I, the rise and fall of Nazism, and World War II. The "truth" about the concentration camps, the unnecessary sacrifice of an entire generation of the nation's youth, the burden of guilt and the sense of loss were borne with silence, denial or resignation. Efforts were made to forget the past and restore "normalcy" to life. After the uncertainty and hunger of the postwar period, the Germans yearned for financial security and soon achieved economic prosperity (Brooks xxix). Grass saw a sensitive relationship between the increasing economic growth of Postwar Germany and its Nazi past (O'Neill 1).

Midnight's Children covers that part of Indian history when the struggle to free India from imperial British rule began, up until the time when democracy was suspended under Indira Gandhi. The freedom struggle pursued an image of a free, independent, democratic, secular, economically stable, and technologically advanced India. However, with the transfer of power the Indian politicians and neo-elites also inherited the colonizers' ways and means of controlling their subjects, the worst manifestation of this being the Emergency proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. There was utter disappointment visible in the fate of postcolonial India, the bitterness because of broken promises and the humiliation at India's inability to rid the corruption of the Raj (qtd. in Needham 57).

Set in culturally and historically different societies, the novels deal with distinctly separate political events and unique national experiences. What brings these authors in the same sphere of discussion is their attitude toward writing or rather their purpose of writing and also their quest to deal with the past. This purpose is not merely to recount the past but to recount these events and experiences in a specific way that offers a
different perspective that challenges history documented by dominant institutions, such as governments, businesses, and universities. Motivated by an inner need, both Grass and Rushdie are compelled to write and are intensely conscious of their role as writers who hope to have a beneficial impact on society.

3.1. ROLE OF THE WRITER

Both Grass and Rushdie are politically committed writers. Finding it inevitable to get involved in political processes, they are not writers who can be satisfied looking down from an ivory tower. Talking about his inability to prevent politics from entering his writing, Grass states, “if sometimes I wish to write or do something that has nothing to do with politics, in the second sentence the history of my country, my own history, is taking me back to the ugly reality we are living in today” (qtd. in Reder 74). It is the history of his country that forms a central part of his writing. Through his writing he is determined not to allow Germans to forget the past. Representing an entire generation’s loss of childhood and chance to grow in a healthy and peaceful environment, he works assiduously to prevent such horrific events from repeating themselves.

In fact, Grass, not content with his literary efforts, actively participates in grassroots politics. In 1965, he began making speeches for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), a party he later joined. He campaigned against Kurt Georg Kiesinger’s appointment as Chancellor and was very critical of the rise of the National Democratic Party (NPD) of Germany. He was deeply disconcerted by Germany’s economic recovery.
remilitarization, treaties with the West, banning of the Communist Party and later even the reunification of Germany. For him, the reunification of Germany implied a concentration of power within Germans borders that had proven dangerous to the world twice already (Brooks 61-66).

Rushdie, on the other hand, is deeply disturbed by the state of the partitioned subcontinent he had left behind. Works such as Midnight's Children, Shame, and Moor's Last Sigh, are his bitter critiques of the disparity between the vision of a secular, united "India" (India and Pakistan comprised one subcontinent before Independence) and what the partitioned parts of it had become after Independence. Rushdie explores postcolonial "responsibility" in that he writes honestly about the problems of post-independence India and Pakistan. The central irony of his novels is that independence itself has damaged the countries' spirits by proving that their people can act as abominably as the British did. In fact, he has often compared Indira Gandhi's regime and her decision to declare Emergency to the imperial rule of the British. For him, the heroism of nationalism has evolved into "nationalist demagogy of caste, of domestic sell-outs and power-brokers" (Brennan 27). This disappointment, humiliation, and bitterness in the fate of the subcontinent emerge as important themes in his writings.

Having always insisted on "the writer's adversarial relationship with dominant ideologies, [Rushdie] has described his own work in particular as proceeding from the desire to represent alternative, emancipatory perspectives that are excluded, suppressed or marginalized by dominant presentations" (Needham 51). Both Grass and Rushdie are not content with describing the world as it is but they aspire to improve it. In their writings, they recall official accounts alongside their own version in a deliberate attempt to re-play
those events. Re-playing, Needham explains, entails re-viewing or going over, while
looking for something that may have been overlooked, intentionally omitted or altered.
She insists the “original” or the prior representation is itself something “constructed” and
“staged.” Re-playing these events helps explore the ways in which the prior
representations were constructed (53). Grass and Rushdie’s efforts at re-staging and re-
playing are not “uncritical repetitions of the hegemonic representations.”4 In their
writings, they work within the structures of presentation by which the powerful have
secured domination. Re-playing for them entails “inhabiting those structures once again
so that the contradictions, silences and exclusions through which they established their
authority and made themselves invincible are revealed” (51).

The urge to re-play, to re-view and to look back, according to Rushdie, is shared
by most writers, who are often exiles, expatriates or emigrants and are haunted by some
sense of loss (Rushdie, 1991:10). Here we come to Rushdie’s notion of “migration” in
relation to the broader questions of roots and community, nation, nationalism, patriotism,
and national histories. Rushdie strongly believes that migrants’ unique experience – of
leaving familiar habitats and reconstructing a new relationship with the world – endows
them with the capability of viewing the world differently. This migrants’ vision is
important in countering the authoritative discourse.

---

4 I borrow this phrase from Needham’s comment on Rushdie (61)
3.2. MIGRATION

The fictional writings of both Grass and Rushdie are conspicuously influenced by their personal experiences with migration. Moreover, the theme of migration has been discussed and analyzed at length by Rushdie in his non-fictional writings. In his essay, *Location of Brazil*, he introduces the term “migrant sensibility” to describe migrants’ unique experiences as being the “central theme of the century of displaced persons” (124). Rushdie explains the uniqueness of migrants’ experiences as he writes:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human beings: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest sense strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross the frontier (124-25).

Rushdie admits that migration across frontiers is not the only form of the phenomenon; all of us are in some ways migrants, traveling from the past into the present. Furthermore, he insists that those who have been “out-of-country” and even “out-of-language” experience the loss in a more intensified form (12). The physical fact of discontinuity, of finding one’s present self in a different place from one’s past, is a tangible loss.

In Rushdie's opinion, “a full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds themselves surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own.” Thus, a migrant loses all three – roots, language, and social norms – that
define his or her identity. He insists that under such circumstances the migrant “is obliged to find new ways of defining himself, new ways of being human” (278).

Rushdie himself was born in Bombay, India where he spent his childhood until the age of fourteen when he was sent to England to study. After futile attempts to return to his family (who had, to Rushdie’s disappointment, immigrated to Pakistan) and start a career in Pakistan, Rushdie went back to England to study at Cambridge University. After graduating, he continued to live in England (Sanga 15). Thus, Rushdie is a “full” migrant; he has, by choice, lost his country, he was obliged to do away with Urdu, and he has been living in a country that is culturally and socially different from his.

In his essay on Grass, Rushdie insists that Grass too is a migrant and has suffered triple dislocation. Grass was born in Langfuhr, a suburb of the Free city of Danzig; Langfuhr is now Wrzeszcz, a suburb of the Polish city of Gdansk. At seventeen, he left home as a German soldier and was interned by the American forces in Bavaria at the end of the war. As part of the American re-education, he was taken on a tour of the concentration camp at Dachau an experience that fundamentally changed his life. After his release, he worked in Rhineland, Hannover, and then later in Düsseldorf. After traveling in Europe he lived in Paris for three years and then moved back to Berlin (O’Neill 1-3). Although he has continued to live in a society whose norms are known to him, Grass lost his city, Danzig and the Kashubian dialect of his childhood and youth. Rushdie insists that for Grass, as it was for Germany, the end of World War II was, a tough and disrupting frontier that had to be traversed. Therefore, Grass is no less than a “full” migrant.
Rushdie, furthermore, upholds that Grass is actually a “double” migrant. He explains the dual nature of the “triple dislocation” in the case of Grass as a man who has migrated across history. Talking about the first dislocation (loss of roots), Rushdie maintains that Grass lost not only Danzig but also the sense of home as a “safe place”. In regards to linguistic dislocation, the old language that had been misused to espouse Nazi ideologies had to be done away with. Grass, a practitioner of the “rubble literature,” had taken upon himself the task of “reinventing the German language, of tearing it apart, ripping out the poisoned parts, and putting it back together” (Rushdie, 1991: 279).

Talking about the social dislocation, Rushdie refers again to the transformation of German society - from Nazi Germany that Grass experienced and grew up with, to the Germany that he lived in after the fall of Nazism. Rushdie stresses, “Nazi Germany was, in some ways, another country. Grass had to unlearn that country, that way of thinking about society, and learn a new one.” Rushdie sees Grass as not just a “full” migrant but also a “double” migrant, who is “a traveler across borders in the self and in Time” (279-280).

Thus, Grass and Rushdie are migrants; both have experienced “triple dislocation” that is often seen in their writings. Both express their longing for the lost homeland (Rushdie yearns for Bombay; Grass for Danzig). Their texts are often sprinkled with relics of their lost languages (Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, etc. in Rushdie’s text; Kashubian in Grass’s). In their writings, one can easily perceive their sentimental attachment to and logical criticism of their lost homeland. While the attachment has its roots in past experiences, the critical attitude ensues from doubt, something that one potentially learns through the process of migration.
Rushdie states that this triple disruption teaches the migrants to doubt, to distrust all those who claim to possess absolute forms of knowledge. Migrants learn to be suspicious of all total explanations and all systems of thought that purport to be complete (280). In such situations, migrants are forced to re-define their identities, to re-evaluate their perceptions and understanding of the world. Rushdie insists migrants must, by necessity, make a new, imaginative relationship with the world (125). They have to create a “third space” for themselves; they have to construct for themselves imaginary homelands where the ideas and values of the old culture are persevered and mingled with that of the new culture.

However, inhabiting such imaginary homelands often puts the migrants at odds with the normative behaviors and assertions of not just the new or adopted country but also the country left behind. Such migrants inevitably find themselves in adversarial positions to the dominant ideologies and authorities. By occupying a “third place,” these migrants are unaffected by the imagined constructs, such as nation, nationality, and nation-ness. According to Rushdie “to be a migrant is, perhaps to be the only species free of the shackles of nationalism (to say nothing of its ugly sister, patriotism)”(124). They are not confined within the narrowly defined national boundaries and cultural permits. Migrants are forced to describing themselves outside of such narrow constraints; they are forced, in a way, to think of themselves as humans rather than citizens.

Having such a migrant’s vision, or “migrant sensibility,” aids those writers who seek to challenge the dominant ideologies, the normative patterns of behaviors and assertions. It is the migrant’s creativity and imaginative power that endows them the ability to deal with the problems of our day-to-day world and offer us an optimistic vision.
of a better world. Therefore, such writers inevitably find themselves deeply involved in politics but taking resistant or oppositional stance to the dominant structures. In their writings, they use their imagination to challenge the states that suppress and alter the recording of events for their own purpose. Literature is a “world of imagination...a place into which the long arm of the law is unable to reach” (122).

These writers seek to reveal the suppressions - manipulations, silences, and omissions within dominant records - by inhabiting those very structures. Even while working within such structures, they incorporate elements of imagination to consciously challenge them. Rushdie explains, “techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be. Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed” (122). Drawing on such techniques from magical realism, these writers try to breakdown the conventional world-view, the unchallenged authority of dominant structures and the unquestioned influence of political ideologies of a state or country on historical processes.

Grass and Rushdie are two such writers, well-armed with their weapons of imagination, who have taken upon themselves the task of exposing the schemes of power and their impact on human existence. Through their writing, they explore problems created by the dichotomy inherent within mankind – that is, those created by the perpetrators of violent histories and the general populations which consist of both supporters and victims of such violence. What Rushdie writes about the message of Grass’s works is true of his own work too: “We aren’t dead yet. We may be in deep
trouble but we aren't done for. And while there is life there must be analysis, struggle, persuasion, argument, polemic, rethinking, and all the other longish words that add up to one very short word: hope” (281).
CHAPTER 4

MAGICAL REALISM IN GÜNTER GRASS’S DIE BLECHTROMMEL AND SALMAN RUSHDIE’S MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN

Die Blechtrommel and Midnight’s Children explore the absurdly inhuman and gruesome historical processes of twentieth century Germany and India. They cover the turbulent period that witnessed wars, racism, communal violence, partitions, shifting boundaries, forced migrations and expulsion of peoples and culminated in the persecution of Jews in Germany and the widespread vasectomies and sterilizations performed in India (Merivale 334). Various efforts have been made to interpret and find comprehensive approaches towards dealing with these human experiences. One way of coping has been to record history in either a “factual” (non-fiction) or fictional manner. Written by historians who aim at objectivity, documented factual history, even in its attempt at fairness, can only record the static events silencing a whole range of human experiences that participated in the making of history. It cannot capture the bewildering and mind-boggling human experiences that at once motivated, resisted, witnessed and endured these historical processes. It does not portray the intensity and horrors of the historical actualities that go beyond the point of human endurance and understanding. For these
reasons, fictional history, as discussed in Chapter 3, provides a better means to capture history because of the possibilities contained in aesthetic expressions.

In their fictional accounts of history, Grass and Rushdie foreground the experiences, dealings and sufferings of the common people, who have participated and witnessed the national historical processes. They depict the lives of the people, their optimism and resistance, their greed and martyrdom, their pain and success, their silences and illusions - all that motivated and were a result of these historical processes. However, to capture the irrationality of the wars, the loopholes and hidden facts, inconceivable dealings and unbelievable motives, one cannot remain within the realm of rationality. As the events that Grass and Rushdie write about are so incomprehensible, they have to imagine the absurd or the “unreal” in order to recreate past events in their completeness. Therefore, while inhabiting the very structures of documented history, their accounts introduce the elements of the fantastic and the marvelous, drawing upon the techniques of magical realism.

Whether Grass and Rushdie consciously use the techniques of magical realism cannot be said with surety. Both find Realism to be too limited to express their concerns. For Rushdie, who is influenced by the oral tradition of India, the use of the marvelous and the fantastic is a natural way of storytelling (Reder: 2000, 75). Grass, on the other hand, is influenced by the early Expressionism, the Romantic tradition as well the tradition of Bildungsroman and Entwicklungromans in German literature (75). Both borrow the techniques of comedy, fantasy, heightened imagery, metaphor, etc from these traditions. What brings them under the realm of magical realism is that, in their works,
fantastic or exaggerated elements are introduced into a realistic framework in a matter-of-fact way.

Critics such Alejo Carpentier have drawn clear distinctions between European and postcolonial characteristics of magical realism (75). European magical realism implies the reconstruction of human experiences and everyday life while capturing the “spiritual” or “magic of being.” Magical realism in postcolonial context is considered to be the amalgamation of the magical (owed often to the indigenous mentality) and the rational (often owed to the Western scientific influences due to colonialism). Grass and Rushdie’s works cannot be read strictly on the basis of these distinctions. Rushdie mingles the rational with the improbable that has its roots not only in the native Indian traditions but also the traditions of the Catholic religion (Kortenaar 21). These Catholic beliefs and other superstitions also form an integral part of Grass’s novel. Like Grass, Rushdie too attributes certain unexplainable traits to his characters and the events they witness, traits that are incomprehensible even to the mindsets of the indigenous Indian people.

Magical realism, as I want to suggest here, creates a worldview in which life’s many dimensions, seen and unseen, tangible and intangible, rational and mysterious, coexist. It treats other aspects of human life – superstitions, hallucinations, dreams, errors of perception, insanity, delusion, etc – in the same light as the visible mundane actualities of everyday life. It also permits imagination to take over the dry and clinically “objective” description of events, in order to recreate past events in a certain completeness that conventional history records are unable to achieve.

---

5 *Midnight Children*’s protagonist Saleen is very much influenced by the tales and superstitions of his nanny Mary Pereira who is a devout Catholic.
Based on this deliberation, I will attempt to explore the various magical realist traits evident in Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Furthermore, I discuss how these writers use magical realist techniques to break down conventional attitudes toward history, to challenge the authority of dominant structures and political ideologies and to redescribe the world with the hope of improving it.

4.1. THE NOVELS’ NARRATORS

Grass and Rushdie do not speak directly in their novels; instead we hear the respective voices of their invented protagonists, Oskar and Saleem. They are the central characters of the novels, first-person narrators whose voices cannot be mistaken for that of their creators. They are both fantastic creations, absurd figures who have maintained an isolated worldview, witnessed grotesques historical processes and undertaken various journeys and identities in life. At the time the protagonists begin writing their seminal accounts, both are approaching the age of thirty (Merivale 332). They are physically deformed, impotent and trapped in “crumbling overused bod[ies]” (*MC* 4). Oskar is a four-foot one gnome, and an inmate of a mental asylum, Saleem is a “big-headed and top-heavy dwarf” (*MC* 533) in the state of disintegration. This state is very much the result of their being “mysteriously handcuffed to history,” of being “heavily embroiled in Fate” (*MC* 4). Forced to bare witness to the grotesque historical processes of their times, their lives are a sum total of everything they have lived, witnessed and endured.
Having faced historical actualities that seem so improbable and irrational, both Oskar and Saleem acknowledge that in order to make “meaning,” the element of the absurd is bound to surface in their accounts. Saleem notes, “If I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (MC 4). Oskar, too, explains that if the miraculous and the unbelievable exist in his text, they exist because they are essential for the text to make some sense as a whole. “Man mag in diese Erklärungen die verständliche Sucht des Menschen erkennen, die da jedem Wunder den Beweis liefern möchte. Oskar muß gestehen, daß auch er jedes Mirakel genaustens untersucht, bevor er es als ungläubwürdige Phantasterei zur Seite schiebt” (DB 493).

The expanse, depth, and intensity of Oskar and Saleem’s experiences and endurances are so vast and unfathomable, that both seem to have lived much longer than their thirty years. They embody the whole of their times which have infiltrated and “leaked” into their very bodies. Commencing to write about his life, Saleem notes,

there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you will have to swallow the lot as well (MC 4).

Hence, both Oskar and Saleem begin their stories not at their birth, but about thirty years before they were born covering a period twice as long as their lived-lives. Saleem insists, “I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth” (MC 4). In the same spirit Oskar states: “Ich beginne weit vor mir, denn niemand sollte sein Leben beschreiben, der nicht die Geduld aufbringt, vor dem
Datieren der eigenen Existenz wenigstens der Hälfte seiner Großeltern zu gedenken” (DB 12). Convinced about the necessity of recapitulating the experiences of their previous generations, both Oskar and Saleem begin their stories only after having introduced their parents and grandparents.

4.2. FAMILIES AND HISTORIES

Every family history carries with itself an array of experiences that are inevitably tied to the external historical occurrences of their times (Sell 2). The subjective experiences – small details about day-to-day lives affected by contemporary political decisions and processes – are often stored as anecdotes and stories that are transmitted orally from one generation to another. In a way, these experiences help us understand and make sense of our present, which is in the process of becoming history. These subjective elements validate as well as challenge the authority of documented history. Both Oskar and Saleem interweave the fictional (hi)stories of their families and friends with their own in order to render the historical events in their completeness (Engel 123). Oskar’s story mainly includes that of the Bronskis and the Matzeraths and their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. Saleem’s account includes the stories of the Sinais, Azizes, Zulfikars, Khans and their friends, relatives and neighbors. Oskar and Saleem each begin their family histories from the point in time when their grandparents meet each other and get married.

Oskar brings his grandmother Anna Bronski into the narrative in the year 1899, as she finds herself in the heart of Kashubia. Saleem introduces his grandfather Aadam
Aziz, who has returned from Germany to the peaceful mountains of Kashmir in the year 1915. Although, Kashubia and Kashmir have little to do with each and are geographically set far apart, there are certain similarities especially with regard to the lives of the local people. Finding themselves geographically between two nations torn by conflict, the Kashubians, between Germany and Poland, and the Kashmiris, between Indian and Pakistan, are the first affected in case of crisis.

The Kashubians are an old Slavonic race, who inhabit the hilly country to the West of Danzig. They are an ethnic group with a culture of their own and a language separate from yet closely related to Polish (Hellington 5). Over centuries the Kashubian region was alternately ruled by the Germans and the Poles, due to the ever-shifting boundaries resulting from the wars between the two countries. Since the first partition of Poland in 1772, the Kashubian territory was a part of the German empire. The centuries-long struggle between Germany and Poland continually intensified after Bismarck’s advent to power (1862) and the Unification of Germany (1871). With the formation of the Empire, Bismarck hoped for a Prussian domination of Poland (Hagen 126). In order to strengthen the central power of the New German Empire, he initiated the Kulturkampf, in which the autonomy of the Catholic Church was sharply curtailed (127). Poles, being predominantly Catholic, felt further threatened by Bismarck’s policies and began their national opposition movement against the Prussian government (128). They were strongly supported by the Kashubians who had always considered themselves part of the Polish people and had historically sided with the Polish cause in the face of German threat (Lutman 18).
Kashmir, on the other hand, was not initially situated between two nations at conflict - mainly because the concepts of political boundaries and nation-states had not yet developed in the Indian subcontinent. However, its location and constitution made it prone to conflict during the Indian freedom struggle and the subsequent partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Over centuries, the central feature of Kashmir’s political history was the constant flow of invasions and dynastic eruptions that brought to power ruling families from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities (Brecher 5). For some decades before the partition, Kashmir was ruled by Hindu dynasties, although a majority of its population became Muslim converts during centuries of Muslim rule (1354-1819). During this time, Hindus and Muslims coexisted with relative mutual understanding and tolerance (Schofield 2-4). At the end of nineteenth century when the Indian national struggle for independence intensified, the British proclaimed the division of the country based on religious differences as a strategy to divide Indian opposition to their imperial rule (Wolpert 273-274). In the wake of this policy of partitioning, there were communal clashes throughout the country. This made Kashmir most susceptible to conflict since it had a large Muslim population but a Hindu ruler (Brecher 3-5).

Oskar and Saleem belong to families that originate from these “in-between” lands. While they owe their heritage to both regions, they do not belong completely to either. Such people are often the first victims in case of wars and strife between the two nations. They suffer the most and bear the brunt of the cruelty and the absurdity of war (Sell 2.2.). Near the end of the novel, Anna Bronksi explains the plight of the Kashubians as she says to Oskar,
So isses mal mit de Kaschuben, Oskarchen. Die trefft es immer am Kopp... Denn mit de Kashuben kann man keine Umzüge machen, die müssen immer dablaiben und Koppchen hinhalten, damit de andern drauf färben können, weil unserains nich richtich polnisch is und nich richtig deitsch jenug, und wenn man Kaschub is, das raicht weder de Deitschen noch de Pollacken. De wollen es immer genau haben! (*DB 500*)

In the same way, Saleem’s family has to always be on guard and is forced to shuttle between the partitioned parts of the Indian subcontinent, and thus unable to set up desired roots. This constant movement ultimately positions them precariously in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, which culminates in their near annihilation. By recounting their families’ historical experiences, Oskar and Saleem present a background, which enhances our understanding of their protagonists’ personal experiences. Through his account, Oskar makes us aware of the uneasy relationship between Poland and Germany and also the imminent wars. Saleem’s stories allude to the impending conflict concerning the region of Kashmir and the growing momentum of the Independence movement.

The events leading up to the political tension occur in the texts much before the actual births of the narrators. Both Oskar and Saleem concentrate mainly on the personal experiences of their ancestors, and include only minimal historical information. However, Saleem and Oskar’s allusions to historical events cannot be overlooked. The reader is faced with highly subjective accounts of the characters’ experiences. This idiosyncratic recreation of historical events, firmly grounded in historical realities is a typical characteristic of magical realism (Faris 169-170). Furthermore, in a magical realist text the bizarre and the unbelievable are often described in a matter-of-fact way. At the same time, the completely mundane could be exaggerated or mythicized. These combinations
imply that the mythic truths and historical events are both essential components of our collective memory (170).

The mythic elements as used by authors who employ techniques of magical realism are essential for a fuller rendering of historical events; they help to elevate the events from their limited scope to a higher level of significance. Social or historical absurdities and their essence are preserved and transmitted through myths. While myth offers "timeless" stability, permanence and continuity, history stands for change, permutation and novelty. Myth allows for an attempt to transcend history, to raise the events from their temporality to perpetual order (Diller 2-3). From the very beginning of their novels, both Saleem and Oskar focus on the mythic, or legendary characteristics of the people, things and events they create.

The first scene of Oskar's account seems to be a reconstruction of harmonic timelessness on the day of creation - before the birth of "measurable history" and human time (11). Anna Bronski is shown sitting alone at the edge of the potato field when her ordered world is disturbed by three frantic men. Scholars have identified Anna Bronski with the Great Earth Mother, an important character from the ancient myths of creation. According to one of such myths, as put forth in Hesoid's Theogony, Earth, Eros and Chaos, are the basic components of human creation and through Eros Earth creates life out of Chaos (11). Similarly, Anna Bronski brings order into the chaotic scene by saving Joseph Koljaiczek and life is created as Koljaiczek and Anna unite on the potato field. Their union receives affirmation from the "festival of rain" that unites the heavens and the earth to create and nurture new life. Oskar provides a matter-of-fact description of their humanly impossible and thus absurd coitus and conception. Hence, critics have also
viewed Anna Bronski and her union with Koljaiczek as a traditional Christian reference to the Virgin Mother and the Immaculate Conception (Keele 12; Diller 12).

Although Oskar does not openly draw parallels between the characters described in the novel and the mythical figures, his manner of descriptions relies on mythical references to create an alternate world. As stated earlier, Oskar gives a rational account of the bizarre coitus; conversely he comically exaggerates the perfectly plausible manner in which his grandparents first met. By elevating the mundane and playing down the bizarre, Oskar creates a context where the absurd or fantastic is introduced but within a realistic framework.

In reference to mythical characteristics, Saleem’s story begins with his grandfather Aadam’s return to Kashmir, after studying in Germany. After having lived and studied in Heidelberg, he is unable to reconcile his Western educated self with his earlier self that revered the traditions and past heritage of India. That is, Aadam seems to have lost his Paradise, his innocence after having obtained Western knowledge. It leaves a void in him that renders him “vulnerable to women and history” (MC 4). This eating of the forbidden fruit of knowledge refers to the Biblical creation myth wherein the “Fall of Man” leads to both human strife and loss of timelessness. Saleem makes it clear that he is writing a legend because “sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts”(48). He attempts to create a legend to preserve the history of his family’s creation which according to this legend originated from the three drops of blood on a large white sheet (MC 4). The three drops of blood are proof of the consummation of Aadam and Naseem’s marriage. Saleem further reminds us that according to the Islamic

---

6 For the sake of this paper I am interpreting Rushdie’s notion of “legend” to be synonymous with “myth”
creation myth, the Lord, the Creator created "Man from clots of blood" (MC 4)(Sura 96:1-2). Thus, Saleem aggrandizes the creation of his family to equate it with the creation of humanity as a whole according to the Koranic tradition.

Both Oskar and Saleem commence to recount and preserve their personal history in the form of legends, thereby exaggerating and mythologizing their own and their families' roles in human destiny. However, not actually being the first humans after the day of Creation, Oskar and Saleem's personal stories inevitably inhabit the existing social, historical and political structures. The struggle for the reestablishment of Kashubia as a part of the Polish state forms the backdrop of Anna and Joseph Koljaiczek relationship. Similarly, the rift between East and West, years of colonial experience and the growing optimism about India's independence is evident in the personal history of Aadam Aziz.

Joseph Koljaiczek strongly supported the Polish cause; he was almost a fanatic, an incendiary as a result of his patriotic fervor. He set many sawmills and woodlots on fire, which in Oskar's words, provided fuel for "zweifarbig aufflackerende Nationalgefühle" (DB 24). The hope for the reestablishment of a Polish state was mythically linked by people like Joseph to the presumed desire of the Virgin Mary, the 'Mutter Gottes,' to claim the Polish throne. Vinzent Bronski, Anna's brother, also believed in this myth and claimed that on his pilgrimage to Częstochowa, the 'Matka Boska Częstochowska' (the Black Madonna of Częstochowa), had expressed her wish to reign over Poland. Similarly, when the sawmills were set ablaze, several people claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary, bedecked with the crown of Poland, on the collapsing roofs of several buildings (DB 24). Koljaiczek then became a mythical figure, a celestial
fireangel; his fires were considered to be solemn affairs, as Oskar explains, “bei Koljaiczek’s Brandstiftungen [...] es wurden Schwüre geschworen” (DB 24) (Keele 13).

Although Koljaiczek underwent a transformation and adopted a quiet and apolitical life (assuming Joseph Wankla’s identity), in Oskar’s account, he retains his angelic and mythic dimensions (14). Koljaiczek’s true identity was ultimately revealed as the search for him continued. When chased by officials, Koljaiczek had tried to escape by diving into the Vistula in which he probably drowned. As his body was never found, legends about his survival and alternate life arose. One version noted his possible escape onto the ship H.M.S. Columbus while another posits his rescue by Greek sailors. Some witnesses claimed to have seen Koljaiczek under the identity of Joe Colchic in Buffalo (New York). Having become a wealthy stockholder in numerous match factories, dealer in lumber, and a founder of fire insurance companies, he supposedly lived with a bodyguard called “Phoenix Guard.” Phoenix, a legendary bird from Egyptian mythology, regenerated itself by bursting into flames and arising again from its own ashes and hence is widely accepted as a symbol of resurrection and immortality (Diller 38). Oskar’s reference to Phoenix here undoubtedly alludes to his grandfather’s miraculous resurrection. Oskar thus attributes mythic characteristics of immortality and indestructibility to his grandfather.

Koljaiczek’s fires are a result of his revolutionary zeal and his desire to destroy an old order and replace it by a new one (38). After a brief period of having lived a typical domestic life, he resumes and excels in his incendiary interests. He is successful not in his own home country but also in the United States, long considered a home to those who felt repressed and limited in their own home countries. His transformability, immortality,
and invincibility could symbolize the undying revolutionary zeal and humanity's inherent need for a newer and better order (38). At the same time, his migration to the United States foreshadows the death of his dreams (to destroy an old order and replace it by a new one) and the future dictatorial regime in Germany during the World War II.

Oskar's portrayal of Koljaiczek's fantastic life throws light on the various historical and political processes of his times. The tension between Germany and Poland, the confusion of politics and religious mysticism, the imminence of wars and dictatorial regime are apparent in the day-to-day life of the Koljaiczecks (Keele 15). While Kolajaiczek stands for the Polish cause, Agnes, torn between the German Matzerath and the Polish Jan, represents Kashubia's dilemma of having to choose between Germany and Poland. On the other hand, Anna Bronski represents the nurturing life force within humanity that endures and survives atrocities, a life force that begets the continuation of civilizations (Diller 16).

While Oskar's references to the relevant historical events are implicit, Saleem discusses them explicitly. Whereas Oskar gives a brief overview of life before his existence, Saleem dwells on his family's past much longer. In Saleem's account of his grandfather's personal history, the Indian colonial experience, the growing optimism about India's independence and its national dream are evident. Aadam took advantage of some aspects of the colonial occupation of India, namely the acquisition of education in Western science and medicine in Germany. However, while residing in Germany, he resisted the common belief that "India – like radium – was discovered by Europeans" (MC 5). Although he adopted the European "secular mindedness and rational thinking," he yearned for the traditional Indian mentality that, in a way, validated India's existence
much before the British “discovered” it (Kortenaar 28-29). Thus, Aadam Aziz decided to go back to Kashmir to reunite with his earlier self.

However, his efforts were rendered futile; his secular ideas did not permit him to take recourse to the traditional Indian thinking. He came to represent the West, the outsider who was never again embraced by his own people. His worldliness was set in stark opposition to the traditional Indian mentality of the local people. Saleem’s account embracing this conflict and creates a hybrid space for the existence of two completely different perceptions of the world, which is a typical characteristic of postcolonial magical realist writing.

The magic in such writing is often owed to the indigenous mentality (of the colonized), while the realism is often attributed to the Western worldview (of the colonizers). Aziz’s storyteller friend Tai embodies the timelessness inherent in the indigenous mentalities. Saleem endows Tai with a kind of immortality; he describes Tai as though he came straight from a fairy tale: “Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying the same boat, standing in the same hunched position [...] forever” (MC 9). Tai represents the pre-historic era free of the ideas of the quantifiability/ division of time and space, free from the ideas of history and nation-state imposed by the colonizers (Needham 58). The Western educated Aziz, on the other hand, acknowledges the measurability of time and the documentability of history (58). In him, the loss of religion has been partly replaced by ideas of nation-state and nationalism (Kortenaar 29).7

7 As Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities explains, the dusk of religious modes of thoughts during the Enlightenment period resulted into the rise of ideas of nation-state and nationalism (11).
From "Western" (post-Enlightenment) perception, progress and change are an integral part of "being civilized;" thus colonial India was considered, in the colonialist script, to be "uncivilized" and "barbaric." Consequently, India's subjugation by a colonial power was often justified on the basis of this primeval identity (59). In the Gandhian script, however, this very "changelessness" that signifies India's prehistoric identity represents India's active resistance to change caused by the disrupting colonial rule (59). This "changelessness" or "not measuring India from the Western perspective" is a way of reinstating self-sufficient, traditional India and, at the same time, opposing the colonialist presence in India. In Saleem's account, Tai stands for the "prehistoric" India, while Aziz represents the modern nation-state. The growing antagonism between the two culminates into Tai's renunciation of his bathing rituals - an extreme form of resistance presented in a magical realist manner.

Tai and Aziz do not only represent the dichotomy between the Western and traditional Indian worldviews. They also reflect the opposition between Gandhi and Nehru's vision about India's course after Independence (Needham 59). Gandhi hoped for a return to a self-sufficient and traditional India. Nehru, on the other hand, dreamed of a truly modern nation that was to be an amalgamation of the "enlightened and scientific rationality" of the West and the "past heritage and tradition" of India. Tai, who embodies Gandhi's vision, was killed later in the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir in 1947 (just as Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948) symbolizing the path not taken. Aziz represents Nehru's dream of India in that he attempts to unite his new "Westernized" self with the older traditional version of self (59).

8 Nehru "architect of the nation" and Gandhi "father of the nation" are considered to be the key figures of India's struggle for Independence.

53
Saleem does not openly write about these political ideologies and processes; rather he exaggerates and comically describes them through Tai and Aziz. He, as the narrator, comments on his own style as being “matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday.” These techniques as he explains “are also attitudes of the mind” that he has “lifted or perhaps absorbed” in his writing (MC 261). The changelessness and agelessness of Tai, in Saleem’s account, almost acquire fantastic proportions. His magical talk, his bizarre stories about having seen the mountains being born, Emperors having ruled and passed away, having met with Jesus before Christianity came into being are explained in a somewhat restrained and routine manner. In the same manner, his refusal to wash or bathe (for about three years) as a resistance to change and its consequences – due to this stench, flowers died and birds flew away, resulting in Aziz’s father’s death - are described in a rather nonchalant way.

On the other hand, the perfectly plausible meeting between Aziz and his future wife, Naseem, is depicted in a highly magnified and stylized manner. The fuss about the perforated sheet, the drawn out process of Aziz’s falling in love with Naseem through a seven-inch hole and the arrangement of their marriage are not new concepts to the traditional Indian mentality. However, in Saleem’s account, these issues are highly magnified and rendered comically. For a non-Indian or Western reader these cultural practices and issues could come across as strange and absurd due to the “experience gap” (discussed in Chapter 1). One may resort to attributing magic to these issues as exemplified when Ilse, Aziz’s German friend states, “they must be putting something in the air up here (MC 27). Conversely, Indian readers are often acquainted with such
cultural practices and many recognize and enjoy Saleem’s exaggerations and his use of comedy. In fact, this is one of the typical characteristics of postcolonial magical realist writing, wherein unique cultural perceptions of indigenous people are introduced and presented that could be entirely unknown to other (Western) recipients.

Apart from presenting a particular worldview, Saleem magnifies people and incidents because, in his account, they are further symbolic of certain political ideologies and processes. Saleem describes humorously the disharmonious relationship between Aziz and Naseem that contributes to Aziz’s slow and steady disintegration. He is the modernizer who wants to inculcate his secular and progressive ideas into his marital life and the upbringing of his children. Conversely, Naseem, refusing to change, lives within the “ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties” of her own making (Kortenaar 17-18 & 28). Known as Reverend Mother, she represents the obstinate changelessness, which can never really unite with Aziz’s vulnerability to history and change. The difficult relationship between Naseem and Aziz foreshadows the impossibility of Nehru’s dream of an India that was to be a marriage of Western thought and Indian mentality.

Aziz’s features, including his nose shaped like the map of India and his blue eyes imply both a Kashmiri and a Western influence. Throughout Saleem’s story Aziz’s face is correlated to that of Nehru’s dream of a modern India. The process of his disintegration, which Saleem metaphorically describes as having left a “hole” in him, began with his first attempt to reunite with his earlier self. Later he believes that Naseem, with whom he fell in love through a “magical” and “sacred” perforated sheet, would fill up the void in him (Kortenaar 100). However, that merely led to the widening of the “hole” and his further disintegration that continues in his grandson. Saleem, the nation’s
“twin”, with the same eyes and nose is destined to a similar fate of disintegration and fragmentation.

Despite the unattainability of Nehru’s aforementioned dream, there was a growing optimism about India’s independence and future. Being influenced by ideas of nation-state and nationalism, Aziz too was motivated by the growing patriotic fervor. Saleem calls this new phenomenon “disease of optimism,” which many like his grandfather had contracted (Kortenaar 137). However, there were people like Tai, who did not share the same optimism. Not comprehending the logic of the Western ideas of nation-state and nationalism, such people as Tai attributed this new collective emotion to be the “devil’s work.” One old man, who like Tai embodies agelessness, says: “I have lived twice as long as I should have, and I have never seen so many people so cheerful in such a bad time. It is the devil’s work” (MC 39). The old man’s indigenous mentality relied on the supernatural (devil) to find explanations for the phenomenon (optimism) that is incomprehensible to him. These men and other take cues from their surrounding to perceive the imminent unfavorable consequences of Indian independence and its partition. Saleem describes this as:

The earth was cracking. [...] and on some days huge gaping fissures appeared in the midst of macadamied intersections. The betal-chewers of the paan-shop had begun to talk about omens; calming themselves with their games of hit-the-spittoon, they speculated upon the numberless nameless Godknowswhats that might issue from the fissuring earth. (MC 39-40)

Saleem exaggerates these occurrences to render them premonitory. Furthermore, he attributes magic to be the cause of the general feeling of optimism. The optimism epidemic, according to Saleem’s account, had been caused by the conjuring trick of one
single human being—Mian Abdullah. In Saleem’s account Mian Abdullah represents the
real-life nationalist leader Sheikh Abdullah who pursued non-communal politics and
opposed the partition (Kortenaar 156). Here, it is important to understand the
circumstances that led to the partition of the subcontinent.

The British rule in India was challenged by the vanguard of the Indian National
Congress (Talbot and Singh 381). The formation of the Congress (1885) had aroused fear
among Muslims that the majoritarian pluralism, combined with democracy would result
in Hindu domination. The Congress was challenged by the Muslim league under the
leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, since Indian nationalism then was exclusive and did
not accommodate religious differences (1932). Supporters of the Muslim league believed
that Western notions of elected representation were not appropriate for a society
differentiated by race, religion, caste, and creed. Nehru, as a key figure, was less
sympathetic to the Hindu-Muslim issue because he believed that it was secondary to
Independence and that religious differences could be displaced by the common bonds of
social and national unity. However, what was supposed to be a side issue received
centrality and the partition of the subcontinent became inevitable (381-383).

During the partitioning, Kashmir became a central point of conflict for two
reasons. The first was that it was geographically adjoined to both India and (future)
Pakistan. The second, as previously mentioned, was that Kashmir had a Muslim majority
and was ruled by a Hindu ruler. Pakistan, which was to be a homeland for Muslims of the
subcontinent as a result of the Partition was less attractive for Sheikh Abdullah (Saleem’s
Mian Abdullah). He was opposed to the partition and had his own plans for a “New
Kashmir” with what would have been one of the most advanced socialist programs of the
times (Schofield 22). He founded the Kashmir National Congress to represent both Muslims and Hindus of the state. However, his plans for Kashmir were soon aborted as partition became unavoidable as the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress failed to reach an agreement (22). Although Kashmir became a part of India (not formed on the basis of religion), it continues to be the source of conflict between the countries as well as communal tensions within the Indian nation state.

Abdullah’s hope for a secular, advanced Kashmir within an “un-partitioned” Indian subcontinent was shared by few people. This incredible idealism and impractical hope in the midst of a communal conflict and struggle for independence typifies, in Saleem’ account, the “optimism epidemic.” Saleem attributes magic to Sheikh Abdullah’s ability to spread this disease of optimism and his pursuit of secular politics and support for the Kashmir national Conference. According to Saleem, Aadam Aziz, the Rani of Cooch Naheen (Queen of Nothing), and Nadir Khan had contracted the disease of optimism and supported Mian Abdullah wholeheartedly. Saleem describes Abdullah as the “magician turned conjuror” who “rose from the famous magicians’ ghetto in Delhi” (MC 40). He had the strange trait of humming without pause, and was popularly known as “Hummingbird.” Depending upon its pitch, his humming was able to give severe toothaches and even erections, making the inflicted vulnerable to his disease of optimism. Saleem thus uses Abdullah’s magical humming skills to explain his art of persuasion.

Although the historical Sheikh Abdullah died from natural causes only in 1982, in Saleem’s story, he is ruthlessly murdered much before India’s independence and its partition (Kortenaar 156). Saleem starts his narration of Abdullah’s murder with the
word, “Facts:” (MC 49) and goes on to describe the bizarre events of Abdullah’s death in a matter-of-fact way. Six men with knives and shields enter into Abdullah’s house to murder him. Saleem narrates, “Then... the knives began to sing and Abdullah sang louder. ... His body was hard and the long curved knives had trouble killing him” (MC 49). Abdullah’s humming excited the dogs, who rushed to Abdullah’s house. “When the dogs came Abdullah was dead and the knives were blunt...” and they “leaped through the window, which had no glass, because Abdullah’s hum had shattered it” (MC 50). The dogs are said to have attacked the assassins and left them in such a bad shape that no one could recognize them.

In Saleem’s version, Abdullah, known for his anti-partition sentiments, is killed in Agra, which is a stronghold of the Muslim League. His fictionalized murder precedes his actual death by about four decades and though his death did not result from homicide, Saleem’s account of Abdullah’s appalling murder is symbolic of the thwarting of his idea of a unified secular India. The shattering of his dreams and the grotesque events that followed and have continued since the partition are reproduced in a compressed version in Saleem’s fictitious account. Nadir Khan, Abdullah’s personal secretary, is forced to be a silent observer of and the only witness to this overwhelming set of events. He could comprehend the “swollen events of the night” only by remembering the painter with whom he had once shared a room, “whose paintings had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art” (MC 50). The artist’s last words -“I wanted to be a miniaturist, I have got elephantiasis instead”- helped Nadir Khan to comprehend the

9 Like Grass’s Oskar, Abdullah is attributed with magical glass-shattering voice.
things that he evidenced that day, as “life had once again, perversely, refused to remain life-sized” (*MC* 50).

Working within the tenets of magical realism allows a writer to move beyond the realm of rationality when life acquires such magnified and grotesque proportions and refuses to remain life-sized. Like Nadir Khan, Oskar and Saleem comprehend and relate to the events experienced by them and their families by stepping out of the conventional worldview and into the realm of the absurd. In their attempts to re-play and re-describe these events, Oskar and Saleem inevitably resort to the elements of the fantastic. Through them, Grass and Rushdie create a bizarre and mythical world while inhabiting the very structures of documented history.

As discussed, these mythic and fantastic traits are present throughout Oskar and Saleem’s narrations, irrespective of their existence and participation. As Saleem notes, “most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence” (*MC*, 14-15). Thus Oskar and Saleem take into account the events that took place in their absence – during their lifetime and even before their birth. Saleem elucidates the manner in which he encapsulates the missing components of his memory and historical knowledge as he explains, “I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge” (*MC* 14-15). Oskar and Saleem perform this trick of filling in gaps by drawing on magical realist techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy, and myth. They restage historical events and people’s subjective experiences before their births in order to create a background for the succeeding events. By magnifying and mythicizing individuals and events they offer us alternative versions to documented histories and conventionally accepted ideas and notions.
4.3. OSKAR’S AND SALEEM’S BIRTHS AND SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES

Oskar’s and Saleem’s supernatural powers allow them to record not only the events before their births, but also to narrate their birth, infancies, and childhoods. Their special abilities make them distinct in the world they describe, and the process of describing this world begin with their birth. Hence, the description of the moments of their birth is not done in a usual manner. Rather such surreal moments are highly mythicized, surrounded by prophesies, and are narrated in a elevated manner as typical of magical realism.

Saleem’s birth is depicted not as a usual private family matter but a highly magnified and mythicized event, since the moment of his birth coincided with the “birth of the nation.” Being thus the twin-brother of the nation, Saleem, shares the exhilaration and hope of the people about the new modern India. He writes, “Soothsayers had prophesized me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity” (MC 3). The whole country is hopeful with “a new myth of an ancient country with a young face”; people welcome the coming to birth of their own nation and also of those one thousand and one children that were born at midnight. Saleem, being one of them, receives a letter from the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Nehru, congratulating him on the moment of his birth, “Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy incident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” (MC 143). Thus,
the event of Saleem's birth acquires an elevated and aggrandized stature. His life and
destiny is equaled to that of the nation's (Kortenaar 141).

Similarly, the timing of Oskar's birth is exaggerated and mythicized. Oskar
describes his arrival into the world as he notes, "Ich erblickte das Licht dieser Welt [...]"
that reminds him of the Biblical text, "Es werde Licht und es ward Licht" (DB 47)
(Keele, 15). However, this Biblical dimension is soon frustrated as the modern world of
electricity and light bulbs intruded, as Oskar noted, "[...] in Gestalt zweier Sechzig-Watt-
Glühbirne" (47). Similarly, Saleem's mother undermines the high hopes and expectations
expressed by Nehru regarding Saleem's fate as she says to his nanny, "It is just a way of
putting things, Mary; it does not mean anything" (MC 143). All the same, partly owing to
their superhuman capabilities, both Oskar and Saleem believe for most of their lives that
they were the center of the world, and whatever happened around them is in some way
related to them (Merivale 333).

From the time of their births, both Oskar and Saleem are fully aware of their
surroundings (333). These unbelievable capabilities – their clairaudience and phenomenal
premature mental development – are reported in a nonchalant manner. Pretending
outwardly to be a crying blue and red newborn child, Oskar casually mentions, "Ich
gehörte zu den hellhörigen Säuglingen, deren geistige Entwicklung schon bei der Geburt
abgeschlossen ist, und sich fortan nur noch bestätigen muß" (DB 47) (Keele 15). His use
of the term "hellhörigen Säuglinge" is so straightforward and matter-of-fact as though it
were a commonplace term (Hollington, 24). This comment by Oskar implies that there
are other children who are born clairaudient. Saleem's clairaudience, on the other hand, is
evident in his detailed recounting of events and instances just after his birth. In a very
matter-of-fact way he recalls lying in a green crib just after birth, swaddled in saffron as photographers and reporters visited his mother in the hospital. Saleem remembers that when he first arrived home, he was faced with the problem of defining himself. Already aware of his telepathic powers, he was “bombarded with a multiplicity of views” of different people about his own popularity and greatness. That only further convinces him that “already [his] presence [was] having an effect on history” (MC 152). He notes in an unaffected fashion, “I lay in my crib and listened; and everything that happened, happened because of me” (155). In this way, Saleem continues to enjoy his self-satisfied infant life occupying his “place at the center of the universe” (Merivale, 333).

Oskar, on the other hand, is faced with the dilemma of choosing a way of life right after his birth. Oskar had no desire to be born in the first place; as soon as he had released himself out of the womb, he yearns to return to it immediately. At the same time, he hears his parents’ plans for his future – his father hoped to pass his grocery store over to Oskar, while his mother promised him a tin drum for his third birthday. Simultaneously, he hears the rhythmic drumming of a moth at the two light bulbs, which awakens the inherent “drummer” in Oskar. His desire to become a drummer overrides his desire to return to the womb away from the adult world (Diller, 40). Therefore, he chooses to live in order to become a drummer, having accepted the moth as his teacher, thus rejecting the bourgeois life (DB 48).

The drum promised to Oskar by his mother, in a way, is to become his first supernatural aid (Diller 43). The moth’s drumming brought forth for Oskar universal images of rhythm and sound in all of nature. Oskar was made aware that in all life there existed a beat, a pattern of pulsations that he could grasp. The drum has been and is being
used by shamans and witch doctors to bring communities and individuals into harmony with the universal rhythm (past, present, and future) (40). As an extension of that practice, for Oskar, the drum was to become a magical instrument by which he could affect the present and at the same time summon up ancestral visions, capture the patterns of his past life and record them (40). Thus, the promise of the tin drum at his birth could be seen as a promise of one of his supernatural aides.

On the other hand, Saleem has no option to accept or decline his birth. Having assumed his extraordinary role in the scheme of the world, he naturally accepts his superhuman mental capacities. Very casually, he lists the different views about him of various people, which he learns on account of his telepathic powers. Even as a baby of a “little over two months,” Saleem notes in a matter-of-fact way, “Homi Catrack’s idiot daughter sent her thoughts across the circus ring and into my infant head” (MC 152). He believes strongly that the unique moment of his birth, which he shares with one thousand other children and the Indian nation itself, endows him with the magical powers to carry out his role of shaping the future of the country and the world. Later, as a ten-year old, he reflects on his and the other thousand children’s births and their miraculous gifts and explains:

What made the event [of their births] noteworthy […] was the nature of these children, every one of whom was […] endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. It was […] as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which could genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time (234-235).
In this manner, convinced of his significant role in the universe, Saleem perceives his telepathic powers to be a confirmation of his magnanimous position, and also as a supernatural aid to affect the future course of events of the world.

In spite of having highly developed mental capacities, both Oskar and Saleem are apprehensive about entering adult life (Engel 139). Oskar, with his extraordinary mental faculties and Saleem, by means of his telepathic powers are actually silent observers of the adult world – the private and the public, their secret lives and fantasies, and their outward images. However, taking them to be naïve and innocent children, adults continued to live their lives in the presence of Oskar and Saleem without the fear of being observed or judged (Merivale 333). Oskar and Saleem witness the various unpleasant aspects of adult life – adultery, hypocrisy, vanity, corruption, gambling, cowardice, outward appearances of complacency, etc. Hence, while Saleem worries about the adult world infiltrating his own, Oskar decides to evade adult life by interrupting his physical growth at age three.

Oskar knows very well that adults will not understand his decision to shun adulthood, and will need a seemingly explainable reason for his interrupted growth (Keele, 16). Hence, he causes his own fall through the trap door into the cellar that was accidentally left open by his father. He is successfully able to impose his will over the natural processes of his body, and at the same time he is able give the elders the reason to accept his decision. This event could also be attributed to his superhuman capacities of enforcing his will against the natural and normally inevitable processes. He thus uses this supernatural ability to establish and retain a distance from the adult world.
Although he is able to establish a distance to adults, the irritation caused by his constant drumming invites their intrusion. But here again nature grants him a miraculous power, by which he can save his drum as well as his distance from the adults. Within a few weeks after his fall, Oskar develops an unbelievably high-pitched, glass-shattering voice that is initially used only as a defensive measure whenever his drum was being snatched away (Diller 44). Oskar’s supernatural aides further confirm his special stature in the world.

Oskar, as well as Saleem, see themselves as distinct from their surroundings: They believe that they are, in a way, creating the world around them and perceive themselves to be raised above the mundane world (Merivale 333). Both are convinced that they enjoy a certain God-like, eternal stature. When Oskar causes the deliberate interruption of his growth, he acknowledges the growth of “something else” within him of Messianic proportions. He writes,

“Dabei, und hier muß auch Oskar Entwicklung zugegeben, wuchs etwas und auch nicht zu meinem Besten – und gewann schließlich messianische Größe; aber welcher Erwachsene hatte zu meiner Zeit den Blick und das Ohr für den anhaltend dreijährigen Blechtrommeler Oskar?”(DB 64)

Although the adults do not recognize the extraordinary powers of the eternal drummer, Oskar is always certain of it. Remembering the events of his birth, he explains,

“Wer aber schickte den Falter und erlaubte ihm und dem oberlehrerhaften Gepolter eines spätssommerlichen Donnerwetters, in mir die Lust zur mütterlicherseits versprochenen Blechtrommel zu steigern, mir das Instrument immer handlicher und begehlicher zu machen?” (DB 49)

The drumming of the moth is, for Oskar, a call for a higher purpose, and the moth is a messenger sent by some supernatural power to remind him of his grand role (Diller 40).
He views the miraculous powers endowed to him – his magical drumming, his ability to impose his will on his biological processes, and his glass-shattering voice – as an endorsement of his prominent role, as well as tools to fulfill his higher mission.

While Oskar receives his call for a “higher purpose” rather secretly (only he is aware of it), Saleem’s birth at midnight and his subsequent grand role is celebrated by the whole nation. He is welcomed and made aware of the magnitude and significance of his responsibility to the nation and the world. Right from his birth, he is gifted with miraculous telepathic powers that are to aid him on his grand mission. Saleem accepts his role, as well as his supernatural gifts, and takes on the responsibility to shape the future of his nation and to the world (Kortenaar 65).

Being clairaudient from birth, Saleem, among other events, witnesses the excesses of his father, the secret gambling of his mother, the corruption of the Indian government, and the failure of the nation’s Five Year development plans. In acceptance of his prominent role, he decides to take the future of the country into his own hands. Using his ability to tune into other people’s thoughts, he decides to convene with the other “midnight’s children,” with whom, to an extent, he shares his calling. He calls the routine meeting with the five hundred and eighty other “midnight’s children” (four hundred and twenty of the thousand and one had died due to malnutrition, disease, and accidents) the “Midnight’s Children’s Conference” that he proudly abbreviates to M.C.C. Coming from different states of the nation that were formed on the basis of languages, these children can not necessarily communicate verbally. Hence, they appear pictorially in each other’s minds (MC 262). Saleem recounts this in a very matter-of-fact manner; his actions come
across as being merely prompted by his divine calling and rendered possible by his supernatural powers.

Although Saleem’s family recognizes the significance and the joyous coincidence of the moment of his birth, they do not acknowledge his divine mission and his superhuman powers. Hence, Saleem attempts at making his messianic attributes known to his parents (Merivale 333). Expecting a great celebration and another public announcement (like the one at his birth), Saleem tells his family, “I heard voices yesterday. Voices are speaking to me inside my head. I think – Ammi, Abboo, I really think – that Archangels have started to talk to me” (MC 194). However, his efforts are immediately frustrated because on the one hand no one believed him and traces the claims that he makes to a “blind innocence of childhood.” On the other hand, his nanny, Mary, is aghast at his blasphemy. Only his mother wants to know about the voices that Saleem had heard. When pregnant with Saleem, she had been to an astrologer to know about the life and future of her unborn child. On hearing Saleem’s unbelievable claim, she recollects one of the predictions the astrologer had made about Saleem - “Washing will hide him…voices will guide him” (MC 194). Even so, well-acquainted with the limited understanding of adults, Saleem refrains from divulging any further information and convinces her that it was nothing but a stupid joke. And in so doing preserves his secret and elevated position as well as the accompanying unique perspective.

Along similar lines, Oskar tries to prove his divine stature and his miraculous powers as something unique (Merivale 333). Once when he accompanies his mother to the Herz-Jesu Church, he sees the statue of Jesus as a child sitting calmly on the Virgin Mary’s lap. Convinced of his own greatness and unable to revere Jesus, he wants to see
Jesus perform the wonders he could, “mein Blech wollte ich hören, Jesus sollte mir etwas zum Besten geben, ein kleines halblautes Wunder!” (DB 165) Oskar places his drum on Jesus’ lap and slips the drumsticks into his hands and waited to witness Jesus perform. But the statue does not move, there is no miracle. This further reinforces his belief in his greatness: his powers are superior to that of Jesus who enjoys unquestioned devotion and reverence of many people. Oskar rejects Jesus from his high pedestal in order to take his place saying, “Schluß mit ihm, der nicht einmal trommeln kann, der mir keine Scherben gönnt, der mir gleicht und doch falsch ist, der ins Grab muß, während ich weitertrommeln und weitertrommeln, aber nach keinem Wunder mehr Verlangen zeigen werde” (DB 167). Not only is his belief in his elevated position and his miraculous powers reconfirmed, but also his adversarial relation to Jesus gains stronger roots, which foreshadows his unpleasant relationship with any form of ideology (Delaney 138).

Oskar always has an uneasy relationship with Jesus and Catholicism. Even at his baptism, he does not want to renounce Satan and spoil their relationship (156-157). The moth becomes his teacher and makes him choose a life of a drummer. Additionally it is Satan who attempts at making him aware of his glass-shattering voice, as he insinuates, “Hast du die Kirchenfenster gesehen, Oskar? Alles aus Glas, alles aus Glas! (157). Satan also becomes his aid to explore the other side of life that could not be reconciled with Catholicism (Diller 85). Being baptized Catholic with Jan’s help, but without having renounced Satan completely, Oskar stresses that it is Catholicism that always inspires him to blasphemy (158). At the same time, Oskar’s mother perceives his blasphemous behavior, as well as his interrupted growth and his uncanny powers, to be sour fruits of her sinful behavior. Unable to choose between Matzerath and Jan, she marries the former
and continues to have a liaison with the later. She always blames Matzerath (who had left
the trapdoor open) for Oskar's condition and then, with Jan, consoles him that Oskar was
"ein Kreuz, das man tragen müsse, ein Schicksal, ein Schicksal, das wohl unabänderlich
sei, eine Prüfung, von der man nicht wisse, womit man sie verdiene" (95). However,
raised as a Catholic, she believes that she is being punished for her deeds.

The protagonists, Oskar and Saleem, are clearly fantastic characters. However,
they are not living in an improbable, far-fetched world. They are introduced into an
imagined yet realistic literary framework. They are depicted as bizarre and abnormal
characters existing in a mundane, everyday human world, with which we are well
acquainted. This intermingling of the fantastic and the conventional is a characteristic
technique of magical realism, often adopted to expose the usually unaccepted and
overlooked aspects of day-to-day life.

Both Agnes and Amina find explanations for their children's behavior in their
irrational superstitions and belief systems. Agnes understands Oskar and his unusualness
through her religious beliefs. On the other hand, Amina relies on the predictions of the
astrologer, whom she stubbornly visits, arguing, "this is still India, people like Ramram
Seth [the astrologer] know what they know" (MC 115). This acknowledgement of the
irrational existing within the ordinary is also a distinctive trait of magical realism. For
Grass and Rushdie's texts, this technique is very important as it enables them to highlight
the smooth coexistence of the fantastic and the mundane. It allows for an acceptance of
the "abnormal" characters into the "normal world;" their free participation in the
everyday life is necessary to illuminate the normally shadowed, hidden, and
unacknowledged aspects of human life.
Through Oskar and Saleem Grass and Rushdie expose terrifying aspects of human history: Nazi and post-Nazi Germany in the case of Oskar and pre- and post-independence India in case of Saleem. Their magical powers – Oskar’s drumming and Saleem’s telepathy – connect as well as isolate them from the rest of the world. They do not belong to any group or ideology; they just move from one role onto another. They function rather as magnifying glasses to be moved around in front of each of the historical episodes.\(^{10}\)

The two protagonists function like “mechanical historians,” who witness events that they narrate. Both Oskar, under the mask of childhood and feigned innocence, and Saleem with his unrestrained telepathic powers (within the nation) are able to acquire a complete – from above and underneath, from the inside and the outside - perspective of events devoid of any censorship. We hear their voices and get their perspective on the historical events they decide to redescribe. Had they been normal human beings, their perspective would have been tainted by their subjectivity. Hence, the protagonists are unusual or absurd characters, whom we cannot psychoanalyze or to whom we cannot relate. This allows for a sense of alienation, a detachment necessary to understand the historical events they describe. Thus by employing the techniques of magical realism – introducing the fantastic element into a fictive framework of historically specifiable events – Grass and Rushdie lay bare the various actualities of the historical episodes that form the basis of their novels.

---

\(^{10}\) Donna Reed uses this analogy in her discussion of Oskar (68).
4.4. HISTORICAL EVENTS

Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* was conceived as a resistance to the post-war tendency of Germany to forget the horrific Nazi past, and to repress associated guilt in order to restore “normalcy” (O’Neill: 1997, 1-2). Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* originated during the state-proclaimed Emergency when the disillusionment with India’s grandiose dream of a secular independent modern nation reached its height, and people witnessed one of the worst manifestations of the nation’s neo-imperialist ways. Both texts trace the various historical events that took place in Germany and in India at different yet overlapping time periods within a span of sixty years. Apart from intermingling the fantastic with the mundane, the rational with the irrational, the two texts are replete in other magical realist techniques – comedy, heightened imagery, metaphor, etc. Dealing with one of the most barbaric events of recent times, the magical realist techniques employed in *Die Blechtrommel* incite shock and horror; its comedy is almost chilling. On the other hand, in *Midnight’s Children* these techniques arouse a sense of disillusionment and sadness at the state of the nation; its comedy is nearly tragic. Since the events and the impact they have had on world history are so different in their scale, I will discuss them separately.
4.4.1 HISTORICAL EVENTS IN DIE BLECHTROMMEL

Talking about the historical content in his literary works, especially Die Blechtrommel and Die Hundejahre, in a conversation with Rushdie, Grass notes:

In the middle of the Fifties, I discovered for myself that I need a confrontation [...] with German history. [...] Just after the war the Germans in both parts [East and West Germany] tried to belong to the winner’s side. [...] And the official, political language was not that of capitulation, it was “disaster,” it was a “catastrophe,” it was hour “zero.” Nice lies, covering the truth. They said of the Nazi period that it was a time when it “became dark in Germany.” This kind of demonisation of the SS, of the Nazi party, didn’t tell the truth.

This is one reason to look back and to show in telling my story that all these things happened in clear daylight. [...] the arrangement between capital and Hitler in the beginning, but also the petit bourgeois people, who were lost after the First World War. It was very easy for Hitler to win those people. [...] And I tried [...] to tell the story of this slow, very petit bourgeois way to go, slowly with all knowledge, into crime. Political crime. (qtd. in Reder: 2000, 73)

Grass attempts to write about the role the petit bourgeois or the middle class played with Nazi regime in making the Holocaust happen. He tries to expose this aspect that was until the 1950s neglected by official historical records; rather such inhuman political processes were mostly attributed to the “evil” embodied by Hitler and other Nazi officials or just “dark” times in German history. In his novel, Grass does not discuss these aspects directly. Rather he, employing the tools of magical realism, works through his fantastic character, Oskar, and creates fantastic, overblown, and metaphoric events and situations to comment on the limitations of such explanations. At the same time, the use of such techniques enables Grass to capture the horror and the incredible inhumanity of the Nazi regime.
Although Hitler had won popular acclaim, he came to power in 1933 mainly as a part of a process of back-room political dealings with the old elites and the German Right that had already been in power between 1930 and 1933. These representatives of the ruling elite class had their own agenda – to control Hitler for their own ends and ensure their power through mass support. They wanted to regain their old position as the ruling class and restore the monarchy, to rebuild the military power of Germany; to reverse the decision of 1919 and to restore Germany to a dominant position in Europe” (Reed 11-12).  

This enormous oversight was made further irreversible by the policy pursued by Moscow until 1933 (12). Following the Moscow line, the German Communist Party (KPD) treated the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as a rival and aimed at its elimination. The Communist Party believed that the exclusion of the SPD, and the Nazi take-over, which was anticipated to collapse, would guarantee their ascension to power. At the same time, the SPD lacked a good leader who could successfully hinder Hitler’s coming to power. Thus the left, due to internal struggle, failed to cooperate with each other to hamper the rise of National Socialism. The traditional German Right, who did not want to join the Communists, went along with the nationalist middle class that was already mobilized by the Nazis. In addition, as thirty-seven percent of the German population backed Hitler’s program, the old elites decided to join the Nazis. Thus, the enormous

---

11 Treaty of Versailles (28 June 1919) stripped Germany of its “world power” status. All its colonies were placed under the authority of Allied States as League of Nations, its military power was greatly reduced, and Germany was to pay for the devastation inflicted on other nations (David Childs, 19).

12 In 1928 the sixth congress of the Communist International met in Moscow and announced a new line that forbade member parties from engaging in collaboration with parties belonging to the Second (Social Democratic and Labor) International (Childs, 42).
support from the middle class played an important role in bringing the Nazis to power (12-13).

In spite of the extreme elements within the Nazi program, Hitler was able to sustain and increase incredible mass support. After the devastating consequences of the First World War, and the economic crash of 1929, German people yearned for economic and social security, as well as the old idea of the special German position in Europe. Hitler excelled in speaking to these needs of the people (Bracher 21). He promised the people a better life using noble sounding rhetoric and mystical terminology, underpinning their belief in German greatness. He was able to create a mystical unity among the people, dulled by the naïve hope for progress, enticed away from the real problems – social, economic, and political – by the doctrines of the German people’s cultural and racial superiority (Reed 51).

Grass uses Oskar to expose the day-to-day lives and dealings of the petit bourgeoisie. He is a grotesque, humpbacked gnome writing from a mental asylum about his environment and the various human processes he witnessed primarily behind the mask of childhood. Grass creates a character that is absurd and grotesque, and depicts situations that are fantastic and outrageous to describe the abnormal and gross aspects of the everyday life of common people under the Nazi regime. Devoid of most human attributes, Oskar documents without any sentimental involvement the full perspective he gets of his environment. Oskar is, at times, a passive observer mocking the bourgeois people around him, but he also resists, sometimes with success, their idiosyncrasies, and he provokes them into action with the aim of exposing their eccentricities. Thus Oskar functions as a vehicle to tell the story, giving us the view from within and without.
Assuming his lack of worldly knowledge and naiveté, Oskar, the “innocent child,” is allowed into all domains of adult life – the tryst between Gretchen Scheffler and Agnes, the Thursday meetings of Jan and Agnes, Markus’s love declarations to Agnes, Greff’s dealings with the scout boys, women’s changing rooms, etc. His small stature permits him to be present everywhere – under the table, inside a closet, underneath Anna’s skirt, etc (Thomas 11-13). Through his exposure to such details, Oskar perceives and exposes in his narration people’s insatiable appetites and their gross apathy.

With explicit details, Oskar describes the various meals his family and their friends devour on a regular basis. He faithfully recalls Matzerath’s elaborate cooking, the huge breakfasts (that Agnes often threw up due to overeating), the visits to the Café Weitzke, and the several course dinners at innumerable parties that were voraciously consumed. Without any reservations, he unabashedly recounts the sexual advances and involvements of several characters. While these people are trying to satiate their infinite appetites, war is brewing in Europe and preparations for the Holocaust are being meticulously carried out by the Nazis (Hermand 10-12; Reed 24). Although people are aware of these events they show apathy and self-absorption.

This apathy and self-centeredness could be traced back to the extreme economic adversity, which the middle class experienced during the depression years (Lebovic 31). Deeply affected by the economic and social crisis, the middle class yearned for an alternative ideology, for new and different state policies, and – lacking a state interested in their plans – for a new state (38). It was the Nazi agenda that spoke to the needs of these people by promising economic policies aimed at overcoming the depression. Being,
as Jost Hermand calls them, *politisch heimatlos* and hence *leicht verführbar*, the middle class supported the Nazi regime (Hermand, 10).

Even when there was an observable improvement in the standard of living of the petit bourgeoisie, they remained politically disengaged and preoccupied with their day-to-day lives. Commenting on the petit bourgeoisie Hermand writes:

Diese Schichten machten sich keine großen Gedanken über Politik, sondern schlossen sich einfach den Herrschenden. Sie wollten letztlich ‘ihre Ruh’ haben’, das heißt unter einer autoritären Schirmherrschaft einfach so weiterwursteln, wie sie das naturgegeben, wenn nicht gar gottgegeben empfanden. Daher waren sie für den Faschismus, der ihnen all das versprach, ein ideales Stimmvieh (12).

While people paid excessive attention to the trivial matters of everyday life, there was a gross negligence of civic or political responsibility (Hollington 40). Consequently, they were easily enticed by the Nazis who provided them with opportunities to fulfill their needs and desires.

In his narrative, Oskar creates a fantastic situation to showcase this relation between the petit bourgeoisie and Hitler. On a wintry night, after all shops had been closed, Oskar decides to entice the common people into stealing. Standing sheltered in a doorway, Oskar uses his magical voice to create holes into the glass windows of the shops; having already made the task much easier, he tempts the passersby and incites them into action. Prompted by a greed that easily blots any streak of conscience, many of them, including Jan, steal their most desired objects. In this way, Oskar brings to light such people’s opportunism (Hollington 38; Keele 17).

In addition, Oskar takes on the role of the devilish seducer – Hitler. He, the blue-eyed drummer, who breaks from his milieu to become an artist and attempts to take place of
Jesus, the Savior, resembles Hitler in many ways (Hermand 9). At the same time, Oskar, having deliberately chosen dwarfism, sets himself in stark opposition to Hitler and the Nazis (Reed 68). He takes on Hitler’s role to highlight how the latter lured the middle class by speaking to their wants, however unconscionable and inhuman the consequences of these desires.

The mass support by which the Nazi regime came to power was thus related to the fulfillment of the wants of the petit bourgeoisie and their inability to take political responsibility for the means by which these wants are satisfied. Moreover this support was sustained by the regime’s successful suppression of people’s freedoms. Soon after the Nazis came to power they created a totalitarian state that instituted total and permanent check on the situations of all individuals in both political and apolitical arenas (Bracher, 356). A system of terror was created that was mainly operated by the Gestapo, the SS and SA whose functioning “rested on the overturning of all legal and moral norms by a totalitarian leader principle which did not tolerate adherence to laws, penal code or constitution but reserved itself complete freedom of action and decision-making” (350). In the political arena, a permanent and complete check was achieved through the total Gleichschaltung\textsuperscript{13} of all German parliamentary institutions by February 1934 (Childs 56). In the non-political arenas, the total check was achieved through the regimentation of educational systems, universities, writers, artists, and monopolized propaganda (Bracher 254). Thus, the system sought not only to ward off any kind of resistance, but also to

---

\textsuperscript{13} Gleichschaltung is defined by Nazi-Deutsch Lexicon as Consolidation. All of the German Volk’s social, political, and cultural organizations to be controlled and run according to the Nazi ideology and policy. All opposition to be eliminated.
control the social and cultural lives of people by imposing a highly regimented and monitored order on them.

In his narrative, Oskar criticizes this regimentation of society to which he is exposed. Oskar, isolated from the society on account of his “abnormality” and his supernatural capacities is not affected by the Nazi order. Therefore, he is able to give a distanced and unique perspective on the increasingly regulated everyday German life. He recounts his experience at school - institution dedicated to initiating people into a mechanical, regulated, and indoctrinated society (Diller 49). Oskar smells the overpowering and suffocating environment of the school as he enters the boxlike school that for him is an “obenflacher Kasten” and climbs up its “monumentale” stairs. His class begins with aimless repetitions of the class schedule under the instruction of Fräulein Spollenhauer. Oskar participates in it but only by means of his drumming. Although that has a momentary favorable effect on the instructor, she soon assumes her authoritarian role and is intolerant of his drumming. Spollenhauer makes several attempts to take the drum away from Oskar. When she almost seizes the drum, he unleashes his magical glass-shattering scream that demolishes the windowpanes of the room and later when the instructor tries to use the cane on his drum he pulverized her glasses with his scream.

Although Oskar escapes through his magical powers, the aimless repetition signifies the indoctrination of Nazi ideology by schools as well as other political and cultural organizations through brainwashing, mindless drilling, and regimentation so as to give no room for curiosity or introspection. Individuals who don’t participate or keep pace with such regimentation or mechanization are not tolerated. Spollenhauer’s demeanor exemplifies the suppression of people’s freedoms and creative energies in
abiding to the Nazi order. Thus, the school becomes a metaphor for the German society under the Nazi regime. It is further underlined by the use of the word \textit{Volk} while referring to the schoolchildren while the teacher seems to be an artificial woman – parched, masculine with an Adam's apple, yellow skinned, and stiff-collared. Central to the Nazi ideology, the word \textit{Volk} implied a "mystical" unity among people through a unified race and territory (Michael and Doerr 420; Reed 51). Hence the school scene has political implications, denoting the manipulation of people's minds and suppression of freedom, curiosity, plurality, and openness through brutal regimentation.

In such a society where the state has overwhelming power and control over its peoples, its citizens experience a lack of initiative, and powerlessness in the face of a totalitarian authority. In such an excessively regimented, ordered, and hence depersonalized society, people's sense of self-worth and life's purpose is threatened. While some, like Agnes, Jan, Gretchen Scheffler, Greff, and Lena fill up their existential void by means of their amorous affairs, others, like Matzerath and Meyn turn to the Nazi party that gave them social recognition and a sense of self-respect (Hollington 38-39). People reinstated their need for self-importance and self-actualization by adhering to the Nazi order thus allowing it to seep into the daily, personal lives of people.

To mirror this invasive Nazi order, Oskar narrates an overblown description of the domestic chore of cleaning carpets. Oskar recounts the carpet beating ritual that several housewives perform together Tuesdays and Thursdays in the public courtyards. He likens this communal activity to that of a factory where tasks are carried out mechanically without any personal involvement.

The destructive and deadly nature of such regimentation of a domestic, communal activity is very apparent in the above passage. Terms such as “eingerieben,” “gebürstet,” “geklopft,” and “Teppichleichen” allude to the violence and aggression of the Nazi order that permeated into the day-to-day lives of people (O’Neill, 1999: 22). In a way, Oskar foreshadows the devastating consequences of creating a depersonalized society.

Oskar, in a fantastic manner, attempts to give vent to the suppressed emotions and aspirations of the people yet make them realize the reasons for their own frustrations. At one of the Nazi rallies, Oskar views from behind the rostrum the pomp – swastika banner, row of flags, pennants, and SS men – all arranged in a sort of symmetry. Oskar is neither happy with the symmetry nor the marching music that the musicians and the trumpeters played. Manipulating his drumsticks, Oskar changes the rhythm of that music to a playful waltz, and later jazz. While other musicians catch up with his rhythm, the young men and women present start dancing to the joyous music. With his magic – manipulation of the sticks – Oskar replaces the burden of standards and doctrines by lightheartedness, joyous music, and refreshing dance (Diller 51). Oskar’s subversion of this episode exposes the immense suppression and internal burden of people behind the artificial pomp and brings to light the absurdity of the state machinery (51).

Thus the mass support by which the Nazi regime came to power was sustained by the regime’s successful suppression of people’s freedoms. It was achieved by coercion
and excessive state control of all aspects of life as well as by indoctrination. The Germans had suffered political, social, and economic setbacks due to the great economic depression (1929); the Versailles treaty had demoted Germany from its superpower position and imposed economic hardships. At that time, the Nazi ideology posed the most fervent exponent of the anti-Versailles forces. It reached back to the older idea of the exclusive German position in Europe and used race theory to support the doctrine of cultural and racial supremacy of a future Germanic empire of the German nation (Bracher 21).

In keeping with colonialism's legacy, one of Hitler's goals was "to break open the expansionist principle of the national state through the imperialist principle of the primacy of the biologically and 'superior'" (21). The personality and ideas of Hitler appealed to the masses as he promised them their lost grandeur and special position in the world. They were distracted from their immediate concerns – social, political, and economic – by their presumed mystical position and their grand mission. Hitler's claims about the superiority of the Germanic people only underlined the adversarial German reaction to the polluting Western influences (of France) after the French revolution (23).

14 Hitler promised a revival of a true Germanic life, unpolluted by Western influences.

While Hitler and the Nazi Party posited the idea of older, uncontaminated Germanic life, they nevertheless resorted to modern means of communication (radios, public loudspeakers, films, newsreels) to infuse this ideological enthusiasm (Reed 53). The Nazi propaganda was a perfected art. It created an illusory world by which the Nazis

14 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, one of its major exponent, advanced the notion that the Germans are the only people capable of profound, original thought, that Germany was selected for a special mission for humanity, which set it apart from the much admired and imitated French (Bracher, 23).
attempted “to blot empirically perceptible reality out of the minds of their subjects and to construct a new, illusory world which appeared to answer all their wants.” As more people fell victim to the lures of this illusory world, the less they were able to see through the mystification and became compliant with the suppressing measures of the Nazi regime (53). Hitler used his illusory art to personify the Nazi ideal and became the sacrosanct prophet, the Führer, destined to lead the “chosen” people, das Volk. While the people, indoctrinated and drilled into depersonalization, were unable to look through this mystic garb. Oskar with his illusory art, lays bare the mystifications and deceptive visions constructed by the Nazis.

This mystification of political ideology reached such extent that Nazism could be viewed as a state religion. In Oskar’s account, Hitler assumes the combined role of the Messiah - Savior of the German people - and the Santa Claus, - delivering gifts to the people. Oskar noted, “Ein ganzes leichtgläubiges Volk glaubte an den Weihnachtsmann” (DB 236). Oskar attributes the three important Christian values – love, faith, and hope – to this unchallenged belief in Hitler. While faith makes even gas (from the gas chamber) smell of almonds and walnuts, love allows them to perpetrate violence and consume each other off, and hope fosters optimism for the beginning and rise of the nation from destruction (DB 237-238). According to this narrative, people have put all their faith, love, and hope in the Savior cum Santa Claus, who is able to convince them that without him, they cannot realize their dreams.

These believers are unable to see that that which fulfilled their desires would be the reason for their destruction. In Oskar’s account, however, the Santa Claus is none other than “Gasman” who just offered reasonable gas rates, so that people could cook as
much they wanted to satiate their voracious appetites (DB 237). Oskar believes that Hitler/the Gasman provided the means/gas to satisfy the wants for grandeur of the middle class; however the grandeur came at the cost of millions, many of whom died in the gas chamber (Keele 19-20).

The means by which Hitler promised the German people grandeur were intrinsic parts of the Nazi ideology. Oskar, like his creator Grass, is skeptical of the concept of “ideology,” believing it would inevitably lead to large-scale disaster. In Oskar’s account, the tragic figure of Niobe acquires a destructive character and is infamous for bringing widespread destruction over centuries. In Greek mythology, Niobe is immortalized through her suffering; nevertheless she is also referred to as a woman whose very presence and interaction with others leads to destruction (Diller 57). Therefore, the green wooden statue of the Niobe, of Oskar’s account, could represent the concept of ideology: Niobe symbolizing ideology’s insidious potential when in contact with or at the disposal of human beings. In this light, Herbert’s attempt to rape Niobe and his subsequent death symbolizes human failure at appropriating ideology for its own selfish interests.

Even when Niobe’s statue is stored away in the cellar, Oskar holds her responsible for the catastrophe in Germany. Despite her dormant state, she is able to feed people’s ravenous appetite and thus contribute to the accumulating disaster. He notes, “doch man kann das Unglück nicht einkellern. Mit den Abwässern findet es durch die Kanalisation, es teilt sich den Gasleitungen mit, kommt allen Haushaltungen zu, und niemand, der da sein Suppentöpfchen auf die bläulichen Flammen stellt, ahnt, daß da das Unglück seinen Fraß zum Kochen bringt” (DB 229). Through his depiction of Niobe,
Oskar shows how the Nazi appropriation of ideology fed both people's desire for grandeur and abundance and was indirectly responsible for the catastrophe.

Oskar expresses his skepticism of ideology at many different instances in the novel. His various attempts at blasphemy – at the time of his baptism, at the Jesu-Herz Church with his mother, and later with the Dusters when he saws off the figures of Jesus, John the Baptist, and others – aim to show, in a broad sense, his doubt about and deep disapproval of any system of thoughts and beliefs that could become an ideology whether religious (Catholicism) or political (Nazism). Another reason for Oskar's irreverent treatment of Churches could be traced back to his creator's (Grass) disappointment with the negative role that Churches played during the Third Reich (Delaney 138). Grass has expressed his strong views on what he called the "cowardice" of the Catholic and Protestant Churches who had "forfeited their claim to ethical leadership" and had passively accepted Nazi atrocities (138).

Oskar too reflects the same disappointment and hence challenges the Jesus statue from the Jesu-Herz Church to action by imploring him to drum. When the figure of the child Jesus later does drum, Oskar is further disenchanted by Catholicism. In Oskar's account, the figure of Jesus could drum but he had done nothing to stop the catastrophe of the Third Reich. The Christian faith offered nothing while the gross Nazi ideology led the country and its people to destruction. Moreover, Oskar is infuriated when Jesus asked him three times "Liebst du mich, Oskar?" Oskar rejects Jesus all the three times ending with "Ich hasse dich, Bürschchen, dich und deinen ganzen Klimbim!" (DB 429) His blasphemous treatment of Christianity again represents his creator's (Grass) belief that
the Catholic and Protestant Churches shared considerable responsibility for the heinous
cri mes committed in Germany under the Nazi regime (Delaney 137).

Although there were some currents of resistance to Nazism by the Churches, most
Churches supported the advent of the new regime (Bracher 350). Mainly conservative in
orientation, they were impressed by National Socialism’s old-fashioned moral tone and
by its strong line against Communists, Social Democrats, Jews, Masons, Liberals, and
Anarchists (Childs 61). The Nazi party program hailed “positive Christianity” as a factor
in the fight against Marxist atheism; a National Socialist Movement of German Christians
had been organized that sought for a “coordination between Church and State” (Bracher
350). Thus the Nazis won the support of the Churches which backed the conservative and
anti-Jewish elements of Nazism.

The destructive nature of this cooperation between the Churches and National
Socialism is foreshadowed by the early and traumatic death of Agnes. She is portrayed to
have insatiable appetites for food and sex, which are recurrent metaphors in the text for
her escape from middle class life. On the other hand, she also is an adherent of
Catholicism and experiences guilt due to her adulterous relationship with Jan. Caught
between Catholicism and her sensuality as a for form of resistance to Nazism, Agnes’s
life follows a circular pattern - from her Thursday meetings with Jan to her Saturday
confessionals and back - until it consumes her (139). Her death symbolizes the deadly
consequences of the formula, as put forth by Georg Just, that “christliche Ideologie +
Kleinhüglerideologie zu politischem Terror [führt]” (qtd. in Delaney 56).

This relation between Christian ideals and Nazi terror is highlighted by Oskar’s
treatment of Christian practices and observances; they are distorted and receive negative
and profane connotations (56). One important example is his account of a horrific and macabre event on a day of religious significance. On Good Friday, Agnes views a repelling scene of eels swarming out of a dead horse’s head after which she begins to gorge large quantities of fish until she eats herself to death. The observance of Good Friday during the Lenten season is a significant day for Catholics; it is a day of fasting and abstaining from meat. Instead fish is eaten, which is a symbol of faith and purity (Delaney 60). According to Diller, fish - especially eels - are also a symbol of sexual purity (23). Food and sexuality are both creative and life-giving principles both threatened by Nazism. Agnes uses these very principles to bring about her own death and thus escapes Nazism.

Agnes’s death also has other political implications. She is Kashubian by birth, a descendent of the Slavic Promerians and hence at odds with Germans. At the same time, she grows up in the mixed-nationality zone in the Vistula delta that had experienced large scale Germanization therefore unfavorable to Poles (Hagen 7). Agnes’s political situation is precarious not only because she has origins in a borderland, but also because the countries (Germany and Poland) that shared borders have a thousand year long history of conflict and hostility (Kulski xviii). This Kashubian dilemma is reflected in her inability to choose between the German Matzerath and the Polish Jan. While political omens draw her to Matzerath, her affection is for Jan, and she is unable to take the responsibility of making a choice (Hollington 40). It is only the presence of a female mediator, the Kashubian Agnes, that allows for a congenial relationship between the German Matzerath and the Polish Jan. Soon after her death, the relationship between the two becomes increasingly hostile owing to their political orientation. Agnes’s premature death is
therefore metaphorically related to the end of the unifying factor of Polish-German relationships and predicts the battles between the two countries (Diller 24).\textsuperscript{15}

In another scene, Oskar describes Germany's indifferent ravaging of other nations and ethnicities. Oskar recalls his visit along with Bebra's troupe to the Atlantic Wall in 1944.\textsuperscript{16} They decide to picnic on the Wall and feast on various ethnic foods. This callous relishing of various national delicacies at the peak of the war symbolizes the heartless devouring of nations by Germany (Diller 32-33; Keele 30). The horror metaphorically implicated in this scene is further intensified as Lankes, following the orders of Lieutenant Herzog, brutally shoots the nuns at the beach to the tune of "The Great Pretender." This appalling scene brings forth the fate of the millions of hapless, innocent victims of various ethnic backgrounds who were ruthlessly killed in response to unchallengeable orders or for being "in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Brooks 104-105). Millions were massacred through deliberately organized, heinously planned measures. The Nazi expansionist principle rested on the imperial principle of the primacy of the biologically and racially superior. Therefore, the inferior races – Slavs in the East, and the Jews within Germany – and the biologically substandard minorities within Germany – physically and mentally deformed people, homosexuals, and others were to

\textsuperscript{15} On 26 January 1934 Poland and Germany signed the non-aggression treaty, to be valid for ten years. The relationship between Poland and Nazi Germany soured on account of the Nazi interest in the city of Danzig. The non-aggression pact was broken and Germany attacked Poland on 1 September 1939 (Kulksi, 27-36).

\textsuperscript{16} Oskar had joined Bebra's troupe that comprised artists with stunted growth. The troupe worked for the Nazi propaganda company. Under the Nazi regime, such dwarfs often played the "fool" or rendered their art useful to the Nazis. Belonging to the non-Jew minorities of Germany, they were abhorred by the Nazis as, on the one hand, the "degenerate" physical stature of the dwarfs did not comply with their standards of the "perfect" Aryan body, and on the other hand, they were seen as a burden on the society due to their "deformation" (Arnds 49-54).
be eliminated in order to rebuild the ideal Germanic empire (Bracher 21-22; Arnds 49-54).

Oskar captures this horror of sacrificing the lives of millions to rebuild a nation by narrating an absurd and unsettling account. On the same visit to the Atlantic Wall, Lankes and Herzog explain the troupe their local superstition of placing “something living” in the foundation of any new building. This gruesome belief hints at the slaughter of millions of lives to realize the Nazi dream of building a grand German nation. The gross absurdity of the situation is further aggravated as the troupe views Lankes’s bunker named “MYSTISCH, BARBARISCH, GELANGWEILT.” Bebra notes that it is a suitable name for the century and adds, “vielleicht wird man bei Restaurationsarbeit nach fünfhundert oder auch tausend Jahren einige Hundeknocheln im Beton finden” (DB 404). Here he acknowledges that the present events will be seen as notorious by future generations (Keele 31). The incredible blatancy of this discussion and its acknowledgement of Nazi barbarism only reproduce the unsurpassed horror of the deliberately organized, meticulously planned mass exterminations of the time that were to make history.

Although people like Lankes showed full knowledge of their actions and intentions, they were unable, rather unwilling, to experience guilt. When the National Socialist regime collapsed in 1945, Germany was mainly in ruins. The time was considered to be “Stunde Null,” a time to make a clean sweep and start anew (McGowan 440). With the help of the Allied Forces, West Germany soon had a burgeoning economy, efforts were made to overcome the past and restore normalcy. In this “normal,” economically prosperous postwar Germany, Lankes and Oskar revisit the bunkers at the Atlantic Wall. As they relish their meal, the fish they eat begins to show its
vertebrae, reminding them of the killing of the five nuns (Brooks 105). Lankes even
lightheartedly names the ghostly nuns, and with Oskar, communicates with the spirits of
the dead nuns and nonchalantly plans different plots, formats and names for the paintings
about the nuns. In this fantastic account, Lankes, who refuses to experience guilt,
represents people’s incredible denial of past events and experiences and a hasty attempt
to overcome them (107).

In this way, despite the horrors of the wars and the Holocaust, Oskar shows how
people like Lankes are too concerned with their own well-being. They are unable or even
unwilling to feel any guilt, sorrow, or pain. Oskar highlights this aspect of the society by
narrating his experiences of working at a unique nightclub called the Onion Cellar.
Unlike other nightclubs, the Onion Cellar offered mainly the activity of “cutting onions.”
Talking about the effect of the onion juice, Oskar explained “der Saft schaffte […] was
die Welt und das Leid dieser Welt nicht schafften: die runde menschliche Träne” (DB
633). This episode critiques peoples inability to mourn the past and feel the pain and guilt
associated with it.

On one occasion, having given vent to their emotions, the guests become violent
and rowdy. Oskar toys with the crowds by first pacifying and then scaring them by means
of his drumming; in turn the crowd alternately becomes cheerful and scared. This bizarre
event condemns people’s inability to take responsibility, deal with difficult emotions, and
come to grip with the past. It criticizes their tendency to hide beneath the façade of
artificial optimism and happiness. Oskar knows very well that the childishness and
naïveté, the cowardice and the indifference to others’ sufferings of the prewar period
continued to exist even after the end of the war. He perceives the same greed and apathy

90
in his environment as being responsible for the postwar economic boom in Germany.
Oskar realizes that the components, which had led to the catastrophic events, still exist in his society.

Throughout his narration, Oskar comments on his recurrent vision of the black cook that embodies the "external" evil responsible for the catastrophic events. He recognizes the ominous presence of the black cook at every act of cruelty and horror in his narrative and his fear of her intensifies continually (Delaney 117). Even nine years after the end of the world war and the collapse of the Nazi regime, Oskar still sees this black cook and still anticipates danger. He ends his narrative reinforcing the looming threat posed by her: "Ist die Schawze Köchin da? Ja – Ja – Ja!" (DB 712) Although the black cook never really makes an appearance in Oskar's narrative, her presence - mainly through his visions and hallucination - is extremely overpowering. The black cook could stand for the components existing within the society - greed, apathy, lack of balance and critical reserve, attachment to ideology, etc - that were responsible for the horrific past events. At the same time, the overwhelming and continued presence of such an intangible character in his narrative represents a fear that people have not changed and suggests that such historical events will repeat themselves.

Throughout his narrative, Oskar, drawing upon magical realist tools, describes various absurd, shocking, and grotesque situations and events set within a historically identifiable society- Nazi Germany. It should be remembered that Oskar is not a regular human being; he is a fantastic creation. He is a tool, which Grass uses to highlight the various historical events. In order to understand the inhumanity of these events, Grass decided not to offer a "normal" perspective of a human protagonist. It is only through the
“abnormal” position of his created protagonist, that Grass is able to portray the absurdity and horrors of the war and the Holocaust. By creating unbelievable, grotesque, and disturbing situations, Grass, through Oskar, captures the horror and the gruesomeness of the Nazi period, with the aim of keeping such crimes against humanity in the consciousness of the people and thereby warning them against its repetition.

4.4.2. HISTORICAL EVENTS IN MIDSIGHT’S CHILDREN

At midnight, on 15 August 1947, India gained independence from the imperialist British. It was a day marked by celebration and considered to be a day of a new beginning, of a “the birth of a nation.” In his memorable speech on this occasion, Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s first Prime Minister, declared, “history begins anew for us, the history which we shall live and act and others will write about” (Modern History Sourcebook: Nehru II). The affectionate title given to Nehru by the Indian people as “the father of the nation” and his moving speech addressed to the nation on the date of India’s birth as a nation have been duly recorded in various modern history books.

Salman Rushdie challenged this historical account in his essay “The Riddle of Midnight: India,” in which he wrote:

[Int all the thousand years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly ‘free’. What on earth was it? (2001: 27)
It is this riddle that Rushdie attempts to solve in his novel, *Midnight’s Children*. He tries to unravel the mystery about that “gigantic place […] as large as Europe […] populated by around a sixth of the human race, […] famous as the ‘world’s biggest democracy’ […] that was…] keeping Pakistan and Bangladesh apart” (26-27). He also charters the fate of this “democratic” physical entity that embarked on a remarkably optimistic tone, which transformed slowly into a growing disillusionment, its worst manifestation being the declaration of Emergency (Kuchta 206). To which, Rushdie creates Saleem, the unusual narrator of his novel and uses as a medium to explore the nation state of India at its various stages after independence. Moreover, drawing on a variety of magical realist techniques, he narrates various fantastical, overly exaggerated, and absurdly comical situations to comment on this tragic state of India.

Born at midnight, on 15 August 1947, Saleem shares his birth time and date with the Indian nation. Therefore, his birth as a “midnight’s child” is welcomed and celebrated with unusual pomp and festivity. Owing to the special moment of his birth, he is endowed with supernatural capacities that put him on a unique, elevated position. Isolated from the ordinary people, he enjoys a grand stature, as he is “the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is eternally young” (*MC* 143) (Rege 258). On the other hand, the nation is referred to by using anthropomorphic terminologies such as birth, soul, and feelings of suppression (*MC* 134-135). Thus, in Saleem’s account, both he and the nation are physical, tangible entities; both have been attributed human characteristics (Kortenaar 34).

Metaphorically related to the nation, Saleem knows that the nation is a fantasy, just like he is a fantastic creation. In his narrative, he mocks people’s unquestioned
acceptance of the concept of “new” India. For him India is “the new Myth,” “a collective fiction,” “a dream” that was shared by the Indian people (MC 130 & 137) (Kortenaar 150). It was a dream that spoke of a new beginning, a “collective fantasy” that aspired to a coexistence of the ancient traditions of India and the modernity of the West, while the past – social, political, religious – of the country had to be forgotten. As Nehru told the assembly, “…this is no time for petty destructive criticism […] We have to build a noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell (MC 136). The existence of the myth of India, in a way, depended on the Indian peoples’ ability to believe in the illusion and to forget the past (Kortenaar 158-161).

This illusionary concept of India is further underlined by Saleem as he equates the occasion of its independence to other festivals celebrated in the country that honor various mythological figures and their grand exploits. He observes that in “August [,] the month of festivals [,] there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate” (MC 129). He continues

[B]ecause a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, capitulating us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will. (MC 129-130)

Here Saleem explains the illusoriness of India on the basis of this contradiction inherent in its conception. This paradox stems from the fact that the Indian subcontinent has existed along with its diverse peoples, cultures, and civilizations for thousands of years, yet it was never identified as a nation (Kortenaar 137). The Indian territory was
mapped by the British when they imposed their rule on India (126). India as a nation was a British construct, which the inhabitants of the subcontinent adopted.

What brought these diverse people together was their struggle for freedom from imperial rule. Most of the people who assumed leadership during the struggle were like Nehru, who were Western-educated and judged India according to the measure of other nations. They sought sovereignty that other nations had obtained on the grounds that India was also a nation (12). It was their nationalism that permeated into the common people; there was a new wave of patriotism among these indigenous people who soon identified themselves collectively as “Indians,” again a name given to them by the British.

In his account, Saleem refers to this feeling of nationalism as “the disease of optimism” that many Indians had contracted. It was this disease that had created the collective will among people to believe in the “myth of India.” Saleem pokes fun at this wave of patriotism that swept the country at the “birth of the nation.” Just a few hours before India was to be declared free, Saleem notes

[s]uddenly everything is saffron and green. Amina Sinai in a room with saffron walls and green woodwork. In the neighbouring room, Wee Willie Winkie’s Vanita, green-skinned, the whites of her eyes shot with saffron […] Saffron minutes and green seconds tick away on the clocks of the wall (MC 132).

The white, saffron, and green in Saleem's description are colors of the national flag of India, adopted by India's constituent assembly on 22 July, 1947. The colors of national flags have historically been used by people, institutions, commercial groups, and others to express their patriotism and solidarity. But in Saleem’s account, this use of the colors acquires enormous proportions. He even attributes magic to the situation - while
Vanita’s skin-color changes to green, the color of the pointers of a mechanical clock are transferred to the intangible “Indian minutes and seconds” ticking slowly toward India’s liberation. Saleem’s use of magic and exaggeration exemplifies the unbelievable patriotism of the Indian masses at the time. He exposes the incredible influence of the nationalist ideology that made these people forget their immediate problems – regionalist prejudices, communal violence, economic disparity, population explosion, and caste conflicts.

This tremendous nationalism and the newly adopted concept of an Indian nation-state was a legacy of the British (12-13). Even after the British departed, Indians followed their model of governance. The political and administrative structures remained the same. Saleem exposes this illusion of independence by narrating a similar situation from his personal history. Just before the transference of administrative powers from the British to the Indian political officials, property prices of houses owned by British officials plummeted. Ahmed Sinai took advantage of this opportunity and decided to buy a house from Mr. Methwold, a British official who was preparing to go back to England. Methwold’s estate consisted of four identical houses that were all sold on two conditions: “[T]hat the houses be bought with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new owners; and that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15th” (MC 109). This resettling of the Indian families into the British official’s houses corresponds to the transfer of power from the British to the Indian government. Methwold’s unusual requisite exposes the farce behind the transfer of power and India’s freedom from imperial rule (Kortenaar 168; Brennan 90).
Albeit the faces of those holding power changed, the colonial mentality has been retained by the new Indian officials. The administrative power structure continues to be imperialistic and corrupt, designed to control and rule its “uncivilized” subjects. The political officials of “new” India took very quickly to the colonizers’ ways; they imitated their former British rulers in their mannerism and dealings. Saleem brings to light this aspect of the elite rulers by detailing the readiness with which Ahmed Sinai takes to Methwold’s house. While discovering the delights of fine Scotch whisky from Methwold’s cocktail cabinet, Ahmed Sinai says, “with our ancient civilization, can we not be as civilized as he?” (MC113) Soon his efforts to be “civilized” are successful, as Ahmed Sinai’s skin-color turns entirely white. He is proud of this change in his skin-color as it confirms his transformation from an Indian to an Englishman (MC 212). The change in Ahmed’s skin color symbolizes the change in the character of the Indian elite who had, having adopted the colonizers’ ways, become increasingly imperialist (Kortenaar 26).

The “ruling” Indian elite is comprised of political officials, businesspersons, and industrialists who occupy one end of the class spectrum. They work collectively in each other’s interests, suppressing “subjects” in the middle or at the opposite end of the class spectrum. Therefore, the business elite supports the politicians, and the subsequent national development policies ensure the continued growth of businesses and industries. Mocking the power elite in India, Saleem recalls, “All over India, I stumbled across good Indian businessmen, their fortunes thriving thanks to the first Five Year Plan […] who had become or were becoming very, very pale indeed!” (MC 212) Saleem’s description of this phenomenon comments on the sad irony in India where the elite, with their
growing economic and political powers, have only replaced the colonizers and adopted their imperialist ways.

While the elite took to the colonizers methods of rule, the general public reverted to their old ways – caste conflict, regionalist prejudices, religious rivalries. For Saleem, it is “a kind of a collective failure of imagination” that the Indian masses “simply could not think [their] way out of the past” (MC 137). Saleem realizes this through the other “midnight’s children,” with whom he convenes on a regular basis by means of his telepathic powers. Saleem is disappointed with them, as he finds out that except for the supernatural gifts, the children’s heads are “full of usual things fathers mothers money food land possessions fame power God” (MC 293). He further notes,

I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian “blackies”; there were religious rivalries; and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at being in such lowly company; Brahmans began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables (MC 306).

Thus fraught with internal conflict, the “Midnight’s Children Conference” reflects India’s state of affairs and the Conference’s slow disintegration begins.

It is at this Midnight’s Children’s Conference when the telepathic rivalry between Saleem and Shiva begins. Still hopeful in the face of such irresolvable internal strife in India, Saleem aspires to find a solution to these problems. Shiva, by means of similar extrasensory powers explains to him that, “there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, right-and-left, there is only me-against-the-world! […] the world is no place for ideas, rich boy, the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams” (MC 307). Saleem, the son of the “white” businessman Ahmed Sinai, is brought up in the comforts of the
luxurious Methwold estate. Conversely, Shiva grows up in the slums in extreme poverty and drudgery. Saleem is actually born to Vaaita, the wife of the street entertainer Wee Willie Winkie. Shiva is the biological offspring of the Sinais. Mary, out of her bizarre jealousy for her fiancé's revolutionary zeal, switches the two infants. Although born to affluent parents, Shiva is condemned to a life of poverty, while Saleem grows as a "rich boy."

Saleem, by recounting this mental dialogue with Shiva, exposes the invalidity of the dream of "a noble mansion of free India, where all her children dwell" (MC 136). Although born in free "new" India, Saleem and Shiva do not enjoy the same freedom and opportunities in the new land. Their fates do change but not because of a better nation. The economic gap remains unchanged yet it is reversed (Brennan 104). The unusual act on Mary's part only underlines the ineffectiveness of India's economic and developmental policies, and that change of an individuals' fate depends mainly on coincidence.

Although the dream of an egalitarian and democratic India had failed to coalesce, the myth of "new" India was sustained by its peoples' ignorance and superstition that sustains the illusion of the "new" India (Brennan 104; Kortenaar 244). Individuals, who can deal with these two necessary ingredients, can, as Saleem acknowledges, move ahead in life. Saleem narrates the absurd story of a neighbor, Cyrus, who is transformed into Lord Khusro Khusrovand by his mother, a religious fanatic. Cyrus's father was a nuclear scientist, and had suppressed the religious fervor of his wife for years. After his death, his mother intended to remove all traces of secularism from her son and instill in him her
religiosity. Saleem notes, “in no time he was being hailed by crowds half million strong, and credited with miracles” (MC 323). The Khusro Khusrovand information leaflet says,

Know, O unbelievers, that in the dark Midnights of CELESTIAL SPACE in a time before Time lay the sphere of Blessed KHUDROVAND!!! Even MODERN SCIENTISTS affirm that they have LIED to conceal from the People whose right it is to know of the Unquestionable True existence of this HOLY HOME OF TRUTH!!! Leading intellectuals the World Over [...] speak of the ANTI-RELIGIOUS CONSPIRACY of reds, Jews, etc., to hide these VITAL NEWS! [...] Do not heed LIES of politicos poets reds &cetera. PUT YOUR TRUST in only True Lord [...] KHUDRO KHUDRO KHUDRO
& send Donations to PO Box 555, Head Post Office, Bombay –1 BLESSING! BEAUTY! TRUTH (MC 321-323)

As evident from this leaflet, Khusro’s religion is nothing but a commercial enterprise. At the same time, it combines phony populism with anti-liberal thinking (Brennan 95). Striking a good blend between the modern requirements (“scientific” justification and international recognition) and the local belief (appearance of God in the shape of common human beings) the leaflet sells cheap solutions to the credulous masses. By narrating this tale about Khusro and his commercial -cum- religious enterprise, Saleem ridicules the religious charlatanism so rampant in India.

Through his account, Saleem lays bare the corroding myth of a “new” India, as he exposes corrupt politics, insincere religiosity, fake secularism, insensitive materialism, regionalist chauvinism, and racial prejudices (Brennan 95). But he also participates in that what he mocks. Jealous of Cyrus’s popularity and success, he complains, “it should have been me [...] I am the magic child” (MC 324). He shows readiness to take the place of the charlatan Khusro. In another passage, he expresses the widely prevalent prejudice about Parsees. While talking about Toxy Catrack, a Parsee woman from his
neighborhood, he comments, “she was twenty years old, a gibbering half-wit, the product of years of inbreeding” (MC 152). As an Indian Muslim, Saleem prides his secularist ideals, while he denounces “the incompatibility of Islam and socialism” in Pakistan (MC 380). Saleem wants to solve the problems of his country, but he is unwilling to give up his privileges to that effect (Rege 265). After he learns the truth about his birth, he stops convening with the other “midnight’s children,” lest Shiva finds out that he was the true heir to the wealth of the Sinais, and hence claims his birthright (MC 358) (Kortenaar 244). Saleem thus proves that his intent to save the country was as farcical as a “new” India itself (Kortenaar 53).

Saleem’s involvement in major political processes is equally preposterous. He is, in fact arbitrarily led from one event on to another. After the war between India and Pakistan begins, Saleem, in an attempt to participate in some way, is out on the street during curfew hour, “foolishly in search of bombs” (MC 408). As one of the bombs explodes, Saleem is struck on his head by a silver spittoon causing him to lose his memory. He is found by Pakistani soldiers, who make him a part of their unit. Even in such a state of amnesia, Saleem’s belief in his greatness does not fade and he assumes the role of Buddha, the enlightened sage. When asked about his own identity and his family, he answers, “don’t fill my head with all that history. I am who I am, that is all there is” (MC 419).

Saleem continues to play the role of Buddha and accepts the Army life; he becomes someone, “who submits to the life in which he finds himself, and does his duty; who follows orders; who lives both in-the-world and not-in-the-world” (MC 425). Saleem travels with the Pakistani soldiers to Dacca, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to aid the
Pakistani Occupation Forces. In Dacca he encounters the advancing Indian military
troupe that is aiding Bangladesh’s War of Liberation. Saleem recalls that the Indian
military aid was a large group of magicians and entertainers from the magicians’ ghetto
in Delhi. Amongst this group he encounters Parvati, another “midnight’s child.” Until
now Parvati and Saleem had seen and corresponded with each other only by means of
their supernatural powers. Parvati immediately recognizes Saleem, and using her magic,
renders him invisible and carries him in a wicker basket to Delhi. It is only in Delhi that
he recovers his memory and perceives that which he has experienced (MC 451 – 457).

Saleem’s account of his “participation” in such significant historical events is
bizarre and imperceptible. It is not patriotism or heroism that is behind his involvement in
the war. Saleem is led from one situation into another on account of his amnesia and his
total passivity under the garb of spirituality and renunciation (Rege 262). Even his exit
from the Pakistani army and return to India is not the outcome of his conscious decision
but of Parvati’s conjuring trick. Through his own example Saleem criticizes the Indian
people whose belief in the “new” India rests on ignorance and superstition, while their
participation in its political processes is nothing but acts of forgetting their democratic
rights and evading responsibility (Brennan 105). Saleem’s unquestioned submission to
the demands made on him represents people’s apathetic attitude that does not allow them
to take a stand and challenge the demagogy of their leaders (105). Thereby, Saleem
exposes the false nature of Indian democracy (Rege 262).

Saleem further challenges the widely accepted historical “fact” that recognizes
India as the world’s largest democracy by ruthlessly criticizing Indira Gandhi’s
government, which was in power, more or less, from 1966 to 1984 with a gap of two
years. In spite of resistance from key political leaders, who opposed the establishment of a Nehru “dynasty,” Gandhi was “democratically” selected as Prime Minister not on the grounds of popular vote but her relation to Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1971, she was “reelected” to the post of India’s Prime Minister. In 1975, Justice Sinha of the Allahabad High Court invalidated her 1971 election on the grounds of electoral malpractices. During this time, social unrest began to increase. There were several railroad strikes and public demonstrations. In the midst of Gandhi’s political crisis and the surge of people’s resistance to her government, Gandhi declared National Emergency around midnight of 26 June 1975, and by dawn, almost seven hundred opposition members were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (Dhar 237-259; Kuchta 212). Thus the country that was envisioned to be a “noble mansion of free India” became one in which people’s freedoms and civil rights were suspended.

After India’s independence, many Indian political leaders and officials inherited the imperialist manners of their former colonizers, but Indira Gandhi’s government was its worst example. Gandhi defended her decision to suspend democracy as a means of maintaining it, and claimed that “democratic liberty does not include license to undermine it” (Kuchta 211). Using the mannerism of former colonizers, the already undemocratic government soon digressed into a dictatorial one, debilitating any kind of civil resistance. By his account, Saleem, who is gifted with phenomenal nasal abilities to smell strange things like emotions, ideas, and perceptions “sniffs out” these imperial manners of political officials when the Emergency was declared and executed. He writes

[w]hen the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers, I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air … in the city which was littered with the phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the
merciless, and the last pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism. (MC 506)

Saleem further strengthens his comparison of Indian political officials with the former rulers as he attributes this despotism to be the “influence of hair-styles” (MC 501). Talking about the “recurrence of center parting in history,” Saleem reminds us that like Gandhi Methwold also had a center parting. Saleem sees Gandhi and Methwold in the same light; both aim at controlling the masses by means of imperialist powers, and at the same time both claim to be “friends” of their subjects (Brennan 90).

Talking about the center parting of Indira Gandhi’s hair, Saleem notes, “her hair parted at the center, was snow-white on one side and black as night on the other” (MC 477). Saleem further observes, “the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – a black part which, being secret, macabre untold, must be a matter for us [writers]” (MC 501). The immediate gains of the Emergency were: No strikes, no bandhs, industrial peace, quiet on campuses, suppression of smugglers and hoarders, stable prices, spurt in economic growth (Dhar, 264). Saleem also acknowledges the white part of the Emergency: “trains run on time, black money hoarders are frightened into paying taxes, even the weather is brought to heal and the bumper harvest is reaped” (MC 517). But people were working diligently and honestly not out of free will but fear (Kuchta, 213). Saleem reminds us that there was a black side to the Emergency too that filled the atmosphere across the country with silences and fears (MC 500).

This fear was further aggravated when Sanjay Gandhi joined his mother in “solving” India’s problems. He was neither an affiliate of the party, nor did he have a
formal position in the government, yet using his mother’s name, Indira Gandhi, he was able to influence both. He came up with his own agenda of eugenics planning and slum clearance that he pursued with utmost brutality. At Sanjay Gandhi’s order, 3.7 million sterilizations were performed between April and September of 1976, and in April the demolition of the Muslim squatter settlements in New Delhi, where six people were killed and tens and thousands lost their homes (Kuchta 213).

In Saleem’s account, the main target of Sanjay Gandhi’s population control drive and ‘Civic Beautification Programme’ is the magician’s ghetto. This ghetto is, according to Saleem, the object of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi’s hatred for various reasons. The magicians of this ghetto share the problems of the Indian Communists; they are interested in socialist revolutionary thinking bereft of regionalist and religious bigotry (Brennan 94). As Saleem describes, the magicians are also people “whose hold on reality [is] absolute; they [grip] it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never [forget] what it [is]” (MC 476) (Reeder 239). These magicians with their socialist concerns recognized the despotism of the Indira Gandhi regime. Due to their “hold on reality,” these magicians cannot be fooled by Gandhi’s disingenuous reasons for declaring the Emergency. Therefore, as Saleem recalls, the magicians’ ghetto is the primary target of the Gandhi regime’s atrocities.

The magicians’ ghetto is also a place where “midnight’s children” like Parvati and Saleem find refuge. In fact, it is in this ghetto that Saleem is reborn to a humbler life: His self-perception and his role of saving the country diminish to modest proportions. Orphaned, with the secret of his birth revealed and having fought on the “wrong” side of

17 Saleem makes it very clear that their socialism “owed nothing to foreign influences” (MC 476).
the war (with the Pakistani Army against India), Saleem is not accepted by his relatives in India. He starts living in the magicians’ ghetto and participates in their revolutionary zeal. Saleem writes about this change in him that is outwardly expressed by his change of color (Brennan 94). He notes, “a renegade Businessist, I began zealously to turn red and then redder, as surely and completely as my father had once turned white, so that now my mission of saving-the-country could be seen in a new light” (MC 474).

However, his modest hope to save the world is nullified, as he becomes the target of Sanjay Gandhi’s slum clearance and forced sterilization program. In his account, the main reason behind these atrocities is Indira Gandhi’s hatred for and fear of the “midnight’s children” (MC 522). It is midnight’s children who had the special gifts to perceive Indira Gandhi’s self-serving hidden agenda and to confront her authoritarian regime. Therefore, according to Saleem, Indira Gandhi sanctions vasectomies and sterilizations to deny the “midnight’s children” the possibility of reproducing. Saleem notes that this was “only a side effect” and continues to explain, “because they were truly extraordinary doctors, and they drained us of more than that: hope, too, was excised” (MC 523). Thus the authoritarian regime of Indira Gandhi denies Saleem any further hope of saving the country and realizing the dream of a democratic, secular, progressive nation.

The loss of hope for Saleem signifies a loss of hope for the nation, which was envisioned to be a democratic, secular state and which is now in a neo-colonial phase. Saleem, after all, is an allegory to the nation; therefore, his fate signifies that of the nation (Juraga 169). He begins his life with a kind of megalomania believing himself to be the central force behind all happenings in the world. Gradually, he realizes that he is just a
passive receptor of larger political and historical processes over which he has no control.

It is his slow and steady disillusionment that teaches him humility (Kortenaar 141). He notes

nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk's-tonsured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber nosed, castrated, and now pre-maturely 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 (MC 534).

The “newly-born” nation, India, also began on an extremely optimistic note but soon thereafter the dreams of a progressive, tolerant and egalitarian state of India began to fade. The country became increasingly infested by unethical politics and corrupted economies, religious and regionalist bigotry, language and caste conflicts, and an ever-intensifying class struggle. Divided and re-divided as a result of linguistic and ethnic strife, the nation-state India, just as Saleem, became disfigured and weakened; it was not able to realize the grand vision with which it embarked into its “new” life as a nation.

Thus Saleem is an allegory of the Indian nation; his degenerating body mirrors the retrogression of the country. Throughout his narrative, Rushdie, through Saleem, draws on various magical realist techniques – exaggeration, heightened imagery, metaphor, melding of the fantastic and the mundane, coexistence of diverse and conflicting worldviews – to portray comically the tragic nature of this disappointment in the fate of India. He narrates unbelievable and fantastic events to capture the paradox of day-to-day Indian life that comprises the age-old prejudices and practices, on the one hand, and modern Western components on the other. At the same time, Rushdie’s of the tools of
magical realism allows him to capture the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of India.

4.5. HISTORY AND FICTION, CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* trace key historical events that took place in Germany and in India at different yet overlapping time periods. In their novels, both Grass and Rushdie re-stage or re-play the historically specifiable events with the aim of offering a different perspective. They recall official accounts alongside their own version in a deliberate attempt to highlight the fallibility of history and to expose those aspects that are excluded from or overlooked in documented history. At the same time, Grass and Rushdie aim at rendering the irrationality and horrors of the historical actualities, the unfathomable human suffering, and the unbelievable human capacity for endurance that have no place in documented history. Such recreation of historical events to offer alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts is a typical characteristic of magical realist fiction (Faris 170).

Oskar and Saleem are artifices; their roles serve to highlight historical episodes (Reed 114). They are not portrayed as ordinary human beings and we cannot identify with them. Throughout his narrative, Oskar does not develop or change. In spite of witnessing one of the most grotesquely inhuman historical events, his belief in his grand stature does not falter. Until the end he insists “Ich bin Jesus” (*DB* 710). Saleem, on the other hand, changes in the course of the narrative. But the change in Saleem should not
be attributed to any anthropomorphic characteristics. He is an allegory of the Indian
country and simply represents the change in the state of the nation.

Neither Oskar nor Saleem plays a specific given role in the society each inhabits.
Rather they assume roles that can best reveal the events they import (Reed, 68). They are
tools used to reveal the overt and the hidden aspects of the events they describe.
Therefore, in their narratives, Oskar and Saleem often support what they criticize. For
example, Oskar mocks and at the same time works for the propaganda company; he
disapproves of and yet entertains the Nazis. Similarly both exemplify what they reject.
For example, Saleem claims to be secular but expresses his religious and regionalist
biases; he wants to end the class struggle but does nothing to give Shiva his fair share.
Through their fantastic protagonists, Grass and Rushdie alert us that there are various
approaches to viewing and understanding past events, ideas, and experiences.

In the same way, Grass and Rushdie through their protagonists offer differing or
contradictory understandings of the events they describe, which again is a distinct trait of
magical realism. Furthermore, borrowing certain magical realist techniques such as
exaggeration, heightened imagery, absurd elements, hallucinations and miracles the
alternative interpretations are rendered so bizarre that their falseness is but obvious.
According to Oskar, the intent behind the bombing of the Polish Post office by the
German was the acquisition of his drum. Similarly, Saleem takes credit for the division of
the state of Maharashtra, which was actually led by language conflict between Gujaratis
and Marathis. Grass and Rushdie show their readers how past events can be rendered in a
way to suit those who decide to recount them thereby raising questions of accountability
and responsibility

109
In order to add more emphasis on the unreliability of documented history, Grass and Rushdie intentionally make their narrators frequently correct their previous incorrect accounts. This technique is used to alert the reader about the fallibility of history (Sanga 25). Grass and Rushdie ask their readers to maintain a healthy critical attitude toward any rendering of past events. At the same time, they warn their readers against a sentimental involvement in historical writing. Therefore, the protagonists of their novels constantly alternate between “I” and “he”/ “Oskar”/ “Saleem,” forcing their readers to jostle between sympathy and distance (Reed, 115). Thus, both Grass and Rushdie hope to cultivate a critical reserve and a healthy distance in their readers. By fostering such a reasonable approach and by keeping the past alive in the consciousness of the people, Grass and Rushdie hope that a repetition of the horrific past events is prevented.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have attempted to explore the ways in which Günter Grass and Salman Rushdie employ various techniques of magical realism to retell histories in their novels Die Blechtrommel and Midnight's Children respectively. Magical realism is a powerful tool: Its unique characteristics offer strategies by which the conventional assumptions about reality can be questioned and reexamined; it embraces the varied yet dichotomous aspects of human experience. Magical realism also empowers the marginalized, the traumatized, and the victimized, who are often forced into silence by giving voice to their experiences and histories. It equips its users with artistic weapons to resist and also confront dominant ideological and cultural structures.

Grass and Rushdie use the tools of magical realism to fulfill their roles as public intellectuals. Through their art, both aim at impacting the society in a positive manner by redescribing it. Grass’s Die Blechtrommel and Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children explore the absurdly inhuman and gruesome historical processes of twentieth century Germany and India. They cover the turbulent period that witnessed wars, racism, communal violence, partitions, shifting boundaries, forced migrations and expulsion of peoples and

111
culmination in the persecution of Jews in Germany and the widespread vasectomies and sterilizations performed in India.

Grass and Rushdie acknowledge that it is impossible to recount such past events and experiences in their completeness. On the one hand, memory is by nature fragmentary, on the other, the events they describe are beyond human comprehension and rationale. Therefore, to render past events as a whole, they have to recreate them. Drawing upon the techniques of magical realism, they reshape and glue the different fragments of their memory to create a cohesive unit. At the same time, using similar techniques, they create absurd and “unreal” situations to portray the grotesqueness and irrationality of those events.

Being fantastic characters, the protagonists of Grass’s and Rushdie’s novels, Oskar and Saleem function as one of the most important techniques of magical realism. Introduced into a fictive framework of historically specifiable events, Oskar and Saleem are tools with which Grass and Rushdie reshape and glue their fragmentary memories. The bizarre and grotesque situations, which Grass and Rushdie create to describe the horror and despair of the historical events, become the narratives of these “abnormal” characters.

Grass and Rushdie employ magical realism to redescribe the historical events with the aim of illuminating those aspects hidden or overlooked in dominant historical accounts, thus challenging the reliability of historical writing. They also give voice to those aspects of human experience closely related to the historical events and yet considered unsuitable for historical writing. Moreover, through their re-telling of historical events, Grass and Rushdie urge their readers to be conscious of the past as a
way to prevent those occurrences from repeating themselves. They utilize the magical realist tools not only to redescribe the world but also to suggest means of improving it.

With the help of their protagonists' narrative style, Grass and Rushdie instigate their readers to doubt not only the authority and reliability of official accounts but also the powerful influence of any kind of political ideology. Grass and Rushdie call for a critical approach, a healthy distance, a balance between the mystical and rational aspect of everyday life so that their readers are able to be critical of and deconstruct myths created for political ends by those in power (Reed 139; Kortenaar 44-45). Drawing upon the tools of magical realism, such as co-existence of the fantastic and the mundane, elements of the absurd and the grotesque, metaphor and overblown imagery, Grass and Rushdie break "the habit-dulled conventional certainties" that make people believe that "resistance is useless." They offer alternative perspectives and visions and thereby instill us with "confidence in our ability to improve the world" (Needham 69).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


117


