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## **The Agency of Things in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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### **Abstract**

The current paper examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in terms of the narrator-subject's negotiation with things. The paper reads Rushdie's novel through the lens of Bill Brown's "Thing Theory", to re-negotiate the material underpinnings of displacement and memory. Objects as things interrupt, constitute, mediate, and regulate personal and collective history. The things of memory interact with each other as excessive manifestations of threatening otherness. Additionally, the novel's use of unreliable narration is an illustration of the subject's acknowledgement of the narrator's uneasy and challenging, yet necessary encounter with objects as things.

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## Introduction

The current paper examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) in terms of the things of memory that mediate the negotiation and re-constitution of identity, history, and culture. For the postcolonial-postmodern subject, the consciousness of a dis-membered or "cracked" (Rushdie 22) identity, coincides with an uneasy encounter with the things of history. The paper reads Rushdie's novel through the lens of Bill Brown's "Thing Theory", shifting the focus of diasporic reading from geopolitical and linguistic models that are based on hybridity, borders and nationhood, to the material underpinnings of displacement.

Memory is needed not merely to realize the past. It is a crucial tool and agent for relating one with the present. This becomes more significant for the postcolonial writer in exile. Homi Bhabha asserts, "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a powerful re-membling, a putting together of the trauma of the past to make sense of the present" (63). To remember is to give life to a disjointed past in re-constituting and re-configuring history.

While recent theories, for example, by Foucault (1982) and Hayden White (1973), show that history deals not with things, but with words as non-objective, ideologically conditioned and socio-culturally motivated discourse, Rushdie's narrative may put in perspective "the tyranny of things" (Brown, "Tyranny" 446). In doing so, Rushdie envisages a changed relation of history with the human subject. History, notwithstanding its force and effectiveness, becomes "the untranscendable horizon" (Attridge 78), one "operating from outside the human capacity to construct and construe signs, imposes limits upon and yet opens up possibilities for thought and action" (78).

## Thing Theory and Material Memory

Thing Theory, articulated by literary theorist Bill Brown, distinguishes between "objects" and "things". Brown argues that an object is something transparent and smoothly functioning, that we tend to look through or consume without a second thought, a thing asserts itself by exemplifying a particularly changed subject-object relation. According to Brown:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us; when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. ("Thing Theory" 5)

Rushdie's things of personal and collective history are provocative, random and familiar, yet

concrete and ambiguous in their specific moment of occurrence. While his postmodern stylization aids in exposing the constructed-ness and fictionality of history, debunking the myth of history as a completed and fully knowable project of the past, the things of memory (personal and collective) are so exorbitant, and simultaneously so specific, that they inevitably implode the individual consciousness into an active engagement with “the chance interruption” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 4), that is, the seeing through of these things qua things. According to Bjornar Olsen:

Our dialogue with the material world is a sophisticated discourse about closeness, familiarity, bodily belonging and it is extremely rich and polysemic involving all our senses ... sounds, smells and touches admit proximity with the world; more than seeing, they mediate the corporeality and symmetry of our being in the world (97).

For Brown, thingness amounts to a form of “latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects) ... the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else.” (“Thing Theory” 5). The things of history, for Saleem, exemplify Brown’s thing/object dialectic. They make memory’s truth intelligible, for the objects of memory are as enmeshed with our senses, sounds, smells, and touches as they are with our deepest and often half-realized sense of personal and collective identities. Several features are characteristic of both the subject—Saleem—and the things that constitute him. He says: “[a]nd my chutneys and kasundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings—by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets ... Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruptions of the clocks” (Rushdie 45)

Materiality is shared by both the body and things. The child Saleem Sinai, even as he is being born, is able to keep time on hold through the old clocktower. In fact, the clocktower is one of the things that make Saleem memorable, while it is through his “memory’s truth” (225), that Saleem is able to hold time still. Memory, according to Saleem “selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogenous but usually coherent version of events” (225). As other people and things leak into Saleem/the unreliable narrator, he leaks into them too. While he boasts of being the puppet master- “the nation performed my (his) play” (276), though he concedes to not having meant it, he is also the puppet who has been doomed to be mysteriously handcuffed to history, buffeted about by history while most of what happens takes place in his absence. Things are not just metaphors of individual identity. In their chance interruption, things acquire memory

value within social and historical networks that leads to the preservation of specific objects.

Moreover, this highlights the workings of the human and the non-human, in Latour's sense of the "symmetrical anthropology project" (Latour 340). In constituting history, Saleem goes beyond the object-thing dialectic. The things that constitute and often define Saleem, in Rushdie's novel, are themselves indeterminate symbols that exceed him and have a social life of their own. There is no solace offered in a rooted sense of these things as permanent, personal and unambiguous. Things operate within the quotidian, private, and the most inalienable part of one's memory through history, and become untranslatable, excessive, and ambivalently amorphous and concrete. They appear and re-appear on a unique horizon to make the subject confront their presence and agency. However, this agency is always liminal and never fully known. Memory's truth is now sedimented and condensed with registers of thingness that make the truth underlying history, both personal and collective.

### **The Object/Thing dialectic in *Midnight's Children***

In *Midnight's Children*, things like the silver spittoon and the perforated sheet act as junctions of personal and national history. Their appearance as leitmotifs imposes a coherent structure onto the schizoid anxiousness of the narrative. Image and sentiment become attached to events in national history that are forever dealt speculatively from the filter of personal memory where cracks, fissure, and leakages abound.

The perforated sheet, with its hole, for example, is the thing that materially fuels and constructs Aadam's forbidden desire. At the same time, the sheet's (w)hole also becomes the thing where desire interacts with matter, making whole the diaspora's liminal, ambivalent and fractured identity as the Heidelberg returned Kashmiri. This material-relationality of the sheets' (w)hole has a "ghostly essence" (Rushdie 117). It also refers to the fragmented, even sequestered view of these things, the knowledge of parts that forces the assembly of a (w)hole for Saleem, the postcolonial-postmodern and de-centered subject, and the grandson of Aadam Sinai. Additionally, the hole metaphysically recurs as the sheet symbolically mutates into Lifafa Das's peep show, that accesses an excessive sneak peek into India. Later, it reappears as the forbidden washing trunk or the car bonnet that allows Saleem to peep into his mother's 'perfidious' secret past; and as the unlocked old clock tower that allows him to block grown up (apprehendable) voices and hear un-apprehended, magical and disembodied voices of the midnight's children. Again, it recurs as the genetic code (a fact dramatically and stylistically put to reversal by the switching of Saleem and Shiva at birth) of Amina Sinai's bid to love her

husband in sequestered bits. The hole in the sheet, thus, becomes the persistent, continuing, inalienable and untranslatable thing that both liberates, in its action as a window of possibilities through memory, as well as limits, in its untranslatability and persistence.

Far from revealing memory's truth, the unreliable narration, convoluted narrative, and the use of devices like magic realism are illustrative of the subject's inability to come to terms with the hyperpresent things of history. These things indicate the dialectic of avoidance and acceptance, of the narrator's challenge in countenancing their materiality. The novel's semiotic of the things of history, politics, culture, and memory's truth go on to construct a shifting and unstable identity. These things prompt, sustain and perpetuate the continuous process of reflection, refraction, and an awareness of "cracking up" (74). The things of history, like the silver spittoon, the washing trunk, the car bonnet, the perforated sheet with its hole(s), and Lifafa Das's peep show are personal objects that go on to perform their own social, familial, and collective roles as things that mediate, control, modify, and limit the subject's identity. As a result, Saleem Sinai continuously morphs into an unnameable Other.

The novel's famous "perforated sheet" (16) is the sedimented thing that is meant to restrict Saleem's grandfather, Dr. Aadam Aziz's vision. A mundane household object, the sheet, becomes "something sacred and magical" (34) as it constructs a collage-like picture of Naseem in fragments, nudging Aziz's imagination, and dictating the character's thoughts, desires and future. On the other hand, the perforated sheet materializes the trauma of partition, foreshadowing the violent history of the partition of India. Thus, history and individual lives overlap and connect intertextually through the thingness of the sheet, whose perforations symbolise restrictive access and excess. These perforations materialise a limited vision which is paradoxically the excessive assemblage of one's own sensory impressions and interpretations. Such an assemblage of the whole from parts by Dr Aziz becomes a model for Saleem's view of personal history. In continuum with his own experience of history, for Saleem, Jamila Singer's chadar too materializes how "the history of our family once again became the fate of our nation ... glimpsed through a gold-and-white perforated sheet" (329).

The pickle jars also emerge as the archive of preserved, protracted time. Saleem works in a pickle factory and his story is mapped onto the thirty pickle jars of the novel's chapters. Saleem uses the material process of pickling to prevent the decay of hi(s)story. Even as his own body is cracking apart, objects like the jars and spices of the pickling process, prevent the disintegration of his own memoir as well as the memories of the Midnight's children. Memory and history, are both things unconsumable. Often unpalatable, they are transformed by these

durable jars into the things of history. Saleem confesses that, “I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams” (45).

Another object is the spittoon, which acts like a vessel to contain lost identity. A spittoon is a common household utensil in the Indian subcontinent, a private utensil to discard chewed betel residue. For Saleem, this familiar personal mundane object becomes defamiliarized, that is, it loses its functional, practical value and is radically displaced, forcing the reader to confront its hard materiality as a thing, and hyperpresent, “within the psychological, social and political dynamics” (Brown, “Objects, Others, and Us” 187) among subjects through history. The spittoon mediates a subject-object agency, creating and dictating Saleem’s character and actions. Analysing the spittoon’s material inventory, Saleem grows up surrounded by spittoon hitters, who played “the ancient game of hit-the-spittoon” (Rushdie 45)— a thing that can collect his forgotten past. The spittoon is the harmonizing and networking agent that brings the locals together in political thought and community culture, the thing that brings Mumtaz and Nadir Khan together, an ornamental gift from the Rani of Cooch Nahi at the wedding of Nadir Khan and Mumtaz, carried forward both as an heirloom and a forbidden dowry item through partition. However, it is also the prophesied thing that does “brain him” (96) in an air strike during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. Saleem loses his memory as a result of this head injury. His connections to his aristocratic family history too are disrupted and he becomes “the buddha” (362), a tracking dog for the Pakistani army. Here, at the Sundarbans, he clings to it like an anchor that can hoard his forgotten past. However, later the spittoon triggers a spiral of nostalgia as it re-appears in “nostalgic agony” (375) in the form of a “spittoon surrogate” (466) or a “talismanic spittoon”, mediating traces of his memory and history. Arguably, Saleem’s entire narrative lingers on the spittoon’s texture, weight, decay and after-life.

Objects may also function as hostile things. William Methwold forces the Sinais to buy and maintain his estate exactly as is—his furniture, records, and his cocktail routines, all markers of elite British culture. At one level, this is a transition story of handing over property from one elite to another. However, it is also a story of material friction and hostility. The grand pianos and whiskeys refuse to blend into the background. As British agents, they mediate colonial haunting, forcing newly independent Indian elites to be controlled by them. It is the play of these things that tyrannizes the subject in their presence (always excessive) while

constantly forming its own interpretative frame of reference which is contingent, simultaneous and spontaneous, thus, offering him no release from the bondage of history. The materiality of things is underpinned as agents that must carry the weight of history, individual and collective, of all those who are rendered fragile and inadequate in carrying it.

According to Sara Guyer's description of "strategic anthropomorphism", anthropomorphism may be used "as a testimonial strategy" (Guyer 33). She refers to "the possibility of a non-human entity becoming human by speaking and positing itself as a human subject, even in the very act of stating that it is not one" (33). In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, there is the subject's overwhelming threat of being obsolesced by things. The narrator confesses:

I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug — that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of disintegrating. (Rushdie 45)

The doors and spittoons, among other non-human entities, may not speak in first person. However, things, by constantly asserting and re-iterating their agency and subjecthood throughout the narrative and at the same time constantly acting to threaten and impose limits on human understanding and articulation, offer no simple way for the human to relate to the things of history that constitute him. The human becomes a thing among other things of history. In fact, things are the cause of anxiety—of a fear of history as the human/human body no longer remains the ideal or the pinnacle of evolution. It is no longer the creator of history, the director of things of history. If agency and subjecthood have historically been the exclusive preserve of the human, things of history act to undercut this notion. Things have a life of their own. But things, like the human capacity to understand oneself through them, remain ultimately unanalysable; and agency and subjecthood no longer remain the privileged domain of the human agent. Thus, there is no easy exchange with the material forces of history. There is nothing simple about materiality as things act in ways beyond the pale of human limits. Things are untranslatable; an encounter with them is both inevitable and inexpressible in human terms offered by a transparent use of language.

Thus, things display an inherent ambivalence and impose a crisis of identity. They constitute Rushdie's narrator by subjecting him to a continual process of (re)presentation and (re)interpretation through the inherent social/ familial role these things play even as he is

shaping them (the things) into his own elliptical, circular narrative with its slippages/spillages trying consciously and constantly to elude the question of a linear “what-happened nextism” (Rushdie 48). There is a constant awareness of the tension between the things that make Saleem and the things made by him and he says “I am the tomb in Bombay ... watch me explode” (241), “I was somehow making them happen” while also conceding as a diary entry, “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence” (18).

The object(s) no longer relate to the subject derivatively, but as a living continuum of things set in motion through the fractured hole/ lens of history’s motley fabric, threatened always by the jagged shards of memory’s mirror. Each thing that constructs and construes memory “index(es) a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable (Brown, “Thing Theory” 6).”

## Conclusion

Thus, the narrator-subject’s negotiation with things from the past, and with the past as thing, signals a recurring uneasiness about the life of objects as things, particularly the gap, blank, void, or hole, that these things entail. Fleeting frontier(s), shards of memory, fragmentary, incoherent and unutterable things, and names of the ostensibly quotidian world, act and interact with each other as excessive manifestations of threatening otherness in a partially remembered and once familiar space. Defamiliarized by their abundance, simultaneity and spontaneity as well as their easy mutability, like the subject-narrator himself, the things of fiction, history (personal and collective) and memory (personal and collective) are liable to spillages and slippages. Far from revealing memory’s truth, the narrator’s unreliable narration is an illustration of his inability to come to terms with the hyperpresent things of history, while indicating his constant avoidance of the challenge of confronting them directly.

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