Midnight's Children and Shame

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Abstract
I've been talking to a lot of journalists for the last week, and I've become very expert at summarizing my books. You know, it's very strange that you write something which is 250,000 words long or, in the case of the new book, a mere 100,000 words long, and people say, 'Can you tell our readers in a couple of sentences what it is you're trying to say?' To be fair to journalists I have to say that it's not only journalists that make these requests. For instance, I went on a lecture tour to India this year, and I remember in Delhi a girl said to me, 'Look, I've read your book, this Midnight's Children-, it's very long, but I read it.' And then she said, 'What I want to know is: what's your point?' To my reply, 'Do I really have to have just one point?' she answered, 'Yes, of course. I know what you're going to say. You're going to say the whole book is the point from the beginning to the end, aren't you?' 'Yes,' I said. 'I thought so,' she said. 'It won't do.' So I thought that instead of talking about a point, I would just talk in a more discursive way about the book, and one might come round to something about a point.
I've been talking to a lot of journalists for the last week, and I've become very expert at summarizing my books. You know, it's very strange that you write something which is 250,000 words long or, in the case of the new book, a mere 100,000 words long, and people say, 'Can you tell our readers in a couple of sentences what it is you’re trying to say?' To be fair to journalists I have to say that it's not only journalists that make these
requests. For instance, I went on a lecture tour to India this year, and I remember in Delhi a girl said to me, ‘Look, I’ve read your book, this *Midnight’s Children*; it’s very long, but I read it.’ And then she said, ‘What I want to know is: what’s your point?’ To my reply, ‘Do I really have to have just one point?’ she answered, ‘Yes, of course. I know what you’re going to say. You’re going to say the whole book is the point from the beginning to the end, aren’t you?’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I thought so,’ she said. ‘It won’t do.’ So I thought that instead of talking about a point, I would just talk in a more discursive way about the book, and one might come round to something about a point.

I thought I would tell you a little bit about the way in which it was written. And it was written, really, in a manner of complete incompetence, I think. When I began to write it, there was a very very large amount of material. You may not believe this, given the length of the finished book, but the original draft of the book was at least twice as long. So what you have here is *The Reader’s Digest* condensed version of *Midnight’s Children*. Of the five years of writing, the first draft probably took about two years. And at the end of this time there was that terrible moment, which is when an author reads his manuscript and even the author is obliged to admit to himself that it’s terrible, that it doesn’t work, and that it’s just a complete mess with no organization in it at all. This is a very depressing moment. And I didn’t really know what to do about it. The odd thing about this first draft is that it was not written in the first person, yet now it is. I hadn’t worked out when I first started writing it that that’s what I had to do. So I just wrote it as a third-person narrative, and it wasn’t surprising in retrospect that it was a mess. I was wondering what to do about this, and I was also worrying about the Tristram Shandy problem, about the fact that Saleem, the narrator, was not born until 150 pages into the book. And I thought this is a lot to ask the reader to put up with. I know Tristram Shandy actually takes longer to get born than Saleem, but I think I get the silver medal anyway, or rather Saleem does.

But I thought something must be done, nobody will wait 150 pages. And then I thought that maybe what I would do was allow him to narrate the section before he was born so that at least his voice would be present in the book even if he himself was not present in the events of the book, and people would get to know him in that way, and so they would be more willing to wait for his actual birth. And then I thought that maybe once he was born, it would no longer be necessary for him to narrate the book and I could return and take over. This was a terrible mistake on my part. Because the moment he began to talk, it became clear that he was
never going to stop. It was like a coup: he just simply took a deep breath and started talking, and 500 pages later he stopped, much to my relief. This obviously meant that the book was completely re-written and I think every sentence in the first draft went out of the window, and new sentences came in through the door. On the whole I was very grateful to him for taking over, because he was clearly able to do what I wasn’t. So that was one, probably the major discovery in the book.

But there were other things that I was concerned about, one of which is that I didn’t want to write a book which could be conventionally translated as allegory, because it seems to me that in India allegory is a kind of disease. You know, everything, all texts, all statements, are interpreted allegorically. There is an assumption that every story is really another story which you haven’t quite told, and what you have to do is to translate the story that you have told into the story that you haven’t told. This comes back to the what’s-your-point question. Because people read a section and they say, ‘I can read what you say, what the story is all about. But what is it about?’ And you say, ‘Well, it’s about what’s on the page.’ And they say, ‘Well, no, but what’s it really about? One can see that it’s very symbolic and all that, but what does it really mean?’ And the idea that a text should really mean what is in fact on the page in front of you is somehow not easily accepted by Indian readers. And so it seemed to me that I must resist allegory.

The book clearly has allegorical elements, but they don’t work in any kind of exact formal sense; you cannot translate the structure of the book into the secret meaning, the book is not a code. Which many people in India expect books to be, it seems. So I thought that instead of using symbolism in its conventional form, I would use a just slightly different kind of thing, which is the leitmotif. Now the leitmotif, which is basically the idea of Walter Benjamin, is that you use as recurring things in the plot incidents or objects or phrases which in themselves have no meaning or no particular meaning but which form a kind of non-rational network of connections in the book. So for instance in Midnight’s Children there are various objects, there’s a sheet with a hole in it, there’s a silver spittoon, there’s a game of snakes and ladders, there’s a hand with a pointing finger, and other things which recur at various moments in the book in quite different contexts. Now these things have very little meaning in themselves. The meaning of the leitmotif is the sum total of the incidents in which it occurs. So it accumulates meaning the more it is used. And what one is able to do by using the leitmotif is to orchestrate what is otherwise a huge mass of material, which doesn’t always have rational connections, but the leitmotif can provide this other network of connec-
tions and so provide a shape. The book is really constructed around that kind of *leitmotif*, and not on the conventional Indian allegorical symbolic model.

Now of course one of the key and most seemingly allegorical elements of the book is the title of the book, the idea of the midnight children. I should tell you a little bit about the genesis of this idea. Originally I thought there would only be one child. Foolish me! At first I thought that there was going to be one child who is born at the moment of midnight and who grows up, and we follow him and we follow the country, and that's it. You see, nice and simple. And then, at some point in the planning, I thought that I'd better have two children, partly because the book has a kind of dualism about the nature of the characters of the two children and partly because there is this very melodramatic device of the babies being exchanged at birth which I liked because it was a genuine kind of Bombay-talkie, B-movie notion, and I thought that a book which grew out of a movie city ought to contain such notions. I liked it also because it was a way of saying what the book's saying: these are children not so much of their parents, but children of the time, children of history.

Interestingly enough, you discover time and time again that the most bizarre and melodramatic and sort of novelistic things that you do, turn out to be true. I didn't think that people were really very often exchanged in the cradle in hospitals. But when the book came out, the man who was then India’s cricket captain read the book, and I saw a newspaper interview with him in which he said this was amazing because it had happened to him. And he said that when he was born, just a few hours old at the hospital, lying next to his mother, an uncle had come to visit him, had picked him up and had noticed that there was a tiny sort of natural perforation in an earlobe, a tiny little hole, and he thought about it and then he put the baby down and went away. The next day the same uncle came back, picked up the baby, had a look, and noticed there was no perforation in the earlobe. And the mother had not noticed. It was the uncle who raised this panic saying this is not the same child. And then they had to hunt all round the hospital. And eventually they found India’s future cricket captain, being suckled by a fisherwoman in another ward. So it seems that it is actually impossible to invent anything, the truth always surpasses it.

Anyway, so now I had two children, and I thought that was plenty. I had Saleem and his kind of dark side Shiva, and that was fine. And I was proceeding along that road when I remember I actually woke up in the middle of the night in a kind of cold sweat thinking, 'It is not possible in a country the size of India that only two children should be born in the
hour. And I thought, ‘If that is so, which it clearly is, then why, the reader will legitimately ask, have I selected these two children?’ And it’s clear that this was a big problem that had to be solved. So I then had to perform a kind of form of insanity. I had to sit down with a calculator, and demographic charts and try and work out, given the population of India on 15 August 1947, given the rate at which the birth rate was expanding, and allowing for child mortality and all that, what would be a convincing number of children to be born in one hour. And eventually, after sweating blood over this, I discovered that a figure of somewhere around 1,000 was not unconvincing for that time. In fact, if anything, it was a little bit low. The real figure might be around eleven or twelve hundred, that’s to say about two a second. So I settled for some reason on the number of 1001. I fail to remember at this moment why that was. But then, you see, I had this terrible problem: how would you write a novel with 1001 major characters? How do you write the novel when you not only have 1001 major characters, but they are divided geographically across a country which is 3,000 miles long and 3,000 miles wide, when they all speak different languages, all come from different social classes, and they have no way of ever meeting? How do you write a book about a thousand people who never meet each other? Well the first problem was to kill 420 of them, which I did by the normal process of child mortality, but to reduce the problem to 581 was not really to solve it. So in the end I had to use this curious device of allowing Saleem, the narrator, to become a telepath so he could become a kind of ham radio and they would all meet in what he calls the parliament of his brain. This was a kind of technical solution to a technical problem of some size.

But I also thought it was probably legitimate because there’s a point in the book at which he first starts talking about being aware of the presence of these children. He is a very lonely child, and lonely children invent imaginary friends, and it seemed to me that it was possible at the beginning to read these children as something that really only existed inside his mind, and they were a kind of alternative fantasy world for him. But of course they don’t remain that. They spill over into actuality. However, I thought that was a way of justifying them in what might otherwise seem to be a rather cheating notion of telepathy. However, I was worried about these children. You see, I thought that if the idea of these children was brought too much to the forefront of the book, it would be a very terrible thing. Given that they are all children with various kinds of magical gifts, the book could have meant that if India were to give itself over to these Nietzschean superfigures, they would save the world, but only if they would be like a kind of key for the superman. And
I thought that would be an appalling thing for them to mean. What I found I had to do in order to prevent them from becoming these Nietzschean figures, was to keep them very far in the background of the book, so that in fact, although the book is called after them, only three of them ever really become characters in the book, namely Saleem, Shiva, and Parvati, whom Saleem eventually marries. And the others are just a kind of vague collective entity that is occasionally discussed in the background of the book. They remain what they were always supposed to be, which was just a kind of metaphor of hope and of possibility, which, one day, was destroyed. A metaphor of hope betrayed and of possibilities denied. They were never really supposed to be more than that, and that's why, although the book is called *Midnight's Children*, there is actually very little in it about the midnight children.

I want to say one other thing about the way in which this book was constructed which is that I find that I was doing a very strange thing when writing it. Which is that at the time that I began to write it, the events that took place at the end of the book had not happened; I mean, that’s to say that the Emergency rule of Mrs Gandhi had begun in India, but it had not ended and, what’s more, it showed no signs of ending. This was very problematic to me because one thing that I was very convinced about was that I did not want to end with the Emergency. It seems to me that whatever you put near the end of the book gives that thing great status and I really didn’t want that to be the last message of the book. However, I thought, what am I to do? It is not possible to end the Emergency in my book if it’s not ended out there in history. And this was a problem, and so I remember clearly my feelings when Mrs Gandhi called her election and lost. I felt a profound personal gratitude, in fact I began to understand Saleem’s feeling of being responsible for history, you know, I thought that I had somehow been responsible because I needed it for my book, and I felt that I should have sent her a thank-you telegram for having completed my novel for me. And in a way I still feel that I was somehow responsible for the end of the Emergency and that history could occasionally obey aesthetic requirements.

Anyway, having said that, that’s probably enough about the way in which it was written, but I think that when the book is discussed in the West, it seems to get discussed almost entirely in terms of a certain string of writers who always get hung around its neck like a kind of garland, which is, you know, Garcia Marquez, Günther Grass, Rabelais, Laurence Sterne, Cervantes, Gogol, etc. So I thought that instead of talking about all that I’d try and talk about its Eastern literary ancestors and the sense in which it derives out of an Indian tradition which, to my
mind, is much more important in it than this aforesaid list. And I suppose the main thing to talk about is the use of techniques derived from oral narrative. It is really impossible to overstate the fact that the oral narrative is the most important literary form in India. That’s to say that the most important literary form is something which is never written down, and the most important writers are people who do not write. And this is because very few people can read and write in India.

The people who really have the mass audience are the people who speak, not the people who write. And the idea of literature as performance in the same way as the idea of music as performance is absolutely central to Indian culture. I can give one example. There’s a town called Baroda which is roughly speaking about half way between Bombay and Delhi, where I was this year. Near Baroda there lives one of the more famous Indian story-tellers, and he decided that he would give a performance of his work, of his stories. Basically they are elaborations on mythical tales, but they are embroidered in all kinds of wonderful ways. And when he announced this, the maidan, the big open field in the town had to be prepared, emergency restaurants had to be set up, temporary toilets had to be erected, all the traffic had to be diverted, special buses had to be laid on to bring people in from the countryside. And for this weekend when he was telling his stories, the number of people who gathered to hear him was 600,000. Baroda has a population of 400,000. That’s to say the number of people who arrived was 50% greater than the population of the town that he was performing in. And this sea of people sat in a field for a weekend and listened to this man tell stories. If ever there was a way of making a novelist feel humble, that was it.

Listening to this man reminded me of the shape of the oral narrative. It’s not linear. An oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story. It goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again, sometimes summarizes itself, it frequently digresses off into something that the story-teller appears just to have thought of, then it comes back to the main thrust of the narrative. Sometimes it steps sideways and tells you about another, related story which is like the story that he’s been telling you, and then it goes back to the main story. Sometimes there are Chinese boxes where there is a story inside a story inside a story inside a story, then they all come back, you see. So it’s a very bizarre and pyrotechnical shape. And it has the appearance of being random and chaotic, it has the appearance that what is happening is anything the story-teller happens to be thinking, he just proceeds in that contingent way. It seemed to me in fact that it was very
far from being random or chaotic, and that the oral narrative had
developed this shape over a very long period, not because story-tellers
were lacking in organization, but because this shape conformed very
exactly to the shape in which people liked to listen, that in fact the first
and the only rule of the story-teller is to hold his audience: if you don’t
hold them, they will get up and walk away. So everything that the story-
teller does is designed to keep the people listening most intensely.

And it seemed to me that this form was much much more successful
than the linear narrative, that if these stories were told in terms of the
beginning and then what happened next and then what happened next,
people would be bored and fall asleep and go away much much more
quickly. And that it was the looping and digressing and swirling shape
that kept people listening; it was as much the shape that kept people
listening as the content of the stories that were being told.

Now it seemed to me that it must be possible to find a written-down
equivalent of that. Obviously one cannot simply write down sentences
that were designed to be spoken because everything about them would be
different, and one does not speak as one writes. But I thought it must be
possible to attempt the creation of a literary form which corresponds to
the form of the oral narrative and which, with any luck, will succeed in
holding readers, for reasons of its shape, in the same way that the oral
narrative holds audiences for reasons of its shape, as well as content. So
that’s what Midnight’s Children was, I think, and I think everything about
Laurence Sterne, Garcia Marquez, and all that comes a long way behind
that, and that was the thing that I felt when writing it that I was trying to
do. Midnight’s Children is narrated, so its relationship to the oral narrative
is very direct. Shame also continues that process, although in the third
person, not in the first. So one of the major roots of Midnight’s Children lies
in the oral narrative.

Another is the story of the god Ganesh. Ganesh stands behind Saleem,
my narrator, very directly, and I suppose for three reasons. I shall talk
about Saleem’s appearance. Saleem has a very big nose. And the reason
Saleem has a very big nose, to be truthful, is that one day I was looking at
the map of India, and the map of India all of a sudden for me resembled a
very large nose hanging into the sea, with a drip off the end of it, which
was Ceylon. Then I thought, well, you know, if Saleem is going to be the
twin of the country, he may as well be the identical twin, and so he
sprouted this enormous nose. After that I was thinking about the god
Ganesh, because the god Ganesh, having the head of an elephant, also
has a very large nose, and it seemed to me that he was a proper mytho-
logical ancestor to place behind Saleem. Partly for that reason, and partly
for two other reasons. One is that Ganesh is the kind of patron deity of
literature, and since Saleem is the story-teller, I thought that he should
have as an ancestor the god of literature. And the other thing is the story
of Ganesh itself. The legend of Ganesh is the legend of disputed parent-
age; that’s to say the reason he has the head of an elephant is because
Shiva and Parvati quarrel over who the father of the child is. Shiva
becomes convinced that his wife has been fooling around, that this child
is not his, and so in rage he cuts off its head and then, repenting, looks
around heaven for a head; and what comes to hand is the head of an
elephant. This is stuck on, and so you have a god with an elephant’s
head. Now it seemed to me that since Saleem’s entire ancestry is also
very murky and disputed and, as I said, he was exchanged in the cradle,
and so, far from being his parents’ child, he’s actually the child of two
other people, it was correct to give him, as a mythological ancestor,
somebody with disputed ancestry, with a disputed family line. So in those
ways I think the book grows concentrically out of Indian elements. I only
say this because this aspect has been somewhat understated in the West.

I thought I’d just say one or two quick things about *Midnight’s Children*
before talking a bit about *Shame*. One is that one of the things I tried to do
in it was to sabotage the form in which it was cast. When it sets out it
looks as though what you’re going to get is a family saga. You know, the
grandfathers, then the parents, then the children, the classic form, the
*Bildungsroman*. And I thought this was more or less right, that I had to set
it up like that because the family’s so central to life in India that it was
impossible to conceive of an epic, even a comic epic, which did not have a
family somewhere near the centre. One could write such an epic about
the Western society which did not revolve around the family, and it
wouldn’t seem strange. But in India I thought it would be very peculiar if
a family was not somehow centrally involved. However, I didn’t want to
write the Forsythe saga or anything like it, and so I thought I had to do
something to undermine this convention, and so I suppose the book
contains two time bombs. One is the baby swop where the reader, to his
or her intense irritation, discovers after one hundred and fifty pages of
reading about a family, that the family that you’ve been reading about is
actually not the family of the child that you’re going to talk about, but
somebody else’s family altogether. So that’s the moment when you annoy
your audience. And the second moment arrives about two thirds or three
quarters of the way through the book. It’s not conventional within the
family saga to kill the family when there are still one hundred and fifty
pages left to go, but in this book just about every member of the family
gets wiped out when there are in fact one hundred and fifty pages left to
go. And Saleem is then left on his own. And I thought that was another way of making the reader understand that the book he was reading was not the book he thought he was reading. But also, because I thought that as Saleem is a character who claims all his life to be connected to history, to be controlling history, to be somehow responsible for history, he could not be allowed to get away with that all his life without being dragged out of the comfort of his family. He had to be un-housed, he had to lose the cocoon around him, and he had to be thrown into the middle of all this history that he claimed to be influencing. He then discovers, at the end of the book, that very far from being the controller of history he is a victim of it, and he never really recovers from this discovery.

The book is very long. One reason the book is so long is partly because of the idea of the novel being something that includes as much as possible. It seems to me really that there are only two kinds of novel. There are novels which proceed on the basis of excluding most of the world, of plucking that one strand out of the universe and writing about that. Or there are novels in which you try to include everything, what Henry James called ‘the loose, baggy monsters’ of fiction. And I suppose that my books would fall roughly into the loose-baggy-monster camp, and although I’m not sure about the loose, the baggy monster is probably true. And this conforms again to an architectural idea, which is really the idea of the Hindu temple. If you look at the spire of the Hindu temple, the purpose of this spire is somewhat different to the spire of the Christian church which is a kind of aspiring towards god. A Hindu temple, let’s say the spire of the Khajuraho temples, is a representation of the world mountain. And on the world mountain, the sculptor, the maker of the temple, places as much as he possibly can. The mountain is crowded, it swarms with life, all forms of life. So the idea, the purpose of the temple is to include as much of life as it can. And again I thought that I would do that, to make an echo there in the form of the book with that architectural notion.

You may wonder why I’ve been talking a lot about Hindu traditions when both the narrator of the book and myself do not come out of the Hindu tradition, but out of the Muslim tradition. And you may wonder why it is, then, that the book derives so many of its symbols from other traditions. In fact, in Pakistan where people are not trained to think in terms of mixed tradition, this has disturbed some of its readers. My view is that the Indian tradition has always been, and still is, a mixed tradition. The idea that there is such a thing as a pure Indian tradition is a kind of fallacy, the nature of Indian culture has always been multiplicity and plurality and mingling. Indians have always been good at taking
from whoever comes in, whether they be Arian or Muslim or British or Portuguese. They assimilate the elements that are interesting and reject the rest. So Indian culture is not purist; the people who these days talk most violently about purism in Indian culture tend to be Hindu religious extremists, and in Pakistan, similarly, the people who talk about a pure culture tend to be Muslim religious extremists. I think that the idea of a pure culture is something which in India is, let’s say even politically important to resist. So the book comes out of that, that sense of a mixed tradition.

I’ll give one other instance about how one piece of the book was made. I think one of the things the book discusses is the idea of heroism, what it is to be an individual and whether it’s possible to be a hero in a country of seven hundred million people. I finally got a curious focus for this in a real-life incident that is translated into a fictional incident in the book. The real-life incident was a very famous murder trial that took place in India in the 1950s called the Nanavati case. Commander Nanavati in the book becomes thinly disguised as Commander Sabarmati. Commander Nanavati was a very prominent and well thought-of naval officer who many people thought was going to take over the Navy, and who one day committed a murder. He discovered that his wife was having an affair with somebody, so he went one morning to the naval arsenal, signed out for a gun and some bullets, went round to the flat where he’d discovered the wife and the lover were, rang the door bell, and when the door was opened, he shot the lover, and he shot his wife; he killed the lover but he didn’t actually succeed in killing his wife. He then went down, out of the house, with the gun in his hand went up to the first policeman he could find, and surrendered. There then followed the most extraordinary cause célèbre of a trial that, as far as I know, has ever taken place in post-Independence India. And this gripped the nation. Was Commander Nanavati to go to jail or not? For years, it was probably about two years, it was an absolutely central issue that everybody was talking about. And in the end he did go to jail after many appeals, although the first court, rather interestingly, found him not guilty. There’s one odd thing that can happen in Indian law — well, certainly in Bombay law — which is that if the judge thinks the jury has done something very stupid, he can reverse the judgement of the jury. Which in this case he did. And then of course there were appeals, and appeals, and appeals. Anyway he went to jail in the end.

I was wondering, why was it that the Nanavati case exercised such a hold over the minds of the people, why did it go so deep, and even today, if you talk to anybody who can remember the Nanavati case, they can tell
you every detail, they can tell you every twist and turn of how the case unfolded. Now, why did it go so deep? And then I had this awful and blasphemous notion which I became convinced was true, which is that the Nanavati case was like a kind of re-staging in the 20th century of the Ramayana story. The only difference was that Sita, who in the Ramayana is pure, is abducted by Ravana, but remains pure, was not very much like Mrs Nanavati. Because Mrs Nanavati was a willing partner in the seduction. However, apart from the character of Sita, the characters of Rama and Ravana remain the same. What was happening was that an abductor had made off with the beautiful wife of a famous and prominent man, and the famous and prominent man had then killed the abductor in order to avenge himself. And it struck me that, supposing the Ramayana had happened in the 20th century, supposing that Sita, virtuous that she was, had been abducted by Ravana and that Rama had gone after him and killed him and got his wife back, would Rama have been sent to jail? So it seemed to me what was happening was that in the 20th century India was being asked to decide between two definitions of itself. One was the definition which had dealt with the rule of heroes, you know, which is that a man had a right to do this if this was how another man was treating his wife. That’s the meaning of the Ramayana story. And the other was the rule of law. So it was a choice between the rule of heroes and the rule of law that the country was being asked to make, and my hypothesis was that that was why it became such a critical thing for the country, because we were all in a way being asked to make a choice. And what happened was that legally the country chose to send him to jail and deny him the status of a hero. But in people’s hearts, in terms of the affections of people, there is no doubt that everyone in India thought that it was quite right for Commander Nanavati to do what he did, they were all on his side. He was the injured husband, it was a crime passionel, and he was a popular figure. That’s the thing much of the book discusses, the position of heroes in a society of such size, and a society which is simultaneously ancient and modern. That, I thought, was the kind of moment which crystallizes in the book.

Talking of heroes gives me a way of switching quickly for a few minutes to talk about Shame. One of the things that worried me about Midnight’s Children was its hero. Saleem, who gave me so many advantages, also gave me one big problem which was that there was an assumption that he was me. The assumption of autobiography was partly a game that I’d played. Saleem and Salman are after all, if you look back etymologically, kind of versions of the same name, and Rushdie and Sinai are names which derive from two different great Arab philosophers,
so there are clear, deliberate affinities made in his name with my name; he’s the same age as me more or less, I mean he’s two months younger, he grows up in my house, he goes to my school, some of the things that happened to me happen in a more interesting form to him, so it’s not surprising that people should assume that an autobiography is intended. However, I found, especially as he grew older, that he and I diverged at many points quite strongly. I sometimes found him very irritating, I frequently disagreed with him. The coup having taken place where he’d taken over the text, I realized that it was absolutely impossible for me to say these things. I could not inform the reader that there are moments when the author and his narrator disagree. And I had to accept that that was, if you like, the price that one had to pay for everything that he gave me.

However, I thought, the next time I was damned if I was going to let that happen again. This time I was going to tell the story and not allow a mere character to usurp me. And I also thought that I wanted a character as unlike Saleem as possible. Saleem’s entire personality has to do with the idea of being central to things. And I thought this time I would like to talk about a character who was marginal, a very peripheral figure like the hero, so-called, of *Shame*. He says I’m a person who’s not the hero of my own life. And I think there are many such people. There are people who are mostly shaped by things that happen around them, not by the things they do themselves, people who are kind of spectators in their own fates. Maybe there are many more such people than actual protagonists who actually shape their own lives. And I thought that it would be interesting to write a book about a character who never really featured at the centre of the main events of his life, who was always at the edges of these events, and for whom the main characters of his life were other people. Writing the history of such a man would seem to me to be writing the history of many other people, but actually all adopt the history of this one man because he was, as he calls himself, a peripheral man. I also thought that it was a way of making sure that he was not taken to be me.

What else shall I say about him? He has three mothers and no father. The idea of the three mothers, I should say, arose out of the discussion. The book is set in Pakistan and it deals, centrally, with the way in which the sexual repressions of that country are connected to the political repressions. Saying that some people are superior to other people in a way permits tyranny. That’s the kind of soil from which dictators can grow. It seemed to me that if you have a country, most of whose thirty-six years of independent life have been shaped by dictators or tyrants of various kinds, that there comes a point at which you can’t say that that is bad.
luck, that you have to look deeper into the society as to why that can happen, why it happens there and not, for instance, in India next door. And I thought that the fact that the society itself was in various ways based on repressive social codes which have nothing to do with political codes, was one explanation to that. And that’s one of the reasons why I decided to explore this idea of shame.

Somebody told me yesterday that Arthur Koestler said that the world is divided into two main controlling forces: in the West you have guilt, in the East you have shame, and that these were the things around which the world revolved. And I came to think about this, I’ve never read this in Koestler, but it seems that if he does say it, he’s right. Because shame and its opposite, which is honour, seem to me to be kind of central to the society I was describing, to such an extent that it was impossible to explain the society except by looking at it through those concepts. So the book is a kind of series of variations on the idea of shame, and it’s connected, of course, to a political plot. I mean, the shame can be public as well as private, which is closely based on the story of General Zia and his predecessor, Mr Bhutto. Just to remind you, General Zia was the man who had Mr Bhutto executed. And I thought that there was a very interesting thing to write about here, which is not so much the personalities of the two men as the relationship of the two men.

Because when Mr Bhutto took over the government of Pakistan it was just after the débâcle of the loss of Bangla Desh. He found the Army in a demoralized state for they had just had this humiliating defeat, and he was anxious to keep the Army in this weakened condition because as an elected democratic leader — well, that’s a loose term, but he was more elected than the generals were; at least somebody had voted for him — he wanted to make sure that the generals did not become powerful again. So he looked around in the Army for the most incompetent general he could find, and this was General Zia Ul-Haq, who was not the most senior general for the job of commander-in-chief by any means. And Zia Ul-Haq, on the grounds of stupidity, and on no other grounds, was promoted, over the heads of many other generals, to become commander-in-chief of the Army. And after that the Bhuttos would wander round Pakistan and they would say, ‘It’s all right, we have Zia in our pocket.’ The President, Benazir Bhutto, used to say this quite openly. It was difficult to persuade them that in Pakistan you never have a general in your pocket. The idea that a general is likely to remain in your pocket, even if that’s where you put him originally, is a very stupid and dangerous idea. And it was Bhutto’s fatal mistake that he believed that Zia was his man.

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So it then seemed to me that the idea that a man you place in power to be your yes-man, should end up as your hangman, was a very very odd relationship, both for the protegé who becomes the executioner and for the patron who becomes the executed. And this, I thought, had some of the configurations of high Shakespearean tragedy. However, it also seemed to me that the people involved were not high Shakespearean tragic figures. They were much lower-grade figures. They were not Macbeth, Othello and Lear and Hamlet; they were clowns, goons. And it seemed that perhaps it was a definition of the condition of our age, and this does not only refer to Pakistan, that what one has is clowns and goons playing out the plots of high tragedies. This may be the kind of flavour of the 20th century. If you look at Reagan's America or Thatcher's Britain, it seems to me that is self-evidently true, that what you have is very low-grade people, second-rate clowns playing out what are in fact tragic plots. And so I thought this is the way that one should write. It would be very easy to write a tragedy about Pakistan, but I thought that would be dishonest, because these protagonists did not deserve tragedy. What they deserved was farce. And it seemed to me that what one should do is to write a story which in its shape is tragic, because there's no doubt that what is happening in Pakistan is a tragedy, it's a tragedy on a national scale. So it was correct to write a story whose form was tragic, but then to write it with all the language of comedy and farce that you could muster, because that was what the people merited, and that would be the way of creating a description of the world as it really was. So that's what Shame is. It's about as black a comedy as it's possible to write. And not for easy satirical reasons, but for naturalistic reasons. Because that seemed to be the only way that one could come somewhere close to describing the world that was there.

I think, because I've spoken longer than I said I would, I will end just by saying one thing. Which is that it will be very easy when reading Shame, as it was for many people when reading Midnight's Children, to forget that it's about a real place. Many people, especially in the West, who read Midnight's Children, talked about it as a fantasy novel. By and large, nobody in India talks about it as a fantasy novel; they talk about it as a novel of history and politics. And memory, which is the other thing that it is essentially about. With this book, too, I've already heard in England a professor of English literature saying on the radio that although this appears to be a political novel on the surface, it's not really a political novel; in fact the political elements are, apparently, quite subsidiary. So I'd like to say that Shame is a political novel and that behind the fantasized or the mythologized country in the book there is a real
country, and behind the dictators in the book there are real dictators.

And finally to say one thing which the book does not say: the book does not make much of the fact that Pakistani politics are badly distorted by outside influence. It does refer every so often to the presence of the Americans and the Russians and so forth. It does not make very much of it, and by and large it uses them for comic effect and no more. Now the reason the book does not do this is because it seems to me that we in those countries quite often use the CIA and the KGB as an excuse for our own problems. And we quite often say that, you know, of course Zia’s in power because the Americans keep him there. Of course there’s an extent to which that’s true, but it’s also a way of saying we do not have power over our own lives, and I think that’s a very dangerous thing for any state to say about itself. So I thought in the book I’d pretend that we did have power over our own lives and that we would assume that the outside influence is very minor and that the internal influence is the important thing. Because I thought that would be more useful, the other thing is too easy to say. However, here I should say that one should remember that the likes of General Zia rule by permission of the Western alliance, that they rule by permission of Europe and America, that Margaret Thatcher and Reagan and the Common Market and all these people are convinced that Zia is the person they should support. And it seems to me that readers in the West who read this book should think about the idea that the freedoms which are so prized in the West are bought at the expense of other peoples’ freedoms; that what seems to be valuable and indispensable for the citizens of the West is trivial and dispensable when one talks about the citizens of the East. You should remember that freedom is a luxury and that freedom, like wealth and political power, is one of the luxuries of the West and it is bought at the price of the existence of the same things in the East. If a book like Shame can do something to convince even eight or nine people that they should attempt to protest against governments which do this in their name — and after all these governments do it in your name — then the book will have served some function. Thank you.

Hans Arndt: I’d like to ask two questions. Where did the widow come in? And, outside the book and its genesis, what’s your alternative?

Well, to talk about the widow. She came in in two ways, really. She came in mainly because it seemed to me that there was a kind of shape in the history of India. In the first thirty years of India, from independence to emergency, it seemed to me that was a kind of age and that there was a
dark irony in the fact that it should be Nehru's daughter who did so much to take the axe to the tree that he planted. It seemed to me that there was in that period a kind of progression from lightness to darkness, from optimism to the absence of optimism, and so the book adopted that shape. There's a nightmare in the book that Saleem has about somebody sitting on top of a stool and rolling up children into little balls and throwing them into the night — I had this nightmare myself, it was very frightening and it was entirely in green and black; and so I gave it to Saleem, and the widow, as a term, emerged from there. And then, when I remembered that Indira Gandhi was a widow, it was too good to miss, really, and so I used it. The thing that’s given me great pleasure is to discover that this term every so often crops up in the newspapers, as if it had been in public use before I made it up, and it’s always very nice to give an insult to the English language.

As to alternatives: First of all I don’t think it’s necessarily the function of a writer to be a prophet, but to describe what there is. I have no simple alternative for India or Pakistan, but I would say that the thing about those countries that prevents one being wholly pessimistic is not to do with their politics. If you look at the political life of India and Pakistan, it has always been very corrupt. But I would have thought that the 50% of corruption that might have been present there ten years ago has now risen to 100%, and I think that it is now more or less impossible to be a public figure at any level in India or Pakistan without being corrupt in some sense, without either buying or being bought. So I think if you look for the future of India, the optimism does not reside in its public life. It resides in the people, and I don’t think it’s a commonplace about India that the people have enormous energy and invention and dynamism, are not passive, and that kind of turbulence in the people is, I suspect, where the optimism lies. A people who refuse to lie down under this terrible yoke of corruption and so forth are not a people about whom one can feel wholly pessimistic.

If you ask me about my politics, my politics would be broadly speaking Marxist, and I would have thought that Marxist politics have much more relevance in India than they have in some Western countries. Some of the Marxist rhetoric which now sounds very passé and dated when you apply it to Western countries still means very important things when you apply it to those countries. So I suppose if you want a simple answer to the solution, I would propose it in largely Marxist terms. I should say, talking of Marxism, that the thing that annoyed a lot of my friends in India most, because Marxists are notorious sometimes for lacking a sense of humour — so are capitalists, this is not exclusive to the left — was a
page in *Midnight’s Children* in which the Marxists are described as conjurers and card-sharpers and sword-swallowers and fire-eaters. I thought this was quite affectionate satire, but there are persons on the left who disagree and who think I was quite wrong, I should never have said such wicked things.

Kirsten Holst Petersen: *Can I ask you a question about Shame?* Unlike the professor you’ve just talked about, I took it to be a political novel about a political subject, and I was wondering, as it is a *roman à clef*, what is the point of telling us that Bhutto was a playboy and Zia a puritanical leader?

Well, the fact is that Bhutto *was* a playboy and Zia *was* puritanical. There is that reason. The novel is not entirely a *roman à clef*. If one tries to translate the other members of the cast into historical figures, it won’t work. I mean, Benazir Bhutto does not correspond to Iskander Harappa’s daughter in *Shame*. As much as wanting to discuss the relationship between Zia and Bhutto, I also wanted to write about another thing, which is kinship. The point is, in real life the families of Zia and Bhutto are not connected, whereas in the book there is a very close family network and all the kind of power struggles in the book happened inside a family context. What I wanted to say is that in this society very very small numbers of people are responsible for the making of history and for the controlling of power, and that there is a kind of Gogolian system where the ruling class is minute and politics is a kind of family quarrel. This means that, really, whether it’s Zia or Bhutto or whoever happens to be in charge, it’s still the same people really controlling it. And these people are very very few in number. What I wanted to say is that this is like a country in the way in which it must have been like to be in the Rome of the Caesars, or the Italy of the Borgias. It’s similar to that: in order to take power you have to kill your uncle.

So the book is about that as well. It operates, I think, as a novel, just as a pure novel, more than as a code. And in fact there are various senses in which the dictators Bhutto or Zia are not like Iskander and Raza. In a way what I hoped — I don’t know if I achieved it — but what I hoped for is that one would make figures in the book who were somehow bigger than the particular instances of them that history had offered us. You could fit a Botha and an Amin into that; there was not only one application of the archetype. And I was trying to talk about the abuses of military power. But the civilian power can be abused just as totally. And in many ways it seems to me that Bhutto has a much bigger responsibility than Zia for the state of Pakistan. For a start, if you look at the body
count, it was probably higher in the Bhutto period than it has been in the Zia period. More people, I should think, were killed in Baluchistan under Bhutto than have ever been killed under Zia. So in a way he was a bigger murderer for a start. Also he was the one who had an opportunity. He was the one who was actually there because he’d won an election, he actually had a national natural majority in the country, and he could have continued to win elections - he would not have won landslide victories, but he would have won majorities. It was possible for him to tolerate opposition, to tolerate dissent, to allow democracy to take some kind of root in the country. But because he was not a natural democrat, he destroyed that possibility by wishing to create more or less a one-party state, by stamping on everybody who attempted to disagree with him. Then, by fixing an election so extraordinarily that the people wouldn’t stand for it, the Army was given its chance to come back in. So it seems to me that Bhutto carries a much heavier share of responsibility.

The worrying thing about the politicians in exile in Pakistan, particularly Benazir and the Bhutto party, is that there is no doubt that if there was an election tomorrow in Pakistan, they would come back with a very big majority. There’s no doubt about that. But what is sad is that they appear to have learnt no lessons from the débâcle of Bhutto. There’s nobody who’s willing to criticize Bhutto’s practice. Benazir is busy elevating her father into the level of a saint. There are miracle stories being spread. It is already said that if people go to Bhutto’s tomb, if they are lame they will walk, and if they are blind they will see. These stories have been spread very rapidly in the country, so a kind of god has been created. And that is very very unhelpful. So in a way I am more critical of Bhutto than of the generals. Because one knows what to expect from generals. Generals behave as generals behave. To ask a general to be a democrat is, you know, silly. But to ask a democrat as elected leader to be democratic is not silly, and when he fails to be so, he needs to be hit. Hard.