

SYSTEMS AND ACCIDENTS IN 20TH CENTURY MAGICAL REALIST LITERATURE: SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AND SADEGH HEDAYAT'S *THE BLIND OWL* AS CRITIQUES OF MODERN NATION-MAKING EXPERIMENTS

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Abstract

This article compares two major 20th century magical realist novels - Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* – as critiques of modern nation-making practices, in Nehruvian post-independence India and Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi. The analysis centers the interplay of accidents and systems, in political constructions and contestations of modern self, history and knowledge. The works are assessed in terms of two aesthetic paradigms of modernity: Baudelaire's vision of modernity as traumatic deracination involving new creative possibilities and freedom, and Cocteau's vision of modernity as an Infernal Machine where a pre-recorded universe annihilates creative freedom. The political significance of these aesthetics are evaluated against the two distinctive nationalist narratives which the authors set out to contest in their respective novels. Both novels offer important critiques of violence. Yet both reveal a Proustian aesthetic of nostalgia, rejecting organized political action in the public sphere to celebrate imaginative introversion.

Key words: Magical Realism, modernity, Salman Rushdie, Sadegh Hedayat, India, Iran, nation-making, postmodernism

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This essay compares two major works of 20th century magical realist literature, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* (1937), in terms of the perennial tension of systems and accidents. These novels each reinvented the national literatures of their respective countries. They also provided profound allegories of two major 20th century modernizing regimes in the non-Western world: Jawaharlal Nehru's post-independence Indian Republic (1947-64) and Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41). While India attempted a multi-party democratic and federal experiment with a mixed economy and non-aligned foreign policy, Iran undertook a rapid authoritarian and one-party modernization project with U.S. geopolitical Cold War support. While India attempted to integrate elements of its traditional heritage into the modernization process (notably cultural pluralism and the Gandhian ethic of reconciliation), Iran attempted (at this early stage) to follow the Atatürk ideal of a violent rupture with tradition to institute a French Revolutionary-inspired homogenous national identity. Yet, despite these differing cultural contexts and modernization dynamics, both regimes produced a comparable existential crisis of national identity. Hence, the articulation of an ontological vacuum in these two novels. In *Midnight's Children*, this is symbolized in the "hole in the center" of the European-educated grandfather who renounces Islam at the book's outset, and passes the hole down through subsequent generations (Rushdie, p. 266).

These two novels have significant points for comparison. Both express deep doubts about modernity from authors in exile (Hedayat's was political, while Rushdie's was voluntary). Both authors, having embraced the Left, became disillusioned with the nation-making process as such and sought a new post-modern path. The novels deal with doublings, the entropic disintegration of sublimated ideals into decaying corporeality and finitude, and the modern crisis of Islamic belief and community. Both are extended intergenerational autobiographies, based on the mystical synchronicity of recurrence. They each present a critique of totality and violence, a plea for pluralism, a mistrust of mass society, and a high aesthetic valuation of traditional life worlds. They deal similarly with ghosts, addiction, delirium, illness and the eclipse of rational consciousness. In a short essay, there is insufficient space to discuss all of these points. This article will limit analysis of these novels to representations of the self, knowledge and history.

Initially, it is necessary to explain how I intend to use “systems” and “accidents” as a framework for investigating these two magical realist novels.

By systems, I mean at once intellectual systems – the vast edifice of Enlightenment thought that dominated the 18th century in Kantian or Hegelian totalities – and the 20th century nation-making systems which attempted variants upon the French Revolutionary-inspired experiment of transcending the chaos of the past. This issue refers not only to the experience of colonialism and its unconsciously self-repeating aftermath, but also to what Hannah Arendt has called “the perplexities of the Rights of Man” (Arendt, p. 290-302). In their respective national contexts, both Hedayat and Rushdie deal at least indirectly with the loss of ontological security, the violence of the modern state, and the need for legally organized self-protection among the uprooted populations by the very states which uprooted them. It is a central feature of the Faustian bargain of modern nation-making politics.

By accidents, I refer to the unanticipated elements in the blind spot of classical sociological theory (in its aspirations to pure science) which have destroyed its best founded predictions and plans for a rational future order. Comte, Spencer, Marx and Durkheim envisioned society as a totality built upon a symmetrical and unitary system. Comte and Marx, particularly, envisioned a utopian end-product. Instead, this conceptual paradigm produced ethical disaster in the modern nation-making experiences of many countries. The most hauntingly violent examples include the modernizing practices of the Soviet Union and Mao’s China, where the Great Leap Forward 'killed 45 million in four years' (Independent, Oct 23, 2011). Both novels also deal with this dilemma in their scepticism over science and totality as categories for remaking traditional societies. Indeed, their scepticism tends to eclipse hope for anything beyond forms of subjective salvation.

Both Hedayat and Rushdie critique universal progress based upon a perceived totalizing modernity that occludes traditional meaning and belonging. Yet, because their very critiques of modernity are based upon aesthetic escapism, they fail to deal convincingly with modernity’s dangers. Neither the uncompromising nihilism of *The Blind Owl* nor the playful cynicism of *Midnight’s Children* help us to face the truth of the moment. The categories of capitalism, nationalism, and so forth, lose the dialectical

vitality invested in them by the traditional Left. They become the static and homogeneous other of romanticized everyday life. Their escapism, if taken seriously, features a utopian rejection of science, modernity and the nation, as such, as if merely by their dissolution a more magical and emancipated reality could gain ascendancy. However aesthetically compelling, it is unrealistic at the political level of everyday life. Although these are novels, precisely such a stance is routinely taken by Subaltern School-inspired scholars, deriving from a similar ideological worldview.

Finally, I am comparing the two novels based upon two modernist aesthetic paradigms. The first is that of Baudelaire: modernity is traumatic uprooting, disorder, and turmoil, out of which new perspectives and creative horizons nevertheless emerge. It is a vision of modernity with freedom, where the unmade future is achieved through action. Secondly, there is Cocteau's vision of the Infernal Machine. Its central tenet is the pre-recorded universe. Following the fatality of ancient Greek tragedy, every human action is predestined to participate in a cosmic pattern where mathematically certain self-destruction is repeated with eternal inevitability. For Cocteau, "the gods exist" and "they are the devil" (Cocteau, p. 5). It envisions modernity without freedom. All action is reducible to a pre-existing and unknowable archetype. Both of these novels, I find, fall into the category of Cocteau's Infernal Machine. As such, despite their high aesthetic achievement, they espouse cultural pessimism. Meaningful human agency is nullified in favour of meaningless inevitability.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Salman Rushdie's magical realist classic, *Midnight's Children* (1981), interrogates self, history and knowledge from a post-modern vantage point. The novel encompasses vast tracts of modern Indian history: from the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre to the Muslim League, and from the Partition riots to the post-independence Five Year Plans. It includes the Sino-Indian and Indo-Pak wars and the Emergency under Indira Gandhi. Saleem, the narrator, is born at midnight on 15 August 1947, the moment of India's national independence. His future is literally and metaphorically tied to India's future. A thousand and one children, born within the first hour of India's independence, are endowed with miraculous powers. Saleem's telepathic powers function as a relay station for the others. His attempt at collective organization finally

demonstrates the futility of purposefully mobilized public action, in the stifling sea of mass society. Only the unique and unrepeatable private moment, it turns out, has value.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a history told phenomenologically, i.e. accidentally, from below. It relies upon memory, rooted in gossip, myths, legends, hallucination, mass media and popular culture. It recalls Saint Augustine's "Memory's Palace" in the *Confessions*, where memory (not physical cause) is the means to attaining the truth. The next step is the epistemic priority of belief over objective knowledge, or the "truth" as "sanctioned by time" over "literal truth" (Rushdie, p. 451). Scientific worldviews are here an accidental matter of conversion, or a psychological process, rather than an inevitably rule-governed or logical system. Rational universalism yields to incommensurable and differing worldviews. This alternative to objective truth resembles the Heideggerian notion of truth as occlusion. This is confirmed in Rushdie's text: "What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same. True, for me, was ... something hidden ... a thing concealed just over the horizon" (Rushdie, p.103). These critiques of the modern paradigm of knowing and being are hidden in *Midnight's Children* behind carnivalesque visions of excess. The critiques consistently and clearly recur throughout the text. The everyday world of accidents and chance is idealized as a site of meaning, while history is an alien and hostile system imposed through echoes of colonial power (Rushdie, p. 131).

Rushdie's magical realism is built upon an interesting contradiction. In one respect, it reminds us of Alexandre Koyré's warning in *Reflections on the Lie* (1943). During military conflict, lying is treated as a weapon to defeat the enemy. This condition, Koyré argued, can permeate everyday life in modern societies: "what if war, an abnormal, episodic, transient condition, should come to be permanent and taken for granted?" (Koyré, p.18). Koyré warned of the totalitarian power to transform war's accidental reality into a permanent order of power. Rushdie's text voices this argument in portraying post-independence Pakistan: "In a country where truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case" (Rushdie, p. 453).

In a second respect, Rushdie's text dismisses as a dream the very institutional basis for systematically preventing totalitarian ascendancy (i.e. division of power, etc.).

In Rushdie's dystopian narrative, the political ideal of freedom sought by the Indian national independence struggle is a mere myth, no more or less real than other imaginary realities that have populated Indian cultural history. Rushdie condemns post-independence India through Saleem's pronouncement: the "nearly thirty one year old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. New myths are needed" (Rushdie, p. 640). Rather than an extended struggle transpiring over generations, exemplified in civil rights, labor and women's emancipation movements, democratic emancipation is merely a fanciful bubble to be popped in favor of new dreams.

At a deeper level, the text targets modern secular history in nation-making. History is not the site of order and progress. It is a totalizing frame that coerces the lived reality of the local. Saleem is "handcuffed to history" (Rushdie, p. 3). The authentically lived reality, beneath the state-imposed system of History, is a heterogeneous chaos of the imagination. Rushdie's novel is built upon an ontology of accidents: "historical coincidences have littered" and "befouled" the narrator's "family existence in the world" (Rushdie, p. 28). His life is nothing but a "vast mountain of unreasonable occurrences" (Rushdie, p. 516). In the narrator's obsessive quest for "meaning", only accidents reveal his "reason for having been born" (Rushdie, p. 225).

At the root of *Midnight's Children's* contradiction is Rushdie's standing as one of the world's great literary cynics. Rushdie rejects belief while embracing mythology, in a fiction which embraces everything. In the many-sided manipulation of mythic surfaces, Rushdie advances a post-modern critique of nation-making as universal progress. The central charge is that it lacks "meaning". Rushdie's novel inaugurated the literary and intellectual articulation of disenchantment with Nehruvianism, a theme echoed by many subsequent Indian-English novelists.

The Nehruvian secular nationalist legacy is ontologically demoted in *Midnight's Children*. Existentially fragmented and phantasmal moments are the authentic Indian experience of modernity. The novel converged with a wider crisis in the Nehruvian consensus: firstly, similar condemnations of Indian nationalism in the Subaltern School, and a rightward shift in India's ruling elite towards neo-liberalism. The new intellectual tendency represented by Rushdie and the Subalterns, and manipulated by the right-wing elite upon India's political terrain, was to affirm the imaginative and existential value of community, i.e. caste and religion, over the secular category of civil citizenship.

The identity crisis of modern societies is central to *Midnight's Children*. Saleem is Anglo-Indian by birth, the bastard child of a departing Englishman and an Indian servant woman who died at childbirth. He is switched in his cradle with the child of a Kashmiri couple. A hybrid, cut off from all knowledge and contact with his origins, he undertakes a lifelong quest for the meaning of existence. This preoccupation with lost roots, i.e. an ontological politics, pervades the novel. Indeed, Rushdie wrote the novel to recover his lost Indian origins, while exiled in Britain (Guardian, July 26, 2008). Saleem's parents are obsessively "determined to put down roots", while the narrator himself has been "pulled up by his roots, only to be flung unceremoniously across the years" (Rushdie, p. 431/482). Time as an existential relation to the self is a pervasive theme. The characters, "seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting this new myth of freedom", revert "to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices." Rushdie depicts this in tandem with the erosion of the modern contract-based state-law complex: the "body politic began to crack" (Rushdie, p. 341). In *Midnight's Children*, India is a "nation of forgetters" (Rushdie, p. 43). Identity is what is at stake. The secular politics of interest is challenged by an ontological politics of identity.

Historically, India's nationalist historiographical tradition has constructed the primacy of secular interest based on the Nehruvian legacy. A comparison illuminates the ontological-identity perspective in *Midnight's Children*. Romila Thapar, for example, a foremost Indian historian, chose to study history at university shortly after Indian independence in 1947. Her decision reflected "the thoughts of most Indians at the time", revolving "around two intertwined themes ... the opportunity of constructing a free society (and) the need to know what our identity as a people was". Her quest for historical knowledge, therefore, had an activist orientation. Concerning "the issue of how a nation formulates its identity", Thapar endorses "the identity of the Indian citizen, over and above religious community and caste" (Thapar, p. xi-xii). This affirms the secular democratic nation-making goals and ideals embodied in India's independence struggle under Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Although Thapar concedes that "what has come is not the society we anticipated", she concludes that "hopefully, one day that society can emerge" (Thapar, p. xiii).

The systemic value underlying Thapar's endorsement of the historical discipline and secular interest is what Nehru called "the scientific temper". In this view, truth

corresponds to reality upon the basis of observational evidence and the logical correlation of facts through theory. For Nehru, the “scientific temper” transcended the mere instrumentality of science: “something more than its application is necessary. It is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, (and) the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence” (Nehru, p. 570). A different and less hopeful perspective is articulated in *Midnight’s Children*. The ideal nation-making aims of the independence movement were mere illusions, both totalizing and harmful. Legends become “more useful than the facts” (Rushdie, p. 57). The “truth” is “memory’s truth”, which “creates its own reality”, and “no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s more than his own” (Rushdie, p. 292). At the national level, there are “as many versions of India as there are Indians” (Rushdie, p. 373). The ontology of accidents is affirmed, over the systemically conceived “scientific temper”, as the authentic India. There is salvation only in imaginative subjectivity.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the broader ideals of freedom and history are the chimeric offspring of colonialism. Science and secularism are parodied. They are identified with the “optimism virus”, i.e. modern Enlightenment confidence that – despite all difficulties – the political dreams of the Independence movement might emerge through prolonged struggle. Optimism is something of which, the narrator declares, we must be “cured” (Rushdie, p. 616). Rushdie’s protagonist declares the futility of politics, i.e. of organized collective efforts to steer the nation-making process in alignment with values and ideas – “Politics” is “at the best of times a bad dirty business. We should have avoided it ...” (Rushdie, p. 608). He declares the “futility of thought decision action” (Rushdie, p.102). The building of a nation-state was a trap which India should never have fallen into. Yet now it is too late to get out. The only remedy, *Midnight’s Children* suggests, is a retreat into the private worlds of fantasy.

The self, in *Midnight’s Children*, is a phantasmagoric explosion of imaginary identities. Plural in its range, it is elitist in its aspiration to find freedom beyond the public multitude (“the many-headed monster”). Saleem’s fictional autobiography derives from magical realism’s kaleidoscopic subjectivity as multiple ephemeral worlds, each qualitatively unique. He is a symbolic historian, in Baudelaire’s tradition of a “forest of symbols”. However, the hope for the esoterically unique traditional communities is

unlikely to prevail against destructive modern mass society. The privileged moment of “privacy” will be sucked into the “annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” (Rushdie, p.647). *Midnight’s Children*, in this way, presents a lament for the vanishing of unique and irretrievable cultural universes, aristocratically sheltered and existentially unable to survive in modern mass society. The “mythological chaos of an unforgettable midnight” is contrasted with the “tattered hopes of the nation” (Rushdie, p. 616-617).

Being, in its incommensurability, is contrasted with history, i.e. unifying system. The “hundred daily pinpricks of family life” are required to “deflate the great ballooning fantasy of history” (Rushdie, p. 482). In his struggle to be free of national history, Saleem even erases the smaller history of embeddedness in family and community, and says: “Don’t try and fill my head with that history. I am who I am, that’s all there is” (Rushdie, p. 489). The narrator’s essential dilemma, ultimately, and reason for writing an autobiography, is that he is “disintegrating” and “falling apart” because his “poor body, singular, unlovely” is “buffeted by too much history” (Rushdie, p. 43). His “singular” body represents an affirmation of difference and uniqueness, i.e. authenticity, against the smooth homogeneity of History as the systemic universal.

Secondly, and relatedly, *Midnight’s Children* critiques modern knowledge in the name of the significance of a devalued unconscious. In a famously recurring passage, Rushdie completely reverses the Enlightenment paradigm of subject-centered knowledge. It is replaced with an ontology of accidents. The productive site of knowledge and significance is located in absence: “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence.” This radical vision of human existence privileges constellations of contingency of which the person is barely aware, as a “few clues one stumbles across” (Rushdie, p. 17). The consequence, for the narrator, is that he is “the sort of person to whom things have been done” (Rushdie, p. 330). He is passive, without agency, a mere flotsam and jetsam upon life’s sea. He can neither understand nor control the main events shaping his existence.

On these grounds, Rushdie’s protagonist affirms the higher existential value of the local fragment, cut off from the dynamisms of the modern public sphere: “I am coming to the conclusion that privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all of this inflated macrocosmic activity” (Rushdie, p. 608). Here, “legends make

reality” (Rushdie, p. 57). In postmodern fashion, totality is rejected. The “urge to encapsulate the whole of reality” is derided (Rushdie, p. 97). There is no place, in the world of *Midnight’s Children*, for organized collective – let alone national - action as a mode of engagement between self and other. Nor is sociological analysis of cause and effect viable. The kernel of modern corruption in *Midnight’s Children* is the totalizing idea of history itself. Modern history and knowledge are a vicious circle undermining the integrity of being. This is ultimately an aesthetic revolt against the nationalist legacy of the French Revolution, which mobilized the population in order to subvert the hierarchic inheritance of the traditional past.

Beyond the elaborately contrived plot, Saleem’s conclusions are discernable – “abandon politics, give up all hopes for a utopian future, discard the masses-and-classes/capital-and-labour/us-and-them paradigms, adopt a grotesque narcissism, and renounce the logic of cause and effect” (Shakil, p. 218). In this way, Rushdie’s’ novel predates the “end of history” refrain.

Midnight’s Children ends upon a Proustian note. After descending into the inferno of Bombay’s Midnite-Confidential Club for the city’s young cosmopolitans, the narrator discovers a pickle. Its taste “brings him back to the past” (Rushdie, p.637). This strong mood of nostalgia is woven into the recurrent recognition of final annihilation. Time is the destroyer of all things: “What chews on bones refuses to pause... it’s only a matter of time” (Rushdie, p. 409). The central image is an eternally recurring ancient curse. This conforms perfectly to Cocteau’s *Infernal Machine*: “once again destiny, inevitability, the antithesis of choice had come to rule my life, once again a child was to be born of a father who was not his father” (Rushdie, p. 580). It is a world of predestined repetition where “every life, past present and future, is already recorded” (Rushdie, p.604).

Sadegh Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*

Sadegh Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl* (1937) is foregrounded in the Iranian 1920s-30s nation-making experience. The Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) constitutes the background. Hedayat’s text allegorizes both the newly pluralistic Constitutional Revolutionary spirit, and the authoritarian post-1925 nationalist regime. It critiques the violent means of the post-1925 regime, inflicted in the name of a ‘higher’ ideal of

national homogenization and 'pure' modernity. Hedayat, espousing Iranian independence and freedom, was also a nationalist. *The Blind Owl* proposes a cautionary vision of the human condition where entropy reigns over the absolute, and suggests the non-existence of pure identity. Where state action links pure identity to sublimated violence in pursuit of higher ends, the mutual and banal destruction of all contending parties results, in all-too ordinary patterns of violence.

Hedayat was active in emergent 1930s Iranian civil society. He created a forum for public self-expression through his role in the Rab'a Avant Guardist, anti-monarchical and anti-Islamist movement. Targeted in 1936, Hedayat went into Indian exile to avoid arrest and write freely. He wrote *The Blind Owl* between 1937-9 in Bombay. He participated in the 1940s Tudeh Party, opposing Pahlavi oppression, Western imperialism and the snares of religious traditionalism. This may have been a revolt against his own northern Iranian aristocratic family, from whom he broke away.

The Blind Owl combines the Gothic and Magical Realist aesthetics. At its 18th century inception, Gothic distinguished a new spatial condensation of the feudal past (barbaric, supernatural and primitive) from the new 'modern' ideals of the international Enlightenment. The dichotomized 'inside'/'outside' was frequently re-established through force of violence (i.e. *Dracula*, 1897) related to tacit Hegelian historicism (i.e. all conflict is resolved into final scientific unity). *The Blind Owl* uses Gothic elements to fragment coherent subjectivity into multiple selves and examine fears about dissolution and transgression of boundaries, i.e. exposure to the emptiness at the border of the subject's identity. The self is a co-mingling of multiple fictions. The dualist system of modernity, still tacit in the Gothic, is broken into numberless accidents with a strange underlying synchronicity in *The Blind Owl*.

Magical Realism represented a shift into a multi-centered rather than dualistic imaginative terrain, focused upon everyday life pluralism. The broad narrative of history is broken into multiple and incongruent everyday fragments. Despite roots in the Gothic tradition, Magical Realism unravels the inside/out dichotomy in the manner of Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of lived experience (a source of post-structuralism). It follows that violence ceases to be teleologically imbued with a heroic quality, achieving absolute resolution. Magical Realism underlines the contingency of

modernity, rather than affirming the 18th century promise of an all-unifying pattern applied to morals, politics and aesthetics.

The *Blind Owl* is split into two major sections, the first being “surrealist” and the second “realist” (Katouzian, p.63). Despite contradictions, these are two versions of one story through persistent mirroring of images and events – or possibly even “the same episode endlessly varied” (Katouzian, p. 67). The inbuilt impossibility of reducing either section to the other denies the possibility any realist or psychoanalytic foundation. The two exist in an absence of reconciliation, affording ontological primacy to neither. It is an Artaudian cry against 20th century ideological reductivism. Knowledge is shifted from a unified positivist paradigm, an explicit system, to a materialism built upon an ungraspable ontology of dreams.

The *Blind Owl* is an ethical critique of what Max Weber called “ethics of conviction” (an absolute end justifies violent means), in favour of “ethics of responsibility” (concern with everyday shortcomings turns attention to means and consequences). This ethics – as well as the general entropic vision of the universe - is consistent with Hedayat’s profound interest in Buddhism. He appealed for compassion extended to all living beings, i.e. “the stray dog” in “Three Drops of Blood” (1934).

Like Cocteau’s *Infernal Machine*, *The Blind Owl* evokes a pre-recorded universe: “For thousands of years people have been saying the same words, performing the same sexual act, vexing themselves with the same childish worries” (Hedayat, p. 84). The narrator, angst-ridden that nobody is ontologically privileged, constructs a Platonic fantasy of pure transcendence. His angel vision originates from “a unique unknown spring”. She is “a creature apart”, and “if her face were to come into contact with ordinary water it would fade” (Hedayat, p. 30). He therefore establishes himself as a superhuman being: “beneath the glance of a stranger, of an ordinary man, she would have withered and crumbled” (i.e. he is ontologically privileged as her chosen witness). Initially, the angel is merely eyes without a face: “frightening, magic eyes (which) express a bitter reproach to mankind” and have “looked upon terrible, transcendental things” (i.e. Judgment Day) (Hedayat, p. 26). In the final scene, the motif is repeated, but as the removed eyeball of the woman the narrator has murdered: “in the palm of my hand lay her eye, and I was drenched in blood” (Hedayat, p.143). The ineffably sublime, a heavenly system, is resolved into its accidental physical basis in the perversely grotesque.

The text suggests that no human being should undertake God's role on Judgment Day or forcibly implement Comte's Laws of History. The narrator has obtained the 'recognition' that he has craved throughout the novel (i.e. to confirm his ontological privilege), but at the cost of destroying the human object of his obsession. The absolute end of cosmic recognition has been subverted by the reprehensible means employed to attain it. The experience expresses a Buddhist insight about the violence of obsessive desire.

The Blind Owl's message concerns modesty. The narrator's arrogance – "All the bustle, noise and pretence that filled the lives of other people, the rabble people who, body and soul, are turned out of one mould, had become foreign and meaningless to me" – is counter posed to a realization that his identity is "a compound of incompatible elements" in a universal condition of "decomposition and gradual disintegration" (i.e. entropy, where more is lost than replaced). He attempts to deify this emptiness in the world – "to love the night" – to ontologically privilege his identity ("until now I had not known myself") (Hedayat, p.86-87). Yet practical everyday life demonstrates his interdependence with others: "How had that woman (the nurse), who was so utterly different from me, managed to occupy so large a zone of my life?" (Hedayat, p. 99). The pre-modern spiritual hierarchy of systemically arranged difference is unsustainable in the emerging Iranian mass society.

The Blind Owl thus presents a materialist view of human fate grounded in everyday life. The narrator is obsessed with the aristocratic category of being (i.e. fixed hierarchic identity) over doing: "all activity, all happiness on the part of other people, made me feel like vomiting" (Hedayat, p. 98). This scourge is industrial activity, as he is "choked by the smoke and steam from the others" (Hedayat, p. 67). The narrator has only "one state of being" (i.e. eternal value), while the "rabble" have "their definite periods" (i.e. secularized time) (Hedayat, p. 66-67).

The ghosts of The Blind Owl carry the "burden of collective memory (and act as) links to lost families and communities." A subversive temporal horizon, they unsettle "progressive, linear history" (Zamora & Wendy, p.497-98). The dispersal of Universal History (the claim of the Pahlavi regime) makes the transcendent subject (i.e. the absolute end) recede and leaves only the body or bodies (i.e. everyday people). The multiplying doublings of the self all point to a single secret act – the book's climactic murder scene. This is a warning about the social repression of the human unconscious

(habitus, patterns of community, belonging). The fundamental spectre of *The Blind Owl* is “the shadow,” for which the narrator tells his story in hopes of revealing himself to it. The spectre is beneath the reach of the symbolic (the intellectual power of naming), lying along the border separating opposing states of being, and hence contaminating pure identity. It is a “contagious darkness” (Hedayat, p. 116). In a subversion of the paradigm of positivist science, knowledge is never pure.

Hedayat – witness to the violence of Pahlavi state modernization - obsessively sought his authentic Iranian roots. The narrator’s house is surrounded by “ruins” and “squat mud-brick houses which mark the extreme limit of the city (and which) must have been built by some fool or madman heaven knows how long ago.” This description betrays a perception of primitivism preceding modernity and hostility to tradition which is characterized as foolish and mad – the very ideology driving Reza Shah’s modernizing state. Never the less, when the narrator shuts his eyes, he can “see every detail of their structure” and can “feel the weight of them pressing on (his) shoulders,” implying the profound degree to which the very traditions he despises are inscribed upon his innermost being (Hedayat, p. 22). There is a crushing awareness of the weight of past time imposed by his Iranian heritage, producing a split personality under the cultural dictatorship of the ruling modernist regime. Hedayat was preoccupied with the ontological vacuum, but in his iconoclasm, he refused to fill it with a concocted positive figure of authentic identity. Such violent identity claims emerged with the 1979 Islamist revolution. But Hedayat remained floating in existential limbo between the future and the past.

In this sense *The Blind Owl*, like *Midnight’s Children*, operates within the Proustian domain of exploring a terrain of memory that is inherently fragmented, unreliable and doomed to eventual disintegration. The metaphor of darkness pervades *The Blind Owl* with reference to hidden processes. A shadow machinery of the unconscious unites every character, and ultimately acts in the role of each. *The Blind Owl* represents a machine: the phantasmagorical underside of either the state, capitalism or the unconscious order of time itself. The characters are forced helplessly to proceed, rather as in Céline’s *Journey to the End of Night* (1932). The individual human will, to say nothing of organized collective human effort, is irrelevant to the outcome.

Conclusion

Cocteau's *Infernal Machine* concerned the naiveté of human beings in believing they have outwitted fate. All claims to absolute knowing, rooted in petty human reality, are doomed to a tragic and farcical crash. Both of these masterpieces of Magical Realism depict modernizing regimes, and indicate the limits of a nationalist politics in terms of assimilating difference. Between the Indian Nehruvian and Iranian Pahlavi experiences, we see highly different paradigms of nationalism. These works, in their emphasis upon difference, nevertheless suggest that there are some contexts for which nationalism, as such, has no solution but oppression.

In these works, the traditional self, embedded in community and invested with meaning by traditional knowledge, is engulfed in the disorder of state reorganization and market commodification. A commendable ethical critique of the totalizing claims of the modern state, linked to organized violence, is present in both books (i.e. the Buddha chapter in *Midnight's Children*). However, in embracing an aesthetic politics of pessimism and inaction, focused upon the lost beauty of traditional worlds, there is a failure to appreciate the potential power and positive meaning of citizenship. This empowering French Revolutionary legacy entails a mode of collective activism for transforming society in alignment with specific values and a systemic program for change. Thus, although the affirmation of pluralism in these two works is to be applauded, its basis in an artistic nostalgia for traditional worlds is a romantic dead end.

Ultimately, Hedayat's despair led to rejection of the world, opium addiction, and suicide in a Paris hotel in 1951. Today, his tomb at Cimetière du Père-Lachaise is a pilgrimage site for many Iranian modernist youth. On the other hand, the full reality of the democratic institutions that Rushdie had cynically dismissed as myths and dreams became manifest when he was targeted with a fatwa by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. We should not confuse Rushdie's public views in the subsequent period with the vision of *Midnight's Children*. Religion is not always as playful and malleable as its depiction in *Midnight's Children*, in a "country that is a sort of dream" (Rushdie, p.159). In its fanatical forms, aided by the ideological and technical implements of modernity, it can pose a deadly threat to the artistic creativity of modernist innovators like Hedayat and Rushdie. Despite the *Infernal Machine* paradigm underlying these two novels, their authors opened up new creative vistas in the 20th century that altered the imaginative horizons of generations. They affirmed the Baudelaire paradigm of a creatively innovative and transformative, if traumatic and deracinating, modernity.

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