

MIDNIGHT'S MULTITUDES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SALEEM SINAI

As multidões da meia-noite: vida e época de Saleem Sinai

ANDERSON BASTOS MARTINS 

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Juiz de Fora, MG, Brasil

E-mail: andersonbastos.martins@ufjf.br

ABSTRACT

This paper reads Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) alongside Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) in an attempt to enter the discussion presented by the latter authors that the *multitude* requires the existence of a new Rabelais who can capture its revolutionary monstrosity in action towards a new sense of democracy.

KEYWORDS: Multitude; *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie, Global Studies, Comparative Literature

RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma leitura de *Os filhos da meia-noite* (1981), de Salman Rushdie, ao lado de *Multidão: guerra e democracia na era do Império* (2004), de Michael Hardt e Antonio Negri, numa tentativa de adentrar a discussão proposta pelos autores do segundo volume de que a *multidão* necessita de um novo Rabelais que possa captar sua monstruosidade revolucionária em ação rumo a uma nova concepção de democracia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Multidão, *Os filhos da meia-noite*, Salman Rushdie, Estudos Globais, Literatura Comparada

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A RABELAIS FOR THE PRESENT

This article represents an inchoate effort to read the slippery concept of the *multitude* in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's well-known tetralogy *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Commonwealth* (2009) and *Assembly* (2017) into the even slipperier world of contemporary fiction. And this will not even be a thorough undertaking, in that I will restrict myself to the two authors' own positing of the concept in the second book in their tetralogy and not attempt any in-depth analysis of the reactions the book has called forth or the ensuing responses from the authors themselves. The reason for this is the sheer complexity of *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's second novel whose world will be brought to the foreground of my incursion into Negri and Hardt's "multitude".

The book *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* is organized in three major parts under the respective headings of *War*, *Multitude*, and *Democracy*. The first of these parts describes a "[...] new global state of war" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 8) in which "[...] [t]he state of exception has become permanent and general" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 7). The second part is where the *multitude* takes centre stage as the subject of "[...] [p]olitical action aimed at transformation and liberation" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 99) from the said permanent and general state of exception. Finally, in part three, a new and revolutionary form of democracy produced and directed by the multitude towards the common good is outlined.

In broad terms, the multitude is conceptualized by the authors both in material forms, simultaneously in its proximity and its distance from other similar concepts such as the *masses* and the *people*, and in immaterial forms, as producers and as products of immaterial labour, which, in turn, includes intellectual, linguistic, and affective interventions. It was here that I decided to begin reflecting on the hypothesis of approaching the *multitude* as a narrative category that can advance my research into the cross-pollination of literary studies and globalization studies within contemporary fiction.

Towards the end of the *Multitude* section of their book, Hardt and Negri call for something we feel tempted to name as a *literature of the multitude*. Emphasizing the potentiality of the imagination within the concerted effort of "[...] creat[ing] an alternative society" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 194), they evoke cultural theories of monstrosity to put forward a draft of how such literature might come into being.

The concept of the multitude forces us to enter a new world in which we can only understand ourselves as monsters. Gargantua and Pantagrue, in the sixteenth century, in the midst of that revolution that created European modernity, were giants that served as emblems for the extreme powers of liberty and invention. They strode across the revolutionary terrain and proposed the gigantic endeavor of becoming free. Today we need new giants and new monsters to put together nature and history, labor and politics, art and invention in order to demonstrate the new power that is being born in the multitude. We need a new Rabelais or, rather, many. (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 194).

It might be tempting to interpret the reference to François Rabelais (c. 1494 – c. 1553) as a deliberate choice to search for an author with the definitive skill to start a new genre in contemporary literature and leave a mark on a par with that left behind by the celebrated creator of *Gargantua and Pantagrue*, a satiric collection of novels that has given rise to many an influential experiment in twentieth-century literary theory and criticism. However, nowadays one must take the assumption

that any contemporary author may leave such long-lasting footprints with a generous pinch of salt. Present-day literature is arguably characterized by the publication of countless titles that, having gone full-circle through the season of releases, most-read lists, prizes and possible cinema or on-demand streaming adaptations, will inevitably take a step back for new arrivals, only possibly to make a comeback on such lists as “the best of the decade” or “the unmissable reads you have probably missed”. But if one does not pin too many hopes on canonization, the reference to Rabelais might point in the direction of untethered creativity and social satire, which make fiction the perfect ground for deploying concepts that are yet to gain a footing in social reality.

SALMAN RUSHDIE AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE MULTITUDE

As an enthusiastic reader and researcher of Salman Rushdie's novels, I take the daring step to suggest that the author be read as this new Rabelais of the multitude, with his second novel *Midnight's children* as the medium for my critical adventure. Salman Rushdie did write a first novel, *Grimus* (1975), but it was a rather bland failure, even though, on second thoughts, it should be viewed as a laboratory experiment that would culminate in the publication, years later, of the incendiary *The satanic verses*. With his second novel, however, Rushdie was quickly turned into a household name in the English-speaking literary circles (he would later become the object of an international-security affair, but I would rather write this piece by feigning ignorance of what was to come).

Midnight's children is narrated by Saleem Sinai, one of the children of midnight, but the reader is asked to accept that the book itself is being written by himself as he reminisces about his life to his simple-minded companion Padma, who is both his employee and his wife, and, above all, the first critic of the narrative. Saleem Sinai was born in Bombay at the stroke of midnight on August 15th, 1947, the very same day and time when India became independent from the United Kingdom. The fact that India is a country where the miraculous and the fantastical seem to be woven into the everyday is the argument Saleem resorts to in order to convince the reader, or “[...] anyone whose personal cast of mind is too inflexible to accept these facts” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 226), that each and every detail he remembers, no matter how implausible it may sound, represents “[...] no retreat from the truth” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 226).

The plot of *Midnight's children* defies any attempt at clear-cut summarization and, for reasons of clarity, only the very essential characters and events narrated will be referred to in this article. It has already been pointed out that Saleem Sinai was born simultaneously with modern India, but he was not alone. Within the first hour of India's independence, a total of one thousand and one children were born in the new country, with Saleem being only one of those, a sort of first among equals. But since Indian children are guaranteed their share of troubles and sufferings in the world, when they reached the age of ten, only five hundred and eighty-one had survived. Every one of these kids had been endowed with fantastical powers, but Saleem, being the first-born, had the most crucial gift of all: it was inside his head that the children of midnight could meet, socialize, debate, quarrel and make peace, unite and split up. His consciousness was, in his own definition, the equivalent of All-India Radio, the real-life nationwide radio station of India. It is within Saleem's head that the children decide to organize themselves as the “Midnight's Children Conference”, or MCC, and this children's council embodies Saleem's naïve notion that they could act as an alternative good force to face up against the evil forces of corrupt institutions and *realpolitik*.

Before looking into the MCC in action, it is necessary to point out that, as a result of very dramatic events that took place during his birth, Saleem Sinai was in actual fact a changeling, brought up by a well-off family who are, like himself, completely unaware that their real son, called Shiva, was growing up in poverty with his widowed father as his only company. Such facts are ignored by all characters but one, but even so, Shiva and Saleem are unable to develop a collaborative relationship within the MCC. As the novel unravels, they become arch-enemies, unable to prevent the dream of a new India from being wiped out and crushed.

Let us, however, not rush into conclusions and final thoughts. As I intend this to be a parallel reading of two open-ended books, it is desirable to gloss over Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's comments on institutions and leadership and their importance to the formation of multitudes. The authors say that "[...] the multitude is composed of a set of *singularities* - and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 99). The two authors' focus here is to distinguish the "multitude" from the "people", whose "[...] component parts [...] are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 99). In their conceptual labour, Hardt and Negri lay "[...] the plural singularities of the multitude" in direct opposition to "the undifferentiated unity of the people" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 99).

The conceptual challenge posed by the distinction above is how to reconcile the plurality that should characterize the multitude and the fact that, by the same token, it "[...] is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 99). It is unsurprising that this challenge remains unresolved in Hardt and Negri's work, but the allure of such a concept as the "multitude" remains likewise undimmed. Such fields as History and the Social Sciences, grounded as they are in observable reality, do not always find themselves in a comfortable position to provide concrete examples of the multitude in action, despite Hardt and Negri's best efforts to do so. This difficulty may prove an advantage for literary researchers if one considers that literature is not bound by pre-existing social realities and is by nature and by definition entitled to experiment with fictional realities. Literature has traditionally been put to many different uses, and my proposal is that we look at *Midnight's Children* as an opportunity to put the concept of the "multitude" to the test in the history-laden, yet fantasy-originated world imagined by Salman Rushdie.

For the sake of conciseness, let me restrict this attempt to the analysis of one specific moment in the novel, when, for the first time, the question of leadership is raised during an assembly taking part in Saleem's brain.

Shiva's conviction that he (or he-and-I) was the natural leader of our group by dint of his (and my) birth on the stroke of midnight had [...] one strong argument in its favour. It seemed to me then - it seems to me now - that the midnight miracle had indeed been remarkably hierarchical in nature, that the children's abilities declined dramatically on the basis of the distance of their time of birth from midnight. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 260).

As normally happens in real-life institutions where criteria need to be set in order that leaders be elected, Saleem's (and Shiva's) claim to natural leadership is not met with easy agreement. In the end, the setting of criteria proves invariably perspectival and there is no such thing as a leader appointed by

nature. The other children, too, put forward their own claims to leadership, and an impasse is reached the moment the following question is laid on the negotiation table: "Who says it's better to do one thing or another?" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 260), in direct reference to the multiple talents the children had been endowed with.

Unwilling to give up his idea that the children should organize, Saleem counterargues by means of a call to action, thus admonishing the other children: "We must think [...] what we are for" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 261). By introducing these "notions of purpose, and meaning" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 261), Saleem tries his last card in order both to organize and lead the group. To his dismay, however, the children do rise to his wake-up call but in so doing reveal no trace of being aware of their special status, making several suggestions that boil down to status quo rather than reform and revolution. In his poignantly disappointed conclusion, Saleem points out that

[...] there was nothing unusual about the children except for their gifts; their heads were full of all the usual things, fathers mothers money food land possessions fame power God. Nowhere, in the thoughts of the Conference, could I find anything as new as ourselves. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 261).

Saleem plays the role of the utopian thinker, simultaneously lambasting the present political structures in the India he had been born in and launching the Midnight's Children Conference as a potential project for the improvement of those structures, an organization that was not only new, but fantastically so, capable of harnessing all the potentialities of the new generation, who would then, in their turn, reform the institutions in the country and turn it into a modern nation fast on its way toward the twenty-first century.

One of the children, however, had the power to travel through time and made a shattering revelation while Saleem was busy looking for the meaning and the purpose of the conference. "I'm telling you – all this is pointless – they'll finish us before we start!" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 261-262), says Soumitra, the time-traveller, whom the other children chose to ignore, only to learn, years later, that "[...] the purpose of Midnight's Children might be annihilation; that we would have no meaning until we were destroyed" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 262).

Much like a time-traveller myself, it is necessary that I skip over important events in Saleem's narrative to find him lying on a stretcher, a prisoner of Indira Gandhi's Emergency Years, being forcibly submitted to an operation of vasectomy. In Saleem Sinai's idiosyncratic history of India's first few decades as an independent nation, the sole reason for Indira's autocratic rule was to quash the Midnight's Children Conference. In reference to her decried sterilization campaigns, our narrator concludes that, by turning them sterile, the old India denies the new one its birth, and the demise of the MCC represents their failure to organize as a multitudinous political entity.

THE MULTITUDE AS AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

Why, then, should I insist on writing this paper, since the final effect of the children being sterilised is, in Saleem's own words, "[...] sperectomy: the draining-out of hope?" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 503).

Midnight's Children was published early in April 1981. In a passionate piece he wrote for *The Guardian* to celebrate the book's forty-year anniversary, Rushdie reflects:

Forty years is a long time. I have to say that India is no longer the country of this novel. When I wrote *Midnight's Children* I had in mind an arc of history moving from the hope – the bloodied hope, but still the hope – of independence to the betrayal of that hope in the so-called Emergency, followed by the birth of a new hope. India today, to someone of my mind, has entered an even darker phase than the Emergency years. The horrifying escalation of assaults on women, the increasingly authoritarian character of the state, the unjustifiable arrests of people who dare to stand against that authoritarianism, the religious fanaticism, the rewriting of history to fit the narrative of those who want to transform India into a Hindu-nationalist, majoritarian state, and the popularity of the regime in spite of it all, or, worse, perhaps because of it all – these things encourage a kind of despair. (RUSHDIE, 2021).

This gloomy reappraisal of India, which encompasses the forty years since the novel was published but is unequivocally addressed at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's support of Hindu fundamentalism, cannot be assessed without reference to the period that followed the infamous issue of a *fatwa* against the life of Salman Rushdie in 1989. A *fatwa* is a document pertaining to the broad field of Islamic law which records a legal opinion by specific agents in the Islamic hierarchy, but which does not have immediate force of law. However, *fatwas* can have a significant impact on the acts of the faithful because they are normally launched by important figures with solid popular support. In the case of this specific event, the dying Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini addressed the Muslim in such terms as these:

I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the *Satanic Verses* book, which is against Islam, the Prophet, and the Qu'ran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death. I ask all the Muslims to execute them wherever they find them. (KHOMEINI *apud* RUSHDIE, 2012, p. 5).

The scope of this article does not include a lengthy analysis of the aftermath of the *fatwa*, but it is a well-known fact within the literary world that Salman Rushdie would spend the following years under the protection of the British government, unable to settle in a fixed address or to make public appearances, banned from entering Islamic countries and turned into a human representation of evil and profanity in the eyes of millions of believers. This cannot help having a heavy toll on one's personal experience of the world and it is only understandable that Rushdie takes a sombre view of India and of the possibility of differences establishing a fruitful relationship. It must be made clear, nevertheless, that my point here is not to subscribe to Rushdie's motives in his *The Guardian* piece – even though one can easily sympathize with him¹ – but simply to put it into perspective and make room for alternative conceptions of societal formations in the contemporary world.

I will now leap into the closing section of *Midnight's children* and then return to previous moments in the book in order to resume my proposition that may be set in conversation with the sociology of the multitude.

As previously noted, Saleem's dreams of organizing the Midnight's Children Conference as a new political force in India fail irrevocably and he ends up a sterile narrator-cum-writer who is also the owner of a successful chutney and jam factory in the Mumbai of his birth, where Padma, his trusted employee, keeps him company while he writes his autobiography – which happens to be the

¹ And this sympathy is made even stronger and more justified in the wake of the atrocious attack the author suffered on August 12, 2022, when a man stabbed him multiple times and caused him to lose sight in one eye and the use of one hand.

very same book the reader of *Midnight's Children* has in their hands – and simultaneously critiques and even attempts to interfere with his text. During the process of writing his book, Saleem discovers strange cracks in his body and starts complaining of constant pain in his bones, a condition that he calls “[...] what-gnaws-on-bones” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 442) and which punctuates several facts in his life. One is never told what precisely his condition is, but his senses tell him, and he the reader, that he must rush to tell his story to the end before his own end finally comes.

In the opening passage of the novel, Saleem muses over the coincidence that connects the time of his birth to that of his country and writes, in one of the most-often-quoted passages in the book, that he “[...] had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 3). And one can safely claim that what follows in the 500-plus pages this massive tale requires is Saleem’s attempt to explain his very idiosyncratic approach to history by keeping those chains firmly in place all the way to the last scene in the book, in which he is trampled to death by the very multitudes whose potentiality he had striven to converge onto the creation of a new country. The actual India of his frustrated adult years, having taken a completely different route from that first envisaged by Saleem, could not but crush his bones and, consequently, add the final word to his narrative.

It takes place on the day when Saleem and Padma decide to get married, which, as it turns out, is the day when he turns thirty-one and India celebrates Independence Day and “[...] the many-headed multitudes will be in the streets” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 532). As he and Padma are forced to leave the taxi they were in heading for their wedding celebration, they get lost in the crowds and are separated, never to meet again. As the throng engulfs his battered body, he sees the faces of all those people who had played a role in his life and senses that his end is near.

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 533).

The language in this paragraph, the last in the novel, speaks of iteration, of the never-ending fate of the children of midnight to be born anew and for newness, and yet once again be smashed by the forces of the old order. Saleem is dead at the end of the novel, the remaining children of midnight have been made barren and been dispersed, apparently unable and unwilling to regroup. The end of the novel is marked by despondency and by defeat, by death and powerlessness. This, however, begs the question concerning what allowed Saleem to dream of infinite possibilities when all the odds were, from the beginning, irrevocably against the children. In order to answer this question, one must address the moments when the novel is focused upon hope and promise.

When Saleem was born, he was sent a letter by no less a person than the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru congratulating him on the “[...] happy accident of [his] moment of birth” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 139). The letter goes on to say

You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 139).

This letter is one of Saleem's most treasured objects, to which he will cling fast to the end of his narration and that will justify his very particular attempt at conflating national history and personal autobiography. Beside this paper version of Saleem's sense of destiny, there is a second object that our narrator subjects to a very personal interpretive exercise and which will inform many of his later actions. The object in question is a copy of John Everett Millais's 1870 painting known as "The Boyhood of Raleigh". In his imperfect recollection of the painting's various elements, Saleem stresses the presence of a fisherman vigorously pointing at some lost point into the sea as he seems to be admonishing two young boys. The chapter in the book is entitled "The Fisherman's Pointing Finger" and this vague command to follow an undefined direction gives Saleem the conviction that he had been born to perform specific tasks that would impact the destiny of his country. At first glance, the baby-narrator Saleem believes the fisherman is pointing directly at the Prime Minister's letter, indicating the mission that lay ahead of him. On second thoughts, however, Saleem muses that the fisherman's gaze lay somewhere else altogether.

Perhaps the fisherman's finger was not pointing at the letter in the frame; because, if one followed it even further, it led one out through the window [...] and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; a sea on which the sails of Koli² dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun ... an accusing finger, then, which obliged us to look at the city's dispossessed. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 139).

It is particularly significant for my purposes here that Saleem includes the poor people of Mumbai in his story at the same time as he underpins his autobiography in remarkable pictorial components. In fact, had fate had its way without human interference, Saleem himself would have been brought up amongst Mumbai's poor multitudes. The night when he was born, another child was given birth at the same time, the son of the well-off Sinais. The family's ayah, enamoured of a communist revolutionary, makes a desperate attempt to contribute to her lover's cause and thus convince him of her feelings. In her silent act of social revolution, she swaps the two boys' name tags, giving the poor child the opportunities he would otherwise be denied. This is how the would-be poor boy Saleem changes place with the would-be rich boy Shiva, giving rise to the enmity that would, ultimately, mean the erasure of the *Midnight's Children*, of whom they were the two "highest-ranking" members.

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt posit that the multitude does not preclude the poor, who, despite their exclusion from "waged labour", are nevertheless in a position to "[...] express an enormous power of life and production" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 129). The keyword here is undoubtedly "production". When the two authors postulate, earlier in their book, that the multitude does not possess an *a priori* ontology, that is, it is not about "being" but "becoming" (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 105), they anticipate their thesis that, as a social project, the multitude is not designed by a special branch of the people who then impart their decisions to the masses below them, but rather a novel form of social organization that must be inclusive in its methods of decision-making. The multitude can only become what its constituent singularities shape it into. By including those "[...] without

2 Large and vibrant fishing community thought to have settled in Mumbai over five hundred years ago.

- without employment, without residency papers, without housing” (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 129), the multitude must consequently include “[...] the wealth, productivity and commonality of the poor” (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 136). This perception, much akin to that of Walter Benjamin in “Experience and Poverty” (1933), does not approach the poor as merely the recipients of whatever productivity surplus the capitalist economy is ready to offer, but rather as themselves producers of the “common wealth” of the multitude.

One can arguably state that Saleem Sinai’s relationship with the poor unfolds at different levels. Firstly, he was himself supposed to be a poor child, had it not been for his ayah’s unorthodox views on social activism. Besides, Saleem’s constant reminder that he had been a prophesied child cannot be disassociated from the fact that the night when his birth and future status was foreseen coincides with his pregnant mother’s realization that her personal dramas unravelled against the backdrop of Mumbai’s poor multitudes.

Always prone to falling prey to superstitions, Saleem’s mother agrees to be taken to see a clairvoyant on the outskirts of the city, and it is during this trip that she is confronted for the first time by the misery of Mumbai’s invisible population huddled up in squalid slums and communities. In the relative protection of a taxi ride, she “lost her city eyes and the newness of what she was seeing made her flush, newness like a hailstorm pricking her cheeks” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 89). To her horror, a parade of previously unimaginable displays of suffering became suddenly all too visible, including “[...] beautiful children [...] [with] black teeth, [...] girl children baring their nipples, [...] sweeper women [...] with collapsed spines, [...] and cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging” (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 89).

After an immediate reaction to recoil and go back home, she is encouraged to continue on her mission. Having left the car, she is deprived of the last physical barrier that protects her from proximity to those *new people*. It is then that she is struck by an alternative way of looking at those creatures who had thus far so scared her.

It’s like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads; but she corrects herself, no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people – what then? *A power of some sort*, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used ... No, these are not decayed people, despite everything. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 89, my italics).

And here we are again in the company of the fisherman and his pointing finger hanging on the wall above Saleem’s cot and directing his gaze beyond the confines of the estate he would grow up in in defiance of his biological fate, which would have had him struggling against poverty in similar settings to those merely glimpsed at by his unsuspecting surrogate mother. Her refusal to dismiss the poor as monstrous and steadfast decision to grant them the dignity of an unknown force also points to another moment in the novel when Saleem, grown into an adult but deprived of his family by the ravages of the Wars of Partition, will find solace in another community of poor people who, as his mother had predicted, are capable of fleshing out that strange, unknown force by means of magical tricks and illusions.

Saleem’s long path to adulthood takes him to various parts of the subcontinent, and, in the final chapters of the book, he is spotted in Delhi by Parvati, one of the children of midnight, who owns a wicker basket that can turn people invisible. Saleem was just about to be taken to a P.O.W. camp in the

aftermath of the India-Bangladesh War when, out of a group of entertainers deployed by the Indian government for their entry in Dacca, the East Bengal city that would become the capital of Bangladesh, Parvati sees the nameless, memoryless, homeless ex-combatant that she immediately recognises as the boy who, years earlier, had dreamt of turning the midnight's children into a political entity devoted to rejuvenating Indian politics. This is also the moment in the book when Saleem recovers the memory of his name and identity. Granted invisibility inside Parvati's basket, he is secretly flown to Delhi and taken to live in the Magicians' Ghetto, a community of conjurers and illusionists that was home to Parvati and would be Saleem's last glimpse of an alternative society – a micromultitude – and his last utopian experience of an organization developed on the fringes of centralized state authority.

The magicians' community can be said to present yet another example of a social organization made up of poor people, of the excluded from the official narratives that justify the work performed by the state with a view to solidifying the symbolic strength of the nation and the desire to belong to it by gaining the credentials to the "accepted" version of the people. Saleem's magician friends, who do not believe in their own magic and are described by him as materialist communists (RUSHDIE, 1991), are treated by the central government as a "public eyesore" that required inclusion in a "[...] civic beautification program" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 493), shorthand for evacuation, resettlement and, in Indira Gandhi's India, the sterilization of the poor as a pre-emptive method against poverty. As it happens, the ghetto is finally razed over by government forces in a fierce attack that left no stone unturned in what had been a harmonious community tacitly led by its most prominent member, Picture Singh, the snake-charmer whom Saleem adopted as the last of his many surrogate fathers. On this fateful day, Saleem was taken for sterilisation while the other members of the community had to fend for themselves with their huts and scant belongings being smashed and crushed with the full force of the state. The most painful casualty was Parvati, killed when trying to escape, whom Saleem had married even though she was expecting Shiva, his archenemy's, son. Baby Ganesh is miraculously saved and is later reunited with Saleem, who, from that moment on, will live the life of a surrogate father himself.

As usual, Saleem decides that the attack on the Magicians' Ghetto had been orchestrated by Indira Gandhi's administration with the sole purpose of catching him and consequently eliminating any possibility that the Midnight's Children could rally their forces yet again. The government's official version that the operation had been intended for the modernization of the city had been but a ruse to conceal its covert aim. This iteration of Saleem's idiosyncratic views on post-independence Indian history will not be stopped before the very final scene of the novel. However, in my conclusion, and as a means of returning to the main focus of this article, namely, to read it as a failed attempt to start a literary multitude as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri intended it as the future of democracy on a globalized planet, it is important to dwell on the elements of the narrative that linger on beyond its final pages. The first of these is the phantasmatic survival of the Magicians' Ghetto which serves as a reminder of the potentiality of the multitude of poor people, which is highlighted throughout Rushdie's novel and Hardt and Negri's *Multitude*.

By the end of that day, the slum which clustered in the shadow of the Friday Mosque had vanished from the face of the earth; but not all the magicians were captured [...] and it is said that the day after the bulldozing of the magicians' ghetto, a new slum was reported in the heart of the city [...]. Bulldozers were rushed to the scene of the reported hovels; they found nothing. After that the existence of the

moving slum of the escaped illusionists became a fact known to all the inhabitants of the city, but the wreckers never found it. [...] Only after the end of the Emergency did the moving slum come to a standstill, but that must wait for later [...]. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 496).

I have previously considered the apparent definitiveness that one tends to read in the final scene of *Midnight's Children* in a comparable way with the crushing defeat suffered by Saleem in his dreams of renewing the Indian political system, construed in his narration as corrupt and unjust. However, if the critic looks at the text in more detail, they can spot several windows of hope left open in it, as if the pointing finger we have discussed above had been replicated in different guises through the novel. The watershed that separates the melancholia in Saleem's demise and the hopefulness materialised in these scattered windows seems to be the Emergency period (1975-1977), when Indira Gandhi, the main villain in Rushdie's novel, was given the power to rule by decree and consequently quash her political opposition. It was during those months that the ignominious sterilisation of the country's poor was conducted. It was also during the Emergency that the "moving slum" was pointing its finger at the potentiality of the poor that we have discussed above when we focused on the prophecy of Saleem's birth. And it was on the first day of the Emergency – like Saleem on Independence Day – that Parvati and Shiva's son was born, baby Aadam, who – like Saleem before him – would be brought up by a surrogate father. The *Midnight's Children* Conference may have been sterilised by the Ghandi dynasty for fear of their uncomprehended powers and talents, but Shiva was spared and spread his seed by impregnating many high-born and well-bred Indian women, and Saleem makes it noticeably clear that this would guarantee the children a new chance when the right time came. To prove my point, let me list three different quotations from the book which allows the critic to state that there is more than fond memories and a fateful goodbye in Saleem Saini's story, but also the utopian hopefulness of a new beginning. The passages are here presented in chronological order in the text.

Once again a child was to be born to a father who was not his father [...]; trapped in the web of these interweaving genealogies, it may even have occurred to me to wonder what was beginning, what was ending, and whether another secret countdown was in progress, and what would be born with my child. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 477).

We, the Children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be is (*sic*) already more cautious, bidding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I: when he sleeps [...] Aadam Sinai [...] does not (as far as I can tell) surrender to dreams. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 489).

I understood [...] that Aadam was a member of a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in prophecy or the stars but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 515).

IN NON-CONCLUSION

For my final words, I must return to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in order to ascertain that they, too, have kept open windows of hope for the political rise of the multitude as a force for the reconfiguration of democracy. The four books that the authors have written to conceptualise Empire and the non-negotiable need to exit Empire by harnessing the multitude's potentiality into a new democracy that is true to its name all point towards the hurdles in the way of this other world dreamt of.

Well, insofar as *Empire* is oriented toward the structures of power, *Multitude* tries to talk about the possibilities of resistance. It has two general axes. One is a question about what democracy is today and what democracy could be in a global world, a genealogy of what democracy could mean in a space beyond the national space. But we quickly realized—and this is quite normal—that all of this political theorizing about democracy remains wishful thinking unless there’s a subject that can fill it. For us, economic analysis, class analysis, analysis of the forms of labor and new forms of cooperation—those are what give the possibility to new notions of democracy. Those are the two *future-oriented lines of the book*. What other political forms could democracy take in a global world? Why is it possible today that we can fulfill them? (HARDT; MINARDI; SMITH, 2004, p. 63-64, my italics).

In this interview, Michael Hardt admits the need to offer concrete evidence to the conceptualizing posited in *Multitude*, but he indicates likewise that the notion of the multitude as a social force of change points to the future. By saying so, Hardt justifies the possibility of reading contemporary fiction alongside the *Empire* tetralogy, since, as we all know fully well, literature, and all the arts, for that matter, speculates the unknown, the un-lived, the knowable and the livable, the finished, the unfinished and the not-yet-begun.

This is what grounds my assumption that, in much the same way as the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, Hardt and Negri demonstrate extensively how the present-day forces of capital wage a veritable war on democracy in a desperate attempt to keep the multitude at bay and in a state of virtual incapacity to organise its forces socially, politically, culturally and economically.

Our task [...] is to investigate the possibility that the productive flesh of the multitude can [...] discover an alternative to the global political body of capital. [...] Perhaps in this process of [...] constitution we should recognize the formation of the body of the multitude, *a fundamentally new kind of body*, a common body, a democratic body. (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 189-190, my italics).

I have chosen to italicise here the phrase that reveals that, much as it can be rather easily dismissed as counterintuitive and impracticable in its utopianism, the multitude as a project, both a conceptual and a social one, is a two-pronged enterprise. It aims to shed light on the multiple entanglements put in place in order to hold the multitude back as it struggles to move forward – and it is impossible to read these sections in their books without feeling a pang of despondency – but it also aims to be read as a manifesto for those who refuse to keep their heads down and, against all odds, insist on dreaming of a fair future for the world society.

The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life. [...] The flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being [...]. You can try to harness the wind, the sea, the earth, but each will always exceed your grasp. [...] The elemental flesh of the multitude is maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a body. (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005, p. 192).

This final quote is what, so far, I have to offer as a response to Salman Rushdie’s dismal picture of Indian society that he brings up in his *The Guardian* piece I have quoted from above. He is clearly justified in his feelings of hopelessness, but that is only because he is holding his gaze at the entanglements that tie the hands and the feet of the children of midnight. Had he given a minute’s thought to “the elemental flesh of the multitude”, he would undoubtedly have given his India a second chance. In the end, this is exactly what his fiction has been doing all through his prolific career. My attempt to

present Rushdie as one Rabelais of the multitude does not end here. I stop here, at this positive note, but my plan is not to elaborate on my hypothesis based purely on the feel-good factor, but rather on the ambition of demonstrating that literature *is large, it contains multitudes*,³ and as such it should not balk at the chance to take part in the imagination of the multitudes, in the imagining of the multitudes.

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3 Adapted from Walt Whitman's famous line "(I am large, I contain multitudes)" (Song of Myself, 51)