Memory—*Midnight’s Children’s* Locus of Truth

Memory is truth. Or at least, according to Saleem Sinai, it is a certain kind of truth. Perhaps such a statement might not initially appear to contain much veracity, regardless of its literal use of “truth”; however, understanding the depth and potentiality of such a statement is fundamental to understanding messages conveyed by the narrator in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Ironically, for one who believes himself to be “handcuffed to history” (Rushdie 3), Saleem should ideally prioritize the accuracy of facts, and yet we often witness the breakdown of the connection between facts and truth. This breakdown principally originates from Saleem’s utter reliance upon memory to construct his past—to give meaning to his past. At times, the constructed memory, especially when spiced with the extraordinary elements of magical realism, is more conducive to Saleem’s version of truth than to the real facts. During these times when Saleem’s memory appears to convey anything but truth, must readers regard these instances as simply insane, untruthful constructions? In order to reconcile such hypocritical notions, I will establish Saleem’s definition of truth and then will elucidate truth’s role as a rhetorical space within the novel. Thereafter, I will turn to Badiou’s ideas on philosophy as a locus of truth and relate them to memory’s role as a locus of truth. I will then strengthen this argument by explicating magical realism’s contribution to the truth within the novel. In the end, I conclude that Rushdie’s use of memory as a locus of truth increases the compossibility of truth, which then helps readers remove the perforated sheet which covers reality.
As aforementioned, the truth behind Saleem’s recollections quite often appears questionable, which leads readers to wonder whether or not he can ever be trusted. For instance, Saleem’s memory mistakenly reassembles the sequence of events surrounding his tenth birthday. Only after Saleem has already spent a great deal of attention (over 30 pages’ worth) on these events, does he finally realize, once Padma asks him the date of the 1957 election, that he has “made another error” (254). Despite the realization that “the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, [his] tenth birthday” (254), his memory will still not allow for a reordering of his recollections. In other words, Saleem’s memory refuses to accept fact as truth. And as Saleem so keenly points out, “if small things go, will large things be close behind?” (254). Readers might rephrase that question as the following: if Saleem can disregard the election in 1957 as a “small” thing, what “big” things are missing from or are misplaced in his narrative? But even though Saleem briefly worries over his factual inaccuracy, he never does revert back in the story to correct his mistakes. Apparently, according to Saleem, the integrity of his narrative remains uncompromised by factual inaccuracies. However, Saleem is still very concerned with truth. If factual accuracy is not a major component of truth, then what kind of truth does Saleem prioritize?

Most people first and foremost regard truth as “conformity with fact, agreement with reality” or as implying “accuracy, correctness, [and] verity” (OED II.5.a). Or they might even identify truth as “genuineness, reality, [or] actual existence” (OED II.7). However, with such definitions, Saleem’s “truth” is unquestionably untruth because he does not actually revert back to re-explaining everything accurately and according to reality or actual existence. On the other hand, if truth is more loosely defined as a “disposition to speak or act truly or without deceit” (OED I.4, emphasis added), then perhaps Saleem does, in a sense, purvey truth, for even if he
does not always accurately recount past events, he never aims to deceive his readers—except once.

Saleem’s alleged “first” and only “out-and-out lie”—a lie about Shiva’s death—originates from his fear of the unknown (Rushdie 510), but does this fear excuse lying? Few reasons can stand as adequate excuses for lying, and Saleem’s fear of the future, unfortunately, does not fall under that rare category. However, before hastily discounting everything else in the preceding 509 pages of the book, readers must first realize that this uncommon fib actually bolsters the truth in Saleem’s narrative. When Saleem confesses, he admits that he “fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one’s memories and the words which strive vainly to *encapsulate* them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred” (Rushdie 510, emphasis added). First of all, from this admission, Saleem emphasizes that intentionally creating past events *ex nihilo* classifies the memories recounted in autobiography as untruth. Simultaneously, he appears to claim that, although a number of his recollections contain fantastical elements, they *did* happen, though perhaps not exactly how he describes them nor, perhaps, in the order in which he relays them. But they *are* derived from somewhere. And if inaccurate, they are not intentionally so. Moreover, by utilizing the word “encapsulate,” Saleem creates a metaphor for memory and words: they are the containers that preserve the past—or, as Saleem might claim, they are the pickling jars preserving the past (531). This metaphor highlights a unique and significant aspect of both memory and language; by *encapsulating* the past, the past is still free to move around within the containers of memory and language.

In terms of this metaphor, Wojciech Majka’s article “Truth and the Phenomenological Landscape of Perception” provides an even further nuanced understanding of the *encapsulating*
properties of language, which also apply to memory. Majka explains that the significance of language is “[revealing the world] by opening up a certain locus where the world can be said to take place” (16). In other words, language creates a metaphysical, rhetorical space in which “the properties that characterise a thing are not really the thing’s, but the language’s, since it is language which makes the thing possible”; thus, “we always see reality from the perspective of the kind of language that shows it to us. In fact, we come to realize that there really is nothing like a thing in the sense of an object with a fixed configuration of properties” (17). This existence of a rhetorical space which never pinpoints the actuality of the language’s object implies a non-existence of truth in the sense of accuracy when conveyed by means of imperfect language. The truth conveyed never will be the truth unspoken. As a result, any expressed truth will unavoidably be tainted by the perceptions of the revealer, as is the case in Midnight’s Children.

The chutnification process, especially as explained by Saleem, embodies the power of tainting factual truth with perceptions, but the “tainted” product surprisingly contains so much more than the original ingredients. While explicating the process of chutnification, Saleem admits his purpose in creating his own chutney blends is to pickle “memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans” (Rushdie 530). But Saleem realizes that the pickling process inevitably contains distortions, and so “the art is to change the flavor in degree, but not in kind; and above all… to give it shape and form—that is to say, meaning” (Rushdie 531, emphasis added). This reveals the purpose behind Saleem’s occasional disregard for factual truth in favor of a narrative that embodies meaning, which implies that sometimes, without manipulation, factual truth does not contain meaning—or it restricts meaning. Ultimately, despite these alterations and consumers’ possible aversions to his special chutney blends, he hopes “that
it will be possible to say of them that they possess the *authentic* taste of *truth*” (531, emphasis added). In other words, Saleem believes that truth and authenticity can still coexist within an inaccurate representation. Perhaps this says something more about truth than what might initially be believed; perhaps the inaccuracy of one truth might actually be the means of conveying a different truth—a less concrete truth of meaning.

If Saleem’s goal in writing his narrative was to perfectly immortalize his life, then we could declare that he is engaged in something that will never be perfectly actualized. But this is not Saleem’s objective. If it were, the inclusion of events and stories unrelated to Saleem’s autobiography, such as his grandparents’ (who are not actually his true grandparents) love story, would serve absolutely no purpose. However, as aforementioned, Saleem’s goal is to relay *meaning*, and due to meaning’s intangible nature, language’s ability to explicate it is even more convoluted and complex than its ability to describe something much more concrete. Butironically, while creating a rhetorical space for the past—a container that purveys a deeper sense of truth and *meaning*, the inaccuracy of memory and language are actually vital in order to encourage compossibility of truth.

In order to better understand why compossibility of truth is so significant, we must first explore Alain Badiou’s musings on philosophy and compossibility. In determining philosophy’s characteristics, Badiou asserts that philosophy possesses four main conditions: “the matheme, the poem, political invention and love” (35). According to Badiou, these four conditions are the means by which philosophers extract truths from philosophy; they are philosophy’s “truth procedures” (35). The existence of such “truth procedures” actually “signifies that [philosophy] does not itself produce truths” (Badiou 35). Because philosophy, a study which yearns after truth, does not actually produce truth, Badiou proposes that “the specific role of philosophy is to
propose a unified conceptual space in which naming takes place of events that serve as the point of departure for truth procedures.” As a result, instead of “[establishing] a truth,” philosophy “sets a locus of truths” (Badiou 37), similar to how language and memory are loci for the past and truth. However, Badiou furthers the role of these loci, for he claims that by offering a “mode of access to the unity of a moment of truths,” philosophy simultaneously becomes “a conceptual site in which the generic [truth] procedures are thought of as compossible” (Badiou 37). In this sense, compossibility points to the possibility of coexistence, namely the coexistence of generic truth procedures. For Badiou, maintaining “compossibility” is vital to truth, but philosophical compossibility can and has been restricted by artificial sutures, such as the aforementioned conditions of philosophy. These conditions, or “sutures,” have restricted compossibility of certain truths because they limited philosophy’s sphere, or its rhetorical space.

In relation to Midnight’s Children, Saleem’s reliance upon memory expands compossibility of truth more so than a strict adherence to factual accuracy ever could, and we come see the truth of this statement when we examine the consequences of Rushdie’s inclusion of magical realism in the novel. In the midst of the inclusion (whether accurate or not) of historical facts of India, Rushdie also relies upon magical realism, interweaving supernatural elements amongst the more realistic elements. For instance, the grandest component of magical realism—the Midnight’s Children, who all possess some sort of supernatural ability simply because they were born so near midnight on the day India gained its independence—is absolutely fundamental to the story. This component provides a purpose, a climax, an identity, a metaphor (for the nation after Indian independence), and so forth. Ironically, magical realism—the literary genre wedged between reality and the fantastical—“represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth” (Warnes 3). As such, magical realism expands the
rhetorical space of truth in *Midnight’s Children*, for it allows truth to span worlds and even forces readers to consider one of those worlds (the fantastic) as another reality. As a result, as is commonly seen in magical realism and which is also true in *Midnight’s Children*,

“characterizations are often realistic, but magical events happen that express an *emotional truth*” (Paola 19, emphasis added). Because of magical realism, the rhetorical space expands, allowing for even more intangible, “emotional” truths. In conjunction, in regards to magical realism, Anosh Irani remarks that “there are certain stories that simply cannot be told in a realistic manner,” for “they need an element of the absurd, the illogical, to arrive at a deeper understanding” (Paola 19). Thus, through magical realism’s departure from reality, the novel’s composibility of “emotional” truths—truths that cannot be seen nor even perfectly expressed, just like almost all other truths, through language—and “deeper understanding”—again, something that cannot be gained through a simple conveyance of a truth—increases. Certainly, Rushdie could have left out the elements of magical realism, but then how would he have exposed the struggles within India after independence? How would Rushdie have alternatively voiced that which was, as Rushdie himself terms, “officially taboo?” (Reula and Rushdie 94).

But utilizing magical realism to euphemistically expose historical issues or to reveal deeper meaning is not this genre’s only function. According to Tamara Sellman, those who better understand magical realism “will begin to master the idea that there really are *many* truths out there, not only one, and that it is better to question assumed reality than it is to conform, if you're interested in knowing what's really real” (Paola 19, emphasis added). As such, magical realism unlocks a multiplicity of truths. In other words, the composibility of truths becomes much greater. Perhaps these truths do not possess the accuracy of fact and reality, but they *do* still apply to reality and so cannot be entirely dissociated from it. In fact, because of the
compossibility of multiple truths, we come to discover a simultaneous compossibility of multiple realities. But Rushdie, by openly exposing Saleem’s fallibilities in regards to accuracy as a narrator, emphasizes that the multiple realities are only fragments of a whole. Returning to the metaphor of the container or pickle jar, though Saleem’s memory is a locus—a pickle jar—containing a multiplicity of truths and of meanings, those truths and meanings still make up one pickle jar.

When we choose to only focus on one ingredient or just one bite out of the whole pickle jar, then we are choosing to look through only one hole in the perforated sheet. Just as Aadam Aziz fell in love with Saleem’s grandmother in parts, we might fall in love with individual ideas, truths, or meanings, but in doing so, we ignore the whole. Oftentimes, we do fall into this rut of ignoring the whole because the whole is either not so readily available or is not so pleasing as its fragments. In terms of memory serving as a locus for truth in Midnight’s Children, though readers may cling to certain fragmented truths, they may still reject other truths and ultimately will reject the greater “emotional” truths or “deeper understanding” because they do not agree with the means of arriving at the greater truths, such as the disregard for factual accuracy.

But magical realism reveals factual accuracy is not actually an absolute when it comes to truth. Moreover, a lack of accuracy might even be necessary in order to convey certain truths that are more obscure, more convoluted, and more multi-faceted than others. As Sellman claims, “there is the truth that the state sanctions and the truth that a community witnesses, and many times these are not one and the same. In a sense, magical realism has served as a kind of literature of witness; it favors the voice of the little guy, the odd man out, the one who was there even if no one believes what he has to say” (Paola 19). In Midnight’s Children, the “little guy,” the “odd man out,” is Saleem. Because India sanctioned a certain fragmented reality, many have
disregarded the other fragments, such as realities like Saleem’s. But by removing Saleem’s reality from the natural realm and placing it into the realm of magical realism, Saleem’s memory, which normally might be disregarded because of its inaccuracy, gains power in relaying truth. As a result, *Midnight’s Children* questions readers’ preconceived notions of truth by validating memory as a locus of truth. Although supernatural elements are not as often encountered in life outside of *Midnight’s Children*, the truths of memory revealed through the utilization of magical realism still apply outside of the novel. Magical realism may have been the medium to help us realize memory’s veracity, but now that we have de-sutured memory as a locus of truth from the condition of factual truth, we can see past the perforated sheet. We may not love what we see, but now we finally have found *real* truth, *deeper* truth.


