

“National and Personal Identity in Literature”

In his novel *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie explores themes of identity and nationality by binding his protagonist, Saleem Sinai, to his country through his timely birth at India's first moment of freedom from British rule. Rushdie makes a point of communicating Saleem's identity through extremely sensorial prose: specifically focusing on his inhumanly powerful nose. His nose is representative of a special sixth sense that Saleem possesses, which links him to every other child in India who was born in that midnight hour, and creates a deep association between him and his country – both its past and its present.

Similarly, James Baldwin discusses identity in relation to nationalism while honing in on racial disparity in America. In his essay *Many Thousands Gone*, Baldwin dissects the American identity, arguing that “The story of the N***** in America is the story of America – or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans” (Baldwin, 32). Baldwin references the fact that America as a country is built on the slave-master dynamics, which rely upon each other. In other words, he argues that American identities between races are inextricably bound up in each other; “the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his” (Baldwin, 33). Even more exhaustively, they are bound up in the history of the nation.

Baldwin's diction takes on a unique perspective in *Many Thousands Gone* which removes him from himself and his experiences only literally, and allows him to voice and thus expose the systematic white America from an interior standpoint, as “we”. As a result, the black American becomes “him”, rather than “I” – an angle which seems to be deliberately lacking in *Many*

Thousands Gone: “he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he—for the most part—eat at our tables or live in our houses” (Baldwin, 33). Baldwin assigns the essay’s protagonist as the (primarily) white American “we”, stressing the country’s collective perpetuation of conduct that has become routine; even ingrained in *our* identity. This all is *our* doing.

Baldwin includes himself in this collective, as an American, speaking as “we” – and admitting that subconsciously he, too, participates in this perpetuation.

The fusion of personal and national identity is discussed on a global scale in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, which follows a couple whose natural attraction towards each other evolves into a codependent relationship shaped by disorder. Hamid makes blatant commentary on immigration, primarily in permitting his characters to travel internationally in an ungovernable manner and pace, through magical doors. This causes affected countries to police the surroundings of these doors, and ultimately forces them to reassess their laws regarding immigration. The lack of control that is an integral feature of *Exit West*’s magical doors is double edged: prospective immigrants and their allies don’t know where these doors lead to, or when they pop up. And so Hamid’s protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, end up living in various locations after having escaped their home country as it sinks into chaos.

Initially kept apart by politics, then pushed together by circumstance, familiarity holds the two to their commitment to each other as best it can. Saeed and Nadia settle into new lives in new locations to discover that the one thing they have in common, their origin, is not a substantial enough component of their identities to keep them together: for them, nationality only has so strong a voice.

Further analysis resolves that Hamid only downplays the impression of nationality to suggest that one is not defined by their origins. However, on impact this contradicts Baldwin's assertions, which insist on the embeddedness of the American identity – its artificiality, its simultaneous difference and similitude between its inheritors, and most applicably, its givenness. In his essay *Equal in Paris*, Baldwin reports on the variances between American and European racial prejudice. He explains that in Paris he was treated with politeness, but not with care. Being that the bar in America is set as low as violence, this difference appears positive – but it becomes clear as the essay progresses that this is a sort of facade; the French are “no better or worse than their American counterparts” (Baldwin, 117).

What makes the French's polite and subtle prejudice most uncomfortable for Baldwin is that he “did not know what they saw when they looked at me” (Baldwin, 117). *Equal in Paris* avows the notion of “given identity” – something that, despite its discriminatory nature, supplies Baldwin with the very weapons he needs to defend himself against it. He explains, “I had become very accomplished in New York at guessing and, therefore, to a limited extent manipulating to my advantage the reactions of the white world” (Baldwin, 116). He recognizes predictability in the face of familiar prejudice, however better or worse it may be than another kind. Baldwin has made himself at home in the part he's been assigned. “But this was not New York” (Baldwin, 116), he laments.

Midnight's Children's Saleem Sinai has been assigned an identity, too. The Indian government forecasted a uniquely gifted child to be born within India's first hour of freedom. Certain that she was pregnant with this “Midnight's Child” and validated by prophecy, Saleem's mother raises her culturally significant son (in a house ironically titled “Buckingham Villa”) with great expectations – seemingly under the watch of all of India:

“Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

‘Dear Baby Saleem...You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own’” (Rushdie, 139).

Saleem’s personal identity is tethered directly to that of his country. He *is* his own person, though, with his own history – as displayed by his nose which, like his grandfather’s, smells danger. Saleem cannot be truly seen, undiluted, by anyone – not even himself. This is because, just like and yet separate from everyone else, Saleem is a body generations in the making. He is a result of innumerable occurrences, and decisions made long before his birth:

“my inheritance began to form...the long sufferings of my great-grandmother which would become the forbearance of my own mother...my great-grandfather’s gift of conversing with birds which would descend through meandering bloodlines into the veins of my sister...the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segments” (Rushdie, 119).

Saleem is more than his family, though. He has “the mythical golden teeth of the boatman Tai” (Rushdie, 119), his grandfather’s once-acquaintance. He’s made of his grandmother’s bitterness, and the crescent-shaped knives which killed pro-Indian politician Mian Abdullah – “fatal moons echoed by my mother’s love-name for me, her innocent chand-ka-tukra, her affectionate piece-of-the...” (Rushdie, 120). He is also the result of a rickshaw-puller named Rashid, and a poet named Nadir – and his forbidden love for Saleem’s mother. “How many things people notions we bring with us...to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world” (Rushdie, 121).

In unfamiliar spaces, Baldwin, Saeed and Nadia are pushed to confront themselves on a more deeply personal level – one which forgets origin itself but bears in mind its effects. Sure, they are their nations, but they are so much more than that. Rushdie drives in the point that one life is many moments, many places, many other lives that were lived long before it. In doing so, he exposes intersectionality at such a grand scale, which extends beyond what any one person can grasp – and renders any one's audacious belief that they could possibly know another's identity well enough to write it for them completely invalid.

Works Cited

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