

# David Anderson: 'Novel-seeming goods': RE-READING SALMAN RUSHDIE'S 'MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN' AND PATRICK SÜSKIND'S 'DAS PARFUM' 40 YEARS LATER

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ZfL

20/06/2022

In a 1984 essay, the American critic Fredric Jameson famously diagnosed postmodernism to be 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. Among its distinguishing features was a new mode of 'aesthetic populism' grounded in an

effacement [...] of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very Culture Industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern.[1]

A new alignment between the twin spheres of culture and the marketplace meant that 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally'. Wherever one looked, one saw 'the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater waves of turnover' (Jameson, p. 56).

This remark about 'novel-seeming goods' becomes particularly stimulating when the subjects of the discussion are, or at least seem to be, novels. Using the examples of E.L. Doctorow's American historical novels *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975) and *Loon Lake* (1980), Jameson argues that in 'a society bereft of all historicity', 'what *used to be* the historical novel' (my emphasis) 'can no longer set out to represent the historical past' (Jameson, p. 66, 68, 71). The 'postmodern fate' of the historical novel is to be forced to come to terms with 'a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach' (Jameson, p. 68, 71).

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum. Die Geschichte eines Mörders* (1984) stand out as two hugely successful novels from this period that raise questions about historical representation within the space of the popular. They might therefore be used as test cases for Jameson's concerns. *Midnight's Children* is a sprawling story of Indian and British imperial and post-imperial history across the twentieth century. *Das Parfum* tells the tightly framed tale of a murderous perfumer in eighteenth-century France. Seemingly very different texts, they bear one curious similarity: both feature a protagonist with an unusually sensitive sense of smell.

The oversized nose of Rushdie's hero Saleem Sinai descends from a literary tradition that takes in works like *Tristram Shandy* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Within the text it serves to link him to a grandfather, Aadam Aziz, to whom he turns out not to be related, having been swapped at birth by a Portuguese nurse named Mary in a parody of the Christian

story. Saleem is born at the precise moment of India's independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947; his confused parentage makes him more a child of 'history' than of his putative parents, and the coincidence of his birthday sees him invested with bizarre magical powers. His nose becomes the 'All-India Radio' that allows him to communicate telepathically with the other 'Midnight's Children', each of whom is themselves endowed with different powers. His picaresque travels through post-independence and later post-partition India – akin to the German odyssey of Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel*, which Rushdie named as a direct influence – include a period in which he works as a human sniffer-dog in the Pakistani army, and culminate in him finding employment at a pickle factory. In the narrative present he writes out his story and reads it to his illiterate partner Padma. The chapters of the text are imagined as distinctive pickles, each with its own particular flavour and nostalgic nuance; the pages emit 'the unmistakable whiff of chutney'. [2]

Patrick Süskind's villain Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is born into the picturesque filth of pre-revolutionary Paris. Like Rushdie, Süskind provides an exact date – 17<sup>th</sup> July 1738 – yet he explains away the fictionality of his creation by virtue of Grenouille's engagement with 'das flüchtige Reich der Gerüche'. [3] Orphaned after the execution of his negligent mother, Grenouille is raised as a social outcast before making his way through a parody of the developmental stages of the *Bildungsroman*. Failing to exhibit any real *development* aside from becoming technically proficient at the task of manufacturing perfumes, he finally settles down in the perfume-making capital of Grasse. There, he commences a psychopathic killing spree, murdering young girls in order to create a perfect scent from their corpses. Each of these is left 'kahlrasiert und blendend weiss' (Süskind, p. 281) after Grenouille finishes soaking up their aura through a process known as 'enfleurage', which is described in detail. The resulting product is of such power that it enables him to turn public opinion at his eventual trial, which results not only in his acquittal but also provokes a mass orgy among the townspeople of Grasse. They never speak of this event again, 'da sie sich später allesamt schämten, überhaupt daran beteiligt gewesen zu sein' (Süskind, p. 299).

Both novels were critically and commercially successful: *Midnight's Children* went on to win the Booker of Bookers; *Das Parfum* was the first German novel to make a profit in the US since *The Tin Drum*. Their use of scent as a key motif alludes to the vagaries of memory and nostalgia. Both texts dwell on the capacity of a specific aroma to impress the senses and evoke a precise constellation of remembered feelings. This might also be understood in relation to Rushdie and Süskind's interest in how their novels would be consumed and digested by readers: an awareness of the text as a 'product' that matches the prominence of manufacturing processes – whether of chutneys or perfumes – within each narrative. Finally, the motif of scent cuts through the postmodernist debate on depth and surface in a provocative way. Is smell, after all, the key to a deeper essence, or is it merely a seductive coating that gestures at a profundity it never incorporates?

In keeping with this tension, each text fuses tropes from popular culture – Bollywood cinema in *Midnight's Children*; the crime novel in *Das Parfum* – with more 'serious' themes, risking the charge of frivolousness as they attempt to shape the historical novel's

'postmodern fate'. Working within a basically comic framework, Rushdie gives his readers in Britain a glimpse of the bleak realities of the British Empire: specific moments such as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, as well as the wider atmospherics of a land peppered by the 'roseate palaces built by pink-skinned conquerors long ago' (Rushdie, p. 388). Meanwhile, the closing scenes of *Das Parfum* rehearse 'ein bekanntes Stück auf überraschend neue Weise' (as Süskind describes the theatrical character of Grenouille's trial), revealing the text to be an allegory of German fascism. The description of scent as 'Aura' even suggests a subtle interaction with Walter Benjamin's *Kunstwerk* essay and a nuanced internal discussion of the ability of art and the aesthetic to lead an ingenuous public astray (Süskind, p. 298).

The differences between the two texts are also instructive. Next to the sheer chaos of *Midnight's Children*, the sense of *Das Parfum's* narrative closedness stands out. As a historical fable dressed as a period piece that simply evaporates into the fleeting realm of scent, it matches the chamber piece feel of Süskind's other writing (the one-act play *Der Kontrabass* from 1981, or the 1988 novella *Die Taube*, for example). The hybridity of Rushdie's text, by contrast, where the 'MCC' is the 'Midnight's Children Conference' and 'Marylebone Cricket Club', where Saleem's putative grandfather Aadam Aziz is also 'Dr Aziz' of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), reveals a complex set of conjunctions concerning imperial history and cultural traditions, addressed at a level of prominence not to be found in either Germany at this time. At the same time, the presence of Alec Guinness in blackface in David Lean's 1984 cinema adaptation of *A Passage to India* points to the uneasy position of imperial narratives within British culture, something which Rushdie also makes clear in his essays of the period (like 1982's 'The New Empire Within Britain').

For Fredric Jameson, postmodernism came in tandem with 'an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that' (Jameson, p. 53). In part by placing the emphasis on 'senses' – that is, the sense of smell – *Midnight's Children* and *Das Parfum* each represent an 'end' in strikingly similar ways. The protagonists Saleem Sinai and Jean-Baptiste Grenouille are each rendered as individuals overcome by the masses. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem is haunted by perpetual anxiety about his ability to act as a vehicle for all of India. Writing in his 'pool of anglepoised light', Saleem constantly fears breaking apart under the pressures placed on his body by the 'crowd' pouring through him as he becomes his nation's consciousness. The 'cracks' that appear on his body 'widen within' as he is transformed into 'Six-hundred million specks of dust, all transparent, invisible as glass' (Rushdie, p. 535). In the closing pages of *Das Parfum*, Grenouille slips back to Paris, where he douses himself in his perfume and is consumed by a rabble at the site of his birth. Having mastered the crowd in Grasse, he has nothing left to prove and allows himself to be destroyed by its Parisian analogue. In each case, the tension between the individual and the mass is resolved in the bodily fragmentation of the artist-protagonist. Yet if this appears to represent the impossibility of a compromise between the one and the many, the texts themselves successfully navigate Jameson's 'frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture' while still retaining a complex approach to 'historicity'. As literary novels in a marketplace saturated

by 'novel-seeming goods', they suggest ways in which the space of the popular can form a basis for meaningful interrogation of history and tradition, moving between levity and seriousness while raising difficult questions about historical reckoning and representation.

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[1] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* I, 146 (July/August 1984), p. 54.

[2] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 24.

[3] Patrick Süskind, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1985), p. 5.

VORGESCHLAGENE ZITIERWEISE: David Anderson: 'Novel-seeming goods': Re-reading Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and Patrick Süskind's 'Das Parfum' 40 years later, in: ZfL BLOG, 20.6.2022, [<https://www.zflprojekte.de/zfl-blog/2022/06/20/david-anderson-novel-seeming-goods-re-reading-salman-rushdies-midnights-children-and-patrick-sueskinds-das-parfum-40/>].

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13151/zfl-blog/20220620-01>