Activity 4 - Speaking to / speaking for the nation

You've been asked to think a lot about the way that we might read *Midnight's Children* as a political text – as a book that has something to say about the real world through the fictions it constructs. Have a look at the critical quotations about the novel on the back of the edition you're reading. You may well find a *New York Times* writer praising Rushdie in these terms:

> The literary map of India has to be redrawn … *Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice.

This is an interesting comment to read in the light of the ideas in activity three; the *NYT* reviewer clearly feels that the fictional portrayal of India in Rushdie's novel contributes to that process of imaginative nation-building which Anderson identified. But there's a problem. Can you think what it might be?

The *New York Times* review attracted sharp criticism from Indian literary critic and theorist Aijaz Ahmad, who reminded readers in 1987 that English is not the only literary language:

> Major literary traditions … remain, beyond a few texts here and there, virtually unknown to the American [and British] literary theorist. Consequently, the few writers who happen to write in English are valorised beyond measure. Witness, for example, the characterisation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the *New York Times* as 'a Continent finding its voice'—as if one has no voice if one does not speak in English. Or, Richard Poirier's praise for Edward Said in *Raritan Quarterly* which now adorns the back cover of his latest book: 'It is Said's great accomplishment that thanks to his book, Palestinians will never be lost to history.'

India's political independence from British colonial rule is only one step in a very long and complicated process of gaining cultural independence – a process which is made more difficult by the widespread (though often very subtly communicated) assumption that the old colonial powers are still the 'centre' of the global community, and that the previously colonized nations are somewhere out at the margins. As Ahmad points out, both the reviewers he quotes imply that 'history' is something that takes place in English, which means that non-Anglophone writers from previously colonized societies are simply left out of the conversation. It is *English* literature which defines a nation, however many thousands of texts in other languages that nation might produce each year.

Rushdie reflects on the experience of speaking English in his Pakistan novel, *Shame*:

> *Outsider! Trespasser! … Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?*

Of course, English is one of India's official languages; there are, David Crystal claimed in 2000, as many English-speakers in India as there are in England. Crystal goes on:

> a language which has come to be spoken by so many people has ceased to be the exclusive property of any of its constituent communities. Nobody "owns" English now – not the British, with whom the language began 1500 years ago, nor the Americans, who now comprise its largest mother-tongue community.

> Everyone has a share in the future of English, first-, second-, and foreign-language speakers alike.

And yet, as the quotation from *Shame* above indicates, English in India is still loaded down with the associations of colonialism. Indians like Salman Rushdie who grew up in the immediate aftermath of independence and thus lived through the post-colonial period speaking, writing and thinking in English often have a fraught relationship with their language – a sense of conflicted identity. Raja Rao was another Indian writer who wrote in English, and in a 1963 preface to one of his novels he said this:

> The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.

In activity two we looked at some of the ways that Rushdie makes his prose sound characteristically Indian. But although Saleem believes himself to be 'handcuffed to history', and in spite of all the ways that the characters in *Midnight's Children* are shaped and defined by the time and place they are living through, I don't think Rushdie was aiming to be the 'voice' of the Indian subcontinent as the *New York Times* reviewer suggests. The novel is too insistent on the impossible variety of Indian life and experience for that. And, don't forget, as Saleem's claims about his role in the development of his country become increasingly, tragically, absurd, they are undermined by the fact that he keeps getting things wrong:

> I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. … Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my times?

Midnight's Children might trace the life of India from the moment of independence, but it does so from a single person's perspective. And Saleem's pickle-jar metaphor allows Rushdie to give a warning about the way that fiction, history and politics get written:

> In the spice bases, I reconcile myself to the inevitable distortions of the pickling process. To pickle is to give immortality, after all: … a certain alternation, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it shape and form – that is to say, meaning.

It's a warning to the reader – and one which the *New York Times* reviewer (and the editors who continue to print his or her assessment on the back cover of the novel) seems to have missed. Fiction isn't history—but history *is* fiction. And the fictions we tell and get told about our histories are deeply politically significant. As Saleem puts it,

> Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its

> heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.

As readers we are affected by the politics and economics of book publishing in all sorts of interesting ways. Just consider the different front covers of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* if you search on Amazon: they're all identical inside, so which version would you pick to take to your first university seminar? Or to the beach?

Publishers always have a certain audience in mind when they decide upon a book jacket design; you can tell easily from this example the kind of message about a book that the publisher wants to communicate. But several commentators recently have pointed out that, as consumers, we are being told a certain story about international literature in English. For example, in a blog post at www.africasacountry.com, Elliot Ross lamented that Chimamanda Adichie's new novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* had been packaged in a way that highlighted Adichie's status as an African writer, rather than with any reference to the content of the novel itself:

> Like so many (wildly varying) writers on Africa, Chimamanda Adichie gets the acacia tree sunset treatment. Whether Wilbur Smith or Wole Soyinka, Rider Haggard or Bessie Head, apparently you get the same cover imagery.... In short, the covers of most novels 'about Africa' seem to have been designed by someone whose principal idea of the continent comes from *The Lion King*.

That *New York Times* reviewer looked at *Midnight's Children* through the lens of Rushdie's Indian heritage, and Adichie, as Ross points out, is presented as 'African' above all. Is this just unimaginative graphic design, or is there something more complicated going on – something to which, as readers, we ought to pay more attention?

Questions:

- Does it matter that British writers in English aren't subject to the same expectations – aren't usually assumed to 'speak for' their country in the same way – as writers in English from elsewhere seem to be? Should it, and/or does it, change the way that you read *Midnight's Children*?
- Why write political fiction? How influential can writers hope to be, or what sort of an influence can they hope to have? (Is there any such thing as apolitical fiction?)