Salman Rushdie’s award winning novel ‘Midnight’s Children’ begins with the confession that the narrator, Saleem Sinai, was born in Bombay, not just once upon a time, as many fables would have it, but at the stroke of midnight on Aug. 15, 1947, the moment of India’s independence from British imperial rule. The date is significant to millions because it represents the end of nearly 200 years of British oppression on the Indian subcontinent.

In one of the opening events for the Midnight’s Children Humanities Festival, a series of public dialogues and discussions to give context to the play and celebrate the marriage of arts and ideas, Nicholas Dirks, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History and chair of the anthropology department, offered historical background for Midnight’s Children.

Dirks addressed the atrocities of British imperial rule that ultimately led to the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan. Knowing the complicated history of India’s struggle for independence helps to offer insight into the way Saleem views the world around him.

Dirks’ interest in India began in the 1600s when the East Indian Company established trading stations in Surat, Bombay and Calcutta, using the colony to import spices, silk and cotton and to export textiles. By 1757, the British empire in India began. In response, a tide of nationalism began to rise in the 19th century and a series of protests ensued. After the Great Rebellion of 1857, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation permitting religious toleration and ceasing further annexation.

In 1919, a group of Indians staged the biggest and most violent anti-British protest since the Great Rebellion. Protests were sparked by the combination of post-World War I grievances, growing nationalist sentiment, a developing belief that Mahatma Gandhi could provide leadership and reactions to brutal repression imposed by the British, especially in the Punjab region.

On Apr. 11, 1919, General Reginald Dyer, the lieutenant governor of Punjab, declared martial law. Two days later, a peaceful, unarmed crowd of villagers gathered, unaware of the ban of meetings. Dyer’s troops opened fire on the crowd, resulting in 1,500 casualties, many of them women and children. This incident propelled the nationalist movement in India, while the British hailed Dyer as a hero for defending Britain’s imperialism in the East.

Despite the tremendous use of force against his followers, Gandhi continued to promote the non-violent, non-cooperation movement and began to recruit Muslim support. Over the next year, Gandhi organized a series of strikes throughout the country. Britain responded with more repression. In Nov. 1921, Britain outlawed all voluntary organizations, imposed restrictions on the press and imprisoned 30,000 Indians.

When an outbreak of peasant violence occurred in February 1922, killing 23 policemen, Gandhi called the effort off, fearing that his followers were not ready for the final stages of a movement that depended on peace as a means to an end. Gandhi reorganized in 1942 to start the Quit India Revolt, a non-violent campaign of mass struggle and resistance. The strategy soon took the form of guerilla warfare—500 post offices, 250 railway stations and 150 police stations were destroyed or damaged, trains were derailed and courts were attacked. British police and troops responded by taking hostages, imposing fines, setting villages on fire and staging public whippings. “Colonial panic” set in and by the end of the year, nearly 100,000 Indians had been arrested.

The combination of nationalist mobilization, exhaustion and depletion from World War II finally brought the British to consider “quit India.” In June 1945, the British convened the Simla Conference in the foothills of the Himalayas, to consider post-colonial development of India. Although the representatives agreed that there needed to be parity between Hindus and Muslims, the partition broke down without resolution.

Under pressure from more strikes, in 1946 the British government allowed an interim, independent “Indian” government to be established. Though there was still no formal talk of partition, the British proposed a loose confederation with three parts, of which two were Muslim-controlled.

On Aug. 16, 1946, violence broke out between the Hindus and Muslims with unprecedented communal riots in Calcutta, Bombay and Noakhali. With the growing violence, the British began to plan their departure, setting June 30, 1948, as the date for withdrawal from India.

In early March 1947 the Muslim League brought down the Coalition government in Punjab and renewed its claim to form the government in the province that was seen as the cornerstone of the Pakistan proposal. In June 1947 it was decided that Pakistan would split off from India. In July, 1947, British officials were given one month to draw the borders between India and Pakistan and the rush to independence became the rush toward partition, according to Dirks.

As hundreds of thousands were on the move to return “home,” the violence again increased. Nearly a million people were killed and five million fled their homes. Borders closed and early beliefs of freedom of movement and joint citizenship were abandoned.

Had the British been prepared to work toward a transfer of power before the combination of World War II and overwhelming nationalist resistance brought them to their knees, Dirks said that they may not only have avoided the tragedies associated with partition, but have been able to play a very different role in the transition.

“Instead, the end turned as nasty as the beginning—with all its corruption, scandal, violence and disruption—had been 200 years before,” said Dirks. These problems, Dirks added, are carried by Saleem throughout his story, “Midnight’s Children.” Burdening him with “the weight of too much history.”

Saleem Sinai’s retrospective view of history suggests that history’s multiple determinations and accidents led to failures of imagination but of the dream of freedom itself. In some ways all midnight’s children were fathered and mothered by history,” said Dirks.

Experts Discuss Religion’s Ties to Politics in Middle East and South Asia

In one of three symposia on “Contemporary Culture,” experts discussed the inevitable ties that religion has to politics in the Middle East and South Asia. From left: Amaney Jamal, assistant professor of political science, and Rachel McDermott, associate professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard, talk with moderator Peter Awn, dean of the school of General Studies. Other topics in “Contemporary Culture” explored by the Midnight’s Children Humanities Festival included “Bombay—The Power of Place and the Idea of the City” and “India and Pakistan: Culture and Society.”