

RUPTURED NATURE OF FREEDOM: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature generally refers to literature written both during the colonial and decolonized period. Strictly speaking, the term is more relevant to those text which came from erstwhile colonies. But unfortunately, this literature particularly the fiction produced shortly before the stroke of freedom or after—such novels as Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, or J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* or Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and near home, partition fiction, more particular, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* project ruptured nature of freedom. It is in so far, man is immersed in historical situation, he does not even succeed in conceiving of the failures in a political organisation; this is not as simply said, that he is accustomed to these failures, but because he apprehends freedom in its plenitude, in its fullness and because he cannot even imagine that he can exist otherwise, in its vicinity, in its lack.

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Postcolonial literature generally refers to literature written both during the colonial and decolonized period. Strictly speaking, the term is more relevant to those text which came from erstwhile colonies. But unfortunately, this literature particularly the fiction produced shortly before the stroke of freedom or after—such novels as Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, or J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* or Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and near home, partition fiction, more particular, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* project ruptured nature of freedom. It is in so far, man is immersed in historical situation, he does not even succeed in conceiving of the failures in a political organisation; this is not as simply said, that he is accustomed to these failures, but because he apprehends freedom in its plenitude, in its fullness and because he cannot even imagine that he can exist otherwise, in its vicinity, in its lack. The present paper is an attempt to underscore the existential/post structural, and within it deconstructive view of freedom. Freedom is identical with existence. Hence, it has no essence, indeed it precedes essence. Human-reality is free because it is not enough. It is free because, as Jean-Paul Sartre, put it, is perpetually wretched away from itself and because it has been separated by a nothingness from what it is to what it will be. Indian struggle for freedom in all to manifestations—and their failures and successes—issued from nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of Indians—individuals or masses—and which forced reality to make itself instead to be, i.e. to choose oneself.

Freedom is thus an intolerable necessity. One may disguise it in bad faith, but it is not a

being but the being of man. Being and being free are one and the same. Freedom as a hole in the heart. We at the stroke of midnight August 15, 1947, took India's independence as full and complete in itself, not Rushdie. He thus introduced the play in what others took seriously. And that is what makes Rushdie's narrative in *Midnight's Children* art as contrasted with history and life. The desire to play is fundamentally to be free, as Derrida also would say, from the desire to possess the present, the give, as if it were something metaphysical. The play, the comic, even the fantastic and far-fetchedly imaginative that Rushdie indulges in has a purpose to serve. In order to imagine consciousness of Rushdie, one must be free from the specific reality of India's freedom, before and after and this freedom from the specific reality must be able to define itself as a being-in-the-world is at one the constitution and the negation of that reality. For example, Salim says jocularly about his birth:

...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clocks hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world... (*Midnight's Children*, 3)

So, if he thus was hand-cuffed, as he says, with history, thrown or tumbled into the world, as he puts it, his birth is yet constituted of the negation and his freedom. It is because negation is occasioned by freedom. First, the bed sheet he was born on had roughly a circular hole some seven inches of decimetre into the centre, he could fantastically measure, clutching at the dream of that hole, and secondly, he was exchanged with Shiva, thanks to the tiny distraught nurse at the Narlikar hospital—Salim, a Hindu boy was exchanged with a Muslim child, Shiva. But this exchange is only metonymic of the larger exchange of Muslims and Hindus across the border both in the east and the west, following the rupture of India—with the birth of Pakistan which later lost its eastern wing to become Bangladesh. Freedom is the first condition of action and an action on principle is intentional. Consciousness, as Sartre says, is the consciousness of something. No factual state, as for example, the creation of Pakistan could determine consciousness to apprehend as negation, as a lack, because consciousness is not which it is, and is what it is not. Could the leaders of freedom struggles suppose that the two-nation theory would become a reality, and Jinnah would turn a *Volte face*, to become the architect of the new state of Pakistan. That Muslims have suffered or will suffer in the united India that become the motive for staking his claim; quite the contrary, after he has formed the project of changing the situation that one nation theory appeared intolerable to him. This even he did not, this is also what Hegel said that mind is the negative. It is itself freedom and freedom have no essence. Its existence precedes and commands essence. Saleem, like other midnight's children is freedom incarnate, and like them, he, his son who will not be his son, and they will both be masters and victims of their time endlessly. They will be trampled as had Saleem's own generation. They too will have to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of multitudes and unable to live and die in peace. As the novel ends on the note:

...Until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating

whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (MC, 647)

This is the last sentence of *Midnight's Children*. Thus, the beginning and the end of the novel affirms that man is condemned to freedom, to borrow the phrase from Sartre, for we cannot reach its essence. The very use of the term 'freedom' is dangerous if it is to imply that the word refers to the concept as according to Saussure, all words ordinarily do. Derrida also says in the opening sentence of his essay "Differance", it is neither a word, nor a concept, for to differ is to defer. Man is both his factuality and his transcendence at the same time. Saleem is at once different from what he is and is different from what he is to be. In both, there is lack of Identity. Does he know who he is—a Hindu child thrown into the lap of a Muslim mother. There is a hole in his identity not only at his so-called birth, in the sheet of his bed, but also in the sheet through which his grandfather examined the pulse of his grandmother. Slightly before meeting his wife—to be Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, hit his nose against frost-hardened earth while attempting to pray. He decided henceforth never again to kiss earth for any God or man. This decision, as Rushdie writes, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history.

Thus, nothingness is this hole in being. Its vacuity of what one considers to be a complete self, a complete identity. But it alone happens with being, Aadam Aziz for one had come to the Kashmir Valley after his medical studies in Germany. He has been absent from the valley for five years. Now, returning he saw the place altered. Instead of the beauty of the tiny valley, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon and felt sad. Many years later, when the hole inside him—the hole caused by the altered prospect of the place—had been clogged up with hate, he would recall his childhood spring in Paradise before military tanks messed everything up. Human reality by which lack appears in the world must itself be a lack—a desire, a question, a doubt. Without the consciousness of something lacking, something missing, Rushdie thinks we are *de trop*, i.e., existence itself is superfluous, contingency and unjustifiable. It is absurd in the sense that there is no reason for its being, no outside purpose to give its meaning, no direction.

Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm. It nihilates the absurdity of existence. It is part of everyday life, deconstructing our placid existence, as it does that of Aadam Aziz. It is not that after deciding not to bow before God or man, Aziz accepted his nothingness and freedom. He soon after was invaded by anguish, which inevitably accompanies freedom and nothingness. But in bad faith, he tries to reunite his being what it is with non-being what it to be, i.e. what he has become after his rupture with his earlier self. For Rushdie, following Sartre, it is an impossibility which only God can arrive at, not human beings who are abandoned to surpass their Ego, except in bad faith. This abandonment is still our salvation, for acceptance of our absolute freedom is the only existence commensurate with an honest desire to exist fully as man. But the recognition comes not in ecstasy of a mystic but in anguish. It is not a merging with the higher power but a realisation of one's isolation, not a vision of eternity but a perception that one is wholly a process, the making of a self in which one cannot be united, one can never possess.

Midnight's Children, as we go through its 650 odd pages, we read the same tale told, that there is a hole what is the consciousness. While Aziz is caught in a dilemma between belief and disbelief, Saleem steers clear of the trap.

What leaked into me from Aadam Aziz: a certain vulnerability to women, but also its cause, the hole at the centre of himself caused by his (which is also my) failure to believe or disbelieve in God. And something else as well—something which, at the age of eleven, I saw before anyone else noticed. My grandmother had begun to crack. (MC 382)

Aziz could not wholly disbelieve, but he also could not wholly believe. Hence, he suffered alternation—a hole. His mother also suffered the same dilemma. After the heart stroke of her husband while Saleem was away in Germany, she handled the gem business in purdah. The story of the novel itself suffers from a hole as it moves back and forth—and chronologically. Going back to Aziz's first encounter with his patient, we learn that his first patient happened to be a female whose pulse, as we noted earlier, he examined through a hole in the sheet hung to separate the patient and the doctor, and that too in the presence of the women wrenchers. He was told that the land owner's daughter suffered from stomach-ache. The hole in the sheet is the nihilation of being from in-itself to for-in-itself—to be other than what one is—but it can paradoxically not have to be, i.e., not to be appropriative. That is the difference between being and having. It is true that desire is lack and lack is freedom and that fundamentally man is desire to be, but it cannot be reduced to having, which Aziz did by marrying his patient.

This happened with postcolonial literature that desire for lack of being—one who staked everything for the sake of freedom—was reduced to having. Our leaders on both sides of the divide tried to grab freedom. It may happen in research in sciences, or sports or aesthetic creative arts yet in these fields, in creating a picture, a drama, a melody, doing is not reducible to having. In desiring to have—positions and pelf, postcolonial rulers lost their freedom. The starkest example, that Rushdie saw in postcolonial India, was the imposition of Emergency, under the slogan Indira is India and India is Indira. This desire for appropriation, of assimilation, destroys its objects. Be it Nigeria or India, people are the victims of this postcolonial hunt; over the decades it has become the desire for devouring. But politics is perhaps not the *leit motif* of the novel as is Rushdie's repudiation of those who took freedom with the spirit of seriousness. The trouble with the spirit of seriousness is that it takes values as transcendent given independently of human subjectivity. India's Independence when taken seriously betrayed its nothingness as Nehru eloquently spoke in the Parliament at the same time when one thousand children were born in the war-hour of midnight, followed by the holocaust of partition. It did not end here; two wars were fought by India and Pakistan, besides the war for the creation of Bangladesh. This also did not end the bad blood daily created over Kashmir. What our serious-minded leaders thought our freedom phenomenal—a phenomenon in its plenitude, complete in itself and once for all Rushdie with his playful retrospection could see its trans-phenomenality. Our leaders could not realise their possibilities. This is despite the fact that as Rushdie says the Prime Minister of India went nowhere without her personal astrologer. She had no view of history, that it is always yet to be, always in the future. Saleem with his nose could smell the scent of danger to her person, so self-assured as she has been.

The central concern of the novel is to plead not for ego lessness in the relation with time, for all time is unprivileged, as also for the relation with others, but for the awareness that consciousness is nothingness, for it is never wholly determined by the past. Why should then Indira Gandhi equate herself with the country? With his tongue in cheek, Saleem says that motive behind her declaring

emergency was not due to her fear of Janta Morcha, but to crush the midnight children—children not merely born in the hour of India's Independence, but the whole new generation born in the postcolonial India. And Saleem is right because Janata Party under Jai Prakash Narain was signalled another independence of a nation which had lived through to the tyranny of Sanjay-Maneka squads. It was another phenomenon of freedom of India got in 1947, and of which the mutiny of 1857 is antecedental and so on. There is this no *arche*, no *telos*, neither essence nor resistance of freedom.

The novel does not go beyond it, not beyond what has happened. The future is nothingness, for it is yet to be. Indira Gandhi could not predict that the call for general election would bring her defeat. But we can now understand her confidence, as Saleem does—that it was her sense of freedom from her past. Her freedom puts her past out of play, secreting her own nothingness. This is human comedy which Rushdie enjoyed enacting in his own life, in miniature of all lives of his times. The novel is an allegory, a comic allegory, at that, of an individual and of a nation, looks as it does, before and after independence, however, not pining for which is not. It is because freedom and nothingness discover their own possibles, only on the ground of the possibility of other possibles. *Midnight's Children* ends on this note. For all his desire to write about the future, Saleem confesses that future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty. It cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place. Saleem in his *detour* of Indian history from 1942 to 1977, a virtual pilgrimage, comes to recognize not only the contingency of the world but also that no event however seemingly stable and final, the freedom of India, for example, is wholly fixed.

For Rushdie, freedom of India was a phenomenon which was not exhausted for what it was. On the other hand, it, as we have seen, is transphenomenal. It has revealed a series of new and newer phenomena of the self-same nature, beginning with the freedom of Pakistan. Thus, freedom is not a being. It is the being of man, people, nations, that is to say, their non-being. They exist, that is, as nothing; if were anything, they would not be free. Serious people refuse to recognise this truth—that to be is to choose. They take to refuge in a stable world, but then the world far from being solid is viscous, or slimy. Saleem's grandfather rued the loss of stability in Kashmir when he came from Germany, but the hole in his heart made him see his female patient as a whole through a hole. This hole eventually widened to reveal the woman. He desires to be become, the desires to have, to possess. He got stuck in the slimy by marrying her.

We may be expecting to rehearse of postcolonial clichés about *Midnight's Children*, as for example, Edward Said observed that the novel is a conscious effort to enter the discourse of Europe and the west, to mix with it, transform it, to make it marginalised or suppressed or forgotten histories is of particular interest in Rushdie's work, and in an earlier generation of resistance writing. This contrapuntal reading agrees with Said's hypothesis in *Cultural and Imperialism*. But the novel is much more than the general pattern of imperialism world-wide and historical experience of resistance. It is even less about Indian struggle for freedom and more about freedom *per se*. The two, in fact, coincide. Saleem the historian is himself historical, that is, he historicizes himself by illuminating history in the light of his project and those of the society. Thus, it is necessary to say that the meaning of our social past is perpetually in suspense. By putting the past in jars, in which history is pickled, held in suspense, i.e. partly dead and partly alive, as pickles are, it awaits ratification in the court of posterity to be free, as Sartre said, is to have put one's freedom perpetually on trial.

It is to this end that *Midnight's Children* today and for ever lies in wait for confirmation from the future as per the expectation the leaders and masses of postcolonial India. But this expectation, as Saleem's life reveals—that he has to go to Pakistan with his family, participate in the war of Bangladesh, slip back into Indian territory, the country of his birth, without however proper papers, hides himself in slums, depends on absolute—nothingness, i.e. a free project which does not yet exist. Obviously the past now put in the boxes will be found wanting in relation to our expectations. No novel offers postcolonial Indian-reality so exhaustively in all its phenomenal aspects as *Midnight's Children* does, yet leaving an empty jar to be pickled up, for Saleem believes that history is inexhaustible; it, like everything else, never becomes wholly translucent to consciousness. All phenomena overflow themselves, suggesting other phenomena yet to be disclosed. History being transphenomenal in character, expresses a rupture, as Derrida would say, between what is taken to be fixed but, which indeed is fluid, always on the way.

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