

A POST-COLONIAL READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: A PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Literature transcends everyday world because its producers are above political motivations. Literature reflects the ideological and cultural forces in which the literary text is infused with the cultural and historical context. Salman Rushdie is an Indian-born British writer whose works combining magical realism with historical fiction, is primarily concerned with the many connections, disruptions, and migrations between Eastern and Western civilizations, with much of his fiction being set on the Indian subcontinent. History of the nation in Rushdie's novels is narrated and unfolded through the life of the individual. For Rushdie, human history is like a running text which composes within itself the past as well as the contemporary sources. The present paper discusses the idea that like other postcolonial literatures, Rushdie seems to search for new social order and realities. In *Midnight's Children*, he presents that the world is hybrid and complex, and its common relations are intermingled. To break with the traditional concepts of national identity to that of cultural identity needs to break away with the determining factors of religion, convention and nation.

Keywords: Post-colonial, hybridity, nation, state, ideological situations, cultural differences National identity, identity crisis, Magic Realism, Migration.

Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of radically determined powers of representation. Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writings that reacts to the discourse of colonization. Post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. It is the critical analysis of history, culture, literature and the modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, France, Spain, and other European imperial Powers. Postcolonial literature has focused specially on the Third World countries.

Salman Rushdie is one of the world's most important writers of politicized fiction. It is not hard to establish Salman Rushdie's fame as his novels have sold in millions and been translated into multiple languages. Perhaps most revealing, the name of Salman Rushdie has become so familiar internationally that even those who do not generally read literary fiction have heard of him and know something about the subject concerning which he writes. He is an eminent writer, however, it is harder to establish what it is precisely that he is famous for- his works or the 1989 *Fatwa* controversy. Moreover, *Midnight's Children* (1981) has been greeted not only as a work of startling originality but as one that was destined to become a landmark text in the emergent counter-canon of postcolonial fiction. Postcolonial theory draws upon key ideas and concepts developed in the anti-colonial struggle.

Postcolonial theory focuses on question of race within colonialism, and shows how the optics of race enables colonial powers to represent, reflect, refraction and make visible native cultures in particular ways. It begins with the assumption that colonial writing, arts, legal systems, science and other socio-cultural practices are always racialized and unequal where the colonial does the representation and the native is represented. In postcolonial era, the nation figure is presented in several ways. The nation is a collective that exists primarily in acts of imagination and thinking, a unity that might be more fantasy than reality, but is powerful nevertheless. Moreover the concept of nation is imagined. People from corners of the geographical territory who will never meet or know the rest continue to see the other parts of the territory and their cultures as a component of own nation.

Salman Rushdie writes mostly about politicized fiction. His works which are totally based on fantasy do not interest him. The maximum work written by him deals with actuality. That's why, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, unambiguously turning his back on fantastical, unplaced, in favour of a text that is carefully located in an identifiable geographical place and rooted in a moment in time so specific that it can be pinpointed..

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there is no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. (*Midnight's Children*, 11)

Midnight's Children concerns itself with the story of Saleem Sinai's life and the history of Indian sub-continent. For India, it is the moment at which it won independence from Britain; for Saleem it is the moment of his birth, a fact that ensures that he and this novel "handcuffed to history". The narrative of the novel is told, as Saleem reconstructs the event of his biography for the benefit of a single auditor, Padma, his occasional lover and a worker in the pickle factory to which he has come to end his days. The setting of the novel thus alternates between a fictional present, in which Saleem intervenes authorly to reflect upon the process of writing, and a fictional past, in which Saleem's family saga unfolds against the backdrop of Indian national life. However, it is clear that Saleem will never manage to forge a new totality out of the multitudinous fragments that constitute his history and the history of the nation. At the start of the novel, Saleem may believe that he can assemble the confused mass of stories into a narrative that has meaning. At midnight on 25th of June, the Prime Minister declares a State of Emergency, allowing to arrest her opposition and censor the media. At the same moment, Parvati's son is born, continuing the tradition of grand events of Indian history corresponding to major events in Saleem's life. They lived in the magicians' ghetto when the soldiers broke in and killed most of the people residing there. Saleem was captured by Shiva and taken away to Indira Gandhi's imprisonment. Saleem tells his interrogators about the rest of the midnight's children and all of them undergo the sterilization process which results not only in the loss of their reproductive powers, but also in the loss of their magical powers. Saleem's birth represents the creation of *Midnight's Children*, while his son's birth represents their destruction. While Saleem was born at the time of great optimism and hope for the Indian country, his son was born at the State of Emergency, at the time of despair and chaos. By the novel's conclusion, however, it has become apparent that the fragments cannot be assembled into a meaningful whole, and that Saleem will end up defeated. Whilst Saleem is unsuccessful in his attempt to provide a form both for his life and for the life of post-

independence India. Even though the story of Saleem does lead him to despair, the novel itself is not a despairing one:

The story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self regeneration. The form-multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country– is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can really be called a despairing work. (Imaginary Homelands , 16)

Rushdie's concern in this novel, to fictionalize an experience of recent Indian history suggests that his novel might potentially be considered as a form of historical fiction. Certainly, *Midnight's Children* has elements in it that identify it as a historical text. It brings within its compass a selection of the major events in modern Indian history, including the Amritsar massacre (1919), the Quit India resolution, Indian independence and partition, the Bombay language marches, the indo-Chinese war, the death of Nehru, the indo-Pakistan war, Indira Gandhi's emergency suspension of normal democratic processes and the defeat of Indira Gandhi's Congress party by the newly formed Janata Morcha party in 1977. So now the question is what makes a historical novel historical? It is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force and Saleem sometimes labours under the delusion that he is a shaper of history rather than a subject of history.

The theme of cultural hybridization is the most apparent in the figure of Saleem who is presented as product, quite literally, of the cultural and political confusion that is characteristic of his time. Rushdie's protagonists tend to descend from the two cultural camps that Rushdie feels define their historical and political moment. In this novel, Saleem is the biological child of departing English coloniser and a low-class Hindu; he is raised by Amina and Ahmed, bourgeois Indian Muslims, and he later adopts various father figures, including his uncle Zulfikar, a General in the Pakistani army. Rushdie's protagonist is defined by multiple allegiances, of class, culture and gender, not all of which are certain, and not all of which help to clarify cultural identity. For Rushdie, there is no new coherent form of identity that can be set, once more, in opposition to other coherent forms of identity. Rushdie is of the view that if history creates complexities, let's not try to simplify it. The postmodern scenario compels a writer to search for alternatives, to negotiate a circumstance and readdress history. Rushdie is undoubtedly a postcolonial writer who mostly engages in the concepts of nation and national history, but he is nonetheless a much celebrated writer who advocates the cosmopolitan vision of glocal identity in which the artificial national borders are blurred. History for him is a changing process. Historical truth is not final. History is made by individuals- men and women –collective memory is another form of hegemony. For example ,the central character in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem draws attention to the role of memory in the process of constructing reality by pointing to memory's selecting certain events:

Memory's truth, because 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. (*Midnight's Children* 211)

This novel emphasizes another aspect of individuality which Rushdie struggles for throughout his literary career, that is, history is an individual event rather than a collective memory, and that what is received by us is only one version among many possible versions. By doing so, Rushdie has established for himself a fictional approach to human individuality in which the sense of exile and alienation are not an exterior effect so much as an innate human reactions to loneliness and separation. Narration like regeneration is a symbolic act of life against deadly silence and segregation. The national history is composed of individual events which are themselves occasioned relatively with relation to other events. Therefore, we cannot separate the colonial history of a nation from its postcolonial or pre- colonial era.

Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that the political significance of Rushdie's writing does change from text to text- not only because his subject matter changes but also because his political location changes. Rushdie's main concern to write fiction is to produce a new outlook on the idea of nationhood, cosmopolitanism also allows fresh thinking about national form, about a new homelessness that is also a worldliness, about a double-edged post-colonial responsibility. Postcolonial literature generally refers to literature written both during the colonial and decolonized period. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a cornerstone of postcolonial literature. The novel clearly illustrates these important ideas of postcoloniality, the creation and telling of history, identity, and storytelling. While the novel discusses these important and significant themes, it becomes necessary to discuss the problems associated with formulating and creating a postcolonial identity and history. The novel illustrates the problems of postcoloniality, the difficulties in assigning an origin point, determining one's own history, and finding an authentic identity. Rushdie promotes an anti-Enlightenment historiography that is determined to deconstruct Enlightenment conceptions of cultural coherence and historical progress. Rushdie does this for a number of reasons, but because the Enlightenment pattern of progress was used by 19th century European colonizers to support and justify their conquest of, and attempted assimilation of, other cultures seen as backward or less civilized.

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