

A SYNESTHETIC PORTRAYAL OF POSTCOLONIAL INDIA IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born British American writer, is one of the most influential writers of modern times, who emerged in 1980s with a new form of expression and technical innovation. His 'Booker Prize' winning novel *Midnight's Children* is often associated with different categories of literary fiction, which include postmodern, postcolonial, historical novel and most importantly, magical realism. The article entitled **A Synesthetic Portrayal of Postcolonial India in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*** examines synesthetically the sensitive religious and political issues of Postcolonial India in a discontinuous, fragmented, and even obscure way through the experimental mode of distorted narration.

Keywords: postcolonial India, freedom, religion and partition, fragmentation, Historiographic metafiction.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is a thematically rich work that explores the connections between history and individual experiences, the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism in India, and the themes of fragmentation, migrancy, and memory. It is indeed a fascinating account on India, one of the most captivating countries in the world, and simultaneously it is a tale about the Sinai family, their emotions and their struggles in the face of a tragedy that befell their country.

Synesthesia is a phenomenon that causes sensory crossovers in human mind. As a result, one senses a forthcoming event through his other irrelevant sense. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem inherits the power of sensing others' emotion through his smell sense. Through his distorted sense of memory and the power of telepathy, Saleem narrates the story of postcolonial India. Thus, Synesthesia becomes a powerful tool of Rushdie as well as his character Saleem Sinai to portray the history of Postcolonial India in a vivid manner.

The British Empire ruled over India for almost 350 years due to which the Indian culture and literature were tremendously influenced by the English culture and literature which further gave rise to cultural clashes as an impact of British rule both in India and on the life of the main protagonist in the novel *Midnight's Children*. The novel employs different levels of hybridization, each depending on each other to exist and work within the text, through which the novel illustrates India's emerging postcoloniality and multicultural clashes.

Midnight's Children explores recurring themes such as the interplay between history and individual experiences, and the consequences of migrancy, fragmentation, and memory, while focussing on personal lives. It covers three generations of a family, beginning with the early 20th century and British colonial rule and captures the political turmoil and violence that characterized India's early independence. Through various historical and personal incidents, Rushdie emphasizes the profound link between the individual's memory and the larger historical context. The fragmented memories and migratory patterns of the novel depict the challenges faced by the individuals who are caught in multiple worlds.

The memory of fragmentation informs much of the novel as the characters are often divided by their backgrounds, ethnicity, and language, while the story itself traverses various regions in India and Pakistan. One of the most striking features of *Midnight's Children* is the unusual way in which the story is structured. The plot jumps back and forth in time, with Saleem introducing events from different parts of his life in seemingly random order; it is because he narrates the events from his disordered memory.

After the secession of the British rule over India, Britain passed the sovereign power to the two newly formed countries – the Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The Partition of India did not only bring the creation of the new countries, but also brutal conflicts which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In the words of Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, the partition had been a period as:

Never before had anything even remotely like it been attempted. Nowhere were there any guidelines, any precedents, any revealing insights from the past to order what was going to be the biggest, the most complex divorce action in history, the breakup of a family of four

hundred million human beings along with the assets and household property they had acquired in centuries of living together on the same piece of earth. (Freedom at Midnight)

Its consequences are the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir and the 1971 conflict over Bangladeshi independence.

More than seven decades after the Partition of India in 1947, the burden of grief in the hearts and minds of those affected still bears heavy. With a mere stroke of ink on a map, a nation was divided into two, affecting families from one generation to the next, the resultant scars and wounds of which run painfully deep even today. People on either side of the dreaded Radcliffe line that divided India and Pakistan experienced unimaginable trauma. The horrific events which led to the displacement of millions of people are forever etched in the memories of those who survived the nightmare. Yet, despite the widespread devastation, there were also some uplifting stories of humanity, along with the memories of all that was lost and those who were lost.

The division of land sparked unprecedented communal violence and led to a mass exodus of people and a tremendous loss of life, property, and identity. The year 1947 is an eventful year where there are political and social tensions between Hindus and Muslims after the Partition: two wars over the Kashmir, and one over the creation of an independent Bangladesh. All these events were depicted in the novel and made great impacts on the plot. Multiculturalism and cultural clashes are major characteristic features in post colonial India, and these cultural clashes are partly the consequences of the British Empire in India.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie skilfully integrates the Indian history with the memories of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai who was born on 15th August 1947. Saleem based on his unreliable memory weaves together the events that occur in independent India on a political and historical scale with the personal events that take place in Saleem's life alongside those of his family. From partition to the Emergency, Rushdie covers many of the most significant events in India's recent history through the lens of Saleem's fragmented memory.

Rushdie portrays the character Saleem Sinai as one who is caught between two cultures. Having European manners, culture and thought, his doubts keep nibbling at

his mind. This is the main problem of many Indians and is the reason for everyone to search for his identity. This searching confronts the protagonist with a dilemma whether to accept newly acquired experiences on one hand or to stay deeply connected with the culture and traditions of his own native country on the other.

The memory and oral narrative of *Midnight's Children* provide alternatives to the conventional forms of history. Saleem believes his memory as valid and as the official version of truth, rather than others version of truth. In other words, Saleem's memory refuses to accept fact as truth. Saleem says:

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. (292)

The central motive of Saleem is the assertion of the nation as a fictional construct. Nationalist scholar Benedict Anderson defines the nation as a societal construct of the imagination. Anderson defines the nation as:

An imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Benedict 6)

With this definition Anderson starts to expose the false consciousness of nationhood. . Therefore, it is exposed that in order for nations to exist, communion and identity must be constructed by the imagination.

The identity of Indians became their fragmented experience which is evident in the narration of Saleem's parents' life. Ahmed and Amina buy a mansion from William Methwold, a British colonist who is preparing to return to London after India's independence, and they quickly move in, living amongst the Englishman's belongings and customs. Methwold's Estate is a small-scale representation of British colonialism. Methwold's insistence on a delayed sale and the retention of his personal belongings represent the trappings of Western civilization and culture. Methwold's

belief in his superiority is on full display as he tells Ahmed, a native Indian, how his own European ancestors are responsible for the creation of Bombay. Methwold believes that India ceased to exist until Europeans arrived and discovered it.

The fragmentation or the partition of India and Pakistan further ensue rage in the hearts of the public, irrespective of their religions. In a fragile voice, Mary Pereira, the nanny of Saleem, describes the ensuing rage of Joseph D'Costa, who told her, "This independence is for the rich only; the poor are being made to kill each other like flies. In Punjab, in Bengal. Riots riots, poor against poor. It's in the wind"(139). When Mary made an anti-patriotic comment that these fights are between only Hindus and Muslims and why should the Christians get involved, Joseph replied "You and your Christ. You can't get it into your head that that's the white people's religion? Leave white gods for white men. Just now our own people are dying" (139). The view of Joseph highlights his Patriotic spirit for his nation irrespective of any religion.

When Amina Sinai was pregnant, a peep-show man came into a Muslim community, who was finger-pointed by the locals as 'Hindu', the mob started chasing him but he was saved by Amina Sinai who claims:

In a Muslim Muhalla you would tear a man to pieces? Go, remove yourselves.' But the mob has stopped being surprised, and is moving forward again... and now. Now it comes.

'Listen,' my mother shouted, 'Listen well. I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!' (100)

Despite the riots, the only thing which stubbornly refuses to fade away is the sense of humanity irrespective of religions, which still glues people of one nation altogether.

Midnight's Children complicates how historical fact is perceived, how a nation is constructed, and most importantly how fictions contest notions of singular historical authority. *Midnight's Children* is a historiographic metafiction that problematizes the notion of universal historical truth without losing its authenticity as fiction. Much of the realm of post-modern fiction is concerned with history. This sub-genre is what Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction:

The postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. (Hutcheon 2)

Sinai's narration becomes critical, sometimes philosophical and ambivalent. Saleem questions and challenges, if not deny, the historiographic claims of authentic representation of the past. The egocentricity of Saleem's historiographic efforts emerges at several places in the novel when Saleem is trying to fit historical events to his personal. To use the language of Michel Foucault, Saleem Sinai's body is exposed as "totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (83). His self-reflexive rendering of history into story shows the readers that how histories are made up involving the process of selection in a manner that cannot remain unaltered and undistorted. It evokes the issue of narrativity of historical representation that foregrounds that reality is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it.

To conclude, *Midnight's Children* is a work of enormous scope and ambition, and its impact has been long lasting. Rushdie combines elements of magic realism and historical fiction to create a book that resonates with readers on multiple levels. As a fantastical tale, the book is often playful, but it also provides a searing political commentary on the consequences of colonialism and the challenges faced by a young nation struggling to define itself on its own terms. One of the most significant themes in *Midnight's Children* is the matter of identity. Rushdie navigates questions of both individual and national identity, inextricably linking Saleem's sense of self with the larger story of India's independence. Consequently, the novel raises questions about how one understand and interact with their own history, and the extent to which one's environment shapes one's sense of self. The research exposes various issues postcolonial Indians faced. Through this research, it is obvious that Rushdie's use of synesthesia does, indeed, parallel his stance on postcolonial national identity, showing that India's national narrative may reside in hybridity.

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