

## HISTORY AS AN INTEGRAL POST-COLONIAL CRITIQUE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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### Abstract

Salman Ahmed Rushdie became an unassailable phenomenon in world literature with the publication of his second novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981, more so after the awarding of the McConnell Booker Prize to it in the same year. For Rushdie, politics and history form an integral basis of his unique style of Post-colonial writing. The protagonist of Salman Rushdie's most prominent novel *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, is an intricate personification of the sub continental India, with his body composed of nearly six hundred million parts corresponding to the region's population, his face mirroring the country's map, and his atrociously sized nose ironically representing the dangling peninsula of the nation. Rushdie brilliantly narrates the events of Sinai's birth and his life amalgamated with historical events so that the history of India looks like a personal family album. The book is an attempt by Rushdie to give a fairly authentic history of the twentieth century India as against the bizarre or exotic depictions of India by western authors like Kipling and Paul Scott. One more laudable aspect of Rushdie's handling of history is that he never takes a stand towards the liberal right or fundamental left. His is a purely humanistic portrayal of human problems and there is not a particular affinity towards any political ideology.

**Keywords:** History, politics, analogy, mirror, amalgamation, literature.

## Introduction

Sir Salman Ahmed Rushdie became an unassailable phenomenon in world literature with the publication of his second novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981, more so after the awarding of the McConnell Booker Prize to it in the same year. For Rushdie, politics and history form an essential basis of his unique style of Post-colonial writing. As a matter of fact, the Post-colonialist fiction writers from Africa like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and NgugiwaThiongo also invariably deal with the history and politics of their respective regions in all their literary outputs. For them history itself is a fundamental aspect of their post-colonial fiction.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a more explicit and conventionally Post-colonial novel when compared to the works of early stalwarts of Indian English fiction like Raja Rao's '*Kanthapura*' and G. Desani's '*All About H.Hatterr*'. The protagonist of the Salman Rushdie's most prominent novel *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, is an intricate personification of the subcontinental India, with his body composed of nearly six hundred million parts corresponding to the region's population, his face mirroring the country's map, and his atrociously sized nose ironically representing the dangling peninsula of the nation. Saleem Sinai's birth at midnight on August 15, 1947, coincides consciously with the birth of the newly independent Indian nation, and his subsequent life story, as also more generally his family history going back to his Adamic grandfather Adam Aziz, parallels in an extensively fantastical form. Rushdie interconnects politics, history and the personal life of the hero of *Midnight's Children* – Saleem Sinai in the novel to make Saleem an ideal Post-colonial subject who is in search of his personal identity. Rushdie uses history as a key factor in his narrative to emphasize his distinct post-colonial style. History forms the basis for most of Rushdie's early works of fiction like *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

## Discussion

At the outset, the novel *Midnight's Children* is obviously concerned with the politics of the land. Rushdie explicitly and tastefully presents factual history as integral parts of the narrator's consciousness in *Midnight's Children*. The relationship between political and social realities and their fictional treatment by Rushdie in his fiction has been the subject of comment since the publication of his novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* in the 1980s. However there has been no serious consideration till date about *Midnight's Children* as a political or historical novel. So the need arises to discover and determine the relationship between politics, history and Rushdie's narrative style and his techniques of story-telling.

The narrator in *Midnight's Children* is the protagonist himself – Saleem Sinai. Sinai, reveals himself as a detached, intelligent and keen observer of life. He is unprejudiced

in political views by not taking any stand or leaning towards either Pakistani politics or Indian politics. Sinai records and reacts to events with a humanistic point of view. By this unbiased stand, the narrator transcends nationality, creed, and race, and gives us a truthful view of historical and political events as possible. History is used by Salman Rushdie as an integral part of the post-fictional narrative as it leads to the issue of a post-colonial individual's identity or the lack of it. Some of the historical events touched upon by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* are listed as follows:

The first historical event referred to in the novel is the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre in which the British Brigadier General R.E. Dyer ordered his troops to fire at an unarmed crowd of Indian protestors in Amritsar. The lengthy freedom struggle of India, followed by the partition of India and Pakistan (though not described in detail), is also narrated. Rushdie also touches upon the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in his plot. The First General Elections in independent India and the early days of democratic rule of the Indian National Congress Party Government is also narrated. The language riots that led to the partition of Indian states on the basis of the language spoken in the particular geographical area also find a place in the plot.

The imposition of martial law in Pakistan in 1958 by General Ayub Khan and the Indo-China war in the Himalayan ranges in 1962 is also integrated into the plot by Rushdie. The Indo-Pakistani military's border skirmishes in Gujarat's Rann of Kutch and in Kashmir, the alleged theft of the hair of Prophet Mohammed and the war between India and Pakistan that followed the alleged theft of the prophet's hair are also narrated in the plot. The emergence of Sheik Mujibur Rehman as a prominent people's leader in the Eastern wing of Pakistan, the armed conflict between the Indian troops and West Pakistani troops in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh as a separate nation are also narrated. The 'Garibi Hatao' movement of the then prime minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the sterilisation camps and the destruction of slums undertaken by her son Sanjay Gandhi and finally the declaration of the Emergency in 1975 by Mrs. Indira Gandhi are also narrated in the novel.

Sinai's personal life is consciously and deliberately interwoven with the history of the nation by Rushdie. He tries a new form of writing or narrating that can be called as the hybrid Post-colonial text, the hybrid referring to the harmonious amalgamation of the western style of writing and the eastern or oriental style of story-telling found in the Indian epics and folklores. *Midnight's Children* draws extensively the style of the digressive Indian epics 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'. The novel swings through time and space with its thirty chapters or jars of pickled personal and national history with meandering digressions and insequentiality of the events. Rushdie tries to reproduce the oral narrative tradition of Indian storytellers and the epics and succeeds marvelously.

The oral narrative form, which is exclusively Indian in style and taste, provides Sinai with a way to organize his own complex autobiography.

Sinai comments before beginning his story, “ I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country ” (Midnight 4). This comment of Saleem explicitly emphasizes Rushdie's preoccupation with history as a significant device for story telling in *Midnight's Children*. The circumstances of Saleem's birth on the stroke of midnight of August 15, 1947, coinciding with the freedom of India from the British colonial rule makes his life analogous to the newly emergent independent nation of India. Saleem's narrative of his personal experiences mirrors the life of India itself. Rushdie makes Saleem not to pursue a chronological mode of narration but makes him adopt a non-linear narrative mode, which oscillates and vacillates between the past, present and future, predicting not only the arrival of events and characters but also his own doom.

Rushdie projects post-independent India in such a way that the narrative is a display of the human history of a nation as it appears to the individual. Indeed Saleem himself explains the diverse links of the individual to history with all the pompous pontification of Polonius' address to Hamlet on the styles of acting as the 'passive-metaphorical', 'passive-literal', and 'active-metaphorical.' (Midnight 238). Saleem's literal interventions in history are moments in the novel such as that when he rides his bicycle into the procession of language zealots and claims collision with history and alters the course of it. The riot that Saleem claims to have perpetuated between the Marathi speakers and Gujarati speakers can be read as a Post-colonial linguistic staging of the familiar colonial policy of divide and rule. Saleem even dares to call Indira Gandhi as the 'Black Widow' and uses his dreams to create a veiled representation of the atrocities committed by the authorities during the imposition of Emergency in 1975.

Rushdie brilliantly narrates the events of Sinai's birth and his life amalgamated with historical events so that the history of India looks like a family album. The infamous Commander Nanavati case in real life becomes the anecdote of Commander Sabarmati in *Midnight's Children*. Cyrus Dubash, a friend of Saleem Sinai in the novel is presented as the founder of a religious cult that closely resembles the story of Hatha-Yogi Lakshmanan Roa in real life, who claimed to the world that he could walk on water. The contrived links between personal life and history go on till the abrupt end of Saleem's autobiography.

There are some significant aspects to Rushdie's handling of history that needs critical attention. From the beginning of *Midnight's Children* Rushdie consciously maintains a continuous effort at synchronising national and personal life, so that the odyssey of the

Azizes' and Sinai's also becomes the odyssey of the nation from the year 1915 to 1977. Through gentle but decisive satire he shows that some of recent Indian history's violent events have had their source in trivial accidents and incidents as with that of the collision of his bicycle into the language marchers that led to the language riots, the theft of the Prophet's hair that led to an uprising in Kashmir and the murder of an Epicurean youth by Commander Sabarmati which was instigated by Saleem's letter, that represents the famous trial of Commander Nanavati of the Indian Navy who killed his wife's illegitimate boyfriend. Saleem presents all the historical events that happen in independent India as perpetuated by the unique tribe of the midnight's children. He takes much liberty with dates thereby undermining the chronometric exactness, which is one of the important aspects in historical writing. For instance, Saleem alters the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and the date of the 1957 General Elections but never apologizes for the discrepancies in dates, justifying, "although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events" (Midnight 222).

Sinai as well as Rushdie depend on their memory and their memory reorders the sequentiality of events. *Midnight's Children* can be called as a novel of fantastical memory, where memory is used as an effective tool to recover Rushdie's early childhood days in Bombay.

The text of *Midnight's Children* makes use of references from other individual recollections of history. References in the text, which might otherwise slip past, unnoticed, as mere embellishments of Saleem's narrative, are in fact just a borrowing. References to 'Mountbatten's countdown calendar' (106) and his wife's 'secret consumption of chicken breasts in a locked lavatory' (65) demonstrate how the reality of history-in-the-making bears its own resemblances to the absurdities and incongruities of the fictionalized process. These two images used in *Midnight's Children* can be traced to the book 'Freedom at Midnight' by the French authors Dominique Lapierre and Pierre Collins. (Cundy 37).

The first two events related to history are very important because the treatment of these two events give us an idea about Rushdie's treatment of history in his works. The first event that is connected with history is about the day on which Dr. Adam Aziz, the grandfather of Saleem Sinai, sees for the first time his patient/bride Naseem Ghani's face. After three years the patient and the doctor confront each other face to face without the perforated sheet on that particular day.

"On the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed for head-ache. Such historical coincides have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (Midnight 27).

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Rushdie justifies the relationship between history and the personal life of his protagonist in these lines. He deliberately interweaves history into the personal autobiography of otherwise what would be an ordinary love affair between a doctor and his patient.

The other prominent event in the novel from history is the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. Rushdie writes that Brigadier General Dyer's fifty armed troops fired " ...a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen found their mark killing or wounding some person" (Midnight 36). Saleem's grandfather Dr. Adam Aziz who was present in the ground at the time of the indiscriminate firing, escapes the bullets and treats as many people as he can and develops a mysterious wound in his chest. This particular incident of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, as narrated by Rushdie in the novel, clearly shows to the readers and critics alike, how deftly Rushdie is handling history in his works. The first point to be noted is that he is fairly accurate about the historical facts he uses in his book. The second point is he makes the historical events to be of personal significance to Saleem by involving a member of his family or at times Saleem himself in the events. The last point is the non-linear chronology of events intertwined in the narrative plot of *Midnight's Children*.

### **Conclusion**

*Midnight's Children* gives us an authentic history of contemporary India in the matter of facts but that its interpretation of history is not always reliable. The book should be considered as an attempt by Rushdie to give a fairly authentic history of the twentieth century India as against the depictions of India by western authors like Kipling and Paul Scott. History and politics are considered to be the two most prominent features of post-colonial writings as there is only meager critical theories available in this canon that too dictated by mostly people who never had experience of any fiery kind of imperialism and colonialism.. Rushdie doesn't imitate the illustrious writers of the genre but he redefines the post-colonial theory by providing a voice for the marginal and fringe elements of the society.

Rushdie treats history according to his own choice either by altering the exact chronology of events or by disguising political or historical figures of eminence as lead characters in his works. He uses thinly veiled characters in his novels to criticize the moral and social discrepancies that he finds apparently prevalent in the post-colonial society. One more laudable aspect of Rushdie's handling of history is that he never takes a stand towards one side. His is a purely humanistic portrayal of human problems and there is not particular affinity towards any political ideology.

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