

DECONSTRUCTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT: A GLIMPSE OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AND E.L. DOCTOROW'S RAGTIME

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Abstract:

The main aim of the present study is to compare and contrast the techniques adopted by the two writers E. L. Doctorow and Salman Rushdie. It critically evaluates how Deconstruction and New Historicism can be useful in studying a contemporary literary work. It also seems to appreciate the techniques adopted by these two writers. Further, literature is a valuable source for studying the history and culture of a nation. It can highlight the politics of the time a worker has been written. Postmodern being an umbrella term allows readers to speculate on the nature of the text. Thus the text is a pastiche of several things requires a researcher to look at it with a microscopic eye to filter the truth embedded within these precious sources of information. Though this paper cannot cover the entire concept of the topic, it prefers to highlight the nature of two versatile geniuses of similar caliber and throws the dice to the readers to do the rest.

Keywords: History, Postmodern, Deconstruction, comparative etc

This article intends to explore two contemporary writers Salman Rushdie and E.L. Doctorow, who are of different origins. Salman Rushdie is a renowned Anglo-Indian British writer known for his postmodern techniques and political commentaries in his works such as *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *Shame Shalimar the Clown*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Satanic Verses*. He is a controversial writer in contemporary literature. The New York Times addressed him as the literary map of India that is to be redrawn in which the continent has found its voice. *Midnight's children* like an epic that moves backward and forwards creating images and vistas that creates an unforgettable presence. It is a postmodern novel that oscillates through time. History is plural and several characters though fictitious resemble real-life characters.

Midnight's Children won the Booker Prize for Fiction, followed by several other awards such as being adjudged the Booker of Bookers. *Midnight's Children* narrates key events in the history of India by a unique storytelling strategy following the life story of a pickle-factory worker Saleem Sinai, who becomes one of the 1001 children born during Indian independence in 1947. It was a turn of the century modern novel.

Shame (1983), is as an allegory of the political situation in Pakistan. In 1988, his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was condemned for blasphemy against Islam. The story centers on the adventures of two Indian actors, Gibreel and Saladin, who fall to earth in Britain when their Air India jet explodes. Rushdie's storytelling technique and the mastery of history is well brought out in the following lines from *Midnight's Children*,

Here, Saleem addresses his unreliability after realizing that he made a mistake concerning Gandhi's death. *Midnight's Children* cannot be understood easily because Saleem is an unreliable narrator. The reader is puzzled because it looks as if Saleem is fabricating events to make his life seem more interesting, and the use of magical realism, raises doubts further. The character realizes that what he is saying sounds incredulous, but he fully believes his exploits are true. Many such instances can be drawn from most of his novels. Therefore Rushdie can be read from a new historicist perspective, who blends, history, fact, culture, and fantasy to achieve his literary purpose. Andrew Teverson says,

Evidently, so far as Rushdie is concerned, his own *Midnight's Children* represents, not an effect of this 'Raj revival but an antidote to it: a fiction that depicts India from an Indian point of view, that places Indians centre stage, and that is overtly hostile to, rather than celebratory of, British imperial activities within India. (7)

Similarly, E.L. Doctorow is a postmodern Jewish American writer popular for his works *Rag Time*, *Loon Lake*, *Welcome to Hard Times*. His writing techniques have made him popular in American Literature. His works recapture history meticulously. He is also a controversial writer like Rushdie. The novel *Ragtime* changed the very concept of what a novel could be

because it is an extraordinary tapestry in storytelling. *Ragtime* is a title borrowed from the music, ragtime. It depicts the dawn of the twentieth century when America has lost its innocence. Doctorow attacks the authenticity of historical discourses. The background to the text was inspired by the emotional exhaustion and image of New Rochelle during the Depression Era that constituted the trolley. With an empty mind, he stared at the wall in New Rochelle and thus began the words, "My house was built in 1906 . . ." (1). The political and social situation prevalent at that time came to him handily. He got the source about the history of the interurban street rail transport from the maps in New York Public Library. Picturizing the 1970s of America, Doctorow's work, *Lives of the Poets: Six stories and a Novella* arose out of the oscillation between the private and public life of the author. The artists in failure and the hurdles encountered by the narrators in desolation became the subject of Doctorow.

Harold Bloom finds Doctorow as a true experimentalist and considers that his "insights into our country's nature and history are all-too-likely to be sustained in the years ahead" (8). To Fredric Jameson, he is the "epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past, of the suppression of older traditions and moments of the American radical tradition" (24).

Paul Levine lists out three essential features in Doctorow's works: history, experimental narrative technique and politics (5). This study concentrates on the historical background in Doctorow's works and its conspiratorial role in advocating the characters. Barbara Foley also notes the historical consciousness in *Ragtime* which manipulates history in terms of subject matter and explores the narrative strategy. Like a typical historian, Doctorow situates the context as Ragtime Era for *Ragtime* which marks the dawn of twentieth-century America. This dynamic nation reflects progress in every aspect without showing any sign of regression. Historians variously call this era as the Progressive Age and the Age of Innocence. But, this novel is not about this era. It is a revision of its already recorded version which is immortalized in history textbooks.

Doctorow picturizes this era through a series of images, peculiar to it, but he does not do much research to establish veracity. He uses an ironic tone to foreground the exclusion of certain harsh realities to enter into the realm of history. He self-consciously exposes the complicity in such constructions and challenges its authenticity.

Doctorow uses simple language and short sentences to bring the readers closer to the era. They are tempted to reexamine their received versions of the past. But, parody undercuts their familiarity through the ironic tone in the phrases which indicate the style and manner of life of the people. He provokes the readers to question the framed reality which depicts America as a progressive nation at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, Doctorow

acknowledges the absence of immigrants and blacks but ironically juxtaposes their plight to foreground the deceptiveness of historical accounts.

These two writers reconstruct history to show how the past can be altered and how history is just a text of the present. Stephen Greenblatt in his essay *Shakespeare and the Exorcists* suggests that literature can be a source of history. History is fiction to these two writers. Therefore there is a need to probe into these two writers to know their strategies to better appreciate their works and understand the history buried in these works in the form of fiction.

Further, these two writers are unique in their strategies. They try to explore how history and politics become fiction. Deconstruction and New historicism are useful tools to the critic to unravel literary texts that are weaved with factual information and therefore literature don't just become fiction; it plays an equivalent role of exposing and reforming society. These two writers are complex in their strategies and therefore the topic grew out as an interest in exploring the ways in which these writers have reflected their nation's history. As it compares writers of two different origins, it falls under the gamut of comparative literature. Being interdisciplinary in nature it gives scope for knowing the blurred history of two great nations. History and Deconstruction are strategies useful in understanding the work of these two writers.

Deconstruction is a philosophical theory propounded by Jacques Derrida that questions all forms of knowledge. New Historicism is useful in studying history parallelly. It is useful in making one realize that if one wants to know about history one needs to look for other sources apart from historical sources and therefore literary texts are a reflection of their time that can serve as valuable sources to interpret history.

These two writers are postmodernists who adopt similar narrating strategies and their purpose also is similar. The most significant part of it would be in knowing how these two writers reinterpret history as fiction. This research article would help other research scholars understand how information is blurred in history. These writers suggest that history is not single, it is multiple. Literature can be one valuable source for history. Every novel is about the past, though it is written in the present. Both the historian and novelist adopt similar modes of language, narration, and devices such as metaphor, simile, and personification for writing their works. Both Rushdie and Doctorow question the segregation and the ontological difference which exists between fact and fiction and the books which deal with the historically verifiable characters and the fictive ones. History written by historians is incomplete and varies, as they accommodate information in a biased manner. As historians emerge from a different social and cultural background, their manner of observation, interpretation, and judgment also vary. Multiple histories arise with different historical accounts. Besides, the power politics, which operate in a society, control and manipulate the production of facts. Moreover, historical discourse is a constructed one which cannot

comprehend the whole of the past. Hence, history has to be written and rewritten continuously.

The American culture confronts problems like that of the reference materials in historical discourse. The culture of America is multifaceted and the concept of Americanness has been continuously examined down the ages. As most of the texts are male-oriented, the emergence of the divisions based on class, ethnicity, gender, and sex shatter the unity and to define Americanness becomes a hard job. Besides, America fails to fulfill its promise of equal opportunity to all since the differences cannot be accommodated. The American Dream which promises success for those who work hard and high standard of livelihood for an average man remain like a fantasy. Only the dominant groups such as the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants have the power to govern the society and Doctorow challenges this biased nature of the well-structured institution. Therefore this article aims at opening up the historical similarity of these two writers who use a lot of techniques and are branded as postmodernists. Further research can be carried on the intertextual and metafictional nature of these two writers.

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