



HISTORICAL REFERENCE AS A MAGIC REALIST ELEMENT IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT

The magic realist writers always refer to history as a magic realist element in their magic realist writings. The magic realist critic, Maggie Ann Bowers, in her book Magic(al) Realism (2007) expresses, "Historical references appear in magical realist writing may seem to indicate that magical realists have not forgotten how to think historically" (76). The magic realist novelist uses the historical references to raise a question about the real history. The critic, Bowers further says, "As we have seen, many magical realist works include historical references, not only to situate their texts in a particular context, but also to bring into question already existing historical assumptions" (76-77).

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is the best example of it. The critic Bowers considers, "Salman Rushdie's writing, and particular *Midnight's Children*, provides us with perfectly illustrative examples of how magical realism can work with this form of historical postmodernism" (77). Some Indian historical events are incorporated in Saleem's family history in the novel. They are Gandhi's hartal of 1919, the Jallianwala Bag massacre of 1919, the Quit India of 1942, Indian independence of 1947, a commander Kavas Nanavati's incident of 1959, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and 1972 and Indira Gandhi's emergency in 1975-1977.

Rushdie refers to Indian history in the novel. He gives the first historical reference when Gandhiji's hartal on 7th April, 1919 against the continuing presence of the British takes place. When Saleem's Grandfather Adam Aziz and Naseem were travelling to Agra, their train was stopped by the agitators in Amritsar. In the second chapter "Mercurochrome", the narrator Saleem narrates, "It is April 7th, 1919, and Amritsar the Mahatma's grand design is being distorted. The shops have shut; the railway station is closed . . . Doctor Aziz . . . out in the streets He is bandaging wounds . . ." (39). In the passage, Rushdie weaves Gandhi's hartal in the family history of Saleem. Saleem's grandfather Dr. Adam Aziz served the wound of agitators. Rushdie weaves the historical event with the fantastic character of Adam because the author wants to make the reader to search for the truth behind the historical event.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre occurred due to the passing of the Rowlatt Act followed by R. E. Dyer's action on 13th April, 1919 in Amritsar. The event is woven into the narrative structure. Saleem's grandfather has become a part of the proceeding of the event. A scar of the event exists on his body. It is a metaphor used for showing the psyche of India. In the second chapter "Mercurochrome", the narrator Saleem Sinai expresses:

. . . . There is a nose like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls. Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather. He becomes afraid for his back. The clasp of his bag is digging into his chest, inflicting upon it a bruise so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death, years later, on the hill of Sankara Acharya or Takht-e-Sulaiman (41)

In this passage, the event is related to the fantastic character of Adam's body through the scar. The event unfolds that Saleem's family is deeply rooted in the Indian history. Rushdie has a doubt about the creation of history by British. Therefore, Rushdie gives a responsibility to the reader to find the true fact behind the event.

In the novel, another important historical incident is the Quit India movement of 1942. When the Cripps mission failed, the Congress decided to compel the British to quit India. The All



India Congress resolved a mass movement on 8th August, 1942. Then Gandhiji inspired all Indian people with his famous slogan “Do or Die”. Then the riots broke out all over the country. In the third part, the narrator Saleem reminds:

In 1942 . . . Doctor Adam Aziz, contracted a highly dangerous form of optimism . . . He was by no means alone, because, despite strenuous efforts by the authorities to stamp it out, this had been breaking out all over India that year, and drastic steps were to be taken before it was brought under control. (45)

When Gandhi began the Quiet India movement, the extraordinary character Adam Aziz suffered very much in the movement. He was unable to reach home. The Quit India Movement is reflected in Saleem’s family. The novelist uses the historical event in the novel. Rushdie tries to search for the real truth behind the event, because the present history does not include exact truth. It has multiple possibilities.

Rushdie refers to the historical midnight of Indian independence of 1947. All midnight’s children were born in the midnight of Indian independence of 1947. They have got magic power at the same time when India was getting independence. Saleem Sinai is one of them. He was born at the same moment. He is the narrator of midnight’s children in the novel. In the first chapter “The Perforated Sheet”, the narrator Saleem describes:

I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s 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-hand joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out . . . I tumbled forth into the world. (1)

In the passage, the fantastic and extraordinary character was born at the midnight when India was getting independence. Rushdie’s midnight’s children were born in the same moment of Indian independence. They have got magic power at the same moment. Rushdie involves Indian historical reference in his magic characters. He forces the reader to see how the India got independence.

In the novel, there is one historical reference of navy commander Kavay Manekshaw Nanavati's event from Indian history. Nanavati killed his wife's lover Prem Ahuja in 1959. Nanavati was a very sincere commander in the Indian Navy. He was doing his job sincerely. He was totally dedicated to his job. Therefore, he always became absent in his house. Meanwhile, his wife Sylvia fell in love with her husband's friend Prem Ahuja. As soon as Prem Ahuja refused to marry Sylvia, she confessed to her husband. He pumped bullets into his friend's body and confessed his crime. In the novel, the writer uses the same event from the history. By using the event, the novelist connects Saleem's story in the plot of the novel. In the eighteenth chapter "Commander Sabarmati's Baton", the narrator Saleem points out:

A newspaper said of the Sabarmati affair: 'It is a theatre in which India will discover who she was, what she is and what she might become . . . But Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play-only I hadn't meant it! I didn't think he'd. . . I only wanted to . . . a scandal, yes, a scare, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never, no. (363-364)

Nanavati's event is involved in the Commander Sabarmati's fantastic event. Sabarmati is only a puppet in the event. In this event, Sabarmati wants to teach lesson to all unfaithful wives. Rushdie subverts the original event, because he has created belief or non-belief on the real story.

Another historical event is the Indo-Pakistan war. According to Saleem, he has played a pivotal role in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and 1975 and in the formation of new country, Bangladesh. In the twenty-sixth chapter "Sam and Tiger", the narrator narrates, "On December 15th, 1971, Tiger Niazi surrendered to Sam Manekshaw; the Tiger and ninety-three thousand Pakistani troops became prisoners of war. I, meanwhile, became the willing captive of the Indian magicians . . ." (530). When the Indo-Pakistani war occurred, he has lost his power. This historical event has brought the Indo-Pakistani war. It brings the controversial current issue of Kashmir. Now it remains an unresolved question. The author wants to find the main reason behind the issue.

Lastly, Rushdie refers to Indira Gandhi's emergency of 1975-1977. Indira Gandhi is the third prime minister of India. She served India in 1966-1977. During this period, she announced emergency in India. This historical event is a confusing event for many people. Specially, Rushdie refers to the event in the novel. He has also no clear idea about the event. In the twenty-eighth chapter "A wedding", the narrator Saleem says, "He was born . . . Adam Sinai arrived at a night-shadowed slum on June 25th, 1975 . . . Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at Emergency, he emerged" (586). Rushdie has a doubt about this historical event. Therefore his midnight's children have been spelled out in the novel.

Rushdie's fiction is based on his serious interplay with historical evidences and his awareness of historiographic contest. A well-known critic T. N. Dhar in his famous essay "Problematizing History with Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*" rightly expresses, "Rushdie views the history of India from a specific stand point because of which he gives a singularly new interpretation of India's past. The novel also problematizes the nature of historical discourse and pays an attention to the problems which are unique to historical re-construction of India" (136). Rushdie refers to the historical events to search for the real truth behind them. The novelist thinks very difficult to tell the truth of history. In his famous book *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism (1981-1991)* (1991), Rushdie says, "History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge" (25). In the above passage, Rushdie tells that history defines reality. However, it is a wrong method that reality is judged on the basis of history.

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