



## MYTH & HISTORY IN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

*Salman Rushdie breathes fire even in his mock-serious methods while describing the incident. His accuracy of the historical facts is unquestionable. Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) evokes multiple number of feelings at multiple levels. Human nature has a prodigious resilience. Any imbalance leads to a sense of despair, desolation and frustration. A sense of uncertainty and futility prevails. The thirst for a life-giving sap prompts the postmodernist novelists to make a gigantic attempt at depicting the reigning anarchy of the contemporary socio-political scenario in pictures, grotesque and incorrigible. The narration in such contexts runs in a surrealist vein to sustain the grip on the audience.*

### INTRODUCTION

Catherine Belsey in the article "Post Modern Love: Questioning The Metaphysics of Desire" states: "The fictional problematizing of history of our access to the 'facts' is so common in recent novels that Linda Hutcheon has coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' and treats it as the paradigm case for postmodern fiction." [Belsey, C. Summer. 1994: 688]

The postmodernist version of historical fiction takes the form of an attack on this veneer. This shows up the scenes between real-world laws and the laws of fiction. *Midnight's Children* does this in several ways. Salman Rushdie creates a frame tale in the disintegrating Saleem Sinai who regularly reminds the reader that he is recounting a story, a narration governed by 'what-happened'. Rushdie inverts the norms of the ontological by having real-world figures fall prey to the laws of fiction which here amount to the lawlessness of fantasy. Hal May points out three ways in which the traditional historical novel incorporates real-world figures without endangering its fabric [May, Hal. 1984: 87]:



1] “Historical realms.” i. e. persons/events are introduced on condition that their representation does not contradict the official record.

2] The culture and ideology of the period under depiction should conform to the received versions of history. This stipulation forbids anachronism, a favourite device of the postmodern historical novel.

3] The logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality. A novel like *Midnight’s Children* flouts this with great gusto.

Features such as apocryphal history creating alternate versions of history and flaunting the violations and distortions of fact and creative anachronism are characteristically post-modern. Salman Rushdie’s manner of connecting the birth and growth of independent India with the children born on the midnight of 15th August 1947 is faithful and sincere to the extent of incredulity. All the children of midnight have magical gifts. Saleem is one of them. When he is ‘nearly nine’, he finds himself endowed with the power to communicate with the other children of midnight. Together they form a Parliament of the brain into which all tune regularly - until Shiva’s propensity for violence destroys this link. Salman Rushdie employs the techniques of inversion, whereby the real appears fantastic and the fantastic. The novel *Midnight’s Children* begins at a point more than thirty years after the simultaneous births of Saleem and independent India. Saleem was awaiting a premature death in a pickle factory where he is employed. Saleem is prematurely aged, impotent, and mutilated by a personal history that parallels that of his country. So, he tells his life-story to Padma, an illiterate working girl who loves and looks after him. Saleem begins by relating thirty-two years of family history preceding his own arrival into the world. These are the tragic elements of this history unfolding from the very beginning. This is told in a comic and mythic form that masks their painfulness.

Saleem begins by relating the tragedy of Aadam Aziz. His grandfather functions as a symbol of the colonized man. His grandfather begins the tragedy of Aadam Aziz, in comic, mythic, and surreal terms. The tragedy of Aadam Aziz was his loss of faith and self-identity on his return in 1915 to his native colonized India from the West. They returned to the valley of his ancestors, Kashmir. Then, Aadam Aziz tries to go back to the traditional customs. As he recites the prayer of his ancestral religion Islam, he is barraged with memories of Heidelberg, where he had learned, along with medicine and politics. This is that “India -like radium - had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans.” [MC: 6] As he kneels down, he recalls his friends Ilse-Oskar-Ingrid “mocking his prayer with their anti-ideologies.” [MC: 5] The description of Aadam Aziz is a serious-faced but funny-nosed, bending down and being vengefully struck by a mere tussock of earth. This description is in the comic epic-tradition: “Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer-mat covered, curved up toward him. And now, it was the tussock’s time.



. . it smote him upon the point of the nose.” [MC: 6] Uma Parameswaran, while extolling the virtues of the novel doubts whether the interpretation of history in the text is reliable in view of their fictitious character. As Uma Parameswaran says:”*Midnight’s Children* is an excellent novel, that it gives us a variety of ideas and techniques, that it gives a fairly authentic history of contemporary India in the matter of facts, but that its interpretation of history is not always reliable.” [1998: 32]

Saleem acquires the nickname of Buddha, which may mean the enlightened or dullurd in Indian parlance. Rushdie’s language has a double bubble. It is prone to multiple meanings, the acnial name alludes to Lord Buddha, the enlightened soul and the original founder of Buddhist philosophy. Saleem’s indecision and inaction is in contrast with Shiva’s bouyancy. Shiva is a scion of Sinais in reality. The War of Bangladesh is almost a civil war, a War of Independence. Musalman killing Bhai Musalman was the order of the day. Shiva played a mighty role in Bangladesh War of Independence true to his mythical name. The tragic consequence of the accident i. e. Aziz’s loss of faith is expressed in mythic and surreal terms. Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds and his grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. He was knocked forever into that middle place unable to worship God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. The other bald foreigner turns out to be Methwold. He is a symbol of the colonizer and of his ominous ‘Tick-lock’. Tick-lock is the real father of the narrator Saleem. Saleem is conceived in an unholy alliance between colonizer and colonized. He is born on the night of India’s independence. He can only live out the most schizophrenic of existences. He has been literally and figuratively disfigured by the awful ravages of history. As he himself says: “I was not a beautiful baby. Baby snaps reveal that my large moon-face was too large; too perfectly round. . .Fair skin curved across my features - but birthmarks disfigured it; dark stains spread down my western hairline, a dark patch coloured my eastern ear.” [MC: 144]

From the description, this is clear that the disfiguring birthmarks on Saleem’s face are a symbol of his politically fragmented heritage. As the turbulent history of post-independence, post-partition India unfolds. So the visage and psyche of Saleem Sinai become more and more battered and disfigured. Saleem witnesses the language of the riots of Bombay in 1956. In West Pakistan, he sees the awful effects of the two Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 on the psyches of the local population. Here Saleem consciously secedes from history by developing amnesia. He parallels the secession of East from West Pakistan that occurred as a result of this war. Amnesia is like myth. She serves to protect the narrator from facing up to the cruel reality of history. The history becomes too painful to bear. At this time, a desire to escape it through some means is only natural. This is fortunate that Saleem is a victim of history. He has been endowed with the mythical, magical powers. These have been the birthright of all the children born on the midnight of independence. It is the exercise of these powers that help to relieve some of the burdens which Saleem has to bear in real life. As Saleem says:



*What I hope to immortalize in pickles as well as words: that condition of the spirit in which the consequences of acceptance could not be denied, in which an overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmatic longing for flight into the safety of dreams. [MC: 431]*

The character of Tai, the boatman, is a figure conceived in both the mythic and the realist modes. Tai, the boatman, is a person of some importance in Dr. Aziz's childhood and youth. In reality, he is a simple ferryman. He "despite of all rumours of wealth, takes hay and goats and vegetables and wood across the lakes for cash." [MC: 10] At the same time, he is mythical in that "nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying the same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes. . . forever." [MC: 9] The narrator tells us that "the boy Aadam, my grandfather-to-be, fell in love with the boatman Tai precisely because of the endless verbiage which made others think him cracked. It was magical talk." [MC: 10] The magical talk foretells events that turn out to be only too historically real and painful to be consigned to an imaginary realm. Dr. Aziz is an adult, red-bearded man. He is "slanting towards the future." He remembers the day when he, as a young boy, asked Tai the unaskable question, "But how old are you really, Taiji?" To this question, he received the mythical response: "I have watched mountains being born; I have watched Emperors die. I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir." [MC: 11] The reference to Christ should alert the reader that this is a possible reference to Christian missionaries- the first wave of colonizers. The rest of the description, followed by the narrator's comments, only serves to confirm this suspicion. Christ's hole-of-hunger prefigures the hole that must be filled at the center of both the colonizer's and the colonized's being. At the end of this little story, the narrator interpolates: "In the brandy bottle of the boatman Tai I see, foretold, my own father's possession by. . .and there will be another bald foreigner." [MC: 12]

Rushdie underscores the shameful ludicrousness of such a claim. By disappointing the reader, Rushdie is using myth to debunk itself. The myth is an inadequate and even foolish response. So, Rushdie seems to be asserting, to the very complex reality of postcolonial independence. The reader is expected to believe in the mythological reunion of the children of midnight. The children of independence, adults by now, are literally and figuratively sterilized by the widow i. e. Indira Gandhi, during the Emergency period. This period followed the 1974-elections in which she and her party lost. Obviously, this was one of the darkest periods (for Rushdie) in post-independence India. As Saleem puts it, in his style:

*Influence of hair-styles on the course of history: there's another ticklish business. . .if the Mother of the Nation had had a coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency she spawned might easily have lacked a darker side. But she had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency too had a white part - public, visible. .*



*.a matter for historians - and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us. [MC: 501]*

Their magical powers can do nothing to save the children from such a horrendous end. This end points directly to their fallibility and to the fallibility of a response. So, it mythicizes some kind of magical, romantic retreat from history. Rushdie says that we have to accept the burden of history. It is no matter how painful is the past and present, or it is no matter how sterile the future may appear. Saleem's hope for some kind of reconciliation with his midnight twin, Shiva is completely shattered. Shiva was his simultaneous birthmate. Shiva has grown up with bitterness and hatred for Saleem. Shiva has no wish to be reconciled with the latter. On the contrary, Shiva is now a major in Indira Gandhi's army and a righthand man of hers. He becomes the instrument of Saleem's destruction. If Saleem and Shiva are viewed as the two halves of India partitioned at birth, then Rushdie sees no hope for friendship or reconciliation between these two countries. Neither does Rushdie see any hopeful future for the new generation, born in India and Pakistan. Another important and noteworthy event is the declaration of Justice Jagmohan's judgement by Allahabad High Court setting aside the election of Mrs. Gandhi under the provision of misuse of People Representatives Act. This led to the declaration of Emergency by Mrs. Gandhi and the eventual birth of Janata Party under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan. The birth-pangs of Janata Party is metaphorically put, currently connecting it with that of Parvathi, the witch at the time of the birth of Adam Sinai. The description is very interesting being a family affair connected with a national event:

*The evening of the thirteenth day, they screamed. Yes, yes, she has begun to push, come on Parvathi, push, push, push and while Parvathi pushed in the ghetto, J.P. Narayan, Morarji Desai were goading Indira Gandhi . . .they were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push. [MC: 418]*

The narrator-protagonist Saleem Sinai is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history. It is a crystallisation of his evolving mood, the distillation of his nostalgic vision which is sometimes critical and at times philosophical. The novelist has a camera-eye which is itself cracked and fragmented. Saleem Sinai is one of the "Midnight's Children" born between 12 midnight and 1 A.M. in the night of August 14-15, 1947. Out of a total of such 1001 children, 420 die and 581 survive up to 1967. All these children meet and discuss and quarrel in the parliament of Saleem's mind forming a Midnight's Children's Conference. Having been born at a crucial moment of history, Saleem claims a place at the centre of things. [MC: 288] The novel *Midnight's Children* represents the nation's psyche. The novelist comments:

*Midnight's children can be made to represent many things according to your point of view, they can be seen at the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the*



*context of a modernising twentieth century economy, or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished, but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. [MC: 240]*

On the authority of Prime Minister Nehru's letter to him, "the role of the mirror of the nation more than the sloganized centrality of Indira Gandhi." [MC: 510] In many ways, India is Saleem and Saleem Sinai is India. The very time of his "clock-ridden, crime stained birth" [MC: 4] handcuffs him to Indian history. Geography too is not less important. Sinai is something like India in miniature. His "map face" [MC: 144] also represents the map of India. Her vastness reflected in its largeness. [MC:144] The disfiguring 'birth-marks' on the face appears to be the creation of the holocaust of the partition. The 'Byzantine domes' and 'Sky blue eyes' are indicative of Himalayas and Kashmir respectively. The 'dark stain' and the 'dark-patch' stand for the two wings of Pakistan. The protagonist's long nose is indicative of India's pride and self-glorification. Saleem's "literally disintegrating" [MC: 37] and "fissured" body from which history pours out [MC: 38] is a possible reference to the underlying political fragmentation and divisive tendencies of Indian politics, past and present. Saleem is really the son of a poor man. He is sent to a rich family and Shiva takes his place. There seems to be a merger of identities in a shared Indian dream:

In fact all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time, fathered you understand by history. It can happen especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream. [MC: 137]

At the political level, the birth of the protagonist Saleem Sinai heralds the very birth of Independent India with partition of Pakistan on the anvil. The two become separate entities. In the case of Pakistan, it is a day earlier, as against the midnight of 14th. It is a midnight show of 13th of August in 1947. The same night the wife of Wee Willie Winkee begins her labour pains. Soon, she delivers her odd child. India declares Independence exactly at the middle of the night. Rushdie's explication of Saleem Sinai's birth as invariably linked to the destinies of India and Pakistan is very interesting. He misses no small details. On the other hand, he uses all exotic details to procure the intended effect with a poetic overdrive. The ten pound baby is a bastard child of Vanitha. This child is easily seduced by Mewthold, a white man, a hybrid offspring of Indian and English. Amina Sinai also gives birth to a baby of light-weight, only to be exchanged by Mary Pereira. She puts her Marxist husband's theory of classless society into real practical terms in a classical manner. She makes the respective identities blur to the point of no recognition by either of the parents:

*During the first hour of August 15th 1947— between midnight and one A.M.—no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the important State of India . . . what made the event noteworthy. . . was the nature of*



*these children, every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or owing to some preternatural power of the moment or just conceivably by sheer co-incidence . . . endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. [MC: 195]*

It is through Salem's consciousness that all events are reminisced. Rushdie expresses them as a part of the workings of his political unconscious. All these major events and episodes parade in quick succession before the mind's eye of the reader. This provides enough evidence for the Panoptic vision of the novelist. The narrator in the novel observes: "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point from which it really begins some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock ridden, crime stained birth." [MC: 10] The political leaders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have acquired the quality of Figures of fantasy in Rushdie's hands. The military leaders are also no exceptions, which can be illustrated as:

*He (the imaginary Indian Major Shiva) grew a luxuriant moustache to which his personal batman applied a daily pomade of linseed oil spiced with coriander, always elegantly turned out in the drawing-room of the mighty, he engaged in political chit-chat, and declared himself a firm admirer of Mrs. Gandhi, largely because of his hatred for her opponent Morarji Desai, who was intolerably ancient, drank his own urine; had skin which rustled like rice paper, and as Chief Minister of Bombay, had once been responsible for the banning of alcohol and the persecution of young 'goondas'. [MC: 487]*

Rushdie's competence to compel the imagination of the reader in this direction and obtain acceptance for his vision knows no parallel. He gains tacit approval of the readers for the confrontationist attitude with which he views the contemporary political situation in the Indian sub-continent. His protagonist Saleem becomes a witness to and participant in the global unrest that surrounds the sub-continent. His involvement in sub-continent's political events is total. He is a mere choric commentator who dons the requisite role with a historical sense of inevitability. Thus, Saleem's representative leadership transcends historical, geographical and cultural barriers. His growth indicates development of free India. He bears the burden of history throughout his life.[MC: 457] The events leading to the imposition of Emergency find a place in his life. The novel covers agitation against Rowlatt Bill, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the formation of the Indian National Army, the dropping of atom bombs on Japan, communal riots, the dawn of independence, the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu Succession Act, the closing of the Suez Canal, Reorganisation of States, language riots, elections of 1957 and 1962, Chinese war, the Nanavati case, Hazarat Bal theft, Nehru's death, Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the Bangladesh war and imposition and lifting of emergency.



The novelist has not only narrated, commented upon or referred to these events with his family and midnight's children. But he has presented the feelings of those times through his fertile imagination. Saleem is linked to history by different modes of connection. He stands in manifold relationship to history- as its creator and its victim. His date of birth itself is a dividing line between the old world and the new. Saleem is a humanist at heart who dislikes the walls that divide mankind. He hates everything that suffocates the free spirit of man. He views the scenario of history with pungent irony. His moral stance can be seen in the large number of descriptions of historical men and events. Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children* emerges as an Indian at the crossroads of history. Thus, the novelist has mixed up historical facts with fiction. He has made this novel a memorable work of history of both the countries- India and Pakistan. The novel ends with the narrator apologizing to the children of the next generation for his and his generation's failure to pass on to them a less painful heritage. Listening to his "son" formulate his very first words, Saleem is tempted to hope that the solution of myth and magic works for his son's generation. The real pain of history can only be dealt with in mythical, magical fashion — realism must be diluted by myth.

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