
Midnight's Children: A Milestone in the History of English Literature

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Abstract:

Midnight's Children is the second novel of Salman Rushdie that catapulted him to great success in the history of English literature. In the year 1981, the novel won both the Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. During the celebration of 25th and 40th anniversary of Booker Prize, the novel also won the "Booker of Bookers" prize in the year 1993 and 2008, respectively. Before becoming a full-time writer, Rushdie worked as a copywriter in advertising agency. His first novel "Grimus" didn't give him as much fame as his second novel "Midnight's Children" did. This novel established him as a great writer in the history of English literature. The novel is about 10001 children born at the time of midnight when India gained its independence. Salman Rushdie in this novel highlights the complexities of lives of people born during the night of independence of India. The narrator and protagonist of the story, Saleem Sinai is also one of them. In this novel the author has portrayed the post-independence history of India and brought the spirit of the magic in the novel. The magic in the novel is contained in the readers' interpretation of the mysterious unseen hidden parts of the lives of the children born at midnight.

Keywords: Magic realism, Midnight's Children, English literature

Introduction :

The history of English literature dates to more than 1400 years. During its vast journey, many writers adopted newer and unconventional styles and ideas at times which was welcomed by the audience and influenced the readership. In the modern times, Salman Rushdie introduced a new concept of writing which became a milestone and has been followed by many other writers. Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus* was a fantasy and science fiction which amalgamated mythology

with science. This novel however could not bring much success and recognition to Rushdie. In his second novel, *Midnight's Children*, he has used a very unique narrative technique of magical realism. With this novel he started a new trend of writing fiction. Every great writer adds something new to the tradition he follows and Salman Rushdie has did the same. In order to see the greatness of his contribution, it seems necessary to look at the contributions of the great English novelists. Daniel Defoe is one of the earliest proponents of English novels. The credit of introducing realist fiction as a literary genre goes to him. He started the tradition of writing English novels with *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*. The two novels are the pioneer novels of incidents in the history of English literature whose chief characteristics included incidents of the solid real world. The happenings in the lives of characters of these novels formed the foundation of script of these novels. *Robinson Crusoe* is an autobiography of the title character. The story is supposed to be based on the adventures of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish castaway who was confined to live on a deserted island for four years. The plot of the novel *Robinson Crusoe* resembles the incidents of live of Selkirk. In the novel, the protagonist Robinson Crusoe, a castaway, spends 28 years on a remote tropical desert island after being washed away by the waves. Similarly, *Moll Flanders* is supposed to be based on the life of Moll, detailing her exploits from birth until old age. Both the novels depict everyday reality of the central characters and their actions. Focus on the incidents of the world was the contribution of early novelists of English literature. Then came the novels of characters. In such novels the thoughts and the fortune of characters are of primary interest. In a way we can say that a novelist's contribution is creating interest in thoughts and actions of characters. Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* and a number of other novels such as *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Oliver Goldsmith* of the period have a fusion of incidents and characters. This is also a contribution to the tradition.

In the work of Henry Fielding and other novelists of this period, moral effect was an important aspect. The novelists felt what to imitate, what to shun and what to present. Moral dimension of the fiction was a major contribution of the great novelists of this period. They have presented the English life and characters of the mid-18th century very beautifully. Characters demonstrating different social types are represented, through which every shade of moral behavior is represented. Their main emphasis is on emotions of characters rather than their actions. But all the contemporary writers do not follow the tradition. Walking on a different path, Jane Austen

rejected their tradition of writing. She wrote large number of novels based on women's traditional dependence on marriage for their livelihood and economic security. She brings in light the difficulties and adversities of women they face in their day to day life. After her, in Victorian era novel became leading literary genre in English. Variety of ideas were practiced spanning over a vast range of genres such as social novel, fantasy novel, science fiction, psychological novels, political novel, detective novels, stream of consciousness novels. All these traditions of writings were quite popular during 19th century and 20th century. The writers experimented with various styles and it was welcomed by the audience. However in 20th century, modern novelists were more concerned with abstract qualities of composition. Literary realism had attempted to represent mental states rather than to imitate the external world. Amidst a variety of genres, a new kind of literary genre flourished which was termed as Magical Realism. Magical realism was an art movement that appeared in 1920 in painting and then came in vogue in literature in 1930s and 1940s. German art critic Franz Roh is supposed to be the one who had first used the term magical realism in 1925, to refer to a painterly style also known as Neue Sachlichkeit (the New Objectivity). German magic realist painting influenced the writers worldwide. Italian writers, Latin American writers, English writers, Bengali writers and many other writers from different parts of the globe practiced magical realism in their work of art. The term magical realism gives the realist view of the modern world in addition with magical elements. The term magical realism is an oxymoron. It consists of two opposite words magic and realism. The two words magic and realism are poles apart. The word magic reminds us of an art that purports to control or forecast natural events or forces by evoking the supernatural. On the other hand, realism is just opposite to magic. It represents the utmost reality of the world as it is without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. The term magic realism suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly of fantasy. In a magical realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place. It results in creation of a different type of fictional world that is different from its predecessor. Since the ground rules of these two words realism and fantasy are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other", a situation which creates this junction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absence and silence.

As stated, in 20th century, many writers worked and developed the literary genre of magic realism. Among the variety of works produced, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is the best example of magical realism. It is a true representative of the magical realist novels. The greatness of the novel stands on the historiography of magical realism. Magical realism with historiography is a form in which our real world re-emerges before our eyes. It is an altered realism. It represents mystical and non-material aspects of reality.

Plot of the novel :

The theme of the novel which describes the post-independence lives of children born at midnight of India's independence has both dimensions, post-colonial and political. It fictionalizes the events of Indian history from the moment of the birth of the nation in 1947 till the declaration of the Emergency by the then Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The novel starts with the end of colonial rule but does not miss its impact on the lives of the people born at midnight of independence of India. The faith of the children born at midnight is linked with the faith of the nation. We see a fusion of physical reality and psychological human reality in an effective way in *Midnight's Children* as a magical realist novel. The text of the novel depicts physical reality accurately. Rushdie has tried to build the reality from scraps of information. The novel is built of facts and figures, dates and events from Amritsar to Bangladesh, and two world wars. Along with it its characters are also real. They act and suffer as real human beings while the psychological reality in the novel is expressed in emotions and thoughts of characters. The protagonist of the novel has imaginary friends. He expresses his thoughts and emotions through telepathy. The novel has fantastical elements in its structure and theme like those of other magical realist novels. The fantastic elements are logical. Though the fantastic elements are logical, the reader accepts them rather than questioning the logic of magical elements. All midnight's children have been endowed with certain magical power and it is through them that they learn to accept the fantastic element in the novel. The other characters too range from the absolutely human to the striking super-human, from a man in general to witches and wizards. In this way they are not true real characters rather they are fantastic characters. These fantastic elements in the novel are hard to believe but still reader accepts them. They don't raise question about magical elements.

The author in the presentation of the text distorts time. He collapses time in order to create a setting in which the present resembles the past. The birth of Saleem's son resembles the birth of Saleem. Saleem was born at the midnight of the independence while his son Adam Sinai was born at the midnight of the Emergency. The effect of the independence on Saleem is that he is a free man, while the effect of the Emergency on Adam Sinai is that he is a mute baby and at the time of birth he did not cry. The speechlessness of the infant signifies the fear of people under the dark days of the Emergency. So like his father he has also become handcuffed to the history. In this way, the present resembles the past. Like this there are so many incidents present in the novel that show of collapses of time. It also inverts cause and effect. The characters suffer before the tragedy occurs. The book ends leaving the reader uncertain whether to believe the events of the story. Like other magical realist novels, *Midnight's Children* is also full of sensory details and the symbols and imagery. They are used without their reader consciously noticing them. The symbols of Radha and Krishna, Rama and Sita and Laila and Majnu are used from classical myths. Main characters of the novel Parvati, Shiva and Ganesh, each represent distinct aspects of the national style. Emotions and sexuality in the novel are present as a social construct. The hero Saleem Sinai has a muslim name but his father is a Christian and mother is Hindu. His opponent Shiva is a notorious seducer. He has fathered many children with innumerable women and wives across the country. He has the habit of losing interest in pregnant women and deserted them.

Magic Realism in English Literature:

Magic Realism got its introduction in arts through paintings. However, it was not surprising to see its influence and advent in English literature in the early decades of the twentieth century. Some of the pioneer works in magic realism in literature are contributed by Jorge Luis Borges from Argentina, Gabriel García Márquez from Columbia, Isabel Allende from Chile who were welcomed and widely praised by audience. Jorge Luis Borges published collections of short stories in Spanish in 1940s. His collections, *Ficciones* (Fictions) and *El Aleph* (The Aleph) are considered to be the initiation of magic realism in Latin American literature. Gabriel García Márquez was one of the most significant authors of 20th century. His book *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) was published in 1967 which brought him accolades and fame as a novelist of magic realism within Latin American literature. Isabel Allende is a well-known

figure famous for his novel *La casa de los espíritus*, 1982 (The House of the Spirits) and is supposed to be the most widely read Spanish language author. However, the magic realism in English literature is prominently attributed to Salman Rushdie in the early 1980s. His first novel, *Grimus* was published in 1975 which could not bring much commercial success to his name. He further published the masterpiece *Midnight's Children* in 1981 which catapulted him to great heights of success and international fame. An immigrant author, Rushdie contributed to English literature giving stroke of genius like *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and others. *Midnight's Children* is an exemplary novel woven with threads of magic realism. The novel became recipient of the Booker Prize in 1981. It was also awarded the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the English Speaking Union Literary Award in the same year. It is one of the bestsellers of its time which broke records by selling more than one million copies in the UK alone. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Booker Prize, a Booker of Bookers Prize was given. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was selected by the judges to be "the best novel out of all the winners". Subsequently in 2008 on the occasion of 40th anniversary of Booker Prize, The Best of the Booker prize was once again announced in the name of *Midnight's Children*. In 2003, the novel was listed on the BBC's The Big Read poll of the UK's "best-loved novels". It was also added to the list of Great Books of the 20th Century, published by Penguin Books.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was not only appraised by the readers and the critics, but also it encouraged other contemporary writers to pursue the style of magic realism in their work. Rushdie brought in the genre of magic realism in English literature which was followed and enjoyed by many English novel and story writers. Readers from all across the globe loved and welcomed this new trend. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* became a trendsetter and milestone in the history of English literature. British author Angela Carter wrote a novel *Nights at the Circus* published in 1984 which bagged the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction. *Beloved* is a 1987 novel by the American writer Toni Morrison which gained popularity as one of Morrison's most accomplished novels. It won many literary awards including Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. Yann Martel wrote *Life of Pi* (2001) depicting the story of an Indian boy who survives 227 days on a lifeboat with a tiger after a shipwreck in the ocean. The genre of magic realism is also seen in other notable novels including *The Particular Sadness of Lemon*

Cake by Aimee Bender (2010) and *The Daughter of the Doctor and the Saint* by Edward Swift (2011). The famous Indian author Arundhati Roy followed the suit of Rushdie and contributed in the genre of magic realism through her novel *The God of Small Things* published in 1997. This novel subsequently won the Booker Prize in 1997. Another notable novel in the stride has been *The Woman Warrior* (1989) by Maxine Hong Kingston.

Magic realism has also been adopted by authors from other languages like in *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* (1986), a Chinese language novel by Mo Yan; in *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), a Spanish novel by Laura Esquivel; in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994), a Japanese novel by Haruki Murakami; in *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), a Japanese novel by Haruki Murakami (2002).

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that Rushdie has taken a lot from the tradition of fiction but as a great talent in the fiction he gives a new architecture to the art of fiction. The novelty in his fiction lies in the historiography of novel. Rushdie amalgamates historiography with magical realism in such a way that his novel becomes an epic in prose. The greatness lies not only in architecture, but also in its theme too. Rushdie depicts the history of a great country which is quite new to the taste of the novel reading public. An epic has sublimity of thoughts and its scale of time is also great. *Midnight's Children* encompasses the whole of Indian history from pre-independence to post-independence. It describes the political events of a great country. It includes all major events from Jalianwala Bagh to Emergency led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Political personalities described in the novel are Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Jai Prakash Narayan and a lot of others are true to facts. Besides, Rushdie also shows a contradiction between religious and national feelings in the lives in the Dr Aziz, Saleem and a number of other characters. The centre of all the events is a muslim family of Dr Aziz. The story told in the novel shows that Rushdie has intimate knowledge with them. Thus we can say that Rushdie's contribution to the fiction is in his hybridization of historiography with magical realism. It has made the novel a milestone in the history of English fiction.

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