

Embellishing The Farce & the Tragedy in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Prof Manminder Singh Anand

Asstt. Prof. in English, Punjabi University Neighbourhood Campus, Jaitu. 151506 Pb. India. Mob:
919876807966

ABSTRACT

*The present paper attempts to analyze the romantic aspects of fact - Fiction , Magic - Realism and the fusion of the former and the latter . This fusion of the real and the magical can be understood in terms of a double lineage, a convergence of two distinct narrative traditions. "Magic Realism" can also be clubbed as a term used by critics to describe a mingling of the mundane with the fantastic. An attempt has been made to focus on the fictional , exotic and uncanny aspects in seminal texts like *Midnight's Children* , *Wide Sargasso sea* , Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* , *One Hundred Years of Solitude* etc and also to compare and contrast their specific preferences. The paper, thus, seeks to present an overview of Magic Realism whose hallmark is to reveal itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourses. Magical Realism serves as a form of global mediation that hybridizes the modern and the traditional, the Western and the Non - Western, the realistic and the fabulous, the literary and the oral narrative traditions, the secular and the religious, the sophisticated and the popular, Modern and Pre - Modern ways of life, it nonetheless manages this fusion on the terms of and within the parameters established by global modernity.*

Keywords:

Fact ; Fiction; Fable ; Magic Realism ; Illusion ; Exotic ; Diaspora ; India ; post colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie is a British Indian novelist and essayist who shot to fame with the publication of his second novel, *Midnight's Children*, which won him the Booker Prize in 1981. It was

later deemed the best booker – winning novel from the first 25 years , of the competition earning the title of “Booker of Bookers” in 1993 and “ James Tait Black Prize” in 1981 . On the publication of this masterpiece ,New York Times remarked : “ The literary map of India is about to be re – drawn. *Midnight's children* sounds like a continent finding its voice .” Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), was the centre of a major controversy, provoking protests from Muslims in several countries. Salman Rushdie was placed under FATWA (Death Sentence) by Iran's Ayotollah Khomeini in 1989 for blasphemy in handling the character of the prophet.^[1]

Salman Rushdie unleashed his views about his epic but controversial book “The Satanic Verses” in an interview with Peter Kadzisthat : “ It was the least political novel I'd even written . I thought it was a novel of introspection but it turned into the most public novel I'd ever written”^[2] About the book being burned in England , Rushdie Averred , “ well all I can say is , it was the most shocking moment of my life , and I think the moment when I actually saw television images ,photographs of my book being burned was the moment that engendered in me the kind of fury that I can't remember other-wise feeling..... I had to find my feet again. I had to learn how to fight back. I had to find the strength it get back to writing”^[3] Naguib Mahfouz, the winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature, criticized Khomeini for "intellectual terrorism" but changed his view later and said that Rushdie did not have "the right to insult anything, especially a prophet or anything considered holy." The Nobel writer V.S. Naipaul described Khomeini's fatwa as "an extreme

form of literary criticism." The world wide condemnation of the 'fatwa' only added to the intensity of the novel as a text which transcended history.

MAGICAL REALISM

Salman Rushdie is universally recognized for the fusion of the magical realism with historical fiction; his work is concerned with the many connections, disruptions and migrations between East and West. Salman Rushdie and R.K.Narayan can be labelled as fantasy writers , they write two different kinds of fantasies.

"The failure and identity appears to be the dominating theme of the two novelists which they fantasize in their individualistic manners". Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children has been compared in its scope and execution to works such as James Joyce's "Ulysses" , Gunter Grass's "The Tin Drum" , Laurence Sterns' "TristramShandy" and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's " Wide Sargasso Sea". Midnight's Children, a sprawling , humorous and aggressive book that mixes fact and fantasy with a linguistic extravanza never seen in Indian writing in English before brought Rushdie unprecedented international fame and recognition. Midnight's Children excellently illustrates Rushdie's strategy of Indianising , Revitalizing and de-colonizing the English language by subjecting it to a process of verbal and syntactic dis-location and adaptive native idioms and cultural Referants. Midnight's Children is a " novel of memory" whereas Shame is a " novel about truth".^[4] Both the novels dramatize the sterility of materialism . "Midnights Children incorporates the stupendous Indian past with its pantheon,its epics ,and its wealth of folklore and fairy tales , while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present." The film was premiered in September 2012 at the Toronto International Film Festival (2012-09-09)and the Vancouver International Film Festival (2012-09-27).^[5]

Midnight's Children has been widely acclaimed as literary " tour de force". It has won plaudits of its author,Salman Rushdie,

from critics throughout the Anglo – Saxon world .The first person narrative is subjective , though the narrator , Saleem Sinai , claims omniscience as he speculates on the motives and thoughts of all the major characters . The novel covers a time span of 60 years (1917 – 77). SaleemSinai , The semi – autobiographical narrator and the central figure in the book , has definite affinities with the Oscar in "The Tin Drum". Through out the story , Saleem seeks to uncover or discover the connections between the personal and the national to the history of India from the period between the First World War and the Indian emergency (1975-1977) when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution and democracy all but collapsed in the country . This connection between Saleem and his national "twin" is a difficult to delineate onehand . From the outset of the narrative Saleem feels that he has been " handcuffed to history " rather than liberated. Salman Rushdie on his narrative enunciated : "what I tried to was to set up a tension in the text , A paradoxical opposition between the form and conent of the narrative."

MAGIC REALISM : Embellishing the "farce and tragedy"

Magic Realism, a term coined by Alejo Carpentier in 1949 to describe a new trend of writing that blended fantastic elements into realistic settings, has gradually grown into a literary phenomenon to be reckoned with. This fusion of the real and the magical can be understood in terms of a double lineage, a convergence of two distinct narrative traditions. "Magic Realism" can also be clubbed as a term used by critics to describe a mingling of the mundane with the fantastic. The paternity of the magical realist novel is traceable to the Western European realistic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries.It has produced literary masterpieces like Gunter Grass's 'Tin Drum' and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' which have stood the test of time and have been hailed as influential to



world literature as a whole.

In 1981, Salman Rushdie published Midnight's Children, a novel that one can say belongs to the genre of magic realism. Though the genre has been totally dominated by Latin American writers -Garcia Marquez, Juan Rulfo, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel- the Indian author Rushdie holds his own. Not only does he employ Magic Realism -the fantastic, the magical, the strange- as a useful technical tool, but he transcends it to portray the almost unreal and surreal dimensions of the Indian subcontinent. And much like the Latin American writers, he brings a magical and refreshing view of the effects of colonialism.

In Midnight's Children, Rushdie turns to Hindu mythology, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the legends of the life of the Buddha. By analyzing in detail the type of magic realism exemplified by Rushdie's fiction, this study breaks new ground as the first to consider the entire corpus of Rushdie's magic realist fiction that is Shame, The Satanic Verses, The Moor's Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Shalimar the Clown, and The Enchantress of Florence highlighting the disharmony and ambivalence created through the conjunction of realism and the supernatural.

Midnight's Children took its title from Nehru's speech delivered at the stroke of midnight, 14 August 1947, as India gained its independence from England. Written in exuberant style, this comic allegory of Indian history revolves around the lives of the narrator Saleem Sinai and the 1000 children born after the Declaration of Independence. All of the children are given some magical property. Saleem has a very large nose, which grants him the ability to see "into the hearts and minds of men." His chief rival is Shiva, who has the power of war. Saleem, dying in a pickle factory near Bombay, tells his tragic story with special interest in its comical aspects. The work aroused a great deal of

controversy in India because of its unflattering portrait of Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, who was involved in a controversial sterilization campaign.

PARODY AND SATIRE

Midnight's Children, contains a great deal of parody and satire of India-but all done with artistry. For those who are language-oriented, the novel owns a treasure of hyperbole, similes, and metaphors: as when he refers to "pickles of history." Pickles, for those who like them and eat them, leave a sour taste in your mouth, just like some episodes of Indian history. To give us his own interpretation of reality, Rushdie posited, "Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts." And he goes on to insert a series of tales and legends within the novel.

In Rushdie's Midnight's Children, the chapters written by the narrator, Saleem Sinai, are punctuated by the often irreverent "oral" interjections, corrections, and tales of Padma, Saleem's illiterate companion and auditor. Rushdie's audience is reminded that the magical realist novelist stands over and above the traditional storyteller, whose role and function are ultimately subsumed by the magical realist writer. Rushdie's principle use of magic realism in the text involves the telepathic abilities of Saleem and the other thousand and one children born at the stroke of midnight on August 15th 1947 (the date of Indian independence), abilities that enable them to communicate with each other and in Saleem's case, to read the minds of those around him. Stephen Slemon firmly believes that 'in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a fictional world from the other'.

Saleem, tireless narrator, is an almost incredible character. No sooner has he told us a few verities than he quickly jabs at us with exaggerations. No sooner he treats a fact than



he contradicts it . No sooner he falls asleep than we see him acting in real life; No sooner he awakes than we know he's dreaming. And if that wasn't enough, the witch Paarvati changes Saleem into an invisible being for some time. Ah! What a fine writer can do with language! When Saleem says: "Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed, and pepper-pots....I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I-even I-had dreamed."

On the surface this is an innocuous juxtaposition, but on deeper scrutiny, we can see that Saleem is appealing to our sense of taste and smell, for pepper can be pungent and explosive. Just as One chuckle at "pickles of history," and when Saleem himself ushers : "Using my nose , it has acquired other compensatory gifts...." one smiles at Saleem's magical nose (or perhaps divine as in the elephant-headed god Ganesh).

This delicate ambiguity is emphasized in the final sentence of the text, which links magic with realism, the individual with history, the individual and regional identity and self-assertion with the magnet of the universal: '....it is the privilege of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and be unable to live or die in peace' .

FUSING TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Rushdie weaves a text that fuses tradition and current cultural influences to create an open-ended post-colonial discourse. Writing that 'the illusion itself is reality,' and thereby acknowledging the hypnotic grip of the magic emitted by the cinema, Rushdie both questions and acknowledges the power of the medium as a component of a hybrid post-colonial Indian culture. As Linda Hutcheon states firmly : 'In granting value to the margin or Other, the post-modern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality,

even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre' . She concludes by noting that : "The regionalism of magic realism and the local and particular focus of post-modern art are both ways of contesting not just this centrality, but also claims of universality."

"it is a text that 'self-consciously reconstructs its relationship to what came before' . The post-modern is linked by magic realism to 'post-colonial literatures [which] are also negotiating....the same tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with the past".

MAGIC REALISM AS CONFLUENCE OF POST MODERNISM AND POST-COLONIALISM

The formal technique of magic realism,(with its characteristic mixing of the fantastic and the realist) has been singled out by many critics "as one of the points of conjunction of post-modernism and post-colonialism" The narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of an tale comprising his life story ,which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma. This self-referential narrative (within a single paragraph Saleem refers to himself in the first person: 'And I, wishing upon myself the curse of Nadir Khan....'; ' "I tell you," Saleem cried, "it is true...."') recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted *Arabian Nights*. The events in Rushdie's text also parallel the magical nature of the narratives recounted in the *Arabian Nights* (consider the attempt to electrocute Saleem at the latrine, or his journey in the 'basket of invisibility' .In *Midnight's Children*, the narrative comprises and compresses Indian cultural history. 'Once upon a time,' Saleem muses, 'there were Radha and Krisna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu; also (because we are not affected by the West) Romeo and Juliet, and Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn' .

At this point Hutcheon's post-modern perspective can be discerned: characters from Indian cultural history are chronologically intertwined with characters from Western culture, and the devices that they signify -- Indian culture, religion and storytelling, Western drama and cinema -- are



presented in Rushdie's text with post-colonial Indian history to examine both the effect of these indigenous and non-indigenous cultures on the Indian mind and in the light of Indian independence. It is in this sense, which blends with Loomba's theory as quoted above, that Midnight's Children is a post-colonial text, via its presentation and examination of the temporal and cultural status of India as an independent nation. This, as Edward W. Said writes, has been initiated in the text to portray the 'conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories....[This] is of particular interest in Rushdie's work'.

According to Hutcheon, magic realism can therefore be described "as a device binding Indian culture of the past to the contemporary multicultural interface." The fantastic is easily discerned in Midnight's Children. Through it, the realistic makes its voice heard. The thousand and one children point not only towards the fantasy of the similarly numbered Arabian Nights, but also to Rushdie's calculations of the Indian birth rate. He estimated that 'a thousand and one children an hour is roughly accurate'.

CONCLUSION

Thus to sum up, Magic realism reveals itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourses. Magic Realism serves as a form of global mediation that hybridizes the modern and the traditional, the Western and the Non-Western, the realistic and the fabulous, the literary and the oral narrative traditions, the secular and the religious, the sophisticated

and the popular, Modern and Pre - Modern ways of life, it nonetheless manages this fusion on the terms of and within the parameters established by global modernity. Salman Rushdie can be considered as the Indian counterpart of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in employing magical realism. His Midnight's Children and Shame have extra doses of this typical Latin American magic. As anticipated, it was a familiar journey through Rushdie world but less magic and more realism in this novel.

REFERENCES

- [1.] Mullan, John. "Salman Rushdie on the writing of Midnight's Children." *Guardian*. 26 July 2008.
- [2.] Rushdie, Salman (2002). *Step across this line: collected nonfiction 1992–2002*. Random House. p. 77. ISBN 0-679-46334-8.
- [3.] Jha, Subhash K. (31 March 2011). "Darsheel Safary Darsheel Safary in Midnight's Children". *Times of India*. Retrieved 20 May 2011.
- [4.] "Deepa finds Midnight's Children lead". *Times of India*. 21 August 2010. Retrieved 9 April 2011.
- [5.] Nolen, Stephanie (15 May 2011). "Mehta at midnight". *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved 17 May 2011.