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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S FICTIONAL FORTE IN BLENDING HISTORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE STYLE INTO ONE AS GLITTERING IN HIS *MID NIGHT'S CHILDREN*: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Salman Rushdie's functional forte in blending history, autobiography and language style into one in his novel *Midnight's Children*, taking instances from the novel where the autobiography of a particular character blends with the history of the Nation, this paper shows this novel as a perfect blend of history, autobiography, technique and language style. Thus, this paper picturizes *Midnight's Children* as a portrayal of Indianness and historical consciousness in his fictional world.

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INTRODUCTION

Every nation has its own language and literature – English literature, American literature, Canadian literature, Australian literature etc., India has Indian literature but the Indian literature comprises several literatures – Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Bengali, Assamese, Gujarathi, Punjabi etc. A new literature is added to this list – Indian literature written in English. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it, "English is but one of the languages in which India speaks" (P 3). Though it is a new voice, it is as much Indian as the others. The beginning of Indo-English literature depended on the propaganda of the English language in India. This underwent a faster development in the first part of the nineteenth century during the period of which a good number of poems got published imitating the masters of English poetry like Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Tennyson. In the second part of the nineteenth century, sketches, narratives, disguised autobiographies with Indian scenes are presented to interest the English speaking public. Thus emerged Indian literature in English. The novel as a literary phenomenon is new to India. Epics, Lyrics, dramas, short stories and fables have their respectable ancestries, going back by several centuries but it is only during a period of little more than a century that the novel – the long sustained piece of prose fiction has occurred and taken roots in India. To quote V.S. Naipaul:

"The Novel which is a form of social inquiry and as such outside the Indian Tradition had come to India with the British. By the late nineteenth century, it had become established in Bengal, and had then spread. But it was only towards the end of the British period, in the 1930's that serious novelists appeared" (P 9).

The Indian literary firmament possesses a rich, hoary background of story-telling – only the form is in verse. But the novel as a medium of story-telling and art is of the West and is alien to India's story-telling. V.S.Naipaul writes:

"The Novel is of the West. It is part of that Western Concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now ... In India, thoughtful men have preferred to turn their looks on the here and now and to satisfy what Dr. Radhakrishnan calls, 'the basic human hunger for the unseen'. It is not a good qualification for the writing or reading of novels....It is part of the mimicry of the West, the Indian Self-violation" (PP 18-19).

In the words of Watson, "... society influences fiction, so does fiction influence society" (P 184). Of all the literary genres, the novel is considered to be the most important, society-oriented genre for it portrays human society with its myriad personalities. Michael Zarraffe comments thus:

"The Novel is the first one to represent man explicitly as defined historically and socially" (P 39). In the words of Barker, "... novels should be no mere reproduction of things

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or events so far as words can reproduce but interpretation” (P 6). A novelist is an ardent observer of events and he records in his mind and later he interprets in his writings. He serves as a bridge between the past and the available present. Ralph Fox observes:

“The novelist, therefore, has a special responsibility both to the present and the past of his country. What he inherits from the past is important, because it shows what are the sections of his country’s cultural heritage which have meaning today. What he says of the present is important, because he is assumed to be expressing what is most vital in the spirit of his time” (P 65).

Today, novel has acquired a significant place in Indian writing in English. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, English literary activities flourished in Bengal. The historical reason is that they established its roots at Calcutta Presidency and the consequent impact of Western ideas and culture, the growth of the press. The early novelists who hailed from Bengal are: Romesh Chandra Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Raj Mohan’s Wife* (1864), Romesh Chandra Dutt’s *The Lake of Palms* (1902), Sarobji’s *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1910), Madhaviah’s *Tillai Govindan* and Jogendra Singh’s *Nasrin* (1915) did concentrate on the historical and social issues along with important issues like emancipation of woman and religious reforms. Deeply influenced by the epoch-making political, social and ideological uprising caused by the Gandhian Movement, the novelists tried to present a realistic presentation of life. H.M. William aptly says:

“... the emergence of the Indo-Anglian novel of social realism and social revolution after World War I can be seen as both an Indian phenomenon (related to the newly active nationalist movement among the intellectuals and the masses) and as part of the English social realism of the period” (P 36)

The most important that took place in the history of Indian English fiction in the nineteen thirties is the appearance of the major trio: Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. They all published their first works between 1935 and 1936. Following them, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manokar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Sudhir Ghose, G.V. Desani, Balachandra Raja, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai Shashi Deshpande, Arun Joshi, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie and a few others like Vikram Seth made a mark in Indian English fiction thereby paying attention to treatment of social and historical consciousness projected rather effectively in their fictional world, out of whom Salman Rushdie emerged as a notable literary star in the horizon of Indian fiction. Salman Rushdie was born in June 19, 1947 in Bombay for a Muslim businessman Anis Ahmed Rushdie and his wife Negin. In 1954, he attended English Mission School in Bombay. In 1961, at the age of 14, he was sent to England to study at Rugby School. During 1965-68, he took a degree in History from King’s College, Cambridge. While acting at the Oval House Kennington in London, he got in touch with Clarissa Laurd in 1969 and married her in 1976 and had Zafar Rushdie as his son through her. The marriage with Clarissa Laurd got dissolved in 1987. Again in 1988, he married an American novelist Marriane Wiggins which too got dissolved in 1992. After his acting career, he as a full-time writer started

working on free-lance and commissioned articles for various newspapers and magazines. He had the privilege of working as an Honorary Professor in the Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He has to his credit publication of such notable works as 1. *Grimus* (1975), 2. *Mid Night’s Children* (1981), 3. *Shame* (1983), 4. *Satanic Verses* (1988), 5. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), 6. *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), 7. *The Wizard of Oz* (1992), 8. *East, West* (1994), and 9. *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995).

Rushdie’s all novels contain features of ‘Magic realism’ mixing and juxtaposing the realistic and the fantastic, skillful time shifts, labyrinthine narratives, plots and elements of surprise and abrupt shocks. Rushdie’s career as a writer is a remarkable success story, for he won a number of literary awards and prizes. *Midnight’s Children* won him the Booker prize and the James Tait Black Prize. *Shame* got him the French prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger. *The Satanic Verses* gave him the Whitebread Prize for best novel and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* received writers Guild Award. The subject matter for Rushdie’s novels are always countries and their histories as evident in his works: *Midnight’s Children* for India and *Shame* for Pakistan. He also takes religion as his theme in *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie is always compared to European and American contemporaries. Though they share some common qualities as they are termed as ‘magic realist’ Rushdie differs from them in his treatment of history and in his presentation. Rushdie’s contemporaries treat history in a higher sense but Rushdie neither laughs nor negates history. By his powerful language style, Rushdie presents the Indianness and historical consciousness in his fictional world.

Midnight’s Children is “mainly an autobiography of Saleem Sinai, it is also the history of India during the period of action” (Parameswaran 20). The story is narrated by thirty-one year old Saleem Sinai who works at a pickle factory in Bombay. Every day he works in the pickle factory and every night, he writes his autobiography and narrates to Padma, a co-worker. He says that his fate did not begin just before his birth, but it began even before his conception. Saleem Sinai, who is born at the stroke of midnight in August 14-15, 1947, when India woke up to freedom. Saleem Sinai narrates the story to Padma, “his necessary ear” (MNC 149). The novel begins with Saleem’s grandfather Adam Aziz as a young doctor, a liberal humanist, idealist with shades of Marxism. He falls in love with Naseem Ghani when he went to give treatment through a white bed sheet with a seven inch hole in it. Adam gets married to Naseem Ghani and gives birth to three children – “twenty one year old Alia, black Mumtaz and pretty, flighty Emerald” (MNC 52).

These midnight’s children have special magical gifts, Saleem has the gift to enter the minds of other people and communicate telepathically, one could travel through time, another could disappear in one reflecting surface to emerge through another and yet another could use his knees lethally. They organized a club called ‘Midnight’s Children Club – MCC. After the assassination of Mian Abdullah, founder of Free Islam Convocation, his secretary Nadir Khan seeks refuge at Adam’s house. There he marries Amina Sinai which ends abruptly. Amina Sinai is again married to Ahmed Sinai. In Dr. Narlikar Nursing home, Vanita, wife of Willie Winkie seduced by Methwold gives birth to a male child and at the same night, Amira Sinai gives birth to a male child in the same hospital - at

midnight on August 15, in 1947. Mary Pereira, the nurse, who is overwhelmed by her lover's Marxist ideas changes the babies and feels satisfied with her contribution to the mission of leveling up of the society between 'haves' and 'have not's'. After switching of babies, the real Sinai grew up in slums, as Shiva while the fake Sinai grew up in luxury. Adam Aziz, the grand father dies. Amina Sinai and her children – Saleem Sinai and Jamila, the Brass monkey, moves to Pakistan. In 1962, they return to India for a brief period and in February 1963, the Sinai's move permanently to Pakistan. The Indo-China war is in full swing and the whole family perishes except for his sister, who is now a singing star.

In 1965 to 1970, he becomes the citizen of Pakistan and leads the Pakistan soldiers when East-Pakistan was about to secede and became Bangladesh. From there, he escapes to Dacca with three other soldiers. Saleem becomes inactive while Shiva acts in a fastidious manner. Saleem here forgets his identity. Saleem meets Parvati, a witch who rein fuses his identity to him. From Dacca, they escape to Delhi. Shiva meets Parvati and deserts her as she gets pregnant. Parvati gives birth to a child on June 12, 1975, the baby Adam. Rushdie deals with Judie exclusively. He deals with politics, religion, films, the Nanavathi case, the Pokhran explosion, Slum clearance in Delhi, mass vasectomy and the election when Janatha Party gained its power. The dominant theme in *Midnight's Children* is the blend of history and autobiography. Rushdie is gifted with the power of fusing the private life of one person – Saleem Sinai and the public events of the sub-continent to create a remarkable legend. "History is part of Human certainty. It makes man real" (Rao 84). Very few things remain unaffected by history. People don't give much importance to history of the nation. History teaches you not to commit the same blunder, because history often repeats itself. Nobody realised this fact more fully than Rushdie. Rushdie is always compared to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Saul Bellow, John Barth etc., A large number of European and American contemporaries have been fascinated by history, both past and present. The contemporary novelist's inclination towards history is explained by Barth in the following words:

"If you are a novelist of a certain type of temperament, then what you really want to do is re-invent the world... and this impulse to imagine alternatives to the world can become a driving impulse for writers. I confess that it is for me. So that really what you want to do is the re-invent philosophy and the rest make-up your own whole history of the world" (Enck 12).

Rushdie rewrites recent Indian history with the same impulse. Though Rushdie and his American contemporaries deal with history, Rushdie differs from them, not only in his treatment of history but also in the presentation of his theme – History. Rushdie's American and European contemporaries mock at all systems and undermine serious historical studies. They produce their own versions of history and make a deliberate attempt to order the chaos of history. They play at history and with history. Barth in his novels treats history in a higher sense. He laughs at it uproariously. He treats history as a joke played on man. This response of Barth is typical of several European and American post-modernist novelists. On the contrary, Rushdie neither undermines nor laughs at history. Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* reveals that history is all important and is to be taken seriously. History is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the protagonist. Of course,

like several writers Rushdie does colour history with his imagination. For Rushdie, without history, it is difficult to establish one's identity. According to him, a perfect understanding of an individual is possible only by placing him in a proper historical background. On the other hand, the history of a nation can be understood only through the life-stories of individuals. Rushdie is similar to Anita Desai in the concept of history. Anita Desai writes:

"While individual history does not make sense unless seen against its national background, neither does national history makes sense unless seen in the form of individual lives and histories" (P. 365).

Saleem Sinai, the narrator-cum-protagonist is clearly "handcuffed to history" (MNC 9) of India by dating his birth at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. When India became independent from the handcuffs of British Empire. Saleem Sinai narrates his life story to Padma, who consoles him in the days of loneliness, alienation and anguish. He begins to narrate the tale by relating thirty two years of family history before his birth. This period parallels the time of Jallian Wallabagh massacre to the independence of India. Saleem Sinai records the circumstances of his birth.

"It is two minutes to twelve. At Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home, the dark glowing doctor, accompanied by a mid wife called Flory encourages Amina Sinai: 'Push Harder' 'I can see the head! ... While in the neighbouring room one Dr. Bose with Miss. Jeya Perira by his side presides over the terminal stages of Vanita's twenty-four hour labour ... 'yes, now, just one last try, come on; at last, and then it will be over'.... While in Delhi a wiry man is saying' At the stroke of midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom 'A moment comes ... but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance'" (MNC 116).

Rushdie makes use of Indian epics, folklore, and myths in narrating the lives of Saleem and his twin Shiva. Rushdie keeps Saleem Sinai at the centre and every event in Indian history is woven round him. Saleem Sinai born in Bombay on 15th August 1947 at the stroke of midnight, is the first child born in independent India. Saleem offers his autobiography but his story is the history of twentieth century India. The personal lives of Saleem Sinai are inextricably linked to the historical and the political events of India. As in the words of Saleem, he had been mysteriously handcuffed to history and his history or his destinies are chained to those of his country's history. Saleem Sinai narrates his birth here:

"I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there is 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" (MNC 9)

Jawaharlal Nehru records the event of freedom in his speech that India wakes up to freedom while the whole world is in sleep. India, after a long time of suppression discovered herself again. This random retelling of the political history of the protagonist in two ways: through events that are connected to him and through the events in which his friends or family members are linked. The first event narrated in *Midnight's Children* is the day Dr. Aziz gets to see Naseem Ghani's face. For three years, from the early spring day of 1915, when Tai,

the boatman had taken the doctor to his first house-call on Naseem Ghani. Dr. Aziz had seen, touched and thrilled at different parts of Naseem's body through the provided seven – inch hole white bed sheet. Adam Aziz with illicit desperation waited that Naseem would develop a headache or a scratch on her chin that would allow him to have a look at her face through the perforated sheet. "On the day world war ended, Naseem developed the 'longed – for' headache.' Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled my family's existence in the world" (MNC 27). The historical event is at national or world level. Just as the first World War came to an end after four years of action on different geographical fronts, Dr. Aziz three years of courting through different parts of her body ended with a face-to-face confrontation that argued for a fruitful future.

The second event in the novel related to history is the Jallian Wallahbagh Massacre. In 1919, the British government passed the Rowlatt Act, which gave unlimited powers, "doing away with ordinary legal procedure and authorising imprisonment without trial" (Majumdar 984). Gandhi called for nationwide protest meetings. As a reaction, on April 13, 1919, about 500000 people assembled at Jallian Walabagh, an enclosed park in Amritsar. General Dyer, Law commander of Amritsar, ordered to fire. "They fired 1600 rounds of ammunition into the unarmed crowd that had no means to exit. Even according to official estimates 379 persons were killed and 1200 wounded" (984). In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie records Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre thus:

"Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machineguns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their work killing or wounding some person"(MNC 36)

This incident reveals that Rushdie is fairly accurate about the historical facts. The next event that finds place in the pages of *Midnight's Children* is nothing but the rise and fall of Sheikh Abdullah, "Sher-e-Kashmir" – the lion of Kashmir. When the Muslim was firmly, established and stood for the 'birth of Pakistan, Sheik Abdullah; a Kashmiri Muslim founder of the Muslim National Conference, which leaned towards Gandhiji's "undivided India" a strand against the Muslim League. Sheik Abdullah, lived even after independence but Rushdie's Mian Abdullah founder of Free Islam Convocation, is killed Rushdie describes him as:

The optimism epidemic had been caused by onese single human being, whose name, Mian Abdullah, was only used by newspaper men. To everyone else, he was the humming bird, a creature which would be impossible if it did not exist. 'Magician turned conjurer', the newspapermen wrote, 'Mian Abdullah rose from the famous magicians ghetto in Delhi to become the hope of India's hundred million Muslims'. The humming bird was the founder, chairman, unifier and moving spirit of the Free Islam convocation" (MNC 90).

Mian Abdullah of *Midnight's Children* is killed by six assassins. "Six new moons came into the room, six crescent knives held by men dressed all in black" (MNC 47). But before he is killed, the humming bird hums so that the "long curved blades had trouble in killing him" (MNC 48). The humming bird's hum was heard by dogs because its decibels are beyond human ears. The dogs came in leap and bounds and

damaged the assassins to the core. Right from the first word of the novel, Saleem is very conscious of his historical centrality. His life is 'chained to history' and his birth at 'benighted moment' thrust upon him. He says:

"..... I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock –ridden, crime stained birth" (MNC 9).

The last event that finds in the pages of *Midnight's Children* is the election of 1977 when Janatha Party won the election by defeating Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Saleem does not see any performance in the Janatha Party, instead he has some bleakest prophecies for his son and his generation. He says:

"yes, they will trample me underfoot Reducing one To specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, They will trample my son who is not my son, and His son who will not be his ... until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their time andto be unable to live or die in peace" (MNC 463).

In the words of Uma Parameswaran said about *Midnight's Children*: "As an autobiography, the novel is very funny, very poignant, very authentic" (P 88). But Rushdie's aim is not to present a biographical account but to link 'autobiography and history'. Rushdie uses first person narrative which helps him to connect Saleem Sinai's life history with the history of India. He uses numerous devices to connect Saleem's personal story with the story of India between 1947 and 1977. There are three main structural devices – he uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points in history and symbolize their long – term significance; secondly, he links political and historical events with one or other of Saleem's circle of friends and family; thirdly he uses Padma as a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic level.

Saleem's face is compared to the map of India by his school teacher and the teacher pulls out a handful of hair thus leaving a tonsure – Kashmir? on his head. To conclude, traditional history always presents the biography of Kings and Generals whereas Rushdie's *MidNight's Children* implicitly presents the idea that the autobiography of a common man contains and participates in the making of history. Saleem Sinai is the symbol of India's Independence and he resembles India in every aspect. He had enough and serious links between him and India. He is handcuffed to Indian history and a tonsure on his head is Kashmir. No doubt, Rushdie blends history, autobiography, technique and languages into one. Rushdie's excellent success as a novelist glitters in his *MidNight's Children*.

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