

EXISTENTIAL ELEMENT IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract:

*Salman Rushdie's **Midnight's Children** is a remarkable success in its mixture of history, myth and autobiography. Steeped in fantasy, the novel pictures the cryptic and multi-layered reality of life in India. Rusdie, undoubtedly, finds his voice in the novel. It is a literary response to a series of a real life-situation masterfully fictionalized through illusions, direct and indirect. It alludes to the political trouble and turmoil of the country in the last quarter of the 20th century. It covers about six decades in the history of Indian sub-continent.*

The present paper makes an attempt to explore the existential problem of Saleem Senai the protagonist of the novel. The problem of existentialism has been made the subject of a number of creative writings and it has been discussed at length from various perspectives. The 'recurring themes' that comes under existentialism in one way or the other are impotency, existence before essence, alienation or estrangement; fear, dread and anxiety; encounter with nothingness; freedom, choice, and responsibility; finitude and temporality, emotional life of man; authentic failure of communication and death etc. But one should keep it in mind that all these characteristics of existentialism cannot be found in one particular writer. A piece of literature, therefore, dealing with the problem of man's essential misery and suffering, frustration and loneliness failure and sorrow, alienation and ennui is known as the part of existentialist literature.

Existentialism comes with the philosophers of nineteenth century as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and others. It was known in continental philosophy and literary personalities like Samuel Beckett, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, and Eugene Ionesco with the contribution of their works. In the years of 1940s and 1950s, French existentialists as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir wrote fictions which popularized the themes of alienation, absurdity, dread, boredom, nothingness, commitment and freedom. But it achieved its greatest popularity in the following years of II World War with the literary works of Jean Paul Sartre.

Saleem Senai, the protagonist of the novel makes the reader believe that his parents are Ahmed and Amina Senai, a wealthy Indian couple. In the middle of the novel it becomes clear, though, that after the delivery, the nurse Mary Pereira swapped two babies, so Saleem is actually not the midnight's child Saleem Senai, but he is swapped for Shiva. Saleem is the child of a poor man Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita. Nine months before the delivery, Vanita had sexual intercourse with the English man William Methwold, so that Saleem turns out to be of Anglo-Indian decent. This is something he constantly denies and rather chooses to believe that Ahmad and Amina are still his parents.

Saleem, right from the beginning comes to the grips of existential problems. He is born at the midnight of 15th of August 1947. He is forced to accept that his destiny is bound with the country. Being a midnight child he is born with divide-self witting or unwitting, he has to play a vital role because he believes he is tied to the history of a vast nation. Here the nurse, Mary Pereira who thinks that she is doing something good, hurls Saleem into a life of continual guilt and loss of identity by changing his name tags with another midnight child Shiva. Observing all of the things, it can be that Saleem Senai is not really what his name is but a product of unlawful relation between a leaving colonial Methwold and Vanita a poor

Indian woman. Here, too, his identity is not pure but a strange mixture of British and French blood. Thus, Saleem Senai remains in difficulty on the horns of dilemma right from the very beginning he is on the earth. Further, the act of Mary Pereira creates problem in his life. He is given into the hands Ahmina and Ahmad Senai, a Muslim parents and their own child is into the care of a Hindu family.

One of the problems of Saleem's fragmented identity is that he thinks himself unholy. Thinking that he is not exactly a real member of the Senai family and does not share blood ties with it, he carries his proposal of love to his sister Jamila forgetting all about the relation of many years with her. Saleem cannot distinguish between just and unjust, real and unreal. As he himself remarks,

“Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible.”(p.165)

However, Saleem's failures provide an aspect of reality which brings forth several confrontations-centre vs. ex-centric, real facts vs. imaginary facts etc. The readers come to realize what actually happened is an impossibility and unnecessary effort for Saleem's endless self-consciousness, revealing more truth than attempted one. The only truth is:

“It was- or am I wrong? I must rush on; things are slipping from me all the time a day of horrors. It was then- unless it was another day.”(p.413)

Both the action and the character emphasize the theme of identity in many ways in the novel. This identity is shown as confused, fractured, merged and superimposed. Sometimes, Saleem is also brought down to the level of an animal. As Saleem grows up, he comes across a number of existentialist problems. Saleem's father, Ahmad keeps him a powerful blow on his face which makes him permanent deaf with his left ear. He finds his own body disfigured. The face of Saleem is round quite unattractive and has a big nose like cucumber and disease afflicted body. During the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, he is hit by the silver spittoon and loses his memory, even his own name. He has been kept as dog in the form of a man for several years and a member of canine for intelligence works, in a type of 'Cutia' unit. At this his body got fully numb. During the emergency, the fragmented identity comes full circle. He is made a sub human which remains him impotent for the rest of his life.

Saleem has another problem of his parentage. He is to have many mothers and fathers. Vanita, the poor woman is his biological mother but Amina is the mother that rears him up. Mary Pereira becomes another one who brings him to the house by changing the surname etc. It is the lady with whom he passes the rest of the days of his life. Pia Aunt is his foster mother. In the sequence of fatherhood, Methwold is his father by blood. But Ahmed Senai who brings him up is also his father. The German snake doctor who confers Saleem a new life by curing him is another father to him. Zulfikar in Pakistan prefers him as his son and Picture Singh, the snake charmer who rescues him from Bangladesh and brings him back to India is the last one whom Saleem considers his fathers.

The fluttering psyche of Saleem can be felt when working in a pickle factory, at the age of thirty one, he preserves his history in pickle jars. He desires what he calls meaning by writing himself. He feels the significance that his adult life has taken away from him. According to Michael Gorra, Saleem “sees himself suffering from a peculiarly, Indian disease... [an] urge to encapsulate the whole of reality”

The thought of his physical weaknesses frustrates him when Saleem finds his hair losing, one joint of his finger, even he loses his sinuses and is castrated, and as a result, he disintegrates into 630 million fragments which is the same number as the number of inhabitants of India when the novel ends in 1978. Severally, he says that to understand him one has to swallow a world and he tries to understand his own fragmented identity. Thus, 'his sense of self is often conflicted and contradictory'.

A quarrel about the class-room door takes place at the time of his school dance and when it closes,

the middle finger of Saleem cuts off:

“I look my hand out of pure curiosity. My finger has become a fountain: red liquid spurts out to the rhythm of my heartbeat”(p.235)

He is, then, taken to the hospital where his mother meets him. The doctor asked about his blood group but Amina does not know and she tells the doctor that she is an A and her husband O. They are both rhesus positive. After the result of blood-test, Saleem is neither A nor O and rhesus negative. At this, Saleem father, Ahmad Senai suspects that Saleem is not his son. Saleem deeply thinks on this as:

“Opposition of inside and outside! Because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichthing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another next. The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Invisible, a one piece suit, a sacred temple ,if you will. It is important to preserve this wholeness. But the loss of my finger (which was conceivably foretold by the pointing digit of Raleigh's fisherman), not to mention the removal of certain hair from my head, has undone all that. Thus we enter into a state of affairs which is nothing short of revolutionary; and its effect on history is bound to be pretty damn startling. Uncork the body, and God knows what you permit to come tumbling out. Suddenly you are forever other than you were; and the world becomes such that parents can cease to be parents, and love can turn to hate. And these, mark you, are only the effects on private life. The consequences for the sphere of public action, as will be shown, are- were- will be no less profound.”(p.236-7)

The reader, therefore, comes to feel that Saleem is emotionally shattered, for he does not feel worthy for his parents' love and affection. And he is lost in the world of depression and isolation contemplating of his real identity and existence.

Thus, with his fragmented self, Saleem finds his existence surrounded with a number of puzzling questions that torment his soul. His life passing through different phases witnesses such rapid changes as overwhelm his psyche. In a series of fleeting relationship Saleem is unable to associate himself with a single one and keeps on faltering trying to grasp the elusive threads which despite his best effort are beyond his reach.

Works Cited

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