

**MAGICAL REALISM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHTS CHILDREN****Nirmal. A. R., Kamal, Chaluviya Road, Kannamba, Varkala, Trivandrum District, Kerala***Abstract:**

*Salman Rushdie's name is synonymous with magical realism in post-modernist phase. While his notoriety was established with *Satanic Verses*, which was seen as anti-Islamic in certain clerical circles prompting a fatwa against the writer, the work which cemented his prominence in international arena was the previous *Midnights Children*, inspired by his childhood experiences in India and Pakistan.*

**Key Words:** *Magic Realism, extremist, unstructured recollection.*

I had wanted for some time to write a novel of childhood, arising from my memories of my own childhood in Bombay. Now having drunk deeply from the well of India, I conceived a more ambitious plan (Rushdie, ix).

What was conceived as a childhood memoir in its production became a study of the cultural history of young India post- independence and a fantastical take on a mundane inconsequential life. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the novel was a child of the midnight of 1947 August 15, the day India became independent. This curious coincidence inextricably intervenes the life of Saleem with that of the fortunes of an emerging country. Furthermore birth of Saleem in the midnight of independence makes him the child of the West and East simultaneously. For Rushdie born in India, relocated to Pakistan during the aftermath of Partition, and finally settled in England, the question of loyalty has been a big one. While the writer was confined by the geographical barriers and the constraints of time, once living in a secret place for 8 years in England hiding from Islamic extremists, he enables his Protagonist to hide in a basket and magically get transported to India from Pakistan. Just like once Romanticism gave the poets the wings to soar above the brutal realities the post- modern writer makes use of magic carpets to bend reality. While we understand that magician is merely tricking us, and what we see is not real, we let him do that for as a spectator what we want is a good show. But once the fantastical world is established, it becomes increasingly difficult for the magician to bring on more and more surprises. The writer can make an elephant fly, but it does not stir us a second time. While we appreciate the craft, it no longer moves us for we have seen it somewhere else. In this context critics like Norbert Schurer argues that the success of the book is based less on its literary quality and more on the fact that it offers exotic landscapes to Western readers and assuages the colonial guilt of Western liberal critics by pretending to be Indian (86). The idea is to consider *Midnights Children* as an escapist literature, which cunningly avoids the pitfalls of societal and political questions by simply refusing to consider them. The problem with such an argument is that it undermines the novelist's efforts to consider the life of Saleem Sinai as a metaphor to the history of the world itself. Saleem Sinai's trajectory of life encompasses the politics and existential crisis of the time through which he lived. An understanding of this trajectory would enable us to have a deeper understanding of the character and the author.

Reena Mitra writes on the trajectory of the novel this way-

*Midnight's Children* is a literary response to a series of real life situations that have been cleverly fictionalized through allusions, disguised as well as direct, to the country's recent as well as not so recent past. The novel has an epic sweep covering about six decades in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Book one covers the time from Jalianwala Bagh incident to April, 1919 to the birth of the protagonist Saleem, on 15 August 1947; Book two extends up to the end of the Indo-Pakistan war in September 1965,

and Book Three envelops the period up to the end of the Emergency in March 1977, and includes the Bangladesh war as well (2).

The constant shift back and forth in time during Saleem's narration becomes a dominant theme in the telling of Saleem's life story. The narrator frequently refers to events or feelings that take place much later in his life. As a result of these shifts in time, Rushdie refers to almost every life event far before its occurrence and description in the novel. This method not only speaks to the tricks time plays, and to the unreliability of measures of time and the telling of history, but also to the theme of fragmentation. Much as Saleem must piece together the numerous elements and phrases of his life and heritage, the narrator calls upon the reader to solve the puzzle of Saleem's narration, which does not follow chronological or linear logic but rather rides the wave of his emotions.

In the same editorial passage in which he distinguishes between active and passive relations, Saleem makes a distinction between two “modes of connection” that join himself to the nation, the “literal” and the metaphorical” (232), a distinction obviously related to that between realism and magic. The connection that Saleem calls “metaphorical” which involves repetition across different scales is based on a narrative form shared by self and nation. The connection that Saleem calls “literal” relies instead on causality, on unidirectional links unfolding in time between agents and contiguous receivers of actions. According to Kortenaar author of *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's “Mid Nights Children”* this misnomer is significant for it betrays Saleem's awareness that, in the world of his readers, sympathetic magic is considered to have only a verbal existence and not a real (48).

The novel follows first person narrative; herein Saleem Sinai is emptying his heart to Padma the listener. The method allows room for stream-of-conscious mode of writing. Saleem Sinai structures his narrative after oral traditions and does not try too much to be consistent with stream-of-consciousness method. As an unpremeditated unstructured recollection in a casual atmosphere the narrative ticks almost all necessary boxes for stream-of-conscious writing style. Nor Saleem is a completely reliable narrator. At one time Saleem reports that he was shot through the heart by an old lover, just to retract his claims in the very next chapter. The fabrications and exaggerations are the very soul of the novel. These literary lies could very well be the novelist's idea of capturing the elusive reality. Search for parental figures, another main theme of the story is another side of the same quest. The fragmented person Saleem is trying to find some kind of a constant in his otherwise unstructured life. Many different individuals metaphorically father Saleem: the novel even suggests that Saleem is essentially the child of history. With each of his fathers' introduction into his life Saleem's existence undergoes a radical change equivalent to a rebirth.

As for the interplay of real and magical in the novel Kortenaar suggests that Saleem's twin models in this regard are Dr. Schaapstekar, of whom it is said that he had ‘the capacity of dreaming every night about being bitten by snakes, and thus remained immune to their bites’ (137), and the magicians in Delhi's ghetto who never confuse their sleight of hand with reality. The latter are ‘people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts’ (Kortenaar 60-61). Salman Rushdie's writing emphasizes sensory experiences as a means of expressing or receiving emotion. Smells, tastes, sights, sounds and feelings abound in Rushdie's descriptions of life experiences. Saleem writes of “a deafening wall of soundlessness” (54), a “bog of muteness” (54) and the “amniotic fluid of the past” (107). In Saleem's India the tropical heat breeds inchoate dreams-“the exotic flowers of the imagination in full blossom, to fill the close perspiring nights with odours as heavy as musk, which give men dark dreams of discontent (165). Rushdie thus establishes an intimate connection between sensory experience and memory.

The reader of *Midnight's Children* must piece together Saleem Sinai's narrative to extract meaning from it. As the narrative involves sudden shifts back and forth in time, as well as many instances of illusion, the reader must solve the puzzle of Saleem Sinai's life. Similarly, the characters in the novel, in the process of their search for self-definition, must attempt to solve the puzzle of their own identities. For example,

Adam Aziz gains a familiarity with Naseem Ghani, who will one day become his wife, through a perforated sheet. Adam may move the hole in the sheet to examine any given area. In this way Adam pieces together a puzzle of Naseem's appearance.

Rushdie himself recalls an amusing experience after the publication of his novel in "Midnights Children and Shame:

I went on a lecture tour to India...and I remember in Delhi a girl said to me, "Look, I have read your book, this *Midnights Children*: It's very long, but I read it." And then she said, "What I want to know is: what's your point?" "To my reply," Do I really have to have just one point?" she answered, "Yes of course. I know what you are going to say. You are going to say the whole book is the point from the beginning to the end, aren't you?" "Yes I said. "I thought so", she said. "It won't do" (2).

A reader can't but agree with the afore mentioned girl's observation. The novelist here does not have a single pointed focus. Neither has he believed that truth can be stated in a straight forwarded unambiguous way. In this way the magical realist techniques that he employs are more a method to capture his sense of reality than to enthuse readers with literary fireworks.

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