

HISTORY OR HIS STORY: SEARCHING FOR AN ANSWER IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*, A 'HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION'

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Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* chronicles Indian history from 1919, the year of Jallianwalabag Massacre, to 1978, the year when the Emergency was lifted. The intervening sixty years of Indian history are interrelated with the rise and fortunes of three generations of the Sinai family. The narration involves the microscopic family and the macroscopic nation into its account. Rushdie once stated that the novel "can be made to represent many things according to your point of view, they can be seen at the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing Twentieth Century economy". The novel follows the narration and the life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai to weave an alternative narration on the birth of the nation. *Midnight's Children* refers to the birth of Indian nations at the stroke of midnight on the day of Indian Independence.

The narrator-protagonist of Salman Rushdie's novel, Saleem Sinai is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history. As the novel follows the course of his narration and participation through a crystallisation of its evolving mood, retrospection or the distillation of his nostalgic vision, through this fiction, an alternative history is documented. Sinai's narration becomes sometimes critical, sometimes philosophical and somewhat ambivalent. The narration is self-conscious, self-reflexive, even paradoxical and critical of this narrative enterprise. With a project to simplify the vision of reality and make it meaningful, Sinai involves historical documentations, amnesia and historical narration coexist, thereby shattering the coherent grand narratives on the building of the nation. Rushdie accepted the novel as a sort of revisionist reading of Indian history from the microscopic perspective that takes into account undocumented historical and social facts, oral histories, subaltern histories and the contradictions inherent in the dominant history.

Midnight's Children is a panoramic epic on Indian social history passing through the most turbulent periods of nationalist struggle, independence and post-independence struggle for building a nation. As Fielding defines a novel, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is likewise an epic in prose that blends history with fiction, fiction with romance, romance with fantasy, and fantasy with history. Unlike historical novels, Rushdie sacrifices historical chronologicity, factual details regarding event, place, action, character, time etc., and then combines fictional narrative with historical narration. The novel presents discontinuous, random, fragmented, even obscure historical events by this experimental mode of narration that rejects chronologicity, logic, or signification. Things are seen as they are, or even as they might have been, or as the individuals

think they had been. The plurality of such narrations becomes the theme of the novel. The traditional model of historical discourse with its emphasis on cause, logic, consequence, lesson etc. is replaced by an unauthorized version of Indian history. The historian-as-author, with sufficient authority over the historical text or the narration of nation, is replaced by a subaltern narrator who does not claim any authority over history. The novel uses postmodern narrative strategies to weave a historical narrative from a postcolonial perspective. The colonized 'other' attempts to rewrite the history of the 'self' and 'nation' or 'nationhood' through this unique and experimental novel.

The narration of Indian history in the master-narratives is revisited for revision. Saleem Sinai's narration of a personal history is juxtaposed to the dominant history of the Indian nation. Historical discourse has always favoured the master class. History is an ideology, preserved, propagated, manipulated and stimulated. The authenticity of history is universally acknowledged although plurality and history are not often integrated. In anti-colonial writings, analysis of history has often accommodated multiple histories. Yet, such historical fields are often left unexplored or guarded for the safety of nationalist agenda. History is a method of writing about the 'self', 'nation', 'nationhood'. Like other structures that society finds, history too, is a superstructure shaped on the dominant perception of the base. Post-structuralism introduced a critique of a foundational history for uncovering marginalized histories. Rushdie's novel serves the same purpose. Within fictional mode, Rushdie attempts to rewrite or at least record multiple oral histories revolving around Saleem Sinai. Through the narrator, the subaltern speaks, attempting to link the self with the nation, being born at the stroke of midnight, on August 15, 1947, at the precise moment of India's independence.

According to Ania Loomba:

Histories written from anti-colonist perspectives have re-written the 'story' of capitalist development itself so that the 'grand narrative' of capitalism now appears in a very different light... (Loomba 244)

The postcolonial historiographical narrative attempts to dismantle the structure and create alternative space for subaltern histories. History is dynamic not because the perception of such events or dates change, but because the perception of such events undergoes regular evolution and renewals. History is shapeless and open-ended. In Rushdie's novel, it is marked by fragmentation, selective amnesia about history, even historical solipsism. This recognition of history as a personal one, often blurred by non-remembrance or the failure of remembering history which makes *Midnight's Children* a metafictional historical narrative. In the novel, we find a continuous engagement with history: a mutual reorganization of the 'personal' and the 'universal' history of Indian nation. According to Peter Hulme, there is a specific reason for moving away from grand narratives because "the grand narrative of decolonization has, for the moment, being adequately told and widely accepted. Hulme proposes that in the present circumstance smaller narratives are much in demand. Saleem Sinai's hi(s)/story is both a fictional 'story' and an autobiography (his story). The backdrop of Indian Independence, or the history of the nation covering a period spanning from 1919 to 1978 is coloured by intense subjectivity and fictionalization. The distinction between history and story is consciously broken by the narrator whose narrative is a continual engagement with the process of making narration and lives.

The epical span of the novel and the multi-layered discourses that incorporate heteroglossia and polyphonic structures allows the novelist to arrive at a configuration of fact and fiction. The documented history is replaced by an individualistic rediscovery of national history. Rushdie tries to strike the key-note of the novel by blurring the distinctions between the public and private histories. The emergence of the concept of nationhood is analysed to shape the new national narrative. In the Indian context, the book appears to be a pastiche of multiple perceptions of Indian reality in the post-independence scenario. The chronological history or biography is replaced by a free-flowing, fluid, both ephemeral and timeless histories of nation. The variegated mosaic of *Midnight's Children* displays a structural and thematic patterning of disparate elements, voices, narratives and perceptions. In the introduction to *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhaba points out that nationalism, by its very definition, is ambivalent. Such ambivalence on the concept of nation is mirrored in every form of national narrative. Saleem's internalization of the Indian national ethos is unique. He personifies India by integrating several of these disparate elements—the ambiguous past, the undefined present and the inexorable future. The persona and the political converge in this encounter with history. Saleem, the participant, Saleem the narrator and Saleem, the historian, converge at a point of exasperation and inexplicable confusion. His perception of history is modified by his role as a narrator, while his personal self interferes with both. The process of churning of events involves a unity in all its diversity. Saleem is a victim of history, and at the same time, its protagonist, according to Josna E. Rege.

The novel is a personified mixture of multiple histories. C.N. Ramachandran, in the essay “The Empire Lingers on: A Note on the Rushdie Phenomenon” refers to the favourable reception of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980. He points out that within no time the British and American critics appropriated Rushdie to the “bandwagon of postmodernism and postcolonialism”. The critics ignored the aspect of historiographic metafiction, although they accepted Rushdie's experiment with language, narrative, magic realism and metafictional aspects of the novel. History is problematised in the novel and thus ignored by the western critics. Critical tribute from India mainly focuses on Rushdie's engagement with history. Anita Desai in a recent interview (2007) has also acknowledged that Rushdie's innovative treatment of history and narration has opened new scope for experimentation and exploration. There are several references to the acknowledged truth unwritten in the historical text; and there are fictional events concealed by the narrator as historical. Rushdie, according to Steve Connor, can be regarded as a pre-eminent postcolonial writer because his novels “expose the fictionality of history itself”. He endorses faith in Linda Hutcheon's view of postmodernist literature as “historiographic metafiction” and then applies the phrase to Rushdie's novel. Dieter Riemenschneider in “History and the Individual in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*” (1990) has observed that the novel exposes the fictionality of history “in its absurdity [the absurd story of Saleem Sinai] exposes the extent of the historian's and historiographer's hubris”.

The narrator catches the glimpse of past not through the written grand narratives but rather an engagement with the memories of the past as told to him by his ancestors. The narrator talks about his grandfather getting caught in the Jalianwalabag massacre. While describing an eyewitness account of the massacre, the narrative falters:

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The fifty-one men enter in the compound and take positions.... As Brigadier Dyre issues a command, the sneeze hits my grandfather fall in the face. ‘Yaaaakh—thooo’ he sneezes and falls forward, loosing his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life”. (Rushdie 41)

The historical date in this context, the narration of the event, and the oral descriptions are combined in a polyphonic historical discourse. The narrator is also aware of this engagement with different histories. The grand narrative begins in the language of a text book:

On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding through this alley way [way to Jalianwalabag]. “It is a peaceful protest”, a person in the crowd tells Doctor Aziz, perhaps an anonymous person who draws Doctor Aziz into the sight of the massacre.

This information, quoted by the narrator, has no authentic historical source. Similarly what the narrator knows about the massacre is partly superadded with fictional improvisations. When the realism and history fails, the narrator takes the refuge of symbolism and allegory. The nose, here, is a major symbol in the novel, and also a comic pastiche. The hierarchy of meaning is collapsed or dismantled by this symbolism. In the opening pages of the book the narrator narrates something that he has never seen, such as “I was born...on August 15, 1947 when clock hands joined palms respectful greeting as I came....” In the second section, the circular hole, some seven inches in diameter of the bed sheet allows the narrator to see his ‘clock-ridden’, ‘crime-stained’ birth. This is the birth of the nation too, seen by the new-born nation itself. India’s tryst with destiny has begun, burying the crime-stained past and keeping the appointment with the clock-ridden hour. Such negotiation with personal and the national emerges as an attempt to nullify history through paradox or parody. The narrator refers to history and culture, the popular belief and conception. He uses such expressions that often confuse the readers about the credibility of narration. While describing the highly dangerous form of optimism that his grandfather contracted, he uses ambiguous statement. The inexplicable action of his grandfather, perhaps narrated to the narrator by some old acquaintance is retold. There is no distinction between fact and fiction in such narrations. Even the events of the recent history are not faithfully recorded by the narrator. The narrator fails to recognize important dates and their relevance. There is a conscious effort to undermine history or the new myth about India by exposing the falsity of the dominant myth and history. Rushdie’s history can be read as an alternative to the colonial histories of James Mill, Macaulay, Churchill or even Nehru. The re-invention of history is fraught with a sense of shame, fear and anxiety. The hegemony of dominant history persists and fails to shatter the premise on which historical discourse is founded. Rushdie’s postcolonial narrative simply replicates a version of history based on personal memory and experience. Important events like the displacement of refugees after the partition, the Bangladesh war of Independence, Emergency or the emergence of Indira Gandhi, the linguistic politics etc. are demystified without any alternative authentic historical documentation. Voice is raised against the mode of historical representation. A dialectics of protest and paradox is introduced in the treatment of history; but like all other postmodern arts, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* replaces historiography with a pastiche or something hyper-historical.



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