

Portrayal of History in Salman Rushdie's Fiction

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The novel in India came into its own under the impact of the novel in the West, especially of Britain. In fact, the novel's rendezvous with history was at the very root of its growth. To present a faithful portrayal of life in their novels, the novelists located human actions in an identifiable geographical and historical space and a comprehensible time frame. The historical novel had a major impact on the novelists in India, first on the ones who wrote in regional languages and, later, on the novelists who wrote in English. Many novelists wrote about social and political developments with varying degrees of commitment. The Indian historians like Majumdar, AK Warder accept the single most significant thing concerning historiography that is the encroachment of literature on the field of history, the option of aesthetic truth for historical truth in presenting history.

The significance of literature in shaping the historical consciousness of the people is emphatic but whereas historians are assumed honest and reliable, creative writers are held guilty of distorting history, because they inject doses of imagination into it. They are also culprit of misrepresentations of events and personages. But other schools of thought find that this belief that historians are wedded to the truth is unsustainable. Historians themselves admit that they may not be faithful or reliable. Besides it is no longer believed that we can have only one absolute truthful picture of the past. Perhaps, as a continuation of the old tradition in which literature *and* history merged into each other, almost all the literatures in major Indian languages of the country have a long-standing practice of using history as a source for creating literary work. The urge for invoking the historical past for the aim of arousing national consciousness came to the Indian English novel a little later than in the novels in other languages. They have shown their interest in awareness of history consistently in using it for different aim.

In historiographic metafiction, the writer, like Rushdie himself, adopts a self-consciousness that immediately divorces him from the historical period he has meticulously created, thus highlighting its fictiveness. Sometimes he reverses the technique by introducing real historical personages into the story as Rushdie has done by mentioning the real names of political leaders in his novels *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* as well as *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The writer deliberately breaks the accepted frames of fiction in order to create 'an alienation effect.' Alienation effect, often abbreviated to A-effect, is an element in Bertolt Brecht's theory of drama. It can be applied to the novels also according to which there should be critical detachment of audience from the work of

art which is a mere representation of life. Rushdie sometimes gives deliberate false information or mis-information through his narrators like Saleem in *Midnight's Children* and its' calculative inclusion is confessed later in the novel by the novelist himself.

Rushdie's selective representation of events and happenings in India in *Midnight's Children* was governed by his special understanding of the post-1947 developments in the country; in the case of Pakistan, his selection of details is governed by his understanding of what Pakistan meant to him, which is suggestively implied in the very title of the novel *Shame*, which functions as the controlling metaphor in the narrative. And relating the story from a specific point of view imposes a constrictive frame on the reality, which Rushdie himself admits in that "every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales...". And this can be well applied to all his three novels under consideration *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

History in all its aspects important events, major views, minor views, the political, and the individual comes under Rushdie's scrutiny in his novels. Palimpsest suggests that there is always the possibility of subversion because, despite attempts to completely 'erase' what is written, trace of the original remains visible. Erasure also implies censorship. It is a concept that has an imbricative, osmotic, overlapping nature. It defies authenticity, absolutism and purity. In Rushdie's magic realism, myth helps to strengthen the fictionality of the fiction; history justifies the claim of the text on actuality. These twin elements of myth and history have come to play a dominant role in postmodernist novels like *Midnight's Children*. The rational and linear world of Western realist fiction and convention are faced with impossibilities by the native narrative which is well grounded.

The *Midnight's Children* can be read, *inter alia*, as the unfolding of the twentieth century Indian history: the Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy, Quit India movement, Cabinet Mission, freedom movement, Muslim League and its role, riots and bloodshed subsequent to the independence, Five Years Plans, reorganization of Indian states and language riots, Chinese aggression, the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal mosque, Pakistan War, Liberation of Bangladesh, the Emergency, the military coup in Pakistan in 1958, and various other historically important events. There are also typically Indian divisions and dissents, chaos and disillusion, communal tensions and religious fanaticism. *Midnight's Children* prefigures *Shame* in depicting the realities of political life and the abuses of dictatorial power. Rushdie with the depiction of Indira Gandhi as 'Black Widow' locates her as 'historical reality and monstrous fantasy.'

The varied political histories of national and international level crisscross at many turns and are blended together beautifully. Rushdie chooses a symbol, for example, he uses the symbol of 'weapon' to explain personal history and links it with political history so that there is no compartmentalization. He gives us the meaning of the name Zulfikar which is meant to be a weapon and by mentioning weapon; Rushdie makes the readers travel into world's history. Here, parallel to the narrator's autobiographical history 'the weapon' i.e. the bomb is dropped at Japan on the very same day when Emerald uses her

own secret weapon. If the name Zulfikar is the two-pronged sword carried by Ali, the nephew of the prophet Muhammad, it is also the weapon such as the world had never seen before, just as the weapon which was dropped on yellow people.

Through him we also see how the English boast of the progress they made in the hundred years of rule in India and now deplored their departure:

Never seen the like. Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly, independence. Seventy days to get out. I'm dead against it myself, but what's to be done?

That the British considered themselves to be superior and better than the Indians is clear from difference in the treatment they gave to latter. The incident of Mr. Pushpa Roy, India's first swimmer of the English Channel, when not allowed using 'whites-only' Breach Candy Pool just because this swimmer was wearing Indian-flag colour clothes which clearly meant that he did not belong to the better sort who were definitely Europeans. Thus one more thing becomes clear that acceptance of transfer of the power from British rule to Independence was gradual.

Rushdie propagates secularism whenever he gets a chance. In St. Thomas' Cathedral when Mary Pereira is in discussion with the young priest about the colour of God, he suggests that it is the "blue" - like Hindu love-God Krishna. He further explains that 'it will be a sort of bridge between the faiths; gently does it, you follow; and besides blue is a neutral sort of colour, avoids the usual colour problems, gets you away from black and white: yes, on the whole I'm sure it's the one to choose.'

Rushdie's major premise is that the history of Pakistan is a shameful one, filled with coups, massacres, rigged elections, religious hypocrisy, and power-hungry, treacherous, mean-minded men who violated the ideals that led to the formation of a state meant to embody the purity of faith. Rushdie attacks, among other things, 'the mutually advantageous relationships between the country's establishment and its armed forces' and emphasizes the psychic damage to that section of the population that must bear the brunt of the tyranny. Death and destruction, Rushdie appears to be saying in the apocalyptic conclusion, will spread throughout a land when a country's leadership is taken over by successive unscrupulous, repressive regimes. As far as he is concerned, Pakistan's history reads like a chapter from a book about the middle ages or any period when barbarians vied for power and left ruin in their wake. To make this point, Rushdie dates his story according to the Hegiran calendar so that the novel's events literally take place in the fourteenth century. The Hegiran calendar unlike Julian calendar dates from the flight of Muhammad in the early seventh century, the famous 'Hegira.'

Rushdie's next novel *Shame* narrates communal stirrings before the apocalyptic partition of India came about, when in Delhi "...the authorities rounded up any Muslims,

for their own safety, it was said, and locked them up in the red fortress, away from the wrath of the stonewashers.”¹³ History and story, the real and the fantastic meet in the novels of Rushdie, presenting the reader with an ‘anti-history.’ The younger brother of Omar Khayyam, Babar Shakil named after the founder of the Moghul dynasty in India, is a dissolute person who copulates with woolly sheep; Rani Harappa nee Rani Humayun lacks authority even in her own house, where ayahs and old servants rule. Later on also guerillas calls Babar Shakil ‘the emperor’ and the history of Babar, the Moghul emperor, is given.

For Rushdie, however, the force of fragments is not something that is easily subdued. Fragmentation pulls at his fiction like some perverse law of anti-gravity, mocking all cravings for unity literary, personal, national. In his works he connects the varied opposites, blend them in apt proportions and result in giving their best presentations after garnishing them with the different toppings. Rushdie has rightly endorsed in one of the interviews that his books have everything to do with politics and with the relation of the individuals and history. We can quote Frederic Jameson’s opinion on Rushdie’s novels that they conceive of the political perspective, not as “an auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today... but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.”

A national impulse is always a part of a larger politics that transcends nationalism. History is the ‘ultimate horizon’ of literary and cultural analysis. Thus politics is just one of the interpretive methods that a writer uses in his creative representations of history. Rushdie’s novels and non-fiction prose have variously discussed the issue of identity and roots. Like all migrants, he has not been able to shake himself free of the idea of roots. He admits being “an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will)”¹⁵. In his works the treatment meted out to dispossessed characters and their plight is born, to a great extent, of Rushdie’s personal experiences. Inevitably, there is a lot of autobiographical material in his books, most pervasive in *Midnight’s Children*. In the narrator, Saleem’s own religious frictions, mixed ancestries, loss of identity etc. we notice Rushdie with the English father, Mission schooling and his care being taken by a Catholic ayah. There is a close identity between the hero Saleem, and the writer Salman Rushdie, as the author himself acknowledges: “The fact that he is called Saleem and I am called Salman ...it’s not surprising that the identification is made.”

Even India, once the ancient golden bird, was now a baby of time. The narrator not only associates his moment of birth with the nation’s birth but he makes us accept that even Nehru congratulated him, ‘the newest bearer’ of the young nation. Thus, emphasizing the historical necessity of his coming into the world. He adds that they “shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.”

Saleem himself says that his life ‘has been transmuted into grotesquery by the irruption into it of history’. In this attempt he is forced to rewrite the whole of Indian

history experientially with himself at its centre, draws correspondences between national events and his personal life, dissolving referentiality into fantasy, forging connections in order to confer meaning on chaos:

And am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning that I'm prepared to distort everything -- to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central hole? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge I'll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back.

Since *Midnight's Children* traces Saleem's ancestry from Kashmir, Rushdie provides interesting details about its people. Through Tai, who is almost ageless and therefore a reliable voice of the people, Rushdie not only suggests that before 1947 Kashmir was not a part of British India, but also underlines the fundamental difference between the character of Kashmiris and Indians "Kashmiris are different. Cowards, for instance We are not like Indians, always making battles."

Through Tai, in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie never misses a chance to intermingle the mundane with history. The absence of the comfortable cushion on the boat brings Emperor Jehangir into conversation, and comparison of Aadam's nose makes him relate the story of one of the officer's in the army of Iskander the Great. In the presentation of this boatman there is a combination of the realist and the mythic modes. During the war between India and Pakistan in 1947, he raises the slogan of 'Kashmir for Kashmiris,' and gets killed. Though there has been a change in the distinguishing traits that Rushdie emphasizes in the Kashmiri character, Tai's thinking has surfaced much too often during the past several years. This perception is further reinforced in the words of Saleem's grandfather Aziz when he tells his wife: "Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman".

Rushdie has deliberately inserted historical details of the nation and matched them with his own. For example as mentioned above there is far-fetched connection of the death of his grandfather with the illness of Nehru, from which he never recovered and succumbed to on May 27th 1964. He links them through the narrator, Saleem who traces the cause of these consequential events in him through a series of connected happenings.

In *Shame* Rushdie feels that Pakistan is a 'looking glass' through which he can cross over when he likes, but it helps him in an exploration of the self. Rushdie's self-conscious intrusion into the story is conspicuously accentuated by a very personal, informal language used by the narrator, such as, 'I had thought' and 'on my hands.' The narrator, once again a fictionalized version of Rushdie himself, appears a character within the story as much as Omar Khayyam Shakil or Sufiya Zinobia. By bringing himself directly into the story, he blurs the distinctions usually found between the real world and the fictional world. Here also, the narrator, like Saleem Sinai is self-aware of his role in the narrative, and at various times 'steps out of the work' as it were, to communicate with the reader.

Here, Rushdie has paralleled the supposedly personal incident with the communal or public one. Both are fused to bring out the common element. Born on the death-bed of his grandfather, his first sight is the spectacle of a range of topsy-turvy mountains which afflict in him a sense of inversion, of a world upside down, 'Hell above, Paradise below'. Like Moor in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is afflicted with speedy growth Omar Khayyam, here in *Shame* is afflicted with sense of inversion. Both have an abnormal type of birth; one before nine months and the other out of three wombs and fed on the milk of three mothers.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Salman Rushdie revisits some of the ground he covered in his greatest novel, *Midnight's Children*. This book is narrated by Moraes Zogoiby, aka the Moor, who speaks to us from a grave in Spain. Like the Moor, Rushdie knows about a life spent in banishment from normal society--Rushdie because of the death sentence that followed *The Satanic Verses*, the Moor because he ages at twice the rate of normal humans. Yet, the Moor's story of travail is bigger than Rushdie's; it encompasses a grand struggle between good and evil while the Moor himself stands as allegory for Rushdie's home country of India. Filled with wordplay and ripe with humor, it is an epic work. As a member of an economic, religious, and ethnic minority, Aurora tries to incorporate her family history into a national aesthetic vision. Uma and Aadam, two representatives of the next generation of Indians, define themselves through a seemingly a historical internationalization of languages and images rather than their plural or hybrid forms.

In contrast, Aurora's paintings reflect the changing fortunes of her family and the nation, within and against images of Mother India. Her career begins with the mural she paints across her room after her mother's death that dispels the idyllic trance of her childhood. The mural incorporates stories of her childhood without their sanitizing gloss: Vasco da Gama, her ancestor, arriving in India, smelling spices and money; the Last Supper with her family members attending their feasting servants; the masons of the Taj Mahal losing their hands to prevent the construction of anything finer; the approaching war for independence; erotic temple imagery through a child's eye; and her own fanciful gods.

It seems that as if he is issuing himself some character certificate or some sort of reference letter. Rushdie comments on the Indian psychology that it is hard to believe that in a country like India, it is impossible to keep something valuable like a boxful of gems being untouched for centuries together. He says bluntly, "Who in the whole of India cares two paisa about heirlooms if he's given the choice between old stuff and money in the bank?"

Rushdie presents the realities of public history, influencing and getting influenced by an individual's actions and aspirations, with the exceptional honesty. Keith Wilson opines on that: "the image of the writer as both master and victim of public and private material, which he has been formed by in the past and is himself attempting to form in the present, dominates *Midnight's Children*."

The identification between the public and private strands is so complete in the novels of Rushdie that it is not possible to separate them properly and this feature gives novelty to his work. Hence, the interplay of the personal and national histories is the most significant feature of his novels. History interplays with the individual lives. Whether there are ancestral invasions of the families of Sinais, Khayyams, Zogoiby's or da Gamas, Rushdie does not confine his works to one generation but spans several generations. We also have the author's endorsement of several events throughout his works as he draws associations and parallels. As the author and creator of his fictional world, Rushdie makes us feel his omnipresence through the novels. He asks in *Shame*: "Is history to be considered the property of the participants only?"

The answer to this question is implicit. History does not belong to either the participants or the historians but to all mankind who share a common heritage. We can say that his works concern the plight of common man. Not only those who participate in the events of history but also those who serve, stand and stare find place in the novels. The collective consciousness is represented along with the cultural heritage of traditions, religion and myth and "history operates on a grander scale than any individual.

Rushdie is known for taking symbols and figures from different myth systems and religions, interweaving them with different juxtapositions: themes from Islam and Hinduism are interwoven with figures from English literature and English literary references. His work advocates that the cultural exchange brought about by the Empire has enriched rather than cheapened contemporary literature; in his fiction Rushdie has demanded the right, in a fractured and confused post-colonial climate, to be a part of the telling of one's own history.

Shame is a black comedy of public life and historical imperatives. The novel focuses on the social mores of the backward and superstitious Islamic society that multiplies on the vice of shame, through limitless repression, creating violence, anarchy, social tension, political uncertainty and restlessness among the general public. The writer presents a whole kaleidoscopic world in this novel. The satire on religious fundamentalism, caste and sects, is pungent and detached. We are exposed to the confinement of the Muslim girls to the 'zenana wing' where they are left to fantasize about realities of genitals, sex organs and the act of fertilization and they are not allowed to come out publicly.

Shame and shamelessness are 'the architecture of the society that the novel describes'. They are the 'roots to violence'. People in countries like Pakistan, which are hardly better than 'a miracle gone wrong' or 'a failure of the dreaming mind,' we are told, grow upon 'a diet of honour and shame'. Strange things can take place and we are descriptively given a picture of such an atmosphere:

Shameful things are done: lies, loose living, disrespect for one's elders, failure to love one's national flag, incorrect voting at elections, over-eating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of

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womenfolk, examination failures, smuggling, throwing one's wicket away at the crucial point of a Test Match: they are done *shamelessly*.

Salman in *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers, through his characters, the humorous definitions of modern Indian democracy and the Theory of Relativity which shows that there is no final morality in affairs of state. When Vasco Miranda leaves for Spain, Aurora gets back to her work, just as politically Mrs. Gandhi returned to power with Sanjay Gandhi as her right hand and morality gives place to relativity in state affairs. Vasco's 'Indian Variation' upon the theme of Einstein's General Theory $D=mc^2$ is a bizarre pun on Indian polity and power. It's well framed by him who explains to the young Moor 'Indian variation' upon the theme of Einstein's General Theory:

Everything is for relative. Not only light bends, but everything. For relative we can bend a point, bend the truth, bend employment criteria, bend the law. D equals mc^2 , where D is for Dynasty, m is for mass of relatives, and c of course is for corruption, which is the only constant in the universe- because in India even speed of light is dependent on load shedding and vagaries of power supply.

Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* alternates between the Mughal empire under Akbar and the Renaissance Italy of Machiavelli, linking the two via the appearance of a Florentine wanderer, Mogor dell'Amore, at Akbar's court in Fatehpur Sikri and the presence in Florence of Qara K z, a Mughal princess with magical powers. It is new for Rushdie to attempt a fiction set back so far in the past, unless one counts the Arabian dream chapters of *The Satanic Verses*; *Midnight's Children* has been read, and with good cause, as a historical novel, but it deals with the recent past.

Rushdie gives us the socio-economic impact and the consequences of Second World War in this novel. He also toys with the nature of mother-son relationships in Indian and Pakistani society, emphasizing the perversion of their closeness. This novel takes up the interdependence and co-existence of public and private affairs in their historical perspective. It takes an individual and his history out to reach society along with its culture, traditions, myth and religion. Like Shakespeare, Rushdie also portrays two distinct classes of people in the vertical hierarchy of society. The setting of the novel has characters that belong either to affluent aristocratic society or the working class.

Indeed Rushdie's world is fused with flavours from tradition and modernity, religion, culture, plurality, and blended well. Thus, we can conclude that the works of Rushdie shows a kind of comic inversion that is to understand a creation, one need to comprehend the world around him. And how these are connected with their locales, in fact not only native places but other geographical locations; their historical evolution and nomenclature; the literary allusions, usage of English language, coinage, and deconstruction from are explored in the next chapter.

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