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Postmodern Historical Narratives in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Postmodern Historical Narrative is a theory that insists on the presence of a past material reality beyond discourse and on the possibility of accessing that past. It is one of the alternative ways to define and theorize the historical real and redeem this important vein of fiction from its common association with an ultimately apolitical relativism. Salman Rushdie is one among the best-known representatives of postcolonial fiction in modern British literature. His works carry a deep imprint of the complex socio-cultural scene of India as well as his passionate involvement with the history and the politics of India which has induced many critics to consider him as an Indian writer in English. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is chosen with the objective of analyzing the postmodern historical narratives, which questions the problematized relations between history and fiction. Rushdie's postcolonial and postmodern novel *Midnight's Children* draws a picture of the time since around 1915 and explains India's situation after it gained its Independence from the British colonizers; it describes Gandhi's *Quit India* movement, the violent partition of

India into the new states India and Pakistan, and the *State of Emergency* from 1975 to 1977 through the eyes of Indian people. In this intensely political and consciousness-raising novel, Rushdie critically analyzes so-called realities through the deconstruction of history. Thus the postmodernist historical novel of Salman Rushdie attempt to insert history into fiction to subvert historical “facts” and rewrite them from a perspective different from the accepted interpretation.

Keywords

Metafiction; Historiographic Metafiction; Salman Rushdie; *Midnight's Children*.

Salman Rushdie is one of the most controversial figures of postcolonial fiction in modern British literature. Rushdie’s novels deal with many themes like history, politics, love, shame, religion, exile and rootlessness. Rushdie’s themes may not be new, but he presents English in some novel ways in his novels - a distinct spoken language or dialect which has been branded Indian English. Rushdie included this brand of Indian English or ‘chutneyfied’ English and started a trend which his contemporaries have enthusiastically perpetrated. What really startles an alert reader of fiction in India is that Rushdie makes use of the postmodernist fictional technique.

Salman Rushdie is the valuable representation of recent achievement in postmodern historical writing and the novel *Midnight's Children* is significant example from the spectrum of postmodern historical fiction. Postmodern historical novels insert historical documents, events and historical personages into the fictional worlds of their works. McHale’s label for historical novels written in the postmodern era is “the postmodernist revisionist historical novel”, revisionist because it revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of

the past and it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of the historical fiction itself (McHale 90).

The present paper considers *Midnight's Children* as an experimental work that shows how episodes from Indian history are ingeniously linked to Saleem Sinai's autobiographical story which is presented in the mode of postmodernist historical narration. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offers its central figure Saleem's "his/story" as an individual mode of history writing that depends on and elevates individual experience as opposed to conventional scientific historiography which attempts to totalize individual experience. This consists of personal historical accounts of Saleem which are mingled with magic realism and the self-reflexive, non-linear and unreliable narration of the text.

The novel *Midnight's Children* is about its central figure's struggle to write his autobiography in personal as opposed to the objectivity of history writing and the novel is by its very nature about fiction writing itself. Saleem is the narrator in the novel but at the same time a writer of his autobiography, and throughout his narration he reminds the reader continually of the fictional nature of the story he is telling by means of his self-reflexive remarks. This quality of the novel makes *Midnight's Children* a novel about fiction writing and draws attention to its status as an artifact, and the inclusion of historical events and personages in the novel's metafictional context implies their fictionality and problematizes them as well.

Saleem is highly self-conscious as the narrator/writer of the novel, which makes it possible for him to reflect his writing process throughout the novel. In the course of his narration, Saleem comments on his writing process, particularly on the digressive nature of his narrative and the errors he has made. These comments make explicit Saleem's consciousness of his position as a writer and of his writing process. Saleem directly refers to his writing as a piece of literature; an autobiography composed of fictional elements along with what he actually lived. Saleem shows his reader how he tries hard to follow the order in

which he wants to narrate his story. Saleem also comments on his choice of a title for the chapter he is writing and tries to justify it as suitable when the title and the contents of the chapter are taken together. Saleem tells his life story to his future wife, Padma. She is illiterate so she has to be satisfied with the amount Saleem consents to give out; even though she serves as Saleem's listener, she is at the same time his critical reader/listener who comments on his narrative. The presence of Padma as his listener gives Saleem opportunities to make humorous commentary on his own writing process.

The role of the reader of a metafictional text is no longer that of a passive receiver, but that of an active participant in the writing process. Accordingly, *Midnight's Children* as a metafictional novel, with parodic and ironic intentions, demands of the reader to be an active participant in the creation of the text as the narrator wants the reader to fill in certain gaps in the novel. Saleem points out his inefficiency as a writer, so he makes it clear, in a humorous way of course, that there are points in his narrative which the reader must complete on his own. The metafictional implications where the narrator is self-conscious are used to parody the realistic and historical representation of autobiographies, historical novels, or history writings because these are imitated with a critical distance and are in conflict with the context of the novel. The distance and incongruity between the expected representation of the past events, maybe in an objective way, and Saleem's fictitious accounts with self-reflexive comments are conveyed to the reader by the use of irony in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie creates an irony between the conventions of autobiography, historical novel, and history writing and those of Saleem's autobiography. This parodic intention of the writer serves as a tool to prove that historical accounts are artifacts.

Parody in *Midnight's Children* not only ridicules and pinpoints the process through which Saleem's autobiography is constructed but it also makes it possible to yield new ways of representing reality. Thus, it enables Rushdie to interrogate the discourse of traditional historiography on the one hand, and

historical novel on the other. It offers new grounds for Rushdie to represent the voice of the individual. The metafictional strategies exploited in *Midnight's Children* highlight its status as an artifact and, by means of metafiction, Rushdie's novel is able to show historical "reality" as constructed and problematizes its objectivity. When the novel inserts real historical events into the metafictional context of the novel, it questions the boundary between so-called fact and fiction. Metafiction as a literary technique and Rushdie's parody are there to show that there is no absolute truth or objectivity in the representation of the past.

The alternative that *Midnight's Children* offers in place of the traditional mode of historiography is an individual mode of history writing that interprets the past events from below and elevates individual experience. This consists of personal historical accounts of Saleem combined with his self-reflexive narration. Rushdie avoids the historical approach that focuses on "great figures" that are of national importance so he creates an individual mode of history writing through Saleem's autobiography that focuses on the lives and experiences of the people who constitute the nation. The argument that Rushdie poses in *Midnight's Children* is that "individual recollections and assessments of history or reality as a whole are ultimately self-validating" as Catherine Cundy asserts in her analysis of the novel (34). Therefore, the individual's versions of historical reality provide his version of truth. An attempt as such can be regarded as making the individual silenced by the metanarrative of history, in that the individual becomes the center, and his voice is in conflict with that of the dominant, opening it to multiplicity. Saleem, through the mingling of and correspondences between important political events and his particular life, depicts the unimportant individual and his experience in the face of historical events. This shifts the focus from the historical figures and events Rushdie deals with in the novel to Saleem, who experiences these historical events, and to his thoughts. For Saleem, his is an attempt to "revert from the general to the

particular” in his account of his/story through his autobiography (MC 334). He informs the reader about the different ways he is connected to the history of India, grouping these ways under “modes of connection”.

In the process of constructing the individual mode of historiography, Saleem struggles to “place himself at the centre of a history that he himself creates, carving out an individual identity in a manner that has national implications” (Reder 225-226). In order to reach such an aim, to operate active, literally, he appropriates the historical facts, alters them and gives new meanings to these events so as to prove his central position. Therefore, the history writing which foregrounds the individual experience rather than totalizing individuals to whom things happen makes it possible to dethrone the central as it is clear from Saleem’s endeavor. Through composing his autobiography, Saleem fights with Indira Gandhi for centrality. He says: “We were competitors for centrality” (MC 420). In order to question the monolithic discourse of history and to claim his place in the construction of history, Saleem asks:

Indira is India and India is Indira ... but might she not have read her own father’s letter to a midnight child, in which her own, sloganized centrality was denied; in which the role of mirror-of-the-nation was bestowed upon me? (MC 427)

In *Midnight’s Children*, the individual is portrayed as the victim of totalizing conventional historical discourse. The historical and political events in the novel are not necessarily of topical value all the time, as is clear in Gandhi’s assassination. Rushdie exploits the events as a political satire but Saleem believes that the significance of the historical events is that they have direct effects on individuals. Saleem can be regarded as the victim of history, as an individual “to whom things have been done” (MC 232), for past events befall him and change the course of his life. Therefore, Rushdie’s handling of such political and historical events as partition, the freedom movement, and the declaration of emergency and so forth is a means to show individuals as victims of history. It

is the main significance of the problem of Partition as depicted in the novel that “Saleem Sinai is indeed a tragic victim of such events in his own life. The division of his family into two units with distinct national identities is a consequence of Partition” (Madhusudhana 13). Saleem adds ironically: “it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace” (MC 463).

The mode of individual historical discourse that Rushdie proposes as an alternative gives the individual the opportunity to create personal meaning from history by highlighting some events and overshadowing others according to his personal view, which emerges as a threat to the objectivity of totalitarian history. Accordingly, Saleem creates personal and fictional explanations and makes up fictitious causes and effects for the already known supposedly historical facts. This means the blend of fact and fiction in his account, a quality which, as we have seen, subverts the official version of history. For example, Saleem assumes that he initiates by his own action the historical events documented in the novel. He claims he is responsible for the language riots that occurred in the 1950s. Language marchers demand “the partition of the state of Bombay along linguistic boundaries” (MC 167)

In addition to the mingling of fact and fiction, Saleem gives wrong dates to the events in actual Indian history and confuses their causes to secure his place at the center. As a result, it becomes impossible to reach any correct accounts of events. The reader is exposed to Saleem’s unreliable narration and cannot know what is “real” and what fiction is. One striking example to these errors is that Saleem places Gandhi’s death in a wrong part in the chronology of his narrative because, as he claims, he made an error in the date. The reason behind the errors in Saleem’s account of the historical facts is that it is “memory’s truth” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 211), subjective and altered. In *Midnight’s Children*, memory takes the place of the so-called scientific and objective

documentation exploited in the conventional historiography. The fact that the historical truthfulness is conveyed through Saleem's memories, almost always unreliable, shows historical truth and reality in general as constructs. It enables Saleem to alter reality by depicting the events as he remembers. Therefore, the role of memory in Saleem's narrative is said to be subverting the claim of the traditional history writing to objectivity since the focus is on memory's ability to create subjective and multiple realities. Saleem draws attention to the role of memory in the process of constructing reality by pointing to memory's selecting certain events.

The novel can produce multiple versions of reality by means of constructing the narrative of facts out of Saleem's memory. By means of resting Saleem's narrative on memory only and giving wrong dates for historical facts as a result, Rushdie questions the objectivity of history in *Midnight's Children*. The objectivity of Saleem's narrative is paradoxically challenged by the errors he makes in his own narrative and by ironically highlighting these errors by admitting them. The fact that Saleem's account in *Midnight's Children* resembles the way memory operates gives the novel its fragmentary style. What constitute Saleem's account of Indian history as portrayed in the novel are fragments of memory. Although Saleem endeavors to reflect the whole of India, its past and culture, he is able to reflect it only in fragments. This fragmented vision is conveyed through the perforated sheet in the novel. When Aadam Aziz returns from Europe, he is immediately asked to treat his future wife. However, he is allowed to examine her body only through a "perforated sheet". During the examination of the different parts of the body each time through the hole in the sheet without seeing her body in its entirety, Aziz tries to guess what the whole of the body is like. The image of a perforated sheet is all pervasive in the novel to emphasize the diversity and the process of seeing the whole through pieces. The idea that reality can be reached only through fragments becomes the leitmotif in the novel. In the same manner, the reader is offered the Indian past through a

perforated sheet in fragments. The theme of fragmentation is a tool in the hands of Rushdie to challenge absolutes in the representation of reality. This indicates that Rushdie rejects objectivity that legitimizes totality and homogeneity.

In narrating the historical past, Rushdie blends fact with fantastic elements and fairy stories. By means of including fantastic elements in depicting historical events through magic realism in the novel, Rushdie attempts to question the possibility of objective historical reality. Saleem as a midnight's child is gifted with extraordinary talents. He can communicate with the other midnight's children through his gift of telepathy which enables the communication between them. The other midnight's children are gifted like Saleem with various extraordinary talents according to their time of birth. Real events and people from Indian history are inserted into this miraculous world of the novel and mingled with fantastic elements. The magicians' ghetto where Saleem begins to live when he loses his family in the war provides this juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic. There live jugglers who can keep one thousand and one balls in the air at a time, fakirs who can stray on to a bed of hot coals, the pullers of rabbits from hats, ventriloquists, beggars and so forth. One of the midnight's children, Parvati, the witch, who can make people disappear, lives together with Saleem in this ghetto. Saleem discusses the effects of the emergency declared by Indira Gandhi on these ghetto people and midnight's children who are excluded from the history of India. Magic-realism in *Midnight's Children* gives the reader a chance to observe the problems of the Communist movement in India and how such individuals as the poor and freaks in the society experience them by rewriting this historical moment from their eyes (MC 399).

The form of the novel, along with its themes, helps Rushdie subvert the historical discourse of the West. Though Saleem writes his autobiography and the narrative seems to be moving chronologically from Saleem's birth to his adulthood as expected in autobiographies, the novel is marked with its nonlinear

narrative style through Saleem's digressions. In the process of composing his life story, Saleem presents flashbacks to past events, or foreshadows events to come, or he narrates other stories and uses digressions within digressions. This hinders Saleem from constructing his autobiography as well because, Saleem starts narrating the time long before his birth, and the relation between time inside and time outside the narrative is a cause of tension. In order to complete his story despite the digressions, Saleem must "work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (MC 9). When Saleem digresses and is late to narrate his birth, he is immediately urged by Padma. She is annoyed with Saleem's non-linear narrative because she is after "what-happened-nextism" (MC 39), reflecting thereby the desire for a continual chronological view in narration. The non-linear narrative of *Midnight's Children* serves to undermine linearity and cause-and-effect relationship that is characteristic of historical narrative. They once more remind the reader that texts reproduce only a version of events and not the "whole story". "As he writes the novel, Saleem wrestles with a chronological view of history" and he aims at showing the discursive function of this "chronological, British-born(e) manipulation of history" (Srivastava 66). He tries to show chronological history is inadequate to represent the diversity of the Indian past by means of his resistance to linear narrative.

The novel *Midnight's Children* is a parody of a form of discourse. It parodies the historical discourse which claims to create a single and unchangeable truth, through Saleem offering his readers accounts of events different from the officially accepted versions. The target of Rushdie's parody at this point is not history writing in the period of colonization only but also after colonization, since Rushdie shows that history in the hands of recent Indian politicians, is just as monologic. He particularly attacks Indira Gandhi and her politics on the grounds that she uses force to deflect multiplicity, hence the aforementioned slogan, "India is Indira, Indira is India".

Midnight's Children exploits historical and political figures and mocks them as well as exposing the version of history that they impose on people. The novel opens their discourse to dialogism by writing different historical accounts of the events that are experienced by individuals which clash with the officially known versions. Rushdie's use of parody is a means of depicting the heteroglossic nature of the world as well. Thus historical reality is reflected in *Midnight's Children* as the process of discerning meaning, not as absolute and objective but as constructed and Saleem puts forward "reality is a question of perspective," and thus multiple (MC 165). Saleem uses the cinema screen as a metaphor in the novel to draw attention to the illusory quality of what we perceive to be real.

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