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History and Fiction in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

This paper intends to examine the interface between history and fiction in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The paper investigates innovative narrative strategies, magic realism, intertextuality, unreliable narration, amnesia, narcissistic narration and so on that Rushdie employs to foreground indissoluble connections between personal and political, familial, and national, fact and fiction, history, and myth, and psychological and cultural. Salman Rushdie has portrayed nation as a body through this novel and hence body can be seen as a literal text. My attempt is to study his idea of body as a cultural signifier and re-amalgamate the dismembered history.

Keywords: History, Fiction, Nation, Narration, Myth, Culture and Magic Realism.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) besides being a postcolonial text, is also a historiographic metafiction. His narcissistic narration that claims to be 'historical' evokes several issues- positionality, provisionality, intertextuality, ideology and narrativity that comes very close to 'historiographic metafiction'- a coinage from Linda Hutcheon to describe the postmodern interaction/liaison of historiography and fiction. Hutcheon has used the term in relation to the novels like Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Fowles' *A Maggot*, Doctorow's *Loon Lake*, Rushdie's *Shame* and so on to show the paradoxes and contradictions of the self-reflexive and historical representation in these novels. Novels like these problematize the accessibility, nature and narrativization of historical knowledge foregrounding the fact that "fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames" (Hutcheon 109).

The protagonist of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is Saleem Sinai and through him Rushdie tries to make the connection between historical and personal. This boundary between historical and personal, in the novel, is blurred in such a way that historical becomes personal and personal becomes historical and what is exactly personal and historical remains unclear for the reader. Saleem Sinai's life is

connected to history in such a way that it cannot be separated. So, Rushdie in the very beginning of the novel tells us that Saleem Sinai is handcuffed to history. Beginning with Saleem's birth on the day of India's independence, Rushdie very beautifully connects Saleem's personal life with history as if history is happening for him. His rewriting of Indian history is the part of subaltern historiography from the viewpoint of an individual. Salman Rushdie says that history is not only which is documented in historical archives or written in our history books but it is also which lives in the mind of people who saw it happening. Thus, there are alternative histories also that are based on memories.

Rushdie through this novel raises the issue of history being partial or the history presented to us is in parts. He foregrounds his argument through the episode of perforated sheet in the novel where Dr. Adam Aziz first sees Naseem Ghani in parts through perforated sheet. Naseem didn't show herself to Dr. Aziz until the day they got married. This has the metaphorical significance because the partial, sequential, and gradual visibility of Naseem Ghani to Dr. Aziz symbolizes the partial history. As Dr. Aziz looks Naseem through a perforated linen sheet similarly the history which comes to us is also filtered through a perforated sheet. It is impossible to know the history because nobody can claim to know everything correctly that happened in the past. Historians write history by collecting data and giving his own narrative to his own data but this narrative don't trust the memories of people. Average person has also participated in some or the other way in the history of India and so their memories are also the history but it is not considered so. Thus, official history debunks and silences other's history. The day Dr. Aziz first saw Naseem was the same day when the World War got ended. Here again we see the co-mingling of personal and historical event. Later Dr. Aziz realizes that he made the mistake of loving Naseem in fragments as she was seen through a perforated sheet. Amina Sinai also falls in love with Ahmed Sinai in parts as she describes "each day she selected one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and concentrated her entire being upon it until it became wholly familiar; until she felt fondness rising up within her and becoming affection and, finally, love". These shows that India before independence or becoming a whole nation was also in fragments because there were all together five hundred sixty Riyasats(estates) and royal states. So, the whole idea of nation comes much later. Thus, Rushdie makes the connection of Dr. Aziz's falling in love with Naseem in fragments and India as a nation of political division.

With the help of mercurochrome, Rushdie raises the problem of differentiating between blood and mercurochrome. With this problem he foregrounds the problem of how to differentiate between official history and personal history. During the Jallianwala Bagh episode (Dr. Aziz) "he is, I know, feeling very scared, because his nose is itching worse than it ever has" (MC 68). General R.E.H. Dyre was the Martial Law Commander of Amritsar at that time and as he arrives Dr. Aziz's nose starts tickling. The General had come with fifty men, twenty-five on each side of him. When they were ordered to shoot by him at that very moment Dr. Aziz sneezes loudly making the sound 'yaakh-thoo' and falls on the ground. General's order to shoot was like Dr. Aziz's 'yaakh-thoo'. The chattering sound of the teeth is compared to the sound of the guns. A man falls upon Dr. Aziz whose shirt was colored red. Here Dr. Aziz gets confused to understand that whether the red color on the man's shirt was the blood or the mercurochrome which Dr. Aziz had with

himself. Later when Dr. Aziz goes back to his home, Naseem thinks that it is the medicine over his shirt and he is trying to fool her but after knowing the truth she faints. Thus, Official history and Personal history is also very similar to each other and it's very difficult to distinguish between them.

Through the character of William Methwold, Rushdie tries to show us that how old and worn out the British rule has become in India which in turn needs to be overthrown. Homi Catrack refuses to switch on the ceiling fan because there was the chance of its falling as it has become old and weak like the British rule. When Ahmed and Amina Senai come to Mumbai, they buy the house of William Methwold and this indicates the transfer of power from a Britisher to an Indian. The day when Ahmed and Amina Senai get the control over the house was the same day the British Raj transferred the governing power of the nation to India and Pakistan. Thus, the transfer of the power of the nation or the government becomes like the deeds of the house. Amina Senai is still unhappy even after getting the control of the house because she is not allowed to change anything in the house. This indicates that much of the thing which was happening during the British Rule will continue to happen even in the independent nation and in the post-colonial time. She was for long not able to replace the photographs of the British women with the photographs of her dead ancestors. This shows that our past cannot be easily revived because it is certainly affected by the British Rule. So, post-colonization will not decolonize abruptly rather it will take time. This is one of the reasons why we still follow the rules made by our colonizers. This shows that the affair which takes place within the four walls of our house has an indirect relation with the political events which happens outside.

Through the swapping episode of Saleem and Shiva, Rushdie raises the idea of fictional history. He questions the authenticity of associating self with the history. We are very proud of our family, religion, cast, etc. and fight over our glorious past. However, none of us know that how authentic our ancestral history is. Shiva was born to Ahmed and Amina Sinai and Saleem was born to Wee Willy Winki and Vanita, however he was the illegitimate and the bastard child of William Methwold and Vanita. Throughout the novel Saleem's long nose is seen as the inherited nose of his grandfather Dr. Adam Aziz but in fact his long nose is the result of inheritance of William Methwold's long European nose whose mother was a French woman. Both the kids were swapped by Mary Pereira in the nursing home and so this foregrounds the falsification of history. Nobody can claim about their glorious ancestry or history with authenticity because nobody knows that the history with which we associate ourselves is true or false. This tells us the unreliability and inauthenticity of the history.

Rushdie uses magic realist mode to challenge colonial, official historiography. The choice of comingling two seemingly antithetical narrative modes is significant. It is often argued that the dominant narrative mode of the West has been realism, faithful reproduction of empirical reality into art. On the other hand, the East has been stereotypically described having/preferring magical narratives. By choosing to relate Indian history in magic realist mode, Rushdie intermingles objective, scientific and empirical reality with metaphoric, mystical, and magical realities.

Saleem Sinai with his powers of telepathy, can access to the minds of his fellow citizens and know their thoughts, aspirations, dreams, visions, desires, and ideas. He is narrating the Indian history from 1915-1977 i.e., thirty-two years before his birth and thirty-two years after his birth omnisciently because of his magical powers. The closer to midnight his birth was, the more powerful he was. He was gifted with this magical power of telepathy because of being born on the propitious hour of midnight on the day of India's independence. He can rewrite history and is able to mingle real with magical, fictional with historical, and historical with personal only because of his telepathic power.

The prophecy of Ramram Seth about the birth of Saleem and Shiva makes this novel a proleptic narrative which means flash forward. The prophecy was:

There will be two heads- but you shall see only one- there will be knees and a nose and a nose and knees. Nose and knees and knees and nose... 'Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him-but crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep...' and DeoShiva, guard us! 'Washing will hide him-voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him-blood will betray him!', spittoons will brain him-doctors will drain him-jungle will claim him-wizards reclaim him! Soldiers will try him-tyrants will fry him..."He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! And he will die... before he is dead (MC 326).

Through this Rushdie gives us the glimpse of what is about to happen in the novel.

Rushdie used the body of Saleem Sinai as a metaphor for India. Each time the nation divides, there is a crack in the body of Saleem Sinai. As Saleem says "I feel cracks widening down the length of my body...I have begun to crack all over like an old jug-that my poor body, singular, unlovely buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams" (MC 260). Saleem's teacher laughs at his face saying that "In the face of thees ugly ape you don't see the whole map of India?" (MC 261). The pulling of hair and the bald spot of Saleem signifies the irrational creation of new state from the old existing states of India. There were linguistic, religious, cultural, and traditional lines drawn on the map of India which resulted in the formation of new states like Tamil Nadu in 1773 and Andhra Pradesh in 1956.

Thus, *Midnight's Children* foregrounds the idea that historical representations are not objective recuperations of past in the present rather they do reveal mediated, metaphorical, subjective, and ideological nature of historical representation. Historiographic meta fictive narrative strategies of the novel indicate the problematic historical fabrication of facts and fictions in history. The novel marks an experimental moment of the postmodern novel which refuses the claims of writing a convincing past without acknowledging its discursivity and discards the hermeneutical process of historiography.

In conclusion, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* proves that, the statement of Linda Hutcheon that the novel is self-reflexive and lays claim to historical events and personages. On the other side, it is called as postmodern novel and literature.

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