



A Study Of Magical Realism Through A Postcolonial Lens In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Introduction

The term Magical Realism broadly refers to the style of writing or technique which includes both magical as well as supernatural events that are told realistically without any doubts which questions the nature of reality and focuses its attention on the act of creation through a combination of fact and fancy. The movement initially began with Latin American writers portraying reality with elements of the extraordinary and magical to depict that their culture was vibrant and complex. These writers used various indigenous aspects such as folklore, myths and legends creating a blend between dream and reality. This can be seen through Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which gained immense popularity and inspired female authors including Toni Morrison where in her book *Beloved*, she has used magical realism to challenge linear notions of memory and time. Marquez has used a multi-generational narrative and a blend of both mundane and magical aspects are highlighted and explored.

However, when discussing this concept in terms of Indian literature, one must remember that India has a diverse culture rich in myths, folklore and traditions. This vast land tells stories of legends, deities and gods one can only marvel at. Salman Rushdie is one such notable figure in contemporary literature who has been established as a master of narrative and literary innovation. He was born in Mumbai on June 19, 1947. His life and work serve as a monument to the intricacies of identity, narrative structure and the enduring quest for freedom of expression along with the themes of gender, and sexuality through the Post-Colonial Lens. Indeed, he has left an amazing track on the map of today's literary world and is famous for his extraordinary talent of mixing magic realism which not only enchanted the readers but played a part in reforming the modern way of thinking. Readers are able to differentiate between Marquez and Rushdie for Marquez's prose tends to be more lyrical whereas Rushdie's works are more satirical in nature. This paper presents a detailed exploration of the ways in which reality is blended with supernatural elements creating a flawless integration of the fantastical and the real. It focuses on how Magical Realism works as a narrative device to construct, reconstruct, shape, reshape and challenge the voices of such fragmented identities along with their lived experiences.

The blend of fact and fiction can be seen through the work of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. She has used her creative imagination fused with facts and imagination in the novel highlighting the use of a nonlinear narrative structure which helps in shifting the story line between the past and the present. It reflects the fragmented nature of memory which helps in creating a sense of elasticity. *The God of Small Things* was published in 1997 and the winner of the Booker Prize explored the story through fantastical imagery and a childlike innocence which helps in showcasing the ideology of children when they use to understand and analyse the society they live in. It takes readers on a journey that depicts reality and cruelties through the eyes of children- Rahel and Estha. Roy has used Magical Realism as a tool to depict both emotional and psychological depth in the characters to critique the political landscape of India during the rise

of communism in Kerala which explores how political ideologies intersect with the lives of the ordinary people. One instance of magical realism can be seen when “The beggars and vendors disappeared. Within minutes there was no one on the road” (Roy, 62). The statement filled with magical realism incorporates the very subject of communism which could either draw attention or repel people away. The government challenges the way Indians think about their beliefs in their old system.

Roy explores issues of social hierarchy, cultural taboos, and the enduring power of love through this storytelling form in her book. She transcends the boundary between fiction and reality is a frequent characteristic in the postcolonial narratives, representing the erosion of the conventional limits found in the literature contests the empire through experiments with temporal order, style and the blend of fantastical and mythic with the real, intertwining the impossible with the possible, thus blurring the traditional distinction between reality and fiction. The book has a non-linear timeline and fragmented storytelling that intertwines the past with the present, portraying how minor incidents such as touch, gesture or a silent word continue to shape and reshape the lives of the characters. For instance “There is very little that anyone can say about a touch. The touch that can take a man’s bones turn to water.” (Roy, 62) is often regarded as trivial or even ignored by the readers emphasized by the narrative framework, highlighting their emotional and thematic significance. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha is loaded with both personal and social weight. Their affection is forbidden yet passionate and the touch between them is not just physical, it represents their resistance to caste discrimination and societal norms, symbolizing the vulnerability and powerlessness which come with their love. This instance represents the memory of love, loss and grief, illustrating how a solitary action is embedded in one’s consciousness.

The evolution and influence of magical realism in Postcolonial Literature

It is difficult to imagine or even come up with one single definition of magical realism for it has been a part of discussion since 1925. A German art critic Franz Roh published a book which became popularly known by two different names. While tracing the development of magical realism one must understand that the term did not arrive out of the blue. It has faced various criticism and authors such as Roh did not consider magical realism to be of importance. He used the term solely because he was in need of a name which would go with a new movement happening around Europe. Apart from magical realism, neo-classicism and Verism were expressions which were coined but never fully defined and remained incomplete till the late 20th century. The texts which were written during 1995 reflect on the journey of magical realism moving beyond Latin America and incorporated into the post-partition books. The essay *Magic Realism* written by Roh was translated into English by Zamora and Faris which not only provided a historical context but has reflected the return of magical realism in literary discussions. Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas while discussing post-colonialism and its literature is vital for his ideology along with Edward Said are celebrated in literature. He argued that the ‘inter’ is the space which carries different meanings of culture. According to him there lies a space where two different cultures meet giving birth to hybridity. He believes that these spaces are often called as ‘new literature’, challenging the dominant narratives, and pre-set notions and providing voices to the marginalized section.

To truly understand the concept of national identity among the diasporic communities, it is necessary to understand cultural hybridity from a postcolonial perspective. The term ‘culture’ is vast and quite confusing to define because for one it could mean everything but for another would mean nothing at all. Culture makes one’s life worth living which includes race, gender, religion, behavior and traditions. In the context of postcolonial literature, various attempts have been made but Robert Young has rightly mentioned “there is no single, or correct concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes.” It highlights that hybridity is not even close to being a static blend of cultures but an ongoing process of transformation. Bhabha has embraced the concept of hybridity to refer to the cross-cultural forms. Globalization has shattered the conceptual limits of race, class, ethnicity and institutions. Due to that, it broadens the opportunities and influences done by the Western culture to the East but also enables them to continually engage with the East. The concept of hybridity questioned the prevailing binaries of ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. This theory has given new concepts of in-betweenness, third space and the importance of self. However, it has provided theorists and readers with a new way of viewing intercultural relationships.

It has to be noted that the West had always overpowered and oppressed the East. Moreover, it wouldn’t be accurate either to mention post-colonialism without talking about Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. He exposed Eurocentric universalism which witnessed the superiority of what Western people maintained over the years.

Orientalism sheds the underlying structures of power, hegemony, culture and imperialism that have been historically embedded in what according to Said is 'Colonial Discourse'. He further describes that the West is not only socially constructed but actually has produced the Orient or the East. It questions the foundation of Western representation and social construction of the East as the ultimate 'other' in history. According to him, it is not a false knowledge construction but a power relationship with political implications. This can be associated with Foucault's concept of power and knowledge which influenced Said's concepts of how both West and East are binary opposites. Colonialism is termed as a geographical area, which is ruled by a more powerful country. In simple words, it can be understood as a practice of establishing complete control over a land or another country and plundering it economically. It began under the garb of imperialism and had both positive and negative effects. The term post-colonial refers to racial difference, legal inequality and subalternity along with suppression faced by different communities. It's a vast concept and won't be fair to define it in just a sentence. The political and cultural reforms proposed by anti-colonial movements in countries like India, Egypt and Africa which formed the head of what we now call Post-Colonialism. While discussing postcolonialism and its influence, the concept of partition must be discussed and kept in the minds of the readers. With one stroke or a demarcation which crossed a line in between the two very nations- India and Pakistan, dividing them not only on the basis of their geography but culture, language and religion as well. This separation made the 'other' in connection with the 'self'. It is quite surprising to note that even though India was colonized for more than 200 years, there are relatively few documents or texts written on the partition history of India. These novels or texts which chose to depict the core problems faced by the mass population discussed trauma and violence both physically and mentally. A Train to Pakistan written by Khushwant Singh serves as an example of violence faced during the partition. "on one hand, there was tremendous love between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims; on the other, they killed each other with savage hatred". Emphasizing on the psychological aspect of a human mind.

Impact of Partition and Post-Partition in Literature

The concept of partition has always been a sensitive subject it is very difficult to be impartial in everyone's eye at once. As mentioned earlier that there is little record of the partition, so readers must not ignore the portrayal of violence and trauma along with a prejudiced or rather dishonest projection while depicting Hindus and Muslims living in harmony until after the partition. Khushwant Singh has deliberately used this technique to stress his perspective and opinion that without the interference of politicians, India would never have needed to be partitioned. During the independence movement, nationalism was the common and central theme for the literature with social realism. This nationalism can be seen in the novels, poetry, journalism and religious and nationalist movements of that time through authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan. *Untouchable* published in 1935 written by Mulk Raj Anand is considered to be a social novel which seeks to reform Indian society, underscores his attack on the Indian social structure, which is firmly rooted in an unjust principle. Arundhati Roy's Booker prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* written in 1997, delves into the issues of caste injustices and social hierarchies constructed by the societies. Velutha is an untouchable whose name ironically means 'white'. It was a deliberate move made by the author to depict the contrast and quest for identity. Velutha had sexual intercourse with Ammu who was a Christian married to a Hindu which stirred a conflict in the discourse created by the society itself. Novels related to the partition are subjective based, for all the stories and narratives revolve around the pain and emotions of the people. Therefore, partition literature is comprised of the same writing style whether it is written by the writers who witnessed the partition or by the writers who heard about the savagery of the partition event. Writers writing about partition have full autonomy to give voice to the feelings, experiences and emotions of those people who went through the trauma of partition. However, only a few do justice when explaining themes such as loss, violence and identity written in any language whether be Hindi, English, Urdu or Punjabi, the common thing is pain and collective memory which makes them and their writings distinguish from one another. Despite the shared trauma, partition literature shares a common ground highlighting their lived experiences, sufferings, resilience and hopes which are not forgotten even after 70 years of independence. This serves as a powerful reminder of the immense suffering caused by violence and the importance of peace. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* written by Rohinton Mistry in 1987 serves as an example for he reflects on the broader aspect of uncertainties which emerged during the birth of partition. The protagonist Kersi from *Swimming Lessons*, seems to be struggling with a sense of alienation, feeling like an outsider in a society which seems to be both friendly and

yet remains to be emotionally distant and unengaged. This feeling of displacement and up-rootedness resonates deeply with the experiences of various individuals who were forcibly dislocated during partition.

The impact of Post Partition literature has been deeply engraved and embedded in the minds of individuals which helped in shaping of self and identity. It has been mentioned above in the paper that the 'self' was fragmented and reconstructed as quoted by Said in his work *Orientalism*. Franz Fanon has argued that colonialism drives the colonized to madness by rejecting any individuality of the native's psyche which was repeatedly represented as savaged and treated as inferior. Universally 'man' is referred to as a 'white man' who ruled the nation and controlled the narrative. Thus, the colonizer becomes the father figure to the colonized. This concept of partition trauma has been expressed by various authors and writers in their works with magical realism. It is a genre or a style of writing in which fantastical elements are presented as a natural part of the storyline, with the emphasis not being on the incident directly but on what they signify and represent. In magical realism, magic appears and makes instances seem to be ordinary and seamlessly blend into the tale. In simpler words, within the framework of magical realism, the world is very much rooted in the real world but is imbued with fantastical occurrences. This genre deliberately blurs the lines and boundaries which separate the real world filled with reality to the world of magic and supernatural things, inviting readers to contemplate a reality where the extraordinary and impossible are merely possible and yet accepted in the everyday existence of an individual.

R.K Narayan was one such writer who in his first book *Swami and Friends* has created a South Indian fictional town of Malgudi which represented as a microcosm of India. It is an old and shabby town in which people are simple and absurd. These people share a common social status and do not let their customs and traditions be disregarded. Malgudi is more than just a fictional town, it has been crafted in such a way that transcends geographical boundaries which became a symbol of human sufferings and conditions. However, Malgudi is firmly rooted in reality and blends mundane life with fantastical and supernatural elements which transform the ordinary into extraordinary. This helps in creating a narrative which provides a layer of depth and meaning in its narrative with an unusual circumstance happening around. With the help of this genre, serious emotions can be portrayed with a blend of magic.

Salman Rushdie has been established as a master of narrative and literary innovation while discussing postcolonial literature. He has left an amazing track on the map of today's literary world and is famous for his extraordinary talent of mixing magic realism with reality, which not only enchanted the readers but played a part in reforming the modern way of thinking as well. Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 in Bombay. His life and work serve as a monument to the intricacies of identity, narrative structure and the enduring quest for freedom of expression along with the themes of gender, and sexuality through the Post-Colonial Lens. Rushdie blends together the personal and the political aspect, against the backdrop of India's Independence and Partition. He was aware of the complexities and prejudices of cultural hybridity along with the lasting legacy of British rule which is deeply rooted in the minds of the people, prevailing Post-Independence. His own experiences as a member of India's Muslim minority imbued him with a unique and wide perspective on the intersection and distinction of East and West, culture and tradition and values and morality. His narrative, thus serves as both a chronicle of his own life and a reflection of the nation's journey. Magical Realism is one of the most prominent narrative techniques used by Rushdie which integrates fantastical elements into a realistic setting, allowing him to create a narrative that helps reflect surreal elements during post-partition India.

Saleem Sinai as the narrator in *Midnight's Children*

Midnight's Children written by Salman Rushdie was published in 1981, which serves as a metaphorical embodiment of the whole nation itself, struggling to find an identity and place in the world as burdened by history. The book was highly appreciated and won the Booker prize. He has developed the scope of Indian novels in theme, technique and language. It dealt with the history of India from 1910 to the declaration of emergency in 1976 through the eyes of the male protagonist Saleem Sinai, born at midnight on August 15, 1947. With the use of magical realism, Rushdie has created a framework within a post-partition narrative while incorporating magical and supernatural features into a realistic narrative. This fusion of fact and fantasy makes readers question the nature of reality. It provides multiple perspectives and opinions of different characters in the novel which seems to be less about individual development but more about representing the diverse political, cultural and social landscape of India. He has redefined the boundaries of narrative storytelling by challenging social and cultural conventions, presenting post-partition perspectives, and using magical realism and the playfulness of his language. He created a complex structure which reflects the multifaceted nature of

postcolonial India. He challenges conventional storytelling and offers a critique of historical facts, data and evidence, lost after the partition.

The novel opens with the voice of Saleem Sinai reluctantly beginning to tell his story. He was born ‘on the stroke of midnight’ but his birth makes him no ordinary baby, readers soon learn that he is also no ordinary narrator. “Oh, spell it out, spell it out, at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world” (Midnights Children, 3). This is an indication that Saleem was born to symbolize the Indian nation at the exact time when India was being torn from the womb of the British Empire. This event highlights hope, faith and potential associated with the new age and marks a journey toward a better tomorrow. However, Rushdie played with a narrative structure which made it complex to understand in terms of time and space when Saleem’s narrative shifted not to his own story but to his grandfather’s story, some thirty-two years prior to his birth. Even so, Saleem recounts the scene as if he was there, both with remarkable detail of physical surroundings, as well as remarkable knowledge of his grandfather’s own mental psyche.

Thus, Rushdie’s literary style and narrative are radically pluralistic, complex, convoluted, and rarely linear which can be seen through Saleem’s character as it progresses steadily from a state of optimism and naïve hopefulness towards a disillusioned fall from grace and into a nihilism. As the story moves forward, Saleem has lost his memory in an accident and readers through his journey can sense his regeneration of self. He has left the ‘forest of illusions’ and the ‘jungle of dreams’ and has found his own true self which is reliant on memory and experience of the past. Rushdie, in this instance, has beautifully inverted the story in which a man escapes illusion and discovers reality. He entered into the jungle as a calm ‘Buddha’ with no memory attached to self or identity and left the jungle as Saleem once again, confused about the nature of his identity. He possessed a telepathic bond with the other children who were at midnight, linked to the emergence of India as a sovereign nation. His physical form in a literal sense fractured as disillusionment with newly born India. Rushdie’s creation of historical narratives contradicts the realities of the real world in fiction and fantasy.

However, the instances in this novel pass before the reader’s eyes are often mistaken whether the story is real or a dream. Anita Desai states that “Midnights Children burgeons with life, with exuberance and fantasy. It has the same effect on the eyes and the ears as magnificent circular performance.” Saleem has multiple stories to tell, too many events, miracles and places to discuss but failed to identify himself as an individual. He is what Bhabha mentioned as ‘hybridized’ for he is partly Christian, partly Muslim and partly Hindu. Rushdie without any doubt is celebrated and admired across the globe for representing the concept of identity as a fluid and evolving subject rather than being a fixed and stagnant entity.

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