

Conflation of Colonial History and Fiction: Re-visiting Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: History and fiction have always been porous genres having overlapping concerns as well as mutual influences. Salman Rushdie is a prominent literary artist among the Indian English authors, who has appropriated himself a space among the creative writers for his extraordinary range of subjects, depth, and his multi-dimensional verbosity and for his epic concerns. Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children's* is characterized at the urgency aimed at colonial and postcolonial history of India. The story of the novel moves beyond the bounds of history for the purpose of finding a universal significance of historical forces operating at the times of independence of India and beyond. The novel can be taken as a magical and haunting tale of partition and loudly talks about the struggle for independence and belongingness that links personal life of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai to the emerging India after Independence. Within the larger frame of narrative, run many others subplots of stories along with the main plot. It is the most popular technique often used in Rushdie's fictional works. The complicated history of India's struggle for independence helps the writer to offer insight into the ways of Saleem, the protagonist narrator viewing the world around him.

Key words: history, fiction, literary, genre, magnum opus.

History and fiction have always been porous genres having overlapping concerns as well as mutual influences. Nonfiction and fiction blend; they merge creating a new history, a new fiction. Roger Webster spells out the relation between history and English as of being complementary subject of disciplines. According to him, English suggests imagination, fiction, sensibility or feeling and history is objective, scientific investigation. The events of history are constantly being told and retold; interpreted and reinterpreted by different people at different times. Historical fiction seems to be a narrative in novel form characterized by an imaginative reconstruction of historical personages and events. "All historical narratives seem to take up some position at a point in the scale between the demonstrations of limited relationships between discrete events and the implication of some vast, non human design." (Chides and Fowler 48)

Salman Rushdie is a prominent literary artist among the Indian English authors, who has appropriated himself a space among the creative writers for his extraordinary range of subjects, depth, and his multi-dimensional verbosity and for his epic concerns. Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children's* is characterized by an urgency aimed at "moving beyond the bounds of history for the purpose of finding universal significance of historical forces operating at a particular phase of time" (Rao, A.S. 115). The novel can be considered a magical and haunting tale of partition and loudly talks about the struggle for independent and belongingness that links personal life of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai to the emerging India after Independence. Within the

larger frame of narrative, run many others subplots of stories along with the main plot. It is the most popular technique often used in Rushdie's fictional works. Stewart Nicholas adds to the discussion, "The narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of a tale which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife –to be Padama. This self –referential narrative recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted *Arabian Nights* (Web). According to Reena Mitra: "*Midnight's Children* is a literary response to a series of real life situations that have been cleverly fictionalized through allusions, disguised as well as direct, to the country's recent as well as not so recent past. The novel has an epic sweep covering about six decades in the history of the Indian subcontinent".(Mitra,2) The novel opens up the history of nation with the Independence of India on August 15, 1947 which coincides with Saleem's proclamation of his birth. Right from the inception Saleem seems to be tragically aware of his central historical role, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (MC3). This provides the form and the structural base to the novel where the writer could afford the facts, fancy and history to interweave stories altogether.

In the novel, Emperor Jahangir is considered as Encompasses of the earth, who built Shalimar, the famous garden of Kashmir. Saleem describes Kashmir as a place of incredible beauty. He also notices that in 1915, Kashmir was still pristine, looking just as it had been during the time of the Mughal Empire:

In those days the radio mast had not been built and the
Temple of Sankarcharya, a little black blister on khaki
Hill still dominated the streets and take of Srinagar...no
Army camp at the lake side, no endless snakes of camouflaged
trucks and jeeps clogged the narrow mountain roads...
travelers were not shot as spies if they took photographs
of bridges, and apart from the Englishmen's houseboats on
the lake, the valley had hardly changed since the
Mughal Empire. (MC,5)

It seems that Salman Rushdie's revision of Kashmir's history in the novel is at once an attempt to readdress dominant conceptions of the region, and a new history of Kashmir that constantly defers an ending. Kashmir is in focus of the beginning of the text, as a paradise that is never attained—therefore Kashmir remains in a sketch of present time, “stranded in the middle”. Britain's interest in India began in the 1600s when the **East India Company** established trading stations in Surat, Bombay and Calcutta, using the colony to import spices, silk and cotton and to export textiles. By 1757, they began to overpower Indian states establishing their British Empire. Salman Rushdie has addressed the British Imperial rule which after a long period ultimately led to the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan. The complicated history of India's struggle for independence helps the writer to offer insight into the ways of Saleem, the protagonist narrator viewing the world around him. He has given a realistic account of the Rowlett Act of 1919 and the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. The **Rowlett Act** of 1919 proved too crucial for the Indian Sikhs residing in the province of Punjab. “The Indians have fought for the British so many of them have seen the world by now, and been tainted by abroad. They will not easily go back to the old world. The British are wrong to try and turn back the clock. It was mistake to pass Rowlett Act” (MC, 37). The impugned Act debarred the people from seeking legal redresses from a court of law. Imprisonment without a trial was a repressive measure unheard of at any given time in the past. People began with their protest against the Act. About the shooting incident of Jallianwallah Bagh in Amritsar, Rushdie deftly incorporates the details. Saleem Sinai: “That afternoon the streets are suddenly full of people, all moving in the same direction, defying Dyer's new Martial Law regulations... On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding ...somebody is making a passionate and sweets...That air is filled with dust...Brigadier R.E. Dyer arrives at the entrance to the alleyway, followed by fifty crank troops...put down their machine guns and go away ...fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd...one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing of wounding some person...”(MC,41) The killing of innocent people by Dyer evokes emotive feelings and sympathy for the victims. It also shows whims of the British colonial Rule. The incident which was an inhuman

act of violence and destruction over the peace-loving citizens took a heavy toll of human life.

Not only the historical tragic events but Rushdie also gives accounts of historical personalities. He writes about Mian Abdullah ‘The Lion of Kashmir’ who founded his own political outfit naming National Conference, pitted against the fanatic nature of Muslim league formed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Rushdie explains: “The optimism epidemic had been caused by one single human being, whose name, Mian Abdullah.... He was the Hummingbird, a creature which would be impossible if it did not exist” (MC, 46). In Agra, in the summer of 1942, Adam Aziz like thousands of nationalist Muslims was affected by the optimism of Abdullah. Aziz told Abdulla's benefactress Rani of Cooch Nahin, “I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got bruise on the chest that turned me into India. I'm still not much of Muslim, but I am for all Abdullah. He's fighting my fight” (MC, 47). Moreover, Saleem compare his grandfather with the rise of Mian Abdullah. He takes the struggle of Abdullah as his father's struggle, who started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. The narration of the incident about the murder of Mian Abdullah, a few days before the convocation of his party in Agra, is clothed in fantasy and grotesque. “Six new moons came into the room, six crescent knives held by men dressed all in black, with covered faces. Two men held Nadir Khan while the others moved towards the Hummingbird” (MC, 57)

Saleem also shows the hypocrisy of British and Indians adapting the western ways of life. Adam Aziz, Saleem's maternal grandfather was an educated Kashmiri Muslim and an Indian nationalist. On his return (Adam Aziz's), he is insulted and ostracized by the village elder Tai who points that his pigskin briefcase which contained his medical instruments represent ‘an alien invader, progress’ (MC, 19) and his Heidelberg medical bag is a “sister sleeping pigskin bag from abroad full of foreigner tricks.” (MC, 11) The moral degradation of people after their return from abroad was noticed by him, “I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make...girls be like them!”(MC, 38) Peoples like Dr. Aziz with Tai do not feel an affinity with Indians. Ahmad Sinai displays the colonial mindset when he says, ‘all the best people are white under the skin’ (MC, 247). All the brutal incidents happening under the British rule leads towards the strong determination of acquiring full

Independence by the Indians under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

The midnight declaration of the independence had to face a political atmosphere filled with communal hatred and violence in the pre-partitioned Delhi. The events were moving fast towards the inevitable end of the colonial rule and the birth of a nation. The life of tired India could be correlated with Amina's personal struggle with her old self, which proved formidable as her mind was still clogged up with the memory of the first man Nadir Khan in her life. As a result "she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit" (MC, 68). Amina accepted and loved her husband in fragments. In contrast, the political and geographical space of the country, in those times, was also breaking into fragments. The dream of nationalist's optimists of a unified and secular India was shattered into pieces in the wake of the rise of pre-Partition violence and religious fanaticism.

In the Delhi section of the *Midnight's children*, the imagined India reappears in the visual space of the bioscope- the '*Dunia Dekho*' machine that shows children the collage of a unified India. Moreover, Lifafa Das' peepshow presents the contemporary images. Lifafa Das has set up his black peepshow against a wall on which someone has daubed a swastika. Swastika at that time denotes to R.S.S. party and the Nazi's power. Swastika in ancient India (Hindu) is known as the symbol of power.

Inside the peepshow of Lifafa Das, there were pictures of Taj Mahal and Meenakshi Temple, the holy Ganges, Stafford Cripps leaving Nehru's residence, untouchable being touched and educated persons sleeping in large numbers on railway lines etc. Lifafa Das was attacked by street children which was the net result of the city quarrels which turned communal. The violent Muslim crowd jumped and *gheraoed* the lone Hindu. Amina after witnessing the public frenzy, rushed to the rescue of Lifafa Das. This shows that she possess the parental gift of religious tolerance and hatred for the religious prejudice. She used the news of her pregnancy as a weapon to save Lifafa Das. "Listen well. I'm with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on, if you want to kill, kill a mother and show the world what men you are!" (MC, 100) This was an announcement of Saleem's arrival in the world and which turned him into 'public property' much before his birth (MC, 100). Moreover the spectacle of Amina's motherhood (full womb) before the frenzied crowd presents the image of unity and wholeness saving Lifafa's life.

The narrative deliberately oscillates back and forth, calling attention to the drastic divide that separates rich from poor or educated from illiterate in India and the transfer of power on with the announcement of partition of India, Narrates Saleem:

On June 4th, my ill-matched parents left for Bombay by Frontier Mail...on the same day, Earl Mountbatten of Burma held a press conference at which he announced the Partition countdown of India, and hung his calendar on the Wall: seventy days to go to the transfer of power...sixty Nine ...sixty -eight...tick, tock. (MC, 120)

Bombay remains the central metaphor which informs this vast novel of epic dimension. With its composite and secular culture it stands as a metaphor for the multiplicity of India. The city of seven islands is brought alive through the description of historical details. "There were signs of ill -omen in the city of Bombay. '...And stars are unfavorable!'"(MC, 149) The novel presents in an ample measure, the post-independence political,

social, cultural, economic and psychological turmoil on post modern lines, which "dwells upon the post-colonial situation with a postmodern gain." (Rao, 98)

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru becomes the first prime minister of Independent India. These prophetic words of the first prime minister of independent India have long term implications:

...end... [Of] a period of ill fortune 'This is no time for Petty or destructive criticism', Jawaharlal told the Assembly, No time for ill- will. We have to build the noble Mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell' A Flag unfurls: it is saffron, white and green. (MC 157-158)

The legacy of British colonialism has undoubtedly shaped the newly independent India, just as William Methwold has undeniably shaped Saleem. "Methwold's Estate symbolizes the colonized India, possessed by the British who has superimposed their culture on Indian mind. Thus

the transfer of assets has a special connotation. It is a parody of transfer of power". (Dey, 20) Saleem is actually the blood of poor Vanita's, who found Amina as his mother and became 'the chosen child of midnight to win the Times of India prize and receive Prime Minister Nehru's letter of

congratulation. In reality he was an Anglo-Indian, the illegitimate son of a departing colonizer, William Methwold and a poor Hindu woman. "In fact ,all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents-the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand by history" (MC, 159)

Rushdie also makes a passing reference to **Gandhiji's death** at the hands of Godse after the

In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off
The violence which ended with the partition of the state of
Bombay, as a result of which the city became the capital of
Maharashtra so at –least I was on the winning side. (MC 265-66)

The narrator also informs the failure of government's Five year Plans and an increase in unemployment and population. "On my tenth birthday, it was clear that freak weather-Storms, floods, hailstones from a cloudless sky-which had Succeeded the intolerable heat of 1956, had managed to wreck the Second Five Year Plan." (MC, 285) Saleem began a psychic journey through the length and breadth the country. The politics and economics of the nation are found to be characterized by exploitation, corruption at all levels, bribery and electoral malpractices. It was the 'pigmentation disorder' which affected a large number of Indian businessmen in the early years of independence. Thanks to the accumulation of black money in the wake of the First Five-year Plan. The business men of Indian turning white which may be termed as 'pigmentation disorder' suggest metaphorically the process of westernization and serves as a moral allegory for the post-colonial history of the nation.

Saleem describes the events of the 1957 election. The communist party made a powerful showing, although the communist candidates Qasim Khan (Nadir Khan) lost his race. The narrator avers: On Election Day, 1957 the All -India congress was badly shocked although it won the election, twelve million votes made the communist the largest single opposition party; (MC,307-08).As Saleem's mother flirts with a figure from her past, now turned communist, India finds itself flirting with communism as well. And India's political turmoil, with its widespread corruption, certainly seems dramatic. Rushdie pinpoints the gross misuse and abuse of power structure by power mongering political personalities who only know how to plan their political expediency than the welfare of the masses. Midnight of August 15, 1947 is a memorable event in India's political history, therefore Rushdie observes, 'Midnight has many children. The offspring of independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepper pots...' (MC, 405)

The relation between India and Pakistan grew worse. India conquered Goa- 'the Portuguese

partition. The announcement of the hall manager was short but fraught with far reaching consequences. "This afternoon, at Birla House in Delhi, our beloved Mahatma was killed. Some madman shot him in the stomach...our Bapu is gone!" (MC, 196). The narrator observes that people behave in a violent way for issues like language, color and creed. Saleem became indirectly responsible for the violence. He admits:

pimple on the face of Mother India'. (MC 406) India also reported the large scale U.S aid for Pakistan. Moreover the Sino Indian border skirmishes arise in the Akshai Chin region of Laddakh. In the meanwhile, Amina, Saleem and his sister Brass Monkey shifted to Pakistan from Bombay leaving behind Ahmed Sinai to his lonely fate. The experience of journey from Bombay to Rawalpindi was to Saleem, a travel from warmth of life to coldness of heart. The narrative constitutes a parody of a revolution which overthrew and elected Government in Pakistan, Uncle Zulfikar was pleased with Saleem. Saleem informs: "Zulfikar became the latest in the line of men who have been willing to call me... 'My son'. (MC, 403) The narrative presents a critique of the topsy-turvy political situation in Pakistan vis-a-vis the midnight coup which is described as a "revolution of the peppers pots" (MC, 397). Intrigue and treason are the hallmark of Pakistan politics. China's unprovoked attack on India on October 15, 1962 and the defeat of Indian force at Jhag-La-ridge, coincidence with the *Midnight's children* launching a concreted assault on Saleem. The war with china ended, showing Nehru's 'Panch *Sheel*' in poor light. Moreover Nehru's death had precipitated a bitter power struggle. India offered Saleem "an infinity of alternative realities" but Pakistan left him confused 'amid an equally infinite number of falseness, unrealities and lies" (MC, 453) Rushdie presents a comparative political scenario during sixties and seventies of India and Pakistan: "President Ayub's reputation was in decline: rumors of malpractices in the 1964 election buzzed about. There was, took the matter of the president's son: Gaubar Ayub... in India, Sanjay Gandhi and his Maruti Car company and his congress youth: and most recently of all, Kanti Lal Desai...the sons of the great unmake their parents" (MC, 463). The porous borders of India were also at trouble due to the newly formed neighbor Pakistan. **Indo-Pak war** broke out in April 1965 between the two countries over the "disputed territory" (MC, 465) the Runn of Kutch.

Ever since partition, the Runn had been 'disputed territory;
Although, in practice, neither side had much heart for the
Dispute...the Pakistan Government had build a string of
Border posts ...several of these of Posts were occupied on
April 9th, 1965, by troops of the Indian Army...war in the Runn
Lasted until July 1st ... (MC, 465)

All the members of his family were killed by Indian bomb raids in Rawalpindi and Karachi. Saleem escaped death but was hit at the back of his head by his mother's silver-spittoon which had been flung in the air by the blast. The disintegration of his body coincides with the cracking up of the nation. The Indo-Pakistan war saw the fall of Ayub Khan. This war was soon followed by a civil strife when Mujib-ur Rahaman declared the east wing of

Pakistan as an independent state and named it as Bangladesh. Soon was Mujibur's proclamation, about the **birth of Bangladesh**, on 25th March 1971. The human experience of Pak-Bengal war is evoked through Saleem's travelling in war-ravaged East Bengal as a man dog .He saw and witnessed the atrocities committed by Pakistan forces in East Pakistan.

...during 1971, ten million refugees fled across the borders
Of East-Pakistan-Bangladesh in to India but ten million...
'the biggest migration in the history of the human
Race'...Bigger than Exodus, larger than the Partition
Crowds, the many-headed monster poured into India. On
The border, Indian soldiers trained the guerrillas known as Mukti
Bahini; in Dacca, Tiger Niazi ruled the roost. (MC, 498)

There was widespread jubilation among the people of Bangladesh when the Indian army marched to the capital. On 15th December 1971, Tiger Niazi of Pakistan surrendered to Sam Manekshaw of India in a newly created state of Bangladesh with ninety-three thousand troops.

malpractice during the election campaign of 1971...(MC, 582) After declaring the Emergency in 1975, Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties, engaged in massive arrests, initiated a campaign of forced sterilization, and destroyed ghettos throughout the country. The chant "India is Indira and Indira is India" represents a call of singularity (MC, 587). The traumatic experience of Emergency only unnerved Saleem. He was disillusioned with post-colonial politics altogether and lost his connection with history and politics.

Saleem's return to India coincides with the supposed political rebirth of Mrs. Indira Gandhi whose new congress Party held a more than two-thirds majority in the parliament:the celebration of Indira Gandhi's new Congress Party, which had won a landslide victory - 350 out of possible 515 seats in the Lok Sabha in another recent election. Indira seem to be ignorant, unable to see her campaign slogan, GARIBI HATAO, Get Rid of poverty, blazoned on walls and banners across the great diamond of India...' (MC, 494). While India was experimenting with its nuclear explosion in Rajasthan, Shiva his son, stormed into Saleem's life. On the public day of 1975, Saleem married Parvati who bore Shiva's child. Saleem's wife Parvati converted to Islam and she took the new name, Laylah. The birth of Saleem child mirrored Saleem's own life because the birth of the child coincides, with the **declaration of Emergency** on the midnight of 25 June 1975. Saleem narrates: "...Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty, by judge Jag Mohan Lal of the Allahabad High court, of two counts of campaign

Rushdie's novel *Midnight's children* 'is a devising political satire and an endless entertainment. One of the dominant themes in Rushdie's *Midnight's children* is his concept of history and its interaction with the individual. Rushdie's concerns with history and its effect on the individual, has created fiction which reveals the inner features of the age, the essential human point of view" (Chandra, 28). For Rushdie, India is a country where national history and individual progress are so intertwined that every national event is reflected in the lives of individuals. This is amplified in the novel where the story of Saleem Sinai and the history of India are intertwined. Saleem represents ups and down -of country's life with the ups and downs in his family. As Rushdie writes:

....during the first hour of August 15th, 1947-between
Midnight and one a.m. -no less than one thousand and one
Children were born within the frontiers of the important
State of India...What made the event noteworthy was the
Nature of these children, every one of whom was, through

Some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some prenatal
Power of the moment, or just conceivably by sheer
Coincidence, endowed with features, talents of faculties
Which can only be described as miraculous? (MC, 271)

The stories traces the various crises in the life of the protagonist that synchronize with the major events specially the Jallianwallah Bagh tragedy, Quit-India Movement, Cabinet Mission, Freedom Movement, Muslim league and its role, riots and bloodshed subsequent to the independence, five year plans, reorganization of Indian States, Chinese aggression, Pakistan war, Liberation of Bangladesh and Emergency. All these major 'historical' events provide the novelists panoramic

vision and are reminisced through Saleem's consciousness. Saleem's words affirm the above mentioned assumption: 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history; my destinies are indissolubly chained to those of my country' (MC 3). To clarify and support Rushdie's style of presenting history and fiction parallel, Uma Parameswaran enumerates the following point in her work, *The Perforated Sheet*:

He uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points
In history and symbolizes their long term significance; he
Links political and historical events starting with the
Jallianwallah Bag Massacre of 1919 with one of other of
Saleem's circle of friends and family; he uses Padma as a
Character is functional at both narrative and symbolic Level. (5)

Saleem's life resembles with the growing India after Independence. He is called, by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the mirror of young India. With Saleem's personal history, we have the history of nation. The historical forces prove so powerful against him that he feels "buffeted by too much history" and begins to show symptoms of falling apart (MC 43) Being a fiction the writer couldn't put an end to his broader concept of fictionalizing history. Rushdie factually speaking, admits to the error in chronology in his epic story, "Re-reading my work, I have discovered error in Chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, In these pages, on the wrong dates...in my India, Gandhi Will continue to die at the wrong time...Does one error Invalidate the entire fabric? 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 times purely in Order to place myself in a central role. Today, in my Confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back..... (MC, 229-230)

The narration is filled with the symbolic imagination of the national history in juxtaposition with the personal history of the protagonist. As a whole history and myths, facts and figures, fantasy and fiction altogether formulates an unforgettable saga of the protagonist Saleem Sinai in the extraordinary nation. Rushdie makes a dexterous synchronization of personal and national history creating a supportive fight consciously enough to construct, intend and present a debunk Post Independence Indian history. The hero of novel, Saleem Sinai is the real proponent of this Indian mindset, and proclaims, "To understand just one of it, you have to swallow the world" (MC, 109). Rushdie through his novel brings a revisionist attitude to history in repositioning the post colonial subject in the panorama of the world. He has thus proved unique in freeing the colonial subject from the colonizers' possession and domination of history and politics.

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