

MAJOR THEMES, STYLES & TECHNIQUES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL, "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN"

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's novel, 'Midnight's Children (1981)' remains an Indian novel in ethos, essence and substance as the author explored deeply into Indian sense and sensibility and digs out incalculable mines of ancient indigenous resources like epic, folklore, oral myth and rituals. Rushdie's novel has been substantiated and appropriated by both post-modernism and post-colonialism because it articulates their common and intersecting interests. This paper focusses the major themes, styles & techniques in this novel.

Keywords: salmanrushdie, midnight's children, rushdie, children

Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' pumped up new mode and fashion of fiction writing in the theme, style and technique of Indian English novelists. There have been over 25 novels since the publication and disproportionate success of *Midnight's Children*, wherein the life of the individual travels parallel with the life of the nation. The remarks of renowned critics in this regard are conceivable:

"The 1981 publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was a watershed in the post-independence development of the Indian English novel, so much so that the term "post-Rushdie" has come to refer to the decade or so afterwards in which a wave of novels appeared by established as well as by young writers that were clearly influenced by *Midnight's Children*." (Josna E. Rege)

The novel seems to be passionate accounts and life story of Rushdie. There is direct and indirect allusion of many facets of his biography and close resemblance between him and the protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai. Ahmad Salman Rushdie was born around the time of India's Independence. Whereas Saleem enters the world on that exact day 15 August 1947, Rushdie was born two months earlier, on June 19, 1947, in Bombay. Members of his family were cutting joke that British only left two months after his arrival. Like Saleem, Salman had a nanny called Marry, who had previously worked at the hospital where he was born. Rushdie's father was so angry about the character of 'Ahmed Sinai' that both were not on speaking terms for many months but at last both forgo their egos and natural relationship has been restored. Rushdie had been more worried about his mother's reaction to the novel, but she soon reconciled and sees through the situation and immediately understood that it was "just a story—Saleem isn't Rushdie, herself isn't Amina, they're all just characters."

Parents of Rushdie have migrated to Karachi of Pakistan and so even he had opportunity to dwell in Karachi. He couldn't perpetuate there for long period of time as he found peerless comparison between Mumbai and Karachi because of the latter being accumulated and stinking with filth, debris and refuge. He expressed his anguish through the expression of Saleem. Saleem "never forget the Karachi for not being Mumbai" the only things smell here are the negative aspects of economic class and religion:

"I breathed in the fatalistic hopelessness of the slum dwellers and the smug defensiveness of the rich; I was

sucked along the small-trails of dispossession and also fanaticism." (The Hindu)

Even the houses seem havocked, plagued and diseased here:

"It was full of deformed houses . . . a wild proliferation of mad houses whose inadequacies as living quarters were exceeded only by their quite exceptional ugliness." (Midnight's Children, p. 352)

The novel narrates the story of India through the suffering of Saleem, whose story is inextricably attached to India and the countries in the vicinity. For this reason Saleem has some special powers, like all the children born on that particular hour of that glorious and auspicious day. For example, he can communicate telepathically with all the other "Midnight's Children" and has an extraordinary and prominent nose that can smell danger. In an interview Rushdie explain the reason for Saleem's big nose:

"One day I was looking at the map of India, and all of a sudden for me it resembled a large nose hanging into the sea, with a drip off the end of it, which was Sri Lanka. Then I thought well, you know, if Saleem is going to be the twin of the country, he may as well be the identical twin and so he sprouted this enormous nose." (Midnight's Children, p. 354)

Though Rushdie was born to Muslim parents, yet he didn't create a pure Muslim character that reads the Koran daily or visits the mosque. He adores the homogeneous intermingling of heterogeneous castes, creeds and sexes which constitute the India. His main character Saleem, is partly Hindu, partly Goan, partly Kashmiri, partly Muslim, partly British, suggesting thereby the amalgamation of different races and beliefs. The novel begins with Saleem Sinai, revealing the accident of his birth:

"I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world." (Midnight's Children, p. 3)

Midnight's Children is the first-person narrative of Saleem Sinai, who writes the fantastic story of his life, reading it aloud each night and getting feedback, critical appreciation and depreciation from his beloved

and would be wife named Padma. Right from the moment of his birth, Saleem projected himself as:

“Mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was no escape.” (Midnight’s Children, p. 9)

Universality of novel is further substantiated and corroborated by the fact that Rushdie has incorporated and exposed various evils of society and perennial problems pertaining to the nation and the world. There is instance early in the novel when the reverend mother even has a racist attitude toward her own daughter:

“Mumtaz, the blackie whom she has never been able to love because of her skin of a South Indian fisherwoman.” (Midnight’s Children, p. 58)

Rushdie keeps drawing the parallels between the life of ordinary individual and major historical events through the 31 chapters of the novel. At the same time he tried to translate the superstition into action. For example, Saleem’s grandparents Aziz and Naseem Sinai on their way from Kashmir to Agra, stopover in Amritsar where Aziz experiences the JallianwallahBagh massacre. The massacre itself is heralded by an itch in his nose:

“As the fifty one men march down to the alley way (to the JallianwallahBagh) a tickle replaces the itch in my Grandfather’s nose. The fifty one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty- five to Dyer’s right and twenty-five to his left . . . as Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. ‘Yaaaahh-thooo! He sneezes and falls forward . . . there by saving his life . . . red stuff stains his shirts. There are screams now and sobs now and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather.” (Midnight’s Children, p. 36)

In *Midnight’s Children*, for the first time, Rushdie acknowledges the millions of common people and diverse group that make up the India. He does this by recording the various voices and perspectives that are almost never mentioned in most narratives and historical novels. As Saleem says,

“To understand just one life, you have to swallow the whole world.” (Midnight’s Children, p. 126)

Saleem, who represents the new born Indian nation is actually a changeling, the son of an Englishman and Indian woman; Saleem is born with unblinking eye and has to be taught to shut them, “for nobody can face the world with his eye open all the time” and out of the 1001, a figure which clearly seeks allusion from *The Arabian Nights*, children born on the midnight of 15 Aug 1947, exactly 420 die characterizes the notorious number of section of the Indian panel code dealing with cheating and fraud.

The individual since the 20th century has become a feeble, puppet and powerless being because governments have become very oppressive and powerful. This postmodern insight can be clearly sighted in *Midnight’s Children*. Saleem, is the centre of attention at the time of birth – the then prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru writes to his

parents; newspapers publish his pictures, celebrate his arrival and award him for being first midnight child of independent India. But as he grows older, he begins to lose his prestige and position, first in Sinai household and then in the country itself. So much so that Saleem feels completely drained out and impotent having been forcibly castrated during the Emergency.

Fragmentation, migrancy and memory are almost central theme not only to *Midnight’s Children* but all of Rushdie’s novels. The novel is classified in a category of fiction that goes by the name of magic realism. Today whenever one thinks of magic realism straight way Rushdie’s name comes to mind.

Midnight’s Children is considered a masterful blend of fiction, politics, and magic. Critics credit Rushdie for making the worldwide literary audience aware of the transitions that India had to undergo in the wake of long awaited freedom from British enslavement. With his adept control of the English language and his ability to produce even the minutest events in full, vivid details, Rushdie takes readers on an imaginative flight that makes them see his native country in a way that they never did before. Showering lavish praise on Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, M.K. Naik and Shymalal A. Narayan writes:

“It is multi-faceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical bildungsroman, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory, a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy, and daring experiment in form and style.” (Naik, M. K. & Narayan, Shyamala A, p. 39)

Its highly imaginative and creative quality, its unconventional word play, the disarranged syntax and spirited metaphors, its stunning fusion of oral narrative, history, fiction, nonfiction, journalism, Hindi film songs, fantasy, realism, the stream of consciousness make one works hard to understand what the novel is about. So, this rich, multilayered, complex, episodic, loose and meandering novel well qualifies as a great and exemplary work of art.

Saleem Sinai complains about for not having a listener to whom he can narrate his story or a scribe who can copy down a story. Saleem has grand illusion about writing a magnum opus equal to that of Valmiki. But he has his facts all mixed up. For it was Ved Vyas not Valmiki who dictated the epic Mahabharata to Ganesha. Rushdie has to face a lot of flak and criticism for his ignorant but fatal error. Mahatma Gandhi figures in *Midnight’s Children* too but so faint is the historical memory of independent India that even the date of his assassination is incorrectly recorded by Saleem. The lapse only reminds the reader of the distance between the modern day Indian and Gandhian ideals.

The use of the first person narrator often makes the author vulnerable to the critics that are really directed at the narrator. Rushdie was blamed for all Saleem’s mistakes and opinions. His careless error set off a volley of objections so much so that Rushdie had come out with a rescue measure and had to publish, “Errata: Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children*.” While he confessed some of the unintentional errors he made in the novel and at the



same time he warned the readers that "Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator". And that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative and definitive guide to the history of post-independence India."

It is a recurring technique in the novel that rivets and spells bound readers:

"Baby Saleem fell ill. As if incapable of assimilating so many goings-on, he closed his eyes and became red and flushed. While Amina awaited the results of Ismail's case against the State authorities; while the Brass Monkey [Saleem's sister] grew in her womb; while Mary entered a state of shock [. . .]; while umbilical cord hung in pickle-jar and Mary's chutneys filled our dreams with pointing fingers; while Reverend Mother ran the kitchens, my grandfather examined me and said, 'I'm afraid there is no doubt; the poor lad has typhoid.'" (*Midnight's Children*, p. 174)

Rushdie uses the cluster and series of metaphors to describe the growth of child during the pregnancy of its mother:

"What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming one might say, a

book – perhaps an encyclopedia even a whole language." (*Midnight's Children*, p. 115)

One should not have any doubt on the talent and skill of Rushdie as a novelist but the courage and intrepidity which Rushdie has mustered in coming out with fact and truth has never been done before by any authors in the history of Indian English Literature in general and Indian English fiction in particular. This has been key and secret weapon of Rushdie's success as a novelist. Had he not been in confinement, controversy and adversity, he may not have been blessed with opportunity.

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