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Problematising History, Politics and Identity in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

This present research aims at coming to grips with Salman Rushdie's engagement with the history, politics and identity of the Indian subcontinent, from his distinct location of a postcolonial migrant writer drawing culturally from multiple spaces, even as he belongs to none completely. A close textual examination of Rushdie's major fictional work has been undertaken in order to expound how a selection of thematic and structural patterns can be traced in the corpus of his major fiction, namely *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). The research attempts to chronicle the development of the writer vis-à-vis a critical examination of these six novels. *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Rushdie's latest major work of fiction was published as this study was nearing completion. It thus enabled the inclusion of examples into the discussion herein. A study of Rushdie cannot ignore his linguistic ebullience. Therefore, it takes into account the manner in which he reinvigorates narrative and the English language. The central thesis can be summarised and situated thus: Rushdie's oeuvre engages with the history, politics and identity of the Indian subcontinent shaped by the perspective of a migrant postcolonial. The study also takes into consideration his remarkable contribution to narrative and language.

Keywords: History, politics, Identity, Post colonialism, Postmodernism, Culture and Narrative technique

1. Introduction

Rushdie's oeuvre explores numerous concerns, but it has consistently grappled with historical and political representation. The interplay between history and the individual, features among the key ideas taking shape in his insistently political work. *Midnight's Children* in particular, engage with the political crises that plague the newly emergent nation states of India and Pakistan.

Most accounts of the Western approach towards history in the nineteenth century are characterised by reliance upon the origin, meaning and teleology of history. Traditionally, history has been considered a self-contained, objective, unbiased corpus of knowledge. However, much of the present epistemological questioning of historical representation and knowledge has been sparked-off by the questioning of the authority of historical sources and documents. The recording of historical events necessitates a prior process of interpretation and analysis, and these obviously imply a degree of subjectivity for as Linda Hutcheon has it: "facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events". Human subjectivity is largely shaped by culture and its dominant ideology. Consequently, history viewed as a human construct bears the impress of cultural and ideological discourse. The difficulty does not arise from the ideological, arbitrary and subjectively determined nature of history, but from the fact that it is a construct that lays claim to totality, closure and objectivity.

Fiction as a literary artefact is shaped by history as a cultural force. The long-established dichotomy between history and fiction was constructed upon the supposition that the former was concerned with reality and objectivity, while the latter with the imaginative and the subjective. The frontiers that demarcate history and fiction are increasingly blurring. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art". Recent critiques of history and fiction concentrate upon the sites of convergence of the two modes rather than their differences.

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In the wake of Hayden White's *Met history, Post structural Theory and Postmodern Historiography* propose a relativist view of the possibility of either objectivity or material preferentiality in historical discourse. Twentieth-century considerations of history espouse that history and fiction merit treatment along a similar basis as linguistically and ideologically determined constructs. They both draw from verisimilitude rather than objective truth, are both regarded as "linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure," they are both "intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality". Fiction and history are not regarded as mutually exclusive, but interdependent. Much contemporary fiction attempts a telling of the stories ignored by history.

2. Discussion

History is the fulcrum of the narrative in *Midnight's Children*. Important public events in Indian socio-politics are allied with those in the lives of Saleem and his family. Several critics have identified Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* as Rushdie's source text for the novel, or an example of the kind of historical version that lends itself to Rushdie's parody. In the view of Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Midnight's Children* is a contemplation of "the textuality of history and, in particular, of that official history that constitutes the nation". Rather than contend for a reorganisation of what may qualify as history, it is a reinterpretation of what has always constituted history that is Rushdie's main concern. Hence, the novel does incorporate monumental historical events, but they lead to an interpretation that is at variance from much of traditional history. Jago Morrison argues that unlike writers like Toni Morrison or Maxine Hong Kingston who attempt to reclaim the silences in history of the dispossessed, for Rushdie "History is conceived as an overwhelming superabundance of experience, a tumult of competing voices". For Rushdie, the problem of history resides in "its omnipresence and bewildering multiplicity". Rather than representing the past as a "knowable totality", his work is "magnificently cacophonous". *Midnight's Children* offers a counterbalance to the totalising discourse of history by foregrounding the private and excentric narrative of the protagonist. This middle-class youth of mixed parentage is India in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem comes to embody India as Rushdie's answer to the political dictum "Indira is India and India is Indira." He defines himself by his association with India's history. He is the instigator of events, and what transpires with him and his family is inextricably interwoven with that of the nation. History literally becomes his story.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie reminisces how the germ of *Midnight's Children* was born in the course of a family joke that the departure of the British was induced by the arrival of Salman who was born eight weeks prior to Indian independence. Subsequently, *Midnight's Children* chronicles the birth of 1001 children born within the midnight hour of India's independence with phenomenal gifts. The most potent endowments are related to the hour closest to midnight. Saleem and Shiva who are both born at the very stroke of midnight have the most powerful abilities. The children of midnight are thus mysteriously "handcuffed to history" (MC 9), their destinies being inextricably interwoven with that of the newly independent nation. Saleem Sinai announces that he was born at the very stroke

of midnight: "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world."

Personal identity is thus linked with national identity. For his portentous birth Saleem not only bags the coveted Times of India prize offered to those mothers who give birth at the exact moment of India's Independence; but also receives a letter from the reigning Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru congratulating baby Saleem. Nehru assured the neonate: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own'." The letter binds the destiny and potential of the neonate Saleem with that of the embryonic polity that is at the same time an ancient civilisation.

In the mode of postmodern readings that privilege the possibility of multiple interpretations, Rushdie is clearly projecting the Amritsar massacre as a denunciation of the coloniser's act. Sabrina Hassumani notes that Rushdie considers the diametrically opposite versions of the massacre wherein "the colonizers viewed this as putting order to chaos; the colonized viewed it as a cold-blooded massacre of innocent victims". Eric Berlatsky is convinced that Rushdie consistently distinguishes between subjective interpretations and deception in ideological terms for political dominance", and exhibits a preference for the truth of one type of interpretation over another. As Hutcheon clarifies, postmodern fiction "does not 'aspire to tell the truth' as much as to question whose truth gets told". Rushdie thus plays upon "point of view" in historical narrations and suggests the multiplicity of historical accounts. In an essay, Rushdie indicts the film *Gandhi* for its distorted portrayal of the Amritsar massacre, pointing out that the film depicts Dyer as a zealous individual whose act was condemned by the empire; but in reality, he was a hero to the colonialists who had taught "the wogs" a lesson.

In *Midnight's Children* the character of Commander Sabarmati is modelled on that of Nanavati. Saleem becomes the engineer of the whole episode as the person who alerts Commander Sabarmati to his wife's illicit relationship with Homi Catrack via an anonymous note. His purpose in doing this is basically to caution his perfidious mother whose rendezvous with Nadir Khan he disapproves of. However, matters take their own turn and wind up with disastrous consequences. Saleem admits that it was he who set in motion the chain of events that transpired.

Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet, I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play — only I hadn't meant it! I didn't think he'd. I only wanted to ... a scandal, yes, a scare, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never, no. (MC 262; original ellipses).

The riots instigated in India with the disappearance of the relic of the holy hair of Prophet Mohammed, are dexterously woven into the events of the Sinai family. Incensed by the death of his son Hanif, Aadam Aziz leaves his Agra abode never to return. The narrator states that a man answering to his grandfather's description was seen at the Hazratbal Mosque where the concerned relic was housed. He wonders if his grandfather was behind the theft of the relic: "Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son?" Aadam Aziz suffers a fall and dies in the valley of his

birth. The narrator goes on to associate the death of his grandfather with the death of Jawaharlal Nehru on 27th May 1964: "Nehru's death; can I avoid the conclusion that that, too, was all my fault?"

In typical postmodern fashion, events from history are installed only to be subverted. Saleem is unable to escape his association with historical events even when he goes to Pakistan along with his mother and sister. Incidentally, he learns that the presence of the Pakistani frontier deprives him of his telepathic transmission to the children of midnight. While in Pakistan, Saleem finds favour with his uncle General Zulfikar. His uncle prefers Saleem over his own son who is an embarrassment on account of his enuresis. Consequently, Saleem is allowed to witness the surreptitious meetings leading to the military coup by Ayub Khan. He claims "not only did I overthrow a government — I also consigned a president to exile" (MC 291). Saleem makes a mention of, but abjures responsibility for certain other key historical events like the deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan, the conquer of Goa by the Indian army, American aid to Pakistan, the Sino-Indian border conflict, the census of 1961 and the victory of the All India Congress in the 1962 elections.

The text is an exploration of complex questions about cultural identity. Like Oscar Matzerath from Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, Saleem Sinai is motivated by the artistic impulse to seek his identity through a "self-begetting novel", one which will, synecdochally, also account for the history of their time and place". *Midnight's Children* is predominantly concerned with a new postcolonial nation attempting to forge an identity and assert itself. The critique of the imperial powers on the other hand, is subtle rather than overt. Brennan notes the manner in which the novel sardonically reflects orientalist precursors like E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. The character of Saleem's grandfather Dr. Aziz harks back to Forster's Dr. Aziz, while the MCC 'Midnight's Children's Conference', comprising the magical children is evocative of the 'Mayapore Chatterjee Club' that the anglicised Hari Kumar is part of, in Scott's novel.

Identity is problematised most emphatically in the context of Saleem's multiple and uncertain parentage. He represents the plural identities of India. This hybrid self-springs from the imagination of a writer shaped by his own experience of plurality and migrancy, in which purity has no place. Saleem is actually the son of an illicit union between an Englishman and a poor Hindu woman. He is brought up by a Kashmiri Muslim couple who are ignorant of the fact that he has been exchanged at birth with their own son. The multifaceted origins of the nation are thus taken into account. Through the complex ancestry of Saleem Sinai the novel represents the different social classes and religious backgrounds. All these play a part in the formation of the new nation via Saleem's complex ancestry.

The narrative technique of *Midnight's Children* corroborates and foregrounds notions of memory and fragmentation. According to Rushdie, the experience of displacement is accompanied by the fragmentation of memory and identity. He speaks of how the diasporic writer who attempts to capture the world is compelled to do so in "broken mirrors", some fragments of which can never be retrieved. Keith Wilson regards *Midnight's Children* as a novel centrally concerned with the limitations of the narrative act: "It 'deliberately invites a questioning of the credentials of the

novelist and of the illusory surface objectivity of the novel form". The novel is indeed intensely self-reflexive, inserting the condition of the writing process into the text. The novel is indeed intensely self-reflexive, inserting the condition of the writing process into the text. This will be discussed in chapter five. Through such met fictive asides Rushdie penetrates the illusion of the real. He foregrounds fictional truth. He uses a cinematic metaphor to explicate the association between reality and illusion:

Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality (MC 165-6).

The narrator acknowledges and even embraces the errors in his novels — both intentional as well as unintentional. The many silences, absences and inconsistencies of the micro narratives are legitimate since the past cannot be completely accounted for. Saleem concedes the difficulty of furnishing an accurate account of event. He feels that "it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (MC 443). In *Midnight's Children* the first-person narrator Saleem draws attention to the error he makes regarding the elections of 1957 and the assassination of Gandhi, but significantly adds "in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time."

3. Conclusion

In *Midnight's Children* as well as *Shame*, Rushdie interweaves history and politics as he deliberates upon the identity of the nation states of India and Pakistan. He is disappointed with the postcolonial nation because those who came to lead it were, as Timothy Brennan puts it, "sell-outs and power brokers".

The writer's disenchantment with a disoriented, aimless generation is encapsulated in *Midnight's Children*. The aspirations of the new nation are at variance from its frustrating realities. Even so, India emerges from the book as a land of possibilities in the form of its voluminous meandering narrative. *Shame* shares stylistic techniques with *Midnight's Children* but as its scope demands, it is tightly crafted. The exhilaration that greeted Independence in the young postcolonial nation of Pakistan has faded. The country is thereby floundering in the midst of lost ideals, rampant corruption and repressive governments. Iskander had once told his daughter that as a nation the people had an outstanding talent for "self-destruction". Rushdie regards himself as a writer of political fiction. *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* condemn acquiescence and quiescence in the face of tyranny. They insist upon political engagement and social accountability. Rushdie emphasises the need for "books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world". His best work manages to accomplish just this.

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