

## **The Midnight's Children. : A Post-Modernist Text**

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### **Abstract**

Salman Rushdie is a postmodernist who incorporates many postmodern features in his fiction. Literature generally uses three main types of fantastic construction viz. 'speculative storytelling, fabulation, and the fantastic elements emerged into a conventional setting. Kafka makes use of these elements in his writings, which can be termed as 'Magic realism'. The most essential component of fantasy and magic realism is 'distortion of reality'. The "fantasy" and the fantastic are the main gateway to Rushdie's fiction.

**KEYWORDS:** magic realism, fantasy, post-modernism.

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Discussing with the audience of the The Guardian Book Club Salman Rushdie had this to say on the writing of *Midnight's Children*: "One day in 1976-I'm no longer certain of the date-a young, unsuccessful writer wrestling with an enormous and still intractable story decided to start again, this time using a first -person narrator. On that day, much of what is now the beginning of *Midnight's Children* was written. " I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time". " Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came". " Handcuffed to history". He further says: " *Midnight's Children*, a book which repeatedly uses images of land reclamation, because Bombay is a city built upon reclaimed land, was itself an act of such reclamation, my attempt to reclaim my Indian origins and heritage from my eyrie in Kentish Town, and by far the best thing that had happen to it, and to its author, was its reception in India, where people responded not to the magic but the realism; where Saleem's narrative voice felt to many readers-as it had to its author-like their own; and where the book was so heavily and successfully pirated that the anonymous pirates started sending me greeting cards. "Happy Birthday from the Pirates". "Happy New Year. Best wishes, the Pirates". These, perhaps, were the ultimate compliments." 1

In an interview to the *The Times of India* Rushdie remarks: " In *Midnight's Children*, there was a line which originally was the first line in the novel but later on I moved it because it was too didactic. It said that most of what matters is our life takes place in our absence. Nowadays, if in the financial corridors of power, people makes decisions, everybody's life changes. If a 169 currency collapses, many of us lose our jobs. The distance between the political sphere and the private sphere has disappeared. In the way that war has become total, so has politics become total. Now, we have total politics which affects private life as well as public life. My project has been not only to chronicle the private lives of people but also to chronicle the public life in the countries they live and to show how these things are joined. In my four novels, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a part of what I have tried to do is to discuss

not only the private life of individuals , but to show how the public life of nations affects those lives. “2.

Salman Rushdie (1947-) is a prolific writer, fortunate enough to get British atmosphere to flourish his writings in English. Born in India but bred in England in a very free atmosphere. That freedom emboldened him to write *Satanic Verses* (1988) and *Midnight’s Children* (1981), *Grimus* (1975). He never knew that he will invite “fatwa” to be beheaded and the killer would be awarded prize money in crores by late Ayotalla Khomeini. The fanatic fundamentalist labeled him as blasphemous although it portrays the humbug religiosity blinding the masses. The book is still banned in India but one of the research scholars is awarded PhD on Salman Rushdie without reading the book and how come the university overlooks such a serious academic blunder. Only Muslims call it a blasphemous, for it hurt the feelings of millions of Islamalites. Without paying any serious attention to the artistic reality, style and of the opinion of the writer, fanatic supremos like Khomineini of Iran without a speck of knowledge of art and literature condemned Sir Rushdie to death. Fanatics are self-made judges declaring any life sentence calling them heretics and declaring their writings as “Murtid” and comparing oneself to Christianity or Roman Catholic who believe that anyone who writes against Christianity is heretic and is condemned to death by burning him alive on a pyre in a public square by “inquisition” religious court. Probably this condemnation and his loose character defamed Salman Rushdie. A young black lady once his fiancée called him an erectile dysfunctional writer and secondly the latest charges lay-down on Salman Rushdie by Taslima Nasreen who is very outspoken, who calls herself as lesbian and laughs at the womanizing bald headed fellow running after Laxmi and many other fairy tale like women, but she/ he would never get she doubts, after his death he is sure he would not get 72 virgins to be awarded in heaven only for those believed, who die to preserve the principles of Islam or declare war against anti-Islamite’s would be awarded 72 virgins in Jannat she twittered.

*Midnight’s Children* (1981) where Salman employs multi-faceted narratives like autobiographical bildungsroman which is a picaresque fiction, a political, and topical satire, a comic extravaganza with surrealistic fantasy. Besides innovation of a new style it is story of Saleem Sinai born on the midnight of 15th August 1947. This is the year and time India was declared a free nation. After a few years Saleem feels that he is mysteriously handcuffed to history, the feeling as if he is neither a Pakistani nor an Indian. The novel opens with an account of the life of Saleem's grandfather, whereas the protagonist appears on the page number 116 onwards; it presents Saleem’s peregrination over the next 25 years covering his experience during the Bangladesh War in 1971 and the clamping of Emergency in India in 1975.

Fantasy and symbolism is meaningfully applied. Saleem represents the ‘free citizen’ of the new-born Indian nation. His father was an Englishman and the mother an Indian woman, like many other Anglo-Indian progeny. Many English planters fathered their children on Indian women. Saleem is born with blinking eyes and has to be taught to shut them for nobody can face the world with his eyes open all the time. “And , out of one thousand one” and the number reminds the stories in Arabian Nights One thousand and one children were born on the midnight of 1947, to be exactly 420 children were enrolled

in the demography. This reminds the notorious number of section 420 of IPC that defines cheating and punishment for it. Salman Rushdie perfectly applies the technique of magic realism as used by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Ben Okri. He succeeds in amalgamating the third world technique of magic realism and the Western mainstream tradition of post-modernist sensibility characterized by the artistic use of language. In this sense Rushdie seems to be pioneer of Magic Realism, using various old tradition narrative patterns with unique styles and experimentations in the use of language making English Hinglish. He is bold enough to chutneyfy English language as most of the Indians do. His imagination is hyperactive and as such he employs Surrealism and magic Realism which have affinities with a strong oral tradition and narrative patterns of third world particularly DH Lawrence, Sterne, Gunter Grass and Garcia Marquez the writer of Love in Time of Cholera.

Political opportunism and fanatic fundamentalism are the enemies of the intellectual properties they being marauded and voracious appetite of the readers is being starved by banning the booklike Satanic Verses and the latest writings of Dr Bhalchandra Nemale on Hindu religion and religiosity. Why is so called fundamentalist fail to know something novel in Satanic Verses and how humbug it is on the part of the entire Muslim community including so called intellectual declare it blasphemous. It is noteworthy that Sanathan Hindus, those who take pride in Vedas, Shrutis ,Smrutis and Upanishads never waged war against the truth finder like Govind Ranade one who entitled his book as Aamche Neeche Rishi Poorvach, a long preface is by a communist Shripal Dange where how the sages and seers eloped the wives the daughters and the mothers of the other persons and fathered their children. Arjuna's mother insist Arjuna to have intercourse with her lest she would curse him and he will be afflicted with a third gender hermaphrodite.

On Valentine's Day February 14, 1989, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against the "blasphemous" novelist. The hard core Islamicists upheld the cleric's extraterritorial terror tactics against Rushdie whose crime was his imagination, and many Muslim countries have banned his allegedly "un-Islamic" novel, The Satanic Verses. The book was more burned than read; from Bradford to Islamabad, fundamentalist made a bonfire of it. Rushdie was agonised that India was the first country to ban The Verses. He says : " The reputation with India is what hurts me the most. My own family did not leave India on partition, and I went to Pakistan much later, as a schoolboy. Pakistan always struck me as an insufficiently imagined community, and Shame, in a sense, reflects this. But to be expelled from India is very painful. This has been an expulsion in more ways than one. India banned my book before it even arrived in India. And my own friends hardly made any fuss about it. There has never been a campaign in India for lifting the ban, or allowing me to visit".<sup>3</sup>

Salman Rushdie's The Midnight's Children can be read as a national allegory which gives a imaginative form to India and its history. "It sounds like a continent finding its voice" reads the blurb from the New York Times on the cover of the Picador paperback.

Neil Ten Kortenaar comments, "then novel does expose the fictionality of the nation and its history, but the denial of the possibility of literal truth we must put our faith in fictions".<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the genesis of *Midnight's Children* in interview to John Hofferden in *Novelist in Interview* responds to the question. 'And after the acting? Rushdie responds: ' I was starving and I got a job in advertising for a year. Then I gave it up to write a book that nobody published; then advertising for another year...I eventually got a deal...that effectively gave me between four and five days a week to write to myself. I thought of it. I thought of it as industrial sponsorship. That is how I wrote *Midnight's Children*...I never really enjoyed it, and in fact it got worse and worse...when I realized that I couldn't do it (advertising) any more-this was before *Midnight's Children* was published. I told my wife to prepare for poverty. So I left in the spring of 1981, and I was fortunate when the book came out. There were some press reports that said that I had won the Booker Prize and then left my job, when actually I had done something much more risky''.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1981. Booker is the prize awarded annually for a novel published by a British or commonwealth citizen during a previous year. It was founded in 1969 and financed by the Booker McConvell. The book was also adjudged Booker of the Bookers in 1993. *Midnight's Children* is considered as Rushdie's tour de force. It was published in 1981 by Jonathan Cape and subsequently published by Pan Books Ltd., in 1982 as Picador edition. The book was an instant success and received rave reviews from critics and from the prestigious literary journals. In a glowing review *Sunday Telegraph* wrote ' India has found her Gunter Grass'. *Newsweek* wrote of it, ' A marvellous epic novel....a brilliant new inspirant to the ranks of V.S Naipaul and Milan Kundera.

The *New York Times* wrote in its reviews 'One of the most important novels to come out of the English speaking world in this generation. *Publisher's Weekly* says, 'Awakening feelings of such excitement and pleasure as only a few writers are capable of inducing, this novel marks the brilliant debut of talent to be reckoned with Rushdie is like all the great novelists a master story-teller and his story is nothing less than that of modern India. The narrator, at the very outset on the first page of his narrative refers to his ideal story teller Scheherazade, the narrator of the *Arabian Nights* which contains thousand and one stories. He says: " I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning-yes meaning something-I admit it: above and all things, I fear absurdity. And there are so many stories to tell, too many; such excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and mundane!"(MC 9,10)

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* is Rushdie's alter ego in guise, both coming into this world on day of India's independence on August 15, 1947.

Rushdie himself plays with words and rambles his being handcuffed to history: " On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of FACT clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came...I had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history indissolubly chained to those of my country".<sup>5</sup>

The prominent feature of the novel is the protagonist Saleem's personal life intertwined with his country. T.N. Dhar in his study, *Micro-Macro Symbiosis and Form of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children** writes the narrative account in *Midnight's Children* in shape of selective recalling of the past from the vantage point of view of the present-a

reassembling of Saleem's personal life and the history of his country with the help of memory. The controlling device employed is the episode, which in the author's culinary metaphor, is a pickled jar. There are thirty such jars held together by the person of the narrator and the chronology of his development. This scheme accommodates the chronological progression of the socio-cultural and political scene of the country. A part of the narration is an account of Saleem's prenatal past which helps us to understand the significance of his birth and his nation. Example of such personal public interlocking can be found in earlier fiction also: In Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' and Steinbeck's 'Grapes of Wrath'. However what distinguishes Rushdie's attempt is that the account of both the personal and the public is totally different from theirs and the personal account is clothed in heavy trappings of fantastic and the public part is properly seasoned to produce which Saleem calls the 'chutnification of history'.

In Rushdie's novel, especially *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*, there are parallels with Rushdie's own life, fiction of his creation and the order of the world events cannot be brushed aside as mere coincidence and sheer chance. As Malise Ruthven asserts: the parallels between the events of Rushdie's own life, the fiction he creates and the order of the world events that would presumably in their course without his intervention seen too apposite to be arbitrary, too loaded with meaning to be dismissed with 'mere' that usually precedes 'coincidence'. The targets of the satirically inventive of his earlier novels-*Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. Indira Gandhi, her son Sanjay, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia-Ul-Haqq-all met 'sticky ends'. This overlapping between the real world and Rushdie's fictional universe would be remarkable even without his admission that the conflation of private and public fiction, the realms respectively of arts and politics, are central to the project of as a writer. 'I think it is the curious phenomenon of 20th century' he told Sue Lawley on 'Desert Island Discs', that politicians have got at inventing fictions which they tell us as the truth. It then becomes the job of the makers of fiction to start telling the 'real' truth. Saleem's history and that of free India go hand-in-hand. The magic and the wizardry of Rushdie is the juxtaposition of his 'the heroes' life events with those of the nations. We get an interesting insight through Catherine Cundy's following observation: 'like the formulated and repeated phrases of ancient epic poetry which help the poet to locate his position in the recounting of the narrative. The spittoons, washing chest, gloves and the perforated sheets of Saleem's past, map out his memory of growing up alongside the new India. The letter from Nehru celebrating his illustrious moment of his birth and the photograph of himself as a baby from *The Times of India* are preserved for posterity inside Saleem's old tin globe, and buried in the garden of Buckingham Villa before the family's final departure for Pakistan. This episode is mirrored in an account in Ved Mehta's book *A Family Affairs* of the discovery of Mrs Gandhi own desire that posterity should remember her'. Many critics have placed Rushdie among the great chroniclers of India's political, social and cultural history.

"Frangmentation is the theme of the novel, from the sheet with the hole in it through which Saleem's grandfather is permitted to glimpse portions of the body of the woman he will marry, all the way to a dismembering of history. "We are a nation of forgetters," Saleem says, and he isn't even sure of his own father. He is reading aloud, like Scheherazade, his dreams, as if to impress a departed wig."6 Rani Dharkar in her interview with Rushdie had posed a question to him that *Midnight's Children* and the *Tin*

Drum both draw upon contemporary history. The picture of the widow Mrs Indira Gandhi he drew was from a very bad dream he used to have in his childhood. Rushdie says 'I had that dream. When I was child that was a recurring dream I used have. All green and black and a witch on a stool tearing people and throwing them away. It was the most frightening dream i had about three times. And I would really wake up screaming'. So this dream was ascribed to the widow of Emergency in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie shows how a politicians feature and traits have fallout on the country: duality characterizes the Emergency scenario, its dynamism and tyranny being symbolized by Mrs Gandhi's parting line between her white and black hair. Its irrational political rhetoric effects the 'irreversible discombulation of the children of the midnight'. Nasbandi (Vasectomy) spells the abolition of hope, the experience that Sinai is coerced to undergo at the hands of Labia lips and lanky beauties. Since it is the reign of gimmickry in Indian politics during three decades after the partition, the Republic Day signifies a good day for illusionists."

The novel is highly political which Saleem justifies 'that for the individual living in the certain kind of society there must be a relatedness of some kind between one's private world and the public world into which one has been socialized. But the political figures who appear-Indira Gandhi, her son Sanjay, Morarji Desai etc, are monsters straight out of a nightmare...' As the country is disintegrating with corruption and communal feuds and flare-ups, so is the individual. For throughout the novel Saleem has been towards a slide towards disintegration; he loses finger, hair, sense of smell, memory, and ends impotent as a result of post-sterilization programme during the Emergency. Saleem is enlisted in the Pakistan army as a mad dog for his olfactory sense. Like the fantastic metamorphoses in Kafka stories, Saleem's transmogrification into a mad dog suggests some deep self loathing. Saleem is literally 'hand-cuffed to history' (MC,9)-the circumstances of his own birth making him analogues with the newly emergent independent nation of India. His narrative is therefore simultaneously the story of his own life and a mirror of the life of India itself. Saleem significantly eschews a purely linear a chronological mode of narration in favour of one which veers between past, present, and the future, presenting not only the arrival of the events and characters which will later be revealed, but also his own annihilation. Saleem leads us backwards and forwards in time between his present standpoint of 1978, back to the events of his father Adam's childhood down through the intervening years to the simultaneous worth of himself and of free India. The model for this pendulum moment in the narrative is what Saleem calls 'the metronome music of Mountbatten's countdown calendar' to independence. The reference to Mountbatten's countdown calendar (MC,106) and his wife's secret consumption in a locked lavatory(MC,65) demonstrates how the reality of history in making wears its own resemblance to the absurdities and incongruities of the fictionalized process. Shiva has the attributes of his divine namesake, "the god of destruction, whom no force could resist". Saleem also born on the stroke of midnight got "the greatest talent of all the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men" (MC,200). Later he developed the sharpest olfactory powers and smells out persons, their clothes, their secretions, the different foods they had eaten that day". When Ahmed Sinai, Mr Kemal and S.P.Butt's godowns are burnt, Ahmed decides to move to Bombay to enter the property business, lured by his friends there, Dr Narlikar, the gynaecologist. Rushdie dwells upon the history of Bombay. Klaus Borner, in his article the reception of *Midnight Children* writes

“Sibylle Crammer equates Saleem Sinia with India herself. This beautifully fitting metaphor, where an individual consciousness and the body politic are conceived as one individual whole, is basically the way of thinking of a mythologist. India’s history between 1947 and 1975 is literally written on Saleem’s Sinia’s body. He carries like a canvas, the colossal painting of India’s history between dream and nightmare. And within this mode of thinking, Saleem Sinia’s creative act of writing under the aegis of his Muse Padma, is at the same time the genesis of the continent.

Rushdie, a master story-teller owes his feat of skill-tour de force-to another born storyteller the daughter of a Vizier, Schaherazade, who, to save her own life by postponing the king’s decision to kill her, said one thousand and one tales-that great oral fiction of the East called in Arabic Alif Laila, oh Laila that is one thousand and one nights. So critic after critic have pointed out TheArabian Nights’ not only as a source of Rushdie’s stories to within stories in Midnight’ Children but also the basic technique on which lies the edifice of his marvellous book which had taken Europe with storm and fascination. Tai the boatman is also a storyteller, spinner of yarns and inhabitant of fantasies who mirrors in his own ‘technique’. The formal construction of Saleem’s narrative and the novel as a whole with his magical talk, words pouring from him like fools money...soaring upto the most a remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail...To vivisect is meaning like a mouse. Tai is able to spellbind the young Adam Aziz with his tales, Padma is a vital spur and judge of Saleem’s autobiography; his ‘necessary ear’. In many ways Padma’s role in Midnight’s Children is representative of the separate technical and even cultural demands that writing the novel made on Rushdie...She provides link back to the culture which Rushdie insists his work most strongly. Padma becomes a vocal and individualized member of the multitude which sits at the feet of the story teller hanging on his every word.

Salman Rushdie ranked among the best contemporary, novelist of the world. The fiction of Salman Rushdie has been analysed, examined and studied from a variety of perspectives. William Walsh observes: “Combining the elements of magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism, extravagant farce, multi-mirrored analogy and a potent symbolic structure, Salman Rushdie has captured the astonishing energy of novel unprecedented in scope, manner and achievement in hundred and fifty year old tradition of the Indian novel in English.” 7

When Saleem says: “I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time” (MC, 3) while the first statement is a realistic mode, the second narrative is fantastic. By doing this Saleem intends to encapsulate the whole of reality. The series of temporal and spatial displacement is demonstrated in the very first chapter. “The Perforated sheet” as Saleem says: “ 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”.(MC,3) The novel begins with an account of Saleem’s birth but soon goes back in time in the year 1915, when Aadam Aziz Saleem’s grandfather got married. After moving from Karachi to Bombay, Saleem is exiled from his roots and finds it difficult to adjust to a new environment. Rushdie has

shown the backward and forward movement of the time in the novel. Time and history play tricks on Saleem: “ Time, in my experience ( quote incomplete) grip on time(106) The idea of timelessness is shown when he gets lost into the magical world of sunderbans: “ Infected....safety of dreams( incomplete quote) (360) Saleem uses sheet spittoon and the pickle jars as metaphors. The metaphors unify the narration in the past, present and the future. In the novel, Rushdie addresses the confluence of dreams and reality and illusion and truth. This confluence causes confusion for Saleem and other characters, as it becomes difficult for them to differentiate between real and unreal.

Saleem contrasts the scientific temperament of his grandfather Adam Aziz, with religiosity, spirituality and mysticism of his grandmother, Naseem. Saleem’s desire for his sister is highlighted in the novel. First he had seen his mother in a washing chest which had sparked off an incestuous desire, which later gets transferred to his sister Jamila. The magic realism intersperse myth, history and supernatural elements with a blend of history. The references to Parvati and Shiva bear a close resemblance to the Hindu gods. “ [Parvati]....oiled his moustache, caressed his knees and after all that produced a dinner of biryani so exquisite that( Shiva)...devoted his undivided attentions to her for four whole months...(411) In mythology Parvati gave birth to a son named Ganesh, after four months of uninterrupted coitus with Shiva and later on Ganesh takes the head of an elephant. In the novel Parvati’s son Aadam Sinai is born with enormous ears: “ears.... ( incomplete quote) Ganesh” (419) Shiva is a god of excess, of ascetic excess as well as erotic. About his sexual escapades Saleem says, “at the height of his philanderings there were no less than ten thousand women in love with him (409) The mythical figure of Brahma, Ganesh, Ravana, Laxmi, Lord Narayana find vivid expression in the novel.

#### Conclusion:

Salman Rushdie is a postmodernist who incorporates many postmodern features in his fiction. Literature generally uses three main types of fantastic construction viz. ‘speculative storytelling, fabulation, and the fantastic elements emerged into a conventional setting. Kafka makes use of these elements in his writings, which can be termed as ‘Magic realism’. The most essential component of fantasy and magic realism is ‘distortion of reality’. The “fantasy” and the fantastic are the main gateway to Rushdie’s fiction. “Magic realism” mingles Rushdie’s magic realist technique in the novel.

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