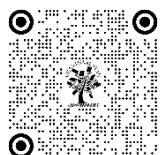


THE ALCHEMY OF MYTH, HISTORY AND REALITY: A RE-READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Dr. Sooraj Kumar ¹, Dr. Seema Rajan S. ²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Anchal, Kollam, Kerala-691306

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, N. S. S. College, Nilamel, Kollam, Kerala-691535



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ABSTRACT

A flawless blend of myth and reality to narrate a versatile history of modern India through the lens of magical realism finds its fertile ground in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. Through the life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai, whose birth coincides with the midnight hour of India's independence, the novel investigates the interplay between personal identity and national history. Rushdie employs myth as a narrative strategy to critique the linearity of historical discourse, instilling historical events with a mythical dimension that challenges conventional notions of reality and truth. This article examines how *the novel tries to* reconstruct history through the lens of myth and memory, creating a space where the borders between the real and the imaginary are constantly unclear. The novel's magical realist framework allows for reimagining historical events, transforming them into allegories of cultural and political significance. By interlacing individual experiences with the collective memory of a nation, Rushdie emphasizes the fragmented and multifaceted nature of identity in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Multiculturalism, Fragmentation, Post-Colonialism, Autochthonous, Historicity and Post-Modernism

1. INTRODUCTION

Through its fusion of myth and reality, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie emerges as a powerful commentary on the construction of national and personal narratives. The novel not only redefines the relationship between history and storytelling but also highlights the enduring relevance of myth in shaping cultural and political realities. The novel interrogates historical authenticity while celebrating the imaginative possibilities of myth and fiction. Indian English literature is reflective of the residual traditions known for its diversity, splendour and majesty, honour and glory. There lies below the surface of the Indian English structure, a dormant, rich tradition known for adaptability and acculturation. As Hari Jaishankar observes: "A rich tradition can well be an integral part of modernity. Both can co-exist and supplement each other. It is a matter of adjustment. Modernization can be adopted to an extent desirable, depending on the need and receptivity of a society." (33) The idea of India has been subjected to reassessment across the whole range of diverse Indian cultures.

Indian English writers were burdened by the fact of multicultural encounters and so they were pressurized to evolve a new ethical identity. Naturally in the Indian context, one finds that Indian writers are no exception to this. Unlike the

creative writers of the West, Indian writer has to play a mediator between his/her history and the new history that has arrived. And here Jean-Paul Sartre's observation warrants mention: "The writer is par excellence a mediator and his engagement are mediation. But if it is true that we must account for his work on the basis of his condition, it must also be borne in mind that his condition is not only that of a man in general but precisely that of a writer as well." (49)

2. ALCHEMY OF MYTH, HISTORY AND REALITY

In the growth and development of Indian novels in English, the 1980s occupy the most significant position that witnessed a second coming of the Indian novel in English and speaks volumes about the originality and unprecedented inventiveness. Its messiah seems to have been Salman Rushdie. Born in Bombay in 1947 and settled in Britain, Rushdie is a prominent prose writer in English after independence. Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children* is characterized by urgency and aims at moving beyond the bounds of history to find the universal significance of historical forces operating at a particular phase of time and sounds like not only a country but also a continent finding its voice. This accounts for the sportive flights of the text with the extensive use of mythical patterns in fragmentation and consideration more than plot pre-figuration.

Myth attains ironic and iconic heights in the text as it is subjected to subversions. Myth affects and effectively blends into the structural implications of the text making room for several perceptions and responses. In the novel, the novelist says:

And there are so many stones to tell, the many, such excess of intertwined Lines, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a coming of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives, and to know me, just the one of me, you will have to swallow the lot as well. (9)

The novelist employs many familiar linguistic techniques of wordplay, networked with parody, farce and numerous connotations in the novel. His manipulative techniques are intended to facilitate better communication with some comic relief. Roger Fowler's words referring to the inviolable relationship between the structure of the novel and the language used in it is relevant in this context: "The structure of a novel and whatever it communicates are under the direct control of language and concomitantly, of the reader's recreative sympathy, his desire and ability to realize and release the technique from verbal dues deposited by another." (3)

The linguistic manipulations in question are indispensable to maintain a postmodern stance, in so far, as it chooses to create a world of fantasy with its well-known instrumentality of magic realism. This consists of disorientation in time, dislocation in space, and distortion of actuality. Rushdie presses into active service all three elements with the apt aid of a carefully crafted linguistic exercise in his mock-serious auto-biography, successfully creating a make-believe world of fiction. As Wayne C. Booth observes: "It is more true because the author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of the reader. He makes his reader as he makes his second self and the most successful reading in one in which created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement." (138)

Rushdie deftly integrates myth into the structure of the novel taking history as its medium. This technique serves well to give manifold opportunities for the novelist to make his encyclopaedic swoop of knowledge, word power and unbridled command over the language of the East while an alien master's English language acts at his behest. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai with his hybrid origin of English father and Indian mother resembles Indian writing in English. Saleem Sinai represents the post-independence generation of children who number one thousand and one. He is of the firm conviction that they have the temerity to do together certain things of great importance and significance. Saleem Sinai grows up in Bombay in the 1950's. He immigrated to Pakistan with his Kashmiri Muslim parents in 1958. He returns to India for a brief stint in the late sixties. He acquires the citizenship of Pakistan and participates in the Bangladesh War of 1971. In the war, he sniffs out Sheikh Mujib, for the Pakistani army to arrest him. He is back in Delhi after the war. In India, he undergoes untold suffering and mortification. He gets imprisoned and is tortured in the dark days of Emergency during 1975-77.

Saleem Sinai marries Parvathi-the witch, one of the midnight's children, who is carrying the child of Shiva another midnight child. Parvathi's death, is evidence to his adeptness at making a dextrous synchronization of personal and national history making many a sportive flight consciously enough to develop his construct, intended to debunk post-

Independence Indian history. Rushdie takes strange detours into history and recreates the fictional reality which is an essential element, a necessary illusion in the popular genre of novel. He approximates his techniques to achieve this end and resorts to a post-modern stance which is doing rounds in the literary circles these days. K. R. Rao says about the

autochthonous nature of his fiction: "What makes his fiction 'autochthonous' is its awareness of the global history of the sub-continent and its narrative technique which combines the elements of magical realism and the sociology of culture, parody and fantasy with, what Henry James calls, 'the inclusive consciousness'" (37)

Rushdie combines cognitive fads of life with the normative abstractions of history in his own mock serious style. He has a technique of implication with which he makes the past, present and future bunch off at once into simultaneity of impression. Rushdie is a legend in transforming the actuality of culture into fictional terms and in *Midnight's Children* incorporates the stupendous Indian past with its pantheon, its epics and its wealth of folklore and fairy tales, while at the same time playing an active role in the tumultuous Indian present.

Rushdie maintains that Indian history has been ruthlessly sawed by the British imperialist rulers and their henchmen in India. He seeks to provide another view of history through the subversive reality and takes every care to keep at a distance the documented one.

In his endeavour, he is aided by the combinative modes of fiction and reality even in his combative moods. Rushdie links the biographical account of the individual with the social collectiveness of India in the form of its contemporary history through the apt use of myth and history and combines it with postmodern open-ended lines. The real meaning of the onward movement of history is reflected in the mythical patterns recreated in the text *Midnight's Children*. The mythical elements found in the text are varied and ranged from the immediate to the eternal. The novelist draws myths from all sources, i.e., Hindu, Christian, Islamic and Greek. Rushdie lends a deep layered significance to the characters so drawn from ancient myths and lends them social relevance with a political touch.

In the text, myth serves as an interpretative strategy besides being a narrative technique. The characters like Padma, Parvathi and Shiva being mythical names prove a religious touch but are delineated in modern social terms. Rushdie's potential for competent grasp of his material is a vital condition for an artist especially in the effective structuring of the plot places him as an artist above par.

The novelist highlights myth in the larger context of a nation and formulates a national perspective with socio-political resonance. His focus is on historical forces operating at a particular phase of time in a nation's life during the dark days of emergency. The definition of a nation by Homi K. Bhabha is relevant in this context. He says: "Nation-like narratives lost their origins in the myth of time, and only fully realizes their horizons in the mind's eye." (1). The same holds true in the text *Midnight's Children*. Further Homi K. Bhabha says that a nation is a cultural space representing certain events and happenings at every point of time altering the picture or image of the nation. The factors that contribute to its image are: "the comfort of social being; the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliations; the blindness of bureaucracy; the straight insight of institutions; the quality of justice- the language of the: law and the parole of the people." (3)

Rushdie makes an earnest attempt at chronicling these events with a postmodern urgency. The emergence of political rationality in the context of post-independence India is of great significance in the novel. Several textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub texts and figurative strategies are employed by the novelist in a perfectionist manner. All these strategies and techniques act in tandem to yield the desired effect. The purpose is one of redefining, the nation and redrawing its cultural borders. Rushdie- makes a gigantic attempt at achieving this objective through the articulation of differentials in language. To achieve this, he uses myth in fragmentations. The following is what John J. White says:

fragmentation describes the situation, where- a single pre-figuration is reflected across a number of modern figures. The distinguishing characteristic of the process is in the repeated use of a single motif, in various contexts, the comparison of more than one character from mythology. (194)

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a faultless example of the ever-changing contours of the literary medium which - assumes the singular form of the novel. Rushdie links the autobiography account of an individual with the developments in history. Saleem's words affirm the above-mentioned assumption: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history; my destinies are indissolubly chained to these of my country" (9). The narrative has a multi-dimensional quality. The primary location of the narrative is rather mental than physical and lends the narrative a great thrust from the restrictions of a particular time and place. As Nagesh Chaturvedi puts it: "Eventually the novel derives a mythical framework of narrative which helps the novelist bring out the deeper relevance of the historical political situation obtaining in the Indian subcontinent" (173).

In the novel, the novelist uses techniques that are ingenious and in fact invents a mode of narration in which myth is the medium that provides a decent dialogue between the individual and history. More than mediations he resorts to subverting myth and deftly handles the literary situation needed to recreate the required atmosphere. The element of subversion so often pressed into service affects the demystification of myths as desired by the novelist and lends modernizing relevance to it. The fragmented and condensed myth foregrounds certain inevitable significations of the text enabling the novelist to reap rich dividends as regards the desired meaning.

3. CONCLUSION

There is an inseparable link between the protagonist Saleem Sinai and Indian history. The novelist uses birth images and metaphors to make turning points in history and symbolize their long-term significance. Moreover, he links political and historical events starting with the Jallianwala massacre of 1919 with one or other of the protagonist's circle of friends and family. His bold departures and varied perspectives of history constitute the classic example of re-interpreting history in an unprecedented manner. Rushdie's thought process ranges forwards and backwards both in terms of time and space enabling the text to assume complexity on account of its ceaseless process of explication. It operates precisely in the core areas of life banking upon the exegetic, structuralist mode of delineation. The use of myth and history, both combined, is a new trend. Its contribution to the evolution of literary text in the present post-modern form as applied to Indian conditions is immense.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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