

POST MODERN ELEMENTS IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract

The voyage of the Indian English Novel entered a new phase with the publication of Salman Rushdie's Midnight Children in 1981. It blazed a different sort of trail. For the first time a novel by a writer of Indian origin reflected the spirit of the contemporary west. Midnight Children demanded a new classification as it is a blend of fiction, history, reality, myth, storytelling. Linda Hutchinson has coined the term historiographic metafiction to classify this novel. Usually Rushdie is considered as a prominent figure in post colonialism. His writings are Postmodernism rejects rigid genre distinctions. It favours fragmentation, instability, disorder, multiplicity, subjectivity. It mocks the idea of absolute truth. It advocates plurality of histories and rejects grand narratives considered as counter Discourse of post colonialism. He carries the legacy of oral storytelling tradition of India. However this novel has post modern elements too. Aijaz Ahmed sees him as being complicit with both postmodernism and post colonialism. This paper attempts to analyze the elements of post modernism in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

Key Terms: Post modernism, metafiction, fragmentation, multiple identities, magic realism.

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Introduction:

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 began a new era in the realm of Indian English writing. It shaped the course of Indian writing in English. Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. Critics have described this as a post modern *mélange*. Here fragmentations, fissures, splinters serve a purpose. These elements synthesise the diverse cultural strands.

Postmodernism:

Post modernism shares a few features of modernism but it is largely a reaction to it. Like modernism, post modernism rejects rigid genre distinctions and emphasizes pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony and playfulness. While modernism favours scientific reason, order, logic, unity, continuity, organization and objectivity and believes in the existence of a universal or absolute truth, post modernism favours fragmentation, provisionality, instability, disorder, discontinuity, ambiguity, multiplicity, subjectivity, self reflexivity and mocks at the idea of an absolute truth, because truth by its very nature is subjective.

Post modernism rejects and subverts grand narratives and focuses on mini narratives on the destructured, decentred and dehumanized subject. Postmodernists accept the things as they are. There is no despair, no disillusionment no attempt to make meaning of every single act or event.

Metafiction:

Midnight's Children is difficult to classify; it recalls another fictional genre –of metafiction. Metafiction is a form of fiction in which the process of writing fiction is the theme. This form developed to question the reality premise of 19th century fiction. It has largely been used to investigate the relation between art and life. Salman Rushdie weds the two separate genres by filtering ancient narrative structures through the postmodern.

***Midnight's Children's* Epic structure:**

In constructing *Midnight's Children* Rushdie has been influenced by ancient Indian narratives like Panchatantra, Katha Saritsagar and Arabian Nights. All these narratives have a teller who narrates the story to a listener. This is also true of the dramatic mode which uses a Sutradhar to narrate his story to *Nati*. Here Saleem is a Sutradhar and Padma is a *Nati*. The choice of the epic form is appropriate for another reason. Like the novel, the ancient epic is also an amalgam of different types of narratives. Using a first narrator is also one narrative strategy.

Salman Rushdie uses epic form in comic manner. According to him the comic epic is suitable form to narrate story of India. The previous literature is used as well as parodied in *Midnight's Children*.

Epic and the Comic Hero:

The epic usually gives us the actions of a heroic figure. *Midnight's Children's* hero is hardly a hero; and he seems to be the opposite of the epic hero. Instead of the handsome, gallant, virile, and god-like hero of the epics, we have Saleem, who, by his own admission, is ugly with his cucumber-like nose, face stained with birth marks, a bald head even as a young boy, a mutilated finger, and premature aging; he is often unheroic, unmanly and is impotent, first psychologically, and later, physically also as he is rendered sterile and impotent by forced sterilization.

In the Hindu epics, the heroes and gods have innumerable names. Each name is associated with a particular attribute, act, or avatar of the god. Saleem also, in a mocking

imitation of this feature of epic heroes and gods, has many names, each referring to one of his characteristic features, physical or mental. Saleem is known by many names, mostly derogatory. He is called Cucumber-nose, Snot nose, Stain face, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha etc.

Fragmentation:

The theme of fragmentation is presented through Saleem's physical mutilations. He says " I will soon be 31 years. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over used body permits. (p.11)

Towards the end he says-

" .. now that I can see the cracks on the backs of my hands, cracks along the hairline and between my toes , why do I not bleed ? Am I already so emptied desiccated pickled? Am I already mummy of myself? (p.444)

Metaphorically fragmentation also indicates the loss of a sense of identity. Saleem's constant search for parental figures gets him to identify many people as his parents. His biological parents are the least significant of all these parents. Metaphorically Saleem is fathered by several different men. Every time he identifies a new father he experiences a new life, a new identity.

This sort of fragmentation of identity is applicable to Saleem's India also. India also has experienced double parentage in the form of native and colonial traditions that have shaped the nation. The breaking up of the subcontinent into Pakistan, India and Bangladesh itself is a complex task. In the novel India's struggles with neighbours are paralleled with Saleem's struggles with other members of his family and other midnight's children.

There is constant change of names in the novels. Mumtaz becomes Amina, Nasreen becomes reverend Mother, Parvati becomes Layla and so on. This too resonates the theme of fragmentation.

Multiple Identities:

The blue eyed Saleem is born to Vanita , An Indian Hindu and Methwold, a departing Englishman, Is brought up by Muslim couple. Thus Saleem becomes an example of multiple identities.

Saleem's characterization bears clear affinities to the description of a postmodern person as a conglomeration of multiple identities. Saleem is so many things simultaneously.

“Who am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, I am everyone everything... (p.370)

Rushdie refuses to India as one united whole. He celebrates India as a land of diversities. He celebrates the various cultures, beliefs, religions, festivals, dress codes etc.

The same is true of the novel itself. It is so many texts at the same time- autobiography, history, mythology, memory and so on, so forth. This sort of inter textuality is another feature of post modern text.

Magic Realism in *Midnight's Children*:

Salman Rushdie artistically incorporates the elements of magic realism in *Midnight's Children*. His use of magic realism as a narrative technique is intentional. He uses magic realism – the fantastic, the magical, the strange – as a useful technical tool.

At its first glance, the words ‘magic’ and ‘realism’ do not seem to be compatible with each other. Realism is all about events that have happened, largely dealing with historical settings. On the contrary, magic concerns with the use of fantastic or magical elements in the narrative.

In this novel, he retraces Bombay and India of his own childhood not as autobiography but as cultural history. The history he provides is not that written in colonial history books, but is one constructed around individuals and their involvement in the historical process.

There are many instances in *Midnight's Children* where Rushdie uses the framework of magic realism. Saleem's gift of having an incredible sense of smell, allowing him to determine others emotions and thoughts, stems from his grandfather Adam, who also had the same large nose and magical gift. The novel explains how Adam's sensitive nose ultimately saved him from being killed in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

History and Individual

In *Midnight's Children*, major historical events are woven into the story. History is seen through the eyes of Saleem Sinai, thus reflected predominantly through individual experiences. For Saleem, born at the very moment of India's independence, his life becomes inextricably interlinked with the political, national, and religious events of his time. This gives him a strong desire to restore his past identity to himself. Realism plays a big role here in terms of describing the significant events that have happened.

In recounting events from history Saleem deliberately makes mistakes on details or dates. The history we get to see in the novel is Saleem's very own construction as such is fragmented, provisional and subjective. This reflects Rushdie's comment on the unreliability of historical and biographical accounts.

Saleem knows that he has rearranged history. Yet, to him it is truth: "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also: but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no same human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own". (p.207)

Without the 'magic' elements, *Midnight's Children* could have been ended up as another historical documentary. Overall, the use of magic realism not only makes this novel more appealing, it also exerts another level of importance in terms of the narrator himself as well as the Indian history as a whole.

The incorporation of the elements of 'magic' and 'realism' gives beauty and meaning to *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's use of magic realism is very apt. The Magic realism can therefore be seen as a device binding Indian culture of the past to the contemporary multicultural interface.

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