

**RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: LITERALIZATION OF
METAPHOR AND RESTRUCTURING OF HISTORY**

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Abstract

*Novel today reflects the external features of the age as well as its inner face. Historical forces influence the writers. Salman Rushdie, too, is no exception. His novels portray the contemporary socio-political picture of the Indian sub-continent. *Midnight's Children* commonly read as an allegory gives imaginative form to India and its history and 6Tattempts a more detailed and subjective interpretation of the myriad reality of the nation than presented in the authenticated history of India. The narrator-hero Saleem's history depicts the conjoint experience of a race and the history of a nation. Literalization of the metaphor of the nation as a person in the novel endows it with comicality. A fabulator's truth is different from that of the historians. In the novel under discussion, Rushdie has brilliantly historicized myth and fictionalized history, thus presenting here a beautiful blend of history and fantasy, personal and political history and the relationship between history and individual.*

Key words: *Allegory, conjoint experience, literalization of metaphor, fictional reality, historical truth, subversion, retelling.*

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Novels mostly become the mirror of the age, but the Novel today has come to be a peculiar kind of mirror that reflects 'not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it' (Pathak 119). No sensible writer can afford to be oblivious of the historical forces. Salman Rushdie, a prominent Post-colonial novelist, has realized this fact fully. With nine novels [ranging from *Grimus* (1975) to *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008)] to his credit, he has been portraying in his special way the contemporary socio-political picture of the Indian sub-continent. His second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1980), set a new trend in Indian English fiction by incorporating the stupendous Indian past, while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present.

Midnight's Children is commonly read as an allegory giving imaginative form to India and its history. In the words of M. H. Abrams:

An Allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the "literal," or primary level of signification, and at the same time to communicate a second, correlated order of signification. (15 - 16)

The underlying meaning of an allegory has moral, social, religious or political significance and characters in an allegorical work are often personification of abstract ideas as charity, greed or envy. *Midnight's Children* attempts a more detailed and subjective interpretation of the myriad reality of the nation than presented in the authenticated history of India. Rushdie's allegory is Indian

allegory in its genuine form. The author employs various devices to link up the story of Saleem's personal life with the story of India as a nation between 1947 and 1977. Rushdie observes very cogently in the novel: 'To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world' (109). The novel ridicules the fallacious notions of nationalism by transcending the idea of the nation-state. It is a postmodern allegory, signifying a negation of the very possibility of meaning.

The narrator as well as the hero of the story is Saleem Sinai, born exactly at the moment when India gains freedom. Saleem's life then chimes with the fluid fortunes of the country after independence. In this special sense, '*Midnight's Children* synthesizes political allegory and the non-fictional novel, trying national events and domestic life: Capote, Mailer and Wolfe are appropriate authors for comparison' (Banerjee 24). Saleem's history depicts the conjoint experience of a race and the history of a nation. The novel unfolds the very twentieth century Indian history, spanning from the Jallianwala Bagh Carnage (1919), Quit India Movement (1942), Cabinet Mission (1946), Muslim League and its role, Independence (1947), riots and bloodshed after the independence, reorganization of Indian States and language riots (1950), Five Year plans (1951 onwards), Indo-Chinese war (1962), the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal Mosque, Nehru's Death (1964), Indo-Pak war (1965), Birth of Bangladesh (1971), the imposition of Emergency and various other historically important events, till 1975. These events evoke the truth of both India and Saleem Sinai, and render the novel as an epic record of extraordinary dimensions and ramifications.

However, an apt reading of Rushdie's allegory requires the reversal of the intrinsic bonding of metaphorical and literal meaning; for instance, his character Aadam Aziz in the novel, is 'hollow inside' (6), but this very Aziz is present at the Amritsar massacre in 1919 and there he suffers a bruise 'so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death' (35): a self-conscious literalization of the metaphor reminding the reader of Achilles' wounded heel causing his death.

Much of the magic of *Midnight's Children* arises from the literalization of metaphor. History books record that the Indians receiving education through English were progressively 'Westernized'. This process is represented metaphorically in the novel by a whitening of the skin. Further, the Indian government after partition froze the assets of Muslim citizens and in the novel, Ahmad Sinai's balls are literally frozen. Similarly, during the 1950s nascent Indian state had a brief liaison with America which corresponds in the text to Saleem's youthful infatuation with the American girl, Evc Burns.

The organic metaphor of the body is central to the novel. Rushdie's book gives a complex yet cursory treatment to the accepted opinion that India was 'born' on August 15, 1947, that British India was 'severed as though by caesarian section to permit two nations to be born' (348), that the Republic of India was born 'on January 26, 1950' (356), and that out of the ashes of the Bangladesh War, 'the world's eighth largest nation had been born' (390). When a son is born to Saleem's wife, Parvati, at the same moment when Indira Gandhi declares a national emergency; Saleem explicitly relates the two events, saying:

while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push pushpush, the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the Police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister, so in a sense they were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push, and as the night darkened towards the midnight hour, because nothing ever happens at any other time, triplets began to screech it's coming coming coming, and elsewhere the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own. (499)

Literalization of the metaphor of the nation as a person in *Midnight's Children*, endows it with comicality. If India were a person it would be as grotesque as Saleem; its paternity would be as in dispute as Saleem's and its ability to tell its story would be inauthentic.

Certain observations made in the course of the novel drive home the point that the novelist's truth is different from that of the historians, 'Sometimes Legends make reality and become more useful than the facts' (200), says Salim in an attempt to highlight the nature of fictional reality. Again, he declares: 'Reality can have metaphorical content that does not make it less real' (200). Evidently, Rushdie's treatment of history conforms to his idea of 'Illusory fictional reality', which is not insistent upon a radical transcription of reality while recording historical truth. In the novel under discussion, Rushdie has brilliantly historicized myth and fictionalized history. His essential message in the novel, as Nancy E. Batty elaborates it, is: 'If history is composed of fictions then fiction can be composed of history' (94).

Midnight's Children offers a self-conscious fictional alternative to the lies that form the myth of the ruling Nehru-Indira Gandhi dynasty. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, says Rushdie is 'a collective dream,' but a dream from which India must wake. In Rushdie's opinion, Indians must accept that Nehru is a father only in metaphor and they must not be deluded by the slogan, 'Indira is India and India is Indira.' Rushdie pleads that the dynasty's myth must be rejected as a lie. The *fact* is that Family rule has harmed Indian democracy and that Indira Gandhi had been too Hindu to be sufficiently national in her politics and also that the Gandhi dynasty is a threat to the nation.

Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, is a cry for freedom against tyranny. It calls for the subversion of all convention and authority. The forces of chaos are embodied in Shiva, the genetic son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai, raised in extreme poverty and filled with a violent resentment on attaining youth. Tyranny and chaos are metaphorically fused together when Shiva becomes Indira Gandhi's follower ideologically. Indira Gandhi, Saleem, and Shiva are three figures of India. Shiva is Saleem's dark shadow: he cannot be denied, but cannot be fully acknowledged either. The majority of the magical elements in *Midnight's Children* are derived from allegory. The violent and rage-filled Shiva, of course, has nothing of Gandhi ji about him, but he does occupy the position of counter-weight to the secular nation that in other histories of India is occupied by the Mahatma. In the present novel, the author

himself defines India's choice not as one between Nehru and Gandhi, but as one between Saleem and Shiva.

To sum up, this random retelling of political history of India is linked to the personal history of Saleem Sinai. Rushdie has presented in his novel a beautiful blend of history and fantasy, personal and political history and the relationship between history and individual. The novel remains an allegory of Indian history. William Walsh rightly observes:

This novel dramatizing the history of independent India in the person of the beak nosed wildly extravagant Muslim Saleem Aziz who was born on the stroke of midnight bringing in India's independence, combines the truth and fluency of Mulk Raj Anand, the speculative and metaphysical habit of Raja Rao and fantasy of G.V. Desani. (257)

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