



Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Novel *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT

Magic Realism is an amalgamation of Realism and magic (Fantasy) through which the plot develops. Anything which cannot happen in real life is fantasy. Magic realism is a literary genre of a novel set in a normal modern world with a metaphysical description of human relationships and society. There would be fantastical things that are treated as realistically as possible. It is defined by contradiction: On one hand, it draws the realistic tradition of literature in which the entire world is depicted as it is with all its everyday problems and on the other hand it fills the realistic world with fantasy and extraordinary things of supernatural. Magical realism, as a movement, first appeared in Europe in 1920 and later in America in the 1940s. The Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende are important magic realists who blend magic and reality in their work to express the serious thought. They mainly blend colonial literary elements and myth. Seeing the attempt of them, many modern writers start to undertake this genre of novel to discuss the serious political and social matters in their works. In this way, this genre became popular in postmodern period.

Keywords: Cultural identity, magic realism, surrealism, myth, Western, African.

Midnight's Children is one of the best novels by Salman Rushdie published in 1981. It deals with the historical incident of the transformation of Indian colonialism to decolonisation. It is a masterpiece of postcolonial literature, historiography, metafiction, and magic realism. The book won Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize both in 1981. The novel is written in three parts. In the opening scene of the novel *Midnight's Children*, a narrator, and protagonist, Saleem Sinai decides to narrate the story of his life. He has a supernatural power to look into the future and predicts that he will die soon. As he predicts about his short life span, his entire body is breaking and crumbling. So he decides to work fast and tell his story before his death. He starts his story before the thirty-two year of independence with his Kashmiri grandfather, Dr. Adam Aziz who has just completed his medical education in Germany in 1915 and returned to Kashmir, his motherland. He was disillusioned with the traditional life of Indian people. At the beginning of his medical practice, he starts Namaz four times every day but one morning, he wounds his nose while offering Namaz. Then he vows that he will never again bow to any man or god. One day he hears the news of the illness of Naseem Ghani, a young daughter of a landlord. He reaches her house for treatment but he has

to give treatment behind a huge curtain with a small hole in it. He continues the treatment for three years and both Aadam and Naseem fall in love, and marry. After the marriage, they move to Agra for a job in 1918 and settle there.

In Agra, Aadam and Naseem enjoy a blissful life and become the parents of five children; Alia, Mumtaz, Emerald, Mustafa, and Hanif. The first three are daughters and the last two are sons. They look after their children very care and responsibility. One day, they witness Gandhiji's strike against the violence and treachery of the British Government. In this strike, Aadam befriends Nadir Khan and provides shelter to save him from British treachery. While Nadir living in Adam's house, he falls in love with Mumtaz, the second daughter, and marries her. They spend three blissful years together underground but he has to leave Agra for Quit India Movement. Finally, he gives divorce Mumtaz and left her alone. The deserted Mumtaz soon remarries Ahmad Sinai, the father of the narrator, Saleem Sinai, and changes her name to Amina. After the marriage, the couple settles in Bombay where they buy a mansion from a British colonist.

By the time, Amina becomes pregnant and the date of delivery comes near. One day she feels the pain of pregnancy on the eve of India's independence. At that time, a woman named Vanita also going to deliver a child in the hospital. Vanita is the wife of Wee Willie who entertains the residents on the estate. Vanita has conceived a bastard child. Vanita and Amina both women deliver their child at midnight of independence simultaneously. But Vanita dies shortly because of excess pregnancy pain. A midwife named Mary interchanges two children on the bed of these two mothers at midnight because of her "private act of revolution." In the days following, Mary assumes her guilt and decides to offer herself as a servant to Amina Sinai to look after her child. Amina names her child Saleem. As he grows, he clarified that he is an abnormal child and grows too quickly. One day, he accidentally sees his mother washing her breast and gets the punishment of it not speaking a single word the whole day. When he obeys the given punishment, he begins to hear voices; the voices of those children who have taken birth during the midnight of independence. Over time, he attempts to organise a group of unique children but become fails. Saleem moves to Pakistan with his family and faces unrest because of Indo-Pakistani War. During the war, he lives a helpless life because he lost his family in a war of bombs. In injury of war, he forgets his name and identity. Saleem, one day, gets selected for the Pakistani army and witnesses unspeakable events. He participates in the brawl between Pakistan and Bangladesh and finally, the nation was divided into two parts; Bangladesh and Pakistan. When the war ends, Saleem lives a life without identity and nationality. One day, he meets a girl named Parvati, a fellow child of midnight birth. She recognises him two falls in love with him. He soon impregnates her.

The day when Parvati goes to deliver her child, she is killed because of an Emergency. When the Emergency ends, Saleem is released from his imprisonment and he soon finds his son and his maidservant Mary. At last, Saleem ends the narration of his story. He faces a strong pain in his body and fails to resist the pressure of the cracks in his skin and body, as he previously predicted, breaking into six hundred million pieces and mixing into dust. The novel ends.

The story of Saleem, the omniscient, preternaturally clever, and eccentric narrator, is of half-real, half-dreamy nature, and turns out to be the story of India itself. The self-reflexivity is very evident from the beginning itself:

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there is no getting away from the date, I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15, 1947... at the stroke of midnight. (MC: 3)

The 'once upon a time sort of beginning transports the readers to the fairy-tale type of opening and the narrator hurriedly unloads his discourse as:

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade if I am to end up meaning-yes, meaning-something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. (MC:4)

Though the narrator displays a sort of hesitancy and unwillingness to be explicit at the outset, the narrative soon picks up its momentum in due course as "there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane. At another place he says:

Who am I? My answer: I am the sum total ...I am everyone and everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come... To understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (MC: 457)

The personal stories of the three generations of Aziz and Sinai encompassing the Indian subcontinent, turn out to be the story of a nation. The coinciding of personal and historical events, with a few liberties with the dates here and there is skillfully maintained throughout the narration. There are as many as 55 direct references to the history of the Indian subcontinent. With a little effort, it is possible to trace them in the novel. The first direct reference is found on page 32 of the novel, where a reference to Gandhi's 'hartal' is made. The other historically important events are General Dyer's large-scale massacre, the Quit India movement, reference to Viceroy Wavell and Atlee, the transfer of power, Nehru's famous speech on the occasion, the assassination of Gandhi, and introduction of the first Five Year Plan, All India Congress Party elections and advent of communism in India and so on. Some references to external affairs are also interwoven in the novel. Saleem spells the inter-relatedness of his own life with the history of modern India. He feels that his birth at the midnight hour of India's independence bears special importance. He gets numerous historical events and dates muddled up as he tries desperately to convince his readers that he is at the center of India's history. He is constantly conscious of the fact that "historical coincidence have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world." (MC: 25) However, this 'vengeful irruption into the history of his age is 'certainly no trivial affair for him.' (MC: 317) At times he finds history eagerly waiting for his arrival:

"At the end of that January, history had finally, by a series of shoves. brought itself to the point at which it was almost ready for me to make my entrance. Some mysteries could not be cleared up until I stepped on the scene." (MC: 103)

Throughout the narrative, the protagonist is falling apart. He experiences a hole in his own story oozes out of it. He questions homogeneity of history by questioning the wholeness of his own self; "because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of every which

thing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another next." (MC: 505) He also views his life apprehensively at times, "I became afraid that everything was wrong - that my much trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void and without the shred of a purpose." (MC: 180) At another time he admits, "At every turn I am thwarted, a prophet in the wilderness, like Maslama, like Ibn Sinan! No matter how I try, the desert is my lot." (MC: 471) The motif of fragmentation is present throughout the novel. But in no case it is prominent as it is in the case of Saleem. He is fully aware of his problems and plights, misfortunes and discordances, so typical of a rootless person." Under the pressure of socio-historical forces his body is giving way, splintering into 'specks of voiceless dust.' He disappointingly utters:

"I am tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself talking and arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more." (MC: 503)

In spite of the feeling of alienation and a constant fear of disintegration, the protagonist attempts to keep alive his ties with history. As the text advances, one comes across a confession by the narrator-protagonist that he was personally responsible for the violence, which led unto Bombay becoming the political capital of Maharashtra. The protagonist boasts:

"and to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded. In this way I became directly responsible for triggering of the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay. (MC: 228)

Saleem is working on changes in the people around him. He is cutting up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati. These ideas of bringing together the fragments to create a unified whole are further expounded by the peepshow of Lifafa Das, who did not believe in shielding his audiences from the 'not-always-pleasant feature of the age' and displayed some of the contemporary images like "Stafford Cripps leaving Nehru's residence; untouchables being touched ...of a fire at the industrial estate." (MC: 84) The Spatio-temporal existence of a human being and Indian plurality is conveyed by such metaphors.

Throughout the narrative, the protagonist is falling apart. He experiences a hole in his own body and his/story oozes out of it. He questions the homogeneity of history by questioning the wholeness of his self; "because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of every which thing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next." (MC: 505) Saleem's story is not a conventional history. While narrating his story, Saleem wrestles with a chronological view of history, inherited from the colonizers. He argues, to justify the validity of his version. "Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15, 1947-but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the age of Darkness, Kaliyuga...." (MC:194)

Here, Rushdie's concept of history is transcendental, rather than linear. He attempts to equate the depiction of reality or discourse of history with a narrative produced out of memory's truth, however unreliable it may be at times. The technique of magical realism finds liberal expression throughout the whole novel. Nicholas Stewart in his famous essay, "Magic realism with the post-colonial and *Midnight's Children*,"

argues that “ the narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of a tale comprising his life story which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma. In this self-referential narrative (within a single paragraph Saleem refers to himself in the first person: 'And I, wishing upon myself the curse of Nadir Khan. The novel recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted *Arabian Nights*”. There are some mythical characters are discussed as Radha and Krishna, Rama and Sita, Laila and Majnu, Romeo and Juliet, and Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. The whole story of the novel *The Midnight's Children* follows the psychological concept of Enigma. Enigma' is the driving energy while 'Magic Realism' is the sustaining spirit of this major novel. The complexity in this novel which drags so many things in as the quest-discovery motif, 'magic realism', 'dream', and historical presentation all these have to create an enigmatic state of mind. The novel in itself becomes non-reasonable in the narration of such a tale. The realistic presentation of historical events with supernatural incidents is termed magic realism. The novel *The Midnight's Children* completely follows the aspects of magic realism. It talks about the Quit India movement, the First World War, India's Independence, the Indo-Pak Division and War, and an Emergency with the supernatural power of Saleem Sinai.

Thus, in this major novel Salman Rushdie, uses the "high art" of historiography, metafiction, and magic realism and these elements of art run parallel to the development of the tale. This method gives birth to the quest-discovery motif and demands of "popular culture" rope in "magic realism". So, the 'post-modern' novels of Salman Rushdie are "a unique class by themselves", thus staking an easy claim to "sui generis."

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