

A COMPREHENSIVE ENDEAVOUR OF FICTIONAL DEVICE IN THE NOVEL *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie, one of the most powerful modern writers, has emerged as a major novelist delineating the contemporary scene on the Indian sub-continent. In the novel, *Midnight's Children*, he uses a different variety of literary techniques and styles in the telling of Saleem Sinai's story. So, the novel looks funny, dark, ironic, allegorical and historical. The language ranges from colloquial to eloquently lyrical. Rushdie uses a whole new set of literary terms to make the novel large and grand as its subject matter. In addition, there is an obvious relationship between Rushdie's prose and the cinema, an important part of Bombay culture.

Index terms: fictional device, literary technique, language and style

Salman Rushdie is a cosmopolitan, an international writer. He is at home in the East and in the West. These two intensely different cultures have conditioned his identity and his writing. He is also an outsider. He has used his writings to broaden and differentiate his outlook and worldview. His masterpiece *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981. It proposes a reflection on the struggles behind the project of Indian national consolidation. It focuses the struggles for independence and the conflicts and inequalities behind the construction of an Indian national identity through the events in the life of the narrator, Saleem Sinai. It encapsulates the experience of three generations of the Sinai family, living in Srinagar, Amritsar and Agra, Bombay and finally migrating to Karatchi.

The novel has an epic sweep extending in time and space, covering some six decades and the entire Indian sub-continent and its history. Though the narrative chronologically covers over a period of sixty-three years from the spring of 1915 to 1978, it effectively begins in the midnight of August 15, 1947 and ends again on the midnight of August 15, 1978. Thus, Time is cyclical and regenerative. It ends where it begins.

The novel *Midnight's Children* is tripartite in structure, presenting a cross-section of humanity, of Indians – Muslims – Anglo Indians. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, was truly cosmopolitan. He is partly Hindu, partly Muslim and partly Christian intermixing of various religious and cultures that make up India. Rushdie succeeds in presenting the past and the present of Saleem in alternating bits of narration in a captivating manner. He portrays many Indian divisions and dissents, chaos and disillusion, communal tensions, religious fanaticism besides traditional values and modernizing efforts. All these are preserved in the novel to evoke the truth of India and make the novel an extraordinary saga of epic dimensions and resonances.

The opening paragraph with its fairy tale beginning establishes the reordination of time and character, history and individual. The protagonist, Saleem is tragically aware of his central historical role, 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to my country'. (1) Right from here his destiny has been chained to the history of the country. Saleem's narrative is an account of his own life and a mirror of the life of India. This provides the form and the structural base to the novel and for Saleem, it gives available facts, fancy as well as history. He realizes the truth that his life consists in an excess of knotted lives, events, miracles, places and rumours.

Saleem remembers his past and tells a historical tale. Pausing here and there throughout the story, he addresses the reader with playful and wonderful tricks of mingling of the making of fiction and telling of history. Here the author tells us that two children Saleem and Shiva were born at midnight of the Independence Day and were exchanged at the same time by Saleem's governess. Now these two children represent India and Pakistan respectively and the changes which take place in their lives are indicative of the changes that occur gradually in India and Pakistan during the course of the novel.

Rushdie employs conventional forms of history, narrative and truth in *Midnight's Children*. He presents a fragmented view of history that stems from the imperfect and partial nature of memory, as evinced in Saleem's narcissistic narration. Much like his narrative, Saleem also claims that he is physically falling apart. His body is riddled with cracks and as a result, the past is spilling out of him. As Saleem's narrative comes closer to the present, it also becomes fragmentary and grotesque. Indian history since independence has a grotesque way of getting involved with the personal life of Saleem's character. The narrator-hero, Saleem swings between the past and the present, the historical and the personal, the apocalyptic and the expansive. He has no stable identity, but he assumes many identities. Rushdie's intricate narrative technique enables him to sustain the simultaneous identities, he has to assume as a human being and a narrator capturing within himself, the euphoria, expectations, tensions and traumas of independence.

Saleem uses the device of cinema screen to bring home his point: 'Suppose yourself in a large cinema hall, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality'.

In this novel, Salman Rushdie adopted the old technique of the first person narrative. The characters were introduced long before they actually appear on the lines and pages of the novel. It creates suspense in the minds of the readers. Rushdie made personal comments here and there. The theme of the novel is quite varied. It is neither stereotyped nor predictable. Rushdie took up the Indian traditions, narrated the things as used in the Mahabharatha, Panchtantra and Kathasaritsagar.

Midnight's Children can be considered as urgency to move beyond history for the purpose of finding out universal significance of the historical forces operating in the particular phase of time, which accounts for the extensive use of myths in it. It derives a mythical framework of narrative which helps the novelist bring out the deeper relevance of the historical and political situations obtaining in the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie has exploited the technique of mythical chapter heading in the novel, such as "Many-headed Monsters" and "revelations". The chapter called "Many-headed Monsters" recalls the evil deeds of Ravana, the mythical monarch of Lanka and also the feats of Hanumana. Rushdie has given a new orientation to the myth of Hanumana who is instrumental in burning down the godown of Ahmed Sinai. The title "Revelations", refers to "The Revelations of St. John, the Divine," the last book of the New Testament.

Characters bearing mythical names such as Padma, Shiva and Parvati point out religious and mythical dimensions of the novel and carry allegorical and symbolical overtones. Rushdie's use of the Shakthi-myth is an example of condensation. Indira-Gandhi, the ex-Prime Minister of India, by description of an incarnation of Kali, is shown as one who aspires to dominate the faiths of religious people who worship different gods and goddesses. The Lady Hand tries to inculcate faith in one goddess:

But I was brought up in Bombay, where Shiva Vishnu Ganesh Ahuramazda Allah and countless others had their flocks ...'What about the Pantheon, I argued, the three hundred and thirty million gods of Hinduism alone? And Islam, and gods of Hinduism alone? And Islam, and Bodhisattivas..?' And now the answer: 'Oh, Yes! My god, millions of gods, you are right'. all manifestations of the same OM. You are Muslim. You know what is OM? Very well. For the masses, Our Lady is a manifestation of the OM'. (438)

Rushdie conceives post-Independence India as Kali-yuga, which also accounts for his extensive use of Hindu myths. The myth of Kali-yuga is metaphorically introduced to find out a satisfying explanation to the novelist's grief over the evils existing in post-Independence India. The evils are the evils of Kali-yuga (the Age of Darkness) hovering over free India:

Kali-yuga the losing throw in our national dice-game, the worst of everything, the age when property gives a man rank, when wealth is equated with virtue, when passion becomes the sole bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success, is it any wonder, in such a time, that I too have been confused about good and evil? (194)

While narrating the entertainment of the oral storytelling, Rushdie makes his serious political comments. The narratives in *Midnight's Children* moved from victimizing history to painful anonymity and disintegration and finally silence. He has used a number of devices to link Saleem's autobiography to Indian history during the period 1947 to 1977. He puts his characters on the map of the twentieth century, with its shattering political master narratives of great wars and decolonization. He makes the past anew by recovering and discovering what might disappear by looking back into the shades of memory. He considers history to be always ambiguous. The novel offers the situation of a nation and a child going through the pangs of birth, tantrums of childhood the anxiety of adolescence and the anomic of adulthood. Saleem's personal story from 1947 to 1977 is associated with historical events very closely by Salman Rushdie. The series of national events covers the Jallianwallah Bagh tragedy to agitation against Rowlett Bill, the formation of the Indian National Army, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, communal riots, the dawn of independence, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu succession, the elections of 1957 to 1962, Chinese aggression, the Nanavati case, the theft of Hazrat Bal, the Liberation of Goa, the death of Nehru, the Kutch war and the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the Bangladesh war and the imposition and lifting of Emergency.

The language ranges from the colloquial slang to the eloquently lyrical. Saleem employs a whole new set of literary terms that he has invented to help in the explaining of his novel. The grammar rules are broken at will to create new type of sentences. There is an obvious link between his text and cinema. Since the story takes place in Bombay, the author should know a little film terminology he feels. Rushdie believes that he has to break up the language and put it back together in a different way; to destroy the natural rhythm of English and let other things into it to serve his purpose. He feels to domesticate English. He wants to take away from it the colonial odour and to use it with more ease Indianness. Hindustani Hindi and Urdu words are used in the novel. Words like Angrez, baba, chamcha, lassi, khichri, jihad, subkuch, talaq, yaar, ekdam, duniya are used in flawless English. He has also employed another technique of transformation of vernacular idioms like donkey

from somewhere, madman from somewhere and translation of Indian concept into corresponding English like piece of the moon.

The narratives in *Midnight's Children* differ from buoyant fantasy to biting social tirade, combination of radical aesthetic experiment and its energy of lighting up the English language with metaphors and myths. In this novel Saleem Sinai makes his narrative in a secular mode. He abhors fanaticism and communal violence and that is expressed to various incidents in the novel like Adam Aziz is a liberal person who does not entertain fanaticism or communalism. He throws a religious tutor out of his house for teaching bigotry and hatred to his children.

Dr. Aziz opposes the idea of Pakistan. His father Ahmed Sinai despite losing business at Delhi for the alleged arson by a fanatical Hindu group distrusts Zinna and snubs the land of the pure Pakistan. Amina, Saleem's mother, goes out of her way to save the life of a Hindu Peepshow man Lifafadas and makes a public announcement of her pregnancy even before her husband comes to know of it. Rushdie had to resort to a conglomeration of the literary techniques because his subject matter was such-India. There was no way to present hybridity of the country than through the multiple narrative heritage like Hindu myths and legends, Sufi metaphors, Christian and Islamic motives, folklores, oral tales etc. There are also tales of Prophet Mohamed and Jesus Christ. India is described as a new myth, a collective fiction.

Rushdie opposes the use of only the western narrative mode and establishes folklore tradition of India, which incorporates a number of Hindu, Islamic and Christian motives and thus creates a secular atmosphere in the novel. He has invariably stressed that imbibing Western and Eastern literary traditions should not be regarded as infidelity towards one's own cultural heritage but as a broadening of horizons, a bridging of gaps.

Being a cosmopolitan writer, he has mixed the different techniques. He made use of both oriental Western concepts in the novel. He utilizes the art of suspense to salvage Saleem's desperate narrative act from absurdity and to risk delivering a powerful political and literary message. This new narrative technique employed by Rushdie heterogeneous, creating an amalgamation of two worlds, connected through the ability to relate individual stories in the novel *Midnight's Children*.

References:

1. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 198.
2. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Picador, 1981). All textual references to the novel are from this edition.
3. *Mythology in the Modern Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). p.194.