

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN – A THEMATIC STUDY

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is a thematically rich work that explores the connections between history and individual experiences, the impact of colonialism and neocolonialism in India, and the themes of fragmentation, migrancy, and memory. This paper aims to delve into these themes and shed light on Rushdie's skillful integration of Indian history with the life of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. The novel captures the political turmoil and violence that characterized India's early independence, and Saleem's personal journey is intricately intertwined with the events shaping the nation. Through various historical and personal incidents, Rushdie emphasizes the profound link between the individual and the larger historical context. The novel also critiques British colonialism and its long-lasting effects on India, portraying characters such as Methwold as symbols of exploitation and moral degradation. Rushdie exposes the myths of British superiority and the neocolonial games played by the British to create dependence among the Indian population. Furthermore, the theme of fragmentation, migrancy, and memory is explored through Saleem's experiences as a migrant and his struggle to reconcile his divided identity. Rushdie highlights the sense of homelessness and anxiety experienced by migrants and their complex relationship with their homeland. The novel's fragmented memories and migratory patterns depict the challenges faced by individuals caught between multiple worlds. Rushdie challenges the notion of objective history and portrays it as subjective, unreliable, and easily manipulated by contemporary regimes. Through a unique narrative style that blends heroism and absurdity, Rushdie underscores the limited agency of individuals in opposing powerful systems. Overall, "Midnight's Children" presents a thought-provoking exploration of history, individuality, colonialism, and the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children, Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Migrancy, British superiority, Identity, Migrants, Narrative style, Absurdity, Critique of colonialism

Introduction:

Salman Rushdie was born with silver spoon in his mouth on June 19, 1947 in Mumbai, to Negin hand Anis Ahmed Rushdie. He was the eldest of four siblings. Along with his three sisters, he grew up in Mumbai. He lived in England from 1961 to 2000 except for brief visits to India and Pakistan; So far, he has been married four times. At present, he is living in United States.

This paper aims to enlighten the reader about the historical and individual connection in the novel *Midnight's Children*. Salman Rushdie skillfully connected with the Indian history that with the life of Salman Sinai, The Protagonist of *Midnight's Children*.

The concept of *Midnight's Children* was derived from the political turmoil and persistent danger of violence that characterised the country's first three decades of independence. This is the most widely recognised book written by Salman Rushdie. Saleem, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, was born on the verge of independence, and the developments in his life were intimately related to those of both India and Pakistan.

Midnight's Children written by Salman Rushdie explores recurring themes such as the interplay between history and individual experiences, the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism in India, and the consequences of migrancy, fragmentation, and memory.

V.D. Bhatnagar observed that, "*Midnight's Children* captures brilliantly this sense of multiple displacements. Personal displacements, geographical displacements and physical displacements coalesce in order to create a great epic narrative of displacements" [1]

THEME OF HISTORY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Salman Rushdie crafts a vital connection in *Midnight's Children* between Saleem, the protagonist of the story from the beginning, and India's past; Saleem was described as being "mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, my destinies in dissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades there was no escape" (*Midnight's Children*, p.9). Rushdie masterfully weaves together the events that occur in independent India on a political and historical scale with the personal events that take place in Saleem's life alongside those of his family.

Saleem's involvement in the Indo-Pakistani War in 1971 and his role in the language riots in the 1950s can both be attributed to him. Then, in 1975, at the "Emergency" event which Indira Gandhi declared to spare herself from being jailed over proved corruption allegations after the elections, she imprisoned her political opponent and violated the democratic rights of the people. Similarly, many occurrences are endowed with personal and historic significance. On their trip from Kashmir to Agra, Saleem's grandparents Aziz and Naseem Sinai stopped at Amritsar, where Aziz witnessed the Jalianwallabagh Bagh slaughter firsthand. As Aziz says in the novel:

“As the fifty one men march down the alley way (to the Jalianwallabagh Bagh) a tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather’s nose. The fifty one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty five to Dyer’s right and twenty five to his left...A Brigade Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in face” (*Midnight’s Children*, p.36).

Aziz sneezes as a result, and when hundreds of Indians are shot dead while they are imprisoned and trapped, "red stuff" stains his clothing. General Dyer is shooting savagely at defenceless Indians during this time. An itch in his nose signals the beginning of the actual carnage. Through the novel's 31 chapters, Rushdie consistently makes comparisons between the lives of a regular person and significant historical events. On the day Saleem was born, his parents bought Mr. Methwold's home in England. On September 23, 1965, when the Indian Air Force struck Rawalpindi, his dad, grandparents, and an aunt were present. When India detonated its first nuclear test bomb in May 1974, Shiva and his ferocious and strong antagonist moved in with Parvati, the witch; on June 25, 1975, the day Emergency was initially proclaimed in India, their son Adam was born. The book is replete with instances that support Saleem's assertion that he is "both literally and metaphorically" connected to history (*Midnight’s Children*, p.238).

THEME OF COLONIALISM AND NEOCOLONIALISM IN INDIA

Midnight’s Children is “considered an example for postcolonial literature and magic realism”¹² In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie attacks British Colonialism and its representatives symbolized in characters such as Methwold with a ruthless clarity and makes every attempt to link up many of the ills an Independent India to the mischief played by the British during their reign.

In Chapter 7 titled “Methwold”, Bombay (or microcosm India) is represented in its pristine beauty and populated by the fisher folk called the kolis-is earliest inhabitants. Rushdie describes how this primeval world was overrun by different invaders beginning with the Portuguese who used the harbor to shelter there the merchant ship and their men-of-war. This was followed by the East India company led by an officer named William Methwold who successfully realized a vision of a British Bombay when in 1668 the East India Company did get its hands on the island. The worst sufferers were the fisher folk as the invaders changed the very character of the city. Regret and nostalgia marks Rushdie’s narration in his chapter, as if would like to put the clock back.

Rushdie’s Methwold is a caricature, a symbol of evil and moral degradation rather than a fully fleshed out character. Rushdie uses him to convey his view about the colonialism. Methwold in the *Midnight’s Children* is a descendant of the Methwold who was the first officer of the East India Company, and he is the last European to rule India before India got its independence. The first and last Englishman thus becomes the object of Rushdie’s wrath as he symbolizes for him the entire colonial adventure of exploitation and demoralization.

Rushdie has brutally attacked through his exaggerated portrayal and caricature of Methwold. He not only expose the myth of the so-called superiority of the British, but also the colonial games that

the British had played specially since Macaulay's time to create Indians who were English in spirit and mental dependents on the British. Thus very much like other migrant Indian English writers, Rushdie consciously sets out to expose British colonialism and its longer lasting impact called Neocolonialism.

THEME OF FRAGMENTATION, MIGRANCY AND MEMORY

V.D, Bhatnagar records that "the novel can be seen as a novel of immigrant experience and thus a product of the authorial displacements" [3]

In the 20th Century, people started migrating from the non-white countries to the white countries. It was around the world 1950s that these migrations began for economic reasons. The trend has continued in the 21st century mainly because of the IT boom in the west.

However, that was not all; Third World writers have been migrating to the metropolitan capitals of London, Paris and New York to find a market for their works because readers in the third world would not support them. Thanks to the impact of colonization on their psyche, most educated people in the non-white in former colonies felt that the great traditions of "culture" and "civilization" existed only in the west that is literatures were superior to our own. The writers similarly looked for intellectual stimulation and encouragement in the "ideal" environments of the west, while some writers actually migrated from the third world, other like Raja Rao and Rushdie went to study in western universities and then stayed on for the same reason. Migration is not a simple phenomenon.

Every migrant who stays away from his native, begins to experience an acute sense of homelessness and anxiety after the initial pleasure for being in the alien land begin to fade away. This is the normal pattern of behavior because the migrant suddenly begins to miss the familiar frame of references and relationships back home. In the case of migrant from non-white colonies (such as India, West Africa, East Africa, The West Indies etc), these experiences have been compounded by rejection in the host countries (usually white) on the basis of colour and race. Race riots keep erupting every now and then, even now, perhaps because members in the host countries feel threatened that they will be overrun and overtaken by former slaves, in their own country.

George Lemming, the famous Barbadian writer of the masterpiece *In the Castle of my Skin*, has written an equally famous non-fictional work. It is called *The Pressures of Exile* (1960). It highlights, with sensitivity, The Terrible dilemma and the divided feelings that a migrant (especially a writer) from the third world experiences in the west.

Interestingly, most migrants (including writers) try to cope with his sense of homelessness and rejection and their own inability to return, by over idealization of home or by the use of satire. Thus, they either tend to praise their mother country in superlatives or they satirize and poke fun at it flaws to justify why they can't return. Rushdie belongs to the category of typical migrants.

Rushdie was always regarded himself as different from earlier migrant writers in the sense of being free from the idealization of nostalgia. But the fact is that beginning with *Midnight's Children*; Rushdie has made Bombay or Kashmir the location of virtually all his novels.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's obsession with the tracing out an ancestry is an attempt to come to terms with the problems of a "divided identity". Intellectually, he is drawn to the west while his emotional being looks for moorings in the mother –country. Saleem is apparently descended from the ancestral line of Adam Aziz, himself an alienated "half-and-half" Kashmir Muslim. His being the child of William Methwold, The last Britisher in India, and Vanita, Compounds the Kashmir alienation with the colonial's. Being a bastard is Saleem's literal situation.

As Saleem becomes a homeless wanderer, his sadness and gloom echo expatriates. His first exile is in losing the home of Vanita and wee – Willie – winkle from his very birth. The discovery that his blood group belongs to neither his father Ahmed nor his mother is responsible for another exile his being sent away to his uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia's home

Again when the family moves from Bombay to Karachi, Saleem is exiled from Bombay, the place he dearly loves. "I never forgive Karachi for not being Bombay" (*Midnight's Children* P. 307). Forcibly exiled from a home to place, Saleem ponders over another exile. He loves the voices of *Midnight children* after a nasal operation he is tricked into undergoing his own parents, under the pretext of being taken out on a picnic.

Saleem says he narrates his story because he fears absurdity: "I admit it" above all things, I fear absurdity"(9). Not belonging to a family or a nation scares him, but he fears the emptiness that comes with it. Thankfully, he is able to piece together his history with the assistance of his memory, which Migraine had previously destroyed. *Midnight's Children's* fragmented memories, migratory patterns, and other mental health issues.

Indian English authors like Raja Rao, Chaman Nahal, Kushwant Singh, and Manohar Malgoankar have included history into their stories. While writing on Indian independence and partition, Nahal, Singh, and Mangoalkar did so from a perspective that argued that there could be such a thing as history. Rushdie, on the other hand, tries to imply that history is a crafting.

Rushdie is the first Indian English author to purposefully employ history in fiction to demonstrate how subjective, unreliable, and easily capable of manipulation it is by contemporary regimes. His protagonists' feelings are used to convey historical events. He does it in a faux heroic, ridiculous style to demonstrate the minor role played by the individual in opposing strong modern regimes.

Conclusion:

Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" is a thematically rich and intricately crafted novel that delves into the interplay between history and individual experiences, the impact of colonialism and

neocolonialism, and the themes of fragmentation, migrancy, and memory. By connecting the protagonist's personal journey with the historical events shaping India, Rushdie highlights the inseparable bond between the individual and the larger historical context. The novel also critiques British colonialism and exposes its enduring effects on Indian society. Through the lens of Saleem's experiences as a migrant, the novel explores the complex relationship between the homeland and the sense of belonging. Rushdie challenges the notion of objective history and emphasizes its subjective and manipulative nature. With its blend of heroism and absurdity, *Midnight's Children* offers a thought-provoking exploration of identity, agency, and the complexities of postcolonial existence.

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