

# Clowning Wisely the Rabelaisian Way: Bakhtinian Carnival – in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to read the corporeal dimension of Salman Rushdie’s famous novel *Midnight’s Children*. This paper would examine how Salman Rushdie’s novel reproduces the strategies by which a crucial phase of the history of the sub-continent is represented through the ‘body’, and it goes on to examine how Mistry deals with issues like marginality and resistance. Such a reading is framed in the Bakhtinian idea of the subversive “carnival.” The paper would examine how this carnival played on the site of the body problematizes the totalizing structure historiography and reveals the repressive and degenerating state of the nation and postcolonial Indian body politic.

**Index Terms - Salman Rushdie, Michael Bakhtin, *Midnight’s Children*, Rabelaisian way, postcolonial novels.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie is a grotesque books. It can be argued that both *Midnight’s Children* is established on similar foundations to express the concepts of hybridity, transformation and combination of cultures, ideas and politics and popular culture. His art as a post-colonial writer reflects the former-struggle between insiders and outsiders in which he felt simultaneously on both sides” (Rushdie, 266). Similarly, Bakhtin offers a theory of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque while Baudelaire underlines demonic aspect of laughter.

Salman Rushdie has always been a maverick thinker who has been able to arouse the ire of conservative religious thinkers. His life has been a perennial journey from country to country – under the crosshairs of unending fatwas. Barring the fantasy tale of “*Grimus*”, all his works have revolved around India – covering a wide spectrum of socio-political contexts. The essay is a deep dive analysis of the vehicle of Bakhtinian carnivalesque employed by Rushdie in his masterpiece, the “*Midnight’s Children*” and argue against the critical stand opted for by critics of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

The carnivalesque, coined by the Russian Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin has often been employed as a tool of criticism by novel critics. It employed mocking those in authority and weaving parody of official practices and customs – often heterogeneous in nature with a focus on the marginalized sections. Rushdie uses Bakhtin’s discourses of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and masquerade to undermine notions of fixity and purity, notions which reify difference and lead to destructive conflict and negation rather than to negotiation and productive change. Rushdie’s fictional renderings of the concepts of hybridity and transformation intersect, in this study, with a theoretical framework centring largely on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. These theoretical works illuminate the way Rushdie’s fiction advances an imagining of postcolonial identity that has the potential to subvert the existing structures and hierarchies which repress the underclasses of society.

## II. BAKHTINIAN CARNIVAL AND RUSHDIE’S MIDNIGHT CHILDREN

Rushdie’s nonfictional writing explicitly states much that is implied in his fiction and contributes to the overall picture he is painting of hybrid subjectivities. The ideas he expresses in his non-fiction interact with those from his fiction and add to the complex picture of identity that he depicts. They also combine with the theories of Bakhtin to provide an innovative account of postcolonial subjectivity and agency that can bring about political change.

The *Midnight’s Children* has been a materialization of the Carnavalesque technique that draws parallel between the protagonist and a newly created nation, where non-living entities like the British Empire have been personified in a young prince “Yuvraj”. The act of equating a nation with an individual has added an extraordinary dimension to the novel, which has often faced criticism on grounds of being sickening.

The writers of the past had the liberty to transcend boundaries of imagination and materialization with the flow of poetic thoughts. On the contrary, modern authors are expected to be socially responsive while drawing parallels between the words and the world. Rushdie through his words criticizes and laments at the diminishing space between personal and public life. The *Midnight Children* elucidates the amalgamation of private and public life, equates umbilical cord with a telephone wire and extrudes diversity in race, language and religion – characteristic of India.

The *Midnight Children* opens up on the post-colonial scenario and the rise of Indira Gandhi, her slogan during the 1971 elections – “Indira is India and India is Indira”, by the words “Saleem is India and India is Saleem”. Rushdie articulates how he has been a function of everything that has happened before him, happened to him or has been caused by him.

The work of Rushdie has had an undercurrent of criticism of the national emergency of 1977 – something that has not gained traction with a certain section of the authoritarian factions. The elements of irony, ludicrousness and irrelevance employed in the work is a part and parcel of carnivalized literature.

Metafictional/ postmodern novelists in the contemporary west and the post-colonial east find the carnival concept a very versatile technique that can be employed for artistic purposes. Mc Hale has observed that carnival literature has been indecorous, heterogenous with undercurrent of parody. *Midnight Children* qualifies to be a carnivalesque in the era of postmodern historiography. Meta fiction with close similarities with 1001 Arabian nights. Carnival tradition has been invoked time and again by magic realist texts from Britain.

Though several critiques have criticized the Magic-realism imbued in *Midnight Children*, no critique has been able to perform a comprehensive analysis on the amalgamation of the elements of magic-realism and carnival elements. *Midnight Children* has also built upon influences from Indian texts like Vikram Betal, *Katha sarit sagar*, while also inculcating influences from Lewis Carroll, Kafka, Gunter Grass, etc.

The MC asserts that Magic-realism and carnival elements need not be mutually exclusive and stands up to challenge the citadels of power and demonic texts – thus meeting furious opposition and power mongers everywhere. These maverick ideas are taken to the next level in *Satanic Verses*”.

While some authors try to usher in social changes by eroding oppressive political structures, Rushdie and his employment of Carnival elements serves no other purpose than that of entertainment. Bakhtin’s works have often been described as the coded critique of Soviet autocracy. Bakhtin has assimilated a variety of post-modern topic – discourse, hybridity, sexuality, subversion, and deviance, the body, popular culture, decentred self, etc.

Cronin and Shepherd have dismissed drawing parallels between Carnavalesque and MC as absurdist, but a careful analysis reveals the socio-political criticism and its true meaning. Rushdie draws parallel with the 1001 children born during India’s hour of Independence and builds upon the failure of successive generations of post – independence Indians as the failures in the protagonist Saleem’s life.

The protagonist’s life depicts that of a true carnival figure, epitomizing multiple identities, birth-death and rebirth situations. Interesting metaphors have been employed where Saleem has been absorbed into the character of Ganesh and Buddha.

India’s role in liberation of Bangladesh has also been brought alive through Saleem’s actions for the liberation of Bangladesh. The event of partition has also been described and Pakistan has been depicted as stain, birthmarks and injuries on India. Sri Lanka has been described as a blood of shining goo emanating from the nostril (Deccan peninsula). India’s changing international boundaries and political situations have been rendered a variety of personas. Exploitation of the people of India – in the pre and post-colonial times has also been brought to life by Rushdie – drawing creative, interesting, yet controversial parallels with erstwhile rulers.

The incident of partition has been described as one where Saleem loses his family, yet survives, invoking the element of magic-realism. Attacks on India have been brought to life as attempts on Saleem’s life. Duration of night has been compared with the length of turd with every inch representing an hour. There have been indirect yet elaborate sexual descriptions with a hole in a perforated sheet being symbolic of the yoni, engaged in perpetual cleansing and the birth-death cycle, Childbirth, death, eating, drinking, defecation, genitals – breast and Phallus, the pot belly have been equated with various incidents and their ramifications.

Rushdie has also brought in a second generation of Indians as Saleem’s children – the ones who would look for fate in their hard work and efforts, instead of relying on stars. The colonial hangover of maladministration has been compared with an illegitimate child that a parent must bring up. The “Lock-Stock-Barrel” approach of colonial handover has been criticized in the novel. Several characters like a soothsayer, snake charmer have been brought alive to bring in an element of ludicrousness.

Elements of Magic realism have been invoked by bringing in the character of a boy who could walk into mirrors only to re-emerge through water bodies or polished metal bodies, having powers to mutate to a werewolf at will or modulate his size and proportions at will. The author exploits his skills of imagination to a freakish extent – depicting blood and gore with magnificence.

There are undertones of satire – against the establishment, the government, colonial masters and their native successors, inept bureaucracy, betrayals and corruption. The Author is also mildly critical of the fundamentalists and describes the days of National Emergency as an “era of darkness”.

As the tale flows, the author invokes laughter in a subtle manner, clowning wisely the Rabelaisian way – a way where we don’t realize that we are laughing at ourselves!

The author executes his work by inculcating various elements – a fusion of the carnivalesque technique and the magic realism elements – that appeals to the readers, maintains a pace, exhibits the therapeutic value of laughter with the writer emerging as a victim and Master of Public and private material. The author manages to elaborate on a snapshot of the history of India.

The grotesque body is a recurring image in Rushdie. The grotesque could also be associated with Bakhtin's concept of the Carnavalesque. Carnavalesque energy represents liberation from official orders hierarchical fixities and prevailing truths through a celebration of change, incompleteness and renewal. John Clement Ball remarks:

In the work of Rabelais, through which Bakhtin's theory of carnival is largely developed, the primary symbol that makes concrete the transformative potential of the carnival spirit is the grotesque body: "the ingesting, defecating, urinating, fornicating body of open apertures, where the psychological self-flows into and out of the world." (Ball, 99)

In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie uses a major section of the novel for the portrayal of Saleem's grotesque body. The leaking body of Saleem indirectly stands for intermingling impurity and mongrelisation which Salman Rushdie always glorifies as devices liberating one from the rigidity and fixity of contemporary life.

Rushdie often employs the technique of mimicry for characterization. Jaidev remarks: "Rushdie is like Desani in his exuberant mimicry which displaces realism and turns characters into caricatures and grotesques" (Jaidev, 31). An element of caricature mingles with the grotesque in characters like Lifafa Das and Ram Ram Seth. Narlikar, the gynaecologist was a birth control fanatic. He asks Sinai:

"is it not a finer thing, I ask you, to eschew procreation - to avoid adding one more miserable human life to the vast multitudes which are presently begging our country - and, instead, to bend our energies to the task of giving them more land to stand on?" (MC, 175)

Salman Rushdie's novels do not contain the actual medieval types of carnival that occur in the novels of Rabelais, but rather display a number of features that could be labelled 'carnavalesque' because they draw on the imagery, practices and characteristics of the carnival as Bakhtin describes it. These features include the practice of masquerade, used to undercut official hierarchies; the use of grotesque realism as a symbol for popular community and hybrid, multiple identities; and the subversion of existing inequalities and prevailing truth claims. Rushdie's novels, with their rich variety of carnivalesque characters and focus on colonialism and its aftermath, are ideally suited to a Bakhtinian analysis, especially as such analysis leads towards an examination of the issues of hybridity, mimicry, and shifting identities outlined by Rushdie himself.

### III. CONCLUSION

Most of Rushdie's characters experience a kind of self-realization in the end and it is suggested through the final homecoming. But even then his postmodern fiction obliterates the possibility of character analysis in the traditional sense, as character and narrative are fused together for artistic purpose. In his historical novels, Rushdie re-imagines historical and political events and characters enabling a reappraisal of his country and its people. The distorted and grotesque characters depicted symbolize the grotesqueness that has crept into human relationships in modern times. But it is impossible to separate Rushdie's characters from the narrative technique, as his characters play a vital role in determining the narrative strategy. Narrative devices like subversion, parody and word play supplement the grotesqueness of his characters. Thus, Rushdie's characters and fictional techniques complement each other and this mingling results in a fiction which is traditional and postmodern at the same time.

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