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Rushdie's Narrative Mode: Indian Oral Cum Postmodern Self-reflexivity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

*Being led by the novelist's illusion of being "GOD", Salman Rushdie was able to encompass multitudes in his booker prize winner novel *Midnight's Children*. He gets out of his depth in attempting to encompass the whole Indian subcontinent's historical and geographical diversity in allegorical framework. Through the presentation and examination of the temporal and cultural status of India as an independent nation in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie articulates the western educated, liberal Indian's inability to comprehend the Indian reality; an inability revealed in him by his recourse to allegory and fantasy. This paper tells about Rushdie's tendency of striving for a system through which he presents his text *Midnight's Children* along with post-colonial Indian history to examine both the effects of the indigenous and non-indigenous cultures on the Indian mind and in the light of Indian independence. This novel; therefore, as a post-colonial text has turned out to be a wonderful text for the narrative style of Rushdie for using the devices that signify Indian culture, religion and story-telling, Western drama and cinema, the episodic causality bearing strong influence of post-modernist novels as well as principles of the Indian art forms.*

Key words: *Rushdie's narration; the reflection of Indian culture (Indigenous, Non-indigenous), Indian religion, history of Indian Independence.*

Rushdie's novels are for and about a tiny stratum of India's and Pakistan's elite, inheritors of the British mantle, the deracinated, speaking English, thinking English, dreaming English, Indians terrified, horrified, revolted by Indians and India, yet unable to escape the umbilical bonds. Rushdie articulates the Western educated, liberal Indian's inability to comprehend the Indian reality, an inability revealed in Rushdie by his recourse to allegory and fantasy.

In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie strives for a system, led on by the novelist's illusion of being God, of being able to encompass multitudes, to show like Krishna the universe in his mouth: saying alongside with his clairvoyant hero Saleem of *Midnight's Children*.

The novel hovers between allegory and realism. On the personal level, reality is a cluster of comic mischances. The point where realism ends and fantasy begins is not always clear, confusingly so for those unfamiliar with this type of writing, where realism is used as a jumping-board for fantasy. Fantasy, at its best, is intended to be a mask for reality, the gateway to a more intense reality but sometimes can become an excuse for unreality or lack of understanding. In parts of this novel, it seems as if Rushdie gets out of his depth in attempting to encompass the whole Indian subcontinent's historical and geographical diversity, even if only in allegorical framework. The agonies of partition, the trauma of nations unable to stand on their feet being forced to run, the incompatible marriage between the two Pakistans (Pakistan and Bangladesh) the festering ghost-haunted marshes of Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan that was, to the arid brick-stone wilderness of the North-Western Frontier, Pakistan. The result is aetheralised abstractions which are no good in a novel as a genre thrives on solidity, even if of a fantastic kind. After this point, *Midnight's Children* falls of as allegory merges into a surrealist nightmare.

In this novel, the narrative comprises and compresses Indian Cultural History. 'Once upon a time,' Saleem muses, 'there were Radha and Krishna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu; also (because we are not affected by the West) Romeo and Juliet, and Spenser Tracey and Catherine Hepburn' (259). At this point, Hutcheon's post-modern perspective can be discerned; characters from Indian cultural history are chronologically intertwined with characters from Western culture, and the devices that they signify – Indian culture, religion and storytelling, Western culture, and cinema – are presented in Rushdie's text with post-colonial Indian history to examine both the effect of these indigenous and non-indigenous cultures on the Indian mind and in the light of Indian independence. It is in this sense, which blends with Loomba's theory as quoted above, that *Midnight's Children* is a post-colonial text, via its presentation and examination of the temporal and cultural status of India as an independent nation. This, as Edward W. Said writes, has been initiated in the text to portray the 'conscious effort to enter the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix up with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories... [This] is a particular interest in Rushdie's work' (260).

Rushdie is a master manufacturer of felicitous phrases. He gives them aromatic ingredients. They are diffused all over his works. His oeuvre is resplendent with them. Saleem Sinai's seminal description of himself gives a glance of that: "Child of an unknown union, I have had more mothers than most mothers have children, giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents – a room of revise fertility, beg and the control of contraception, and even of the widow herself."²

Rushdie uses the device of one of the oldest narrative techniques, i.e. of the first person narrator recounting his life story to a sympathetic listener. He pours long narratives at one go in breathless haste in large paragraphs without any full stops. Padma; named after the lotus goddess, pulls him up when he falters. Rushdie openly expresses his contempt for linear narration. The novel does not have a continuous forward narration rather it is complex and interrelated, based on structure repetitions and episodic casualties, which is, in fact, one of the strong points of the novel, as it is the perfect hitching of the content to the form. Rushdie disappears the linear narration as Saleem says: "But have is Padma at my Elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next. At this rate, Padma complains, you'll be two hundred years old before you manage to fell about your birth. She is affecting non-chalance but does not fool me. I know how that she is despite all her protestations, hooked. No doubt about it: my story has her by the throat...fighting down the proper privet of the successful storyteller, I attempt to educate her... Padma- pressures of what happened next and remembering the finite quantity of time at my disposal, I leap forwards."³

Padma prefers the option always open to audience and deceits him when the narrative tale as up on the traditional independent power of the story teller to do what he likes with a dependent and slotted audience "she is captivated, helpless as a mongoose frozen to immobility by the swaying, blinkers eyes of a hooded snake, Parlay said Yeats by love". The narrator is deprived of a narrate and loses its meaning the pursues of which he has given at the novel's inaction as main impetus: "How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counter weights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps-kept? My feet on the ground? I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and lotus goddess of the present... But must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-diversionary of a straight line?"⁴

The presence of Padma is essential for Saleem's narration of the story. Her continuous absence has disastrous consequences for Saleem's confidence and control of his material of the past: "But today, I feel confused, Padma has not returned and in her absence my certainties are falling apart. Even my nose has been playing tricks on me-by day, as I stroll between the pickle vats tended by our army of strong, hairy armed, formidably competent women, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date: But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been, in Indira Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time."⁵

We have been attributed to Saleem's fallible memory but this is in fact a device of the novelist to keep the reader alert and the same time it also hints at the unreliability of the writer, as well as of history geography. As we see in the date of Gandhi's death or General Sam Manekshaw's acceptance of the surrender of Pakistani army at the end of Bangladesh war. The narrator says: "Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning that I'm prepared to restart everything-to re-write the whole of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me there can be no going back, I must finish what I've started, even it, initially what I finish turns out not to be what I begun"⁶

At the very beginning Rushdie maintains a continuous effort at synchronizing nation and domestic life, so that the odyssey of his grandfathers and parents become the odyssey of the nation from the year 1915 up to about the year 1977. The convergence of the national and domestic life is underscored repeatedly in the novel. Saleem subsumes most matter of public record within himself so the inheritable subjectivity of any chronicling process if incarnated in his appropriation of responsibility for major events within the historical brands of his narrative. The narrator links himself with the contemporary events. He says: "in this way I became directly responsible for triggering off violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay (now Mumbai), as a result of which the city became the capital of Maharashtra ... about Indo-Pak war of 1965."⁷

He expresses "Let me state this quite unequivocally, it is my first conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pak war of 1965 was nothing more not less than the crimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth. In order to understand the recent history of our times, it is only necessary to examine the bobbing-pattern of that war with an analytical, unprejudiced eye."⁸

Saleem's character represents the consciousness of the country – 'experiencing its life and the time. At the same time, Saleem works as Rushdie's alter-ego can also be an allegorical representation of Indian independence. Saleem; like Rushdie, (born two months before) is born on the exact hour of the Indian independence, representing Rushdie's own observation in comic vein or in fantastic modes at the political state of the country. Rushdie with his English father, Indian mother, mission schooling and cared by a catholic 'ayah' (nanny) give symbols to link the autobiography of an individual to the history of a nation.

Saleem represents the history of India as an album; a family album, he is at the centre, draws correspondences between national event and his personal life. His reference of self is dissolved in fantasy, forging connections in order to confer meaning on chaos. He is aware that he is bound by his egotistical frame of reference so that his interpretation of history is always, to some degree, based upon his imagination, he still cannot do anything else but trusts his own memory. This, Rushdie calls: "Memory truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and verifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality."⁹

Saleem also offers a more cynical account of the surrender of the individual to the community, at least as an official policy. From its creation, Pakistan has attempted, largely unsuccessfully, to reconcile the logic of the rights of the private liberal citizen with its commitment to Islam, the popular ideological basis of the nation, because "in Muslim theory, church and state are not separate or separable institutions" (Lewis 28). After suffering a blow from a spitoon in the "Land of the Pure" (Pakistan), Saleem forsakes his private narrative, forgets his mothers, fathers, and midnight origins and, abandoning his "lust-for-centrality" (354), achieves

purity. Saleem's newly adopted "philosophy of acceptance" in the army life, which requires the abandonment of self-interest in the service of the "greater good" of the nation, however, leads him to commit horrible acts in the name of a fraternal community. Working as a bloodhound, he ruthlessly tracks down the enemies of national unity. In his other role as Buddha, "abstracted," "emptied of history," "anaesthetized against feelings as well as memories," Saleem denies his in-the-world, material being (350). The metaphor of swallowing the world that Saleem repeatedly invokes in his attempt to narrate the nation exposes the weakness of both the historical and historical models: the rhetoric of democracy and individual rights inevitably leads him to the problem of the particular posing as the universal, while the rhetoric of community, the pressures of having to transcend place and time, literally leaves him abstracted and disembodied.

This vast narrative spanning over sixty three years of India's history, also including some glimpses of Pakistan and Bangladesh, achieves its compactness through some special devices. The use of repetitive imagery and summary of previous happenings revive the reader's memory. He deliberately uses the same language to highlight the great difference for instance, Saleem himself is born at Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home, "at the precise instant of India's arrival at Independence"¹⁰ while his son Adam Sinai, is born in a "night shadowed slum" of emergency. The narrator thinks itself as preserving both vegetables and events. He says: "Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the classification of history; the grandiose of the pickling of time, I however have pickled chapter. Tonight, by serving the lid finally on a jar bearing the legend special formula 'No 30 Abracadabra' I reach the end of my long- -winded autobiography, inwards, and pickles, I have immutable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid with the shadows of imperfection."¹¹

He makes clear the sense of his narrative: "At Braganza pickles, I supervise the production of Mary's Legendary recipes; but these are also my special blends, in which, thanks to the powers of my frained nasal passages, I am able to include memories, dreams ... ideas."¹²

The events are intermingled in the story of Saleem as vegetables acquires the special flavor of the spices in which they are pickle. The events of different time echo each other this idea is suggested again and again that people and events are leaking in to other events. The novelist is very good at descriptions; his hero can smell even emotions, and so one finds even inanimate things impregnated with emotions and smelling of them.

Another important part of Rushdie's narrative technique is his building up a sense of suspense. He casually mentions a person before that person is appeared in actuality. The identity of Mrs. Braganza is not revealed until the end of the story when we find that she is no one else but Saleem's own nurse Mary Pereira whose chutneys he remembers. Thus Indira Gandhi is portrayed quite early in the novel as widow when Saleem is approaching at his tenth birthday. Later by incidents we move to know that the widow is no one else but i.e. Indira Gandhi.

On the technique of novel, Ron Shepherd states: "Midnight's Children differs from earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of diction are broken: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person; ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straight forward sense; religious or metaphysical, the novel is full of cryptic clues, archaic utterances and seem always on the point of offering some important explanation, of arriving at some goal or conclusion but what this conclusion is one cannot be sure. It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight of hand narrated with a passion for narrating other than for clarifying meaning."¹³

We frequently see the narrator's shift into dream and nightmare, which sees him as a narrator both in the first person and the third person, which mars the credibility of the character as a separate entity. In the narrative the reader is shuffled between the past, present and future, which is a deliberate attempt by the novelist to present the variety and multitudinous of the country and her people. The interplay of the private and public lives in the novel imparts a unity to the novel, where fact and fantasy reinforce each other in order to give a heightened picture of reality. This sets the outline for the plot structure of the novel. For instance, the passage narrating Brass Monkey's fight with reimburse draws parallels between situations those are widely a part in time and space. The blood on Evie Bums face is a symbol of the blood caused by the rioters in then Bombay.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is an ironic commentary on the major political events that took place between 1947 and 1978. Like a historian, Rushdie records major historical events and like an artist he reaches history. We get The story of the narrator as well as of the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie is dexterous in employing the technique of irony in the description of the post independence India.

"I remain, today half convinced than in that time of accelerated events and diseased hours the past of India rose up to confound her present, the new born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant so that people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic began to crack."¹⁴

Rushdie makes a good use of rhetoric language. To make his language more effective Rushdie employs certain linguistic devices, which make the novel more appealing and powerful. The city-riots in Amritsar is quite geographic.

"Amritsar dung was fresh and (worse) redundant. Nor was it all bovine. It issued from the rumps of the hoarsen between the shifts of the city's many tongas, ikk as and gharries, and mules and men and dogs attended nature's calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit."¹⁵

This juxtaposition of mules, men and dogs in one brotherhood of shit is suggestive of the author's disgust with the city. Same description we find in the city of Karachi... through each juxtaposition, Rushdie ventilates his disgust with the cities in India as well as those in Pakistan.

We also see the influence of Bombay film industry in the novel. Rushdie adopts the structure of Bombay film industry in broad prospective, which provides him perfect model for the novel. Thus the novel is very close to Hindi film. Rushdie adopts its many

clichés in the novel, such as, sudden recognitions, identity confusion, etc. To present his complex theme of the history of the Indian subcontinent. The exchange of two bodies born in Dr. Narlikar's nursing home by the nurse Mary Pereira interims to the scene of Hindi films. The novel is also a sort of comic epic genre, a form of which is a fusion of Homeric, mythic and tragic connotation. The story of the novel spreads through six decades and almost three generations of India's pre and post independence history. It is an epic in the sense that it tries to describe or contain "and India whose stories are too innumerable to be contained."¹⁶

Rushdie's use of refreshing language, felicitous phrases and literary allusions are other factor for the immense popularity of *Midnight's Children*. The rich exploitation of sound and meaning in language will, for a long time, be Rushdie's greatest contribution to the diversification of the Indian novel in English. His basic concern in the novel is to bring in India, not only as a grand theme but also through the medium. For his purpose, Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani words and phrases picked from their colloquial usages.

This synthesis of the English and Hindi is abundant in the novel. It begins with the opening pages of the novel, where Saleem tells us that he has been called by various names in his family such "piece-of the Moon" for which the actual Hindi an English word come together forming a phrase as a name, such as 'Picture Singh' still further, traditional name such as 'Padma' and 'Ganesh' are used and their etymological mythical aspects are also referred to. Rushdie coins the phrase as "whatitsname", "to begin at beginning", "cursing curses at dogs", "dreaming dream", which sparkle the narrative shedding off its monotonous colouring of a cliché.

Maria Cuto's statement seems correct- "*Midnight's Children* evokes this lost centre in language that conveys the ineffable and inescapable Indian-ness of the novelist."¹⁷

Rushdie inserts North Indian vernacular language habits into flawless English intoned sentence makes the double usage of the same word for fluent effect as "chhi chhi," Padma covers her ears, "My God, such a dirty-filthy man I never knew!"¹⁸

Rushdie inserts crisp, befitting vernacular words/phrases, into flawless English sentences viz: "...and now Tai Bibi leaning out of a window shouts, "Hey, bhanchued! Little sister-sleeper, where you running? What's true is true...! ¹⁹

We can take another example such as: ...the Nawab had invited all of these to his daughter's henna ceremony".²⁰ Rushdie offers vernacular idiom through transliteration as, "... donkey from somewhere!" ²¹ Further he also says: "...mad man from somewhere."²²

Midnight's Children simultaneously addresses different audience, who has sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually exclusive or competing needs—inscribe the post-colonial identity in diverse, sometimes even in contradictory ways. Rushdie's relationship with his diverse audiences—from the West and from the subcontinent—and with his colonial legacy is, questioning, critical, self-conscious and aware. He questions to define the expatriate's identity and relationship to the West. He asks: "What does it mean to be an Indian outside India? How can culture be preserved without being ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves? and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from ones that came with us" ("The Indian Writer in England", 81)

The novel *Midnight's Children* particularly belongs to peculiarly hybrid cultural/textual form called the Indo-Anglican novel. A significant proportion of the Indo-Anglican work's audience is from the West, though the writers are originally from the subcontinent but their writings written in English, aspiring to and often being published by well-known publishing firms from the UK and US fed on a diet of post-colonial works by Kipling, Forster, Kayes and Scott, the audience brings certain preconceived expectations to any work about the sub-continent. The audiences are much more familiar with and according to Western representatives of the colonized subject. These Indo-Anglican works negotiate different cultural terrains and audiences but does not have homogenous audiences. Rushdie's novels can be keyed into all the features of the Indo-Anglican work discussed so far. They reflect the absence of a homogenous audience.

One of the most telling and significant passages in all of the complex fiction of Salman Rushdie occurs in his discussion of the game of "Snakes and Ladders" in *Midnight's Children*. For one thing, this passage illustrates Rushdie's ability to evoke memories of childhood with a tenderness and nostalgia that rivals a Proust or a Novokov. For another, it shows the way in which he so effectively employs images from popular culture in the construction of his highly literary fictions, since "Snakes and Ladders" itself is a central thematic importance to the structure of *Midnight's Children*. In this simple children's game, alternatives are clear and unproblematic. Ladders lead upward and good; snakes send one sliding downward and are bad. But Rushdie's narrator, harried Saleem Sinai notes the way in which this apparently innocent game figures a much less innocent tendency toward dualistic thinking: "implicit in the game is the unchanging two-ness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil... metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions, Alpha against Omega, father against mother. This novel has turned out to be a wonderful text for the narrative style of Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* with which to begin and end on "Third World" Literature in English (Third World standing in for formerly colonized territories). This crucial element of ambiguity and multiple possibilities, emphasized as it is by the self-contradictory Shandean narrative excesses of Sinai himself, becomes in fact a central thematic element of the entire book. In the case of *Midnight's Children* this theme is linked in an obvious way to the use of Tristram Shandy as a narrative model.

Telling about writing *Midnight's Children* Rushdie counters to Omar Khayyam Shakil: "... It is probably not too romantic to say that when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor" ("The Indian Writer in England", 75-76)

The appearance of *Midnight's Children* in 1981 was a remarkable event in its own right. For many English-speaking Indians, the book was tremendously exciting: a sprawling, clever, and delightful English novel in which the foreign words were not French or

Italian but Hindustani, and in which they recognized familiar figures and events from their own history. The pictures of reading the book were certainly different from the pleasures of reading R. K. Narayan or Anita Desai, and this had to do both with the immensity of the book's vision and with Rushdie's infectious enjoyment of the language. It was almost as though Sterne had suddenly appeared in the twentieth century as an expatriate Indian, for here was a narrator both 'firangi' (foreign) and 'desi' (native) – a desi hidden in a firangi or vice versa. Two towering works about colonial India – Kipling's *Kim* and Tagore's *Gora* – had already dramatized for us this figure of the non-Indian Indian, of hidden ancestry and deceptive appearances. Rushdie's Saleem gave it a new and provocative spin by dramatizing this dual descent not just thematically but stylistically as well.

When *Midnight's Children* first appeared, no one could have foreseen how precisely this couple of 'firangi-desi' would emerge to dominate various trends of Rushdie criticism. It has done so, not only in the questions that have risen about the relative appeal of his work in Asia and in "the West", but also in the debates about his "authenticity" as an Indian writer and about the precise ways in which Indian names and words appear in his work. Indeed, an uneasy suspicion of the 'firangi-desi', of the nature of his alliances and the strength of his kinship, has put increasing pressures on the concept of the "hybridity", which seeks to hold some of these tensions at bay.

Rushdie presents history through the metaphor of chutnification, which gives way to his narrative. In other words Saleem is actually preserving the facts of history as chutnification, a method of preservation where each of the thirty one chapters in the novel stands for a pickle jar. Saleem suggesting the future leaves the last jar empty. Thus the novel ends literally against closure.

At the end the image of narrator is cracking up. In his robust life now he is in imminent danger of disintegration as we can see from the voice of Saleem: "my hopeless, unversed body ... began to crack... Parched, it yielded at last to the effects of a life time's battering. And now there is rip tear crunch and a stretch issuing through the fissures, which must be the smell of death... I hear live being spoken in the night, anything you want to be you can be the greatest lie of all, cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones spilling beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bag of bones falling down, down, down, just as once at Jallianwala. A broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimed, release... yes, they will trample me under foot... because it is the privilege of and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times ..."²³

Rushdie's narrative technique is marvelous. He is the master of narration at present time. The charm of his themes consists in their narrative qualities. His novels demonstrate the unique narrative which lures the reader ever onward into the pandemonium of the text. His narrative technique is used for the factual rendering in historical setting. His manner is unbiased as with strict objectivity he renders the personal experiences and situations. Rushdie's novels are complex, many layered with episodic causality, bearing strong influence of post modernist novels as well as principles of the Indian art forms. His exalted diction, elevated word usage and felicitous word phrases leave strong impinge on the readers. We see the use of daring literary innovations and disorderliness, such the unconventional word play.

Rushdie's narrator constructs his own reality, which is dependent upon the events of the outside world but it is interpreted privately, because everybody interprets it through its own mood and way. He gives the heightened picture of reality through a realization of true self and thus rejects the partial realities. However, while doing so; he renders this reality with a touch of fantasy.

Rushdie's technique of novel writing deserves the highest place in Indo-Anglican literature. About his technique Rushdie told in an interview: "for instance there is a technique that Dickens used a kind of background or setting for his works which is completely naturalistic background, he imposes totally surrealistic image." What I tried to do thought not to quite in the Dickensian way was to make sure that the background, the bedrock of the book was eight-that Bombay like Bombay, the cities were recognizably correct so that fantasy could be rooted in that kind of reality.¹

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