

Midnight's Children: A Study in Postcolonial Perspective

By

Dr. Rashmi Priya

J P University

Chapra

rashmi.priya01@rediffmail.com

Abstract:

Midnight's Children is one of best novels written by Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist and essayist. The novel is a postcolonial literature that gave immense fame and recognition to Rushdie worldwide. With this novel he became an established writer. Salam Rushdie had written this to show the impact of colonialism. The novel won both the Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. The novel had also won the "Booker of Bookers" prize in the year 1993 and 2008. It is about 10001 children born at the precise moment of India's independence that highlights the complexities of natural lives of people born in the night of independence of India. The narrator and protagonist of the story, Saleem Sinai is one of them. In this novel, the author has very beautifully portrayed India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the subsequent partition of India. In the novel, all the historical events leading to India's independence and after the independence find specific place. They are very minutely described, starting from Jallianwala Bagh massacre to the Emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. All the events that took place in political scenario of India in post-colonial phase are described very well. With these historical events the story of Saleem Sinai goes parallel. Terrible situation that occurred at the time of independence is represented through the eyes of protagonist Saleem Sinai. So the novel can be seen as an attempt to re-evaluate and re-examine the history and thereby to find the solution for the creation of a harmonious and well balanced society.

Keywords: Midnight's Children, Postcolonial, Magical realism, India, English literature

Introduction:

The history of English literature is very vast and it is confined not only to English speaking countries but it refers to the literature across the whole world. Initially it was considered to be associated with English speaking countries but later on with the rise of colonialism it spread to the whole world. Authors all around the world have written poems, novels, and other literary pieces of art in English and they also got fame and recognition. After the Second World War, colonialism was fading worldwide and new nations were emerging with newer forms of government. The power of imperial nations was decreasing and colonised countries were getting freedom. At that very moment a new kind of literary genre was evolving. That was postcolonial literature. Colonialism had very bad impact on the minds of the people living in the colonial countries. Situations were very terrible. This inspired many writers to pen down articles, essays and stories on it. It is difficult to give an exact timeline of beginning of postcolonial literature but it can be termed as a kind of literature that flourished after the colonial nations gained independence from a colonizing power.

Postcolonial Literature:

The term postcolonial is usually associated with slave countries which are geographically spread very broad on the globe. Such countries include all the countries which were under the colonial governance of imperial powers like Great Britain, France, Spain, Denmark, Portugal, Belgium and Germany. These countries were Caribbean, Central and South America, Africa, the South Pacific islands, and

Malaysia. It also applies equally to Indian subcontinent, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the Philippines. However postcolonial literature is not limited by geography. It treats a wide range of concerns. Colonial powers left their administrative system, their language, their culture and many more things as their legacy when they left the colonised countries. Colonial countries underwent drastic situation after decolonization. The main theme of postcolonial literature is based on the problems and consequences of decolonization. It tries to highlight the social and political situation of the country when they got freedom. Postcolonial writers had tried various themes in their fictions and among them the most common are of exile and alienation, rebellion, struggle, opposition against colonial powers identities, multiculturalism, and the establishment of cultural autonomy free from imperial forces.

Postcolonial literature includes works such as Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), and Ingolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), among many others. It would be interesting to note that these authors belong to different countries, viz. Samuel Beckett to Ireland; Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Columbia; Salman Rushdie to India; Chinua Achebe to Nigeria; Tayeb Salih to Sudan; Toni Morrison to the USA; J.M. Coetzee to South Africa; Michael Ondaatje to Sri Lanka; Arundhati Roy to India; Ingolo Mbue to Cameroon. This suggests that postcolonial literature is a very broad term that encompasses literatures by people from the erstwhile colonial world, as well as from the various minority diasporas that lived in the west.

Postcolonial Perspective in *Midnight's Children*:

Among many novels my focus in this paper is on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Salman Rushdie, the writer of the novel got literary notability with this novel. The novel is a postcolonial literature as it a loose allegory for events in India both before and, primarily, after the independence and partition of India. The book is divided in three parts. The Book One explores the incidents from 1915 onwards till the birth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, on 15 August 1947 that coincides with independence of India from the colonial rule. The Book Two focuses on Saleem's childhood and his role in Indo-Pak war in 1965. The Book Three which is the last part of the novel deals with the Bangladesh war and dark period of Emergency in India. In brief, the book covers period from 1915 to the emergency period till 1977. The book begins with the story of the Sinai family, particularly with events leading up to India's independence and partition. Saleem, the protagonist of the novel, is born precisely at midnight, August 15, 1947, therefore, exactly as old as the independent Republic of India. He later discovers that all children born in India between 12 a.m. and 1 a.m. on that date are imbued with special powers. Saleem, using his telepathic powers, assembles a Midnight Children's Conference, reflective of the issues India faced in its early statehood concerning the cultural, linguistic, religious, and political differences faced by a vastly diverse nation.

The novel starts with the birth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. He "tumbled forth into the world" at the exact moment of India's independence, "on the stroke of midnight as a matter of fact...at the precise instance of India's arrival at the independence". So from the very first page of the novel, Rushdie has linked the life of his protagonist with that of the nation. His birth on August 15, 1947 coincides with the birth of a new and modern nation. Saleem will soon be 30 years old. He feels that he has to tell so many stories, of his parents and grandparents, tales of a new nation, so he should be fast. According to this, his story soon travels back in time. He starts with the story of his maternal

grandfather, Aadam Aziz who was an educated Kashmiri doctor and an Indian nationalist. He fell in love with a Kashmiri girl who was his patient too. The doctor-patient relationship would eventually turn into husband-wife relationship. The newlywed couple on their way to Agra where Adam Aziz took a job as a doctor at Agra University, stranded in the holy city of Amritsar on April 6, 1919. During their stay at Amritsar they came across a political agitation. A few days later after their stay, on April 13, 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place.

“As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway a tickle replaces the itch in 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.”

The author however provides the minute details with much precision. This can be noticed in the following lines too.

“Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machine-guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person.”

Dr Aziz did his part of medical practitioner and contributed towards freedom movement. His baptism received a severe bruise on his chest. He with his bag in hand moved around the streets bandaging the wounded, disinfecting them with mercurochrome, a medicine which looks like red blood shed in violence. In this novel we find a large number of historical events and each one is related with Saleem and his family. A long series of events of Saleem's family moves parallel with major historical events of India from 1915 to 1947 in the eight chapters of Book One. Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Muslim League and its communal politics, the role of nationalist Muslims who opposed the idea of Pakistan, Quit India movement, Cabinet Mission and its failure, the partition of the county and the consequent riots and bloodshed all these historical events find specific space in the novel. On 4th June 1947, Mountbatten held a press conference and announced the partition of the subcontinent into three parts. Few days after this announcement, on 18th June 1947, Ahmed Sinai shifted to Bombay and hence the story too shifts to the metropolitan city of Bombay where Saleem was born. Saleem was born at the exact moment of independence.

“Newspapers celebrated me: politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.”

The author has very beautifully woven the facts with fiction. The birth of Saleem and other *Midnight's Children* is linked with the birth of the nation. By giving date and time Salman Rushdie has made the novel more historical. All important events of India are linked with the lives of characters. Saleem is the central figure of the novel. His growth and development from childhood to adolescence mirror the growth and development of nation between 1947 and 1965. The event of his huge appetite and fantastic growth is comically and metaphorically combined with India's ambitious five year plans and the huge amount of foreign aids, these five year plans have devoured. Saleem's grotesque figure represents the map of India which got disfigured because of the partition of its geography. This comparison of Saleem's appearance with that of the nation's map gives the text a historical touch. In order to give more historical touch to the novel Rushdie has included major events in this part of the novel. Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru's death, reorganization of the Indian states, India's five year plans, the language riots, the imposition of Martial Law in Pakistan, the Chinese Aggression, the theft of holy relic from the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar and the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 all these events find full expression in this part of the novel.

“This afternoon, at Birla House in Delhi, our beloved Mahatma was killed. Some mad man shot him in the stomach, ladies and gentlemen – our Bapu is gone!”

These lines from the novel shows the death of Mahatma Gandhi. Salman Rushdie is a master of moulding facts and fictions. At the autobiographical level, disintegration of *Midnight Children's* Conference, deaths of Aadam Aziz and uncle Hanif, revelation of Mary Pereira's crime which exposes Saleem's birth secret, migration of Sinai family to Pakistan and destruction of the family in the war of 1965 etc. – all these events are part of Sinai's family but at the same time history goes parallel with these events. The novelist presents the language processions and agitation in Mumbai between the Marathi speakers and the Gujarati speakers where Saleem and Shiva, another *Midnight's Children* took active part. The narrator has given an interesting description of Aadam Aziz's revenge of his son's death which is coincided with the theft of the holy relic from the Hazratbal mosque of Srinagar in 1963.

“At four forty-five on Saturday morning, Haji Muhammad Khalil Ghanai noticed the theft, from the Mosque's inner sanctum, of the valley's most treasured relic: the holy hair of the Prophet Muhammad.”

The act of stealing created unrest in muslims. On January 1, 1964, Doctor Aziz died and his death is linked with the death of Jawahar Lal Nehru.

In order to show political situation Salman Rushdie has portrayed the India-China war and India-Pakistan war. In 1965 Indo-Pak war became the cause of the death of Sinai family. Everyone related to Saleem was killed except Jamila Singer and the family of his uncle Mustapha. The war resulted in pangs and suffering, loss of life and violence. Saleem survived in the war, but lost his gift of memory. He lost his hairs, finger, telepathy and now memory. The Indo-Pak war left him “orphaned and purified”.

The last chapter of the book is about the period from the Bangladesh War to 1971, India's Emergency and its consequences. The chapter deals the postcolonial history and politics of India and its sub-continent. The author gives the detailed and realistic picture of Pakistani politics. At the historical level, it gives the picture of Indo-Pak war first and then the disintegration of Pakistan into two wings and at the narrative level Indo-Pak War left Saleem orphaned. He had lost all his magical gifts. He has now become a dog soldier in Pakistani army. He was sent to East Bengal as a man-dog to hunt Mujib. Realistic detail of the horror of the fratricidal gives the novel a historical touch. Thus history and narrative move parallel to each other. Now at the fictional level the narrative presents an imaginary dream forest which occupies the same geographical space as the real Sunderbans. Saleem, the man-dog and three war soldiers deserted the Pakistani army and entered the forests of Sunderban. There they recognized their crime and met with punishment. A tidal wave threw them out of the illusive forest and they returned to the world governed by time and history. It was October 1971 and the war at Bangladesh was nearing an end. The Mukti Bahini fought the last battle against the Pakistani army with the help of the Indian armed forces. On December 15, 1971, in the capital city of newly independent Bangladesh, General Niazi and his troops, surrendered to Indian army and became prisoners of war. Saleem became the willing captive of Parvati-the-witch. Through her magic, Parvati enables Saleem to travel back to India by hiding in a basket. On the Republic Day of 1975, Saleem married Parvati the witch. She was converted to Islam and she was given a new name Laylah like Saleem's mother Amina. Here Rushdie has given all the details of history day wise. The nuclear explosion of Pokhran, the corrupt government of Indira Gandhi, murder of L N Mishra all are historical facts. All these historical facts are linked with imaginary world of Saleem.

Now the story moves towards the birth of another midnight child. He was Saleem Sinai's baby. Like Saleem he was also handcuffed to history. On June 12, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty

by Allahabad High Court of malpractice during the election campaign of 1971 and it was precisely at 2 pm. Parvati, Saleem's wife entered labour. The labour lasted for thirteen days, the period which coincided with the political turmoil in the country consequent upon Mrs Gandhi's refusal to resign after the court verdict. The midwives in the labour room urged Parvati to push and push, the opposition leaders urging Indira to resign. On the stroke of midnight of 25th June 1975, Indira Gandhi proclaimed Emergency and suspended civil rights.

"...the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alerts, and arrest-of-subversive-element; something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my sons, the child of the renewed ticktock, came out into the world."

Saleem's son Aadam Sinai was born. The child born at the precise hours of Emergency was mute and didn't cry. The speechlessness of the child signifies the fear of the people under the dark days of Emergency and the lack of freedom of speech. The mute baby thus at birth, like his adoptive father, became "handcuffed to history."

Emergency signified the dark period in the history of India. The novel brings out many atrocities of Indira Gandhi Government. The totalitarian rule of Mrs. Gandhi turned the nation almost fascist. Nameless fear gripped the minds of people who remained silent spectators about the crimes and atrocities of the dictatorial government. Tyrannical forces were let loose to discipline the people and also to crush all the opposition to the Prime Minister. The press was censored by the government. The forced sterilization and bulldozing of slums for beautification of Delhi are witnessed by the people without resistance because people were not allowed to resist A forceful family planning operation on all the four hundred and twenty midnight children is performed in the emergency in order to make them impotent. Saleem himself becomes a victim of sterilization along with other midnight's children. Such forceful vasectomy of the private life of the people shows the tyranny of Indira Gandhi's government. Thus all the major historical events are captured by the novelist. As a postcolonial literature it encompasses the social and political situation of the country, struggle and rebellion of the people against the colonial power. At the same time the novel is the presentation of multiculturalism. India is a land of many religions, cultures, festivals faiths and beliefs. So many regional languages are spoken in India. It has different culture, language and traditions. Still the people respect each other's culture and faiths and live together in harmony. The novel has very beautifully portrayed all these things. Incidents of the novel took place in the different cities of India such as Kashmir Agra Bombay Delhi as well as in Pakistan and Bangladesh. People living there belong to different caste and religion. So the novel describes the multicultural society of Hindu, Muslim, Christians, and Parsi.

Conclusion:

Midnight's Children is the major post-colonial novel in English which fictionalized the events of Indian history from the birth of the nation in 1947 till the declaration of Emergency by the Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976. Thus post-colonial history reproduced is fictionalized and mythicised. Entire narrative is closed in fantasy. The myth and reality overlapped boundaries. In this novel, numerical exactitude is a feature which relates facts with fantasy. In his 1983 interview, Salman Rushdie states his fascination for figures when he said, "It seems to me that the period between 1947 and 1977, the period from Independence to Emergency has a kind of shape to it. It represented a short of close period in the history of the country. That shape became part of the architecture of the work." (Interview with Salman Rushdie by C Pattanayak).

History of the subcontinent plays a major role in the novel as Saleem's life is entangled with the nation with whom he was born. His grandfather is present in Delhi while Jallianwallah Bagh massacre

occurs, and after his birth, while they live in Bombay, his presence happens in many noteworthy events, like he becomes the cause of a slogan against Gujarati by Marathas when he accidentally falls into the procession. Later he becomes the cause, indirectly of course, to the death of Nehru. Then there is the Sabarmati case in which also Saleem is said to have his hands. When his family migrates to Pakistan, he is the one with Ayub Khan in the first coup. Again because of his great olfactory skills he gets a chance to be part of the team that overthrows Mujib in Bangladesh. He is present in Dhaka when Manek Shah marches with army to liberate Bangladesh. (There is a great contradiction woven here, when Pakistani soldiers are eagerly awaiting to finish off vegetarian Hindus, they are told to slaughter and rape their Muslim siblings in East Pakistan, by their superiors.) Then in final chapter the arrival of widow, who is referred throughout the novel, the Prime Minister and his son who plots a devious plan to oppress the opposition by sterilizing them.

So like a master weaver, Salman Rushdie has woven a magical realistic tale of a newly born nation with the life of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the novel. The character of Saleem Sinai is imaginary. He is not the part of history. He is entirely the result of author's imagination. His interconnection with that of the history makes the novel magical real. This is what Salman Rushdie's historiography of magical realism is. It is a blend of fiction and facts that occurred during the post-colonial phase of India. :

References:

- Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic(al) Realism*, Routledge New York, 2004
- Dey, Pradip Kumar, *Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd, 2008
- Dutheil, Martine Hennard, *Looking for Origins in Midnight's Children and Shame*, Bern: Peter Land, 1999.
- <https://en.wikipedia.org>
- Interview with Salman Rushdie by C Pattanayak, *The Literary Criticism XVIII*, 1983
- Mitra, Reena, *Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd, 2006
- Price, David W., *Salman Rushdie's Use and Abuse of History in Midnight's Children*, Ariel, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1994.
- Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight's Children*, Vintage Books, 2006
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press Books, 1995