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Analyzing narrative tools and styles in Salman Rushdie's '*Midnight's Children*'

Antara Vashistha,
Independent Researcher
Postal Address: A-171, Gulab Bagh, Uttam Nagar, New Delhi, 110059

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children is a crucial text in the history of post-colonial literatures. An allegorical chronicle of Indian history, Midnight's Children tells the tale of Saleem whose life is inextricably intertwined with that of his nation. Keeping Saleem at the vanguard as the rambling, digressive, and self-reflexive narrator, the text embarks upon a journey that both challenges and dismisses the various teleological and historical discourses that claim to know India. The text's intentions and themes, in turn, are complemented by the distinctive narrative style adopted by its post-modern narrator, whose narrations are contrapuntal to both the European and Indian meta-narratives of history. This is facilitated through an array of narrative tools, from magical realism, orality, creolization, allegories, and dialogic storytelling. This paper analyzes how Rushdie uses language and narrative tools to cater to his purpose and if he succeeds in his endeavor.

Keywords: identity, magical realism, post-colonial, self-reflexivity, cultural hybridity

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children has continued to occupy a key place in post-colonial studies ever since its publication back in 1981. Seeped in elements both postmodern and postcolonial, the text rejects the historical narratives presented by European historians, while scathingly critiquing the notion of the nation's history constructed by fervent nationalists and powerful politicians. Rushdie's unique narrative style underscores his narrative intentions and themes while attesting to his storytelling prowess. His style involves a series of literary techniques that empower the narrator to voice an array of postcolonial concerns, while carefully constructing a societal fabric interwoven through swaths of not just

tradition and modernity, but also the past and the future. The text's inherent multiplicity speaks volumes to the fact that a postcolonial experience cannot be represented by a single rendition, but rather, its plurality necessitates the presence of literary expression(s) of cultural hybridity that transcends the binaries of Western and Easterns.

Rushdie's raconteur is marked by seemingly unreliable ramblings and self-reflexive autobiographical narrations, a coalescence that is contrapuntal to both the European and Indian meta-narratives of history. Imbued with elements of magical realism, the narrative explores a myriad of post-colonial concerns and anxieties about how to locate oneself in a world that becomes increasingly rife with intersecting languages and cultures. These narrative elements invite a certain reimagining of the nation-state, as it strives to be postmodern while locating itself in a peripheral position. Rushdie's intentions and themes are thus limited not only to hybridity or orality but rather, uses these elements to reconstruct history to form a bildungsroman of both Saleem and the nation.

Written in the first person, the text offers a partial perspective of Saleem Sinai, who speaks of "my India", with his version being one amongst many possible versions. Saleem's authority over the story comes as a product of his memory and invention. As a narrator, he distorts the teleological and the prominent version of history to prove his centrality in those moments. Saleem, posing himself as a memoirist, writes about a series of picturesque comic adventures he has had and demands them to be interpreted as allegories of larger historical events and political circumstances, thus, becoming an allegory of national history himself. This motif repeats itself through the course of the text, where, Saleem declares that it was him that caused Nehru's death and that the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 was caused to wipe his family off the face of the earth. The crux of this allegory lies in the way the text explores the links between the self and the nation. The debate between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the text remains complementary to each other. Further, owing to the use of a self-reflexive, incompatible mode of narration which is mediated by the nature of memory, Rushdie showcases the intimate relationship between writing and identity, and thus, consequently, of that between nation, self, and the text. Rushdie's sense of loss as a migrant seems to linger in the text and it can be seen as an intersection of the national and the cosmopolitan.

Amongst the series of narrative styles adopted, the creolization of the Western and Eastern plays a significant role. Alluding to European and Latin American literature, Rushdie tries to locate India in a larger, cosmopolitan setting. The inter-texts present in the novel are "doubled". Linda Hutcheon argues that these texts are "on one hand, from Indian legends, films, and literature, and the other, from the West.- The Tin Drum, Tristram Shandy, One Hundred Years of Solitude, and so on." This transcultural presence is telling of the postcolonial existence as it navigates through the ebbs and flows of multiculturalism enriched through the erasure of the native land's culture. These Western allusions further These western allusions serve as tickets to locate the self within the world, juxtaposing two incompatible frameworks.

This juxtaposition, furthermore, is made possible via the usage of magic realism, a form that allows the miraculous and the mundane to co-exist at the same level, thus suppressing the imperial culture by reclaiming the cultural discourses for its own. Saleem's magic realism is a hybrid of orality (folk tale) and literacy (history). Further, while creolization purports to find what Bhabha calls a third space, it inevitably hinges on the fixedness and rigidity of identities that it tries to reject. Thus, we find a rather 'stereotypical polarity' between Indian spirituality and European Worldliness. These binaries can be seen in Tai, the oral storyteller, and Aziz, the Western-educated doctor. Further, the merging of the East and West is also found in various characters, Amina Sinai, for instance, remains an amalgamation of the two with a superstitious mother and a skeptical modernizing father, as well as in Saleem, a self-declared emblem of the nation. The claims that Rushdie seems to be making, thus, become paradoxical. While on the one hand, he is trying to state that while the Eastern and Western ideas are merged but can be distinguished, he seems to also be claiming that identities, as they exist, are hybrid, thus discarding the notion of
pure identity.

To showcase the former, Rushdie is bound to present England as linear, modern, and scientific, while relegating India once again to the cliché of Orientalism by presenting it as cyclical, traditional, and religious. Thus, in the words of Chris Bongie, his expressions of 'mixed and hybrid identities inevitably hinge on fixed identities that they purport to reject.' The unconditional 'historical time of modernity' associated with the 'colonial project' for example, is represented by the repetitive use of the phrase Tick Tock in the text, the chiming that comes through from Lord Mountbatten's 'English-made' clock. On the other hand, Eastern progress is seen as a 'timeless' discourse of irrationality. Further, Saleem, through the metaphor of an All-India Radio provides the reader with the science-fiction cliché of telepathy, foregrounding himself as a historian who participates in the events that he narrates.

Further, Rushdie's magic realism does not depend upon religious beliefs involving reincarnation or divine intervention; rather, it is relatively modern in its inclusion of amnesia, telepathy, and an allegorical relation to the nation itself. The blend of oral storytelling, supernatural events, and gossip/rumors can be seen both in Mary and Tai's stories whose "magical talk" is a blend of the history of the nation and a folktale drawing from sources such as the Mahabharata, the Bible and Arabian Nights. This orality also offers the storyteller, Saleem, a direct relation to his audience, which is personified in the character of Padma; which is a creation of a community of readers/naratees personified.

Moreover, this orality also allows a certain kind of elasticity in the tale's spiraling structure. This cyclical view of time, which shows a 'simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present is further linked with the way the Indians tell their stories, as the narrator comments, "No people whose word for 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' is the same can be said to have a firm grip on time." Saleem's magic realism, further, is more grounded upon its self-consciousness than in hybridity like most third-world literature. He juxtaposes the colonizer's culture with the colonized's culture to thematize culture. Throughout the narrative, Saleem thematizes orality.

Moreover, in its quest for identity, Rushdie's text implies a third position, which harbors both modernity/tradition; West/East. Etc. Hybridity here, itself becomes a theme, and the text lies both outside and above hybridity, while also being inside, contemplating itself. The narrative style of magic realism further complements a literary expression of cultural hybridity. The oral nature is further important since it is embedded within a written narrative, allowing it more power and a sense of modernity since, as rightly put by Benedict Anderson, national consciousness is the product of print literacy and thus modern. It presumes an awareness of events unfolding simultaneously in different spaces and filling what Walter Benjamin calls, a 'homogenous, empty time'.

Further, Saleem's narrative presumes a 'pre-text' of national history, which is the received story of the nation as perpetrated by those in power. This pre-text further, in its teleology, boasts of a well-defined narrative form with established origins, points of progression, and an agreed chronology of significant events. In the text, Saleem, insisting his life is an allegory of national history and the national history to be a part of a narrative that revolves around him, creates an active metaphorical relation with the text where the story of his life is both mirrored by and mirrors that of the nation. Further, Saleem's self-conscious thematization heightens the events of national history, thereby rendering them fantastic. The 'outbreak of optimism' can be seen in the optimism disease. Similarly, in his fascination for Evie, Saleem showcases the Indian's fascination with America.

Further, while the narrative seems to follow the received notion that India was 'born' on August 15, 1947; this birth does not take place until the end of Book One (Chapter- Tick Tock) in the text. This birth is further complicated by Mary Pereriah's switching Shiva and Saleem at the moment of the birth. Further, the metaphor of birth is integral as most historians speak of the growth of a nation as if it were a human child. British India was thus, 'severed as though by caesarian section to permit two nations to be born'. Moreover, with the paternity of Saleem as well as the nation put under dispute, its ability to tell its story further again comes under perusal. While Saleem's parentage comes as a shock for the reader, it fails to invalidate the previous family history, thereby, positing the contingency and constructedness of history. This invention remains a demand of the narrative and not some notion of fidelity to literal truth that determines the story. Moreover, Saleem invents a grandfather in his image. Aadam Aziz, with his dreams of secularization and modernization, complements his hybrid intentions. Aziz's disillusionment with his German friends, Oskar and Isle Lubin who are portrayed as anarchists whose progressive politics leave no room for Aziz's difference further births in him a sense of return to the nation. His friends, with their presumptions that they alone knew what the modern world required, saw India as an "invention of their ancestors", causing Aziz to refigure his identification with India, thus catalyzing his return to Kashmir which allowed him to "reunite himself with an earlier self that ignored his German friend's influence." A sense of self-conscious nationalism can thus, be seen in Aziz's identification with India. Saleem's parentage and the revelation that he carries the blood of the colonizer in his veins further complement Tariq Ali's remark about the new state of India being "India in

its color, composition, and make-up, but its pedigree is unmistakably British." Further, this twist of an alternative genealogy expresses dissatisfaction with the established narrative of Indian history, which is more or less embodied in the character of Aadam Aziz. Saleem's bastard status and his racial hybridity thus, explain his attraction to all things English not as a form of mimicry but rather a coincidental identification since the colonizing other is a part of the self.

Midnight's Children offers a fictional alternative to that perpetrated by the dynasty, "the substitution of a new myth for the old one." The text rejects the whole 'Indira is India/India is Indira's metaphor and aims to discard the misappropriation of the nation's history with that of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Rushdie offers a counter-myth to the myth of the Nehru-Gandhi Dynasty, which, he argues is a threat to the survival of the nation. The postmodern tendencies in his narrative technique, which posits the text to be a historical meta-fiction further try to 'counter myths with facts.' Saleem argues that for the nation to contribute to the self-definition of its citizens, the nation itself, has to be a collective fiction, ' a dream we all agreed to dream'. Aiming to subvert every form of convention and authority, the text tries to resist tyranny with its liberal freedom being under threat from various forms of anarchy caricatured in the text as the language-marchers, religious rioters, the many-headed mob and Indira Gandi, the Widow. In this manner, Rushdie's novel, as rightly stated by Lipscomb, attempts to deconstruct "historical discourse's claims to singular authority." Rushdie argues that 'when there is no literal truth, we must put our faith in fiction.' Hutcheon argues in her notable text, 'The Politics of Postmodernism' that postmodern representation affirms only to subvert, but subverts to affirm. Similarly, Rushdie's text deconstructs the notion of a nation having a stable identity and a single meta-history, at the same time; it also invites a skeptical faith in the notion it has just discarded.

Further, through the orality of the text, Saleem brings the performativity of words into practice. As put by Todarov, Rushdie's text has made the transition from mind to matter possible. Saleem's desperate quest to find relations leads him to reduce everything to verbal. Owing to this, he delights in puns and wordplay, emphasizing the verbal nature of the world in the text. Further, words such as 'Talaaq!' and 'Hartal!' very easily turn into actions as they carry their socio-political baggage. Saleem's self-reflexivity with his words, further, showcases the poststructuralist tendencies of the text as while he both wants and yields their power, he remains skeptical throughout of his capability to handle the narrative that he is telling, an aspect which is apparent in his literal disintegration. Saleem hence, puts his faith in words, while deconstructing it. This wordplay further complements the text's magic realism. The narrative style, further, also complements the theme of the text being a bildungsroman to both Saleem and the nation. Evident through the narrative, Saleem regards everything as a sign addressed to him. He also seems to harbor a great conviction of his latent greatness, a trait he has acquired over time. He can identify a sense of heroism in both the imperialist as well as nationalist symbols. While he finds the former in the boyhood portrayed in Raleigh's painting in his bedroom, the latter, too, is easily accessible owing to his birth coinciding with that of India's independence, a symbol of which can be easily found in Nehru's letter. This

sense of centrality along with the conviction of latent greatness further finds its essence in Mary Pereirah's song, 'You kin be just what all you want." However, being unable to find a sense of corroboration of his greatness in his surroundings, he begins to foster a painful self-consciousness, and finds in himself, burgeoning, a division of self. While one seeks to be the epitome of greatness, the other seeks anonymity and tries to hide in smaller places such as the washing chest. Just like the perforated sheet at the beginning of the narrative, it seems that concealment forms a rather huge part of Saleem's making. Saleem's identity thus shows a kind of fragmentation. Much like Fanon who also accounts for colonial subjectivity in terms of fracture and incompleteness, Rushdie presents Saleem too as a fragmented modern self whose narcissism and identification with the nation can be taken as extreme forms of identity formation experienced by many belonging to the third-world nations. Saleem cracking itself could be taken as a kind of decolonizing as he aims to reclaim/create a third space. These cracks, which could be coming from the weight of the history could be taken as the centrality of his being finally catching up to his self whose center is unable to hold its mass.

Rushdie's text, thus, shows both postmodern and postcolonial intentions. Like most postmodern texts, it shows, what Lyotard calls, 'an incredulity towards meta-narratives'. It challenges the relationship of history with literature, thereby questioning the authenticity of the former while also challenging the apparent fictionality of the latter. Further, since the text works as a pastiche of many kinds of writings, it also manages to subvert the notions of both Western metaphysics and the teleological notion of national history as it is conferred, thereby bringing in the reader, a sense of historical ambiguity. As an allegory of a post-independent India, Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' also subverts the nationalist ideology, while also indicting the promises made in a 'tryst with destiny.' The entire narrative, haunted by Rushdie's sense of loss, is written in severe isolation a small space removed from the world as the narrator, Saleem, sits in an 'enchanted shadows' cast by an anglepoise lamp.

The narrative style in Rushdie's text ranges from elements of self-reflexivity, and magic realism to a dialogic story-telling, thus, complementing his intentions and themes as he writes a national allegory contrapuntal to the notion of history and attempts to reclaim India from the clichés of orientalism, thematizing orality as well as hybridity, while tracing the relationship between the self, nation, and state as it attempts to locate the modern self in a Third World country in a post-colonial setting. The text's end marks the disintegration of the narrative, in a scene that is akin to Saleem's death as he gets crushed and turned to death. However, it is nowhere near the end. Saleem's legacy is sprinkled in the generations of Midnight's Children who walk or will walk the face of the earth. The text's end foregrounds the various assertions Saleem has been making all this while, postulating the post-colonial and post-modern identity to be unfixed, thereby not only distorting cliches of orientalism but also challenging the meta-narratives of history, orientalism, nationalism, and identity.

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