

LINKAGE OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS WITH PERSONAL HISTORY AS DEPICTED IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF SALMAN RUSHDIE: AN APPRAISAL

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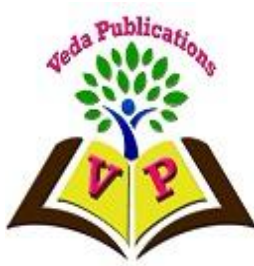
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ABSTRACT



This article throws light on the lineage of history with the personal history as depicted in the fictional world of Salman Rushdie, who is a man of 'Magic realism' and whose novels are intertwined with the history of India and filled with varied textures of mythologies, fabulous fantasies and harsh realities. Rushdie's works are deeply embedded with the historical consciousness of the Protagonist and mixture of colour history with his imagination.

Keywords: *Religious Fanaticism, Intolerance, Magical realism, Historical Consciousness, Alienation.*

Every nation has its own language and literature – English literature, American literature, Canadian literature, Australian literature etc; India has Indian literature but the Indian literature comprises of several literature Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya, Bengali, Assamese, Gujarathi, Punjab etc., A new literature is added to this list Indian literature written in English. “English is but one of the languages in which India speaks” (Iyengar 3). Though it is a new voice, it is as much Indian as the others. In the world of C.R.Reddy, Indo – Anglican literature is not a different kind of literature. It is part of Indian literature spreading its light ever increasingly.

The novel as a literary phenomenon is something new to India. Epics, Lyrics, Dramas, Short Stories, and Fables have their respectable ancestries going back by several centuries but it is only during a period of little more than a century that the ‘Novel’ – the long sustained piece of prose fiction has occurred and taken root in India, The words of V.S.Naipaul are apt quote here:

“The Novel which is a form of social inquiry and as such outside the Indian Tradition, had come to India with the British. By the late nineteenth century, it had become established in Bengal, and had then spread, But it was only towards the end of the British period, in the 1930’s that serious novelist appeared...”(P 9)

Ancient India has no novelists but there were many story – tellers, whose tales we are never tired of listening. The Indian literary firmament possesses a rich, hoary background of story – telling-only the form is in verse. But the novel as a medium of story – telling art is of the west and is alien to India’s story – telling. To quote V.S.Naipaul,

“The Novel is of the West. It is part of that western concern – with the condition of men, a response to the here and now... In India, thoughtful men have preferred to turn their looks on the here and now and to satisfy what Dr.Radhakrishnan calls, ‘the basic human hunger for the unseen’. It is part of the mimicry of the West, the Indian self – violation” (PP 18-19)

In the words of George Watson, “...society influences fiction, so does fiction influence society” (P 184). Of all the literary genres, the novel is considered to be the most important society – oriented genre, for it portrays human society with its myriad personalities. As Michael Zarraffe puts it, “ The Novel in the first one to represent men explicitly as defined historically and socially”(P 39). In the word of Mair and Ward, “ The novel if to be anything

is contemporary history, an exact complete reproduction of the social surroundings of the age we live”(P 195). Truly speaking, novels do depict values, feelings and emotions of human beings. They serve as “ barometers of human responses to social forces “ (Raghava 6). A novelist is an ardent observer of events and he records in his mind and later he interprets in his writing. He serves as a bridge between the past and the present.

Ralph fox rightly observes:

“The novelist ...has a special responsibility both to the present and the past of his country. What he inherits from the past is important, because it shows what are the sections of his country’s Cultural heritage which have meaning today. What he says of the present is important, because he is assumed to be expressing what is most vital in the spirit of his time” (P 65)

Today, novel has a acquired a significant price of place in Indian Writing In English getting flourished through the literary creations of such notable novelists as Romesh Chandra Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore who established themselves through their works *Raj Mohan’s Wife*(1864), *The Lake of Palms* (1902), *The Slave Girl of Agra* respectively. Only after the Freedom movements headed by Mahatma Gandhiji, that too, deeply influenced by the epoch – making political, social and ideological uprising caused by the Gandhian Movement, the novelists tried to present the realistic presentation of life. H.M.Williams aptly comments thus:

“...the emergence of the Indo- Anglican novel of social realism and social revolution after world war I can be seen as both an Indian phenomenon ...and as part of English social realism of the period.” (P 36)

K.S. Venkata Ramani, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao presented societal issues through their works *Murugan*, *The Tiller*, *Kandan*, *Patriot Untouchable* , *Coolie*, *The Dark Room*, *Kanthapura* respectively. The novelist like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonker, Khuswant Singh, Sudhindranath Ghose, G.V.Desai, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya followed suit in depicting social and domestic issues in fictional writings. The Eighties witnessed a great exhibition of talents of Indian fiction in English. With It started with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*(1981), *Shame* (1982), *Satanic Verses* (1988), *East, West* (1994) and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*(1995).

With Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, there emerged a new kind of novel. Almost all his novels contains features of 'Magic realism' mixing and juxtaposing the realistic and the fantastic skilful time shifts, labyrinthine narratives, plots and elements of Surprise and abrupt shocks.

Salman Rushdie was born in June 19,1947 in Bombay for a Muslim businessman Aris Ahmed Rushdie and his wife Negin. In 1954, he attended English Mission School in Bombay. In 1961, at the age of fourteen, he was sent to England to study at Rugby school. Since leaving for India in 1961, he had been living in England. In 1964, his family moved to Karachi in Pakistan. During 1965-68, he took a degree in History from King's College, Cambridge. In 1969, he met Clarissa Laurd and married her in 1976 and had a son by name Zafar Rushdie through her. The marriage with Clarissa Laurd dissolved in 1987 and again in 1988, he married an American novelist Marriane Wiggins which again got dissolved in1992. As a full time writer, he started working on free – lance and commissioned articles for various newspapers and magazines. Not only a full- time writer but also he was an Honorary professor in the humanities at the Messachutts Institute of Technology and a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His books got published in twenty- five languages. His fictional works are: 1.*Grimus*(1975), 2.*Midnight's Children*(1981) 3.*Shame* (1983), 4.*The Satanic Verses* (1988), 5. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), 6.*East, West* (1994), 7. *The Moor's Last Sigh*(1995), along with some other non – fictional works like *The Jaguar Smile : A Nicaraguan Journey* (1987), *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) and *Wizard of OZ* (1992).

Midnight's Children is the autobiography of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist. Saleem Sinai's story is intertwined with the history of India. It is filled with varied textures of overlapping mythologies, fabulous fantasies and harsh realities. The narrator is handcuffed to history and he narrates his story and his involvement in freedom movement to Padma, the representative of readers. He narrates the incidents in which he becomes the instigator, that is directly connected to the history of India. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie deals with the period from 1915 to 1975. There is a constant mixing of fact and fiction, reality and appearance, literal truths and metaphors. The story is narrated by thirty one year Saleem Sinai who works at a pickle factory in Bombay. Everyday he works in the pickle factory and every night he writes his autobiography and narrates to Padma, a co-worker. He says that his fate did not begin just before his birth, but it began before his conception.

History is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Protagonist. Of course, like several writers Rushdie does colour history with his imagination. This make-up imagination has to be accepted because *Midnight's Children* is not a history book but a genre in literature – a novel. For Rushdie, without history, it is difficult to establish one's identity. A perfect understanding of an individual is possible only by placing him in a proper historical background. On the other hand, the history of a nation can be understood only through the life- stories of individuals. Rushdie is similar to Anita Desai in the concept of history. Anita Desai remarks:

“While individual history does not make sense unless seen against its national background, neither does national history makes sense unless seen in the form of individual lives and histories”(365)

Saleem Sinai, the narrator cum protagonist is cleverly “handcuffed to history”(MNC 9) of India by dating his birth at the stroke of midnight on Aug 15th,1947, when India became independent from the handcuffs of British Empire. Saleem Sinai does narrate his life story to Padma, who consoles him in the days of loneliness, alienation and anguish. He begins to narrate the tale by relating thirty two years of family history before his birth. This period parallels the time of Jallianwallabagh massacre to the independence of India. Saleem Sinai does record the circumstances of his birth:

“It is two minutes to twelve. At Dr.Narlikar's Nursing Home, the dark glowing doctor, accompanied by a mid wife called Flory....encourages Amina Sinai: ‘Push Harder’ ‘I can see the head’...While in the neighbouring room one Dr. Bose with Miss.Jeya Perira by his side presides over the terminal stages of Vanita's twenty - four hour labour....’yes, now, just one last try, come on: at last, and then it will be over’... While in Delhia wiry man is saying... ‘ At the stroke of midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom....’ A moment comes.... but rarely in history. When we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of the nation long suppressed finds utterance”(MNC 116).

Rushdie makes use of Indian epics, folklore, and myths in narrating the lives of Saleem and his twin Shiva. Rushdie keeps Saleem Sinai at the centre and every event in Indian History is woven around him. Saleem Sinai born in Bombay on 15th August,1947 at the stroke of midnight is the first child born in independent India. Saleem offers us his autobiography but

his story is the history of twentieth century India. The personal events of Saleem Sinai get inextricably linked to the historical and the political events of India. As in the words of Saleem, he had been mysteriously handcuffed to history and his history or his destinies are chained to those of his country's history. Jawaharlal Nehru records the event of freedom in his speech, that India wakes up to freedom while the whole world is in sleep. India, after a long time of suppression discovered herself again. This random retelling of the political history of India is connected with the personal history of the protagonist in two ways: through events that are connected to him and through the events in which his friends or family members are linked.

The first events narrated in *Midnight's Children* is the day Dr. Aziz gets to see Naseem Ghani's face. For three years, from the early spring days of 1915, when Tai, the boatman had taken the doctor to his first – house call on Naseem Ghani. Dr. Aziz had seen, touched and thrilled of different parts of Naseem's body through the provided seven - inch hole white bed sheet. Adam Aziz with illicit desperation waited that Naseem would develop a headache or a scratch on her chin that would allow him to have a look at her face through the perforated sheet, "on the day world war ended, Naseem developed the 'longed – for' headache. Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (MNC 27). The second event in the novel related to history is the Jallian Walabagh massacre. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie records Jallian Walabagh massacre as follows:

"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"

(MNC 36)

This incident reveals that Rushdie is fairly accurate about the historical facts. At the superficial level, this incident may not be related to Saleem Sinai and his family but it foreshadows another Jallian walabagh(Emergency) under another Dyer. The next event that finds in the pages of *Midnight's Children* is the rise and fall of Sheikh Abdullah, "sher-e-kashmir" – the lion of Kashmir. When the Muslim was firmly established and stood for the birth of Pakistan, Sheik Abdullah a Kashmiri Muslim Founder of the Muslim National

Conference, which leaned towards Gandhiji's "Undivided India" a strand against the Muslim League, Sheik Abdullah, lived even after independence, but Rushdie's Mian Abdullah, founder of Free Islam Convocations is killed. Rushdie describes him as :

"Mian Abdullah rose from the famous magicians ghetto in Delhi to become the hope of India's hundred million Muslims; the humming bird was the founder, Chairman, unifier and moving spirit of the Free Islam Convocation" (MNC 40)

Right from the first word of the novel, Saleem is very conscious of his historical centrality. His life is 'chained to history' and his birth at 'benighted moments' thrust upon him. He says:

"... I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock ridden, crime – Stained birth" (MNC 9)

The next public event that finds its place in *Midnight's Children* is the men slaughter of Lila Sabermathi's lover Homi Catrack by Commander Sabarmathi of Indian Navy. The last event that finds its place in the pages of *Midnight's Children* is the election of 1977 when Janathan Party won the election by defeating Mrs. Indhira Gandhi. Uma Parameshwaran's words about *Midnight's Children* are: "As an autobiography the novel is very funny, very Poignant, very authentic." (P 88). But Rushdie's aim is not to present a biographical account but to link 'autobiography and history'. Rushdie uses the first person narrative which helps him to connect Saleem Sinai's life history with the history of India. Rushdie uses numerous devices to connect Saleem's personal story where the story of India between 1947 and 1977. There are three main structural devices – he uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points in history and symbolize their long – term significance ; Secondly, he links political and historical events with one or other of Saleem's circle of friends and family: Thirdly, he uses Padme as a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic level.

Rushdie uses 'pickle' as a symbol of history. Saleem Sinai spends his day working in a pickle factory. Pickle is not a mere preservative but it adds spice to food. Rushdie through pickle suggests that history is necessary for our survival as individuals. In fact, it becomes a necessary constituent of Indian meal suggesting that history is an important aspect in every human life. Saleem Sirai is the symbol of independence and he resembles India in every aspect. He had enough and serious links between him and India. He is handcuffed to Indian

History and a tonsure on his head, in Kashmir. No doubts , Rushdie blends history, autobiography, technique and languages into one in *Midnight's Children*.

The Moor's Last Sigh traces the history of a family over generation. The early part of the sage takes place in the Cabral Island near Cochin – the home of Cardamom, Cumin where Moor's mother's family are tycoons in the spice trade. A trade which attracted the Portuguese and other colonial powers to invade India some centuries ago. The Portuguese family of the novel traces their origin from Vasco da Gama, the men who landed in Calicut in 1498. The Moor, the protagonist of the novel flees to Spain where he is imprisoned by his enemy and his enemy compels him to write his personal story and his family history.

English language is one of the greatest gifts to Indians, because India is not divided not by rivers and mountains but by language walls. The one language that unites us together is the English language. As Aurora puts in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, only English brings us together.”(MLS 79). In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the more recent and present problems are narrated. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie starts to present the historical events, later enters into emergency. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, he presents the religious riots, after the demolition of Babri Masjid on Dec6,1992. The Bombay Bomb blast on March 12,1993 finds a reference in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Again there is a reference to Emergency rule (1975- 1977) and the regime of Janata Party. Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* traces the history of Spain by which he presents a multicultural society – “the fabulous multiple culture of ancient al Andalus”(MLS 398) – “ a world in which the tolerance of the Muslim rulers for Christian and Jewish citizens led to the flourishing of a highly complex and productive culture’(cantor 324).

Rushdie presents the violence and catastrophic effects of religious intolerance in India in *Midnight's Children* and Pakistan is presented in *Shame*. The intolerance which prevails over the Islamic world is presented in his *The Satanic Verse*. The same religious fanaticism is repeated in his *The Moor's Last Sigh* about the sprouting up of the present sectarian conflicts in India:

“violence was violence, murder was murder, two wrongs did not make a right ...In the days after destruction of the Babri Masjid, Justly enraged Muslims /fanatical killers’ ...smashed up Hindu temples and killed Hindus, across India and in Pakistan

as well... They surge among us...Hindu and Muslim, Knife and Pistol, killing, burning, looting” (MLS 365).

To conclude, in the fictional world of Rushdie, history plays a vital role and the historical events are narrated in a new light closely linking the historical events to personal history.

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