

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: The Link between Magical Realism and Post Colonialism

M. Anandharaj,

Associate Professor of English
Department of English, Sir Theagaraya College,
Chennai
India.

ponnnananand@gmail.com

Indian English novel is very distinct in itself and has never been simply an extension of world English fiction. Among the important writers of Indian English fiction, Salman Rushdie has developed the scope of Indian novel in English both thematically and technically. Just as the Indian novels in English are varied in theme and tone, the technical methods employed in them are also diverse. Many writers including Salman Rushdie emerged in the 1980s to enrich the English language by attaching it to new forms of expression and technical innovations. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is often associated with several categories of literary fiction including magical realism, postcolonial fiction and postmodern text. *Midnight's Children* presents an encyclopaedic exploration of an entire society through the story of a single person. The most important aspect of the novel's narrative is its use of magical realism. It is one of the most widely studied and written about novels of the twentieth century. The exploration that it undertakes of the connections between and relation of the individual self to the historical nation has been of great interest to postcolonial critics especially with its use of magical realism. This paper gives an outline of magical realism and how it is treated by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* within the postcolonial framework.

Midnight's Children is one of the most widely studied and discussed novels of the twentieth century and it has generated a lot of critical responses. It deals with the history of India from 1910 to the declaration of emergency in 1976 through the eyes of Saleem Sinai who was born at midnight on August 15, 1947. Salman Rushdie employs a number of different literary styles including magical realism in the telling of Saleem's story. This novel tries to project itself as a complete reflection of the life and character of the subcontinent India and in the effort it falls within the framework of Post-Colonialism. This paper attempts to give clear views about magical realism and how it is used by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* to establish itself as a postcolonial text.

Magical realism is an artistic genre in which realistic elements appear in an otherwise magical setting. The term was initially used by German art critic Franz Roh to describe painting which demonstrated an altered reality. Later it was used by Venezuelan Arturo Uslar-Pietri to describe the work of certain Latin American writers. Magical realism is associated with incorporating magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative without questioning the improbability of these events. This fusion of fact and fantasy is meant to question the nature of reality as well as draw attention to the act of creation. By making the lived experience appear extra-ordinary, magical realist writers contribute to a re-envisioning of culture as vibrant and

complex. According to Roh, magical realism is a form in which our real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day. During the 1940s, Latin American countries sought to construct and express a consciousness distinct from that of Europe. As Catherine Belsey notes, the way in which the narrative is constructed is a key element to the construction of 20th century realism. This approach to literary realism is relevant to magical realism as it represents the real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real. The key to understanding magical realist texts is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction.

Generally, a historical context is either direct or hidden in a magical realist text. Though one cannot say that magical realism is specifically Latin American, the fame of Latin American magical realism has encouraged adoption of this form of writing globally. Magical realist writers came to be recognized in India, Canada, Africa, U.S and across the world for their aesthetic-political overtones. In Indian writing in English, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have tried to write magical realism by interpreting its essence for a postcolonial view of reality. It is true that certain locations and countries have become associated with producing magical realist writing. In general it has been noted that magical realist fictions are often set in rural areas. The Colombian novelist Marquez sets the majority of his novels in a fictional town called Macondo on the isolated Caribbean coast of Colombia. The African American novelist Toni Morrison also sets the magical realist events in rural areas and small townships. But some politically motivated writers have set their magical realist fictions in large cities that are under political and social tensions. Knowing this, Salman Rushdie sets his fiction in some of the world's largest urban areas such as London, Bombay or New York. We can also see that much magical realism has originated in many of the postcolonial countries that are battling against the influence of their previous colonial rulers. This kind of postcolonial frame work in writing magical realist fiction is applicable both to Latin America and India.

This paper attempts at a re-reading of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the light of the link between magical realism and Post-Colonialism. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is known for its brilliant use of magical realism, through the use of which it has attained the status of a perfect postcolonial text. Salman Rushdie, the British Indian novelist and essayist, became famous after his second novel *Midnight's Children* which won the Booker Prize when published in 1981. His early writings provide a serious critique of Indian political culture. His style is popularly identified with 'magical realism' and his writings deal with the issue of split identity and conflict of immigration and exile. As a novelist from a country with a colonial legacy, the idea of 'nation' has always been the central concern in his fictional and non-fictional writing. The postcolonial conception of a 'nation' differs from the general notion of nation referring to 'same people living in the same place'. Since Indians are different people living in the same place, India remains pluralistic in its languages and cultures with different histories of communities. With magical realism, postcolonial writers are able to challenge realistic narrative and present an alternative reality. According to Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern technique of magical realism is linked to Post-Colonialism in that they both deal with the oppressive force of colonial history in relation to the past.

Midnight's Children recounts the history of India's transition from British colonialism to independence. The story is expressed through various characters endowed with magical powers and is located within history. The novel is an allegory of India before and after the independence and partition of India which took place at midnight of August 15, 1947. The narrator of the story is Saleem Sinai with an enormous nose and other magical powers like telepathy. The novel is divided into three books. The novel tells the story of Saleem's family and the earlier events leading up to India's independence and partition. The narrator Saleem Sinai is born at midnight on August 15, 1947. He discovers that all children born in India between 12 A.M and 1 A.M on the same day are having special powers. Saleem tries to use these powers to convene those children. The convention, or midnight children's conference, is in many ways reflective of the issues India faced in its early statehood regarding the cultural, religious, linguistic and political differences. With his special powers of telepathy, Saleem tries to bring hundreds of geographically disparate children into contact and in this attempt he also attempts to discover the meaning of their gifts. In particular, those children born closest to the stroke of midnight wield more powerful gifts than the others. Shiva and Parvati who is called 'Parvati-the-witch' are two of these children with notable gifts and roles in Saleem's story. Meanwhile, his family ventures into a number of migrations and endures the numerous wars which plague the subcontinent. During this period, he also suffers amnesia until he enters a quasi-mythological exile in the jungle of Sundarban, where he is re-endowed with his memory. In doing so, he manages to connect with his childhood friends. Saleem then gets involved with the Indira Gandhi-proclaimed emergency and her son Sanjay Gandhi's 'cleansing' of the Jama Masjid slum. For a time, Saleem is arrested. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the midnight children. After that, he can only pick up the few pieces of life he may still find and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his young nation. It is a chronicle written for his son who is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history like his own father.

Rushdie's principal use of magical realism in the text involves the telepathic abilities of Saleem and the other 1001 children born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947- the abilities that enable them to read the minds of those around them. In a magical realist text, we can see a conflict between two oppositional systems taking place and each of them works toward the creation of a fictional world from the other. These two are the world of fantasy and the world of reality and they can be seen to be present and competing for the reader's attention. In this novel, through the fantastic, the realistic makes its voice heard. The 1001 children point not only towards the fantasy of the similarly numbered *Arabian Nights*, but also to Rushdie's calculation of the Indian birth rate. Further, Rushdie's comments enable the gift of telepathy to be perceived as a magical signifier of the objective reality of contemporary Indian society which makes its impression on the individual psyche. Here we come to understand that Rushdie uses magical realist elements mixing the real and fantastic; distortion of time and incorporation of myth / legends / folklore.

In this novel, the mingling of the fantastic and ordinary, which is an aspect of magical realism, seems Indian as the characters involved in contemporary political and social upheavals also possess the power of mythic heroes. In the beginning of the novel, there is a fine passage as an example for this mingling of the real and fantastic - Saleem's grandfather in the spring of 1915

tries to pray and hits the earth; three drops of blood fall from his nose and immediately turn into rubies; his tears too solidify like diamonds:

One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Adam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies. (4)

We see another character Mian Abdullah, a political figure before independence dedicated to resist the partition along religious lines, who has the strange trait of humming without a pause. His humming raises and falls and it causes certain effects on those who are nearby to him. This gives a colour of strangeness to the incidents in which he is involved. In the attempt to kill him, the eyes of one of the killers crack and fall out. Earlier the glass windows of the room had fallen due to the humming of Mian Abdullah (58). Later in the novel we are able to see Amina, who is Saleem's mother, having fears of getting a child with a cauliflower in its head instead of brain (461). We also come across another strange washerwoman Durga whose breasts are colossal and inexhaustible with a torrent of milk (622). Such incidents are there in the novel, which give a kind of dream-like quality due to the mixing up of the real life with the fantastic elements. Identity - national and personal - is Rushdie's subject. Saleem and the new state of India are symbolic counterparts. Both are born at midnight on August 15, 1947 along with other 1001 children. After the loss of one power Saleem gains another, for his gigantic and remarkable nose becomes capable of scent distinction far beyond normal. He gains the ability to smell emotions and intentions. From these ideas origin a fantasy which is so complex that a summary is difficult to make. The novel remains a continuous and subtle investigation of the relations between order, reality and fantasy. The narrator Saleem constantly relates his life to that of India's. His birth, growth, development and destruction are India's and importantly, his central character-trait has been a failure to realise what direction things are happening. The characters seem to wander through the pages of history, colliding with important moments in the development of India seemingly by accident. Thus, Saleem's grandfather is on his knees after a mighty sneeze when Brigadier Dyer's fifty machine-guns open fire in the Amritsar massacre of 1919; it is Saleem's father who buys one of Methwold's villas; Saleem is born at the moment India is; and almost all of the major events of his life, leading finally to the destruction of the children of midnight and India at the moment of declaration of Emergency are coincidental to developments in the new country. Saleem and India must deal with genealogical confusion as they struggle to construct their identities.

The loss of reference to the identity of the characters in the novel is clearly understood when Saleem's grandfather finds it difficult in identifying himself after 1947 due to the fight between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The 'crack' in the body politic corresponds to all the 'cracks' in Saleem, as he feels himself going to pieces. This conversion of metaphors into events is another type of magic in the novel. When Saleem informs his family of his special gift of hearing voices, his father hits him in the ear. His 'stupid cracks' are literalised into physical cracks. Empirical referents evoke non-empirical referents and vice versa. Thus, in this novel, magical realism is a way of showing 'reality' more truly with the aid of various magic of metaphor. Quite naturally, this novel significantly shaped the course of Indian writing in English

after its publication. Rushdie looks like a story-teller who tries to return the English language to the tradition of magical realism which has a history from Cervantes through Sterne to Milan Kundera and Marquez.

Midnight's Children is regarded as a postcolonial text and if postcolonial literature is understood in the binary model of colonizer vs. colonized, then Rushdie's narrative fits in that model. Since post-colonialism remains part of English Studies, critics who focus on colonialism also endorse the view of Rushdie as a perfect postcolonial writer. Protagonists or narrators in postcolonial writings are often found to be pressed with the questions of identity, conflicts of living between two worlds and the forces of new cultures. Postcolonial writings take place through the process of re-writing and re-reading the past.

Rushdie wants his midnight's children to question the colonial paradigms so that the constructed 'Other' may give India and some such colonized countries a decolonized identity. The opening sentence in the novel reads like this: Saleem tells, "I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time" (3). The initial part of the statement gives a picture of social realism during the time of 19th century and the later part reflects the traditional fairy tale to indicate the forthcoming fantasy. Saleem is in need of these two techniques to achieve his purpose of creating a significant identity in an anarchic world. Rushdie's view of the 'unchanging two-ness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil' finds parallel in the term magical realism. The search for the whole in Saleem can be acknowledged as finding what will make up his identity which is a central concern in post-colonialism. We are able to understand that the author is trying to make us understand that his subject is identity, both national and personal. Saleem's magical realist physical fracturing is also a critique of the colonial predicament of identity fragmentation which results from the contamination of foreign culture in the native's corpus. As we have already seen, Saleem continuously links his life to that of the country's. Saleem tries to understand his country's colonial past, makes sense out of its independent present and tries to come to terms with his (and India's) postcolonial identity. Here we have to note that Rushdie, like Saleem, is also a product of postcolonial India. He was born in Bombay in 1947 just two months before India's independence and he spent his youth in India. His teenage years were spent between England and India. This shift between his homeland and England may be the reason for his heavily Anglicized tone of his literature. Yet his literature is trying to discuss the themes of identity that break down colonial constructs of Western dominance over Eastern culture. With this, he tries to establish himself as a prominent Anglo-Indian postcolonial writer

Beyond the novel's magical realist strategy to upturn the usual realism lies the chance to stand against the colonial models. As a political position, the post colonial provides the needed space for resisting the Western realism. The metaphors and allegories in which the novel is steeped facilitate a politicized resistance against western paradigmatic inconsistencies like its historical discourse of orders which is not only false but also derogatory from a postcolonial perspective. For example, the strange connection between Saleem and India not only metaphorizes Saleem's life as a microcosm of the nation but also sees it as an alternative to the grand narrative in which the history of India is written by its Western conquerors.

Rushdie tries to subvert Western colonial constructs of identity and culture by employing specific postcolonial literary techniques such as fragmentation, plurality and language along with magical realism. *Midnight's Children* can be considered as one such attempt of Rushdie to recapture India. From this perspective, we can come to the conclusion that Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* successfully links magical realism with post-colonialism.

Works Cited

Primary Source:

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage, 2008. Print.

Secondary Sources:

Ashcroft, Bill *et al.* *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. Print.

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Kristal, Efrain. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.
