

Factual History Fictionalized: A Case Study of Subjectivities Employed in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* regarded as one of the most revolutionary novels of English literature, which backed up Booker (1981) and Booker of Booker's (1993) prize. The novel has been widely considered as the best novel of postcolonial studies. Rushdie revisits Indian history and politics from the pre-independence era to the application of emergency by Indira Gandhi. What becomes the point of conflict in the novel is Rushdie's experimentation with Indian history and his ability to personalize history through the personal experience of its narrator. By applying the doctrine of "Postmodernism" this paper tries to unfold the relationship between history and the one who writes it. Through the perspective of the narrator Saleem Sinai, this paper brings out the dialectics of creations of history and fictionalization of historical events in the larger historical context which follows the unreliability of history, more or less a *subjectified* version of the one who creates it according to his own perception, knowledge and bias.

Keywords: Fictionalization; Narrator; Postcolonial; Postmodernism.

"History only love those who dominate her"

(Salman Rushdie, *Shame*)

Salman Rushdie, a British-Indian writer in English is one of the prominent writers of postcolonial literature who was born in 1947, the same year in which India got its independence. This could be the possible chance that Rushdie chose this as the backdrop of his second novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). The novel brings out the development of Saleem Sinai, the hero and the narrator of the novel who is born at the midnight hour of 15th August of 1947 along with thousand more children. He takes birth with the birth of an independent nation, henceforth depicted as a symbol of national and historical culture. His birth with the emergence of nation confronts his relationship with the historical and political fate of the nation, "mysteriously handcuffed to history [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (Rushdie 3) as the narrative claims.

Midnight's Children was published in 1981, and before the end of the year grabbed him a Booker prize. It was widely accepted by most of the critics and reviewers, who appreciated it for its originality and exoticness. Rushdie himself has explained how western scholars take this work to be fantasy, and the scholars of the Indian sub-continent take it to be a history. Perhaps, it can be considered both and like his other scholarly works, much else ahead of; political issues, social history, farce, filmic extravaganza, uncouth comedy, and a tragedy of loveless families. The novel appears to be of postmodern temperament. Magic realism, postcolonialism, national allegory, 'stream of consciousness', disoriented narrative, 'heteroglossia,' and the employment of history have been experimental aspects that give postmodern dimensions to the novel. Post modernism as a movement began after the 2nd world war. It negated the idea of "absoluteness". A postmodernist and deconstructionist thinker Jacques Derrida in his essay *Structure, 'Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'* (1970) writes

It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence – eidos, arché, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 2)

There is no "truth" or reality that stands out beyond existence. The system advocates the deconstruction of "metaphysics of presence". Derrida supports the idea that 'presence' provides support to the concept of 'centre' which remains temporarily self-identical and self-present. The 'centre' follows a hierarchy and its distortion has been the main focus of the postmodernist thinkers to bring out 'margin' to the 'centre'. Therefore, truth, certainty, absoluteness, centre, and reality are construct, be it religious, social, political, historic, or economic. Everything is a linguistic construct, just a mere "freeplay of language."

Merriam Webster dictionary defines 'history' as "a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events". The application of the postmodern doctrine on 'history' questions its reliability and factuality of events. If there is nothing beyond language, how historical documentation happens to be the final sermon of whatever happened in the past. The postmodern view of history interrogates the binaries of Fact and Fiction and advocates their unity at some middle grounds. Henceforward, it questions the credibility and authenticity of history.

Midnight's Children creates an incredibly heterogeneous and varied history of India, full of tales, images, and ideas – a multi-faceted history. Thus the

novel question's contemporary India's social and political issues and the issues related to the "metaphysics of presence" of history and storytelling techniques. The book is not predetermined to be the flat chronological narrative of the period. Instead, it is intended to be a combination of Fact and Fancy which Bhaktin regards as 'carnavalesque'. Imagination and truth meet to overturn the language of authority, and the whole system is subverted by permitting the impossible to happen, where an 'impotent narrator' can come up as a historian to de-centre the centrality of history, historical facts and interrogates its documentation. Furthermore, the narrator is not punctual about the chronological order, as the novel does not proceed with the linear movement, which makes it difficult to find out the usual order of events, causes and results that constitute the years of pre- and post-independence of India. The vision of Salman Rushdie is rather historical than personal in the way that he sees the individual in connection with greater historical and social powers that constitute his life. Gordon Wise in an interview with Salman Rushdie finds out that all is in the novel "*has had to do with poetics and with the relationship of the individual and history.*" (59) The story of the novel is mediated by the conscience of the speaker. Born around the historical landmark, the narrator reclaims and rediscovers the history as a historian with the apology for every distortion he makes in the Indian History of Independence.

Rushdie in his book *Imaginary Homelands* himself asserts "History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as our own perspective and knowledge." Hence writing of a historical is influenced by the prejudice, misconceptions, judgment, perspective knowledge and deed of the historian. It is never appropriate and accurate. It is always altered and distorted by those who write it as he says in *Midnight's Children*

"Memories truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies, also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent vision of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (Rushdie 242)

The subjectivity elimination, alteration, exaggeration, and glorification of the creator of history lead to the implausibility of the actual events. Any truth or memory or its documentation is never reliable. When it is seen on a hyper canonical framework appears as the incredibleness, inappropriateness and inaccuracy of documentation of historical events.

Reality becomes the question of perspective, opinion, “circumstances”, and perception of the one who sees it. As Rushdie does in chapter, ‘All India Radio’ of Book Two of the novel where he claims

“...and the heat...the little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances. Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on wrong date. But I cannot say now... in my India, Gandhi will continue to die on wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?” (Rushdie 230)

In the novel, narrator couple of times repeats “Please believe me”. “Please believe me, that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of melodramatic, ridiciling, grumbby appeal for pity.” (43) He tries to bring out the possibility of an author of any text who can metaphorically explain and distort the essence of an event for his personal bias. Later he writes about an incident “This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget.” (43) The word ‘forget’ implies the situation of forgetfulness or half-consciousness of the writer about the event which is written and preserved as an historical document.

The subjectification of national or meta-history to the experiences of an individual which Linda Hutcheon calls ‘Historiographic Metafiction’ is multiple times employed by the writer on the various intervals of times. Hutcheon expounds “Historiographic metafiction asks the reader to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time” (105). Rushdie attempts to rewrite, rediscover and re-document the history in the novel through the techniques of heteroglossia, polyphony, and pastiche. His personal experiences are painted in the color of magic realism which gives it a successful attempt to voice a voiceless individual and his/story. Whenever anything happens in India Saleem senses everything through his nose. He feels cracks on his body with the division of India after 33 years of its independence. Aadam Aziz discovers a huge hole on his chest during the Jallianhuala Bagh incident. Revered Mother grows headache at the beginning of World War one which cured after the war stops. Saleem sees himself inextricably connected with the destiny of India. He is “linked literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively” (330).

Anita Loomba discusses the anti-colonialist perspective of writing about the experiences which questions the credibility of the history documented by hegemonic colonials to overshadow the colonized documents in her text *Postmodernism and Poststructuralism*:

Histories written from anti-colonialist perspectives have re-written the 'story' of capitalist development itself so that the 'grand narrative' of capitalism now appears in a very different light... (Loomba 244)

In the novel, the narrator Saleem Sinai acts as a historian who is documenting the past of the country where he also commits some deliberate mistakes he is making in his narration. Subsequently, he wants the readers to believe in his version of the story like a historian. Rushdie compares reality to the big cinema, he claims that the view of reality shifts according to which seats you occupy. "What's real or true aren't necessarily the same." (87) For every individual, it depends upon your seat. He discards the idea that history is the non-negotiable body of epistemological facts. He makes history Nietzschean in that it is interpretive and not factual. He makes the character Tai claim to have lived in the era when Jahangir visited the Kashmir Valley; on the contrary, he was living in 1917.

Rushdie reveals his intentions of writing this novel in his book *Imaginary Homelands* to revisit history at periphery and to reclaim India's past. He articulates, "It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself ... I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim." (*Imaginary Homelands*).

Robert Eaglestone regards Rushdie as "A great writer does not merely live in certain time but shapes the understanding of an age. This is true to Salman Rushdie." Through his novel *Midnight's Children* he proposes a different way to observe the events of past that transform the way existing way of history, nation, narrative and nation's narrative from the enlightened discourse of its progress and its rules; which provides fertile grounds the postmodernist school of thought to experiment with history and historical documentation. Foucault summarizes it by saying "the success of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who have used them, to disguise themselves so as to perfect them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially impose them." (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 151)

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