

Representation of Magic through Body-Parts in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Magic has always been an inherent part of literature. Writers from all across the world have attempted to incorporate magical events, objects, and characters into their works, regardless of whether they fall under the categories of mythological writing, pure fantasy, or magic realism, a genre of fiction writing that focuses on presenting real and unreal elements within the same narrative. One of the major writers who incorporated improbable, absurd, and unreal elements in his narrative to bring out the truer version of reality is Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie. His most celebrated work *Midnight's Children* marks the presence of magic in various seemingly real characters. In this paper, the researcher intends to explain the concept of magic, how it differs from person to person and its connection to mythology. How the characterization has been inspired from Hindu deities like Lord Hanuman, Ganesh and Shiva will also be reflected upon. Further, the paper will focus on tracing unique representation of magic in the novel. The way Rushdie, an impeccable writer of magic realism, allocated supernatural powers to different parts of characters' bodies will be discussed in detail. The research paper will also highlight symbolic significance of extraordinary qualities endowed to major as well as minor characters.

Keywords: Body Parts; Extraordinary; Magic; Magic realism; Mythology.

Introduction

Meaning of the term 'magic', which can be used in both negative and positive sense, differs from one storyteller to another. Going by the wide spectrum of events and phenomena which can be considered as magic, it includes "mystery, an extraordinary happening, or the supernatural"

(Bower 04). It encompasses witchcraft, magic spell, surreal, grotesque, bizarre, and at times, even absurd happenings. In other words, all that cannot be proven scientifically falls under the umbrella term of magic. One of its significant aspect is that its connotations vary depending on the social or cultural setting in which it is being used. And because one perceives unreal from their own perception, mixed with personal experiences and belief system, authors like Salman Rushdie attaches the improbable to the probable for creating a world of magic realism. Magic realism, a self-explanatory term, relies on both natural and unnatural phenomena to create its setting and places characters who are not portrayed as super beings but as normal people, possessing extraordinary attributes. The range of magic in these texts vary from ghosts to grotesque to weird occurrences presented as everyday phenomenon. By employing the techniques of plenitude of details and matter-of-fact narrative style, the author enhances not only credibility of text but also the reliability of readers on the narrative. The same experience, which may appear natural to somebody with strong cultural beliefs, may seem to be unacceptable to someone with a different cultural setting and educational background. Realizing the wide scope of magic, writers of every genre have used it as a crucial element to make their tale interesting and their characters memorable.

Of all the writers who were enthralled by the aspect of supernatural, Salman Rushdie stands out for he used magic not to create a world of fantasy, but to reach an alternate form of reality. For this reason he is hailed as one of the most prolific magic realist author who interweaved India's historical and political past with preternatural phenomena. His second novel *Midnight's Children*, since its publication in 1981, has captivated the attention of a number of readers and scholars all around the globe. The text stands as a quintessential example of post-modern novel that follows non-linear narrative technique to tell various plotlines simultaneously and can be categorized under various labels like magic realist text, historiographic metafiction, and post-colonial fiction. Praising the novel for merging the bizarre with the acceptable and locating its position in world literature, P. Indira Devi comments: "It is a very un-Indian book about things Indian, a wonderful mix of the beautiful and the grotesque that only India seems to offer to the western world" (Devi 70). After winning the Booker Prize in 1981, Rushdie was conferred with Booker of Bookers Prize in 1993 for this novel. Divided into three books, the story takes its readers to a voyage of India by enlisting significant events that took place between 1917 and 1977. Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist, recounts the saga of three generations of Sinai family.

Discussion

In his literary piece *The Meanings of Magic*, Michael D Bailey states that “magic appears central to human culture” (Bailey 02). The fact that, since eternity, magic has occupied humans’ thought process become quite evident when one looks into the plethora of ancient texts, folklores and mythological stories which are considered as a major part of Indian culture. In these tales, a number of deities have been shown using extraordinary *as-tras* to defend themselves or attack their enemies. Other than making use of amazing weapons, they also exercised the power of their body parts to perform unusual and extraordinary acts. For instance, Dadhichi, the saint, “had offered his bones to Indra for making ‘Vajra’ - a deadly weapon out of it to kill enemies” (Balodhi 103). With the help of miraculous strength of his bones, a great weapon named Vajrayudha was created to kill Vri-trasura, the formidable demon. On the other hand, Lord Hanuman, who possessed Anima siddhi and Mahima siddhi could make his body shrink into the size of the smallest particle or could multiply his body’s size to become a giant as per his will. Lord Rama’s magical touch turned Ahalya, who had turned into a stone after Saint Gautam’s curse, into a living woman again. A number of writers, not only in India but around the world, got influenced by Indian mythology and chose it as a medium to bring their characters to life.

No interpreter of Rushdie’s texts can deny that he was highly influenced by Hindu mythology. Commenting on unbreakable relation between mythology and his novels, Kokate Netaji Bharat writes, “Myths are the ‘magic eyes’ and ‘the main gateway’ of his fictions.” (Kokate 41). Being inspired by mythical stories, he presented a galore of characters who used different parts of their bodies to represent magic in his narratives. In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie makes his readers see magic from a different perspective. His magic, rather than being in its purest form, gets amalgamated with social, political and historical reality. Instead of using the idea of witchcraft or special props such as magical wand, gemstone, golden egg, speaking objects, extraordinary lamp and carpet, he chose to impart his characters with mystic, supernatural, uncommon, and at times, purely magical qualities that emerge directly or indirectly from their body itself.

Primary element of magic in the text is *Midnight Children’s Club* (M.C.C.). Rushdie uses a set of children aptly called ‘midnight’s children’ for being born between 12:00 to 1:00 on August 14, 1947. These five hundred and eighty one children joined together to form a club and often organized meetings that connected all the kids residing in distant localities, belonging to different strata of society. M.C.C., seen on a symbolic level, stands

as an embodiment of India's faith in cultural pluralism and is therefore referred to as "a mirror of the nation" (Rushdie 254). M.C.C. can be seen as a mini India, a land that celebrates 'unity in diversity', where people from different cultural setup live together. Clashes in M.C.C. denotes religious and cultural strife that has become a reality of modern India. From a broader perspective, conflict resulting from ego clashes of Saleem and Shiva can be seen as continuous enmity that exists between people of different political parties, ruled by two contrary mindsets. Every child that participates in this conference is bestowed with magical abilities, depending on how close to the midnight they were born. The three main pillars of this group are the protagonist Saleem Sinai, his adversary Shiva and his confidant Parvati. Saleem Sinai, like the Hindu deity, Ganesh, is born with an extra-large and extrasensory nose that could even smell emotions and intentions of people around him. His big nose holds a significant place in the novel as it helps Saleem in being a physical replication of Indian map. Through the narrative, Saleem is denoted as 'map face'. Pointing out the similarity that his features had with the map, geography teacher named Zagallo asserts: 'In the face of thees ugly ape you don't see the whole map of India?' . . . 'See here-the Deccan peninsula hanging down!' . . . Thees birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West!" (Rushdie 321).

Saleem possessed the nasal liberty that assisted him in inhaling more than just scents and body odours. He could even sniff the negative feelings of anguish, hatred, shame, revenge, and jealousy. When Aunt Alia, who was rejected over Mumtaz by Aadam Sinai, puts on her happy mask to welcome Saleem and his parents in Karachi, he could "smell the vengeful odours leaking out of her glands" (Rushdie 305). While discussing about the Emergency period which was imposed under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, India's then President, and lasted for about two years, Saleem claims that "something smelled rotten in the capital [Delhi]" (Rushdie 420). Diving into the fact that Rushdie knows the importance of each word and uses it in the most significant way possible, one can understand that the word 'rotten' has been used to hint towards the absolute power that was exercised by Mrs. Gandhi as the Prime Minister of Indian democracy. During the Emergency period, other than violating fundamental rights, she also imprisoned many of her political opponents to curtail their power. Another special organ of Saleem Sinai's body, brain, possessed the special gift of telepathy through which he could communicate with the miraculous children of midnight. Initially, he could comprehend "only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my [Saleem's] skull" (Rushdie 166). With time he understands the functioning of his own brain

that links him to several brains at a time.

Shiva, the one whom Saleem regards as his alter ego, was named after “the god of procreation and destruction” (Rushdie 127) in Hindu mythology. Both these traits, the traits of proliferation and obliteration can be found in the character of Shiva. For entering the world at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, “the hour had given [him] the gifts of war” (Rushdie 200). As he had the strongest knees the world had ever witnessed, he could knock off any body builder. Being exchanged with Saleem after his birth and raised in abject poverty, Shiva’s perspective of the world varied from that of Saleem’s. He hardly felt attached to anybody and certainly did not want to be a part of M.C.C for a long period of time. Shiva’s cold attitude results from absence of money, love and care. As he feels a void in his heart, he develops an indifferent attitude towards other’s problems and indulges in physical love making without actually being in love with multiple ladies. The world, during the war of 1971, saw him as a War hero who used his gift of immensely powerful knees for the betterment of our country. He was a man whom no force can defeat, not even the young ladies belonging to upper class of the society. Super-potent Shiva, the symbol of procreation, fathered a number of illegitimate babies by indulging in non-serious affairs with several women. During the sterilization campaign that was led by Mr. Sanjay Gandhi, Shiva became the victor and Saleem turned into a victim. The war hero acted as the main force against Saleem’s extraordinariness. He came to magician’s ghetto with his army men to evacuate them all from the area. However, Shiva’s main concentration remained the rich kid Saleem whom he knocked down with the help of his knees. The narrator describes the whole scenario of Saleem being dragged to Benares for forceful sterilization as:

“Major Shiva has joined the fray, and he is looking only for me. Behind me, as I run, come the pumping knees of my doom . . . The knees of the war hero are coming closer closer as I flee, the joints of my nemesis thundering towards me, and he leaps, the legs of the war hero fly through the air, closing like jaws around my neck, knees squeezing the breath out of my throat, I am falling twisting but the knees hold tight . . . I, too, was pulled roughly towards a van; while bulldozers moved forwards into the slum, a door was slammed shut” (Rushdie 426).

Shiva, who had come with his army men to evacuate magician’s ghetto, had an ulterior motive. Having dragged Saleem, he took him to the city of Benares and held him as a captive inside the Widows’ Hostel. Two of his colleagues whom the narrator calls Abbott and Costello, pressurized him

into revealing the names, addresses and physical description of his midnight friends. As a result of this revelation, four hundred and twenty men and women aged 29, were forcefully brought to the same confinement for getting them vasectomized. The doctors who were assigned to perform these operations were so diligent and proficient that they carried surgeries for eighteen days on "a mere 0.00007 per cent of the six-hundred-million strong population of India". After the effect of anesthesia reduced, the building was filled with the sound coming from "tormented cry of children who had lost their magic" (Rushdie 435). This series of events clearly demonstrates how differently-built and special body organs of these characters were involved in their turning into ordinary from extraordinary. Shiva's knees led to Saleem's mouth revealing hidden information that led to unwilling operation of midnight's children's reproductive organs and turned them into regular beings who could no longer connect telepathically. Shiva's indirectly snatching off of protagonist's fertility and his knees' attack proving to be fatal on Saleem's extra-sensory and huge nose symbolizes suppression of the powerless in the hands of authoritative ones.

Saleem's own body in the novel, as stated by Malgorzata Kowalcze in an article titled *Posthuman Magical Corporeality in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, "is presented as a plastic material which can be formed and reshaped" (Kowalcze). In the beginning of novel, by using the element of metafiction and taking liberty to comment on his own narration, Saleem tells his readers that he is in a hurry to tell his own story mixed with the story of India's political, social and cultural strife for his body (symbolizing India) is getting disintegrated moment by moment. After completing the narration and getting separated by his confidant, Parvati, he feels like he is left all alone in this dark world. The phenomenon of a man experiencing a quick flashback of his life moments before dying is believed to be true by many people across religions. Rushdie employed this idea while writing his protagonist's end. Saleem gets a vision where he is surrounded by all his family and friends, including grandparents Adam and Amina Sinai, Naseem, aunt Alia, Mustapha, Hanif, Emerald, Nadir Khan, uncle Zafar and aunt Pia, Rani of Cooch Naheen, Rashid and Shiva. He starts to feel that the cracks his body carried are now widening. Eventually surrendering to his own fear, Saleem Sinai disintegrates "into [approximately] six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust" (Rushdie 31).

"Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view", mentions the metafictional text (Rushdie 201). These children can certainly be perceived as the carrier of extraordinary organs

that could make others around them either suffer or heal. A Poor girl from Delhi named Sundari was so stunning that anyone who gazed at her face would go blind. Moments after she took birth, her mother, father and their neighboring woman's vision got impaired. An unnamed boy who resided near the great watershed of Vindhya Mountains, like Lord Hanuman, was endowed with *Anima* and *Mahima siddhi*. As a result of which, he could increase or decrease his body's size as and when he wished. Another girl belonging to the miraculous group of kids was born with fingertips so incredibly green that she could produce eggplants in Thar Desert. The significance of gentle touch is shown through the girl who lived in Gir Forest. A mere touch of her hands could cure even the deepest wounds of people. Perhaps, by assigning such special qualities to such minor characters, some of whom have not even been named in the novel, the author wanted to indicate towards the fact that the whole of India is blessed with rare intellect and power which assists them in becoming extraordinary.

The author introduced the supernatural not only through the body parts of prominent characters, but also through the sketching of little developed minor characters. For instance, Tai Bibi, "the whore of whores" (Rushdie 316), despite being a five hundred and twelve year old, lured Saleem by deliberately changing her body's odor to resemble the one that he liked. Making use of her special power, she succeeded in copying the natural body odors of Saleem's mother, his aunts and Jamila by applying trial-and-error method several times. Like Laura Esquivel in *Like Water For Chocolate* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices*, Salman Rushdie also associates magic with food. Aunt Alia, Amina's younger sister, mastered the art of impregnating food with ill feelings. Explaining the hazardous effect of vengeance-induced food on Saleem's pregnant mother, the narrator says:

"When she [Amina] was sure [of her pregnancy], she told her good news to her big sister Alia, giving my aunt the opportunity of perfecting her revenge. What Alia said to my mother is not known; what she stirred into her cooking must remain a matter for conjecture; but the effect on Amina was devastating. She was plagued by dreams of a monster child with a cauliflower instead of a brain; she was beset by phantoms of Ramram Seth, and the old prophecy of a child with two heads began to drive her wild all over again" (Rushdie 329).

When Amina ate kormas that were filled with the feeling of revenge, she started fearing the unborn child her womb was carrying. As a result of Alia's culinary sorcery, at the age of forty two, Saleem's mother gained

a lot of weight, her hair became white, and she started to resemble an elderly woman. Despite having connected by blood, Alia left no stone unturned in taking revenge from her sibling. This presents the readers with detrimental effects of lower level feelings that makes a human inhumane.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that *Midnight's Children* introduces the element of supernatural and miraculous via body parts of its wide range of fictional personalities, partly inspired by Hindu mythological characters. To represent magic in a different way than other writers, Rushdie has made use of Saleem's abnormally large and unusually sensitive nose capable of smelling human emotions, Alia's hands that were skillful in mixing emotions with prepared food, Tai Bibi's alterable body odor, Shiva's powerful knees and midnight's children's healing touch, irresistibly beautiful face, fertile finger, and changeable shape of bodies.

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