

History As Art in Midnight's Children
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Abstract

Salman Rushdie is a committed artist who understands his responsibility towards society as a whole. Being the supporter of universalism, liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, democratic values, he advocates moral values with each work of art. He accepts that there is an intimate relation between art and ethics and no decent society can march ahead without following moral values. Gone are the days of anarchy and chaos as people of the world wish to lead a civilized life with full social, political and economic security. In *Midnight's Children* he condemns the communal riots that erupted between Indian and Pakistan just after partition. Millions of people of both the nations lost their lives due to fanaticism and results were disastrous. Had people followed ethical values, they would not have been killed by the rogues and supporters of fundamentalism. Nobody can ignore the blessings of peace and communal harmony. Why to give a free hand to Satan to do whatever he likes?

Key Words: Two world wars, Congress Party, Muslim League, West Pakistan & East Pakistan

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Introduction

In his novels Salman Rushdie asserts that ethical values help people immensely in coming out of agony and misery. Success and prosperity are everlasting when they have the foundation of right means. As a student of history Salman Rushdie studied the horrible results of two world wars. He was well acquainted with the bad results of Napoleon's hatred for neighboring nations. He knew that Stalin controlled Russia by force for more than thirty years and got his enemies killed secretly. He noticed the disastrous results of imperialistic policies of Hitler and Mussolini (1936-1945) and ultimately America dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945). So, Rushdie never wrote to support communal violence and hatred. He knows that violence and war don't solve problems of poor nations like India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh etc. and this he made clear in *Midnight's Children*, *Shalimar The Clown* and *Shame*. Each of these three novels makes his moral purpose clear.

As a matter of fact Salman Rushdie took the risk of his life by exposing the cruel dictators of Asia because he is supporter of the fundamental rights of people. Being a man of dynamic nature with a positive vision, he supports right knowledge, right conduct and decent ethical philosophy for social reconstruction and economic regeneration. He has always been prepared to pay every cost for the solution of basic economic problems of poverty, illiteracy, orthodoxy, rigidity and backwardness. Since he has seen the civilized life of Europe, he wants that India and Pakistan should make economic progress and provides jobs to their young men and women and solve the problem of unemployment. Let people lead a life of integrity and communal harmony.

While observing the life of Jammu & Kashmir, Lahore, Islamabad, Kabul, Dacca etc. he noticed that communal frenzy ruled the hearts of many greedy politicians who wanted to make money by all possible foul means and unfortunately many of them did succeed in their mission. In *Shame* he has exposed prostitution that has become an institution in Lahore and Karachi. In *Shalimar The Clown* he satirized the military officers who succeeded in raping the innocent girls of Jammu & Kashmir. On many occasions the army officers and the police officers found themselves helpless before selfish politicians. They noticed that many girls and married women were abducted and raped by the terrorists. Pakistan's government authorities failed to take any serious and practical step to abolish terrorists from their soil. Elections were conducted here by bullets and not ballots. Prime Ministers and the Presidents made money by cunning means and cheated the masses. Education of

the masses was ignored and neglected by these wicked fellows. Rushdie lamented the fact that his father migrated to Pakistan due to his love for Islam.

A lot of speeches are made in Pakistan's National Assembly to assure the members that steps are being taken to improve the economy of the country. The authorities deliver lectures in the public that bright days are not far away. But alas! Falls promises have been made as no large scale industries have been established in the country. It is not too much to remark that Pakistan has depended upon the American aid for many decades. Unfortunately, the Mollanas attach importance to rigid social system and forget the new developments in the fields of industry, science, technology, medicine and management. They fail to inculcate moral values in the minds of children and the results are disastrous. Ironically the rich citizens send their children to Europe for their higher education as there are no decent colleges and universities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Children of poor families fail to get proper education and training so essential for their survival. As a satirist Rushdie exposes the authorities who are responsible for this intellectual darkness, desolation, anarchy and chaos.

Nucleus

In *Midnight's Children*, *Shalimar The Clown* and *Shame* Rushdie boldly asserts that the principles of constitution are not followed in Pakistan. Elections are not fairly contested. People don't enjoy the benefits of fundamental rights. There is no clear cut division of powers between the centre and the states. People don't get fair justice as the lamp of justice is fully extinguished there. Lawyers twist the articles of law for selfish purpose. Bribery has become a permanent accepted fact in the system. No energy and support are provided to the just and honest officers. The sacrifices of Mohammad Ali Jinnah have been forgotten by the new generation of political leaders. Saying and doing are two different aspects of life. There is no second line of leadership in the country. At the top of everything, orders are dictated by the terrorists to the officers. Only the editors of two-three newspapers feel free to print the exact and correct news. Otherwise the editors flatter the leaders due to lack of security. After 1947 many Pak editors have been killed and the offenders have not been punished. The killers of Benazir Bhutto got scot free.

It is improper to argue that Rushdie is prejudiced against India. Since he took birth in Bombay, he always finds himself related emotionally with the Indian soil. It is true that he feels sad when India lost against China in 1962. Pt. Nehru felt emotionally hurt due to India's defeat in the war. Actually he never expected this cheating from Chau-En-Lai. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie describes the pictures

of deserted India (1962) due to the defeat. It was India's humiliation at the world level. One of the reasons for this defeat was that the country could not prepare itself for any untoward incident of this type. Due to poor economic resources Indian government could not buy latest weapons for her soldiers. But Rushdie highlights the glory of India when she helped West Pakistan getting freedom from East Pakistan and declaring itself as Bangladesh with the Indian support. Now India improved her economic and military resources in nine years (1962-1971) and faced Pakistan second time boldly. In the novel *Shame* Rushdie appreciates the steps taken by India to support the freedom of Bangladesh. Here the ego of Pak leaders and military dictators had been exposed by him.

With his superb skill Rushdie relates history with art, culture, literature, music, beauty, architecture, fine arts, etc. as *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *Shalimar The Clown* are not mere books of history. In the lengthy novel *Midnight's Children* he provokes many questions such as What were the expectations of Indian people after getting freedom? Could the Congress government satisfy all sections of society just after 1947? How did the cabinet tackle the problems of illiteracy, poverty, backwardness and rigidity? Why did the new authorities opt for democratic system of government? How could India maintain peaceful relations with Great Britain? When did the nation have its own constitution? How did the authorities maintain unity in diversity? How did India maintain friendly relations with her neighboring nations? Why did Pt. Nehru grant liberty of expression to all political parties? Was it not a difficult task to promise justice to every citizen of India? What did he feel about the future of Panchayat Raj in India? Were Indians really free in all walks of life after 1947? What was the fate of minorities in India after independence? Were the Directive Principles of State Policy followed in spirit? How did the Indian authorities maintain federal structure of the country? How were powers distributed among Centre and the States? Did India become powerful with the annexation of Princely States with the Centre? Why did India join U.N.O.? Was it a mistake of Pt. Nehru to refer the Kashmir issue to the U.N.O.? The readers of *Midnight's Children* have to analyze such questions while reading the novel as it is more than a novel. The reader does not find the love interest in the novel in the traditional way as it does not end with the ringing of marriage bells or with the death of hero or heroine. The mission of the artist is to join emotion with reason and also history with art.

As a first rate scholar Salman Rushdie admires the contribution of Indian intellectuals who sacrificed their life for the national freedom. Congress was basically established by the Britishers to create a group of Indian sycophants who may help

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the British authorities in England and India. But the members like Mrs. Annie Besant observed the miserable conditions of Indians in the beginning of 20th century and felt pity for them. Slowly and slowly Indian landlords and princes joined Congress Party and its annual sessions were arranged in the big cities of India to discuss the problems of Indians. In 1915 Gandhi ji noticed to his bewilderment that the members of Congress Party assembled for two days, enjoyed rich food and then departed without making any action plan for national freedom. Soon the purpose of Congress was decided and Moti Lal Nehru, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Vipin Pal, Balgangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Sarojini Naidu etc. became active in the party. Rushdie refers to the thoughts of such leaders in *Midnight's Children*. Then the author minutely observes the differences between the Congress leaders and members of Muslim League. Muslims were also divided among themselves as many rich Muslims were attached emotionally with Indian soil and had no interest in the formation of new nation in the name of Islam. They were happy as Indians as they had their agricultural land here.

Due to his interest in the political affairs of the country and the world Salman Rushdie refers to the Civil Disobedience Movement, Non-Cooperation Movement and then Quit India Movement of 1942 when British authorities working in India, realized that it was not safe to stay in India any longer. The affect of general massacre in Jallianwalla Bagh hurt the sentiments of the people. Gandhi came forward to revolt against Rowlett Act and Salt Tax Policy. The efforts of Sir Cripps failed to appeal the Indian leaders as they wanted only Swaraj without any limitations. Fortunately Lord Mountbatten reached India as the viceroy and wisely tackled the whole situation with love and sympathy. Two nation theories were followed and the British Geographer prepared the maps of new India and new Pakistan. Gandhi's efforts for united India failed and many Indian leaders accepted the Muslim League's proposal for the formation of Pakistan. Of course, people like Gandhi didn't give up their moral values and accepted the reality with a bitter heart. He was not prepared to adopt violent means to keep India united. Rushdie admires the efforts of Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel to unite princely states with India. Pt. Nehru and his supporters felt delighted on the night of 15th August 1947 when the Indian flag replaced the British flag in the Parliament. Now Indians were fully free to work for the bright future of India. Through Saleem the author narrates all these events of freedom struggle of India. The author asserts the fact that time proved to be a great factor in Indian politics and many unexpected things took place. He highlights the difference between optimism and pessimism when the country gets Independents.

In Book three of *Midnight's Children* Salman Rushdie narrates his experiences, emotions, feelings, passions, impressions etc. about new India after 1947 and his ideas become the source of his intellectual strength. The period of history (1947-1975) inspires him to develop the plot of the novel and create the interest of the readers in free India ³/₄ her achievements and failures. Saleem discusses various national and international issues with Buddha, Shiva and Muslim Friends and remains confused. All the time he remains conscious of his parents, family and experiences and inspite of pricks of conscience he joins the army of Pakistan. Indian government continues to implement the Five-year plans for the betterment of the country even after the defeat of 1962. Yet the defeat against China creates a strong feeling of nationalism in the hearts of people. Rushdie notices this factor and illustrates it in the third part of the novel.

Quite often Rushdie recollects his personal experiences and impressions about India as he is fully aware of the poverty and backwardness of the people of Pakistan. Yet the Pak authorities decided to attack upon India in 1965 and got defeated. Rushdie laments the situation how could the authorities decide to invite the expenses of war in such days of poverty? How could they shape the future of Pakistan with crooked means? A lot of soldiers had to face rough weather in the forest of Sunderbans and Saleem regrets for joining the Pakistan army. Here the author shares his personal experiences with the readers and *Midnight's Children* are aptly regarded the autobiography of the author to a great extent.

Many Americans and Britishers were not prepared to trust that India made rapid progress just after Independence. A lot of colleges, hospitals, roads, post offices, ports, factories etc. were built in twenty-five years. Banking system was developed to give a boost to national economy and Reserve Bank of India worked smoothly to take care of national economy. India had her own currency in 1957 and the Indian farmers were no more the slaves of feudal lords. Fair elections were conducted and T.V. was introduced in many cities of the country. India had her own foreign policy and the prestige of the country had improved due to her free judiciary and Parliamentary democracy. All these features of Indian democracy have been approved and appreciated by Salman Rushdie in the third Book of this novel. Yet he refers to the dark aspects of Indian economy Corruption in offices, poverty of the masses, social backwardness, rigidity and unemployment.

Finally Rushdie feels disgusted with the imposition of emergency in India in June 1975 by Indira Gandhi. She takes all political powers in her hand and pretends to be the preserver of democracy. Parliament is dissolved and all the major leaders

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of opposition parties are put behind the bars. There is an atmosphere of fear and horror in the whole country as the printing of newspapers remains suspended for nearly three weeks. Then the editors were ordered to admire emergency rule. New powers were given to the police officers of each district and family planning programme was introduced with force. Naturally certain communities raised their voice against her policies and yet the administrative officers used their powers freely to maintain discipline in the society. So many political leaders of Congress Party felt frustrated as powers were captured by five major political friends of Sanjay Gandhi. Rushdie, the supporter of democracy, condemns the policies of Indira Gandhi without bothering for her reactions. Of course, Indira Gandhi reacted badly against this novel as she was not in the habit of tolerating the criticism of her policies. Yet Rushdie ignored her criticism and didn't apologize for what he had written. As she lost support of the people in the general elections (1977) he felt happy. So, Rushdie has his personal story to narrate here and succeeds in his mission to a great extent.

In this novel Salman Rushdie appreciates the fundamentals of Indian culture and finds unity in diversity in India. People worship various gods and goddesses and respect the religious sentiments of her fellow beings in spite of minor differences. Muslims feel attached with Hindus and earn their bread by preparing various goods for Hindus. Both the communities survive in the same streets. Many Hindu scholars write poems and novels in Urdu. Many Muslims scholars make speeches on *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Puranas*, *The Gita* etc. Secondly, Indians learn classical music with interest. Thirdly, the Hindus get married in traditional manner and offer prayers to Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Lord Rama, Lord Krishna etc. They teach the fundamentals of ancient Indian Classics to their children and generally keep statues of gods in their homes. Holi, Dusshera and Diwali are celebrated with full enthusiasm. Of course, they have respect for Nature and pay due respect to air, water, fire, sky and the earth and regard them eternal. Most of them worship statues of gods and natural elements. Sanskrit is still regarded the language of gods. Yet the people of new generation learn English, Spanish, French, German and other foreign languages. At times they imitate the Western Civilization. But Rushdie does not hide the bitter truth that communal differences often lead to riots and disturb the normal life of the country. In this novel Lifafa Das became the victim of communal feelings but the mother of Saleem protected him at the nick of time. In Book one the author describes the communal violence that erupted in Punjab and Bengal just after Independence.

Dr. Nagender Singh Nathawat admires the influence of this novel upon other novels of 20th century and remarks:

This novel is about the Indian subcontinent between periods of 1915 to 1977. The dawn of independence and the imposition of emergency figure prominently in the novel. (MNSR 9)

He finds the mixture of fairy-tale, autobiography and history in this novel. Actually Salman Rushdie follows the opinion of V.S. Naipaul who asserted the need of 'fact fiction' in place of traditional love-story based novel.

Regarding hero of this novel Saleem Dr. Raju Kumar remarks:

Saleem Sinai is very conscious of his existence in the traditional and historical pattern of Indian setting. He has great respect for his great Indian tradition and he is preoccupied with his birth place. He is always in duality to search a right world to locate himself... Saleem Sinai's world covers not only India and Pakistan but also the events connected with Bangla Desh. (SR 35)

Conclusion

Thus, Salman Rushdie is aptly admired for his novel *Midnight's Children* as it made him popular in the whole world. Secondly, the narrator keeps the readers in his grip in spite of interpolated stories and episodic intensification. He has given round characters to the readers whom he had met in real life. He paints the actual life of the hills of Kashmir and the slums of Bombay and Delhi with real colors. Of course, *Midnight's Children* has got to be studied along with *Shame* and *Shalimar The Clown*.

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