

Creative Use of History in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

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Abstract

Since the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981, Salman Rushdie has become a phenomenal literary figure who has broken the contemporary literary impasse. In fact, *Midnight's Children* proved to be the tour de force for him in the literary world of India as well as of the whole world. Salman Rushdie treats the theme of history in *Midnight's Children* quite creatively by making the historical events connected with the lives of the protagonist Saleem and his family. The novel contains an official history that has been re-interpreted by the author creatively. Salman Rushdie does not make the monumental events of Indian history rather he uses those historical events creatively.

Midnight's Children is absolutely historical in the way there is a focus on the Emergency of the seventies as well as on the significant historical event of the massacre of JallianwalaBagh. And these great incidents of history have been creatively presented by Salman Rushdie. Emergency gets a fuller treatment in *Midnight's Children*. Emergency was imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Once again the author creatively uses the imposition of Emergency in the way it coincides with the pregnancy of Parvati representing the birth of the Janata Party.

The general elections of 1977 called by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi after the Emergency, also get mentioned in the novel. In these elections, Congress Party suffers a crushing defeat at the hands of the Janata Party. Salman Rushdie ends the novel on a pessimistic note in the way that Saleem mentions evils prevalent in the society and political corridors of all the three countries - India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Keywords

Literary impasse, monumental events, doctori-attache, paraphernalia, clandestine affair, telepathic communication, mottled history.

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In the creative works of fiction, most writers write about political history in which they present in detail, police crimes, the sufferings of the people of the country which is partitioned, the clashes based on racial discrimination, the maneuvering of elections, military coups, etc. They also delineate the misuse of power by the people who are at the helm of affairs. All these themes have been treated by the writers of historical fiction abundantly. And there has also been a great demand for such descriptions and presentations in literature. And most of the time, they have been successful in their creative depiction of history. They use the tools of historical fiction creatively in a systematic manner. For this, they have to rely on the collection of reliable data which is further used creatively by them in their works. Thus the creative use of history in this special genre of historical fiction has been proving its worth right from early days to the present. There are a number of literary works based on history and these works have got a tremendous success most of the time.

Salman Rushdie published his mega novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981 and since that time he has become a phenomenal literary figure who has broken the contemporary **literary impasse**. In fact, *Midnight's Children* has proved to be the *tour de force* for Salman Rushdie in the literary world of India as well as of the whole world. *The New York Review of Books* finds the text of *Midnight Children* as the most significant work in this generation of the English-speaking world. *New York Times* also writes that Salman Rushdie is a writer who is welcome to "world company", (Clark Blaise, *New York Times* 19 Apr. 1981)

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has started a new literary generation that has entirely changed the face of Indian writing in English. In this regard, Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paulo Piciucco opine:

The imaginative re-working of Indian history in a culturally hybrid environment, the innovative use of literary techniques...together with a supreme command of the English language and a genius for storytelling modeled on the hoary Indian narrative traditions and cultural practices, had established Midnight's Children as a trend-setter and classic for all times. (Studies in Indian Writing in English v)

Let us see how Salman Rushdie uses history creatively in *Midnight's Children*

The birth of the protagonist Saleem Sinai has been creatively designed by Salman Rushdie in such a way that Saleem enters the world exactly at the stroke of midnight when India gets its freedom i.e. midnight of 15th August 1947. Hence Saleem Sinai is of the same age as that of India after its independence. Like Saleem Sinai, a number of children are also born at the same time and a very powerful impression has been created by the author that all these children who are born between

12 a.m. and 1 p.m. have been born with special powers. According to Catherine Cundy who writes:

Midnight's Children anticipates Shame in terms of its level of engagement with the realities of political life and in particular the abuses attendant on the assumption of dictatorial power. (Cundy 37)

Salman Rushdie has presented the history in his mega novel in such a creative way that it has become almost a parody of the history of India. The novel contains an official history that has been re-interpreted by the author creatively. Salman Rushdie does not make the **monumental events** of Indian history, rather he uses those historical events creatively. Through the life of the protagonist Saleem, Salman Rushdie tries to define his own association with the history of India.

Saleem and Shiva are born on the stroke of midnight of 1947 and thus their lives are thus mysteriously “handcuffed” to history and in this way their destinies are a part and parcel of the country which has achieved its independence. When Saleem is born at that midnight time, his mother receives a letter from the newly appointed Prime Minister Pt. JawaharLal Nehru congratulates Saleem’s mother on the birth of her child on that auspicious hour of freedom of the country. In this way, the Prime Minister’s letter which is a creative idea on the part of the author becomes the symbol of the relation of Saleem’s destiny with the history of the country. Saleem comments:

Think of this; history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15th, 1947 – but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga, in which the cow of morality has been reduced to standing, teeteringly, on a single leg! (MC 269)

Midnight's Children is absolutely historical in the way there is a focus on the Emergency of the seventies as well as on the significant historical event of the massacre of JallianwalaBagh. When Adam Aziz who is Saleem’s grandfather, leaves Kashmir and reaches Amritsar while going to Agra, the incident of JallianwalaBagh takes place. Adam Aziz goes to the place so that he may utilize his services of medical knowledge. The description of the massacre given by Salman Rushdie is absolutely creative: Aziz penetrates the heart of the crowd, as the Brigadier R. E. Dyer arrives at the entrance to the alleyway, followed by fifty crack troops. He is the Martial Law Commander of Amritsar – an important man, after; the waxed tips of his mustache are rigid with importance. As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather’s nose. The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty-five to Dyer’s right and twenty-five to his left; and Adam Aziz ceases to concentrate on the events around him as the tickle

mounts to unbearable intensities. As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. 'Yaaaakh-thoooo!' he sneezes and falls forward, losing 'his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life. (MC 41)

The falling down of Aadam Aziz and scattering of all his paraphernalia in the following description is marvelous in its creative use:

His 'doctori-attache' flies open; bottles, liniment, and syringes scatter in the dust. He is scrabbling furiously at people's feet, trying to save his equipment before it is crushed. There are a nose-like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls on him. Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen on top of my grandfather. He becomes afraid for his back. The clasp of his bag is digging into his chest, inflicting upon it a bruise so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death... (MC 41)

The details of the firing by Brigadier Dyer's men who kill one thousand six hundred and fifty men while unnumbered people fall into the well to their death. However, there is an official version of the firing recorded in official books: 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. 'Good shooting,' Dyer tells his men, 'We have done a jolly good thing' (MC 41-42).

By presenting the massacre of JallianwalaBagh, Salman Rushdie expresses his rejection of the British ruler's act of inhuman crime. Sabrina Hassumani aptly opines:

The fact that Saleem's narration is not "pure" history, "pure" facts, points out the difficulty involved in labeling "history" as "factual" to begin with. History Rushdie demonstrates, is always an interpretation that depends on the subjective perspective of the interpreter. Thus, the "fact" is Brigadier Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on a political demonstration in JallianwalaBagh, and thousands of Indians were killed. *The colonizers viewed this as putting order to chaos; the colonized viewed it as a cold-blooded massacre of innocent victims. (16)*

In the novel, *Midnight's Children* Salman Rushdie presents the landmark dates of Indian history and every important historical date of India coincides with the happenings of important events in the life of Saleem. Salman Rushdie comments on the mental faculties of the children born on the midnight stroke. Saleem says:

So among midnight children were infants with powers of transmutation, flight, prophecy, and wizardry... Saleem and Shiva, Shiva and Saleem, nose and

knees and knees and nose...to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war...and to me, the greatest talent of all - the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men. (MC 277).

Salman Rushdie takes a jibe at the emergence of the Communist Party that won the elections of 1957. Here Saleem's connection with history has been presented through his mother who had a **clandestine affair** with her first husband Nadir Khan who is an active member of the Communist Party and is known as LalQasim, the Red. Salman Rushdie highlights the political activities that appear in the headlines of the different newspapers. The death of Aadam Aziz coincides with the sudden death of Pt. JawaharLal Nehru on 27th May, 1964. Saleem says:

One last fact: after the death of my grandfather, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fell ill and never recovered his health. This fatal sickness finally killed him on May 27th, 1964. (MC 387)

Salman Rushdie also presents the history of the Indian Government of the 1960s when after the death of Pt Nehru, the political situation becomes volatile and a bitter struggle for power erupts in the corridors of the government. Saleem describes:

My grandmother Naseem Aziz arrived in Pakistan in mid-1964, leaving behind an India in which Nehru's death had precipitated a bitter power struggle. Morarji Desai, the Finance Minister, and Jagjivan Ram, the most powerful of the untouchables, united in their determination to prevent the establishment of a Nehru dynasty; so Indira Gandhi denied the leadership. The new Prime Minister was LalBahadurShastri, another member of that generation of politicians who seemed to have been picked in immortality; in the case of Shastri, however, this was only Maya, illusion. (MC 454)

Salman Rushdie also discusses the crucial war between India and Pakistan. The war proves to be futile and results in the death of all the members of Saleem's family except his sister Jamila. Saleem comments:

Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth. In order to understand the recent history of our times, it is only necessary to examine the bombing pattern of that war with an analytical, unprejudiced eye. (MC 469)

Pakistan occupies an area of Kashmir and hostilities between these two nations become extremely bitter:

On the morning of September 23rd, the United Nations announced the end of hostilities between India and Pakistan. India had occupied less than 500 square

miles of Pakistani soil; Pakistan had conquered just 340 square miles of its Kashmiri dream. It was said that the ceasefire came because both sides had run out of ammunition, more or less simultaneously; ... (MC 477)

Salman Rushdie creatively installs the events from history in *Midnight's Children* and makes Saleem face them. He leaves for Pakistan along with his mother and sister in the hope that he will have nothing to do with the Indian history there, but he gets involved in the history of Pakistan. When he is deprived of his **telepathic communication** with children of midnight due to the presence of the Pakistani frontier administration, he gets help from his uncle Zulfikar who is a General there. General Zulfikar allows him to witness the surreptitious meetings leading to the military coup which was to be led by Ayub Khan. Saleem describes the historical event of military coup in Pakistan when the president of Pakistan has been overthrown and exiled:

Midnight. Rawalpindi speeding past us at seventy m.p.h. Motorcycles in front of us beside us behind us. 'Where are we going Zulfy – uncle?' Wait and see. Black smoked-windowed limousine pausing at darkened house. Sentries guard the door with crossed rifles; which part, to let us through. I am marching at my uncle's side, in step, through half-lit corridors; until we burst into a dark room with a shaft of moonlight spotlighting a four-poster bed... There is a man waking up, startled, what the hell is going... 'Shut up,' my uncle says, superfluously. 'Come with us.' ... My uncle's pistol is extracted from his mouth. 'Turn. Quick march!' ...

The man cries, 'For God's sake be careful; that thing has the safety off!' (MC 404-5)

Emergency gets a fuller treatment in *Midnight's Children*. Emergency was imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Once again the author creatively uses the imposition of Emergency in the way it coincides with the pregnancy of Parvati representing the birth of the Janata Party.

Thirteen days' labor of Parvati represents the days during which Allahabad High Court's judgment against Mrs. Indira Gandhi was pursued and consequently, she was found guilty of malpractices in the elections of 1971:

History-books newspapers, radio programs tell us that at two p.m. on June 12th, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty, by Judge Jag Mohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court, of two counts of campaign malpractice during the election campaign of 1971; what has never previously been revealed is that it was at precisely two p.m. that Parvati-the-witch (now Layla Sinai) became sure she had entered labor. (MC 582)

Indira Gandhi did not resign instantly from the post of prime minister but took exactly thirteen days for her resignation. Another creative use of history can be seen in the birth of Parvati's son. She gives birth to her son at the midnight of 25th June, 1975, the day when Indira had imposed the Emergency rule. Mrs. Indira Gandhi behaves just like the Mughal emperors. Saleem says:

When the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers, I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air...in that city which was littered with the phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last, pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism. (MC 592)

Salman Rushdie comments on the motive of the imposition of the Emergency through Saleem in the following words:

No, the Emergency had a black part as well as a white, and here is the secret which has lain concealed for too long beneath the mask of those stifled days: the truest, deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight. (MC 597)

The public kept silent against this autocratic misuse of power by the then Congress Government. This silence of the people has been compared to the silence of the baby born to Parvati. During the Emergency, people have inflicted injuries, politicians of opposition parties were put behind the bar. All these acts are creatively presented to represent the infliction of untreated tuberculosis which is only after the Emergency that the baby Aadam is cured of tuberculosis.

Saleem finds his autobiography among those who have been subjected to another victimization by the Congress Government when it starts the mass sterilization campaign initiated by Sanjay Gandhi. Saleem summarizes the role of Mrs. Gandhi family during the Emergency in the following words:

Sanjay Gandhi, and his ex-model wife Menaka, were prominent during the Emergency. The Sanjay Youth Movement was particularly effective in the sterilization campaign.

I have included this somewhat elementary summary just in case you had failed to realize that the Prime Minister of India was, in 1975, fifteen years a widow. Or (because the capital letter may be of use): a Widow.

Yes, Padma: Mother Indira really had it in for me. (MC 588)

The general elections of 1977 called by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi also get mentioned in the novel. Saleem compares Mrs. Indira Gandhi with

a 'Widow'. In these elections, Congress Party suffers a crushing defeat at the hands of the Janata Party. However, Salman Rushdie believes that Janata Party may not be capable to rule the country. Saleem remarks:

I discovered that on January 18th...the Widow...the Prime Minister had, to the astonishment of all, called a general election....But on that day, I knew nothing about her crushing defeat, nor about burning files; it was only later that I learned how the tattered hopes of the nation had been placed in the custody of an ancient dotard who ate pistachios and cashew and daily took a glass of 'his own water'. Urine-drinkers had come to power. The Janata Party, with one of its leaders trapped in a kidney machine, did not seem to me (when I heard about it) to represent a new dawn; but maybe I'd managed to cure myself of the optimism virus at last...At any rate, I've had – I had had, on that March day – enough, more than enough of politics. (MC 616)

Salman Rushdie ends the novel on a pessimistic note in the way that Saleem mentions evils prevalent in the society and political corridors of all the three countries - India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh:

I hear lies being spoken in the night, anything you want to be your kin is, the greatest lie of all, cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, a bag of bones falling down down down, just as once at Jallianwala, but Dyer seems not to be present today, no Mercurochrome, only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons... Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both master and victims of their times...(MC 647)

Thus the author ends the novel with a cynical and scathing comment on the fragmentation of the country. Salman Rushdie creatively delineates a **mottled history** of India that has become a decentered country.

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