

Magic Realism as Postcolonial Narrative in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children'

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Abstract

*Magic realism is a synthesis of the literal and the metaphorical. The two irreconcilable worlds artistically interweave the fantastic and the real into a quasi surrealist art form. Such an art form allows the writer to enter into the language of colonial discourse effortlessly through oppositional narratives. It reflects the act of colonization and the process of decolonization through a language of binarial oppositions. Reflecting upon the 'metaphysical clash' that the imperial power affords, magic realism offers a counter narrative brings into play the possible hybrid positions and situations in a narrative form. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a magic realist tale, a poignant amalgam of real and the magic. He brings together the fairy tales and postcolonial experiences together symbolizing the deterioration of imagination, experience and identity, each relying upon each other to make the characters whole and to mirror the process of making of a nation. History and fiction share common space of origin, the space of an emergent hybridity and the position from which the narrator embarks upon the postcolonial narrative. This paper is an attempt to analyze Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a magic realist postcolonial narrative.*

Key Words

Magic realism, postcolonial, narrative, realism, fantasy.

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The term 'Magic realism' was first used by Franz Roh, a German art critic, to counter mark Expressionism. "Expressionism shows us an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects" (Roh 16). However, magic realism became "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha 6-7). Wendy B. Faris attributes five key features of magic realism: a) contain "irreducible element of magic" b) "the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world" c) presentation of irreconcilable narratives d) "narrative merges different realms" e) contests the fixed "ideas about time, space, and identity" (167-73). Magic realism is an oxymoronic term suggestive of realism and fantasy. It incorporates magical episodes into a realistic narrative. The oppositional narrative works in the direction of fashioning an imagined world different from each other. It makes possible the synthesis and coexistence of irreconcilable worlds. "Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts, and complex tangled plots" (Murfi & Ray 142). It is a quasi-surrealistic art form. The language of the irreconcilable narrative is a discontinuous dialectic, allowing no transference from one form to the other, creating "disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences" (Slemon 11). Within the postcolonial discourse such a language reflects "the act of colonization, whatever its precise form, initiates a kind of double vision or "metaphysical clash" within the colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population" (Slemon 11). Magic realist narrative, in such a socio-cultural context, reiterates a dialectical dispute between the accepted codes and the fantasized codes. The narratives mirror the social relations of the postcolonial in at least three possible manners:

The first involves the representation of a kind of transcendent or transformational regionalism so that the site of the text, though described in familiar and local terms, becomes a metonymy of the post-colonial culture as a whole. The second is the foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath. And the third involves the thematic foregrounding of those gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the text's disjunctive language of narration. (Slemon 12-3)

Magic realist narrative as postcolonial discourse enters into a "metaphysical clash" with history illustrating a conversation between the imbibed and privileged notions of imperial history and the subjugated voices within the colonial process. Such a discourse is a "re-visioning" procedure affirmatively envisioning the renovation and restoration of reality.

Magic realism as postcolonial discourse offers “a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (Slemon 21).

Midnight's Children indicate a poignant amalgamic relationship between reality and fiction. The first person introductory narrative at the beginning of the novel demonstrates the realistic emphasis that is laid on “I was born...once upon a time,” a typical nineteenth century realist narrative that anticipates fantasy. Merivale observes: “In its multiplied fantasies, its introductions of the supernatural into the everyday, its haunting and its “traffic of the dead,” its characters fatally crushed by their obsessions, and above all in its apocalyptic vision of the extinction of a family from the earth, standing synecdochically, at its conclusion....” (Merivale 330). The graphic-reflective sequence of adjectives “actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically, and passively-literally, I inextricably intertwined with my world” (Rushdie 272) explicate the possibilities of a complex magic realist narrative world. The voice of the real is heard through the fantastic in *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie brings in magical events integrated from fairy tales, folk tales and myths which assume normality. No one discards the story of the boatman Tai who claims: “I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die...I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir” (Rushdie 11). Tai Bibi maintains to have “possessed a mastery over her glands so total that she could alter her bodily odors to match those of anyone on earth” (Rushdie 365). Cooks Coalesces emotions with food to bring out definite emotional and physical consequences. The Midnight Children's Conference is a key magic realist trait. 1001 children were born on August 17, 1947 and 581 survived.

Rushdie's blend of reality and fantasy markedly has an Indian flavor as the characters are embedded with the existing sociopolitical disarray yet own the supernatural powers. 581 reflect the number of members in Indian parliament and 1001 can be alluded to the *Arabian Nights*, an amalgamation of Arabian literature (fantasy) and Indian politics (reality)? All children who were born close to midnight possess supernatural powers. They can walk through mirrors, proliferate fish, turn into werewolves, alter their size, convert man into woman, impose abrasions with words, consume metal and fly soaring like a bird.

The magic of *Midnight's Children* exemplified through hyperbolic narrative of Rushdie about the children and their supernatural abilities: “at Gwalior they have seen the ghost of the Rani of Jhansi, rakshasas have been many-headed like Ravana, doing things to women and pulling down trees with one finger” (Rushdie 245). “Imperialistic powers

deprived the colonized people not only of their territories and wealth but also of their imagination" (Durix 187). In Deleuzian terms these children embody a "radical deterritorialization" of identity by becoming *other*.

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come...each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude" (Rushdie 383).

The make believe stories of Saleem are maintained to be believed but difficult to fathom. The gift of telepathy can be recognized as a supernatural signifier of the objective reality of existing Indian society which makes its impression of the individual psyche. Saleem's telepathy indicates the "polyglot-frenzy" marked with "the inner monologues of all the teeming millions" (Rushdie 168). The telepathic gift that allows Saleem to correspond with the thousand and one children and to understand the mind around him reflects the magic realistic element. Saleem who realizes his telepathic skills has been smacked half deaf as a return to telling to his family. As he hits his head, he learns his knack to communicate with the 580 children.

Slemon observes that "Magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of borders and centres, and to work towards destabilizing their fixity" (Rushdie 13). The "Eastern Western" cinema Rashid, the rickshaw boy chews over is an ironic hybrid of Hollywood film making and Hindu culture, a critique of Western cinematic influence on Indian culture. *Midnight's Children* accentuates its concurrence of two customary irreconcilable frameworks. Episodes in the novel ascribe to a 'meta' world and to a historical narrative built on verisimilitude, "yet much that occurs is frankly fantastic, involving superpowers, a divinely mandated destiny, and a wildly implausible personal connection to the events of history" (Kortenaar 17). Embarking upon the formulaic East-West polarity, Rushdie typifies the substantiation of Indian spirituality versus Western worldliness. Amina is wedged between a progressive father and a superstitious mother yet testifies, "this is still India" (Rushdie 100). Her father believes that "the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo and all things magical would never be broken in India" (Rushdie 67). This binary is further strengthened by Aziz, a doctor educated in the West and Tai, the oral story-teller: "Tai-for-changelessness opposed to Adam for progress" (Rushdie 107).

Magic realism symbolizes the two “modes of connection” that connects Saleem to the nation, the “literal” and the “metaphorical” (Rushdie 232). “Characters can only exist, and the author can only create them, because they do not perceive but have passed into the landscape and are themselves part of the compound sensations...we are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 169). The writer meets reality to disclose the inexplicable. “For Rushdie, reality is not simply the hard facts visible in the world; rather, it is also the “metaphorical content” that can be found here (i.e., the ideas, thoughts, concepts, theories, programs, hopes, and dreams that human beings have)” (Schurer 44). “Anything you want to be, you can be: You can be just what all you want” (Rushdie 127). Reality is viewpoint where one enters into a dialectical dialogic with time and space. “Reality is question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems—but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible” (Rushdie 165). Rushdie artistically weaves the challenge of traversing from the literal to the metaphorical in the following passage:

Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view; they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of modernizing, twentieth century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind (Rushdie 230).

Rushdie infuses a certain subversive colonist discourse in his story. Rushdie merges the past of the Indian culture with the existing multiculturalism. Magic realistic elements affirm Indian tradition of oral amusement. The cultural-identity obsessive Saleem caught within the traditional fascination for the Indian literary works where history turns mythic and the good-evil dualism that Saleem lingers by is an intense instance of postcolonial quest. Saleem, the narrator's destiny is associated closely with India which allows us to read the novel as a national allegory. His tarnished face is compared with Indian map, his elephantine nose suggestive of Lord Ganesha's nose. His story is self-directed and often defective. A protract correspondence is set between pickle making and the procedure of historiography. The chutnification of historical reminiscences conserves but alters the state of things. Padma is a stereotypical rural Indian woman and a parody of Mother

India. The concept of nation is entrenched in his fabulatory and unattainable narrative. Rushdie envisions a fresh pluralist and secular India at an allegorical level embedded in the *Midnight's Children*. Each one carrying visions like an organized industrial society, where gender no longer matter, humans and nature peacefully cohabit and transportation becomes is not a problem. The reflective cultural heterogeneity caused by the historical deposition effected by colonialism is mirrored in the magical realistic technique through a critical interaction of the decolonizing process offering alternative possibilities in the construction of the Other breaking the Europcentric universalist ideals.

Midnight's Children illustrates the struggles in the making of a nation. "It is ostensibly and undeniably anchored in the historical and the political, a novel about individual and collective national identity" (Aldea 57). The novel also exemplifies a search for identity, personal and collective, that is infused by the fantastic. It explains us "how to make sense of the world by foregrounding the commonality of the processes of making history and fiction as human constructs" (Aldea 57). Thus within the magic realist is the making of, what Linda Hutcheon names, a "historiographic metafiction. *Midnight's Children* demonstrates the making of a historiographic metafiction corresponding to the history of India both with the personal history of Saleem Sinai and with the history of the making of a decolonized hybrid India. The personal and national identity can be seen as a narrativization of the postcolonial attempt to discard the fixation of any identities.

Eva Aldea finds in "the way it attempts to 'contain' the whole subcontinent and its cultural hybridity, its carvinalesque stule, the heterogeneity of its language and its syncretization of the mythical and the historical are all seen as ways of expressing the hybridity, multiplicity, and syncretism of the reality of the postcolonial situation" (Aldea 57). The irreducible in the hybrid form of magic realism alienate the foundation of the influence of realism paving way for fresh forms of discourse that reflect alternative ways of being to materialize. "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (Bhabha 112-14).

The whole process is captivated with the presentation of hyperbole, melodrama, parody and fantasy in a self-reflective mode referring to the imperialistic forces from the worth of the subjective over the other. History and fiction, within this postcolonial narrative, share a common origin. "History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's

unreliable narration might be, I believe, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to 'read' the world" (Rushdie 25).

Saleem speaks of the "national longing for form" (Rushdie 191). India's yearning for form is a typical example of decolonizing procedure that associates not of the function of Indianness but of nationhood.

A nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; a mythical land, a country which could never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream (Rushdie 129-30).

"*Midnight's Children* proclaims palimpsestism as a form of archaeological knowledge far more befitting the case of India than the lockstep of syncretistic logic and its favoured mode of enquiry—the syllogism" (Hart 7-8). The process of decolonization summons both the myth and history, in literary terms, the magic and realism. Myth and history or magic and realism in *Midnight's Children* are reciprocally constitutive building within the framework of Indian and the modern. He merges combines within the postcolonial hybrid the thought of the other, the thought of the nation. "Rushdie's form of magical realism is one which mixes the old 'realistic' plot of external action, not only in time, but in the exaggerated specific time which is history, with the modernist sense of a moral internal action, or the exaggeratedly unreal action of memory and dream" (Crane 187).

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