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SALEEM AS AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR; A POST MODERNISTIC APPROACH IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract

Midnight's Children is categorized in a category of fiction known as magic realism. *Midnight's Children* pursues a technique that reminds you of Gabriel Marquez's style in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Midnight's Children* bring to mind another fictional genre of Metafiction. The 19 century fiction worked hard at constructing verisimilitude and somehow mimetic realism came to be the customary by which other novels were evaluated. Metafiction exposes the tricks used by writers and it illustrates that fiction forms its own autotelic cosmos that does not communicate to anything in the real world. Not like the writer of realist fiction, metafiction does not pretend to produce a delusion of truth. At the very onset, Saleem Sinai creates an ambience like an *Arabian Nights* and insists that he has many stories to inform. Saleem is the *Sutradhar* who narrates his story to Padma who is the Nati. These stories as explained by as Saleem have a way of leaking into one another. Rushdie starts off with the convention of beginnings and begins with the birth of the hero but before his birth and by the time he gets back to the original story of Saleem's birth we can see the narrator straying into numerous deviation, digressions and interruptions and herein the readers also take a distinctive delight in the embedded tales. This is how Rushdie get us to listen to the stories which we did not set out to hear initially. The narration of the story becomes a theme in *Midnight's Children* like all metafiction. Rushdie does this to ridicule at the conventions of nineteenth century realism. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem warns us that he is going to tell a tale that is "a strange commingling of the real and the improbable", which spins the real illusory division topsy turvy to enquire the probability decisive factor of fiction. *Midnight's Children's* weird juxtaposition of history and fiction where historical facts coincide with the life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai produces a distinctive permutation. Rushdie plays with historical events and conventions to depict them to be as "unreal", as fictive as things that fiction refers to.

Keywords: Narrative, Unreliable, Metafiction, History and Fiction.

Wayne C. Booth in his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* has used the term Unreliable or fallible in early 1960s. Booth asserts that "I have called narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not"(158). In *Midnight's Children* Saleem is found not giving the precise information related to the official history of India and digressing from the facts and this way we find him taking the route of an unreliable narrator. Other than W C Booth, M. H Abrams also has expressed his concern on the usage of the term unreliable narrator, he points out that "The fallible or unreliable is one whose perception, interpretation and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates does not coincide with the reader to share" (Abrams 244).

Fiction and history are both different kinds of stories, it is not hard to hold that reality also could be a made up thing. This notion of reality as being made up by the spectator or observer is called the constructivist view of the universe. Postmodern fiction demonstrates us that reality itself is a fictional of our own making. Usually we also organize our lives and create our own reality in the way Saleem constructs the novel by choosing and organizing events that make him the hero. Rushdie was eager to know how humans filter reality. We all retain information things in our mind that we choose to remember. Memory plays a vital role in keeping all the good ones and flashing out all the unpleasant happenings into the background. We must realize that postmodernism is uniquely a Western phenomenon which emerged out of either as a response or as an expansion of the Western modernity. On the contrary Postmodern Western fiction mirrors and is fashioned by the postmodernist crisis in the West.

Rushdie and his character Saleem have much in common that they have been befuddled with one another. Born in the year of India's independence both are *Midnight's Children*. Both Rushdie and Saleem share a Kashmiri ancestry and upper class anglicized nurture, Saleem pursues Rushdie's way from Peddar Road to Pakistan though the conditions might have been different. Most First novels are assumed to be autobiographical like DH Lawrence's

Sons and Lovers, George Eliot's *Silas Mariner* and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* have too much and speak of the novelist.

Although the novel refutes to have common distinctiveness between fiction and fact, critics manage to elucidate proceedings in the novel in the view of related actions in the author's life. Something similar can be noticed in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The bafflement of fiction with fact had continued to plague Rushdie unfortunately. Rushdie was held responsible for all Saleem's gaffe and views. Rushdie was once inquired by his reader that if he was going to use the Hindu customs and society in his story and would he go that extra mile to look for them. Rushdie's reader were predominantly exasperated by what they supposed was an impertinent employment of Hindu customs and traditions. Most of these oppositions came from viewing the novel as a definitive history of India and a very few readers realized that his use of first person narration was also a part of his narrative stratagem. Writers usually create a character who is their mouthpiece but this was not true with Saleem as Saleem's pompous discourse and illusions were as much subject and topic to the author's irony as that of the reader's mockery. In "*Errata: Or, Unreliable Narration in Midnight's Children*", Rushdie gave clarifications to his readers by giving an exhaustive reference to all the errors he was supposed to have made including getting his dates, information and statistics incorrect. In doing so he owned up to some of the inadvertent mistakes he had committed in the novel but at the very same time he admonishes his readers that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator and he also points out that *Midnight's Children* was far from being a trustworthy guide to the narration of post-independence India and moves on further to explain his method. Simultaneously Salman explains why he felt the need to introduce mistakes in an originally error free passages. Rushdie clarified that while writing the novel it probably turned out to be different from what he had set out to write. Rushdie wanted to write about the novel of memory but in the meantime he got interested in the process of filtration and the role that is played by the filters in remembering. Rushdie explains how his subject had

changed and instead of representing the lost time facts he focussed on the remake of the past to facilitate his present intention by means of memory as a tool.

As we know that history deals with facts while novels deal with fiction. But historical fiction is a genre that uses past occurrences and figures as a background for a fictionalized narrative. Rushdie takes up the account of post independent India which ends in the Emergency as his core subject. The history of India runs corresponding to the life of the raconteur Saleem ensuing in a distinctive pairing of the personal with the public. When Rushdie was apprised of the errors in his depiction of history, he took refuge in the contrivance of the unreliable narrator. Rushdie introduces errors because he was more concerned with the process of history creation than showcasing the dissimilarity between fiction and history. In *Midnight's Children*, the remembered truth is juxtaposed against recorded truth and the validity of the former is established by Rushdie. Saleem to a certain extent gets a few facts wrong. Here also Rushdie has an explanation as he wanted to make a distinction between truth and remembered truth. Rushdie takes us into the midst of the raging debates in historiography as to what is the position of truth in history and what role and value memory has in the telling of history. In its attempt to make history writing closer to science, Western history has placed an undue stress on verifiable truth since the 19th century. Oral history continues by the reason of memory, which functions by selecting, distorting and adding which would be imprecise when compared to scientific history. However Rushdie points out that the so-called objective history also entails a selection and illustration of events in a way that distorts and modifies them. This way Rushdie takes us through the process of history making. Similarly Saleem's method also provides us with a notion of how facts may not only be chosen to fit a definite theory but also distorted to endorse certain interests. Saleem's mistakes unveil the design of written history to the readers as how certain aspects and facts favourable to certain groups are chosen and approved/accepted as the history of the whole society. Rushdie illustrates that unlike his novel

which visibly divulges how history is made; quite often we find official histories conceal the fact that they are also stories. This is evenly true with regards to the way human beings systematize and organize their lives. Human beings also like Saleem use the logic of memory to recreate their pasts. Obviously, in recollecting things they screen out the unlikable and distasteful while retain their happy and cheerful memories and in doing so there is definitely some amount of distortion. Rushdie is accentuating the fact that remembered truth is as legitimate and valid as literate truth and that each one has the right to present their own version of truth.

As quoted in Abrams M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 8th Ed, one of the critics Hayden White goes on to say that the narrative put up by historians majorly focuses on imposition of events rather than mere representation of facts. As a modus operandi he may use events which didn't happen in history to create some confusion for its viewers. This way the idea that is levied on or imposed on text may sound exactly as unreliable. *Midnight's Children* is also one novel wherein the writer has used the history of India but according to his own fashion, imagination and as per his own schema. On the other hand a clear distinction has been sorted out by Emile Benveniste while explaining about the difference between history and discourse states that "in history events that happened in the past are reported "objectively" as facts. The job of the narrator is to record them as objectively as he can. In "discourse" however, events are reported as if they are happening here and now, and the narrator's job is to persuade the reader to share his view of the events with him." (206 -07).

Another aspect of the postmodern fiction is the point wherein Saleem has arguably been pointed by most of the critics for being a cognisant and self reflexive narrator. This we can find at many places in the novel when Saleem tries divulging his gaffe. He admits ". . . the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; [. . .] I had entered into the illusion of the artist,"(*Midnight's Children* 241). This complements to the fact that he was narrating the history according to his whims and fancies and in a way creating his own imaginative world:

Reality is a question of perspective; more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, setting at first in the back row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that illusion itself is reality . . . (Midnight's Children 229)

To support this post modernistic approach in the novel, few critics have avouched and pointed out that Rushdie has exploited this for his own interest.

Juliet Myres opines that “ Rushdie exploits the ability of postmodern fiction to draw on innumerable fictional and factual sources as a means of representing the world” (67). Similarly Malcolm Bradbury, He points out that, “ It was a fictional marvelously and perfectly familiar with the modern and postmodern experiment of the novel a book self – conscious about its being a novel, a work of an author exploring the role of author and storyteller with absolute narrative command of master” (360).

In addition to this, Linda Hutcheon highlights *Midnight's Children* a postmodern novel in which, “the stress is in the act of de – naturalizing documents in both historical and fictional writing” (83). Hutcheon adds that “the novel talks about how the documents can do longer pretend a transparent means to reveal past events. The historians never seize events directly and entirely but rather incompletely and only through the texts like novel itself” (23). The focus perhaps is towards the narrative skill and Saleem is quite noticeable about it “ . . . there are so many stories to tell , too many ,such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense and improbable and mundane! I have been swallower of lives” (*Midnight's Children* 4).

We may come up with many reasons behind Salman Rushdie's usage of unreliable narration. It could be because of a person's incapacity, predisposition or partial acquaintance towards area under discussion. Jonathan Culler opines, “Unreliable [narrative] can result from limitation of

point of view-when we gain a sense that consciousness through which focalization occurs is unable or unwilling to understand the events”(Literary Theory 90).

Rushdie adds that all these errors are speckled as an admonition to the readers that Saleem is not to be taken at his word. The Ganesha error for instance is calculated and intended to deflate his pretentiousness and pomposity. Bearing in mind that Saleem is bragging about his acquaintance of Hindu systems and beliefs, his monumental mistakes and inaccuracy depicts that he is not to be trusted. Chiefly evident is the mistake that we found on the very first page regarding Valmiki Vyasa confusion as he mentions that it is Lord Ganesha who sat at the feet of Valmiki and took down the Ramayana but in actuality it was Vyasa who dictated Mahabharata to Lord Ganesha.

Saleem is not a disconnected or unemotional observer is what Rushdie wants to tell us. He projects events in a certain manner with vested interest and awareness to make himself become visible as the hero of the story. While commenting on the evolution of Bombay city, Saleem tells us that the goddess Mumbadevi known as the city's patron has fallen out of favour with contemporary Bombayites: “The calendar of festivals reveals her decline ... Where is Mumbadevi's day?” (*Midnight's Children* 123). Image of Bombay has been tweaked “Our Bombay : it looks like a hand but it's really a mouth, always open, always hungry, swallowing food and talents from everywhere else in India .A glamorous leech, producing nothing except films bush –shirts Fish . . . in the aftermath of Partition. (*Midnight's Children* 172)

On the contrary if we look at the calendar of festivals it absolutely includes a Mumbadevi Day except Saleem's. In another series of error we hear about Lata Mangeshkar singing on All-India Radio as early as 1946. It seems Saleem is not aware of the fact that it was General Sam Manekshaw who accepted the surrender of Tiger Niazi, the Pakistani army-officer at the end of the Bangladesh War. In another event Saleem admits they were carried out by a giant tidal wave while escaping the sunderbans but at the very same time he contradicts his own

claims and mentions about the weather forecast report which never reported about the tidal wave in that part of the country.

Subsequently we can find Saleem admitting that he has started to lose grip on his memory “ it occurs to me that I have made another error- that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after my tenth birthday, but although I’ve racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly to alter the sequence of events. This is worrying. I don’t know what’s gone wrong” (*Midnight’s Children* 222). Rushdie acknowledges that the novel also contain a few mistakes that are his as well as of Saleem’s. One is to be found in the description of the Amritsar massacre, during which Rushdie have Saleem say that Dyer had entered the Jallianwallah Bagh compound followed by 'fifty white troops'. The truth is that there were fifty troops, but they weren't white. When Rushdie first found out these errors he was upset and tried to have it corrected. But now he was not so sure, the mistakes appeared more and more like Saleem's; its wrongness feels right. Simultaneously the small errors in the text such as the wrong dates of important events including the date of Gandhi's assassination are clues indicating that Saleem is capable of consciously distorting facts. Saleem's life from his birth to his near death-like condition is meant to parallel the journey of free India from an optimistic nation to a comatose, submissive one.

Rushdie draws our attention to another postmodern technique - Saleem’s filters play a great role in the design of the novel. He relates the pattern of the novel to Saleem's need and urge to write himself, to imbue and permeate his life with some meaning and sense. In order to give himself a central role, Saleem figures out the material according to the writer. There are more than a few examples of Saleem ‘cutting history to suit himself’. Each noteworthy happening in post independence India’s history corresponds and coincide with the life of the protagonist, for the most significant part being his birth. Aadam Aziz, Saleem’s grandfather inadvertently loses his way in Amritsar into the Jalianwallah Bagh tragedy. Saleem’s father Ahmed Sinai in Delhi is seized to ransom by the Hindu arsonists while in a communal riot Saleem’s mother

Mumtaz (Amina Sinai) holds the centre stage. With Saleem’s birth we see Nehruji announcing the birth of the nation. Saleem is about to plan the strategy and tactics for the 1965 war; he is also determined and packed off to actively participate in the Bangladesh war. During the slum clearance campaign and in the wake of the Emergency Saleem is detained and forced to undergo sterilization. This way one comes across many examples related to the events. These are designed and intended as hints, evidence, clues and as indications that Saleem is able to manage distortions and misinterpretations both great and small.

Post modern technique of Fragmentation, migrancy and memory feature in *Midnight's Children* in an important way. In Rushdie’s article "Reclaiming a City and a History" (1984), he states that when a migrant writer tries to unlock the gates of the past as he attempted in *Midnight's Children*, he found himself writing a novel of and about memory, and for such reasons he made Saleem an unreliable narrator. Saleem makes mistakes of memory and his visualization which is influenced by his personality and conditions is fragmentary and patchy. Rushdie expresses that no matter how firmly an Indian writer tries to write about India genuinely he can't as he is residing outside and is dealing with a reality whose remains have been irreversibly misplaced. Damaged reality and the reconstruction of a whole reality which has been lost are Rushdie’s major apprehensions as an expatriate. Saleem grows up witnessing reality through a perforated sheet and on denial of information Saleem resorts himself to an alternative method of cognition or knowing through Memory’s truth: “Well then I must content myself with shreds and scraps: as I wrote centuries ago, the trick is to fill in the gaps guided by the few clues one is given....by the other remaining shards of the past lingering in my ransacked memory - vaults . . .” (*Midnight's Children* 507).

While writing his novel of memory, Saleem makes judicious use of the images of fragmentation: “Child of an unknown union, I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stronger talents” (*Midnight’s Children* 291). Memory acts as a guarantee to his lost childhood being. Memory’s

truth teaches Saleem who he was and is. Saleem has to rely deeply on his memories as he did not have anyone trustworthy so he arrives at a juncture where memory though "it select, eliminates, alters, exaggerate, minimizes glorifies and vilifies also" is more dependable than "someone else's" version (Midnight's Children 253). Memory helps him put together the fragments from the past that migrancy had taken away from him. The not so true and rather fake memory here modifies the actual account of description into an unpredictable one. M H Abrams in this context points out, "Point of view signifies the way a story gets told –the mode (modes) established by an author by means of which the is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting and events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction." (Abrams 240). Rushdie has used first person point of view in the novel and Saleem's memory here acts as an important aspect of the narrative. David Gallo opines that representation of memory doesn't simply refers to the recording of the past but in actuality it takes into account of the deliberate consolidation of the retrieved information and other pertinent details in effort to make sense of the pastness of the past.

Looking at the depiction of the nation's history and its association with its cultural myth and background it appears to many critics a post colonial novel. Timothy Brennan suggests that "For all its patches politics in the storyline, Midnight's Children filters day to day controversy through the medium of Indian mythology, there by reversing the direction of most Indian nationalist fiction, which relies on a history with an appropriate solemn attachment to folklore (110)."

Elleke Boehmer says that " Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children comprises a medley of Images and stories drawn from Indian myth, legend, film , history, bazaar culture and conventions of pickle-making images which separately and together are made to correlate with national self –perception Indian itself develops into a complex figure for the plenitude of India." (198 -99)

Discussions around postmodernism usually centres upon narrative and this obviously presents a corresponding association between work of fiction

and postmodernism and many illustrations of postmodernism reflect in the novel form. Postmodernism and novel can be regarded as a discourse of oppositional type. Postmodernism revolves around different aspects of representation and the ways in which we represent it in order to come to terms with reality.

Rather it could be glanced that the postmodernist novel dwells more on novel part as it gives way to different dimensions other than its close resemblance to its association with the past. "The novelist cannot legitimately or successfully embody present day reality in exhausted forms. . . . Present day reality is changing rapidly, it always has done, but for each generation it appears to be speeding up. Novelists have to evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less contain an ever changing reality. (Johnson 17)

J.F. Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* opines that "all forms of representation rely upon narrative in order to validate themselves, and it could be said that all knowledge is primarily narrative as, no matter their medium, all artistic and cultural representations require some meta narrative to explain, validate or justify them (7)."

Point of view and its manifestations is another post modernistic context. Gerard Genette says that the first person pronoun can be used by the narrator to assign or delegate himself and also in case if he wants. She has paid focus on the fact that the most important part to be focused upon should be towards the point of view rather than on the usage of pronoun. She also talks about the choice of either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrative pattern. Rushdie has focused much on focalization instead of point of view. Genette accentuates that:

Most of the theoretical works on this subject [narrative perspective] (which are mainly Classifications) suffer from regrettable confusion between what I call here mood and Voice , a confusion between the question who is the character, whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? And the very different question who the narrator is? –

or , more simply the question who sees? And the question who speaks? (186)

There seems a lot of possibility of unreliability when we talk about the usage of first person narrative. Riggan William says that:

First person narration is , then , always at least potentially Unreliable, in that the narrator with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words or motives Much of what he / she [the I – narrator] tells us also gives an idea of what he himself is like and has 'a certain characterizing' significance over and above its data value, by virtue of the fact that he is telling it to us. His narrative cannot be accepted purely in absolute terms of true or false, probable or improbable reliable or unreliable, convincing or unconvincing. (19 - 20)

From the above citation we can conclude that 1st person narrative has much more chances of fickleness because of its viewpoint towards the subject matter. There is likelihood of either fabrication or straightforwardness and *Midnight's Children* is also narrated from the 1st person point of view and this is one reason may be why we find slipups in Saleem's unfolding. Saleem tries to assert umpteen times that he is in his mindful state but still he remains unsure to the readers " . . . little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances. Re –reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. [. . .] But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been." (*Midnight's Children* 229 -30).

Thus we can conclude that in *Midnight's Children*, the novel's form is inseparable from the theme. The novelist employs a particular manner of telling a story because he wants to show how stories are made, and that history too is a fiction, a story. We learn that Rushdie's errors are the unreliable narrator's. We also discover how magic and realism have been blended by the author; to merge the post modern's faith with the oral narrator's "village" world view.

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