

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

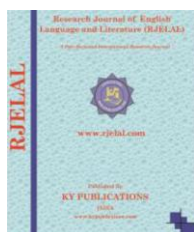
## SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN" AND POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT.

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.393>



### ABSTRACT

The search for identity on the part of the protagonist is marked into three distance phases. The first phase is the one in which the protagonist undergoes a crisis of identity due to several factors. This leads to the second phase of negation and total loss of identity. The final phase is one of reconstruction as the protagonist attempts to establish an identity on his own terms.

**Key words :-** Post-Colonial, Post modernism, Identity, Crisis, Fragmentation.

### Introduction

The 1980's witnessed the beginning of a new era in the realm of Indian Writing in English. It all began with the publication of Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" in 1981. Rushdie had woven magic into his fiction. It left the world spellbound. The skyline of Indian Writing in English changed overnight. Rushdie's contribution to literature can be gauged by the fact that fictional works now belong to pre or post-Rushdie ambience. As an individual and as an artist, race, nation, religion, identity, hybridization and subversion. Critics describe his fiction as a post-modernist melange or hotchpotch. The fragmentation, fissures, splinters serve purpose in his fiction- they help the writer to achieve the synthesis of diverse cultural strand. "Midnight's Children" is considered Rushdie's biggest commercial and literary success. In 1993 it was declared the "Booker of Bookers", the best novel to have won the Booker prize for Fiction in the 25-year history of the award.

### The Postcolonial Context :

"Midnight's Children" is the story of Saleem told in the first person by the protagonist himself from the vantage point of 31 years. The

"midnight hour" that witnesses the birth of India, also witnesses the birth of Saleem Sinai and a thousand other children whom Rushdie calls midnight's children. The blue eyed Saleem born to Vanita, an Indian Hindu, and Methwold a departing Englishman, is brought up by a Muslim couple. Thus, Saleem becomes the perfect example of the post-colonial hybridity that Homi K. Bhabha argued in his introduction to "The Location of Culture".

"The need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjects and to focus on those

moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood, singular or communal, that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, In the act of defining the idea of society itself." (P. 1 -2)

### Saleem Sinai : A Conglomeration of Multiple Identities :

Saleem's character bears affinities to the description of a postmodern person as a

conglomeration of multiple identities. Saleem is so many things simultaneously:

“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. (P.383)”

This is true of the novel itself. It is so many texts at the same time-autobiography, history, mythology, memory and so on and so forth. This sort of intertextuality is the feature of postmodern texts.

#### **The Theme of East-West Encounter and the Elements of Subversion :**

The theme of east-west encounter in the novel helps Rushdie to weave the element of subversion which is a postmodernist trait. For example, the India that has been for long known variously as the land of milk and honey, the land of saints, the land of the holy Ganges, the land of three million gods and so on, receives a new, almost contrasting, picturization at the hands of Rushdie. Poverty, hunger, famine, corruption and falsehood are the new ground realities. The depiction of Indira Gandhi and her Emergency Rule are down to earth, subversive. The description of the transfer of charge of the Methwold Estate is humorous and reflection Rushdie’s critical attitude towards the British. Also violence, murders and bloodshed are an everyday affair in this once-upon-a-time land of peace, love and harmony. Slums, like teeming sores, are everywhere. But thanks to the efforts of Indira Gandhi.

.....; the city was being beautified, and if there were a few deaths, if a girl with eyes like saucers and a pout of grief upon her lips fell beneath the advancing juggernauts, well, what of it, an evensore was being removed from the face of the ancient capital ..... (P. 431)

#### **The theme of Fragmentation : A Postmodern Feature :**

Through Saleem Sinai Rushdie is relating the dreams and nightmares of the first generation of free India. The paralleling of autobiography and history render the novel its non-linear episodic structure through which Rushdie has woven into the text the theme of fragmentation. In order to solve the puzzle of Saleem Sinai Story, we have to piece the fragments together.

The Theme of fragmentation appears very early in the novel. Aadam Aziz views Naseem Ghani in the sections through a white perforated sheet. Later Amina learns to love her husband in segments :

..... She divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioural, compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal tics and prejudices and likes .... in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit. (P. 68)

Saleem’s Physical Mutilations also resonate the theme of fragmentation:-

I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. (P. 9)

and later –

I recognize this fever; it’s, come up from inside me and from nowhere else; like a bad stink, it’s oozed through my cracks.(P. 208)

and towards the end –

.... now that I can, I swear, see the cracks on the backs of my hands, cracks along my hairline and between my toes, why do I not bleed? Am I already so emptied desiccated pickled? Am I already the mummy of myself? (P. 461)

Metaphorically, fragmentation indicates the loss of a sense of identity. Saleem’s constant search for parental figures gets him to identify

many people as his parents. His biological parents are the least significant of all the parents. Metaphorically, Saleem is fathered by several different men. Every time he identifies a new father, he experiences a new identity –

“...., I have had more mothers than most mothers have children, giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents-” (P. 243)

This sort of fragmentation of identity is applicable to Saleem's India too. India also has experienced double parentage in the form of native and colonial traditions that have shaped the nation. This breaking up of the sub-continent into Pakistan, India and Bangladesh is in itself a very complex task considering the different cultural, religious, political and linguistic traditions that exist therein. Very often in the novel India's struggles with its neighbours are paralleled with Saleem's struggles with other members of his family and the other midnight's children. In the following lines, Saleem gives more importance to his own family history than the history of the nation –

..... 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.(P. 338)

The changes of names in the novel resonates the theme of fragmentation of identity. Mumtaz becomes Amina, Naseem becomes Reverend Mother, Parvati becomes Laylah and so on.

#### **Presentation of History :**

Postmodernism mocks at the idea of an absolute truth, because “truth” by its very nature is subjective. How then can history be defined as a set of recorded facts? There can be so many versions of history as there are individuals. The title “Midnight's Children” reminds us Jawaharlal Nehru's historic speech made at the hour of India's Independence on the midnight of 15 August 1947. “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.”

The narrator is “handcuffed to history”. Alongside Saleem's personal history we have the history of a nation. So, history must walk hand in hand with Saleem's autobiography. Having been born at the precise moment of India's Independence, Saleem's life becomes inextricably linked with the social, political, national and religious events of his time. There is a parallel drawn between Parvati's thirteen day labour and the thirteen day political drama in India, when Indira Gandhi, found guilty of malpractice during the 1971 elections refused to resign and later declared Emergency in the country. Both Parvati's and Indira's travails end in a “nightmare”. Such connections and parallels attribute a mythic dimension to time that moves along in a cyclic fashion addressing the continuation of family tradition and history. History in the novel is, in a postmodern way, fragmented, provisional, openly subjective & plural. In the novel history is dislodged from its time frame, in order to illustrate that no singular truth or meaning exists.

#### **Narrative Technique:**

##### **(1) A Self-reflexive narrator:**

Postmodernism favours subjectivity and self-reflexivity. Saleem Sinai is a self-conscious, self-aware narrator. This technique not only allows Saleem to convey his innermost thoughts and emotions but also helps to construct a dialogue with the reader. In the following passage from the chapter “A public Announcement”. Saleem indulges in self-reflexivity :

.... I must interrupt myself. I wasn't going to today, because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration because self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings; but I simply must register a protest. (P. 65)

There is use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. However, Saleem Sinai engages his readers more like a story teller rather than an autobiographer. His style of narration drawn heavily from the oral tradition of story-telling.

**(2) Presence of Surrogate Reader, Padma :**

Padma is the surrogate reader in the novel. She is ignorant of the conventions of narrative art and does not want to be bothered with political and social problems that the narrator was trying to bring into the limelight. The presence of the surrogate reader shows that Rushdie is very conscious of the reader and the reader's response. Thus, the concept of Reader Response Theory has been integrated into the novel.

The priorities of the narrator and the listener (reader) are in conflict. Saleem acknowledges the conflict and is peeved at the demands made by Padma as a reader:

How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience ? (P. 150)

**Use of Language :**

The use of language is fresh and bold. There is use of lexical items, verbal patterns from Indian languages like Hindi, Gujarathi and so on, without hesitation. Even words are invented to suit emotions; for example, Abracadabra, chutnification. There is codes-switching and code-mixing.

**Conclusion :**

Saleem Sinai who is a self-reflexive narrator is a perfect example of the post-colonial hybridity. Like a post-modern person, he is a conglomeration of multiple identities. The theme of east-west encounter introduces the element of sub-version and the theme of fragmentation metaphorically indicates the loss of a sense of identity. History is presented as fragmented, subjective and provisional and is also dislodged from its time frame to illustrate that no single truth or meaning exists. The use of fresh, bold & innovative language adds to the beauty of the text.

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