

CHAPTER-V

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

Salman Rushdie represents the modern writers who started writing in the 1980's. So far as Rushdie's writing is concerned, there is a significant break from the traditional way of fiction-writing. The moment Midnight's Children was published (1981) Salman Rushdie became a cult-figure in the Indo-English Literature. Critics were totally dazzled by Rushdie's style of writing. He doesn't follow the linear method of story-telling. The theme of Timelessness is the major idea in Rushdie's fiction. He makes use of fantasy as the device which makes it possible for the novelist to reach the unreachable areas of human experience. Rushdie exploits fantasy in his writing "as only being useful as a way of enriching realism and not as an end in itself".¹ Madhusudhana Rao says that "fantasy is the main gateway to Rushdie's fiction". Fantasy is, in fact, what Madhusudhana Rao calls "a Time-denying and space-denying concept".²

So far, most of the Indo-English novelists have written about the British Raj, Indian Freedom Struggle, the Partition, and social conditions. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand is mainly concerned with social conditions. Raja Rao has written about the Indian philosophy. However, all these themes have been incorporated in Rushdie's Midnight's Children which links the private life of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai with the historical life of India.

Midnight's Children is far from a straightforward narrative.

The narrative refuses to follow the linear method of narration. Therefore, Midnight's Children greatly differs from the earlier realistic fiction. In this respect Ron Shepherd rightly states that:

*Midnight's Children differs from this earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of fiction are broken: the unities of time and place and character are, at best, unstable: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person; ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straightforward sense religious or metaphysical; the novel is full of cryptic clues, arcane utterances, and seems always on the point of offering some important explanation, of arriving at some goal or conclusion, but what this conclusion is we can never be quite sure. It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight-of-hand, narrated with a passion for narrating rather than for clarifying meaning.*³

Rushdie is influenced by Scheherazade, the legendary story teller of the Arabian Nights, that quintessential fabricator of stories. This influence becomes clearly evident when Saleem Sinai, the protagonist says, "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something".⁴

Though Midnight's Children is an autobiographical novel, it goes beyond the confession. Here, T.N. Dhar rightly comments:

*With Scheherazade lurking in his mind the narrator promises a story, but in the garb of a modern day confession, with an autobiographical form and a strong intellectual element; however, the story goes beyond the confession because it transcends the boundaries of a purely personal account; it acquires the proportions of an epic, with Valmiki deep in the consciousness of the narrator, and embraces the story of a whole country.*⁵

K. Raghavendra Rao also points out that "Rushdie is heir to other narrative traditions of the Islamic tradition of Thousand and One Nights, and the Hindu of the Panchatantra, Kathasarithsagara and Kadambari".⁶

Rushdie has, so far, written four novels: Grimus (1977), Midnight's Children (1981), Shame (1983), and Satanic Verses (1989) a much disputed novel. Rushdie's use of English language in his novels is very striking. Midnight's Children and Shame portray the protagonists' search for their own identity, Saleem Sinai and Omar Khayyam. His first novel Grimus is a science fiction.

The narrative technique in this novel is not one of continuous forward movement but it fluctuates from the personal story of Saleem to the history of his country. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai himself speaks about the style of his narration "... there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane".⁷ Apart from delineating his personal story, the narrator wants to tell us the stories which are 'improbable

and mundane'. Thus Rushdie mixes facts with extremely fanciful events. In doing so, he indulges in 'fictional license' and breaks away from the rules of well-made plot.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part depicts the events from 1915 till the protagonist's birth and the second part portrays Saleem's childhood and the third part of the novel deals with politics directly exaggerating the Emergency operation and the victimization of Saleem Sinai.

Rushdie makes his protagonist Saleem move in time and space covering the years from 1915 to 1978. The autobiographical information is embedded in the narration of the history of his family, and more picturesquely his life in Bombay. He portrays the fate of his family over three generations. First of all, he takes us along with his grand parents from Kashmir, Amritsar to Agra, where their five children are born. After staying in Delhi for sometime, his parents move to Bombay where Saleem is born at the moment of India's independence, at midnight. Finally his parents go to Rawalpindi in Pakistan, where they perish in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

From the very beginning Saleem's personal story is linked with the fate of the country. This is an extremely important aspect of the novel since the personal and historical stories are intermixed in such a manner that they are inseparable. The fictional aspect is the imaginative recreation of personal experiences and the individual perception of the larger, national history. This is

an inextricably heady mixture of a vibrant and dynamic consciousness. Saleem himself comments upon this attachment between his private life and the historical life of India in the following words:

*I was born in the city of Bombay once upon a time. ... I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947 ... on the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact, clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.*⁸

As we read this novel, we come to know that the personal life is magnified by relating it with the history of India. It is to be noticed that Rushdie was born in June 1947, but the protagonist of Midnight's Children who is created in the image of Salman Rushdie was born on the historical midnight of 14-15 August, 1947. It seems that Rushdie deliberately changes the date of birth to magnify the private life story of the protagonist. Sushila Singh, in this regard remarks that:

*Despite Rushdie's being born in June and not in the historic midnight and his having a very happy childhood, what he creates in Saleem Sinai, the narrator hero, can be interpreted as a variant on his own persona. Through his endeavour Rushdie has tried to balance the conflicting claims between history, self and writing.*⁹

Saleem Sinai and other midnight's children are bestowed with the gift of miraculous power of imagination. Rushdie lends

him the power to see and to report with greater imaginative details than he could as an ordinary man. It is because of this power that Saleem recalls the life story of his grand father, Aadam Aziz. Now, our main concern is to know ^{to} what extent the author follows the principle of verisimilitude. Rushdie recalls the events which occurred in the life of his grandfather. In fact, it is beyond the range of the author. That's why he lends the miraculous power of imagination to the protagonist by means of which Rushdie achieves verisimilitude. For instance, he tells us:

*In the beginning, before I broke through to more-than-telepathy, I contented myself with listening; and soon I was able to 'tune' my inner ear to those voices which I could understand; nor was it long before I picked out, from the throng the voices of my own family; and of Mary Pereira; and of friends, classmates, teachers.*¹⁰

It is really interesting "to read the account of his birth in Bombay, his babyhood, boyhood and adulthood, and kinds of people he gets associated with - classmates, uncles, aunts, especially uncle Hanief, and his actress-wife Piya, Picture Singh, Parvati and many others. His association with all these people makes us believe that he is a human being like us. But the fact is that the story of Saleem is not exactly a human story for Rushdie has no intention of allowing us an exploration into his character as a novelist generally does. There is no exhaustive analysis of human relationships as in a novelist like Henry James."¹¹

There are diverse themes in Midnight's Children. All

these themes lead to the major theme of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai's quest for identity. Thematically Midnight's Children deals with the political history of India along with the personal story of Saleem. The historical and cultural history of India is related to the events which take place in the family of Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai. Now, to link the political and historical events with the personal story of Saleem Sinai, Rushdie exploits three structural devices. As Uma Parameshwaran puts it:

a) Salman Rushdie "uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points in history and symbolize their long-term significance; b) he links political and historical events, starting with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, with one or other of Saleem's circle of friends and family, and c) he uses Padma as a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic levels".¹²

The protagonist, Saleem Sinai seems to be passive all the time. As he grows up, he faces many hardships. When he tells his parents that he has acquired the power of hearing voices, his father, being shocked of this heresy, gives him a terrible blow on the side of his head. As a result of this, he becomes deaf in his left ear and the bicycle accident offers him the power of hearing the voices of other midnight's children who start sending signals to him. Again, he is injured in a bomb-blast, during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. So he loses his memory completely and is unable to remember his own name. But he regains his memory

after the snake-bite in the Sunderbans, during the Bangla Desh war. All the time he feels that he is impotent. Thus Saleem encounters with many calamities. M.K. Naik, in this respect comments that:

*These several accidents and assaults and their consequences indicate the stresses and strains which disfigure the protagonist's identity throughout his life. The idea that he is fated never to know peace and stability is symbolically suggested by the fact that when the house in Pakistan is being constructed, a jar carrying his umbilical cord is buried in the foundation, but the house is destroyed by a bomb during the war and the hero who has migrated to Pakistan has to return to India.*¹³

When baby Saleem was born, his birth was greatly celebrated by the newspaper and his position was ratified by the politician. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to him:

*Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention: it will be in a sense, the mirror of our own.*¹⁴

All midnight's children are gifted with the wonderful power of imagination. Many of them die owing to malnutrition and the misfortunes of everyday life. Those survived, celebrate their tenth birthday. One such midnight's child is Shiva. He is the alter ego of Saleem. The story becomes more complicated. Now the fact

is that, Saleem is not the real son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai. He is the son of an Englishman and a Hindu street-singer's wife, Vanita. Shiva who is given to the street-singer by Mary Pereira, belongs to a Kashmiri couple, Ahmed and Amina Sinai. Mary Pereira is compelled by her Christian lover Joseph D'Costa to exchange the babies at the time of their birth that is midnight of 15th August, 1947, in order to have the equalization of classes. Saleem's is a fragmented personality because of mixed ancestries. He is a son of an Englishman, Indian mother and is brought up by Catholic ayah.

Shiva and Saleem are different in the sense that Shiva has a fighting spirit, while Saleem has the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men. In spite of their bravery, they are completely confused because they belong to Kaliyuga which is dis-integrated. Shiva stands for destruction. He is named after the God, Shiva. But in this novel he is portrayed as a ruffian and very rough. He has learned to fight for survival from his earliest days. The following speech of Shiva sums up his nature:

*'Rich kid', Shiva yelled, 'you don't know one damn thing! What purpose, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, yara? For what reason you're rich and I'm poor? Where's the reason in starving, man? God knows how many million of damn fools living in this country, man, and you think there's a purpose!'*¹⁵

Saleem with his telepathic power calls a conference

of midnight's children. Thus Saleem and other one thousand midnight's children are the representatives of modern India but they are victimized by the circumstances. Saleem patiently faces the calamities. He doesn't act. In his interview with Rani Dharker, Rushdie speaks about the close relationship between the author and the protagonist as well as about the device of the use of the first person narrative. "I think by and large when he's child there is a fairly close unity between his point of view and mine. Not always but most of the time".¹⁶

Further, Rushdie clarifies that he is different from his protagonist, Saleem Sinai who is created in the image of the author. He says, that "there is a problem with first person narration, there is a problem with having a figure who swamps the book like that, which is that it is very difficult to give the reader the impression that the narrator's point of view sometimes diverges from the writer's."¹⁷ Saleem seems to be passive in the novel whereas Rushdie is an active man in real life. Now the question arises why has this change been made? What purpose is served by making the protagonist Saleem, passive throughout the novel? The fact is that an autobiographical novelist should try to resist the temptation of what Avrom Fleishman calls 'self-magnification' and 'self-denigration'.

Saleem Sinai, in his quest for identity, feels himself alienated and loses his own self and identity as an individual and reaches a state of 'historyless anonymity'. He says:

*... while I tumble forwards to prostrate myself before my parents' funeral pyre, a minuscule but endless instant of knowing, before I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love, a fleeting but also timeless explosion in which I bow my head yes I acquiesce yes in the necessity of the blow, and then I am empty and free.*¹⁸

The theme of identity in its broad historical terms may be defined as national identity for Saleem Sinai. Mainly the story takes place in Bombay and later it is shifted to Kashmir, Rawalpindi, Sunderbans, and finally Delhi to dramatize the quest of the protagonist for identity.

Like Saleem, his wife's son, by Shiva, is also born at midnight when Indira Gandhi imposed Emergency Rule on India in 1975. His son also faces the identity crisis. He is also "mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country".¹⁹ Now, the problem is that Saleem's son refuses to speak because he is "a child who heard too much, and as a result never spoke, rendered dumb by a surfeit of sound".²⁰

M.K. Naik is right when he says that:

*Midnight's Children thus illustrates the permanent plight of individual identity in the hostile modern world, which makes it impossible for anyone to remain an island but compels everyone to be part of a continent, with the result that the individual is inevitably 'handcuffed to history'".*²¹

Padma's role in the novel is very complex. She acts

like a chorus. In this respect, Uma Parameshwaran remarks:

*It has been variously suggested that Padma is to be seen as a vidushika who in a Sanskrit play is a buffoon or jester who accompanies the hero; ... Padma is like the chorus in a Greek drama - always on the stage, but never initiating action; essentially a non-participant but occasionally giving a thrust to the play's progression.*²²

Midnight's Children reaches its climax in the events describing Indira Gandhi's Emergency. Rushdie portrays the fictional picture of life under the Emergency. The narrator in the novel clarifies that "my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data".²³ 'The Widow' here means Indira Gandhi who declared Emergency in 1975. Now, Parvati's thirteen-day labour is connected with the thirteen days of political disorder in India when Indira Gandhi was accused of the malpractice during the election of 1971. But later she refused to resign and declared Emergency. Parvati and Saleem, Indira and India each undergoes a great suffering. The comparison of Parvati's labour pains with Indira is nightmarish.

Come on Parvati, push push push, while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai ... were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push ... the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own ... suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship ... of the press, and armoured-units-on-

*special-alert, and arrest of subversive elements.*²⁴

Saleem tells the story of his family but the narration is interrupted frequently to comment on his present situation, and many other related issues. The narration moves forwards and backwards. In this regard, Dieter Riemenschneider rightly remarks that:

*Saleem, the chronicler of events in Midnight's Children, moves through time and space in order to grasp the totality of the Indian subcontinent. History to him is a closely knit, complex and intricately interrelated sequence of events not ruled, as it seems, by any logic exterior to it; rather, it creates its own logic. He returns again and again to a central passage of his story; Nehru's letter to his parents on the occasion of his birth on 15 August, 1947, the day India became independent.*²⁵

What Rushdie has done in Midnight's Children is to link the private life with the history of India. Thus all events that happen in his life are associated with the historical and cultural life of India. To quote Riemenschneider,

Saleem's grandparents, on their way from Kashmir to Agra, stop over in Amritsar where Aziz experiences the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre ... Saleem's parents marry on the day in 1945 when the first atom bomb is being exploded to destroy thousands and to usher in the nuclear age; they depart from Bombay on 4 June, 1947 the day partition and the date

*of Independence are announced by Nehru and Mountbatten; they acquire their own house on 15 August 1947, the day Saleem is born. ... Aadam is born on 25 June 1975, the day emergency is declared for the first time in the country.*²⁶

Sometimes, we feel that Saleem Sinai is not a character. In the novel he says, "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 repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world".²⁷ In this connection T.N. Dhar also rightly says that if we study the character of Saleem carefully we feel that "he is a more of voice - a reliable authorial voice, reliable because he does not have a life of his own. ... We see him walk in flesh and blood, but he is not a 'character' at all ... he is one and the many, man and monster, participant and voice - all rolled into one".²⁸

Therefore, while reading this novel, we have to keep in mind that we are reading the fictional story of Saleem Sinai rather than factual rendering of his life. The protagonist tells us that "in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe".²⁹ This is a very significant remark because, it means that all history is simply the perception of an individual subjective mind. Salman Rushdie, alias Saleem Sinai's life story is as much true as history is true in this sense. This makes autobiography, the novel and history are all imaginative creations.

In order to authenticate the fictional story, to draw parallels between the real and the imaginary, to provide choric irony; and to establish the fact that he is in control of the narrative, the narrator interrupts the fictional action frequently.

In the novels of George Lamming, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi and Salman Rushdie in the words of Arun Mukherjee "we find a narrative mode that is anti-realist, episodic in its loose structure, historical, closer to oral narrative and its convention of a collective audience with whom the narrator shares a common past and common cultural expectations".³⁰

In his perceptive analysis M. Madhusudhana Rao explains the character of Saleem Sinai in the following words:

However, as a form of fulfilment, in his quest for true identity, Saleem Sinai takes recourse to fantasy to seek his roots with the Indian psyche, through fantasy and memory of a bygone past, though not in its recent past, which in any case negated him. Thus, Saleem Sinai moves in and out of Time in the narrative. When he is in time, that is, as 'observing', but in no case participating in its national history, it is a matter of pain and disillusionment for him.³¹

According to Madhusudhana Rao, Rushdie's style of writing is like that of the post-modernists like Gunter Grass and Kafka and Beckett, because he makes use of 'silences' and 'broken

continuities' as his fictional devices. Rao states that:

*A world of Absence and Infinite blank nothingness defines the mind of Saleem Sinai. As in the post-Modernist fiction, Saleem's mind is poised ever so gently on the meaninglessness and absurdity and meaningful profundity and most important, upon revelation.*³²

Arun Mukherjee stresses the point that it has become essential for the Third World writers to make use of the loose episodic structure to portray collective struggles such as freedom movements, pains of decolonization. As time passes, it is but natural for the modern writers to use new techniques. Therefore, Mukherjee rightly remarks that "They wished to ^{write} about things this form had not tackled before: things such as national histories, collective hopes, collective struggles such as freedom movements, pains of decolonization and neo-colonialism and so on".³³

Rushdie claims that Midnight's Children is a social inquiry. He confesses that he has broken the rules of the traditional fiction-writing and adds that the concept of the novel itself is considerably changing. In this regard, in his interview with Rani Dharker, Rushdie explains:

It seems to me that what's happened is that as the 20th century has altered reality, the traditional form of the novel has become less and less able to notice it. To notice the conflicts and the shifts and in order to take those into account, to bring those into a book you have to break those

rules. Because they seem to be rules for another time and I don't necessarily think that Midnight's Children kind of remakes sand provides a new grammar or makes a new set of rules. But at least it tries to say that those rules don't work. We have to see what rules or what principles could be used. So in that sense of course it's a social inquiry.³⁴

Keith Wilson is of the opinion that Rushdie clearly presupposes for his work a type of reader who has capacities for collaboration that go beyond Padma's simple demand for linearity and logic. Rushdie presupposes such readers who are able to read contextual references.³⁵ Further, Wilson adds that Rushdie "doesn't presume a reader for whom art is a simple representation of life and who has never pondered the nature and limitations of the mimetic act; ... he doesn't presume a reader whose literary frame of reference is limited to the twentieth-century novel or whose national frame of reference is limited to India".³⁶

Keith Wilson rightly compares the narrative technique of Midnight's Children with that of Tristram Shandy. Wilson says that Saleem Sinai's "nose is of similar epic centrality to Tristram's as is his equivocal potency that is in part the price he pays for being the excluded observer. He attempts to translate public history into private obsession in order to make it explicable, an attack on contingency and experimental chaos for which Uncle Toby's unsuccessful attempt to contain the campaigns of the War of Spanish Succession within the bounds of his bowling green must surely

stand as the supreme literary model ..."³⁷

In the final analysis, we may say that Midnight's Children is in the tradition of Tristram Shandy, Thomas Mann's Tin Drum, a genre of the novel which is concerned with the art of self-conscious narrative itself. In other words, the novel is concerned with the theme of novel-writing itself. And so the subject matter of the novel is the writer's 'self' itself; but this self posits a complicated relationship with the external world which is actually, the political, historical, cultural reality itself. That is why Midnight's Children displays and stresses the umbilical chord which exists between the autobiographical self and the external historical reality. The narrative becomes the burden of imaginative fantacising as much as what is called 'magic-realism'.

Midnight's Children can be said to be the best novel, that is best imaginative, literary creation, a work of literary art, which is also related to the genre of autobiographical novel. Fact and fantasy (fiction) as it were vie with each other to enrich rather than impoverish each other in this novel.

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