



Fable and Fantasy to Depict the Realities ‘Alienation and Exile’ In the Select Novel *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie

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ABSTRACT:- Salman Rushdie’s initial full-length novel, *Midnight’s Children*, published in 1981, received extensive critical approbation, together with that year’s Booker prize, and launched its author’s deeply triumphant literary career. Rushdie wields the thoughts as a political weapon against all forms of convention, including religious systems, and concurrently attempts to thwart sarcastic nihilism. However, it will be argued that even in this drastically postmodern circumstance, the story of *Midnight’s Children* does not escape a definite equilibrium of form or integrated structure. There is a baseline of objective order residing underneath the external chaos and epistemological anguish of Rushdie’s narrative, a suggestion of decisive principles and structures that moderately redeems the corrosive relativism of his unreal worlds. Rushdie was knowingly instilled with the very values that he shortly found to be illogical and bare. As a result, he is estranged and exiled from two worlds: the world of the West and its persistent modern values; and also from the Eastern world of tradition and devout belief systems, the world of faith-ridden India. These themes, exile from the world of convention and trust, and alienation from the modern world that discarded him philosophically and justly, are consistently expressed as the central trepidation of Rushdie’s writing, particularly *Midnight’s Children*.

This allusion to creating fiction reveals the central precept of Rushdie’s postmodern, post-religious worldview. Only the imagination is accomplished of creating meaning in the desolate and secular universe, and this is done through the invigorating conception of fantastic fictions and inestimable alternate realities. As a result, abundant questions applicable to the study of religion reverberate throughout the text of *Midnight’s Children*. In *Midnight’s Children*, conclusion is most certainly enforced. In fact, the whole notion of closure is associated with repressive political regimes that, through the use of force, foreclose the opportunity of narratable leftovers and utter a world of inflexibly defined possibilities through the exploitation of truth. This enforcement of closure is, however, accompanied by its effacement in the leftovers that are evidently accomplished of producing further narratives.

Keywords:- accomplished, effacement, evidently, foreclose, inestimable, trepidation.

Salman Rushdie’s initial full-length novel, *Midnight’s Children*, published in 1981, received extensive critical approbation, together with that year’s Booker prize, and launched its author’s deeply triumphant literary career. Rushdie wields the thoughts as a political weapon against all forms of convention, including religious systems, and concurrently attempts to thwart sarcastic nihilism. However, it will be argued that even in this drastically postmodern circumstance, the story of *Midnight’s Children* does not escape a definite equilibrium of form or integrated structure. There is a baseline of objective order residing underneath the external chaos and epistemological anguish of Rushdie’s narrative, a suggestion of decisive principles and structures that moderately redeems the corrosive relativism of his unreal worlds.

Postmodernism, Exile and Alienation the recurrent themes:

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Rushdie writes, “those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have had modernism forced upon us”, and that “I’ve been in a minority group all my life, as a member of an Indian Muslim family in Bombay, then of a *mohajir* – migrant – family in Pakistan, and now as a British Asian”. (IH. 4) For Rushdie, such a situation of exile is figurative of post-illumination relativism and disenchantment, and his fastidious milieu has produced in him a state of intellect where issues of hostility, identity and belonging are vital. Hence, he considers himself in a situation to speak with ability on behalf of the postmodern circumstance.

This allusion to creating fiction reveals the central precept of Rushdie’s postmodern, post-religious worldview. Only the imagination is accomplished of creating meaning in the desolate and secular universe, and this is done through the invigorating conception of fantastic fictions and inestimable alternate realities. As a result, abundant questions applicable to the study of religion reverberate throughout the text of *Midnight's Children*.

The story of *Midnight's Children* spectacularly appropriates mythic religious motifs, symbols, narrative schemas, names, imagery, and elements plucked indiscriminately from Brahmanical, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian faiths. Some parts of the story are written in a mythic and oral style. In others, overtly religious imagery, liminal states, notions of transcendence, rebirth, and eschatology are deftly wielded to add involvedness and intricacy to the ostensibly anti-religious narrative.

On the other hand, there is a much deeper side to this persistent appropriation of religious motifs and imagery, particularly when it is applied as a milieu to what is on the facade a defiantly relativist and postmodern narrative. To exemplify, one can cite the inversion Rushdie makes of the classic religious theme of the human pursuit for decisive knowledge of self. Also the strange narrative configuration of *Midnight's Children* poses questions regarding the processes of self-knowledge, epistemology, and hermeneutics within a relative universe devoid of any Prime Mover or eventual referent.

These issues are profoundly related and evidently express Rushdie’s essentially anti-religious and anti-traditional attitude to epistemology, ontology and politics. Yet it will be seen that even in this climate, but on a deeper level, the story of *Midnight's Children* does not get away a definite balance of form or integrated structure. There is a baseline of purpose order residing underneath the apparent chaos and epistemological anguish of Rushdie’s narrative, a hint of definitive principles and structures that somewhat redeems the corrosive relativism of his imaginary worlds.

Midnight's Children opens with Adaam Aziz, the grandfather of the main protagonist, praying to Mecca one morning curtly after he has returned from medical school in Europe. While kneeling to pray, he hits his nose against a hoarfrost tough tussock of earth. Instantaneously his blood and tears freeze and shape up into rubies and diamonds. The story reads: And at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never to kiss the earth for any god or man. This decision nevertheless made a hole in him, a situation in an imperative inner chamber, leaving him susceptible to women and history.

In this opening page, the traditional Indian man is dismissed for the secular modern man. Rushdie has orientalised the traditional cultures of India, and a tension is born which remains throughout the story. In renouncing his God, Adaam loses his self-identity and belonging, he becomes contingent on his history, “vulnerable to history”, and to “this belief [of his European friends] that he was somehow the invention of his ancestors”. (MC. 12)

His world has lost its underpinnings, and notions of self and authenticity are made indefinite and open to understanding. The book is narrated from the point of view of Adaam’s grandchild, Saleem Sinai, a product of a post-colonial, secular, and urban India. Saleem’s birth is the summit of one thousand and one miraculous and unfeasible births that crop up around midnight on August 15 1947, the very hour of India’s independence. These are the ‘Midnight’s Children’, each holding a fantastic mystical gift. Born on the stroke of twelve, Saleem is the most prevailing of these prodigious offspring, and has the skill to read people’s thoughts, the very core of their being.

“Chained to history, these fantastic and unlikely children embody the emergent nation .state of India and reflect its subsequent awakening”. (Karamcheti, 1986. Pp. 81-82)

"None do this more so than Saleem, whose elongated face is like a map, *imago mundi*, of the subcontinent." (MC. 231) and who overtly symbolizes modern secular Indian man.

Archetypal of Rushdie's legendary style, the narrative is thoroughly pluralistic, intricate, convoluted, and hardly ever linear, yet as it progresses, Saleem's character moves increasingly from a state of optimistic and adolescent hopefulness towards a disillusioned fall from elegance and into a nihilistic hopelessness. Ghostly, a climax to this strand of the story is reached when Saleem is struck down during an eschatological war with Pakistan and loses his memory, his concept of historical self. He is emptied of history, emptied of his past, and in so being, he becomes a reflexive abstinent labeled only '*The Buddha*'. During the dream-like chapter '*In the Sunderbans*', Saleem as '*The Buddha*' enters a timeless and liminal environment, the deep jungles of east India.

On entry, time is representatively killed, scale is distorted, and within the fluid environment of "incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels over-towered by the cathedral-arching trees", 19 (MC. 360) '*The Buddha*', a clean slates without personalities, confronts his memories. Rushdie has written of this section, "If you are going to write an epic... you need a descent into hell. That chapter is the inferno chapter". (Grant, 1999. 53) Yet, rather than expressing the standard pattern of the descent of the hero and resulting attainment of true and indispensable self-knowledge and dominant return, Rushdie gives an disparate postmodern, discrepancy on the theme. While sitting under an enormous tree '*The Buddha*' is bitten on the heel by a lucid snake, and during his ensuing fall into gnosis, instead of finding the still and everlasting pivot of his being, he is aggressively rejoined to his past.

He instantly begins recounting his life story and the stories of his ancestors, his history starts issuing from his mouth "because he was reclaiming everything... all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man".²¹ (MC. 364-65)

Identity and the place history, memory and narrative play in its configuration are central to the narrative construction of *Midnight's Children*. In a post-traditional world with no remedy to any decisive or important notions or values, people can only ever be what it is their memories tell them they are, an accretion of their past familiarity. Understanding and knowledge can only be arrived at through framework, to know a thing in itself, all the history and combined imaginings that have gone into creating it must themselves be understood. An inestimable regress of imagination and elucidation is the only true path towards knowing the world and oneself. As sediments of history, people only know themselves through a recurrent interpretative reading of their past and present experience.

In the same way that history flows and seeps into a person the recapitulation of this history enthusiastically creates one's notions of self. Memory is the inventive act and the narrative the ultimate result. As Saleem recites the story of *Midnight's Children* he creates both himself and his world through his remembering. Not only does this process occur within his own mind, but also, the story he recites falls persistently upon the ears of Padma, a crouching woman who sits at Saleem's feet and whose act of invariable interpretation mirrors that of the readers.

The character of Padma represents the finished story Saleem is weaving. Her name, *Padma* – 'lotus' in Sanskrit – indicates that Saleem's very narration is a conception or blossoming of reality, cognate in symbolism to traditional pan- Indian notion of cosmogenesis as an telling lotus. At points Saleem eulogizes her, crying, "Lotus... which grew out of Vishnu's navel, and from which Brahma himself was born: Padma the source, the mother of Time".(MC. 199) An illustration evocative of Vishnu residing on the Buttermilk Sea, exactly dreaming the world into being, as Brahma steadily emerges from the lotus emergent from his navel.

If it were not for the ambiguities inherent in Rushdie's text, it would become visible here that he is making an equation between the reader's mind, and the inventive power of *maya*, redolent of Buddhist or *Advaitan* notions of epistemology. Rushdie's point is evenly distrustful, for the faculty of memory from which worlds are created is discerning, it is imperfect. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes that he is interested in "the process of filtration itself... the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes".²⁸ (IHL. 24)

As one of the characters in *Midnight's Children* states, "reality is a question of perspective", absolutes can by no means exist, and any world is fragmentary, ephemeral and chaotic. (MC.164) the epistemological issues attribute of postmodern critique are intrinsic within the book's narrative structure. Reality is not seen as being entirely accessed by the rational, reason is not 'free floating' and objective, there is no a priori or univocal relationship between what it said and what is ontologically real.

However, because this view of an historical and conditional universe rests upon anti-religious, modernist, and postmodernist foundations, it eventually undermines any religious worldview. For Rushdie, the act of understanding does not simply reflect or amend the world, it factually creates it. Later in the story, Saleem's mother attempts to love a man through loving his break up parts. His core being plainly changes as it is perceived in contradictory ways.

This lack of any definitive truths or indication points, and trust on pure imagination in the creation of reality, allows Rushdie's writing to reflect the entirely phantasmagoric and bizarre. But, in effect, such a form of imaginative writing, although encompassing quasi-religious forms, expresses an opposite worldview to the traditionally religious. It is self conscious fantasy built upon the aesthetics of despair, an epistemological incapability to express real truth.

Furthermore, the ends of such a phantasmagorical writing style are not aimed at expressing the world in any truthful way, but rather in doing the opposite, destroying the tangible and inflexible world-views of others. For Rushdie, the imaginative narrative fulfils a more serious role than mere philosophy - it is a political tool. He states that,

"To dream is to have power... Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so it may subsequently be reconstructed", (IHL. 122) and "[l]iterature can... give the lie to official facts", (IHL. 378)

And hence its primary role is to subvert and destroy, rather than passably reflect or, in the final analysis, create. For a writer such as Rushdie, alienated and exiled, no systems are more worthy of such deconstruction than politics and religion. But apart from creative fantasy, apart from sublime art, Rushdie does not offer any better or more ingenuous alternatives.

In his writing Rushdie often shows more intricacy and subtlety, and the impressions gained from its reading are not automatically austere, or even anti-religious. Definitely, there are indications that underneath the ambiguous narrative of *Midnight's Children* there resides a hidden and consistent structure to reality. The story runs as a continual interplay of synchronicities, recapitulations, prophetic inter-windings of fate, homologies, and rhythmic patterns. In forming a background tempo, these hints at an organizing intelligence residing deep beneath the plurality of imaginary worlds Rushdie creates, even if such a mind or ultimate logos can only ever be that of the author himself.

Saleem talks of a "national longing for form... an expression of our belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes",⁴⁹ (MC.300) and states that "everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form".⁵⁰ (MC. 226) It is a testimony to Rushdie's ability to readily manipulate language that the overall tone of a book that rests upon such bleak epistemology never becomes devastatingly depressive or nihilistic.

Such a 'deep structure' to *Midnight's Children*, for structure is what it lastly amounts to, no matter Rushdie's overt skepticism, reads almost like a concealed shift in proportion or scale. At points the narrative does just that, shifting focus and systematically deepening its view of the universe: For a tale based upon notions of memory and history, such a dramatic slide in part has the result of resetting all characters and themes within a much broader, more solid and optimistic framework. As explored above, the deconstruction and distrust of hard factual reality, and the seeming plurality of ingenious 'truths', intrinsic within the case, then it can be argued that on another level there is also a centripetal counter-movement which seeks to bring all the fragments into relation with each other. Religious and mythic motifs, names, and symbols set and sustain the tempo and over all form of the story – a slow rolling cyclic hitting, turning in on itself retelling, retracing, and steadily sedimenting into an ever deepening and somehow intensely meaningful tale.

Outstandingly, this buoyancy spreads into the epistemology of Rushdie's narrative, creating a guarded hopefulness somewhat recognizable to ideas of the critical use of the hermeneutical circle. On the last pages of the book, when Saleem is surveying the thirty jars of chutneys and pickles into which he has distilled and bottled the thirty chapters of the story, the lives, histories, and memories of all he has known, he is more hopeful and retrospect about his hermeneutic search for truth and value. Narrative can be seen to act as a form of centrifugal fragmentation. If such is Rushdie's own background and history may have instilled in him values and a worldview that can never be called traditional, religious, or even companionable with religion, conversely,

the one quality his characters possess that appears to be as unlimited as their alienation and illusion is their continual optimism and boundless hope.

In Rushdie's advocacy of a redeployment of events and stories that have always counted as history, Rushdie does not critique narrative itself as a method of recounting the real, but rather sees narrative as a medium that has not reached its transformative impeding in the political, social and ethical dome. In this context, critics most often see Rushdie, quite acceptably, as an advocate of self-reflexive narrative that points to its own incapability to entirely correspond to the real, while concurrently insisting on the power and significance of narrative itself.

While this reading of Rushdie is valid and significant, throughout this paper I argue that Rushdie's novel also inconsistently functions as a review of narrative historiography and its propensity to be disloyal to a longing for form that encloses definite historical events while apart from others. While Rushdie's fanciful and plentiful narratives in *Midnight's Children* do endeavor to ingest the world and all of its players and events, these narratives are supplemented by a shadowy series of events that are diagonally referred to but never unambiguously narrated as part of the novel's multitude of stories.

Rushdie's fluctuation of unifying and rational narrative and extreme and fragmentary non-narrative suggests some unusual possibilities for how the historical real can be, and should be, represented. Rushdie suggests, an connection to history must be maintained in order for agency to exist and for political and social action to be probable.

Nonetheless, Rushdie has at the same time claimed by both postmodernism and post colonialism, leaving him open for praise by proponents of the radical and transgressive impending of postmodern discourse, while simultaneously leaving him open to attack from more immensely minded theorists. Within postcolonial studies, the development of the Subaltern Studies movement illustrates the diverse approaches to historiography that Rushdie's work is both praised and castigated for employing.

The placing of Rushdie's work in this collection of debates over representation and historiography is not accidental or coincidental. Rather, Rushdie installs such debates within his own work, undoubtedly asking to be included within this conversation. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's Uncle Hanif insists on the creation of inflexibly and relentlessly realistic films, with adherence to the truth of the plight of the working classes, after specializing in more fantastic storytelling techniques.

Likewise, the painter Aurora da Gama in *The Moor's Last Sigh* vacillates between artistic styles which might be said to show faithfulness to objectivity and those more in line with deconstruction or denaturalization. So, while Rushdie's critics accuse him of flights of fantasy and representational methods adverse to radicalism, Rushdie examines intimately the radical and liberating probable of multiple modes of representation. Rather, they also propose alternative means to establish objectivity and to access the real.

Likewise, Rushdie constantly and expansively literalizes various normally used metaphors to generate a world where language and materiality are nearly continuous. Rushdie falls into what appears to be a characteristically postmodern relativism. The pseudo-scientific language and intricate ends Saleem takes to connect him to history points the reader away from taking Saleem's claims gravely. Saleem goes on to define each of his four terms, noting how he affects his nation both literally and allegorically and how India affects him in both manners.

No doubt, with such an intricate rubric any member of the nation could find correspondences between history and their own lives, but of course this is, at least somewhat, the point Rushdie makes here. Equally important, however, is the insinuation that such elaborate structuring sacrifices referentiality for unity. This is clear when Saleem's mania for form and consistency produce a close communication between his own life and India's but does so by generating obvious mistakes.

While it is unquestionably part of a fiction, its laying claim to historical personages and events seems to allow it to be read as untrue as well. The crucial peculiarity between fictional truths, untruths, and outright lies are, however, central to the novel, and are only in part evident in the mistakes made by its narrator. However, Rushdie is vigilant, to show that not only are some fictions preferable to others, but also that fiction itself is not, in itself, a lie. Rushdie also deploys an additional important gray area amid truth and falsehood in

order to insist on the political and moral consequence of maintaining some measure of historical materialism; that of metaphor.

Perhaps, the most invasive of Rushdie's narrative strategies that are used both to expose the pitfalls of historical discourse and to insist upon its necessity is the literalization of commonly used metaphors. Rushdie self-consciously takes metaphors regularly employed in predictable textbook accounts of Indian history and makes them literal. Metaphor, by its nature, colors the arrangement of events and lends it a degree of interpretation, by comparing one set of events to something else. If history is supposed to be a translucent presentation of past events, its heavy confidence on metaphors exposes the degree to which it depends upon the conventions of fictional narrative and tropological language that describes not the event itself, but something else entirely.

The fantastic, profligate, and fairy-tale feel of *Midnight's Children* that Naipaul criticizes comes principally from the literal presentation of historiography's metaphorical excesses, not from any science-fiction style going away of imagination. Rather, it reveals how these flights of fancy, these deviations from the reality of considerably lived experience, are already installed in discourse that is apparently most reliant on the materiality of life itself, that of history.

In doing so, Rushdie seems to offer the opportunity that both the nation and its history are nothing if not a metaphor. We arrive, then, at the intricate and baffling finale, that *Midnight's Children* proposes India itself as a fiction built largely upon the discourse of traditional history, the stories of India that create its imagined community. These histories, in turn, are built upon a series of metaphors that, when literalized in *Midnight's Children*, disclose the extrication between what could be said to have truly occurred and the collective vision expressed through historical discourse. It seems, at the very least, that while shared fictions may be indispensable to construct a nation, and these fictions can have no relation to the truth of the historical past built as they are upon metaphors and tropes that do not describe lived experience, but give us an alternative fantasy world.

Saleem here argues to Padma, that although the existence of the "*Midnight's children*" is metaphorical, it is, even so, real and true. Saleem's perseverance that fictions, stories, and legends are not unavoidably the opposite of facts, truth and reality, and that truth has metaphorical content is not limited to this conversation of the children, but extends to various episodes in the novel. Rushdie is more concerned, I suggest, with the exigencies of accurate historical representation and how, illogically, metaphor and myth may help us to achieve this goal where conventional methods cannot. As vertiginous as this comparison becomes if looked at closely, it is clear that for Rushdie metaphor is a gateway to truth as much as it is an obfuscation of it and is not necessarily that which leads us astray.

In this world, Saleem's India, reality does have metaphorical content and, indeed, the metaphorical is the real. *Midnight's Children* an attempt to stand for the real India of the twentieth century, although with some momentous differences instead, the reader is rhetorically instructed to streamline that text from the one they are given, that of the fictional world. The edifice of a fictional world in which metaphor and authentic experience are coterminous allows Rushdie to draw this peculiarity, for in this world, lies and mistakes still are common occurrences and prevent a translucent historical representation, even in a world in which, within the logic of post structural theory, such transparent depiction would be practicable.

Metaphor and narrative are here seen as the stimuli to the social and political thoughts which is necessary for change, while falsehoods, lies, and unrealities are positioned as powers for stasis and lack of movement.

"What's real anymore? What's true?" (MC. 90), Saleem cautiously separates the two seeming synonyms:

"What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same." *True*, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside stories Mary Pereira told me: Mary my ayah who was nothing more and less than a mother; Mary who knew everything about all of us. *True* was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman's finger pointed in the picture on my wall, while the young Raleigh listened to his tales? Now, writing this in my Angle poised light, I measure truth against those early things: Is this how Mary would have told it? I ask. Is this what that fisherman would have said? (MC. 90; emphasis in original)

In *Midnight's Children*, conclusion is most certainly enforced. In fact, the whole notion of closure is associated with repressive political regimes that, through the use of force, foreclose the opportunity of narratable

leftovers and utter a world of inflexibly defined possibilities through the exploitation of truth. This enforcement of closure is, however, accompanied by its effacement in the leftovers that are evidently accomplished of producing further narratives.

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Abbreviations:

- [1]. MC --- Midnight's Children.
- [2]. IHL ---- Imaginary Homelands.