

## Changing Textual Identities and Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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### ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, connects the destiny of one family, and of one character-narrator in particular, with the destiny of India, by symbolically associating Saleem Sinai's birth with that of the new nation. *Midnight's Children* is a loose allegory for events in India both before and primarily, after the independence and partition of India. The protagonist and narrator of the story is Saleem Sinai, born at the exact moment when Indian became an independent country. He was born with telepathic powers, as well as an enormous and constantly dripping nose with an extremely sensitive sense of smell. The textual journey that follows plays with concepts such as margin and centre, identity and otherness, unity and division etc. While witnessing Saleem's changing sense of self, India is also revealed as a stage for the inter-change of multiple perspectives on the idea of the nation. Thus, 'the myth of the nation' becomes the pretext for the display of postcolonial attitudes and fallacies, due, in part, to its focus on establishing a compact and well-defined sense of identity. The aim of the paper is to show that in *Midnight's Children*, magical realism and textual identities are used within the post-colonial structure to handle post-colonial issues

### KEYWORDS

Otherness; Identity; Nation; Narration; Children.

The fact that history is the victor's version of events is, by now, a long-acknowledged reality. And in the hands of the conqueror history becomes thus a means of justifying itself and wrapping the intrusion, the occupation, the violence, and all the other negative aspects of its actions in the hide of a civilizing mission. As Leela Gandhi reminds us, Hegel used the term 'history' in connection with 'civilization', associating them both with Western Europe. The result is that colonialism was to be seen, and it was often said to be an attempt to awaken the savage and less fortunate peoples around the world to the blessings of Western social organization. Thus, the division between superior and inferior, even between human and non-

human. In this context, Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, comes with a deconstructive force from within the tradition of colonialist historical recordings and it shatters the preconceived ideas already in place in the mind of a colonial, or even an early postcolonial reader. In the words of Edward Said:

The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, to transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories is of particular interest in Rushdie's work (2)

The novel interweaves three major themes; the creation and telling of history, the creation and telling of a nation's and an individual's identity, and the creation and telling of stories. Within these three connected themes, the novel explores the problems of post-coloniality, depicted in the novel as the difficulties in assigning one's point of personal or national origin, the problems in determining one's personal and national history and the impossibility of finding and achieving personal and national "authentic" identity. This voyage in, as Said calls it, is taken through the pen of Saleem Sinai, the most suitable representative of the multiple cultural voices on the background of an India confronted with the colonial experience. He declares his identity to be like a receptacle full of other people's identities that flow into him:

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! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well [3].

Using western ideologies and theories, Rushdie makes Saleem, the narrator and 'author' in the novel, turn tables and move the centre where some of the most recent postcolonial theorizers believe it should be, that is, somewhere in between cultural identities and otherings, playing a game of mirrors in which the focalizer is also the focalized and identity is created from pieces, as a multi-cultural puzzle. The levels on which this game takes place are various: textual, historical (basically textual as well through writing and re-writing), implying racial, gender, social, political, and religious considerations. Saleem Sinai begins his story, of a person hand-cuffed to history, a

representative of India's destiny as a new-born nation.

This year [1947] there was [...] a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will - except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood [4].

There is a sense of irony in the whole paragraph and the whole affair, so to speak. What comes to be called 'the Indian world' had existed long before colonization, guided by its own rules and delighting (or not) in its own variety and multiplicity on every level of its existence. In a mythical land, a 'myth of the nation' is born. The paradox is that the so-called independence is actually a passage to a type of organization that is not specific to it, but it was brought by the Western world. It is not a return to the previous state, which seems impossible. In the words of Timothy Brennan:

If European nationalism was a project of unity on the basis of conquest and economic expediency, insurgent or popular nationalism [...] is for the most part a project of consolidation following an act of separation from Europe. It is a task of reclaiming community from within boundaries defined by the very power whose presence denied community [5]

The novel employs different levels of hybridization, each depending on the other to exist and work within the text, through which the novel illustrates. India's emerging post-coloniality. The ability of the narrator, Saleem Sinai to wordlessly communicate with the other Indian children born on the same day, the date of Indian independence August 15, 1947, demonstrates how magical realism gives Indians the opportunity to communicate the thoughts, desires and dreams of a nation.

The novel also employs the formal technique of magical realism, a hybrid of realism and the supernatural, through myth and historical events, and Rushdie simultaneously represents ordinary events alongside fantastic elements (Abrams 2003). Hence, these

Midnight Children literally give voice to an entire subcontinent, without the narrative being controlled by British colonial powers; this post-colonial narrative becomes possible with magical realism's supernatural power to connect post-colonial citizens and allows them to communicate together (D'Haen 198).

In this novel, perhaps more than in any other, Rushdie seems to address this tendency, which is the result of the chance of choice or a combination of the two, and the examined cases are not only national, political or social but personal as well. The experience of Aadam Aziz seems to subscribe to a similar trajectory, by choice and chance, since, after he spends a year as a student in Germany he has adopted some of the mental structures of the European West. When he returns 'home', he attempts to retrace his previous perception of it, "his childhood's springs in Paradise" [6], but he is unable to do so. Just as Aadam Aziz's decision to accept his newly created and not very well culturally-determined self is

marked by blood and tears, so will be India's decision of finding a new place for itself in a world in which it has no choice but to enter. Saleem's narrative underlines this situation as being one of the causes for the troubles (and failure even) of new-born India of acquiring a sense of unitary and stable national self which does not seem to apply to it. The other may be the mistaken presupposition from which it starts. Saleem records a fragment from Nehru's discourse at the moment of India's birth:

A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance... [...] We end today a period of ill-fortune [7].

The formal technique of magical realism becomes the frame work of the novel, through which the characters become able to communicate their individual perspectives and provide their own more accurate versions of history. The term magic realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a tendency in German painting which demonstrated an altered reality (Bowers 2004, P8). Later it was used by Venezuelan Arturo Ulsar Pietri to describe the works of Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes. Magical realism is the very opposite of absolutism and the traditional. Writers like Rushdie have used this technique to open up new opportunities, varieties and wonders as metaphors for the issues they focus on e.g. celebration of plurality, identity crises, multi-culturist and hope for a new nation.

Magical realism is not merely a stylistic device used by Rushdie, but instead, it remains a necessary formal innovation needed to adequately express India's new post-coloniality. And since most often than not, this is supposed to be done by a complete removal of any colonial influence, the operation proves to be

impossible. However, in Rushdie's novel, this is shown at the level of national history and politics only through the lens of personal history. The narrator prepares his readers (with Padma as a representative within the text) for the birth of the one, the child born on August 15th, 1947, at midnight. He wraps his narrative in almost mythical hues (he is prophesized in a manner which may recall the great religious teachers), but he also never forgets to undermine it and 'trivialize' it at the same time (after all, no one is a prophet in his own country). His coming is seen as the first sign of a new nation and it is recorded as such by the reporters of the Times of India and by a letter from Nehru – "we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" [8].

The irony comes from the fact that, although the child was actually switched at birth and he is the illegitimate son of an Englishman, Methwold – allegedly the descendant of an imperialistic officer – and a poor Indian woman, the truth of Nehru's words remains, Saleem being indeed a mirror of the nation's identity, but in a different way than expected. The years of Saleem's development are wrought with fear of failure. For example, when the second prophet of his coming, Purushottam, the sadhu, who had spent his time living close to Mubarak – He who is blessed – loses his healing powers, Saleem immediately feels this to be a sign of his own failure to come up to the holy man's expectations:

The sadhu Purushottam suddenly lost his magic. Water had worn a bald patch in his hair; the steady dripping of the years had worn him down. Was he disillusioned with his blessed child, his Mubarak? Was it my fault that his mantras lost their power? [9]

It is a haunting fear of failure that seems to mirror India's young government. When the new is actually revealed to be 'tainted'

by the old, by the very intrusions everybody was trying to avoid, the reaction is one of acceptance on a personal as well as a national level:

when we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira [of switching the babies], we found that it made no difference! [...] In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts [10].

The next step is the attempt to re-define oneself and the nation, which Saleem does by writing or re-writing his story and history while also discussing it with a reader-narratee, thus the inclusion of *Midnight's Children* within the category of historiographic metafiction. The purpose of all this seems to belong to the same family as Bill Ashcroft's observations:

The central strategy in transformations of colonial culture is the seizing of self-representation. Underlying all economic, political and social resistance is the struggle over representation that occurs in language, writing and other forms of cultural production. Representation can be defined as the process of giving concrete form to ideological concepts, and its importance in political projects of self-determination cannot be overestimated, because it involves the entire fabric of cultural life and the sense of identity that is inextricably woven into that fabric [11].

It might prove interesting to notice that Saleem Sinai is not the only Rushdian character who tries to gain identity by self-narration. A similar case, for instance, is that of Solly Solanka (double's' again) in *Fury*, a more recent novel. Within the same metafictional area of the connection between fiction and reality, Solanka travels through different types of creative

discourse in an attempt of determining the essence of his self and he has to face the textual and/or psychological otherness within before succeeding it. The term 'textual otherness' is connected to Solanka's fictional nature and it refers to the types of discourse that he does not feel as his own, as defining him, but as disrupting the unity of his self. Similarly, Sinai confronts the cultural definitions of self and others within himself, which he believes to be strongly connected to the cultural kaleidoscope that defines his country's identity as a nation. The purpose, which he himself states in the beginning of the narrative, is that of achieving a sense of unity:

time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity [12].

It is a common perception that magical realist fictions are often set in rural areas but some "politically motivated writers like Salman Rushdie have set their magical realist novels in big cities which are under political and social tension" (Bowers 2004, P.32) Stephen Slemon (1996) has contributed largely to the connection between magical realism and post-colonialism by presenting magical realism as an instrument to undermine the Western concept of stability. In the article "Magic Realism as a Post-Colonial Discourse", he emphasizes the function of magic realism as the weapon of the "silenced, marginalized disposed voices in their fight against inherited notions of imperial history" (P 15).

At a simple level, the novel is the story of Saleem Sinai, and, at a deep level, the story of his country where Saleem is important as an individual, a representative of Independence and a literary mechanism (Goonetilleke, 1998, P 21). Saleem hints that when his body falls apart, he will crumble into 630 million pieces, the total number of India's population. The mixture of the fantastic and the normal is an important aspect of magical realism. At the beginning of the novel, the passage which deals with Saleem's grandfather in Kashmir is a wonderful example of blending the real and magical elements. In the spring of 1915, Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz hits the ground while praying and three drops of blood fall from his nose and assume the shape of rubies; his tears become solid like diamonds. In a magical realist text, there is a conflict between the world of fantasy and the world of reality, and each world works for creating a fictional world from the other. In *Midnight's Children* through the magical, the realistic creates its voice and makes it heard. Rushdie has used magical realist elements by mixing the real and the fantastic, twisting time and including myth and folklore. His magic realism has its origin more in the inner and psychological worlds, inner conflicts, moments of uncertainty, the style of storytelling of the unreliable narrator, and less in the beliefs, rituals and illusions of people as a whole.

Another appearance of magical realism in the novel is the character of Tai, the boatman, who claims to belong to great antiquity. He claims himself so old that he has "watched the mountains being born and seen emperors die" (Rushdie 2006, P. 13); he also says that he "saw that Isa, that Christ when he came to Kashmir" (P. 13). Tai's longevity represents old and pre-colonial India. Milan Abdullah, a political figure before Independence, has a strange trail of humming in a sharp and high-pitched manner, without any interruption,

which causes a certain effect on the people surrounding him.

In a country that founded four major religions, Rushdie's extensive use of religious motifs is a necessity in acknowledging India's inherent spirituality. Rushdie harnesses this religious saturation to provide a narrative and thematic framework with which to familiarize the reader with the story. Saleem's repeated allusions and linkages to Christ, Buddha, Mohammad, and Ganesh provide the narrative with a feel similar to a sacred text. The melding of these differing religions, moreover, both through the character of Saleem himself and the plot in general, forces religious similarities, rather than differences, to prominence. Through this promotion of religious equality and understanding, Rushdie thereby cleverly undermines religious importance. He achieves this both through characters formally denouncing beliefs and by magical instances, initially attributed to God, but which are explained through rational means.

In addition to religious diversity, India has thousands of spoken languages and over twenty official languages. For India, such a wide range means another potentially divisive element in the creation of its national identity. However, Rushdie's use of English mixed with several phonetic re-creations of Indian words ensures a kind of linguistic objectivity. Since "the language of the colonizers is wilfully assumed and transformed" by the author, it acts to "[subvert] the imperial gaze" (Faris 158). As a highly politically-motivated novel, the story also addresses the authoritative tradition which suggests "that the price to pay for a comforting univocality may be terror" and therefore the aggregate of personal histories counteracts violence (Faris 145). Through his magical abilities, Saleem opposes authority, an integral trait of transculturation, and is presented as a

modern Shaman who journeys through sacred space and time but disengages it from its beautifully contrived scaffolding of orderly time and orderly space bound to great authorities, church and state (Faris 154).

Wendy B Faris (1995) states that "in several instances, magical realist text is written in reaction to the totalitarian regimes" (P 179) and that "Rushdie writes *Midnight's Children* in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi's autocratic rule" (P. 180). This remark brings to light the fact that magical realism is an alternative way of stating things indirectly.

Through magical realism one can discuss reality without actually discussing it and what the author cannot say directly can be said by an unreliable narrator like Saleem who is the liminal space of the meeting of magic and realism (Gardner, 2012, P. 49).

The harshness of reality is questioned and challenged by the lightheartedness of magical and fantastic elements, and through this contrast, reality is emphasized.

Saleem writes the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his still young nation, a chronicle written for his son who like his father is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history. Saleem uses magical realism, with its blending of mythology, realism, fantasy and history, to tell his story and this enables him effectively to continue his story and to express his position as a postcolonial citizen. Magic and references to ancient myth control and structure the narrative and are well-established in contemporary history.

As the characters become hybridized socially, through their shifting relationships with each other, the characters alter and change. Through those character interactions and character

changes, the novel depicts social shifts and historical changes. The relationship between the other midnight's children with whom Saleem can communicate, alters after these children learn their parents' religious and traditional beliefs. Before this cultural indoctrination, the children communicate with each other openly, able to discuss their different gifts and talents, but after learning their cultural traditions, the relationships between the children disintegrate. Through the novel's presentation of a multitude of differing characters and allowing these characters to articulate their own histories and stories, a new colonial and post-colonial history emerges through these varying characters' voices, which remained silenced in an imperial and colonial India.

The novel's social and cultural hybridization, exposed through the multitude of differing characters, also allows historical hybridizations to occur, through which the characters may explain accurate versions of their own colonial and post-colonial history, as opposed to the one-sided version for the British colonists. The novel uses ample human depiction of these narratives.

Rushdie's manipulation of roles regarding the anti-self-marks his fundamental divergence from the rest of magical realism. While transculturation is evident and continues throughout the novel, it is never truly implemented and completed. A prominent aspect of Faris's extensive discussion of transculturation focuses on the idea that the process in "magical realism is a two-way cultural bridge" (Faris 157), which enables "a cultural conversation that heals" (Faris 155). This healing occurs through the convergence, and ultimate merging, of the colonizer's empirical reality with the native culture's ancient spiritualism, creating a collective national identity. In this novel, Rushdie leverages many of the techniques typical of transculturation in an effort to show the overriding similarities of

differing cultures. As Faris notes, Rushdie's "erosion of individual identities [relates] to his desire for greater pluralism in society, applying this idea specifically to Islamic religion" (Faris 168).

Rushdie's desire for transculturation is similarly evident in his use of language. His break from the traditional creation of the anti-self, however, proposes an alternative to the process of transculturation in magical realist texts as outlined by Faris. That Shiva is Saleem's anti-self, the person from whom he realizes and gains power, suggests it is not only the colonizer that India must overcome to achieve unification, but also its own discursive cultural identities. As India gains its independence, it becomes more like its colonizers, a transformation that is made quite apparent in the estate of Methwold, as the Indians become "infected by cocktail-hours, budgerigars, pianolas and English accents" (Rushdie 110).

The Indian sub-continent is associated with concepts of multiplicity, hybridity, and plurality. Rushdie (1991) in his "Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism" (1981-91) says:

My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism hybridity... to my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature super abundant, heterogeneous, and many things at once (P 32)

The *Midnight's Children's* Conference is a model for pluralism and evidence of the prospective power innate within coexisting diversity which is a natural and definitive element of Indian culture. It is done by using magical realism.

For the sake of their privacy I am refusing to distinguish the voices from one another for one thing, my narrative could not cope with five hundred and eighty-one-fully rounded personalities; for another, the children, despite their

wondrously discrete and varied gifts, remained to my mind, a sort of many headed monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel, they were the very essence of multiplicity. (Rushdie, 2006, P 317)

Saleem's fascination to enter into other people's minds is a magical idea derived from his desire to create his own narrative. His desire to combine events like sports, films, and daily affairs and create and tell one's story highlights the formal technique of magical realism. He deconstructs the historical events through the use of magical realism. Events such as the nationalist propaganda, the state of emergency declared by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh (East Pakistan) are all recounted through magical realism. It provides a suitable ground for Rushdie to criticize the political history life in the country and reveals the attempts of political leaders to appropriate truth to serve their vested interests. Due to his supernatural ability to peep into the minds of other people, what he calls "mind-hopping" he touched on a variety of social and political issues and revealed the problems, a newly independent country can encounter. Saleem's description that "At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh – I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire at another moment I was starving to death in Orrisa" (Rushdie, 2006, P 140) reveals the contrasting images of richness and poverty prevalent that time. This inequality, corruption, discrimination and misleading practice of politicians are all highlighted through Saleem's magical power of peeping into other's minds thereby making it more effective.

The criticism of the practices and injustices of government during the Emergency is also described through magical realism. During the period of emergency from 1974-77 many oppressive and detrimental actions were taken and

the sights of the citizens were curtailed. Rushdie has fictionalized those events through magical realism.

The creation of only one specific identity a personal identity or a national identity becomes impossible, due to the impossibility of condensing various people's perspectives into one coherent narrative.

Saleem realizes that each person has his or her own personal history, and although, as Jameson explains, national history plays a role in a post-colonial citizen's narrative, one's memory exerts a 'special' kind of truth over one's narrative. Saleem attempts to explain this idea to Padma.

Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also, but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent vision of events, and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own (Rushdie 242).

Thus, memory becomes the author of one's reality, just as Saleem becomes the author of his own reality and history by combining mythology and cultural histories through magical realism. Saleem attempts to fashion his narrative, while simultaneously constructing an Indian narrative but he struggles with the relationship between truth, reality and storytelling. He confuses dates in his narrative and attempts to explain what occurred.

Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say now, what the actual sequence of events might have been, in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time (190).



*Midnight's Children* presents the possibility of a unified country by re-imagining the history people of India share within a context of mutual cultural tolerance. Through highlighting the various aspects of culture that Indians experience together, Rushdie emphasizes the necessity for a more pluralistic culture. By deviating from the traditional roles of colonizer and colonized in the creation of the anti-self, this novel portrays the individualistic approach to transculturation as futile. Saleem's appropriation of a fellow native as his anti-self is reflexive of the internal turmoil that perpetrated the failure of transculturation. Rather than unifying together against the oppressive legacy of colonialism, India further divided itself through cultural intolerance. The greatest obstacle in emerging as a truly successful country with a hybrid culture is not the wounds England left behind, but rather India's own self-inflicted wounds.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a cornerstone of postcolonial literature. The novel clearly illustrates these important ideas of post-coloniality, the creation and telling of history, identity and storytelling. The novel illustrates the problems of post-coloniality, the difficulty in assigning an origin point, determining

one's own history and finding an authentic identity. The novel itself remains the embodiment of hybridity through the formal hybridity of magical realism, the social hybridity of the multiple and diverse characters, and the historical hybridity of the character's perspectives, along with the hybridity of storytelling itself with Saleem's conflict between oral storytelling and novel writing, the novel becomes able to adequately, respond to and attempt to solve the issues surrounding post-coloniality. By the end of the novel, it is quite evident that India is a nation of individuals rather than a tolerant conglomerate intent upon change. Indira Gandhi's slogan, "India is Indira and Indira is India," further emphasizes her individualistic approach to government (Rushdie 483). In what is supposed to be a democracy, Indira rules the country with a univocality that is representative only of herself, and she assumes absolute control when she is threatened. It is only fitting that Saleem dies "alone in the vastness of the numbers" as all 600 million citizens of India march over him, "reducing [him] to specks of voiceless dust" (Rushdie 532-3). The uncooperative masses trample over the individual and the dust that once sought unification is forever fragmented into pieces, never to be whole again.

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