



Magic Realism as Rewriting Postcolonial Identity: A Study of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

*Magic realism as a literary narrative mode has been used by different critics and writers in their fictional works. The majority of the magic realist narrative is set in a postcolonial context and written from the perspective of the politically oppressed group. Magic realism, by giving the marginalized and the oppressed a voice, allows them to tell their own story, to reinterpret the established version of history written from the dominant perspective and to create their own version of history. This innovative narrative mode in its opposition of the notion of absolute history emphasizes the possibility of simultaneous existence of many truths at the same time. In this paper, the researcher, in efforts to unfold conditions culturally marginalized, explores the relevance of alternative sense of reality to reinterpret the official version of colonial history in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* from the perspective of magic realism. As a methodological approach to respond to the fiction text, magic realism endows reinterpretation and reconsideration of the official colonial history in reaffirmation of identity of the culturally marginalized people with diverse voices.*

Keywords: *Magic realism, postcolonial identity, voices, margin*

Introduction: Revisiting Colonial History

The term 'magic realism' which was first used in painting by the German art critic in 1925 has been a popular literary and strategic mode of writing. It refers to the blend of everyday reality with fantasy. Magic realism is now considered a literary tool and narrative mode where realistic elements appear in a magical setting. The term is associated with putting magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative to have a deeper understanding of reality without suspecting the improbability of these events. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* reposes India's journey from colonialism to independence, and parallels the personal and family history of the protagonist Saleem Sinai with the national history of India. Saleem, with his magical power to enter other people's minds, allows him to read and control the other by revealing events unknown to other people. The use of magic realism enables him to create his own version of history from the marginalized perspective, tell his story in the colonized world, and reinterpret

the colonial official version of history written from perspectives of dominant authorities. By using magic realism, Rushdie's narrator succeeds to represent a different, but internally consistent, version of reality to offer alternative visions of India, and to comment on the social and political problems of postcolonial India.

From Colonial to Postcolonial India

The magical elements are illustrated like normal happenings that are presented in a clear-cut manner which allows the real and the fantastic to be accepted in the same stream of thought. At one point, Maggie Ann Bowers, in *Magic(al) Realism*, explicates connection between magic and realism:

. . . in magic realism 'magic' refers to the mystery of life; in marvelous and magical realism 'magic' refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science. The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show. (20)

Some traits of the magical realist trend are identified as the "mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories" (Cuddon 488). Blending the realistic and the fantastic, the narrator explicates the inexplicable.

Magic realist writers have used this technique to open up new opportunities, varieties and wonders as metaphors from the issues they focus on. Through magical events, writers formulate new perspectives and devices to explore the narrative world. By applying magic realism perspectives, readers can explore an alternative history in opposition to the official version of history. These magical events take place in a real world and through which the stories remain intimate, not unbelievable. Magic realist works are not mere fantasies that can be dismissed; they refuse to be tied by the restrictions of real life rather help us see and think differently of the ordinary events or issues we come across daily.

Magic realism contains an implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite. In the historical context of India, this narrative mode breaks from the discourse of privileged centers of literature. This is a mode primarily about and for ex-centrics: the geographically, socially and economically marginalized. Therefore, magic realism's alternative world works to correct the reality of established viewpoints (like realism, naturalism, modernism). Magic realist texts, under this logic, are subversive works, revolutionary against socially dominant forces. Alternatively, the socially dominant may implement magic realism to disassociate themselves from their power discourse.

Stephen Slemon has contributed largely to the connection between magic realism and postcolonialism by presenting the former as an instrument to undermine the Western concept of stability. In "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," Slemon emphasizes the function of magical realism as the weapon of the "silenced, marginalized, disposed voices" in their fight against "inherited notions of imperial history" (15). In this light, Slemon considers magic realism an instrument to address social and political issues while turning away from the Western style of narration and literary tradition, and thus, asserting own sense of identity. Slemon also emphasizes that "magic realism as a literary practice seems to be linked with the perception of 'living in the margin' encoding

with it perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial center and its totalizing systems” (10). So, in this sense, magic realism is not only a moderate theoretical frame to explain the world in a different way but also a strong protest against the social, cultural and political hegemony of imperial thought.

Rushdie’s magic realism has its origin more in the inner psychic world, the story-telling style of the unreliable narrator, and less in beliefs, rituals and illusions of people. Through magic realism, Rushdie questions different social and political issues, like poverty, inequality, social hierarchy, oppression, and so on. He critiques warfare between India and Pakistan, India and China, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Moreover, he shows his disgust against Indira Gandhi’s ‘State of Emergency’, where under the ‘Forced Sterilization Program’ the midnight’s children, including Saleem are denied of their reproductive and magical power. At the same time, Rushdie’s narrative lambasts Gandhi’s domineering role in the destruction of promise and hope of a new future for India and the Indian people.

Rushdie is probably the most well-known writer of magic realism in English language (Bowers 47). He uses the magical realist narrative style where myth and fantasy are blended with real life. His *Midnight’s Children* parallels the life history of the protagonist Saleem Sinai with the national history of postcolonial India. As a postcolonial citizen, Saleem combines his multiple identities, and his story stands for the plural identities of India and the search for self-identity. Since it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to deal with these issues through realism, Rushdie has rightly and tactfully used magical realist technique. Besides, this, “the real history of India that Rushdie saw and in the first thirty years of his and the nation’s life was so fantastical that a traditional realist novel could not properly describe it” (Schurer 45). In the novel, magical realism is used within postcolonial structure and to handle different postcolonial issues, such as identity problems, hybridity, reinterpretation of the official version of history and the emergence of a new postcolonial history, creation of one’s own story, and so on.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the unreliable narrator reposes beliefs and illusions of people of the fictional world, critiquing those of the real one. “This is typical of magical realist writing in English since because it appears later than its counterparts in Europe and Latin America, it frequently produces forms of magical realism that combine influences from writers across the globe” (Bowers, 47). Moreover, Rushdie accepts equally the usual and the unusual, and combines lyrical and fantastic writing with an examination of characters, and an implicit criticism of politics and society. Rushdie’s narrator unfolds Indira Gandhi’s Regime and the ‘State of Emergency’ she declared by using magical realism, an effective narrative device to unravel truths.

In the beginning of the novel, the passage which deals with Saleem’s grandfather in Kashmir is a wonderful example of blending the magical and the real elements. In one spring morning in 1915, Saleem’s grandfather hits the ground while praying and three drops of blood fall from his nose and turn into rubies; his tears become solid like diamonds:

One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the payer mat, transformed into rubies. (Rushdie 4)

Another instance of magic realism in the novel is the character of Tai, the boatman, particularly, Tai's claim to be of great antiquity. He claims himself so old that he has "watched the mountains being born" and "seen emperors die" (13); he also says that he "saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir" (13). The reason why Rushdie had shown such impossible longevity of Tai is that he wanted Tai to represent old and pre-colonial India. Milan Abdullah, a political figure before independence, has the strange trait of humming without any interruption, which has sharp and high pitch and which causes a certain effects on people surrounding him. "It was a hum that could fall low enough to give you a toothache, and when it rose to its highest, most feverish pitch, it had the ability of inducing erections in anyone within its vicinity" (55). In one incident, "his humming causes the glass windows of the room fall down" (58). Similarly, Abdullah reclaims that "his body was hard and the long curved blades had trouble killing him; one broke on a rib" (58). In these incidents, characters reveal the magical and mystical out of the materials of the narrative. Bringing readers to the inner psychic center, Rushdie's narrator reestablishes the sacred and profane, and terrestrial and celestial.

Later in the story, we also come across different fantastical events. The soothsayer Ramram made a strange prophecy over the birth, life and death of Saleem, where he said, "A son, Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland neither older nor younger.... There will be two heads but you shall see only one there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees.... Spittoons will brain him doctors will drain him jungle will claim him wizards reclaim him!" (114-15).

Saleem's narrator in *Midnight's Children* brings together some of the significant events in the world in midnight of 15 August 1947 parallels the birth of independent India with magical power of telepathy. It was the day India was declared independent from the British Regime. The novel creates a symbolic reading of Saleem's character by supporting his narrative of a new born nation, India. Along this line of theoretical frame, Fredric Jameson argues that the third-world texts should be read as 'national allegories' since unlike first-world texts there is no significant partition between the public and the private, between the poetic and the political. In support to this analogy between myth and reality, Jameson recourses the postcolonial India: "The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69). Jameson's reconstruction of the real out of blending of the myth and fantasy narrates the history of India more effectively than that of the history book itself. In that sense, fictional sounds more realistic than history itself through the narrative mode of magical realism.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's narrator remarks an analogy between India and Saleem. At that point, the narrator reinforces: "[...] I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades there was to be no escape" (Rushdie 3). In support to this explication of the captive individual, embodiment of the colonized India: "At a simple level, the novel is the story of Saleem Sinai, and, at a deeper level, the story of his country where Saleem is important as an individual, a representative of Independence, and a literary mechanism" (Goonetilleke 21). His story is written for his son who, like his father, is both tied and supernaturally gifted by history. There are lots of elements in the novel that force a reader to see Saleem as India.

Through the magical resemblance between Saleem's face and India's map, and through the magical association between the private and the public events, Rushdie establishes Saleem as the microcosm of India, embodiment of the nation-state. Saleem's personal history is essentially the history of India. As Saleem was born at the precise moment of India's independence, he considers himself a quintessence of India's history and a representation of modern India. The strange affinity between Saleem's physical body and India, and the parallelism between his personal life events and the national events, which is purely magical, suggests that he, as an individual, represents the entirety of Indian history.

The Making of Postcolonial Identity

The Indian sub-continent is associated with postcolonial concepts of multiplicity, hybridity and plurality. It is quite difficult and, to some extent, impossible to define a diverse country like India by a homogeneous and authentic national identity. Having people from different cultures and languages, India is defined by its diversity, and people from different religion further pluralize the identity of the nation. Rushdie avoids the concept of a homogenous Indian culture, and in his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, he 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 superabundant, heterogeneous, and many things at once" (32). The Midnight's Children's Conference is a model for pluralism, and evidence to the prospective power innate within coexisting diversity, which is a natural and definitive element of Indian culture. Saleem's relationship with other midnight's children clearly exposes the multiplicity and diversity of India:

For the sake of their privacy, I am refusing to distinguish the voices from one another; and for other reasons. 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, and I see no point in dividing them now. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 317)

The multiplicity and plurality is a dominant theme in *Midnight's Children*, and is also what Saleem refers to when he says, "[t]here are many versions of India as Indians" (Rushdie 323). Saleem's life becomes the microcosm of the whole nation.

Hybridity remains crucial in *Midnight's Children* because every aspect of the novel is filled by blending different elements and characteristics. "Besides the use of hybridity, the novel also uses humor which allows exploration of Indian history and postcoloniality" (Bounse 3). It permits the novel to create its own identity instead of forcing it to be a mere chronicle of history. Saleem's telepathic power of communication with other midnight's Indian children from different parts of India unfolds how magical realism allows Indians to share the thoughts, desires, aspirations and dreams of a nation. These midnight's children give voice to a whole subcontinent, and Rushdie's postcolonial narrative is only possible with the supernatural power of magical realism to reunite postcolonial citizens within the same cultural history of India.

Saleem, who struggles for personal identity, becomes a symbolic counterpart to India, which struggles to reunite its multiple nationhoods in post-independence period;

his life becomes a microcosm of post-independent India (Miller 46). After the loss of telepathic power, Saleem gains another as his huge nose starts smelling emotions and intentions. From these events and ideas emerge fantasy so complex, and the novel remains a constant investigation of the relations between order, reality, and fantasy. Because of such lives within him, it is very difficult for him to narrate his personal story and he feels that, like India, he must reconcile his multiple identities in order to narrate himself. He points out:

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracle places rumors, 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. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 4)

“Saleem’s struggle with self-identity lies in what Rushdie has called ‘multiple rooting’ which leads to multiple identities” (Miller 46). He was switched by the nurse at his birth, and was raised by parents who are not biologically his own. When his parents came to know his true identity, they let him leave with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia for quite a long period of time, and later he moved to Pakistan with his parents. Like Rushdie, who is a product of multiple nations, Saleem must find his true identity by going through his multiple identities. These allusions to his diverse parentages are related to the disintegration of identity and memory.

In *Midnight's Children*, the coexistence of multiple realities within the same space becomes a metaphor for different aspects of history, and provides Rushdie opportunities to sharply critique the political condition of the country which reaches its zenith in the condemnation of the maltreatment of the Gandhian Regime in the 1970s. The existence of myth and magic on the one hand, and Indian history on the other hand forms the main argument against the charge of escapism in the novel. Not only do the magic and Indian histories coexist, but it is through the lens of magical realism Rushdie has deconstructed the historical events. Events such as the nationalist propaganda, the ‘State of Emergency’ declared by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh (East Pakistan) where India helped Bangladesh win the war, are all recounted through magical realist lens. It also provides a suitable and favorable ground for Rushdie to severely criticize the political life in the country. Again, magic realism does not counterbalance the political dimensions of the novel but achieves the opposition to social and political hegemony.

In *Midnight's Children*, out of a magical realist tale arise Rushdie’s comments on history, conceived as one, rationalized and mythologized simultaneously, constructed at the hands of the post-independent Indian leadership. The magical realist dimension is instrumental in Rushdie’s deconstruction of history as a colossal and reliable body of knowledge, and criticism of political leaders’ attempt to appropriate truth so as to serve their interests. Rushdie also criticizes different social issues such as poverty, inequality, social hierarchy and class system, the oppression of poor, and so on. In the novel political violence, and oppression is apparent from the very beginning and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre is one of the most significant ones. British administration was trying to stop all kinds of political meetings and in such a meeting in Amritsar in 1919, the soldiers of General Dyer killed 370 innocent people where Aadam Aziz was lucky enough to survive only because he fell over from a magical sneeze. Nibert Schurer says

that Rushdie uses the massacre to point out how different individuals and traditions interpret history differently: while Aadam is horrified by the slaughter, Dyer believes that they have done a very good job (25).

By narrating the event from the perspective of Aadam Sinai, Rushdie has given the Indian citizens the ability to create their own version of history. Through the character of the Rani (Queen) of Cooch Naheen, who is interested in cross-cultural concerns, Rushdie seems to say that these high-class Indians were busy with their luxuries and are becoming anglicized without paying any attention to the plight of the poor native people. He also mentions the war between India-Pakistan, India-China and Pakistan-Bangladesh, and the military coup in Pakistan by which General Ayub Khan came to the power. Apart from the British, West Pakistan has a colonial attitude towards East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and India has a paternal stance towards both, which might imply the continuation of the legacy of colonialism.

At one point, Wendy Faris draws analogy between magical realism and totalitarian regime. Further, Faris notes that “in several instances, magical realist texts are written in reaction to the totalitarian regimes” (179) and that “Rushdie writes *Midnight’s Children* in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi’s autocratic rule” (180). Saleem’s telepathic association with other midnight’s children introduces him with a world totally unknown to and isolated from his family and friends, and makes him aware of the multi-layered realities of a postcolonial country and its citizens. Because of his supernatural ability to peep into the mind of other people, what he calls ‘mind-hopping’, he has the chance to touch on a variety of social and political issues, and to reveal the problems, a newly independent country like India may encounter. Young Saleem discovers the difference in the experience of people from different parts of the country and from different social status. Saleem chronicles his life story in the narrative description of the landscape of India:

At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pajama cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire ... at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa where there was food shortage as usual: I was two months old and my mother had run out of breast-milk. I occupied, briefly, the mind of a Congress Party worker, bribing a village schoolteacher to throw his weight behind the party of Gandhi and Nehru in the coming election campaign; also the thoughts of a Keralan peasant who had decided to vote Communist. My daring grew: one afternoon I deliberately invaded the head of our own State Chief Minister.... And finally I hit my highest point: I became Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister...“Look at me!” I exulted silently. “I can go anyplace I want!”
(*Midnight’s Children* 240-41)

In these collages of Indian history and colonial regime, Rushdie’s narrator contrasts images of richness and poverty. Rushdie’s intrusive narrator illustrates the abundant of foods and he wants to destroy the surplus one in one part of India. At the same time, it is exposed that people have been starving without food in another part of the same subcontinent. It is a criticism of the government and its failure to ensure equality among people. Further, this passage also sheds light on corrupt politicians who want to get power even by bribing individuals. Such digressions construct another alternative space where other characters gain brief existence in the novel and constantly draw attention to

their existence. In the meantime, these politicians add to the social and political criticism at the core of the novel.

Rushdie's revelations of the social hierarchy in postcolonial India through the Indian businessmen who, after Nehru's declaration of independence, begin to turn white and Saleem's official father Ahmed Sinai is one of them. In that context, such a magical transformation of color could imply the existing class and patriarchal system. In his father's symbolic whiteness, Saleem recognizes the way Indian businessmen had exploited the rest of the people, and become masters of their own destinies. "The skin pigmentation disorder which afflicts Indian businessmen could perhaps be seen as [...] the complicity of India's elite professional class in the global economic exploitation of India's relatively cheap labor power and natural resources" (Morton 40). Saleem also contrasts his father's business, as a capitalist agent, with his own social downfall, and his initial class-awareness. He identifies himself with a large number of the oppressed poor people, and provides an alternative history from his own marginalized perspective. He also talks about the class divisions between Brahmins and untouchable in his address to the Midnight's Children Conference.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem warns his readers against prematurely rejecting the socially marginal perspective as unreliable:

Don't make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium; or even the insanely exaggerated fantasies of a lonely, ugly child. I have stated before that I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written (and read aloud to stunned Padma) is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 200)

In this case in point, magic realism's use of the ex-centric categories of carnival, madness and childhood is another interesting case. Moreover, the post-Enlightenment's marginalizing constructions are subverted when magic realist fiction confronts them with other traditions that envision these.

Conclusion

I have explored Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* that has used magic realism in its unique way where they differ in terms of style and settings, that they belong to different magical realist traditions, and that the sources of their magical realism are not the same. Although it is true that Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* possesses magical power, he cannot be labeled as a magical realist device. Rushdie's English language magical realist writing combines both Latin American mythic tradition of magic realism and European surrealist tradition of magical realism. "His most characteristic form of magical realism is his 'magic realization of metaphor' in which Rushdie interprets a metaphor literally that is then enacted in the narrative" (Bowers 54). Magical realist writing is a perfect form of writing for a postcolonial immigrant, and a person with hybrid identity like Rushdie for its contrasting viewpoint.

From the study, I contend that magic realism reinterprets official or colonial version of history, gives voices to the oppressed, marginalized and disempowered, and allows them to tell their own stories from their own perspectives. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* emphasizes the political subjugation and different occurrences and issues of postcolonial Indian citizens. Magic realism also exposes the social, political and cultural

problems of a society, nation, community or race, and most importantly, conveys a sense of alternative truth.

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