

**ICONOCLASTIC PERSPECTIVE ON HISTORY: A  
REINTERPRETATION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S  
CHILDREN***

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**Abstract**

*Salman Rushdie's masterpiece *Midnight's Children* (1981) is especially known for its remarkable representation of history; for the novelist does not write it exactly in official terms of historical facts; yet he is not apart from them completely. He, in a word, shares a review of history in fictionalized form which strikes against fixed paradigms of human minds about Indian history providing a new vision. Therefore, the novelist knows that reality in history is not an actualization of true facts. It does not mean that existed facts are completely incredible. They may be a part of truth but they should not be generalized as a substitute for an absolute truth, as they are a means of representing half-truth in full-fledged form. Hence, Rushdie realizes this politics with reference to constructed facts of history. Hence, he starts experimenting with these facts. In addition, this amalgam of historical facts in Rushdie's fiction cannot be understood in linear and simple terms of reality, as reality is not as common as it has been viewed in official terms. Hence, Rushdie demands an intensification of creative consciousness which is imbued with iconoclastic perspective on history.*

**Keywords:** Iconoclasm, Colonialism, Globalization and fixed paradigms

The word 'iconoclasm' literally means to criticize traditional and popular beliefs, but an extension of its meaning can be realized through literary interpretation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The connotation is not completely apart from etymological roots of the word; but it depicts a growth with respect to Rushdie's growing attitude towards liberal ways of living in the world. His approach to history is not about condemning one aspect and supporting the other intentionally, but he always looks at possibilities of utopia on Earth experimenting with established norms of a politicized world. Therefore, he is not static about truth but grows with his liberal understanding of human existence. As Jasbir Jain aptly states, "The road to indigenous history lies through several routes-oral traditions, myths, memoirs, travelogues and fiction. And the act of reconstructing indigenous pasts requires a constant resistance to the dominant

hegemonic structure” (70). Moreover, he searches for a meaning in his madness that does not accept fixed entities of historical world. He clearly writes in the novel:

Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems-but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen... the illusion dissolves- or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality (197).

Hence, true history is always a process of becoming better rather than merely a representation of hegemonic discourses. It does not mean that history has not dark sides. There may be such things about human world which should be analyzed with iconoclasm. Rushdie’s fictionalized experience through life story of the protagonist in the novel is a kind of contrapuntal reading of official history where several things are missing due to stabilized codes. Hence, history is not as innocent as it has been viewed earlier.

Further, title of the novel represents ironical vision of Indian freedom on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, as political liberty must not be considered as an actual liberty. There are a lot of other things which have to be done for the sake of upcoming generation. Hence, the title is a metaphor to highlight dark sides of this freedom where partition and communal riots have been consequences of long freedom struggle. Real freedom cannot be achieved in this way, and if people assume it as a worthy starting of living, then humanity in India will always be in ‘midnight’. The same case is applicable to all the histories across the world. Therefore, Rushdie has been a controversial novelist concerning socio-political issues of world history. In addition, his treatment of Indian history is a metaphorical representation of politics of the world. Expansion of this view can be felt in his other fictional works. His fictional representation of things is not much simple and linear.

To think of Salman Rushdie is to think of existence in motion; and implications of the existence may vary from person to person; but for Rushdie it has a plethora of new things in diverse ways. Scholars across globe have been talking about issues like space, identity and self; yet no one is able to actualize them completely due to burden of constructed perspectives. All discourses have become only a part of acquired knowledge of human existence; and humanity appears to be fixed upon given paradigms, whereas real humanity demands an intensive care for everyone. Therefore, there is a need to rethink about the whole system where the word 'rethink' itself is also not enough to provide a valid solution. Rushdie’s fiction, in a sense, has a spirit that inspires to be iconoclastic for the sake of betterment in the world. His utopian vision, therefore, is not only about equality, fraternity and liberty, as these notions have nothing to do with minor layers of individual existence of certain communities. Hence, Rushdie’s ideas about fiction and reality lead to a vision where most of intellectual discourses appear to be futile to actualize utopia on Earth. Consequently, spirit of existence must not be fixed and permanent anywhere as it becomes an obstacle in the path of individual freedom that is oppressed and suppressed everywhere due to hegemonic system. It, in other words, can be viewed as a stigma on a civilized society. Rushdie’s problems are concerned with those issues that have never ever been talked and discussed by scholars. If they are discussed somewhere they become strategies of misrepresentations. Hence, spirit of entire literature and theoretical paradigm is not about a change, but it must be about accepting a change to change in its every possible manner.

Whenever one becomes a part of constructed perspectives, then it automatically becomes a problem for the others. Therefore, problem of otherness will never be finished following the same rules of the old game. Hence, one must be very careful having the spirit of existence in motion or iconoclastic perspective to look at the existence; for one's own misunderstanding may lead others' understanding to a strategy of exploitation; and this becomes an integral part of collective consciousness gradually. The novelist has understood it better in humanist terms and explores it in his fiction. Moreover, the novelist does not articulate a story in the novel traditionally, as it would not be as iconoclastic as he desires to make it. These things would perpetuate the same rules of the old games. Hence, his fiction appears to be a complex web of different things which lead readers to a confusion concerning many possibilities at a time. Therefore, Rushdie recognizes how human history has been stabilized with power politics. Actually construction of history has been based upon a particular notion. Hence, the rigidity of history is weaved by certain people issuing it for selected purposes; and it has stopped possibilities of becoming real. That is not a liberal and actual way of living in a humanitarian world. Additionally, life is not a stabilized substance of human history. There is a need to intensify vision of human consciousness to realize importance of silenced voices within constructed history. Colonialism and Nationalism have been major realities of Indian history, but both are dangerous for humanistic vision. These have been the root-causes of wars and riots in the short span of stigmatized past in India. Therefore, Rushdie's dream of history provides a way by which scholars can see how history is a process rather than a constructed thought.

This paper seeks to discuss the idea of iconoclastic approach towards Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* by re-cultivating the roots of history. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is considered to be the most famous novel concerning history of Indian sub-continent. History, in this novel, is not official but unofficial record of six decades (1971-77) in fictionalized form where technique of magic realism and use of telepathy deflect history. Andrew Teverson clearly writes in *Contemporary World Writers*: "Rushdie's concern, in *Midnight's Children*, to fictionalize an experience of recent Indian history suggests that his novel might potentially be considered as a form of historical fiction" (125). Therefore, Saleem's relationship with history appears to be complex; for history, in the novel, refers to historiography concerning a lot of things at a time. Rushdie knows the whole but without knowing all. This philosophical problem is a major part of Rushdie's gathering where identity deals with constructed paradigms of history, but the novelist does not accept an organized and fixed view of identity with respect to historiography. As Andrew Teverson accentuates, "*Midnight's Children* may incorporate purposeful mistakes of historical facts, but it does so in order to veraciously represent how an individual might have understood and misunderstood a viable historical moment" (126). The contemporary society within the domain of globalization sees fixed form as obsolete, because everything is a matter of doubt and re-justification for modern Man. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist is a metaphorical representation of all problems in the novel. Sinai, in other words, is trapped into a web of hegemonic discourses where liberty of individuality deals with rigidity of historical world rather than liberal, metaphysical and individual terms. Saleem himself asserts, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies, indissolubly chained to those to the country" (3). Rushdie emphatically comments how external facts of socio-cultural world affect the constructions of human consciousness. He also knows how a creative writer justifies relations of human existence with socio-political values that should be for betterment of the world.

History, in this sense, may be a means of transformation; as it has been a record of metaphors and interpretations affecting voices of innocent people. Moreover, these metaphors have replaced reality of Man's world. It does mean that new interpretations would be much truthful, as it always a process becoming more and more real. Hence, Salim, protagonist of the novel, will never be satisfied with upcoming realities of human history, as he is always doubtful about the nature of reality. He, on the other hand, becomes familiar with humanist politics in history protesting against hegemonic discourses where life is completely meaningless. In other words, the past-ness of the past has exposed its politicized form before human civilization where humanity seems to be lifeless into the domain of certain constructions. Therefore, history has never been away from politics which reconstructs it for selected purposes of power politics. History, in a sense, has not been as such—as it appears to be before the world. Furthermore, it shapes the whole system including religion, culture and social practices wherein Rushdie knows depth of individuality justifying its original sense of living that would be far away from fixed paradigms of history which have been obstacles in the path of individual freedom and its originality. The irony of society is concerned with fixed paradigms which produce certain fixed attitudes into people's minds. Religion, for instance, has been a matter of controversy through the world. Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) is considered to be a critical work upon Islam. Hence, the novel was burnt and banned in Indian subcontinent; yet Rushdie must not be viewed as anti-religious person in that sense in which he has been discussed; because he attempts only to destroy those socio-religious practices which have become a matter of colonization in the name of *Dharma* and *Karma*. The people are acquainted with reality; yet they have to play a game of telling lies under certain fixed practices of religion and history. The novelist realizes roots of problem which must be interrogated. Sinai's grandfather Adam Aziz, in the novel, is an appropriate justification for discussed view with respect to constructed paradigms of socio-religious practices where true nature of humanity is suppressed and oppressed due to certain strategies. Rushdie emphatically writes through character of Sinai, "One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915 my grandfather Adam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray ... he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man..." (4).

Partition of India, in a sense, is somewhere concerned with certain fixed attitudes of such socio-historical and religious practices. Rushdie's philosophy deals with not fixed paradigms of humanity but with an iconoclastic perspective where liberty, fraternity and equality are the ways of living without any certain dominant code. Rushdie, in other words, does not want to disrupt existence of the others owing to certain dominant practices. He respects all but without supporting the all; for flexibility, fluidity and mobility provide a true way of understanding without losing importance of each individual. Therefore, Rushdie is demystifying constructed history of minds with respect to official history; because fixed constructions stop possibility of 'being' beyond that place where one is trapped into a designed game. Rushdie is not anti-historian concerning a partial view about it. His amalgam of historical facts with re-arrangement of them does not mean that he has forgotten a proper order of history. Instead, he does not want to follow any concrete center to live upon it, as flexibility produces a new pattern of life where one is to live rather than has to live into fixed paradigms. It does not mean that present paradigms are pure and well-established. On the contrary, politics of misrepresentation has always been with human history. One must experiment with fixed norms of social system for the

sake of betterment of human civilization. Scholars, in other words, must not associate this with absurdity in the name of flexibility or iconoclasm. Moreover, it must be assumed as a liberal way of understanding and living where there is no obstacle and barrier of being lovely and humanitarian to all without neglecting individuality. On the other hand, he desires for such ideals where life and history must be seen in shifting paradigms rather than in rigidity. Therefore, Man can speak for multiple dimensions of life without any hesitation. Rushdie, therefore, writes in nostalgic mood about Kashmir: “In those days there was no army camp at the lakeside, no endless snakes.....no solders hid behind the crests of the mountains.....”(5). The narrator Saleem Sinai’s nostalgia about Kashmir valley shows Rushdie’s own perception about history comparing the present geographical outlook of this valley with the acquitted history of its past-ness where everybody used to feel happy and secure there. Now, this beauty has been shaped by dirty politics of socio-cultural values in which humanity is crying in the lap of security. The novelist shows how much dark- life is to be in these constructed paradigms of living. Therefore, Man’s mind is not free even to think of that which has to be thought for scanning this history from the virus of such dirty politics that creates divisions among human beings. Colonial mentality due to constructed paradigms would always lead to such dangers and divisions.

Much has been discussed about approaches of colonialism and post-colonialism. These approaches are usually considered to be not having any relevance with respect to the present scenario of culture, religion, history and society. Moreover scholars talk about overcoming differences between the rest and the West owing to globalization where countries have become a global village. The inter-independence is a need of the present time. Keeping all things in mind, there is a need to refine it; as history appears to repeat itself in new forms. Rushdie is not only worried about the past and but also about the future; for history is not only the past; but the present and the future could also be viewed as the parts of this chronology; as the present is shaped by the past; and the future can be seen as the reflection of the present. Therefore, fixed paradigms about the future may be as dangerous as these have been in the past. In addition, new visions of globalization must be experimented with doubt; for education, technology and other models are implemented into Commonwealth countries to perpetuate domination of certain countries that have been imperialists earlier. Therefore, globalization, in a sense, is another form of imperialism. Globalization itself is not much dangerous; as certain political strategies through globalization may be harmful to developing countries. Therefore the present system of the West seems to be the future of the East. Ashis Nandy writes in *Return from Exile*:

All politics of the past, as well as those of the future are attempts to shape the present. And the search for a non-oppressive present or a just and sustainable future often ends with new modes and techniques of oppression. The past is often used to keep non-western cultures and civilization in a vice-like grip: and it comes in useful for imposing limits on visions of the future. The present of the non-west is often projected as the past of the west; the future of non-west, in such a straitjacket, can only be the present of the West. (9)

India, for example, is using metro-technology, credit system in education etc.—but they all have become obsolete in the West developing super technologies out of traditional one. Hence, developing countries are unable to develop themselves owing to new ways of colonialism into the form of globalization. It does not mean that erstwhile colonies must not interact with

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western culture and technology in the age of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Developing countries like India, in other words, should start thinking about their inbuilt capacities by which they themselves can contribute to global economy without any particular prejudice. Therefore, constructed paradigms of history must be experimented with respect to globalization; otherwise subjugated countries will never be able to make their history, culture and technology.

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