

**HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S
MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN**

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Abstract

Historical consciousness is the base of Rushdie's novel. In all his novels, Rushdie opposes events of the outside world and presents intimate, experiential microcosmic details about the lived events. Everything of past becomes the subject of Rushdie's works. Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children* too travels in this direction. The novel is an epic that spans six decades and almost three generations of India's pre and post - colonial twentieth century history with the three generations of Sinai family.

Keywords: History, epic, post colonial, three generations

It is an allegory of the history of modern India, which it chronicles through the magical lives of thousand and one children born within the country's first hour of independence from Great Britain on August 1947. The narrator Saleem is conscious of his historical centrality. He is mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destiny being indissolubly chained to those of his country. His birth "at the benighted moment thrusts upon him at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement" (MC 3).

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as well as newspapers greet his birth. He states, "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh! spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence. I tumbled forth into the world" (MC 9). Saleem's birth is important as it symbolizes the birth of a nation. His coming into the world was nothing less than a historical necessity. "My vengeful irruption into the history of my age", says he "was certainly no trivial affair" (MC 317).

Saleem's story travels back in time to 1915. He narrates the story of his maternal grandfather Aadam Aziz, who was an educated Kashmiri and an Indian nationalist. He had spent five years in Germany to study medicine. He rejected the traditional ways and belief in favour of modernity. "This decision, however made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to woman and history" (MC 10).

His home-coming was looked upon as an evil-intrusion by the boatman Tai. Tai, stands for an ancient India which is changeless, has a non-linear cyclical history of repetition and rebirth. Tai brings in urgent summons to Dr. Aziz who "is about to set history in motion..." (MC 13).

The doctor treated Ghani's daughter Naseem through the perforated sheet. The doctor-patient relationship eventually turns into husband-wife relationship. It was a prolonged treatment of an invisible patient which coincided with the World War I. On the day World War ends, Naseem finally complains of a headache, and the doctor receives permission to see her face.

On the day the world war ended, Naseem developed the longed-for headache. Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world. (MC 27)

Dr. Aziz and his newly married wife Naseem came across a political agitation. It was the heyday of Gandhian nationalistic movement. A hartal was called. It was a day of mourning, a day of protest against the infamous Rowlett Act. His sense of participation in the anti-colonial protest forged his national identity. He treated the wounded with mercurochrome and did his part of medical practitioner and contributed towards the freedom movement. This kind of active participation filled him with patriotic feeling and made him a true Indian. He embraced Indian nationalism and secular ideal.

Mercurochrome is a metaphor for human blood shed due to inhuman violence inflicted on peaceful demonstrators, who gathered in Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April, 1919. The deliberate killing of innocent people at Jallianwala Bagh did evoke protest against the colonial rule. The blood of Indians flowed on that day caused the baptism of Dr. Aziz who received a severe bruise on his chest. Jallianwala Bagh killing took place on April 13. As the brigadier issues a command, Aadam sneezes violently falling to the ground and thereby missing a bullet aimed in his direction.

Rushdie links the two events to illustrate the way in which humans rely on their individual experiences to make sense of huge, abstract historical events. Sometimes, public history and private history intersect directly, as when Aadam participates in the pro-independence riots and miraculously manages to avoid being shot.

Saleem jumps ahead to the summer of 1942. Aadam and Naseem now live in Cornwallis Road, in Agra and have five children - Alia, Mumtaz, Hanif, Mustapha and Emerald. During 1942, in the official history, the partition of the country occurs. In 1942 Aadam aligned himself with a charismatic man named Mian Abdullah also known as Humming Bird. He rose from the famous magician ghetto in Delhi and became the hope of India's hundred million Muslims. He was the chairman and moving spirit of the free Islam convocation.

In 1942, preparations were afoot to hold the second annual convocation when British rulers murdered Mian Abdullah's benefactress.

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I start off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into India. I'm still not much of a Muslim, but I'm for all Abdullah. He's fighting my fight. (MC 46)

In the summer of 1943 Mumtaz married Nadir in a secret ceremony with the approval of the family members except for the mother. Naseem ends her three years of silence, releasing a torrent of abusive words at her husband. Saleem notes that this occurred on the day when atomic bombs were dropped on Japan.

In August 9, 1945 Emerald runs out of the house and tells her suitor Major Zulfikar that Nadir Khan is living in her basement. In the meantime Nadir Khan flees leaving a note of divorce to Emerald. In August, 1945 Subhash Chandra Bose fought a pitched battle against the British soldiers in the rain soaked forests of Burma while the Satyagrahis in India were staging non-violent demonstration against the British rulers.

Aadam Aziz was revengeful against God after his son Hanif's death. Aziz's loss of optimism after the death of Humming Bird, his disappointment with the new nation and his growing submission to his wife's fanaticism had taken a heavy toll on his body and mind. Gradually his bones started disintegrating and his body developed cracks and fissures like the new nation. Grandfather's disease of disintegration of body would eventually leak into Saleem.

Thus the narrative gives a lucid description of Aadam Aziz's revenge and death in Kashmir which coincided with the theft of the holy relic from the Hazretbal mosque of Srinagar in 1963. The communal disturbances which occurred in the sub-continent following the theft might be read as an "attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son" (MC 277).

On January 1, 1964, Dr Aziz climbed the hill on which Sankara temple stood with a stick in hand. But he could not enter the inner sanctum of the temple to take revenge upon God. His bones disintegrated and he died. Then Aziz's story of reckoning with God ended where it began in his youth when he left the valley with a hole in the heart. Prime Minister Nehru fell ill and he did not recover. The fatal sickness claimed his life on May 27, 1964. Thus the private life of Dr. Aadam Aziz coincides with the public life of India. The private life of Saleem Sinai also coincides with the public life of India. To know the stories of India one should know the whole story of the narrator.

And here are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places and 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. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me. (MC 9)

Saleem claims that his body is falling apart and that his destined to crumble in approximately 630 million particles of anonymous dust. At the time of *Midnight's Children's* publication, India's population stood at about 630 million. Saleem symbolizes modern India and conceives of himself as a physical embodiment of India's history. He claims that he will crumble into 630 million pieces; Saleem suggests that when his body falls apart, he will release all of India. It is the notion that, in his individual body Saleem contains a physical representation of every single and anonymous Indian Citizen.

Rushdie denotes Saleem as modern India and makes it concrete. He beautifully portrays the metropolitan city of Bombay. Saleem loves the city and feels nostalgic. As a matter of fact

Midnight's Children is a city novel and Bombay of 1950 is the fictive space. Events of this novel take place in the sprawling city. Bombay with its secular culture stands as a metaphor for the plurality and multiplicity of India. Saleem identifies himself with the historical city of Bombay.

Saleem is preoccupied by a sense of "destiny, historical role [and] numen" (MC 274). "He is reminded of the facts that historical coincidences have littered and perhaps befouled my family's existence in the world" (MC 25). The historical forces are so powerful against him and he feels "buffeted by too much history and shows the sign of falling apart" (MC 37).

Saleem's parents buy an estate from a departing Englishman William Methwold. Methwold's estate symbolizes the colonized India, possessed by the British who had superimposed their culture on Indian mind. Thus the transfer of assets has a special connotation. It is the parody of the transfer of power. "My notion is to stage my transfer of assets. Select suitable persons such as yourself. Mr. Sinai - hand everything absolutely intact; in tip-top working order" (MC 111).

Saleem's fragmented physical body mirrors the growth and the development of the nation between 1947 and 1965. Similarly the newly independent nation shows cracks and fissures. Saleem's unformed figure represents the map of India which got disfigured because of the partition of its geography. Saleem represents the newly born post-colonial nation. His illegitimate birth informs the birth of the post-colonial country which is the product of time and history.

Infant, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents - the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand by history. (MC 118)

Time is hybrid and so is history. In India businessmen turning white which may be termed as pigmentation disorder suggests the process of westernization and serves as a moral allegory for the post colonial history of the nation. Thus the link between his personal history and the history of the nation looks co-incidental. This draws parallels between the happenings in his life and the life of his family members and the happenings outside in the life of others. Thus private and public experiences are politicized.

A journalistic account of an historical event prevails constantly and the language riots of 1957 is the major force. In 1955, the states' reorganization committee submitted its report to Mr. Nehru and a year later, its recommendation had been implemented.

India had been divided a new, into fourteen states and six centrally administered territories. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or mountains or any natural features of the terrain; they were instead walls of words. (MC 189)

Saleem's tenth birthday coincides with the tenth birthday of a new nation which witnessed disasters like storms and floods. Thus Saleem starts experiencing the mutilation and fragmentation of his body and tries to understand in his own way how the life of a single individual can influence and reflect the life of a nation. Saleem provides identification both of the individual and the newly independent state.

I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our scientists might turn 'modes of

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connection' composed of dualistically combined configuration of the two pairs of opposite adverbs. (MC 238)

To explain the connection actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally midnight's children were inextricably entwined with their world. Saleem was related to the nation 'actively-literally' when his action like intervention in the language riot directly influenced the course of history.

His link with the country 'passively-metaphorically' may be established in the connection between the child Saleem's program of self-enlargement and the infant nation's heroic program for growth. His relation with the state 'passively-literally' suggests the historical events that affected him and his family like the freezing of the property of Ahmed Sinai by the state and followed by the freezing of his emotion.

'Actively-metaphorically' Saleem's fate was entwined with the fate of the secular democratic country. The mutilation of his finger and cracks and fissures in his body corresponded to the cracking up of the state. It is only in 'passive-metaphorical' mode of connection that Saleem assumes his central position as a witness and chronicler.

Saleem took up the new role as the "part of the surrogate son" (MC 243) to his uncle and aunt Pia. Hanif began to despise the myth-life of India which provided life and sustenance to Bombay film. He wrote about the fantasy in the Bombay film on the life and the mind of the people of a newly independent state which made a pledge of secularism and modernism. Independence at the midnight hour gave the nation an opportunity to come out of the shadow of the fabulous antiquity of Hindu India and become a modern and secular state by espousing multiplicity and plurality.

Regional, religious, linguistic and caste-based loyalties were uppermost in the minds of the people of the republic and the country's secular and democratic body politic developed cracks and fissures. Salman Rushdie opines:

In that time of accelerated events and diseased hours, the past of India rose up to confound her present; the new born secular was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity... so that people were seized by atavistic languages, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body political began to crack.
(MC 245)

Rise of coalition governance in politics, fundamentalism in the field of religion and regional intolerance in the last part of the twentieth century and after confirm the authorial apprehensions about the fate of the nation.

Saleem Sinai, the victim of history, became now the victim of his name. The title 'Sinai' suggests not only Mount Sinai, the place of revelation, but also it suggests "the name of the desert - of barrenness, infertility, dust, the name of the end" (MC 305). Saleem's infatuation with Eve was brief and it coincided with the historical event of the linguistic division of Bombay. Besides, Saleem's disastrous love affair with an American girl serves as a parody for India's Short-lived romance with America during the 1950's when India received large quantities of American aid. Sonny agreed to plead love on behalf of Saleem. But pleading or canvassing one's private feeling coincides with the act of public canvassing for general election. The political parties of Indian

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Congress, Communists and regional parties like DMK started their election campaign. This campaign rhetoric farcically describes Saleem's indirect courtship for Eve.

The narrative gives a journalistic account of an historical event, the language riot of 1957. In 1955, the states reorganization committee submitted its report to Mr. Nehru and a year later, its recommendation had been implemented. The committee did not consider the state of Bombay province and this led to violent protest and mass demonstration. The United Maharashtra party stood for the Marathi language and demanded the creation of the state to the north of the city of Bombay.

Methwold Estate was cut off from the rest of the city of Bombay by a two-day long protest march of the supporters of Marathi language. Some Marathi speaking mob asked Saleem to speak some Gujarati words. But Saleem's Gujarati was as bad as Marathi. To save himself from embarrassment, he repeated a rhyme designed to make fun of the speech rhythm of the language. The Marathi language marchers took it as a war cry against the Gujarati demonstrators.

The two parties fell upon one another with no little zeal, and to the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way fifteen killed and over three hundred wounded. (MC 192)

Saleem became indirectly responsible for triggering of the violence which ended with the partition of the state, Bombay. Thus, in this way Saleem is responsible for national events of consequences. His responsibility for historical developments is obvious from the remarks,

In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the states of Bombay as a result of which the city became the city of Maharashtra.... (MC 229)

Thus the unity of the novel is perceived through the identification between the public and private strands. The interaction of historical and individual forces had made the narrator what he is:

Who and what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come.... I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (MC 457-458)

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