



The Liminal Space in Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children*

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Abstract— Salman Rushdie's "*The Midnight's Children*" is a work that has been the focus of interdisciplinary studies for decades now. It has achieved the status of a cornerstone in studying, analysing, and understanding the concepts of Post-Colonialism, Magic Realism, and Identity through different perspectives. It still remains a work that captivates the attention of researchers because of the multifarious ideas placed subtly within the work.

The aim of my paper is to study the aspect of liminality in Salman Rushdie's "*The Midnight's Children*". Liminality is an anthropological term that refers to a tumultuous phase between two major events, in this case, the events of Independence and Partition. Rushdie's narrative technique in his masterpiece has introduced an alternative to chronological narration and has been accepted by post-colonial writers grappling with issues of identity and memory. In my paper, I have studied how Rushdie's fragmented narration highlights the issues of diasporic writers in their works.

Keywords— *Liminality, Narration, Partition, Salman Rushdie, The Midnight's Children.*

Salman Rushdie's second novel, "*The Midnight's Children*" addresses the radical political, social, and economic changes resulting from India's Independence from the British Raj of almost two centuries. Independence was accompanied by the painful event of Partition that witnessed mass genocide, destruction of public and private property and a mass migration, larger than even the Holocaust. The novel depicts the changing human psychology affected by the sudden and illogical Division of what had once been one single mainland, dividing it caused intense religious feud and hatred. The period surrounding Partition was one of chaos and trepidation; doubt, fear, and hatred gripped the common masses replacing intense patriotism and unity during the Struggle for Independence. This sudden shift in the attitude of the population that had just exhibited secularism in opposing a foreign power crumbled altogether at the face of political manipulation and profiteering. In his article, 'Revisiting Hindi Literary Records of Partition', writer Kuldeep Kumar comments that:

"The event unleashed primordial forces of unprecedented intensity and barbarity (that) displaced humanity...for its survivors the Partition was not an event. It was a process that is yet to cease unfolding." (Kumar, 2017)

For Rushdie, portraying this displacement and the sense of loss was the biggest challenge. However, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* won the Booker of Bookers, in 1993, after a tough competition from William Golding's *Rites of Passage*. According to the judges, it was accorded this honour because:

"Midnight's Children is the best post-war novel, a work where the rules of fiction are massively broken by an incredible artistic intelligence." (Bradbury, 1993)

Additionally, he was awarded with The Best of Bookers, for *Midnight's Children* in 2008. Rushdie has been researched on extensively, providing academicians and theorists opportunity to comprehend the crisis and interpret

the symbolism he has used to portray a wide range of issues. In my paper, I aspire to locate areas in the novel where the political, social, and psychological interstices symptomise the apparent liminality in the psyche of the writer and the characters in a post-colonial land.

According to Wikipedia, “in anthropology, liminality is the ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete.” (Wikipedia)

Post-colonial narratives are quite often dealing with the issue of liminality since the masses have to adjust to a sudden shift of power within their culture. Colonised nations have, without exception, had to struggle to bring back a sense of normalcy after the Rule ended. In most cases, it meant ensuring that anarchy, internal feud, and dictatorship doesn't threaten the democracy and independence of the nation whilst trying to achieve development and ensure security from other foreign threats. Apart from the politico-economic strife, there's the simultaneous struggle to locate a centralised culture that best represents the newly found country. This, perhaps, is much more arduous, given the degradation of history and suppression of local culture that the colonials had subjected the land to, for centuries. In this desire to forage the roots of “[n]ationality, nationalism, nativism” (Said, 1993) there is a constant melee of the past with the present, as Homi K Bhabha explains:

“The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such an act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.” (Bhabha, 1994)

This “in-between space” that Bhabha refers to is the area of liminality which the post-colonial writers must grapple with. Therefore, most, if not all, postcolonial narratives portray this liminal space in social, political, and more importantly human elements within their texts that they must make sense of and come to terms with.

For India, the situation was dually challenging: it had to face the shift from colonial rule to independent operating, and it had to witness the event of Partition. The landmass was divided on the basis of two dominant religions each gaining a share: India and Pakistan. Thus, immediately post-Independence of India, the time-frame within which

Midnight's Children is situated, the atmosphere was precisely this, liminal. The masses had not recovered from the surprise of Independence, when they were horrified at the political decision of Partition imposed upon them. This decision followed by intense destruction, homicide, and forced migration deeply shook the basis of stability and security when masses had to evacuate their home overnight, migrating with nothing to a foreign land to adhere to the legally binding and nightmarish reality of displacement. The Partition came as a jolting shake to the expectations of the newly Independent country that expected to revel in harmony and unity. For a newly independent country, the Partition was a massive downfall resulting in a further loss of lives and property. The UK High Commissioner Terence Shone writing to the Secretary of States for Commonwealth Relations is quoted reporting:

“Communal strife burst upon both new Provinces before they were in a position to grapple with it. This was particularly the case in East Punjab where, it may be said, the new administration has scarcely ever been able to function. Local conditions were thus all too favourable for passion, anarchy, and chaos. The streams of Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab poured through the East Punjab and carried the germs or communal infection to Delhi and the surrounding country. The government of East Punjab were virtually helpless; the Central government were taken unawares; the police were no longer reliable; the Armed Forces, which had to be called in at once to restore some semblance of order and afford some measure of protection to the ever-growing columns of refugees, were still in process of being divided and were becoming infected by the communal virus.” (Shone, 1947)

The violence and vengeance spread rampantly; decimating compassion, humanism, and brotherhood wherever it went. The genocide was the worst example of human ruthlessness and hatred in the modern era. It, then, is not surprising that Partition has inspired many Indian writers to address the cause of such mass-scale murder and fury. Partition, as a process, has continued to elicit a complete genre of literature in almost all the Indian languages. It has been the theme of multiple documentaries, movies, T.V. serials and has been recorded in autobiographies, biographies, interviews, news articles, and memoirs.

In his novel, *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie has the difficult task of portraying this betrayal, loss, grief, death, and hatred gripping the whole Indian Sub-continent. His achievement to do so has been accepted by researchers all over the world, Sarah Bounse writes that:

"*Midnight's Children's* importance and significance as a postcolonial text arises from the novel's ability to intertwine three major themes: the creation and telling of history, the creation and telling of a nation's and individual's identity, and the creation and telling of stories." (Bounse, 2009)

Throughout the narrative, Rushdie's protagonist, Saleem Sinai, tries to reason this loss of land and identity as he moves from India to Pakistan. He keeps questioning the reality of events - "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." (Rushdie, 1981). Here it is worth noting that India was declared Independent at midnight, the time when Saleem Sinai was born. The symbol of midnight is crucial since it represents both, a beginning and an end. However, it also represents the stage of transformation, the shift from one form to another. The end brings a sense of chaos, a struggle to comprehend whether the beginning would be as promised. Midnight is also the time for dreaming, the time when the conscious is asleep, when what happens can easily be questioned for veracity. To portray this struggle between reality and wistfulness, Rushdie uses a different kind of narrative style - the oral narrative.

Midnight's Children's biggest achievement is its narrative style which is reflective of the narrative styles of folklores. Oral narratives have a dis-jointed and non-linear narration. Due to this, postcolonial narratives have been known to utilise oral narration styles in order to address the issues of memory and identity. In the novel, the protagonist, Saleem Sinai experiences a similar ambiguity in determining the linearity of his life. In the chapter titled "Alpha and Omega", the narrator, Saleem says:

"I have titled this episode somewhat oddly. 'Alpha and Omega' stares back at me from the page, demanding to be explained - a curious heading for what will be my story's half-way point, one that reeks of beginnings and ends, when you could say it should be more concerned with middles." (Rushdie, 1981)

Postcolonial writers look at the historically accepted and approved method of story-telling within their culture. It's obvious that oral narratives are the stark opposite of mainstream English literature by British writers. For postcolonial writers, the challenge is to assimilate the foreign with the national in a way that the national dominates the foreign. Objectively speaking, in a bid to turn the power tables and apprehend the narrative style from what Rushdie termed "Behalfies". Though later, he would write:

"Beware the writer who sets himself or herself up as the voice of a nation." (Rushdie, 1997)

Rebelling the colonial frame of narration is a way of protesting against the age-old practice of suppressing and altering the natives' voice. Almost all Indian English writers, from Raja Rao to Rushdie, employ the oral narrative feature to distinguish their work from their colonial counterparts and follow the traditional, native root of narration within their culture. This style of narration is, in itself, an achievement since it "ha[s] come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization." (King, 1997) Additionally, Franco Moretti, too, accepts that *Midnight's Children* alters the acceptance of novel as Eurocentric form, reorienting the 'centre of gravity' of the novel from European to a 'truly worldwide literary system' (Moretti, 1996)

Another important aspect of the postcolonial writings is 'Memory'. For a newly independent nation, memory plays a very deceptive role. It lures the academic with promises of certainty and shatters the illusion like a mirage. A writer in search of cultural history, native identity, belongingness is lost in the maze of manipulated colonial writings, erased individual history, and glorified coloniser's apparition haunting and dooming their search like Rushdie's protagonist found out on his own way. Saleem says, "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 version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own." (Rushdie, 1981) It's evident that Rushdie here questions the reality and it's veritability, further ahead in the text he makes a comment that can be agreed upon as the basis of memory formulation for all colonised natives: "I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred." (Rushdie, 1981)

For Rushdie, the act of reclaiming the past is entirely subject to memory that determines its reconstruction. Thus, it (memory), plays an important role in recreation of history and the constitution of an individual's identity. Rushdie uses memory as a tool to refurbish and restore history and identity. In the quest to seek a balance of memory with past, he steps into a parallel quest of trying to equate reality with illusion that merges together in order to confound the viewer. In the text, Rushdie comments, explaining that : "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. Gradually, the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves - or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality." (Rushdie, 1981) Catherine Cundy in her essay comments on this frequent usage of cinema to address the split between reality and illusion. She writes, that:

"Rushdie's use of the cinema screen in *Midnight's Children* as a metaphor for the illusion/reality split can be seen on one level as a debunking of the quasi-mystical language sometimes adopted by such writers as Forster and Scott to convey the aspect of Indian 'reality' which they cannot comprehend or assimilate into their existing view of the world. To question the nature of perception through their brash artificiality of the Bombay talkies is to introduce a new dimension into the discussion..." (Cundy, 1996)

This constant tussle of reality with illusion leads Rushdie to conclude in his essay, *Imaginary Homelands*, that - "reality is an artefact." (Rushdie, 1992). In *Midnight's Children*, he states that, "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." (Rushdie, 1981). This constant deliberation of the author to address the actuality of 'reality' and trying to theorise it through fiction and non-fiction, is evidential that it is an important facet of his thought-process, one that needs a substantial definition. In an interview in 2017, he says: "We don't have an agreement about the nature of reality. I mean, reality is now an argument. And sometimes it becomes a violent argument. So I don't think you can write realism in the way that people used to because of this problem of consensus, about there not being a consensus of what is real." (Rushdie, 2017)

This, perhaps, is the best conclusion that can be made for a writer dealing with post-colonial issues. This agreement, of there existing more than one version of reality, is endemic in oral narratives. This can be another reason for choosing oral narrative form for fiction.

Through my paper, I've tried to show how memory, reality, and the form of oral narration have all played a significant role to aid the author in successfully portraying the unstable and fluctuating state that he was trying to present. Of these, memory and reality are psychological elements that are utilised by the author as forms of story-telling to attribute the sense of chaos and confusion that the characters experienced. There are times when he has

been criticised for producing "interleaved, palimpsestic texts [that] point to the magpie tendency that permeates his writing, both fictional and non-fictional." (Mendes, 2013)

Another, quite frequently, quoted critic of Rushdie, Graham Huggan, argues that:

"*Midnight's Children* is a radically revisionist novel, a work of historiographic metafiction that shows the inescapably ideological character of historical facts...Its author has been rewarded, not so much for writing against the Empire, but for having done it so amenably, with such obviously marketable panache." (Huggan, 2001)

However, his feat of having managed to convey to his readers the complexity of the Indian society, the balance of analepsis and prolepsis, and the brilliant usage of 'magical realism' that would immediately confer Rushdie with an importance similar to Garcia Marquez, has surpassed all the opprobrium that he has been adjudged with. As Eleanor Brynne comments:

"If one of the failed projects of *Grimus* was to produce a hybrid narrative that could accommodate Eastern and Western literary traditions, *Midnight's Children* is widely praised for succeeding in doing so." (Brynne, 2013)

He acknowledges the difficulty that artists have to face whilst trying to express themselves, in the 2017 Unbound Book Festival in Columbia, where in his keynote address he said,

"Artists lives are made difficult by engagement with power but the job of the artist is to open the universe." (Rushdie, 2017)

Of course, the engagement of fiction with complex ideas of individual imagination, memory, and reality will always stoke up discord, especially while portraying characters in a negative or unpleasing light. Rushdie's expertise in successfully redacting the challenging and controversial issues of memory, identity, and reality are proof of his acceptance as a writer and a thinker. Rushdie has definitely won his critics over with his *Midnight's Children*, as Catharine Cundy states:

"Indeed, one of the chief achievements of *Midnight's Children* is the way in which it serves as a testament to the importance of memory in the recreation of history and the constitution of the individual's identity." (Cundy, 1996)

Therefore, I believe that Rushdie has been successful in portraying through this seminal novel, the liminal phase in the historic past with full credibility. He has also highlighted the internal struggles within the text, of

representing the abstract, yet indelible, emotions felt by the community collectively.

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