

Interrogating Rationality in *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Rationality is something that makes humans superior to other living beings. A society can progress if it allows the use of reason and rationality and people are expected to act in a rational manner. My paper is an attempt to discuss how the grand narrative of rationality is questioned in *Midnight's Children* authored by Salman Rushdie. Being a postmodern novel, it is an attitude of suspicion towards the modern. To be postmodern is to distrust the claim that one can attain enlightenment or peace by the judicious use of reason, that one can become happy, that higher goals can be achieved if only one wait and work. If the modern designates the era of emancipation and knowledge, consensus and totalities, then the postmodern marks an attitude of disbelief towards the modern. No matter how much people run after science and truth, it becomes difficult to claim that rationality is one step above irrationality.

Keywords : Reason, science, enlightenment, disbelief

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Rationality is the quality or state of being reasonable, based on facts or reason. Any process of evaluation or analysis that may be called rational is expected to be highly objective, scientific, logical and "mechanical". If these minimum requirements are not fulfilled i.e. if a person has been, even slightly, influenced by personal emotions, feelings, instincts, moral codes and norms, then the analysis may be termed irrational, due to the internalization of subjective bias. Inversion of the elements of the real world is a marked feature of magic realism. Magic realism as a device is used by postmodern novelists. Salman Rushdie uses the narrative style of magic realism in which fantasy and magic are blended with real life. The term "magic realism" is an ambiguous one. Magic is an antithesis to reality. This technique blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality. The practitioners of magic realism weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details, together with fantastic and dreamlike elements. The children born on the midnight possess mysterious magical gifts. Some are so beautiful that they can cause blindness; some can transform themselves into werewolves. A witch girl who lives in Gir forest has an uncanny power of healing touch and a boy in Shillong has the blessing of not forgetting anything he ever sees or hears. Parvati, the witch born in old Delhi in a slum is a great conjuror.

"Parvati-the-witch entertained the crowds with the help of a large wicker basket with a lid; happy volunteers entered the basket, and Parvati made them disappear so completely that they could not return until she wished them to; Parvati, to whom midnight had given the true gifts of sorcery..." (528-529)

The two most powerful of the Midnight's children are those born at the exact moment of midnight: Saleem and Shiva. Shiva is the destructive hero with powerful knees. He rises to martial bravery and the status of a war hero, while Saleem has acquired the gift of telepathy. His abilities enable him to provide a mental forum in which the group can meet. He can not only pick up the children's transmission and send his own messages but also acts as a sort of national network. It is Saleem through which the children are able to talk to one another and it is he who lays the foundation of the Midnight's Children Conference.

"I picked out, from the throng, the voices of my own family, and of Mary Pereira; and of friends, classmates, teachers." (233)

Telepathy enables him to probe into the minds of people. Saleem finds that on his birthday, his father thinks about his secretary. He uses his talent to help himself with his schoolwork by taking information out of the minds of his more intelligent classmates. He, like a tourist, discovers the country's geography and then politics, exploitation, corruption, bribery and electoral malpractices. While describing the boatman Tai, Saleem is not free from the pangs of irrationality. He violates what is accepted as possible or probable, true or facts. On asking his age, he says:

"I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die. Listen. Listen, nakoo..'- the brandy bottle again, followed by brandy- voice, and words more intoxicating than booze-'...I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head." (13)

This is not a rational answer. Incredulity is naturalized by exaggerating what could have been partially true or factual. The boatman Tai gives up washing for three years.

"He took to drifting slowly past Aziz household, realising the dreadful fumes of his body across the small garden and into the house. Flowers died; birds fled from the ledge outside old Father Aziz's window" (29)

Salman Rushdie has devoted one chapter to Saleem's exile on the Sunderbans. The chapter "In the Sunderbans" is narrated in a surreal dream like manner. Saleem, Ayooba, Shaheed, and Farooq encounter nightmares. They are confronted by bizarre and unusual nightmares. Ayooba sees in his dreamy wakefulness the translucent figure of a peasant whose heart has

been pierced with a bullet steering mournfully down at him. The next morning his arm becomes stiff and refuses to move. He encounters another bizarre apparition:

“One night Ayooba, who was regressing towards infancy faster than any of them, and had begun to suck his one moveable thumb, saw his mother looking down at him, offering him the delicate rich-based sweets of her love; but at the same moment as he reached out for laddoos, she scurried away, and he saw her climb a giant sundry-tree to sit swinging from a high branch by her tail: a white wraithlike monkey with the face of her mother visited Ayooba night after night...” (507)

In their dreams, they are visited by four girls who make love to them at night after night. The apparent unrealistic elements in a fictional work dominated by fantasy may give the impression that fantasy is motivated by a desire to escape from reality. However, fantasy may be deliberately used by the author not to escape from reality but to transcend reality, to subvert it to create a more encompassing vision of reality. So, fantasy may be consciously used as a device, as a method, as Salman Rushdie and so many postmodernist novelists do so often. The readers come across a photograph in which the images enter into a conversation. This is a denial of what we call “reality”.

“Memory of a mildewing photograph (perhaps the work of the same poor brained photographer whose life-size blows-ups so nearly cost him his life); Aadam Aziz aglow with optimism fever shakes hands.... Yes, there is a conversation going on in this photograph...” (53-54)

We see that Padma, the listener doubts the authenticity of Saleem’s narrative.

“‘What nonsense’ our Padma says. ‘How can a picture talk? Stop now; you must be too tired to think’ ” (55)

But, Saleem convinces her. He tells Padma that a little uncertainty is not a bad thing. But, he learns one thing very quickly that it is dangerous to impose one’s view of things on others. Therefore, he unfolds the discovery of maternal adultery with the touches of a fairy tale:

“Once upon a time there was a mother who, in order to become a mother had agreed to change her name; who set herself the task of falling in love with her husband bit-by-bit,..” (296)

There is frequent mentioning of ghosts and witches in the novel. Naseem Aziz dislikes Rani of Cooch Naheen and half-believes the stories about her:

“These scholars of hers, man, everyone knows they have to perform extracurricular duties. They go to her bedroom in the dark, and she never lets them see her blotchy face, but bewitches the into bed with her voice of a singing witch” (56)

Mary Pereira is haunted by ghosts. We do not know whether it is an epitome of guilt which she feels or she is actually haunted by the ghost of Joseph D’ Costa.

“Here then was Mary’s nightmare come true; here, visible through the pall of dust, was the ghost of Joseph D’ Costa, walking towards the ground-floor office of Ahmed Sinai!” (388)

Postmodern art is characterized by pastiche and collage. Art in postmodern world does not belong to a unitary frame of reference, or to project or a Utopia. The plurality of perspectives leads to a fragmentation of experience, the collage becoming a key artistic technique. In literature, there are collages of texts put together from other texts. It is a reaction against modern rationality and functionalism. Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai stand for fragmented worldview. Aadam Aziz cannot have a complete glimpse of Naseem’s body. He can have a partial glimpse of her body through the perforated sheet. The doctor is allowed only that portion of her body to be seen which has the complaint for him to address. At the start of the novel, Saleem may believe that he can assemble the confused mass of stories. Saleem manages to forge a new totality out of the multitudinous fragments that constitute his history and the history of the nation. Like T.S.Eliot’s ‘hooded man’ of “the Wasteland”, Saleem might be constructed as a modern Indian Fisher king- a figure whom has received a sexual wound (his castration) that has rendered him incapable of regenerating his land. Saleem is unsuccessful in his attempt to provide a form both for his life and for the life of post-independence India; therefore, *Midnight’s Children* itself prevents the possibility of narrating the nation in all its complexity, without the need to beautify; to eliminate variety, difference, perplexity in the interests of a totalising vision. Lifafa Das, a peepshow man often visits the locality with his magic drum. By the magical rattle of his drum, he attracts the children and the adult alike to show them the collage of a unified India.

“See the whole world, come see everything” (97)

Inside the peepshow cabin are the pictures of the Taj Mahal, Minakshi temple, and the holy Ganges, untouchables being touched etc. He puts more and more pictures into his magic box to keep to his words to the customers to show the entire world.

The novel traces the various events in the life of the central character that synchronize with major happenings in the recent history of India. It is about the growth of the protagonist as well as that of the nation seen as a process.

“I have 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. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity.” (3)

This is a sad idea because he believes himself to be responsible for history and this is quite absurd as he is not. There is frequent forward or backward shift in time that makes it difficult to trace the proper sequence of events in the life of the protagonist. At the very outset, after having given the date of his birth, the narrator somersaults to his thirty first birthday. This marked break in chronology in the novel reveals the author’s intention of giving not a record of events in the order of their occurrence but of projecting the basic historical truth as interacting with and affecting the life of the individual. History is presented with sobriety in *Midnight’s Children*. It is delineated in a serio-comical vein. What is presented in the novel is not pure history but twisted history and diluted facts and figures. Saleem’s fallible memory constantly plays tricks and provides excuse for factual errors and unreliability and his partial, fragmentary vision represented by the perforated sheet that he gets as legacy from his grandfather. Saleem Sinai tries to recapture and restore the past with the help of his memory and what is presented in his narrative is not the literal truth but his memory’s truth which selects, eliminates, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and finally creates its own reality. Salman Rushdie seems to suggest that when an individual recaptures history he provides a version of truth which is valid for the individual. So, there are errors, ambiguities and the untruths in Saleem’s version. By any means, it is not an entirely reliable account.

Salman Rushdie has his typical way of concocting a blend of art and life. In *Midnight’s Children*, through the mixing and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, Rushdie

makes an attempt to understand and interpret the multi-layered and complex reality of the socio-political life of the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie says:

“I think of fantasy as a method of producing intensified images of reality.”¹

¹Hoffenden, John(ed). *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen, 1985.

In Rushdie's novel, what is real or unreal, rational or irrational is often uncertain not only to the reader but also to the narrator. Or, the real may have so many facets as to blur reality itself. In a vast country like India, with an immense variety of life experiences and constant mingling of 'great' and 'little' traditions that have their own visions of reality, facts often get fictionalised and truth often seems incredible.

Postmodern thought goes beyond a Kantian split of modern culture into science, morality and art and involves a rehabilitation of the cultural and aesthetic domains. It questions the enlightenment ideology. Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Voltaire saw themselves as initiating an era of humanitarian, intellectual, and social progress, underlined by the increasing ability of human reason to subjugate analytically both the external world of nature and the human self. The major tendencies of Enlightenment philosophy were towards rationalism, empiricism, pragmatism and utilitarianism. Heterological thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Frederick Nietzsche emphasized the role of emotion, body, sexuality and unconscious which is an antithesis to the Enlightenment philosophy. Postmodern themes were present in Romanticism, in Nietzsche's philosophy and in surrealism. Postmodern thought is characterized by a loss of belief in an objective world. Salman Rushdie, in his *Midnight's Children*, undermines the belief in one objective reality. Modern times involved a restricted concept of rationality, with a dominance of technical means-ends rationality. Through novels, he provides alternative renderings of the past and problematizes historical discourse. Rushdie rejects the mainstream realistic tradition of novel writing of India and deals with the historical and cultural issues in a radically sophisticated manner. This is reflected in his modes of narration, use of fantasy and the grotesque, novelty of images and metaphors and rich and suggestive texture of his language. The novel goes beyond the cognitive and scientific domain to include the role of magic and

fantasy in the life of the people. The overstressed conceptions of rationality are interrogated in the form of romanticism and irrationality in the novel.

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