

## The Issue of Collective Consciousness and the Art of Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*

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### **Abstract**

Salman Rushdie in his famous novel *Midnight's Children* attempts at the evocation of a nation that had lapsed into fitful slumber ever since the time of its birth. Thus controversial novel often in the limelight for its scathing jibes at political leaders have undergone editing and reediting only to come out with much more than what it could have uttered if allowed being literal. This manner of affecting the subtler senses of a modern Indian reader is the topic for consideration in this paper. The dexterous usage of all elements Indian, including usage of religious iconography and recent cultural history have the primary aim of striking at the roots of Indian understanding of the various socio-cultural approaches to a range of issues. Rushdie's tremendous acumen for creative analysis is here to achieve more than what catches the eye of the reader. An in depth study of the manner in which collective consciousness of a nation has been resurrected in the utilisation of the numerous elements of significance in Indian culture is what comprises this research paper focussing on the objectives intended and achieved by the novelist.

**Keywords:** Nation, independence, collective consciousness, freedom, hybridity

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Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is by far one of the most sensational novels in post colonial India. Its most important feature is the fact that it works at a level where history and fiction merge to produce a unique combination of the two. What was the purpose of such mingling of fact and fiction and what at all did Rushdie aim at by producing such a piece of literature that portrays hybridism at all levels of being, from structure to form, to understanding deserves proper explication. The essence of Rushdie's endeavour seems to be hidden somewhere in this very hybridism. It aims to give to its readers a form of understanding that through its levels of complexity and multitudinous metaphors presents a picture that is tampered so that it can be presented only when the mode of presentation suits the conglomerate identity of the nation which the novel speaks about. But then again the question that seems to be the cause of much throbbing in the mind of the reader is the aim of Rushdie, why at all is history presented through such a moulded individualised perspective. The answer can be found in the fact that the writing of Rushdie is mostly claimed to belong to the genre of magic realism which helps him to build and break the construct that he aims to develop his perspective on. This aim of Rushdie's seems to be, to impinge on the national consciousness of the people of India, the country in question in his novel. The use of individual perceptual details is brought forward by Rushdie using the skilful technique of chronological shift that successfully keeps the story and its culmination under wraps. The use of the history of a singular family is cunningly used by Rushdie to set the Indian scenario as a backdrop so that the historical occurrences happening simultaneously feature in the thoughts of the reader almost on the level of national consciousness. The very theme of the birth of children in the midnight Of India's Independence Day is the indication of the historical undertone in the fictitious family story.

The concept of the multiple voices in the mind of the protagonist Saleem Sinai is but the very metaphor for the Collective consciousness of the Indian people that seems to be the primary theme of the text. It almost seems synonymous to the poetic invocation by Milton in his *Paradise Lost Book I* that aims to declare the aim of the poet. Rushdie in his novel camouflages his motto of affecting the collective consciousness of the Indian people in delineating their history. The term 'collective consciousness' as coined by French social scientist Emile Durkheim refers to the shared beliefs and moral attitudes which operates as a unifying force within society. Rushdie it seems creates the determinate system with a life in the form of his novel and as such communicates with the consciousness of the society, making his novel a statement of truth which encapsulates the collective memory of the clan and at the same time builds upon it.

Rushdie's intention has led to the use of various devices in his novel that give different dimensions to his creation. The beginning of consciousness is through birth of an individual and the metaphor of birth takes the prime position in his text. The birth of Saleem Sinai and the other midnight children might constitute the title of the novel. But what is of more importance is the fact that the historicity of the birth is called forth after a long while of discussing the family ancestry of Adam Aziz, his grandfather. Thus Rushdie intentionally brings to focus the central event of India's independence by the birth of Saleem. Hence we hear Saleem saying at the very beginning of the novel "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly linked to those of my country." He undoubtedly infuses a satiric undertone to the event by adding that the expecting mothers seemed to have engaged in a competition to give birth at exactly the strike of the hour of independence so that their children are entitled to the prize declared by the Times of India. It is but a cynical commentary on the fact that much like India which at the hour of independence belonged to the Indians but was a product of British intervention so was the fate of these midnight's children, who were the children of their parents but their birth at fateful hour had made them more the products of India's new found independence. The blood that flows in *Midnight's Children* is labelled "mercurochrome": a chemical which only looks like blood. It is not to be confused with the real bloodshed in non metaphorical violence inflicted on real human bodies. Thus their blood becomes the blood of sacrifice, blood calling out for vengeance, or a baptism, marking the coming of an age.

The fact that an alteration of the babies at birth had taken place and that Saleem was actually the child of Mr. Methwold is a metaphor of the hybrid origin of the country. Rushdie from this very point of time engages in a play of creation. He creates India out of the entire gamut of characters that he had introduced by turning the narrator's voice into the voice of Saleem. It is from the point that Saleem's true identity is revealed and Saleem turns out to be the symbolization of the post-independence India. It is true that the metaphor of birth is part of the larger metaphor of the nation as a person that is inseparable from the imaginative construction of the nation. Historians and politicians who are always conscious of making the kind of history that would be recorded speak of growth and maturity as if the nation is a human child. It almost seems as if the nation is the name of a journey, of wounded memory, desire and fear. This might be considered the reason that this personification of the nation makes it possible to call Nehru the father of the nation. The metaphor of birth isn't limited solely to this very aspect. The culmination of the image of the nation takes place with the birth of Ganesh on the midnight of the declaration of the emergency rule imposed by the then Prime Minister of India- Smt. Indira Gandhi.

The birth of Shiva Saleem's alter ego also seems to have an immense role to play. It is quite perceptible that Rushdie from the very beginning of the novel had knit a complex plot that embedded in itself seeds of further revelations that would be incrementing the plot line. Shiva is one such seed that would germinate in the long run to form the antagonist of the plot. Throughout the time when Saleem is in the invading army he does not act, Shiva on the other hand acts quite unequivocally. Saleem's inaction might be compared to Shiva's action. The description of Shiva as given by the Bangladeshi carpetbagger is "They have one mighty soldier fellow, he can kill six persons at one time, breaks necks khrikk-khrikk between his knees."(358 Rushdie)The crux of the situation again lies at the base of the fact that Shiva is actually the son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai and Amina has always been Pakistani at heart. Thus Shiva born of Muslim parents and fighting for East Pakistan kills his fellow Muslims while Saleem who is born of both Hindu and English parents remains inactive. This betrayal once again appeals to the collective unconscious of the Indian reader who may connect it to Saleem's English side, to Britain's divide and rule policy. Saleem's Indian side does not however seem relevant to the episode in any historical context, since India went to great lengths to help the Bangladeshi refugees to great extent during the partition.

Another aspect that might be considered while talking about Rushdie's evoking the collective unconscious was the usage of religion in metaphors in the entire novel. The use of divine names brilliantly by Rushdie to form the metaphors of Hindu Gods and goddesses in the corpus of the novel has to have an impact on the readers who would unconsciously be guided into the religious framework of their Indian minds in the way Rushdie intends them to. The name of Shiva makes him a Hindu while Saleem makes him Muslim. But Rushdie successfully complicates the issue here by the question of birth that he had raised beforehand. Saleem is more Hindu than Muslim and Shiva is completely Muslim. This dichotomy lies at the crux of the divide and rule problem of the Indian subcontinent. This entire event of child exchange has been brilliantly used by Rushdie as a metaphor to imply the fact that what a person is at heart is the true creed of the individual and names are but mere necessities for social identification. This is something Rushdie aims to infuse in his reader's conscience. How far he had been successful in his endeavour is a matter that can only be decided by time. Rushdie ironically pairs Shiva and Parvati in a sexual communion almost rendering the fact as if their union was predestined by their names and the resultant Ganesh is but an extension of this humour. It should however be mentioned that while Rushdie indulges in this playful gesture of summing up of loose ends following a nomenclature of names, he performs this action just to connect to his reader who is brought nearer to the text as a result of his connection with the essentially Indian themes. Another matter of utmost importance while discussing the use of the religious names in the text is the name 'Padma' used by the narrator for his ever-present listener. It seems a matter of divine resemblance that the presence of Padma as the listener of the almost epic story of the narrator seems to be another point of similarity with the epic features. The writing of Ramayana by Ganesha who was both the listener and writer for saint Valmiki seems to have its parallel in the presence of Padma. Padma in the novel is both real and symbolic. A fact reflected upon by Uma parameshwaran, who says that Padma is the representation of the collective consciousness, the spirit of the country, just as Saleem is an individual consciousness participating in the history of the country. Padma is the common people who with their basic respect for learning sustain the artist. The effect of the Indian-ness in this story line can be better understood by a close reading of Lannoy's study of the Indian subject as being ruled by a retrospective modality and a non-linear thought process:

The Indian syllogism is the reverse of the Western: the notion of effect is formed first, and that of the cause is retrospectively inferred and stated afterward . . . . The thought process itself is retrospective, cyclical . . . For example, parson can mean either “day after tomorrow” or “day before yesterday”, while atarson can equally mean “three days ago” or “three days from now” . . . A sequence of connected events, while it may be perceived lineally, is not valued in the same way as a non-linear pattern outside history. Karma is lineal, a cumulative process which is a hindrance to the attainment of a goal of higher value – transcendence of “effect and cause,” transcendence of opposites. To escape from Karma is to escape from time. (153 Mukherjee)

Saleem in his similar pursuit to escape from time and its lineal Karma sets up his own web of Maya leela as an antidote against what is paraded as “authentic” history. If the *Bhagavad Gita* makes creativity obligatory for Vishnu, the Supreme Being, for the narrator himself the creative act of writing becomes the paradigmatic karmic act. Vishu purana’s concept of its God goes thus:

Vishnu as creator: he creates himself; as preserver, preserves himself; as destroyer, destroys himself at the end of all things. This world of earth, air, water, ether, the senses, and the mind; all that is termed spirit, that also is the lord of all elements, the universal form, and imperishable: hence he is the cause of creation, preservation, and destruction; and of the vicissitudes inherent in elementary nature. He is the object and author of creation: he preserves, destroys, and is preserved. He, Vishnu, as Brahma, and as all other beings is infinite form. . . .(154 Mukherjee)

This is also what Saleem recognizes but shies away from in speaking to Padma of “the lotus- calyx, which grew out of Vishnu’s navel and from which Brahma himself was born”.(154 Kane). Rushdie we thus see makes immense use of Hindu mythology in the subtlest of applications to achieve his end of appealing to the Indian masses.

Another device that Rushdie employs to offer the readers a world very much known but yet unknown is the combination of fact and fiction in a delicately moving saga of personal and public experiences. Rushdie had amalgamated fact and fiction in such a fashion

that the real and the virtual have come together in the novel giving it a mythic aura. Magic realism as a technique seems to have accidentally emerged out of Rushdie's work. The works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez such as *One hundred years of solitude* seems to be like the conjurers trick that seemed to evolve an entire country by itself and dissolved it as well by the wave of his wand. The work of Rushdie on the other hand is like the creation of a trance like state in which history seems to take a different colour when looked at from the eyes of one who had experienced it. The surrealism that makes its presence felt in the passage :

No colours except green and black the walls are green the sky is black (there is no roof) the stars are green the widow is green but hair is black as black. The widow sits on a high chair the chair is green the seat is black the Widow's hair has a centre parting it is green on the left and on the right black. High as the sky the chair is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children are green the walls are green the Widow's arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream . . . . the Widow's hand curls round them green and black.(207 Rushdie)

This surrealism is the work of the master artist who paints the picture and makes the story stand to it. The novel moves and in its movement is found a stealthy pace. The interweaving of fact and fiction as seen in Rushdie can be summed up by a comment made by Rushdie himself when he says: "There are two countries real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality."(34 Mukhejee)The world of the fantastic is based on the realms of desire, and through it, reaching out into a world of otherness in seeking an imaginary unity with the "otherness". This unity with the otherness might be considered to be the unity with the other that is history. The formation of the novel as the story of an individual in a historical setup might have brought the individual much nearer to a history that would have been considered as something merely known. But this journey that Rushdie commences through history makes the individual one with it, and thus the effect of the magic realistic attempt attains success. This interdependence of the two and Rushdie's idea of keeping the background a known history is reflected well in one of his interviews where he says:

For instance, there is a technique that Dickens used that I thought was very remarkable. He used a kind of background or setting for his works which is

completely naturalistic background, he imposes totally surrealistic images . . . What I tried to do though not quite in the Dickensian way was to make sure that the background, the bedrock of the book was right – that Bombay like Bombay, the cities were recognisably correct so that fantasy could be rooted in that kind of reality. (38 Dhar)

On considering what might be an important factor when it comes to the dual play of fantasy and reality with respect to time, one has to consider the chronology of narration. Though the narrative of *Midnight's Children* moves in a chronological manner, in a linear sequence from 1947 to 1978, time is sometimes reversed and “localised” to dramatize a particular subjective experience. It means that there are two temporal realities: the objective, impersonal historical reality; within this, in an inclusive manner, a subjective and intuitive perception of a particular reality is dramatized. Related to this particular use of time the narrative structure operates on the levels of fantasy and reality. The magical aura of fantasy is superimposed on a world of history and facts. The world of fantasy is hoisted with the birth of the pioneering and chief protagonist, Saleem Sinai and his imaginary Midnight's Children's Club. Their world and activities are realized in the rarefied atmosphere of the twilight zone of fantasy and reality.

Rushdie's association with the post modernists like Gunter Grass and Kafka is quite compelling in his use of silences and broken images. Like the post-Modernists Rushdie also seems to dwell on the ideas of “emptiness” and “silences”. His creation of an entire novel on the bed rock of the socio-political history of the subcontinent is based on the idea of emptiness - a nullity. A world of absence and infinite nothingness seems to define the mind of Saleem Sinai. The fact that his mind suffers from moments of forgetfulness is symbolic of the huge void that is forming in his mind, a void that slowly engulfs him as a whole as the reader loses the sight of him in the crowd at the end. However it should be noted that the well knit magical plot of the story is slowly shorn of its magic and left to the bare minimum of reality when at the end Saleem returns to India for the last time for this time his return to Delhi is without its earlier magical spells and without its aura of hope. This is now an India in the post –Nehru era, dominated by characters like Shiva. The contemporary setting is a painful debasement and desecration of the earlier values of independence movement. It is amazing how Rushdie cleverly combines fact and fiction in the recreation of history. While



comparing the two world famous samples of magic realism the similarity of texture and the difference in plot becomes a matter of study. The difference between the magic realism of Marquez and Rushdie lies in the fact that Rushdie, in structuring his novel to affect the collective consciousness of his readers through the incorporation of pages from history unknowingly engages in a socio- political framework for his magic realism. Marquez on the other hand had stressed more on the “magic” quotient of the “magic realism”. This is because Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for example, is based on the theme of love and disintegration of a family of four generations. Structurally it operates on a principle of parallelism between the evolving geographical and genealogical identity. However the point of similarity in both these texts is the fact that both are realized in a world of “fantastic realism”. It is in the truly subverted world of reality itself that both the fictional worlds are realized.

The theme of disintegration in the world of *Midnight’s Children* that has always been termed as the characteristic that gives to the novel its title of being a post modern text is the fact that this might be seen as the outcome of the endeavour taken by Rushdie to generate a text that would play at the level of consciousness of his readers. The present world which has since long, come out of the period of Modernity into a world that no longer repents the disintegration and fragmentation and has successfully taken them to be a part and parcel of life, have to be dealt with. Rushdie’s employment of this is seen presented in a way that it is not repented for, but has been skilfully incorporated in the novel to suit its purpose, often as symbols of the events that are to determine the entire storyline almost performing the function of the Aristotelian chorus at a metaphorical level. The metaphor of the perforated sheet that comes to the readers at the very first instance of the novel is the hole that later on comes to portray the socio – political void in the firmament of the country that has its reflection in the lives of the midnight’s children. The fact that these children share the same mind space in Saleem’s head show them to be the parts of one singular whole, almost as if the fate of the entire country born at the night of India’s independence is divided amongst them. They are the representation of the future of India and what happens to them is the tortuous infliction of the preposterous predicament that the country has to suffer in the post independence era. The perforated sheet at the very last seems to represent the void in Saleem’s mind as well and later comes to stand for the moral and emotional which the

characters and in turn the country seems to be thrusting itself in. Thus the perforated sheet that seems to be the orifice for the viewing of a diseased physic now looks into the diseased nation. It is important to note in this respect that Rushdie's cunning play of metaphors works here. Previously it was doctor Dr. Aziz who was looking through the orifice and now when Rushdie holds the whole up to focus on the plagued condition of the state he upholds this truth for the readers to see. It is here that Rushdie's aim is clear; the reason why he attempts at the collective consciousness of the readers is so that they can identify the sickness themselves as that had studied the scenario in history and be the doctor to it. While *Midnight's Children* is the perforated sheet; the choice so as what is to be done about the truth that is focussed through it, is of the readers.

The question that might arise at this point of time is how can one be so sure that the consciousness that Rushdie aims at is the collective consciousness of the people whose history he has penned down? Well in that case attention must be drawn towards Rushdie's use of language. Rushdie's language is the language of the colonizer so to say. But his diction is a completely Indianised one. When Saleem speaks he speaks like the Indian educated in English. Even here Rushdie's aim seems to be the topic of our discussion, i.e. aiming at the popular consciousness, the character of Saleem as sketched by Rushdie is of one born post independence in a well to do aristocratic family. This is the truth of the post independence India. The retreat of the European powers had left the governance of India to itself but had left its own language behind to mark the elitism of the westerners. Rushdie also directs metaphorically at the sadness of the situation when considering the fact that English had not yet been a language as gigantic in its proportions of influence then as it is now, this was the time when it was made into one. As Saleem says:

India had been divided anew, 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 worlds of words. Language divided us. (25 Pareswaran)

Rushdie's attempt almost comparable to Chinua Achebe's to conquer the colonizer's language by writing in it has various facets to it. Much like Achebe and his compatriots who used African terms indiscriminately in their novels, Rushdie's attempt seems to be in the similar direction. His use of an English tastily flavoured with Hindi as pointed at by various

critics; begins on the very first page of the novel where Saleem tells us that he has been called in various names including the name of “piece –of-the-Moon”, for which the Hindi phrase too is provided later. In other cases although a Hindi word is used the English translation of it given after it in brackets. Rushdie here differs with Achebe for even though Achebe uses crude African terms he doesn’t bother to explain them. Rushdie seems to be following his own linguistic system in that. The reason for this trend in Rushdie might be because of his intention of affecting the larger Indian audience is his primary underlying motif and surmounts the other intention of conquering the language of the colonizers. Canadian critic Neil Ten Kortenaar, who engaged in an extensive study of the various aspects of *Midnight’s Children* has recently compared a long list of all the Indian words and names used by Rushdie. His endeavour when studied, yield certain facts about the usage of such words by Rushdie which seem to form the crux of his bilingual trait. Rushdie engages in doubling or tripling of nomenclatures in the use of such compound words as “muslim muhallas” and so on. It is important to note that certain words such as the thrice thunderous” Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!” that is uttered by Nadir in divorcing Mumtaz lacks the intensity of thunderclap sound as it would have been in case of proper pronunciation. Rushdie uses these words not for any other reason but to bring the text to more known premises of the Indian reader who would find himself connected to the sound of disaster in the three words. The meaning of these three words in their original Urdu has much more significance to the Indian readers for whom making and breaking of marriages isn’t an easy affair.

Finally in delving into the depths of the Indian population and their minds Rushdie brings forward the narrator and the sorry state of his life. He being one of the children with prowess more than ordinary children at the beginning of the novel had induced immense expectations at the heart of the readers who had expected the magic in the text to come out in the form of unexpected thrills and bafflements. But then again Rushdie had given his readers the unexpected, as Saleem has grown to be someone who in the course of his eventful life undergoes amputation at several levels in order to be turned into a spectacle of intervention. This however is revealed to the reader bit by bit and it is only when the entire picture of Saleem is completed and the reader comprehends the metaphor behind his being. His entire life seems to be the metaphor of the formation of India after independence and in the result of

his life Rushdie paints the painful portrait of failure and obscurity. It is just as Saleem himself says:

Yes they will trample me underfoot . . . . reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his . . . . because it is the privilege and the curse of *Midnight's Children* to be both masters and victims of their times . . . . to be unable to live or die in peace.(345 Rushdie)

The final metaphor that Rushdie employs in mentioning the pickling of memories seems to encapsulate his entire novel. For his entire novel is nothing but the pickling of history. He has well preserved these events in the pickle involving fantasy and reality making it seem as if Saleem's mind is the pickle factory from which this pickle has emerged but Rushdie in actual sense makes the pickle out of the ingredients in every reader's mind. For it is in this manner that the impingement in the collective unconscious of his intended readers in every reading of the text will find a new ingredient to the pre- formed pickle. Thus, Rushdie as if completes his intention and also proclaims his victory in the last pickle metaphor. However what is to be noticed is the presence of the empty pickle jar is that it is undoubtedly in tandem with the emptiness of the whole in the perforated sheet that has extended itself in almost all spheres of post modern human life. The element of amnesia in the text, and through the final disappearance of Saleem in the jostle of men, to the final empty container of pickle; can be found Rushdie's indication that the remembrance and understanding of human mind is soon going to disappear, making human history a huge blank in the timescale of the universe. Thus Rushdie in his magic realistic documentation performs a function of far greater magnitude and implication than Marquez in his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Marquez had evolved and dissipated a family whereas Rushdie engages in the penning of an epical novel that is forever revealing concepts of human predicament and the culmination of the ever present human history into an irremediable void.

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