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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Nation, History and Memory: A Critical Study of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Aakankhita Sharma

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Dibrugarh University.

Article History: Submitted-16/07/2019, Revised-28/08/2019, Accepted-29/08/2019, Published-10/09/2019.

Abstract:

The concept of nation is one of the prominent themes of post-colonial fictions. The post-colonial writers try to resist the western construction of the 'other' by redefining nation in their fictions. *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie is considered as a classical national allegory that deals with the events of India, before and after India's independence from the colonial rule. Rushdie, here, longs for the India of pre-colonial era. But, in the Post-colonial era, a nation is not a homogenous entity but fragmented by diverse culture, religion and traditions. The nation is an abstract concept which exists in the minds of its members. Therefore, the history of a nation, which is produced by memory, is also not united. There are multiple histories of a nation. In the novel, Rushdie deconstructs the notion of a nation as a homogenous entity and also debunks the great narratives of the national history. The aim of this paper is to study how Rushdie tries to recapture and restore the past of India with the help of his memory and to take into account different historical events mentioned in *Midnight's children*. The paper also highlights how, with the help of fantasizing and fictionalising of ideas and events, allegories and chutnification of history, Rushdie tries to show the complexities of the post-colonial nation. The methodology of this paper is descriptive and analytical based on the text *Midnight's Children*.

Keywords: nation, post-colonial, history, memory, resistance, great narratives.

Introduction

The word "nation" is derived from the Latin word "natio" which means "people, tribe, kin, genus, class, flock". A nation is a large group or collective of people with common characteristics attributed to them which include language, traditions, customs, habits, and ethnicity. By comparison a nation is more impersonal, abstract, and overtly political than ethnic group. It is a cultural-political community that has become conscious of its autonomy, unity, and particular interests.

According to Benedict Anderson, nation is an imagined political community and he imagined it as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anderson believes that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. An imagined community is different from an actual community in the sense that it is not based on everyday face-to-face interaction among its members, but in the minds of each member lives the image of their communication.

Thus, the glue of imagination is one of the basic ingredients which is required for the setting up of the concept of nation and Benedict Anderson was the first for this inevitable linking up of imagination with nation. Like a nation which has its own restricted boundary, the imagination too has certain limitations. Again, a nation cannot be imagined without history. Therefore, both history and imagination play a vital role to form the concept of nation.

The history of every country is replete with instances of various struggles and as a constructive source of nation, it provides with a sense of belonging to the citizens of a nation. But the same history has been used to please the mighty. As a result, history becomes a source of great narratives for its concerned nations in Post-colonial literature, which results unconsciously in more than one national history.

Being a post-colonial and post-modern writer, Rushdie undermines the conventional ideas of history as merely recorded facts and presents a multiplicity of histories that are consisted of a chutnified mixture of memory and recorded fact: memory produces individual histories that overlap some aspects of recorded history yet remain unique, individual versions of history. What is presented in his novel *Midnight's Children* is not the literal truth but memory's truth which selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and belittles also and finally creates its own reality:

I told you the truth, I say yet again, Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and nullifies 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.292)

Analysis

Rushdie left India for Britain when he was fourteen years old, his parents eventually moved to Pakistan and he eventually became a British citizen. In his *Imaginary Homelands*, a collection of essays, Rushdie states that he is constantly reminded of the fact that his present is 'foreign' and his past is 'home', even though a home effaced with the passage of time. In such a situation, he is forced to look back to India, fully conscious of the fact that "if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." (*Imaginary Homelands*. 10). Thus, his position as a diasporic writer enables him to project the "Indias of his mind", not the actual history of India, in his *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie asserts the concept of nation as a fictional construct in the novel. Every individual has their own versions of history regarding the nation. It varies from person to person. It is a myth. If the nation is a construct of the imagination, then it is inherently a work of fiction. Furthermore, if nation exists only in the mind, it is not possible for the nation to have a single identity. Nations of the mind might share common ground but each imagined community is a fictional creation of the individual. As a result, a singular historical narrative is problematic. It is true in case of India also which is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country. Here, different communities like Bengali, Madrasi, Punjabi etc. have their own concepts of history. In India, religion and money play the vital role in shaping the history in the minds of the people. Hence, the concept of independent India is nothing but a "new myth, a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God." (Rushdie.150)

Rushdie brings the concept of nation as a collective fiction to the novel through the narrator-protagonist Saleem's genealogy. Saleem is presented as allegorically tied to the nation. Rushdie links the individual history of Saleem and his family with the history of the nation in a magically realistic manner. With his birth date, Saleem has been "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (Rushdie.3). Saleem Sinai is born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, at the precise moment of India's independence:

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing

Home on August 15th, 1947. And he time? The time matters, too. Well then at night. No, it's important to be more...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. 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. (Rushdie.3)

With him are born other one thousand "midnight's children"- all born in the early hours of India's independence. These one thousand "midnight's children" have been blessed with supernatural talents. Saleem's gift is telepathy through which he can communicate with other midnight's children. Along with his parents, Saleem's birth has been celebrated by the newspapers and the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself. According to a letter he has received from the Prime Minister Nehru, his destiny mirrors the destiny of India:

Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own. (Rushdie.167)

Saleem has a complex identity. When he is born, his biological mother is the Hindu woman, Vanita; his biological father is not her husband, but the British Methwold. His ayah is a Christian. When born, the name-tags of the two babies are changed, and the baby of the rich, Muslim parents goes with the poor Hindu couple. The father who raises him is a Muslim businessman, who becomes white, as all Indian businessmen have, since they take over what the British left. Saleem's mother, on the other hand, is a black-skinned Muslim woman and not influenced by the British. She is rationalistic but changes as she gets older. She gets more superstitious like all women in her family, she suffers from early ageing. Thus, a definite identity cannot be attached to Saleem. Through the multiple identities of Saleem, Rushdie celebrates the diversity of India. He tries to show that a post-colonial country like India is never singular or pure but a hybrid.

Again, the birth of both a child and a nation is a process of pain, suffering and bloodshed. When a woman gives birth to a child, she has to undergo severe pain and suffering which may result in death. Similarly, the process of nation-building is not an easy one. It is full of bloodshed, violence and killing of innocent people. When Saleem is born, Ahmed Sinai breaks his toe and the doctors are so occupied with taking care of him, that they do not have time to take care of Saleem's biological mother, Vanita, who dies. At the time,

when one part of the country prepare themselves to celebrate the birth of a new myth, the myth of a nation which had never previously existed, on the other side of the same country, massive bloodletting, killing of innocent people, partition riots, arson, police haunts are going on simultaneously:

And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world. (Rushdie.155)

Thus, Saleem becomes a representative figure of his generation and of all the Indians right from his birth.

Rushdie presents a completely different picture of the incidents happened in the freedom struggle of India. The official record of India generally glorifies the events of the freedom struggle. But it is only a limited vision of the events. The truth lies in the other side which remains hidden from the common people. Rushdie presents this truth through Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who was a doctor by profession and he was a witness of the Jalianwalabagh's massacre. On August 6, 1919, Aadam Aziz and Naseem Aziz were in the city of Amritsar. Mahatma Gandhi issued a call for a day of mourning-hartal-on August 7 to protest the British presence in India. On the day of hartal, riots broke out and Aadam treated the wounded by Mercurochrome that left bloodlike red stains on his clothes. Six days later, a peaceful protest erupted in violation of the martial law regulations. The crowd moved into a compound, where Brigadier R.E. Dyer and his troops eventually surrounded them. Aadam's nose began to itch furiously. As the Brigadier issued a command, Aadam sneezed violently, falling to the ground and thereby missing a bullet aimed in his direction. The troops continued to fire into the crowd. Of the one thousand six hundred fifty rounds fired, one thousand five hundred sixteen found their marks:

Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put down their machine-guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. 'Good shooting', Dyer tells his men, 'We have done a jolly good thing'. (Rushdie.42)

The official record of India glorifies this event as a turning point of Indian freedom struggle and the victims are regarded as patriots. But for Aadam Aziz, this was a deliberate killing of innocent people and the total lack of humanity on Dyer's part which evoked indignation against the colonial rule. This event infused him with patriotic feelings and made him an Indian, with the new faith of nationalism. Through the personal sufferings of Aadam Aziz, Rushdie depicts the sufferings of the innocent people. The manner of Aadam Aziz's escape from the massacre nullifies the glory of the event narrated in the official record of Indian history.

Another such incident of communal riot is evident in the case with Lifafa Das, a peepshow man who arrived in the Muslim neighbourhood near Chandni Chowk. This man with his mobile Duniya Dekho Machine often visited the locality. By the magical rattle of his drum he attracted the children the adult alike to show them the collage of unified India. He put more and more pictures into his magic box to keep his words to the customers to show the entire world. On that morning a petty quarrel amongst the children as to who should put his eyes first into the hole of his box turned communal. The violent Muslim crowd turned on the lone Hindu:

And now the insanity of the crowd like a pointing finger and the whole disjointed unreality of the times seizes the muhalla, and the screams are echoing from every window, and the schoolboys have begun to chant, 'Rapist! Ra-pist! Ray-ray-ray-pist!' without really knowing what they're saying; the children have edged away from Lifafa Das and he's moved, too, dragging his box on wheels, trying to get away, but now he is surrounded by voices filled with blood, and the street loafers are moving towards him, men are getting off bicycles, a pot flies through the air and shatters on a wall beside him. (Rushdie.99)

Amina Sinai, Saleem's mother, who had the seeds of secularism and hatred for religious bigotry family sown into her blood through the legacy of her father, ran to rescue Lifafa Das with the public announcement of her pregnancy even before her husband knew about it. Thus, the announcement of Saleem's arrival turned him into public property much before his birth and saved Lifafa Das's life.

Even after India got her independence, the people could not free themselves from the fear of the communal riots. This is depicted through the incident of Gandhi's assassination.

The news of Gandhi's assassination filled the mind of the Sinai family with terror because if the murderer turned out to be a Muslim, violence would break out. Therefore, they remained confined to their house until the radio announced the identity of the murderer- a Hindu: one Nathuram Godse- which brought relief to the Muslim: "Nathuram Godse. 'Thank God,' Amina burst out, 'It's not a Muslim name!'"(Rushdie.197). This shows the true picture of the time when on the one hand, people were mourning on the death of Gandhi, on the other hand, Muslim people were only conscious of their own safety. Here, Rushdie mentions a wrong date of Gandhi's assassination. He does it deliberately in order to show the fallibility of his memory, after all it is India of Rushdie's mind. Again, the wrong date of Gandhi's assassination intensifies the fact that in Independent India, Gandhi dies every day because his dreams of Independent India are not fulfilled till now. People tend to forget his ideology and they are only preoccupied with their own interests. The new expectations from independence have been totally shattered. Thus, independence comes not only with one thousand privileged 'midnight's children', but the non-human activities like violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed etc. are also its children. These non-human offspring of independence are more varied and violent than one can ever dream:

Midnight's has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepper pots...I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I-even I-had dreame. (Rushdie.405)

Thus, the midnight's dream of independent and unified India is completely shattered. There is not a single unified and ideal India but every community demands their own rights which lead to violence and corruption. Thus the concept of India is not unified and ideal in the post-colonial era but it is fragmentary.

This is how Rushdie depicts the "India of his mind" through the personal story of Saleem Sinai and his family. Being born at the same time, both India and Saleem have left the child stage at the same time. As Saleem grows rapidly as a child, at the same time one princely state after another joins the nation India.

In school, Saleem has been tortured during geography class, with the teacher holding and mocking him, comparing his face to the map of India. "These stains", he cries, "are Pakistan! Thees birthmark on the right ear is the East wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!"

(Rushdie.321). The incident culminates with the teacher, lifting Saleem by his hair and pulling his hair out.

When the teacher tears the hair of Saleem's head and he loses a part of his finger, there are riots in East Pakistan and in Kashmir there are increased demands for independence. When there is disagreement in the Midnight's Children Conference, the war with China breaks out, and in the end of the war, when India is defeated with damaged self-esteem and economy, Saleem is operated upon and thus 'drained above'; he cannot get in touch with the others telepathically any more. When the war between India and Pakistan of 1965 breaks out, almost all of Saleem's relatives are wiped out, and he himself is 'wiped clean'; he is hit in the head by his silver spittoon and suffers from a total loss of memory. During the Emergency, Saleem is "drained below", castrated, and thus loses his hope. Saleem is losing his hair, one joint of his finger, he loses his sinuses and is castrated, and as a result he disintegrates into six hundred and thirty million fragments, which is the same number as the number of inhabitants of India when the novel ends in 1978. Saleem is writing the story as a defence against the cracks and disintegration of his body. His aim with the story is to create meaning in his life by telling his story before his memory fails him. Since Saleem's body is linked to the body of the country and his destiny is chained to that of India's, the cracks in Saleem's body are also linked politically. Thus, while he is worrying about his disintegrating body, he is really talking about the disintegrating nation:

I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous and necessarily oblivious dust. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (We are a nation of forgetters). (Rushdie.43)

Conclusion

Rushdie examines India as an outsider which enables him to realize the complete failure of the new hopes and expectations that come with the Independence. After so many years of Independence, it is found that nothing has changed except the colour of the rulers. The conditions of the poor and the exploited remain unchanged even after Independence. Everyone comes with their own demands which shake the unity of the nation. The new history of Independent India does not represent the glorious history of ancient India. This is shown through the cracks and disintegration of Saleem's body.

In this way, through the genealogy of Saleem and his family, Rushdie portrays the condition of post-colonial India in *Midnight's Children* which has a complex culture and where multiplicity, pluralism and hybridity are central ideas. Since the protagonist of the novel is a product of diverse cultures, religions and traditions, so India also has a mixed tradition and there is no such thing as a pure Indian culture, a true Indian religion or a true Indian tradition. The novel shows that India cannot be understood as one unified whole, but a country that must be divided into many different fragments in order to be understood. While Saleem narrates his own history, he commits a number of mistakes which he notices and points out but he usually refuses to correct them. This shows that he is depicting the India of his own mind which leads to the conclusion that the novel should not be read as a history book but as a novel about Saleem's version of his history. It also reinforces the fact that every individual has his own version of history regarding a nation which is basically a construct, an imagination. At last, Saleem has many cracks in his body which results in the disintegration of his body. It is a symbol of the disintegration of the nation. But with the birth of a new, more pragmatic generation depicted through Aadam Sinai, Saleem's son, a positive hope comes for the rebuilding of the nation.

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