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## Interweaving Personal and Political History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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### Abstract:

This paper attempts to address the representation of nation in postcolonial novels with reference to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* presents a magic-realist narrative which is preoccupied with India's nationhood, her attainment of it and the challenges India faces in the subsequent years. On the other hand, in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry, by presenting historical events, highlights the impact of certain events post 1947, like the Emergency on the Indian nation. This paper attempts an analysis of both these novels as historical and literary documents of modern India's nationhood and also analyse the authors engagement to it within the theoretical frameworks of Anderson, Bhaba and Timothy Brennan.

### Keywords: Nation, history, postcolonial

The idea of the nation has been one of the most significant points of discussions in postcolonial world. According to Benedict Anderson, the concept of nation is the idea of an "imagined community" or shared community. Through this "*Imagined Community*", the postcolonial societies can invent a self-image through which they can seek to escape the tyranny of the imperialist society. From the point of view of literary theory, nationalism is of special interest. It is because, according to Brennan, the ties between literature and nation evoke a sense of the "fictive quality of the political concept itself". In Timothy Brennan's essay "The National Longing for Form", he suggests that the burden of one strain of writing from the so-called Third World has been to critique "the all inclusive gestures of the nation-state and to expose the excesses which the priori state, chasing a national identity after the fact, has created at home". He suggests that such writing appropriates and at the same time inverts the form of the European novel. According to him, writers like Salman Rushdie are "well poised to thematize the centrality the centrality of nation-forming while at the same time demythifying it from a European perch".

In his work *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhaba speaks out against the tendency to group the Third World Countries into a homogenous identity. He, instead, claims that all sense of nationhood is narrativized.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is one of the most read novels which also won the Best of the Booker Prize marking it as the foundational text depicting the Indian nation. In this novel, interestingly, the birth of the protagonist coincides with the official birth of the nation. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist declares at the outset that he is "handcuffed to history".

*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 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, its 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)*

At the beginning of the novel, it is indicated that the destiny of India would be linked to Saleem's destiny. As a matter of fact, Saleem himself says "*I had 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.*" (Rushdie, 3)

This novel of Rushdie is about an emerging nation, India. However there is also reference to the birth of the other two neighbouring nations, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The novelist has linked the private destiny of Saleem Sinai to the public history of the nation. Again, as a novelist from a country with a colonial legacy, Rushdie is also involved with the concept of nation. It is not Saleem alone who is special but there are hundreds of midnight's children who possess special powers. All of them possess extraordinary powers with Saleem having the power of telepathy. However, later, the nation is described as disagreeing and gifted children refusing cooperation during the Emergency. They have to pay the price by losing their special powers as India at the time of Emergency had become a despotic state.

The special children are no longer united. Saleem's pleas are not given importance. What proves to be Saleem's loss comes out as Shiva's gain. Shiva is presented as Saleem's double. By showing the rivalry between Saleem and Shiva, Rushdie shows the tension between the two

neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan. It is noteworthy that at several points in the novel, Saleem is shown to be related to many historical events. Be it the Maharashtra-Gujarat partition or the Sabarmati murder case, Saleem is shown to have a hand in it.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* depicts the longing for a national form as well as the difficulty to attain it in the face of the nation's heterogeneity. In the introduction to his collection of essays Bhabha stresses the need, in light of the break-up of the European Empires and the constitution of independent postcolonial nations, to think beyond ordinary and initial subjectivities to "focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences". For Bhabha, the in-between spaces, provide the terrain for negotiating strategies of selfhood and the collective experience of nation-ness. The move away from fixed organizational categories of identification results in a perception of the subject positions, such as race, class, gender, etc, that form identity. This process of redefinition of subjectivity ultimately encompasses human communities and the identifications produced in them. For Bhabha this process is true of all human communities, but especially true in post-colonial nations, in which a return to an essential, pure national past on which to assert a true, untainted and natural national identity, is impossible. Interstitiality or in-betweenness challenges the idea of monolithic, homogeneous identity. And the in-between subjects in *Midnight's Children*, Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai, informing the national project with their interstitial identities, challenge the idea of a monolithic, homogeneous Indian national.

As Saleem's narrative of the nation captures the continuous clash of ancestry and history, he discovers that the legacy of in-betweenness captures all aspects of his life. He discovers that he is not the real descendent of Aadam Aziz but he is the son of the Englishman, William Methwold. As Saleem's life prefigures that of the nation, *Midnight's Children* disturbingly places Englishness at the origin of Indian nationality. Saleem Sinai's narrative undermines his own origin and consequently, the origin of the nation. Rushdie's novel questions the concept of the nation as a homogeneous entity and instead suggests that it is more of an "imagined community"

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* analyzes the concept of nation, trying to arrive at a better understanding of the complex set of processes that shape it. Anderson defines nation not in terms of common language, history, territory, etc, but as a social construct, as a product of a

collective imagination. He theorizes the nation as “an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”(Anderson, 6). Anderson defines the nation in terms of imagination because its members will never know, see or even hear of their fellow citizens, yet in the mind of each is the image of their communion. The nation is limited because each one has a frontier, beyond which are other nations. Finally, the nation is imagined as a community because, despite the inequalities and eventual exploitation of certain segments, it is conceived as a horizontal brotherhood, a deep comradeship, and as such produces profound attachments among its members. According to Anderson, along with the concept of nation, other signs such as “nation-states, republican institutions, common-citizenship” etc consolidate the fixity of the nationally imagined community in the minds of its members. However, in this novel, as violence enters the narrative, Saleem realises that “there are as many versions of India as Indians”.

On the otherhand, in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, the author narrates a cluster of stories related to the political, social as well as historical development of India, especially between the years 1975 to 1985. Mistry begins this novel with an epigraph by Honore de Balzac. “ Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm-chair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true.” This indicates that there is truth in the fictitious narrative that the readers are going to read. Like Rushdie, Mistry, too, interweaves national history with the personal lives of the protagonists. He presents the events that happened in the postcolonial India in 1947, particularly the State of Emergency under the reign of the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He shows how Mrs. Gandhi’s decision to impose a ‘State of Internal Emergency’ proves to be fatal for ordinary people. Mistry explores the political implication of the Emergency on the lives of the Indian nation.

Before narrating the horrors of the Emergency, Mistry narrates the post-independence period turmoil. Maneck Kohla’s family suffers a lot. Infact his father’s family business sees a decline after the independence. He had lost majority of his estates in the Partition and is now left with only a small shop to make both ends meet.



*Once, though, Maneck's family had been extremely wealthy. Field's of grains, orchards of apple and peach, a lucrative contract to supply provisions to cantonments along the frontier-all this was among the inheritance of Farokh Kohlah, and he tended it well, making it increase and multiply for the wife he was to marry and the son who would be born.*

*But long before that eagerly awaited birth, there was another, gorier parturition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror's wand. ( Mistry, 205)*

However, the Kohla's are not the only sufferers. The violent massacre affected the lives of the other characters. The two Hindu characters, Ishwar and Narayan witness this violence while at the home of the Muslim tailor, Ashraf Chacha. In order to repay the family's kindness, they save them from an angry Hindu mob ready to slaughter any Muslim.

The most devastating historical event in the novel, as mentioned earlier, is the Emergency. Om, Ishwar, Dina and Maneck are the victims of this Emergency. The political situation of the Emergency under the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi imposes an imbalance on the narratives of nationhood. The Emergency influences the life of the nation to the extent that it degrades and reduces the nation to a mere plaything of the discourses of power. In this regard, under the Twenty Point Program agenda of the Emergency, sterilization occurs which leaves one of the characters castrated and degendered. It can be said that this physical castration can be linked to the symbolic castration of the life of the nation during Emergency as it exposes the ambivalences of power and gender in a state of lawlessness.

In this novel, Mistry interweaves the lives of the subaltern, the marginalized and the poor into the narrative of the nation. The four main characters come together but gradually their lives fall apart mostly because of the Emergency. Interestingly, the dictatorship of the state can be seen in the fact that it uses the discourse of nationalism to establish the ideology of nationalism. People are made to listen to the National Anthem. Infact, when Om and Ishwar, after watching a show, run towards the exit door, they are asked to stay back and listen to the national anthem as in the time of crisis, their motherland needs them. It can be said that the State of Emergency, unable to

justify itself on practical grounds, uses patriotic ideology to justify its policies. Again in his depiction of the Indian nation, Mistry disseminates the history of the nation under the guise of the sterilization programme. Ishwar and Om are the extreme sufferers of this programme which leads to one being crippled.

At this point, it is noteworthy to mention that while the common man suffered during the Emergency, the educated lot had mixed attitude towards it. As a matter of fact, Dina's brother, Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta of Au Revoir Exports supported the Emergency. Nusswan remarks "People sleeping on the pavements gives industry a bad name. My friend was saying last week – he's the director of a multinational, mind you, not some small, two-paisa business – he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated.....got rid of. Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy" (Mistry 372-373) He even refers to the Emergency as "A true spirit of Renaissance" (Mistry 371). Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta are happy that the production would increase and business would flourish because there would be no union strikes now.

It can be said that in both these novels, the nation is viewed from the point of views of the protagonists. It is noteworthy that as both the narratives progress, the attitude towards the nation changes. Both begin with a hope but gradually disappointment creeps in. The hopes of a self-sufficient and independent nation where one would find fulfillment gets bleak. Om, Ishwar, Dina and Maneck's fate makes us frightened. The novelist's re-telling of certain historical events from the perspectives of the protagonists helps him to construct his story of the nation. Thus, it can be said that while Rushdie depicts the birth, growth and fragmentation of a nation, Mistry depicts the gloomy days of the nation.

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