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Rushdie's Critique of Politics in *Midnight's Children*

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Salman Ahmed Rushdie is one of the prominent diasporic writers of Indian origin. Rushdie has always considered himself as an outsider, a displaced citizen of the world. The sense of alienation prevails because of his double identity. Even in the land of his origin, he is often considered to be an outsider. Nevertheless in his books, he delves into his nation's past, particularly about the birth of two nations. His much acclaimed novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), winner of the Booker's prize, is focused on the independence and partition of India and Pakistan. His novel *Shame* (1983) depicts the political and social state of affairs of Pakistan. His *The Satanic Verses* (1988) caused a huge controversy as the novel allegedly was hurtful to the religious sentiments of the Muslim community.

The present paper focuses on his *Midnight's Children*, where he critiques politics as practiced by the political leaders/rulers of pre-independence and post-independence India. An attempt has been made to analyze the use of strategies, tools and means employed by the political players of the colonial and post-colonial period and the continuities and discontinuities between them. Rushdie, through his text, aims to unravel the character of men who ruled the country before and after independence in 1947. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has been acclaimed as a landmark work in the history of Indian literature written in English. Rushdie employs various allegorical and parodic modes to put together a remarkable tale. Written in the tradition of Indian storytelling, Rushdie masterfully draws up compressed images of Indian social, cultural and political reality uniquely tempered with fantasy. The use of magic realism enables him to mix together the contrasting elements of the past and the present; colonial and the postcolonial, individual and the historical. The seemingly fantastic tale makes a searing criticism of the prevalent dynamics of politics, particularly pertaining to the events of India's independence and subsequent partition.

The major theme of the novel *Midnight's Children* is narration of history and identity, both at national as well as individual levels and their implications in the dynamics of politics. Rushdie shows concern over the degeneration of politics, loss of identity, traditions and religious beliefs. The work highlights the influence of the colonizers on the indigenous population. Modernity has had an impact on India's beliefs, religion and culture. The communal divide and the resultant partition of the country are the issues of concern in the novel. Rushdie is critical of the post-independence rulers who have continued to run the country on institutions inherited as such from the colonizer. The repressive policies and the manipulative politics prevalent both in India and Pakistan become the focus of parody. The novel opens with its narrator Saleem Sinai informing his birth date and time as coinciding with the birth of the nation, i.e. midnight on August 1947. Through the story of Saleem's life, Rushdie attempts a parodic political history of India. Rushdie portrays the life events of the

fictional hero Saleem Sinai linked with the actual political and historical events that took place. Uma Parmeswaran succinctly points out:

Midnight's Children is mainly an autobiography of Saleem Sinai, but it is also the history of India during the period of action. Rushdie links these in two ways: through events in Saleem's life that are actually connected to contemporary events through himself or one of his circle of friends or family; and through having significant events in Saleem's life coinciding with political events of historical importance. (Parmeswaran, 7)

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, described in Percy Lubbock's words as a "novel within a novel" (Lubbock, 7) and in William Walsh's view as "the personification and realization of Indian life," (Walsh, 257), provides a view of progression of India's history linked with that of the narrator-protagonist Saleem Sinai. Born at midnight on August 15, 1947, Saleem grows up with notions of specialness and uniqueness thrust upon him. As he grows older and goes through a life of anguish and isolation, he realizes that he is as much a victim of mistakes and blunders committed by those at the helm of affairs as any other citizen of the nation. Confronted by his own ordinariness, he can only take refuge in fantasy and the mythical in order to be able to deal with reality. As he shifts between the past and the present, the mythical and the historical, Saleem projects ideas of the self which are constantly changing and confusing. Repeatedly Saleem lapses into fantasy to find meaning to his own as well as country's identity. The political happenings in the country are shown as having a close link with the personal shaping of the self.

At the literal level, *Midnight's Children* is about the children born on a particular date. Rushdie's real intent is to focus on the birth of the nation and its stumbling steps towards assumption of new identity. The tale that emerges is one devoid of optimism as Rushdie depicts the divisive politics at play, various political leaders seeking to serve their own interest, heightened conflicts on linguistic, religious and caste basis, the communal riots, loss of moral values, rampant corruption and rise of dictatorial forces hidden within the garb of democracy, etc. Rushdie describes how Saleem, the protagonist, suffers before, during and after the partition. As a common man, independence of the nation has not made any positive impact on his life. The self-centered rulers ignore the interests of the masses. Rushdie, thus, brings into sharp focus the difference between what was dreamed of before independence and the harsh realities of actual political practice.

Using the technique of magic realism, Rushdie beautifully links the fantastical characters (for example, Saleem, Padma and Shiva) with the real life personalities of the colonial as well as the post-independence era. Through an autobiographical description of Saleem's life, Rushdie portrays the history of India spanning a period from 1917 to 1977. Rushdie links his fictional characters to the political history of India to reveal the prevalent strategies of politics before and after Independence. The first historical event that Rushdie refers to is that of the Jallianwala massacre in 1919. Through Saleem, Rushdie describes how on April 13, thousands of people who had gathered at Jallianwala Bagh defied the Martial

Law imposed by General Dyer. The government had banned the meeting by the nationalists. The protest was supposed to be peaceful. Hundreds of people were killed due to the shooting orders given by R.E Dyer, the Martial Law Commander. Saleem's grandfather Adam Aziz, who was a witness to the historical bloodshed himself, suffered a bruise at his chest. The experience led to a feeling of nationalism in him. The reference to the historic event of massacre as experienced by the fictional character heightens the sense of horror at such blatant exercise of power.

Rushdie's technique of magic realism is evident as the fictional character Saleem, who possessed the telepathic powers, used the magical powers to see the political developments. Saleem carefully watched the political and social developments that took place in different parts of the nation. He "toured Connaught Place in New Delhi in the guise of an auto- rickshaw driver" and complained about the fare and talked about "rising prices of gasoline" (173). While at one time, Saleem shows himself as a landlord from Uttar Pradesh, at another, a starved man from Orissa. The description given of the Congress worker engaged in the act of wooing the school teacher to side with his party reveals the malpractices in Indian politics. The money-power plays a crucial role in mobilizing support for a political party. The act of bribing the voters shows the desire of the parties to continue, to remain in power and to enjoy the comforts of power. The politics of the Indian leaders has created a gap between the rich and the poor. The policy of protecting the rights of the landlords has resulted in widening of the gap further. The unequal distribution of national resources has remained an important issue of contention for the communists. The oppositional state governments often complain about the step-motherly treatment of the centre. The issues of starvation in Orissa and surplus grains in Uttar Pradesh can be seen in this light. Some states get better irrigation facilities which results in a rich crop yield while, some others are deprived of the basic requirements for the agricultural growth.

In the novel, Rushdie has attempted to portray the political and social problems of India. The post-independence Indian rulers claim to be benefitting the masses through the Five- Year Plans of the democratic government. Rushdie, on the contrary, points out the futility of such plans and policies. Nothing tangible has been done for the masses who continue to suffer in the post-colonial era. Rushdie seems to suggest that even national planning serves the interests of the ruling elite. He gives an account of how the five year plans, made by the government for the overall development of the nation, became a plan for the development of the business class which derived maximum dividends out of it.

Rushdie gives a journalistic account of how the language issue has been a major one impacting the dynamics of politics in India. In 1955, Nehru implemented the recommendations of the committee regarding the re-organization of states and declared the formation of fourteen states and eight union territories. The formation of the boundaries was on the basis of language. The Indian rulers had yielded to the political pressure of the groups/organizations formed in the name of language. With telepathic powers, Saleem was able to see how people were indulging in infighting over the language issue.

Rushdie makes his fictional character, Shiva (one of the members of the midnight's conference) participate in the election as a gangster for one such political party. Rushdie shows how political parties take the undue advantage of money and muscle power as well as administrative machinery. This makes a mockery of democracy. The financially sound politically powerful parties are able to win elections by force and by other manipulative practices like rigging of elections. The use of force or coercion for fulfilling political aspirations is quite common practice in the political world of today. Rushdie, through the protagonist Saleem's narration, pictures the Indian politics of post- independence era. Saleem and Shiva ,leading the two rival groups, symbolize the two main political parties in India. They are in constant war of words while canvassing during elections is going on. The political allegations and counter- allegations by the main political players result in deepening of the political rivalries. The struggle of the political parties has a negative impact on the development of the nation. Saleem describes how, with his enhanced telepathic powers, he was able to communicate with the midnight's children in a better way. He acted "as a source of national network" (227). Saleem and Shiva indulge in a political tussle over the leadership of the Conference. Having been born at the stroke of midnight, (which even Saleem claims), Shiva claims to be the supremo of the conference. However, Saleem's claim of leadership becomes stronger as he is the founder of the Conference. Amidst the claims and counter-claims of communism and capitalism voiced by Saleem and Shiva respectively, the former dominates the latter. Through the fictional characters Saleem and Shiva as leaders of fictional Midnight's Children's Conference, discussion and their counter discourses, Rushdie parodies the state of Indian politics.

Capitalism, as Rushdie suggests, got precedence over communism owing to the support of the dynamic inherent in the political and social structure. Shiva, the fictional character in Rushdie's text, gives his arguments on the issue of economic disparities in the society. He talks about the rich and the poor whom he describes as "have- and- lack" (255). The mention of the "right- and – left" (255) refers to the political parties. The leftists or the communists strive for equal distribution of wealth of the nation to put an end to the disparity between the high and the low. Shiva points out that the Tatas and the Birlas who are the producers of commodities have also gained political prominence. Shiva describes to Saleem the power of the big industrialists such as Birla and Tata as "they make things" and for "things the country is run" (255). Shiva's observations depict how the owners of leading business houses get favours from the men in power. The policies of the government aim to watch the interests of the leading business houses.

Through a portrayal of elections under the dictatorial regime, Rushdie reveals the state of democracy in Pakistan. He describes how the president of Pakistan, Ayub Khan declared elections leading to crucial developments. The election "was to take place on the day after the engagement ceremony, under the adult suffrage called Basic Democracy" (321). Saleem describes the procedure for the election in which a "hundred million people of Pakistan had been divided up into a hundred and twenty thousand equal parts, and each part was represented by one Basic Democrat" (321). The Electoral College which consisted of one hundred and twenty thousand Basic Democrats were to elect the man for the top political

position of the nation. The Nawab had invited four hundred and twenty basic democrats which included even the commoners. He had also invited “two real *badmashes*, the returning officers of the combined opposition party” (321-22). Rushdie depicts the political scenario of the democratic systems of the Third World countries where the manipulative practices adopted by the politicians make democracy a farce.

Rushdie also refers to Indira Gandhi’s patronage of her controversial son Sanjay Gandhi who emerged as a powerful youth leader. His most controversial act of forced sterilization of people was carrying out in order to eradicate the population problem in India. Rushdie, once again, merges the historical with the fictional when he talks about Sanjay Gandhi having a secret dinner meeting with Mustapha Aziz to put his plan into action. Rushdie obviously condemns the atrocities committed on the Indian masses in the name of reforms by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi. The declaration of Emergency was a tool used to silence the voices of dissent. On the pretext of bringing about reforms, Indira Gandhi continued to remain in power assuming the role of a dictator. Saleem relates how his Uncle Mustapha, while standing on the steps of the mosque, unfurled the banner which read “ABOLISH POVERTY” (398). The banner “bore the cow- suckling-calf symbol of the Indira Congress” (398). But Picture Singh satirizes the futility of carrying such banners with slogans which are far from reality. Rushdie portrays Picture Singh as a true socialist who does not believe in mere political slogans. Even though the eradication of poverty was one of the main slogans of the Congress, the miserable plight of the downtrodden continued even after the end of Emergency. Picture Singh’s portrayal also indicates how common men are eventually able to see through the games political leaders play.

Rushdie, thus, documents the ongoing breakdown of politics in India. Colonial politics has continued to maintain hold on the post-independence India. The colonizer used autocratic practices to subdue the Indians. The oppression and suppression of the people continued even after independence. Rushdie’s description of the rise of Indira Gandhi on the political scenario provides a searing commentary on how the Indian leaders ended up emulating those very colonizers against whom they earlier launched their struggle for freedom. The description also reinforces the truth that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the most active leaders in the Indian struggle for independence, transformed herself into being a dictator and destroyer of common people’s rights. Rushdie, effectively, brings out the irony of the situation when he links the illness of Saleem’s child with the sufferings of Indian masses reeling under the Emergency. Rushdie projects how the attempts of a commoner to rise in politics and change the system or to fight against the tyrannical rule prove to be futile. The commoners like Saleem or Picture Singh cannot match with the political strength and resources at the disposal of men in power. The revolutionary politics proves to be an utter failure as the masses are preoccupied with their own basic needs. Saleem’s declaration to quit politics indicates that the ordinary people are unable to participate in the tedious game of politics. It is beyond their capacity to fight against the demonic forces which rule the roost in the modern day political scenario. Obviously things have not changed over the ages. Even Socrates said: “If I had tried long ago to engage in politics, I should long ago have lost my life... true champion of

justice...must necessarily confine him to private life and leave politics alone" (Quoted by Nathan Widder in Mackenzie, 590). The last political event that Rushdie describes is that of 1977 election in which Congress party headed by Indira Gandhi tasted humiliating defeat at the hands of Janta Party led by Jayaprakash Narayan. However Rushdie's protagonist Saleem does not see any change of fortunes with the change of the guard.

To conclude, it may be said that by ending the novel on a note of dismay and hopelessness, Rushdie has precisely pointed at the degeneration of politics in modern India. Rushdie points out how the political practices of post-independence leaders are in no way different from those of the colonizers. The colonial politics was aimed at maintaining political control over masses. Whatever development projects they undertook were to facilitate their rule over people. Even after the end of the colonial rule, the Indian rulers have failed to formulate any alternative strategy for development or reform for the welfare of the masses. Following the legacy, they have continued to govern on the basis of institutions already in force. The partition of the country, the political design of the British, could not have materialized, had the Indian leaders utilized their own intellect in thinking about the disastrous consequences of the partition. Now after the partition, the rulers of both the countries keep toeing the policy of divide and rule resulting in division of the people in the name of religion, class, community, language and region. Rushdie, through the narrator protagonist Saleem's narrative of family history and his own life events, has aptly described how the masses have suffered during the colonial rule as well as after the partition. Saleem, in fact, is a representative of the common masses who continue to lead miserable lives. Shiva, the other fictional character, is representative of demonic forces employed in manipulative practices by the men in power. Rushdie's critique of politics as it is practised continues to be valid in the contemporary India as well.

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