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A Challenge of Unified Identity Faced by an Imagined Community: A Study of Salman Rushdie's Novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*

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Abstract:

No doubt, a nation is one of the biggest and largest forms of social and political organization in the present civilization. But when a nation comprises of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistics and religious groups of people it becomes all the more challenging to bind them in a single thread. This seems to have been the major concern of Rushdie's two seminal books *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* both dealing with social and political history of India and Pakistan respectively. Like most parts of the world these countries had been planned by locals and foreigners, each side motivated with their vested interests or chiefly by foreigners who had a very crippled sense of culture, topography and geography of the region. It is true of all the bigger or smaller nation of the world that an Imagined Communities is always at the centre but for countries like India and Pakistan as proposed by Rushdie in his novels there is a need to sharpen a unified sensibility among the people inhabiting them to ensure a sustainable peace and progress within the region and to protect it from further disintegration.

Keywords: topography, Imagined communities, unified sensibility, disintegration.

However, variable may be the factors responsible for the creation and formation of different nations of the world, one thing has always been remain common among all the nations of the world and that is the fundamental idea or the basic objective of their formation which makes a nation more impersonal but a political entity to safeguard the common interests of the people inhabiting its territories. As per the present civilization the idea of nation has a western origin and it has evolved out of human progress or economic and political development of overall civilization. It is one of the biggest and largest forms of social and political organization. There is an imagined community is always at the center of such organization. When we think of India and Pakistan in term of imagined community, the phrase once given by Benedict Anderson to explains the concept of a nation, certain related issues start cropping up to strike our minds especially about the political and social development of India and Pakistan - the countries as proposed by Salman Rushdie in his novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* respectively. The term can safely be used to define both the countries. There is no doubt that both nations came into being as a result of imperialistic expansion especially of the western world.

But before we look forward to view India as proposed by Rushdie in his seminal work *Midnight's Children* we feel an urge to have a glimpse of history to know whether these

countries are planned or they were just simply there as most countries of the world before colonial periods existed in their fractured sense with no man made frontier at all. History tells us that India was not a country as such before the British arrived there. Like most parts of the world India or the Indian continent was also divided into many bigger or smaller princely states and the entire region had repeatedly been invaded or defended by foreigner or local kings from time to times. Arrival of the British East India Company as a part of imperialistic expansion had a great role in making and shaping the whole region into a nation. Before the arrival of that company it is hard to believe that the region was a one nation. For the people of the princely states, however, a unified identity was hard to conceive because of the regions inherent multitude of varying languages, cultures and religions. But much of the colonizer's success brought about by its definition of the people of this region as 'Indian' especially by those who wanted to keep it ruling for long. But result of this had been other way round also. It triggered rise of nationalism, much as a protest against imperial regime and the regions struggle to gain independence from the British was important because it united the masses for a common purpose. But as religious identity became more clearly defined, a growing chasm appeared between not only between Indian and the British, but also between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus themselves which ultimately culminated into an abrupt and irrational partition of this region.

So both countries are planned but planned by both locals and foreigners each side motivated with their vested interests or chiefly by foreigners who had a very crippled sense of the culture, topography and geography of the region. To ensure peace of the region all the authorities seated at the decision making positions decided to plunge the region into bloodshed in the name of partition on the lineage of religion. Then there came the emergence of two rival nations with the hope of empowering each other in the near future-a goal set at the cost of all round development of the nations.

Through the course of the novel *Midnight's Children* the narrative of Saleem Sinai shows how India is born and hand cupped to insidious realities of the time to come. Along with the birth of this child there came the hope of an imagined community well depicted metaphorically in the form of the birth of 1001 children of midnight. On account of his mastery over the art of magical realism he has been quite successful in mingling the elements of facts and fantasy, history and fiction in his works. Rushdie thus plays upon 'point of view' in historical narrations and suggests the multiplicity of historical accounts. So the whole issue of authenticity of a narrative or the history bulls down to one question that is who has the right to tell that narrative? To Rushdie it appears that each one of us who is the part of a larger narrative has the right to tell that story. Most of the stories of the characters of the *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* are not only to be appreciated for their fantastic elements but also for their technical beauty and the way their stories are enfolded within the stories of others and contained, folded within themselves, so that the story become a true mirror of a nation. As *Salman* Rushdie believes, "all our stories contain the stories of others and are themselves contained within the larger, grander narratives, the histories of our families, or homelands, or beliefs" (*Two Years*11). While writing about the

truth in fiction this is how Rushdie penned in his autobiographical book, “To grow up steeped in these telling was to learn two unforgettable lessons’. That ‘stories were not true but by being untrue they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him and that all stories belonged to him, just as they belonged to his father, Anis, and to everyone else” (*Joseph Anton*19).

In his novel *Midnight’s children* he attempts to chart the lives of three generations of the Sinai family. Various major political events between 1947 and 1978 have been given place in the text and interwoven with the story of Saleem along with an artistic use of magical realism. Fantasy and realism go hand in hand to present the history of the sub-continent. The plot runs from their home in Kashmir, to Amritsar, Agra, Bombay and Karachi; finally halting in Bombay. The entire book has been divided into three parts. The first part of the book chronicles the period from 1915-1947. Saleem traces the story of his grandfather Aadam Aziz, a young German-return doctor, his marriage to Naseem, his leaving Srinagar for Agra with his wife, and the marriage of his daughter Amina to Ahmed Sinai, followed by the birth of the narrator, Saleem. The second part of the novel deals with the childhood of Saleem and the migration of the family to Karachi on account of the financial crisis they face. Part three is intensely political. It ingeniously recreates contemporary historical events with a focus on the Emergency of the seventies. Along with the story of Saleem which is no doubt a fulcrum around which the stories of 1001 imagined population of India also revolves round. These 1001 children whose birth like that of Saleem took place at the time of the birth of the country, becomes a symbols of entire Indian population of the time. All this occurs against the backdrop of Indian democracy in the wake of numerous challenges.

In his influential book *Imagined communities: Reflection on the origins and spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation first and foremost as “an imagined political community” (6). This is because the number of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them. Yet it is an accepted truth that in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. Each individual think that they are the part of the greater collective that they share a deep horizontal comradeship with many others. Similarly these 1001 *Midnight’s children* do not know each other, being born at difference places speaks different languages, have different religions but are the part of a large political organization named as modern nation-state. This so called socio- political organization takes every step to ensure a place for each in the palatial house of its territory. Though they are quite unlike to each other yet share an understanding of their common interests. These 1001 *Midnight’s Children* represent dream of millions of free Indian who wanted to build, according to Rushdie, in the words of Nehru, “No time for ill will. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell” (*Midnight’s Children*118).

Once this noble mansion is created it becomes all the more important to keep all its children united so that walls of this man-made building should not crumble to ground even in adverse weather. So the sense of belongingness of this imagined community needs to be sharpened from

time to time. This sense of mutual and national belonging is manufactured by the performance of various narratives, rituals and symbols, which stimulates an individual sense of being a member of a select group. The performance of national tradition keeps in place an important sense of continuity between nation's present and its past and also helps to create a sense of a unique sense of shared history. This entire job of manufacturing a sense of belongingness among the midnight's children is done by Saleem Sinai who through his special gift tries to communicate among them an attempt to save himself from disintegrating into pieces. Being an embodiment of nation itself his narrative is the narrative of the nation and the story of his family becomes the story of continuity of past, present and the future of the nation. Saleem succumbs to the Indian tendency to embrace multitudes:

“I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world” (383).

If the invention of the tradition is central to the nation then so is the narration of history. But who has the right to tell that story seems to be an important issue to Rushdie who believes in the multiplicity of versions of the history of a place or nation. In fact there are as many different versions of history as there are narrators. Rushdie believes that we all have that right to tell the narrative that belong to our self or of which we are a part in one way or the other. In such circumstances national integration becomes a bigger challenge for an imagined community. Working on the convergence of the two modes, literary and historical rather than on their differences Rushdie makes his fiction a part of history itself. To face the challenge of disintegration due to multiplicity of versions of history Rushdie makes Saleem's version however who himself quite unsuccessful in his task, as one worthy of study.

Another issue that Rushdie deals with is that of religious and linguistics, ethnic and cultural differences of the people. Religious and linguistics differences have always been an overriding factor in the assurance of the economic and political stability of the imagined community. Given to these differences, conflicts start cropping up with the imagined community which ultimately makes their sense of belongingness toward each other very fragile. This multiculturalism, religious pluralism, multiethnic races deteriorate into something more dangerous thing that is relativism between these groups of society. In such environment comparatively bigger culture, bigger religion or any other bigger social group always wins leaving other to be an oppressive one. These divisive forces within the nation threaten the realization of its goal. Thus in a way nationalist representations might contribute to the continued oppression of some groups within the national population who have not experienced liberation in the period of formal independence. That is why “many once colonized nations have struggled with the internal

differences that threaten the production of national unity. This does not reflect a political failure on the part of newly independent nations, but perhaps reveals a problem inherent in the concept of nation itself” (Mcleod103). As an allegory for newly independent secular India, Saleem Sinai's physical disintegration is a reflection of the fragmentation within the country and of the Indian Subcontinent as well. The cracks and fissures that plague Saleem's body are a comment on the national corpus afflicted by communal and other divisions. To keep a nation united it is necessary that performance of different discourses should be placed in motion and remain dynamic but the dependency on the invention of tradition, symbols , icons, narrative, and their performance to maintain the unified sensibility become all the more heavier when imagined communities is multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial, multilinguistic and above all religiously varied . However strong may be the role of these discourses to stimulate a unified sensibility it has been observed that a nation with a colonial past remains always vulnerable to dissecting forces inherent in it. The fact that many occupants of colonial lands did not possess a sense of deep, horizontal comradeship prior to the advent of colonial government, the production of a unified imaginary community can be both national greatest strength and its ultimate weakness.

Shame is every bit as political and historical as *Midnight’s Children*. The main concern of the novel is shame and shamelessness born from the violence which is no doubt modern history of Pakistan, where seeking unity among its four major states poses another challenge to the ruling class of the nation. In fact, like *Midnight’s Children* which tells the story of failure in the realization of hope of an inspirational generation, chiefly due to the corrupt and myopic vision of ruling class of the country, *Shame* is a novel which tells us the story of a failure of dreaming minds. This is a dream which was once seen by the Muslim Elites that eventually led them toward the formation of an invented and imaginary country- a vision of safe heaven to rule the rest created just for the fulfillment of their vested interests. It is a pitch black comedy of public life especially about the life of Pakistan leadership. The novel is marked by elements such as class, race, or nation, and like *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame* also records the precise periods such as the moment of decolonization and partition and History serves as the fulcrum of the narratives in both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. Important public events of Pakistan socio-politics are allied with those in the lives of Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder .

Like Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, Omar Khayyam in *Shame* tries to come to terms with his personal and national histories as colonized people. Certain unraveled mysteries continues hovering around the birth of Omar Khayyam whose three mother themselves refuse to disclose the name of his father and they are at their best in their unabated show of hypocrisy. Rushdies says, “Young Omar Khayyam was gradually made aware that certain irregularities had both preceded and succeeded his birth” (*Shame*21). Almost similar things have been happened in the creation of Pakistan a country without history and past and where situation has come to such a pass that all the four states have not yet been able to have a stable democratic set up and the whole country is still reeling under the pressure either of religious fundamentalism or the military regimes. Unlike the epic scale of *Midnight's Children*, *Shame’s* focus is concentrated

on the tyrannical and repressive nature of the regimes of the Pakistani elite, wherein democracy has no place and violence reigns. Atrocities and murders committed by rival politicians and general turned politician marked the true history of Pakistan. In an article on Pakistan Rushdie writes that it is a place in which "democratic institutions indeed democratic instincts have never been allowed to germinate. Instead, the country's elites - military, political, industrial, aristocratic, feudal – take it in turns to loot the nation's wealth" (*Step*285).

Right from the date of its creation the elites from the Punjab Province has the dominance over the rest of three states of Pakistan. The very birth of Pakistan as per Rushdie one of the great shocking event, an event which was meant for eroding the past for its inhabitants and a country imposed on uneducated mass by a few foreign educated elites whose ideologies constructed with certain anomalies and irregularities suffered with hypocrisy and short-sightedness. To quote Rushdie "I must tell you what things were like in those early days after the partition; the city's old inhabitants, who had become accustomed to living in a land older than time, and were being slowly eroded by the implacably revenant tides of the past, had been given a bad shock by independence by being told to think of themselves, as well as the country itself, as new" (*Shame*21). Cracks of languages have ever been visible between the four major states as well as among other various ethnic groups of the state. It is quite ironical that the state chose Urdu as its national language which is no way the language of the masses over there. It might be the part of ruling Elites' modus- operandi to subjugate the others within the states. Given the enormous differences of topography, languages, cultures it becomes a big challenge for the state to manufacture a unified sensibility among its imagined communities. Meanwhile as per Rushdie's view the state sought the aid of religious fundamentalism and the dictatorial regimes to maintain order and law in the state which in turn has worked totally against the vision of its founder.

To conclude Rushdie seems to advocates that the myth of nation might have been an idea of bringing the masses under common shed in opposition to colonialism but it could not be a reliable source to ensure political, economic and social rights of all the citizen irrespective of their racial, religious, and linguistics differences. Any attempt to ignore the diversity of so called imagined community that seeks to homogenize would be a dangerous step. We see that the disintegration of *Midnight's Children* does not simply highlight a political failure on the part of newly independent nations, but reveals a problem inherent in the concept of nation itself. For the nations like India and Pakistan, Rushdie seems to argue that they must respect their diversities given to their multicoloured nature of its different religions, languages, races and cultures of the masses. As it is pointed out in an scholarly article, "a basic tenet of the conception of *Midnight's Children* is an acceptance of the fractional nature of the final product. For, the realities of public history or private experience are never reducible to the encompassing forms that the absolutist artist may want to impose upon them" (Wilson28). The dominant images of fragmentation include Saleem's mutilated body that seems a caricature of the map of the nation, the disintegration of the 'Midnight's Children's Conference', and the eventual fragmentation of

Saleem's body into 400,000,506 parts. His own disbanding, as also the dispersal of the 'Midnight's Children's Conference' reflects the demolition of the national ideal of 'unity-in-diversity'. The image of the perforated sheet invoked at the onset of the novel becomes a symbolic trope in the course of the text with Saleem's realizing that it is via such fragmentary forms that he will have to seek wholeness, filling as many gaps as he can. A vacillation between form and fragmentation occurs throughout the novel. Numerous characters exemplify this impulse for formal unity through fragments. For instance, Lifafa Das, the peepshow owner bids people to view the whole world in his postcards: 'Dunya dekho'. Saleem is convinced that India has a widespread national longing for form. This form could only be cemented by mutual sense of belonging on which the future of this imagined community may survive.

As far Pakistan as depicted in *Shame* is concerned this assurance of a unified sensibility and belongingness seems all the more challenging where all the four states are bounded by a single thread of fanatic religiosity. This ever growing religious fundamentalism is posing toughest challenge to the ruling elite of the country where little efforts have been made so far to render support to middle class of the country to stand against ever growing terrorism and poverty. Repeated attacks of militancy one which exemplified only by the ruling class once against each other now have brought the country to such a pass that Baluch people have intensified their revolt against the Punjabi and the Sindhi Start expressing their hatred against the dominance of the Punjabi more explicitly than ever before and to bring North-West frontier State under common umbrella still seems a far-cry for the Government and military of Pakistan. This has well been depicted in *Shame* which is another seminal and historical work by Salman Rushdie.

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