



Magical Realist Narrative Technique As Tool Of Political And Cultural Syncretism In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Narrative mode is the strategy employed by an author in presenting the discourse. It is one of the most important aspects of literature that carries the reader to the heart of the work of fiction. Among a variety of choices, each mode renders a particular style, a unique viability, vitality and vibrancy to the narration. As a result, it makes a profound difference on the narration. The mode of narration is a very important weapon for an author to make his literary work successful producing a specific effect. Contemporary Indian writers began to take a mature view of Indian reality and handled new themes with greater clarity and confidence by experimenting with new methods to express novel ideas. They try to explore their writings in the light of the innovative narrative strategies. Salman Rushdie deals with India's transition from colonialism to Indian independence and partition of British India. *Midnight's Children* explores political, social, and cultural events in modern India. It also focuses on universal issues as the nature of literature and the relationship between individual and collective history. The theme in the novel is travels on zigzag trajectories into history in an allegorical method with a span of nearly sixty years. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* can be considered as a link between magical realism and post colonialism.

Keywords: Narrative mode, Magic Realism, Contemporary writers, Post colonialism,

Introduction

Narrative mode is the strategy employed by an author in presenting the discourse. It is one of the most important aspects of literature that carries the reader to the heart of the work of fiction. Among a variety of choices, each mode renders a particular style, a unique viability, vitality and vibrancy to the narration. As a result, it makes a profound difference on the narration. The method of narration or the way the writer applies literary tools and techniques makes the basic point of narrative mode. The author may sometimes speak in his own voice or employ character or characters or narrator agents to depict the story.

The narrative mode is the set of methods that an author uses to present the process of the narration. In simple, it is the method used to convey the plot to the audience. It encompasses many overlapping areas of concern, like narrative point-of-view that determines through whose perspective the story is viewed, narrative voice that determines the manner through which the story is communicated to the audience, narrative structure that determines in what order events are presented and narrative tense that determines with what sense of time the story is expressed- the past, present or future. The method of constructing a plot in fiction has undergone a drastic change.

Previously, novelists tend to construct their plots around definite beginnings and endings. The progression of their narrative was a movement from a natural starting point to a definite ending. Contemporary novelists began to subordinate the problem of constructing a logical sequence of events. They show more interest in constructing logical or rational sequences structuring the events of the novel so as to present a coherent world or vision of reality. The temporal progression of plots of this kind can be described as movement from appearance to reality. The reader is not introduced to events in the story with cause and effect but gets a gradual insight into these as they emerge from the welter of facts that constitutes the plot of the novel.

The mode of narration is a very important weapon for an author to make his literary work successful producing a specific effect. With the employment of right technique he can convey his ideas to the readers interpreting and transforming reality involving several devices. It is the 'how' (technique) rather than the

'what' (subject) is instrumental in causing paradigm shifts. Hence the technique employed is not just an ornament or super imposed element upon the content to give it additional value but the intrinsic quality of the subject matter itself. As Mark Schorer opines:

When we speak of technique, we speak of nearly everything. Because, technique is the tool or means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally of evaluating it... Narrative technique is actually the means by which he discovers, objectifies, explores, and evaluates his subject and his dexterity determines his success. (Schorer, 67)

Indian Narratives

Indian Writing in English has rich variation of narratives. Its great narrative traditions are exemplified by the works like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, and the Panchatantra. In these narratives Gods combine with human beings and clash with demons to sustain human stories. This could be considered as mythographic consciousness that is encyclopaedic in range and symbolical and archetypal in intent. The art of narration in Indian fictional writings has developed into an independent and important genre of literature in recent times. Through their narratives the contemporary Indian writers voice their thoughts in the written mode in the fullest sense. As K. Srinivas Iyenger puts in:

The advance in fictional technique is a landmark in the history of Indian English novel. The novel has emerged as —a living and evolving genre, and is trying in the hands of its practitioners, a fusion of form, substance and expression, is recognizably Indian, yet also bearing the marks of universality. (Iyenger, 322)

In Indian writings in English, the intention to break up the causal sequence of the story and employ the new methods of narration is an emerging reality. Interpreting myths and legends with reality have become a prevalent practice among writers in order to make their works locally situated and universally relevant. The traditional monologic method of narration inspired by the European writers in their grand narratives gives way to polyphonic narration with multiple voices of narrators. Chronologically ordered narration is replaced by fragmented and non-linear presentation. The narrative modes are supplemented by ultra-modern innovative techniques by exploring the possibility of the cyber world. The postmodern tendency of abandoning omniscient authorship giving scope to polyphonic or multi-voiced narratives becomes visible in the contemporary novels. There is a strategical change in terms of time and process of the narrative.

Contemporary Indian novels experiment with the choice of narrator and voice. Point of view, undeniably, becomes a powerful tool of the author in revealing subtleties of human psychology. With regard to time, a speaker relates events according to normal chronology, but in works of fiction, the plot reveals the story rearranging the time line and allowing the reader to rediscover the original events until the end. With regard to narration, normally a speaker tells of past events either from first person or third person perspective. Most of the writers, who exhibit awareness about the constructed nature of narrative, do not deploy a traditional linear plot. Nor do they concentrate on the life and experiences of a limited number of people taking place in a sequential order.

The traditional linear plot is shunned to introduce frequent digressions. The compact, well-knit plot in the construction of narrative is stuffed with a variety of material involving a number of characters, places and experiences with a thin link among them. Instead of developing a single story, the plot now marks the presentation of multiple stories and also develops on the pattern of story within the story. Consequently, the reader gets involved in making sense of the multi-layered narrative. Another trend that marks a shift in the development of plot is its construction on the pattern of visual forms of art. The author seems more interested in showing than telling. The complex nature of the plot having a major shift in contemporary Indian English fiction can be observed in Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*, Shashi Tharoor's *Riot and The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and many others.

No matter whether novelists opt for a huge canvas with a wide variety of characters or concentrate attention on the emotional interaction of a handful of people, their very choice of narrative mode and point of view heightens the thematic import. As K. Srinivas Iyengar observes, novelists can choose any one of the following patterns of narration: "grand chain pattern (stringing together of a number of episodes), the hour glass pattern (reversing the directions of the plot) or the boomerang pattern (actions returning at the end to the point it started from), the wheel pattern (several narrative strands emanating from a single centre) and the stream of consciousness pattern (indicating the several waves of action that blow over a mind under focus)" (Iyengar, 26). In recent times the narrative technique has shifted its focus from simple unfolding of the story to highlighting the mental and emotional changes in the characters. Amita Shresth states that the method adopted by a writer to present life in the process of living may be described as the narrative technique. (Shresth , 553)

Contemporary Indian writers began to take a mature view of Indian reality and handled new themes with greater clarity and confidence by experimenting with new methods to express novel ideas. They try to explore their writings in the light of the innovative narrative strategies. Different narrative techniques are subtly interwoven into the texture to generate a structure to the novels. Apart from the Indian oral narrative method, they explore the concepts formulated by their western counterparts.

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances... able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society... All classes, all human groups, have their narratives... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes, 79)

The authentic nature of the narrative is more significant than the subject matter presented in the writings. The plot, setting, theme, mood, characterization, structure, style, tone, language, narrative mode and many other aspects contribute for designing the blueprints of the fiction. Contemporary writers of fiction strive to emphasise on the mode of presentation of the story to produce a certain effect in considerable variety. The manner in which a story is told changes from one author to another, from one historical period to another, and even, in the case of an author like Amitav Ghosh, from one novel to another.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Bestowed with the prestigious Booker Prize thrice for fiction, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) received numerous accolades along with wide critical response. It has won the Booker in the year of its publication. For the second time, it was adjudged the 'Booker of Bookers' in 1993 for the best Booker Prize for Fiction in the twenty-five year history of the award. The novel was pronounced the 'Best of Booker' for the third time again in 2008 for the best novel in the last forty years of the award. It is one of the most widely studied and discussed novels of the twentieth century. Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* talks about the reason behind his inspiration to write *Midnight's Children*.

A few years ago, I revisited Bombay, which is my lost city... Shortly after arriving, acting on an impulse, I opened the telephone directory and looked for my father's name. And amazingly there it was; his name our old address, the unchanged telephone number, as if we had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an eerie discovery... It was probably not too unromantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born, when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself. (Rushdie, 9)

It took four-five years for Rushdie to complete this 500 pages novel. It spans over a period of 70 years from the time of India's Independence to the declaration of Emergency by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The novel covers the major political events of modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Salman Rushdie adopts the first person narrative mode in this novel. The narrator is a young man, Saleem Sinai who is born at the stroke of midnight when India broke free from shackles of slavery. This novel has been translated into twelve different languages and deals with incidents of pre and post-independence era of Indian Sub-continent. The novel appears to have overtones of autobiography as the narrator protagonist bears close identity to Rushdie. He also uses number of devices to link Saleem's autobiography to Indian history from 1947 to 1977. He presents manifold diversity of Indian life and language. The novel is divided into three books. Book-I and Book-II unfold the best of Bombay's culture and language. Book-III shows the dissatisfaction and Indian contradictions. The narrator is associated with all important historical events and there is a link established between the nation and the life of the protagonist.

The novel is considered as a best example of postmodern literature. Rushdie deals with India's transition from colonialism to Indian independence and partition of British India. The story is told by its chief protagonist, Saleem Sinai, and set in the context of actual historical events. Rushdie's style of relating the history with fictional accounts is spontaneous and he explains the process with the term chutnification. The frequent references between his story-line and Bollywood films also give it a flavour of a pastiche. The novel has a multitude of named characters. The narration starts with the story of the Sinai family and the events leading up to India's Independence and Partition. Saleem's family undergoes number of migrations and suffers the numerous wars which plague the subcontinent. During this period he also suffers amnesia and enters a quasi-mythological exile in the jungles of Sundarban. Here, he is re-endowed with his memory and reconnects with his childhood friends.

Political and Cultural Syncretism

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* explores political, social, and cultural events in modern India. It also focuses on universal issues as the nature of literature and the relationship between individual and collective history. The theme in the novel is travels on zigzag trajectories into history in an allegorical method with a span of nearly sixty years. From the very beginning of the narrative, Rushdie continuously maintains to synchronize the three generations into national and domestic life. It is the story of Sanai family living in Amritsar, Bombay and migrating to Karachi. Rushdie efforts to depict the virtual effect in Indian literary history- the Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy, Quit India Movement, Freedom Muslim league, Cabinet Mission, Five Year Plans, Chinese aggression, War with Pakistan, Liberation of Bangladesh and Declaration of Emergency and finally the riots and bloodshed.

Saleem becomes involved with the Emergency and is held as a political prisoner. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the midnight children. There are passages of scathing criticisms of Indira Gandhi's

personal lust for power. Saleem picks up the few pieces of his life and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and his young nation. Rushdie employs the technique of magic realism liberally throughout the novel. This innovative device is used to employ the nation-as-family allegory. At the same time, it is used to mystify the impossible telepathy among a huge number of children from a multitude of languages, cultures, regions and religions. It also encompasses the comic and the tragic, the real, the surreal, and the mythic. He involves the magical element of telepathic abilities of Saleem and the other 1001 children born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. They are gifted with the abilities that enable them to read the minds of those around them. All the midnight's children are born with special power, with hundred and thousand possibilities. Saleem, the principle narrator, the most gifted of 1001 children has been endowed with a magical power and vision. His physical impotence and deformed shape can be read as caricature of the political map of India. Rushdie displays the magic realistic narration with the qualities he imbibes in the midnight children.

Rushdie reflected on the power of Indian oral story tellers to draw huge crowds and hold the individual attention of this largely illiterate audience. (Cundy: 29)

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie conjures up a generation of Indians born at Midnight of 15 August 1947. What made the event more remarkable is the nature of these children. Just possibly by sheer coincidence or through some freak of biology, or phrases owing to preternatural power of the moment these children are endowed with features, talents or faculties which can be described as miraculous. Saleem narrates the bizarre qualities of these children in the matter of fact style to make them credible. He introduces some of these children on their tenth birthday. He introduces a pair of twin sisters who were born in the town of Baud on the Mahanadi River in Orissa. The twin sisters are possessed with the ability of making every man fall in love with them. Next he introduces a Delhi beggar girl, Sundari whose beauty is so intense that within moments of her birth it blinded her mother and the neighbouring women who had been assisting at her delivery. Her father had just a fleeting glimpse of his daughter and his vision was so badly impaired that he was unable to differentiate between Indian and foreign tourists. This strongly affected his earning as a beggar. For some time she was forced to have a rag placed across her face. Finally, her old and ruthless great aunt slashed her face nine times with a kitchen knife. This in turn proved to be a blessing in disguise. Whoever looked at her offered her something. Though cruelly disfigured Sundari, she received more alms than any other member of her family. In *Imaginary Homelands* he says:

Writing my book in North London what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that a version and no more than one version. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could. (Rushdie, 10)

In this magical realist text there is a conflict between two oppositional systems. Both these systems work toward the creation of a fictional world different from the other. These two are the world of fantasy and the world of reality. The realistic in the narrative is revealed through the fantastic. The 1001 children born in one hour, on one hand points towards the fantasy of the similarly numbered Arabian Nights, and on the other hand Rushdie's calculation of the Indian birth rate. His comments enable the gift of telepathy to be perceived as a magical signifier of the objective reality of contemporary Indian society. It also makes its impression on the individual psyche. He uses magical realist elements mixing the real and the fantastic along with distortion of time and incorporation of myth, legends and folklore.

Midnight's Children is a fusion of history and fantasy. The novel presents a vast span of the recent history of India by an element of fantasy that enables the writer to convey the aspects of reality that have been painfully experienced in realistic mode. The experimental truth in the form of sincere depiction that Sidonie Smith terms as 'the autobiographical contract' clearly determines the reminiscence and autobiographical nature of the work. The striking factor of the novel comes from the energy harnessed by the author to hit a pleasant balance between the elements of an autobiographical involvement and the device of fantasy. The novel has an epic sweep covering about six decades in the history of the Indian subcontinent and Rushdie has cleverly framed his own "literary aesthetic of truth telling". (Lodge, 85)

Midnight's Children depicts the events and experiences in the lives of three generations of the Saleem Sinai's family. Saleem is a powerful narrator born with elephantine nose while his alter ego Shiva is all knees. Saleem acts as a reporter of the events of history as he creates alternative history by creating things out of memory and imagines truth as opposed to the truth of history that preserves his materials in the chutney of fantasy and myth. The account begins with their life in Srinagar and follows their route throughout Amritsar, Agra and Bombay to Karachi from where Saleem alone returns. He hides in the basket of Paravati, the witch, only to experience the tremors of the emergency that had been clamped in India. At the semantic level, the novel is far more complex and has intriguing social and political connotations. Rushdie traces the history of Indian from the day of its independence, the day Saleem is born, to the day when Emergency was declared 26 June 1977. The years run parallel to the thirty one years of the narrator's life. Through his consciousness, Rushdie delineates the entire continuum of Indian history from the Mughal period to the present day. The novel derives its title from the children born on the midnight of 15 August 1947.

... on the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clocks hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came... at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world! 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... I, Saleem Sinai, had become heavily embroiled in Fate-at the best of times, a dangerous sort of involvement. (Rushdie, 1)

He organizes the group and refers to them as *Midnight's children*. As Patricia considers Magic Realism as, ... a way of showing reality more truly with the marvelous aid of metaphor and as a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely Third World Consciousness.

(Merivale, 329)

The narrator of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai is eccentric and the narrative drifts into dream, nightmare and fantasy. He tends to see himself in both first and third person. The narrative blurs the chronological boundaries. The unities of time and place are also not observed. This narrative technique helps the narrator who is also a chronicler to present the variety and multitudinous of the life of the Indian sub-continent. As the counterpart of India, Saleem narrates his history from a distance of time and place. He is compared with the narrator of the Mahabharata, Sanjay who is endowed with special power to see things from a distance and narrate the events of the Kurukshetra war. Saleem is also endowed with magical power of telepathy, so that he can see from a distance and read the minds of other people.

In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator is synonymous with the new born nation. Rushdie has created genuinely new concept as Saleem is really trying to tell the story of his life and the life of the new born nation. His life has been badly shaped by the time of his birth, exact hours of his begetting, the confusion of his parentage and a variety of other disasters peculiar to him. The historical context is either direct or hidden in a magical realist text is clearly evident here. In Indian magic realistic writings in English, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have tried to interpret its essence for a postcolonial view of reality. Magical realism has originated in many of the postcolonial countries and battled against the influence of their previous colonial rules. This kind of postcolonial frame work in writing magical realist fiction is applicable both to Latin America and India.

The loss of identity of the characters in the novel is clearly understood when Saleem's grandfather finds it difficult in identify himself after 1947 due to the fight between India and Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. The crack in the body politic corresponds to all the cracks in Saleem, as he feels breaking into pieces. When he informs his family of his special gift of hearing voices, his father hits him in the ear. His stupid cracks are literalized into physical cracks. Magical realism is a way of showing reality more honestly with the help of various metaphors. The writers who employ magic realism use a variety of techniques that bestow deeper meaning and reveal mysteries in all possibilities. Rushdie employs magical realism to explore an oppressive regime. He examines British colonial rule over India and its transition into independence. The setting of the novel is in the territory of India and Pakistan that is 'marginalized' and heavily contributes to the magical realist quality of the novel. The main character and narrator, Saleem, is born at the exact moment, India becomes an independent nation. He is born with psychic abilities and has an incredibly sensitive sense of smell. He is the one who figures out that all the children born between midnight and 1 a.m. in India on the day the country became independent have various types of special powers.

The narrator Saleem in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is very self-reflective. Thus the novel is often compared to Laurence Sterne's eighteenth century novel *Tristram Shandy* due to its self-reflective narrative stance. It is also compared with Gabriel Garcia, Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for its skillful blending of the ordinary and the fantastic. Rushdie's uses a hyperbolic narrative, a cast of improbable characters like a telepathic narrator, a child who can travel through time and another character who can change sex at will, to create a tale of modern Indian history. Time is often mentioned and prophecy appears frequently.

Magic Realism as a Narrative Tool

Combining the element of magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism extravagant force, multi-mirrored analogy as a potent symbolic structure; Salman Rushdie has captured the astonishing energy of novel unprecedented in scope, manner and achievement in the hundred and fifty year old tradition of the Indian novel in English. (William Walsh, 189)

Salman Rushdie though his novel *Midnight's Children*, describes Magic Realism as an alternative way of approaching the truth. There are several instances of preternatural, surreal, or magical happenings. He artistically incorporates the elements of Magic Realism- the fantastic, the magical, the strange- as a useful technical tool. He transcends this technique to portray the almost unreal and surreal dimensions of the Indian subcontinent. He brings a magic and refreshing view of the effects of colonialism like Latin American writers. In this context, *Midnight's Children* is a highly imaginative and inspired commentary on life and led in a specific period of the past. The novel truly becomes a mirror of the authors as well as the people's thoughts. The two reasons why the novel assume the form of Magical Realism is very understandable. Firstly, the events that Rushdie depicts are selected especially from the recent past, that is, the post-Independence history of India. Dealing with the recent past in fiction generally entails the difficulty of avoiding unambiguous in the fiction. The second reason is due to the problems of dealing with improbable events. The novel deals with the most unrealistic events like that of the Emergency extremes of the Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi. These events are so improbable and so unrealistic that it is difficult to represent them in a realistic narrative. Hence, Rushdie uses this narrative device form that gives scope for a kind of synthesis of fact and fantasy.

Rushdie uses the technique of memory to recollect the happenings of the past or elaboration of recorded facts. Memory is proposed as a method to create a new reality of history. By invoking memory along with recorded fact, Saleem imagines his past to compile a new reality from fragments of memory. In linking the history of Bombay, Saleem acknowledges the destruction of rice by the development of tenements and conveys the historic value of rice:

But still, in the city, we are great rice eaters. Patna rice, Basmati, Kashmiri rice travels to the metropolis daily; so the original, your-rice has left its mark upon us all, and cannot be said to have died in vain. (Rushdie, 107)

Rushdie plays with language on par with his portrayal of history, reality and memory. Through Saleem Sinai, he describes the necessity of accepting the partial nature of memory. While re-imagination helps the mixing of memory and history, a strict adherence and reliance to history results in cracks. Saleem embarks on a desperate search for meaning as he attempts to connect his own history with that of the nation. As noted in the above passage. Saleem wonders if he is: "Prepared to distort everything– to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (Rushdie, 108) Saleem actively and admittedly links himself with the nation. As Reder articulates:

Midnight's Children is out to show that history does have meaning: In fact, history has many meanings for Rushdie, history is individual, and history meaning is determined by the present. The message is, to a great extent, that history is not logical, it is not scientific or even objective– but it still can have meaning. (Reder, 240)

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* can be considered as a link between magical realism and post colonialism. It is known for its brilliant use of magical realism and in words of Linda Hutcheon, "the postmodern technique of magical realism is linked to postcolonialism in that they both deal with the oppressive force of colonial history in relation to the past." (Hutcheon, 23) He uses the narrative style of Magic Realism in which myth and fantasy are blended with real life and gives equal acceptance for the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Rushdie creates a new world in which the fantastic incidents take place again and again. This new world is a traditional India in the clutches of supernatural invasion. For example, in Kurukshetra an old sikh woman woke up in her hut and saw the old time war of the Kurus and Pandavas happening right outside. The woman pointed the place where she saw the chariots of Arjuna and Karna. Rushdie takes the narrative of magic realism to a new level.

Rushdie's narrative is embedded as the narrator says: "And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane. (Rushdie, 4) His narrative has the framework of a framing narrative that involves many fantastic and magical tales. The narratives are not linear, they are cyclical in the sense that the action moves from past to present to past to future to present to future. Sometimes narrative have episodic structures.

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