

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a Postmodern Novel

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Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is representative of what has been called postmodern fiction. We find elements of fantasy, history and mythology which create a nuanced presentation of the narrative. The novel portrays a fictionalized history of India from 1915 to the Emergency of 1976. The midnight's children are metaphorical representations of India being born at the same time as the new nation on the midnight of 15 August, 1947. They are born with magical powers which diminish over time indicating the weakening potential of the country in later years. This paper will point out some aspects of postmodernism which are evident in the novel.

A key aspect of the postmodern novel is its break with realism. In *Midnight's Children* the narrator declares: "Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning that I am prepared to distort everything?" (24). Hutcheon in *Poetics of Postmodernism* states: "When modernist aesthetic autonomy and selfreflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social and political world ... what would characterize postmodernism in fiction would be what I here call 'historiographic metafiction'" (Hutcheon ix).

In *Midnight's Children*, from the outset, the author draws attention to his historical narrative as a fictional construct: "I must work fast ... there are so many stories to tell" (4). Later he states, "I don't want to tell it ... but I swore to tell it all" (589). This novel, like all "postmodern art ... is intensively selfreflexive and parodic, yet it also attempts to root itself ... in the historic world (Hutcheon x).

The novel presents a fictional version of history with characters participating in major historical events. The Jalianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 is described in detail. The treatment of this event is closest to realism in depicting history in the novel as Dr Aziz moves around among the wounded administering mercurochrome.

The Partition, the 1962 war with China and the 1965 and 1981 wars with Pakistan are markers in the narrative. The Midnight's Children's Conference disintegrates as the nation weakens. It "finally fell apart on the day the Chinese armies came down over the Himalayas to humiliate the Indian army (352). Later, Saleem's sister, the Brass monkey, is transported to Pakistan where she is transformed into a singing sensation, Jamila the Singer. She speaks out against dictatorship in Pakistan and is forced into hiding, her voice suddenly silenced.

The Emergency of 1976 is a key episode in the last part of the novel. Saleem's grandson, Aadam, is born on the midnight of 15 June 1975 when the Emergency was declared in India by Indira Gandhi. His birth on the midnight of this day signifies the next phase in the nation's history. The first Aadam in the novel, Dr. Aadam Aziz, grandfather of Saleem, lives in an era of hope and release from oppressive colonialism after Independence. The second Aadam, born in a slum, signifies a grim return to an oppressive chapter in post Independence India. The remaining Midnight's Children who are seen as a threat by the Prime Minister are imprisoned: "those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities" (612). The Midnight's Children are released from prison on the day freedom returns and general elections are declared in March 1977.

Magic realism is a defining characteristic of the postmodern novel. The Midnight's Children are born with magical powers. The Midnight's Children include, for example, a Goan woman who has the gift of self-multiplication, a girl who can fly like a bird and a girl with green fingers who can grow aubergines in a desert. "Magic realism ...refers

to the tendency among contemporary writers to mix the magical and the mundane” (Devi, 7).

The idea of the disintegrating nation is physically represented in characters like Saleem who states: “I have begun to crack all over like an old jug” .” He states:” my poor body ... buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below ... has started coming apart at the seams.... I am literally disintegrating” (43).

Another character who represents the idea of the disintegrating nation is the Rani of Cooch Nahin. She figures in the first part of the novel and is a friend of Dr. Aziz. She is dismayed by Muslim politics and the idea of the imminent Partition of India. Her body becomes diseased reflecting the malaise of the times: “The Rani of Cooch Nahin, who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence “(53). These characters “represent the richness of the historical moment of India’s transition to nationhood that brought many social and political ideas into the fray” (Gopal 96).

In a postmodern novel other texts are incorporated and permeate the fictional world of that novel: “the multiple, the heterogenous, the different—this is the pluralizing rhetoric of postmodernism” (Hutcheon 68). In *Midnight’s Children* Hindu mythology recurs defining people and events, juxtaposing history with timeless myth. “The ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’ are similarly overlaid in the text by its relation of characters to mythical archetypes within the Hindu pantheon” (Cundy 39). Saleem has a large nose as does Dr Aziz recalling God Ganesha. A central myth which is mentioned in the novel is the story of Shiva and Parvati. Shiva, one of the *Midnight’s Children*, is, like the god of destruction, aligned to death and war. He is a soldier. Parvati is the consort of Shiva in mythology and Major Shiva in the novel. Their son, Aadam (whose foster father is Saleem), has large ears like the son of the mythological Shiva and Parvati, the elephant-headed Ganesh: “elephantiasis attacked him on the ears instead of the nose—because he was also the true son of Shiva-and Parvati; he was elephant-headed Ganesh” (587).

The despotic leanings of the Prime Minister are indicated in her desire to be a goddess: "desire to be a goddess: "the people of India,' the Widow's Hand explained, 'worship our lady, like a god. Indians are only capable of worshipping one god'" (611). For this reason the Prime Minister has the Midnight's Children imprisoned.

An important feature of the postmodern novel is the use of parody: "parody has come to be a principle mode of postmodern selfreflexivity" (Hutcheon 35). History is parodied at several points in the novel. The idea of Partition is represented in the idea of a partitioned woman. Dr. Aziz views his future wife through a perforated sheet. Her father is conservative and does not wish her to be fully viewed by a male doctor. The girl's anatomy is revealed bit by bit to the doctor through a large hole cut in a sheet. The doctor forms a picture of the girl as "a partitioned woman" in a "badly fitting collage of her severally infected parts" (26). However the partitioned woman is really one whole woman; the implication is that it is as absurd to partition the subcontinent which is one whole as to try and see a woman as separate parts of her body.

The treatment of Indira Gandhi and the Emergency provides a key episode of parody in the novel. The Prime Minister is described as the Widow who is envious of Saleem Sinai's fame as a Midnight's Child. She imprisons the Midnight's Children in Benares and makes them undergo sterilisation so that they cannot reproduce powerful progeny. Magicians recur in the novel embodying magic realism. Mian Abdullah, a friend of Dr. Aziz, who starts a political party, the Free Islam Convocation, comes from a family of magicians. He unites several Muslim splinter groups and this is "a great conjuring trick" (56). In other words, he hopes to transform the destiny of India, as if by magic.

Caricature is also recurrently used by post modern writers to distort reality: "Distorting of perspective and the human form" have had "an impact on Rushdie's imagination" (Joshi 227). A prominent demonstration of caricature is the huge nose of Dr. Aziz. The influence of other literary works is evident. The influence of Lord Ganesh in visualizing D. Aziz and Aadam Sinai has been noted. The character from a children's book,

Pinnocchio, we recall, has a nose which keeps growing. Tai, the boatman, tells Dr. Aziz: "Follow your nose and you will go far" (15).

Dr Aziz's nose itches when he is about to receive important information. When he medically examines his future wife for the first time his nose begins to itch indicating her significance to him. Another character, the Englishman, Methwold, who owns a large estate in Bombay by that name, has a large nose, indicative of the authority of the ruling class. Since Methwold and Aziz, the ruler and the ruled, both have enormous noses this functions as an equalizer--the colonial's sense of their superiority to the colonised is shown through the caricatured nose to be a wrong presumption. Saleem Sinai's nose is like a detector: when the Constitution is altered to give Indira Gandhi absolute powers, he "inhaled once again, the sharp aroma of despotism" (592).

We can see how the history of the nation is Rushdie's central concern in the novel and the nation itself is Rushdie's central character in *Midnight's Children*. History and fictional characters are cleverly woven into the tapestry of the novel to create a quintessential postmodern novel using history, Hindu mythology, parody and caricature.

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