

**Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*:
Connection between Magical Realism and Postcolonial Issues**

Md. Abu Shahid Abdullah

European Joint Master's Degree in English and American Studies
Otto-Friedrich University Bamberg, Germany

***Abstract:** *Midnight's Children* is the story of Saleem Sinai, the narrator, whose birth parallels the emergence of independent India. By the apt use of magical realism, he narrates his life story and relates it to the national history of India. Rushdie uses the magical realist technique to talk about the postcolonial people of India, and different postcolonial issues. Instead of using realist technique, he employs this particular technique to expose and comment on different social and political problems a newly independent country like India has to encounter. Here, magic has been considered a regional alternative and a protest to the Eurocentric categorization of the world. It is used to reinterpret the colonial version of history and provide an alternative and nativized version.*

***Key Words:** *Magical realism, postcolonialism, Hybridity, Identity crisis.**

1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie is one of the writers, who emerged in 1980s with a new form of expression and technical innovation. His 'Booker Prize' winning novel *Midnight's Children* is often associated with different categories of literary fiction, which include postmodern fiction, postcolonial novel, historical novel, and, most importantly, magical realism. Various characters in the story are gifted with magical power, and the most important of them is the narrator Saleem Sinai. In this novel, both the magical and the realistic world exist simultaneously and promote a complex viewpoint of truth and history referring to the social, political, cultural, and military histories of India and Pakistan, and in this regard magical realism helps to achieve the social and political domination. This novel falls within the frame-work of postcolonialism as it reflects the life of the people of Indian subcontinent in both pre and post-independence era. *Midnight's Children* recounts the history of India's journey from British colonialism to independence.

By using magical realist technique, postcolonial writers can challenge realistic narrative and can put an alternative reality and in this sense, there is a bridge between postcolonialism and magical realism. The aim of the paper is to show that in *Midnight's Children*, magical realism is used within the postcolonial structure and to handle the postcolonial issues. The paper will mainly focus on different postcolonial issues: identity problems, hybridity, reinterpretation of the imperial version of history and emergence of a new colonial and postcolonial history, creation of one's own story, and so on, and will show that, these postcolonial issues are dealt with and explained by the apt use of magical realism. Last

but not least, the paper will show that magical realism is used as a tool to criticize the political condition of India.

The term magic realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a tendency in German painting which demonstrated an altered reality (Bowers, 2004, p. 8). Later it was used by Venezuelan Arturo Uslar-Pietri to describe the works of Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes. Magic realism is now considered an artistic genre where realistic elements appear in a magical setting. The term is associated with putting magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative without suspecting the improbability of these events. Although it will be quite unfair to say that magical realism is particularly Latin American, the fame of Latin American magical realism has inspired its adaptation by many writers globally. Magical realism is the very opposite to what is called the absolutist and the traditional. Writers like Rushdie have used this technique to open up new opportunities, varieties and wonders as metaphors from the issues they focus on, e.g., celebration of plurality, identity crisis, multi-culturalism, and hope for a new nation. Through magical events writers can find new viewpoints, can open new windows through which they can see the world differently. These magical events take place in a real world and through which the stories remain intimate, not unbelievable. Magical realist works are not mere fantasies that can be dismissed; they refuse to be tied by the restrictions of real life rather help us see and think differently of the ordinary events or issues we come across daily.

2. Magical Realism: Affiliation with Postcolonialism

It is a common perception that magical realist fictions are often set in rural areas “but some politically motivated writers like Salman Rushdie have set their magical realist novels in big cities which are under political and social tension” (Bowers, 2004, p. 32). According to Carpentier’s and other postcolonial interpretations of the mode, magic realism is associated with non-western cultures which could not be approached with a typical western mentality because magic realist works are full of exotic magic, myth, and grotesque elements. This use of magic has been considered a regional alternative and a protest to the Eurocentric categorization of the world. The direct allusions to history and the history of the margins have strengthened the postcolonial identity for magic realism.

Stephen Slemon (1995) has contributed largely to the connection between magical realism and postcolonialism by presenting magical realism as an instrument to undermine western concept of stability. In the article “Magic Realism as a Postcolonial Discourse”, he emphasizes the function of magic realism as the weapon of the “silenced, marginalized, disposed voices” in their fight against “inherited notions of imperial history” (p. 15). According to Slemon, it is an instrument to address social and political issues while turning away from the western style of narration and literary tradition, and thus asserting own sense of identity. Magic realism is not only a simple attempt to see and explain the world in a different way but also a strong protest against the social, cultural and political hegemony of imperial thought.

3. *Midnight's Children*: Magical Realism and Postcolonial Issues

Midnight's Children recounts the history of India's transition from British colonialism to independence. The whole story is expressed through various characters gifted with magical powers. The narrator of the story is Saleem Sinai who willingly tells his family history to the reader and to his lonely listener, Padma. In describing his grandparents' personal history, he mixes Indian history with his own narrative. Saleem's arrival in the world in midnight August 15, 1947 parallels the birth of independent India which gained its independence from British power. The novel creates a symbolic reading of Saleem's character by supporting his narrative to the narrative of a new born nation, India. "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, 2006, p. 9). "At a simple level, the novel is the story of Saleem Sinai, and, at a deep level, the story of his country where Saleem is important as an individual, a representative of Independence and a literary mechanism" (Goonetilleke, 1998, p. 21). Saleem hints that when his body falls apart, he will crumble into 630 million pieces, the total number of India's population. His story is written for his son who, like his father, is both tied and supernaturally gifted by history.

The mixture of the fantastic and the normal is an important aspect of magical realism. In the starting of the novel, the passage which deals with Saleem's grandfather in Kashmir is a wonderful example of blending the magical and the real elements. In one spring of 1915, Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz hits the ground while praying and three drops of blood fall from his nose and turn into rubies; his tears become solid like diamonds. In a magical realist text, we find the conflict between the world of fantasy and the reality, and each world works for creating a fictional world from the other; in *Midnight's Children* through the magical, the realistic creates its voice and makes it heard. Rushdie has used magical realist elements by mixing the real and the fantastic, twisting time, and by including myth and folklore. His magic realism has its origin more in the inner and psychological worlds, inner conflicts, moment of uncertainty, the style of storytelling of the unreliable narrator, and less in the beliefs, rituals and illusions of people as a whole.

Another appearance of magical realism in the novel is the character of Tai, the boatman, particularly, Tai's claim to being of great antiquity. He claims himself so old that he has "watched the mountains being born" and "seen emperors die" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 13); he also says that he "saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir" (p. 13). The reason why Rushdie had shown such impossible longevity of Tai is that he wanted Tai to represent old and pre-colonial India. Milan Abdullah, a political figure before independence, has the strange trait of humming without any interruption, which has sharp and high pitch and which causes a certain effects on people surrounding him. In one incident, his humming causes the glass windows of the room fall down. Later in the story, we also come across the fantastical events like the 1001 midnight's children with various magical gifts; Tai Bibi, the whore, who claims to be 512 years old, and who can assume the body odor of any person; Saleem's mother's fear of getting a child who will have cauliflower in its head instead of brain; Saleem's telepathic power and later his ability to smell emotions and intentions; a strange washerwoman Durga whose breasts are

gigantic, and are unlimited sources of milk, and so on. These elements provide a dreamy or magical quality because of the blending of the real and the fantastic.

Wendy B. Faris (1995) says that “in several instances, magical realist texts are written in reaction to the totalitarian regimes” (p. 179) and that “Rushdie writes *Midnight’s Children* in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi’s autocratic rule” (p. 180). These remarks hint to the fact that magical realism is an alternative way of saying more than what can be said in a direct manner. “Through magical realism one can discuss reality without actually discussing it and what the author cannot say directly can be said by an unreliable narrator like Saleem who is the liminal space of the meeting of magic and realism” (Gardner, 2012, p. 49). The harshness of reality is questioned and challenged by the lightheartedness of magical and fantastic elements, and through this contrast the horrible truth of the reality is emphasized. In discussing narrative choice of magical realism it is important that along with the serious side of the literary method there is also a funny and playful side which requires specialized audience.

Saleem uses magical realism, with its blending of mythology, realism, fantastic elements, and history, to tell his story, and this remains the most effective way for him to continue his story and to express his position as a postcolonial Indian citizen. Magic and references to ancient myth control and structure the narrative but instead of fossilizing it in past they are well-established in the contemporary history. The novel’s major themes, the creation and telling of history, identity and stories arise through the structured hybridity of magical realism and without magical realism it would be extremely difficult to connect these free themes, along with the discussion of the problems of postcoloniality. *Midnight’s Children* uses the technique of magical realism to solve the problems of postcoloniality because people would like to create their own identities, histories, stories, beliefs, customs, and tradition, and to share them with others. The novel focuses on Saleem’s personal and familial events and by doing so it actually discovers Indian historical events; Saleem’s birth, growth, development, and destruction are India’s. The midnight’s children conference, in many ways, reflects the issues the newly independent India faced regarding the social, cultural, political and religious differences. The novel makes the historical events less powerful and put it in background by emphasizing personal and familial events, and also by using humor. By putting aside these historical events, the novel wrestles with British power over India, Indians’ sense of identity through independence, and the consequences of this long desired independence. The novel also shows how the postcolonial people invent their own historical narrative by getting away from colonial narratives. They do it by emphasizing personal and familial histories and by using humor in depicting these histories.

The Indian sub-continent is associated with concepts of multiplicity, hybridity, and plurality. It is quite difficult and, to some extent, impossible to define a diverse country like India by a homogeneous and authentic national identity. Having people from different culture and languages, India is defined by its diversity, and people from different religion further pluralize the identity of the nation. Rushdie (1991) avoids the concept of a homogenous Indian culture and in his *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, he says, “‘My’ India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity....to my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature

superabundant, heterogeneous, and many things at once” (p. 32). The midnight’s children’s conference is a model for pluralism, and evidence to the prospective power innate within coexisting diversity, which is a natural and definitive element of Indian culture. Saleem’s relationship with the midnight’s children clearly shows the multiplicity and diversity of India, and once again it is done by using magic realism:

For the sake of their privacy, I am refusing to distinguish the voices from one another [...] For one thing, my narrative could not cope with five hundred and eighty-one-fully-rounded personalities; for another, the children, despite their wondrously discrete and varied gifts, remained, to my mind, a sort of many headed monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel; they were the very essence of multiplicity, and I see no point in dividing them now. (Rushdie, 2006, p. 317)

The multiplicity and plurality is a dominant theme in *Midnight’s Children*, and is also what Saleem refers to when he says that there are many versions of India as Indians.

Hybridity plays an important role in *Midnight’s Children* because every aspect of the novel is filled by blending different elements and characteristics. “Besides the use of hybridity, the novel also uses humor which allows exploration of Indian history and postcoloniality” (Bounse, 2009, p. 3). It permits the novel to create its own identity instead of forcing it to be a mere chronicle of history. It will be really easy to understand the difficulties associated with postcoloniality and postcoloniality itself if someone understands the novel from the perspective of hybridity. Saleem’s telepathic power of communication with other midnight’s children from different parts of India shows how magical realism allows Indians to share the thoughts, desires, aspirations, and dreams of a nation. “The novel employs the formal technique of magical realism, through myth and historical events, and Rushdie simultaneously represents ordinary events alongside fantastic elements” (Abrams, 2005, p. 203). These midnight’s children give voice to an entire subcontinent, and this postcolonial narrative is only possible with the supernatural power of magical realism to connect postcolonial citizens and let them communicate together.

Saleem, who struggles for personal identity, becomes a symbolic counterpart to India, which struggles to reunite its multiple nationhoods in post-independence period; his life becomes a microcosm of post-independent India. After the loss of telepathic power, Saleem gains another as his huge nose starts smelling emotions and intentions. From these events and ideas emerge fantasy so complex, and the novel remains a constant investigation of the relations between order, reality, and fantasy. Because of having so many lives within him, it is very difficult for him to narrate his personal story and he feels that, like India, he must reconcile his multiple identities in order to narrate himself. He says,

“There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracle places rumors [...] I have been the swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me.” (Rushdie, 2006, p. 9)

Saleem's struggle with self-identity lies in what Rushdie has called "multiple rooting" which leads to multiple identities (Miller, 2006, p. 46). He was switched by the nurse at his birth and was raised by parents who are not biologically his own. When his parents came to know his true identity, they let him leave with his uncle Hanif and aunt Pia for quite a long period of time, and later he moved to Pakistan with his parents. Like Rushdie who is a product of multiple nations, Saleem must find his true identity by going through his multiple identities. These references to his multiple parentages relate to the fragmentation of identity and memory. The loss of the reference to the identity of the characters in the novel is also seen when Saleem's grandfather finds it difficult to identify himself after the independence when Pakistan and India start a war over Kashmir. Saleem is looking for the whole and the search for the whole can be admitted as finding what will make up his identity. His magic realist physical fracture is also a criticism of the sufferings of identity fragmentation which arises from mixing both the foreign and native cultures. As Saleem is well aware of the link between his life and that of India, he tries to understand his country's colonial past, concentrates on its independent present, and also tries to come to term with his as well as India's postcolonial identity.

The midnight's children are like a magical realist device which highlights the persistent struggle to reconcile with identity within the polarities of the postcolonial. By virtue of their birth they are "children of the times" and magical creations as well. In the novel the characters give their own and more accurate version of history through the magical realist framework but, most importantly, it is not a stylistic device employed by Rushdie rather an innovation to express clearly India's new concept of postcoloniality and the new problems and struggle associated with Indian postcoloniality. To assert own identity and demonstrate a new Indian postcoloniality, it becomes necessary to write in a new manner to communicate with colonial and postcolonial society. In this novel, it is also a method to refute any kind of hegemonic account of the former colonizer, namely the British. In an interview, Rushdie explains that "*Midnight's Children* was partly conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India has been written about in English" (Kanaganayakam, 2002, p. 171). In order to describe any former colony like India, realism technique is used which gives a minute, accurate and truthful account; however, magical realism upholds the view that it is not possible to present the whole picture with one version of history. It refuses the concept of an absolute truth and a singular version of reality, and thus allows for the possibility of many truths to exist simultaneously. If the novel is a space of dialogues, then magical realism with the blending of genres, cultures, traditions, and ideologies explores the space through clashes and adjustments between trends. In this trend, the rational and absurd neither destroy each other nor fill separate spaces. When magical events take place, they do not escape from history to fantastic rather provide a more critical look at events.

In the novel, the characters get in touch with each other, become socially hybridized, and they alter and change. Through these changes in relationships and the changes in the characters, the novel describes the communal shifts or diversity and the historical changes. The midnight's children communicate with one other freely by using their magical power, and are able to discuss their gifts and talents; their relationships change when they become aware of their parents' social, traditional, and

religious belief. The novel presents a multitude of characters and let them tell their own story; through these diverse voices of different characters a new colonial and postcolonial history arises which has never been heard in the imperial India. These Indian characters want to reinterpret British imperial version of Indian history and go on to write their own history. Saleem blends his family history with Indian history and links both the histories to his present moment and issues. The parallel narration of his familial and Indian history helps him assert his power as a postcolonial citizen, and India's power and history as a postcolonial nation.

Saleem communicates with other midnight's children by using his "magical power" of telepathy. Being a Muslim his relationship with Shiva and Parvati, who are Hindus, demonstrates the mixing of religious and cultural mythologies which exists in India. Rushdie's use of magical realism allows Saleem to blend narratives from different cultures. He skillfully uses his own family history with the religious, cultural, literary, and mythological figures from Hindu religion, Arabian love story, Western literature, and Hollywood movies and superstars to mark his narrative in the story by describing how the car which Homi drove fast to meet Lila was the same Studebaker in which his mother had once rushed to the clinic of Dr. Narlikar. "Through magical realism the novel provides a more accurate and vivid images of events by combining the characters, their personal histories, and mythologies and histories of various culture" (Bounse, 2009, p. 27).

In order to gain knowledge Saleem likes the idea of entering into other people's minds which is a magical and supernatural idea. Saleem's fascination to enter other people's mind derives from his desire to create his own universe, his own narrative. His attempts to combine events like sports, films, daily affairs reverberate the formal technique of magical realism. His desire of creating and telling one's own story also marks the novel's use of magical realism to create postcolonial identities and alternative histories. Not only do the magic and Indian histories co-exist, but it is through the lens of magical realism the writer deconstructs the historical events. Events such as the nationalist propaganda, the state of emergency declared by the Prime Minister India Gandhi, the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh (East Pakistan) where India helped Bangladesh win the war, are all recounted through the magic realist lens. It also provides a suitable and favorable ground for Rushdie to severely criticize the political life in the country. The magical realist dimension is instrumental in Rushdie's deconstruction of history as a colossal and reliable body of knowledge, and criticism of political leaders' attempt to appropriate truth so as to serve their interests. Saleem's telepathic association with other midnight's children introduces him with a world totally isolated from his family and friends, and makes him aware of the multi-layered realities of a postcolonial country and its people. Young Saleem discovers the difference in the experience of people from different parts of the country and from different social status. Because of Saleem's supernatural ability to peep into the mind of other people, what he calls "mind-hopping", he has the chance to touch on a variety of social and political issues and reveal the problems, a newly independent country can encounter. Saleem's description that "At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh...I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire....at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 240) reveals the contrasting images of richness and poverty; one has

abundant of foods and he wants to destroy the surplus one, and in another place people do not have enough foods and they are starving to death. It is a criticism of the government and their failure to ensure equality among people. There is also reference to the politicians who want to get power even by bribing individuals. Instead of describing these discrimination, inequality, corruption and greed in a direct and realistic way, Rushdie reveals them through Saleem's magical power of peeping into other people's minds and thus makes it more effective and convincing.

The criticism of the practices of the Indian government during the Emergency is given through magical realism. It emphasizes not only the injustices of the government but also the handling of the facts through nationalist discourse. During the period of emergency from 1974-1977, many detrimental and oppressive actions were taken, and many certain citizen rights were curtailed in the name of the nation. Rushdie fictionalizes all those events, and the criticism of the national struggle and problem of the nation is promoted through the framework of magical realism. By using magic realism, Saleem not only tries to expose the political violence of India but also gives a strong assessment of his involvement with the history of India; for example, the room in which he was born was saffron and green in color, which symbolized the colors of Indian flag.

Some of the magical events of the book arise from Saleem's preference for memory's truth over established facts. His description of the Emergency in disguise of a six hundred and thirty five day long midnight is not factually and historically accurate but from his perspective it is very appropriate as the Emergency is, for sure, a tedious, cruel, and painful period of gloom for his body and soul. The image is also an appropriate metaphor for the state of India during this period. Rushdie deliberately made a mistake in the accuracy of historical events and a sort of negative reaction to the novel emerged out of the misunderstanding the fact: the date of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi being one of them. These mistakes do not result from emphasizing more the magical aspect of the novel to weaken the realistic side of it; they are used to disturb factual world in the realm of history. In an article entitled "Imaginary Homelands: 'Errata' the Riddle of Midnight", Rushdie, referring to the criticism, says "My India was just that, 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously true and suspect" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10). Even the narrator Saleem becomes doubtful of what he is recording in writing. He says,

Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time (Rushdie, 2006, p. 229-230).

When he is aware of the mistake, he wants to correct it but in spite of his efforts his memory refuses to alter the events. Here, the wall between the fantastic world and the rational one become indivisible, and history, myth, memory, and imagination are all shown to contribute to the narrative of Saleem.

4. Conclusion

Midnight's Children is the story of postcolonial India where the narrator Saleem Sinai is presented as the microcosm of Independent India. Here, the personal events of Saleem are paralleled with the national events which are done by the apt use of magical realism. Instead of giving a realistic depiction of India through realism, the novel mixes fantastic and real elements. In dealing with different postcolonial issues like hybridity and identity crisis Rushdie has relied on magical realism. The novel explains the problems of postcoloniality, the difficulties in searching one's own history and finding own identity. Magical realism in this novel is a counter-technique to the Eurocentric realistic tradition. Here, we find the story of a postcolonial India not from the perspective of the colonizers but from the natives who have reinterpreted the imperial version of history and told their own history by mixing reality and fantasy, comedy and tragedy, happiness and sorrow, and everything is done by the formal technique of magical realism. Instead of showing the social and political problems of a newly independent nation directly, Rushdie has relied on the mind hopping power of his narrator. To wrap up, it can be said clearly that in *Midnight's Children*, there are different postcolonial issues and these issues are described, interpreted and analyzed by the magical realist technique.

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