

Role of Ancient Myth, Fantasy and Orality in *Midnight's Children*

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'To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world' (109), so observes the narrator Saleem in Salman Rushdie's epic novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). In this text, the narrator hero is philosophically obsessed with a desire, rather Indian desire, for the whole. He attempts to swallow all the India. This desire for the whole, the multitude may be understood as a veritable Indian disease. Noted critic Srivastava sees this desire 'as a specifically Indian urge to encapsulate the whole of reality' (Srivastava 62). Therein lies Saleem's ambition and downfall.

Salman Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children* published in 1981 was hailed as a 'Post-colonial meta-fiction, a novel about third world novels' (Brennan 85). Since 80s, a wave of novels by Indian English writers appeared that were clearly influenced by this seminal Rushdie text and its conception of national literature. Rushdie's examination of the relationship between the self and the nation, and his advocacy of the concept that there are as many equally valid version of the truth as there are Indians, proved liberating for the Indian English writers. *Midnight's Children* has been the major post-colonial novel in English which fictionalizes the events of Indian history from the moment of the birth of nation state in 1947 till the declaration of the emergency by the Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976 which did a death knell to the monolithic dream of a secular-democratic nation-state, perhaps insufficiently imagined, and expressed in the midnight speech by the first Prime Minister. Dreams of the founding fathers since '60s turned into a veritable myth and writers expressed disillusionment with the corruption and failure of the nation-state. In opposition to the monolithic concept of the nation, of the history, *Midnight's Children* advocates

plurality of our fractured selves, The narrative is determined from the outside, by a pretext of the epical myths, orality and religion.

Notwithstanding their absolute involvement in history, their individuality, the narrator in a Rushdie text are, more often than not, fantastic and yet are real. Rushdie returned to India in the late '70s as a young man of 30 in the aftermath of emergency when many Indians expressed outrage at the Congress party's betrayal of the secular-democratic ideals on which the early post-independence generation had been raised. In *Midnight's children*, Rushdie re-affirms and seeks to re-create, in a post modernist way, the lost nationalistic democratic ideals for the underdog and the under-privileged. Post-colonial history thus reproduced is fictionalized and mythicized.

Saleem, the principal narrator, the most gifted of 1001 Midnight's children, has been endowed with a magical power and a vision. His physical impotence and deformed shape may be read as a caricature of the political map of India. All the midnight's children are born with special power, with hundred and thousand possibilities but all these possibilities are simply wasted. Saleem and Shiva are born with contrasting qualities. They are leaders of the group but they have their double, one in reality and another in the realms of myth. Saleem stands for the whole, abundance. He contains within him the mythical creator Brahma. Shiva is the god of destruction and hence, is a rival to Saleem. The novel remains as allegory of Indian history and may be read as a literature of subversion of every form of convention and authority. The narrator patterns his own storytelling on oral narration and deploys fantasy in order to be faithful to the reality of India, a country and a nation where millions believe in the world of Spirits. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie presents an ideological post-colonial critique of the linear, imperialist discourse of meta-history which represses rather distorts India's own account of history.

India is a vast and ancient land teeming with millions of people of different races and colours. Ancient epics, myths and oral tradition inform the lives of the people even today. The elephant headed Ganesh is the

great storyteller in the ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. He is the patron-deity of arts and literature. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem, the powerful narrator is portrayed as a storyteller of Ganesh like skill. He is born with elephantine nose while his alter ego Shiva is all knees. Saleem is a reporter of the events of history, he creates alternative history by creating things out of memory and imagines truth as opposed to the truth of history. He preserves his materials in the chutney of fantasy and myth (pickling process). At day time he works in the chutney factory and during night he writes his stories for the imagined listener Padma (Lotus). Lotus has an association with mud. Padma likes listening stories of sensation and thrill. She has no power of intellection and thought. She believes in stories and more stories. Indian subaltern multitude is gullible and is swayed by the rhetoric of the politicians and vote catchers easily. Saleem has the potential of an omniscient and omnipotent narrator; creator as well as preserver. He is modern Vishnu. Empowering himself in mythology, the all knowing narrator chutnifies his own version of history and truth. it is "memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also: but in the end, it creates its own reality" (MC 253).

Entire narrative is clothed in fantasy. Myth and reality overlap boundaries. Fantasy may be seen as seriously narrating political reality when the readers and the author share certain views. In this novel, numerical exactitude is a feature which relates fact to fantasy. In his 1983 interview, Rushdie states his fascination for figures when he said, 'It seemed to me that the period between 1947 and 1977 the period from independence to emergency had a kind of shape to it. It represented a sort of close period in the history of the country. That shape became part of the architecture of the work' (Interview with Salman Rushdie by C. Pattanayak 1983).

Saleem's narrative is valuable precisely because it is self-conscious and invites judgement and criticism. He claims omnipotence and omniscience as a narrator, but more often than not, he laments his inability, his lack, his impotence. There is a kind of post-modern playfulness and trivialization which inform Saleem's narrative and which instills in the

mind faith, doubt or questioning. Why and how should the alternative to Saleem be Shiva, a figure of violence? What is the lesson of emergency? If the idea of a secular nation-state and history be rejected, would the rule of anarchy and lawlessness descend on the life of the nation? Shiva represents the dispossessed without a stake in the dream of the nation and constitutes a political threat to Saleem's plural India. Shiva, very like his mythical origin, is made to signify chaos and unmeaning. He, in the text becomes Indira Gandhi's henchman during the emergency when the sterilization of *Midnight's Children* metaphorically nullifies the hope and possibilities with which they were born. Only he, Shiva, escapes the bulldozer and thus fathers the next generation. There is a glimmer of hope in the end that Saleem can claim one of Shiva's offspring as his own son. He thus becomes able to write his autobiography for his son, the elephant-eared son born of Shiva and Parvati, Saleem's wife. Thus Saleem is not the biological father of his own son, just as he himself is not the biological son of Amina Sinai and Ahmed Sinai, his foster parents. But then the theme of illegitimate birth can be traced back to the grand epic *Mahabharata*. Is it not the fact that the mythical god Ganesh, the god of fortune, Karna and many other mythical figures are bastards? In *Midnight's Children*, the theme of illegitimacy perhaps constitutes a critique of the concept of the purity of race, class and nation and may be seen as an item of criticism of the concept of Hindutwavis-a-vis the concept of multiculturalism which may adequately explain Indian nationalism. Narrator Saleem is born of Vanita, a Hindu nourished by Muslim parents, that too, because of a magical act of the exchange of children at birth in the hospital. Thus, he is allowed to be bathed in the confluence of world religions, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Metaphorically the narrator is endowed with plural identities and stands for post-colonial India.

In his personal heritage, the identity of the country emerges. His birth coincides with the birth of a modern nation, nay two nations and subsequently three (Bangladesh). Birth of the narrator and the birth of the nation take place precisely at the same hour thus at birth Saleem is 'handcuffed to History.' He is the child of history as other *Midnight's*

children are. He grows, develops and finally goes into cracks and fragments in the same way as the nation grows and develops and experiences fissures in the body politic. This interplay of the personal and national histories gives the narrative shape and a sense of unity to the novel. This metaphoric consciousness of history, awareness of oneself as a blend of past and present, makes the narrator Saleem realize that history operates on a grander scale than any individual.

“Who, what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen been 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” (MC 457).

Rushdie once referred to Indian English writing as ‘Empire’s bastard child’ (Rushdie talk 4-4-1997). Is not Saleem, the principal narrator of the same status? In *Midnight’s children*, the chief protagonist Saleem can be seen as an indication of Indian writing in English claiming centrality of position. But by now, English language has achieved centrality by virtue of the fact that among other things Rushdie, as a technician, has made it the fit medium for conveying indigenous consciousness. Rushdie’s position as a man and as a writer needs to be understood in this context. He lays claim to India, a kind of centrality and also a sense of engagement with the history of the subcontinent. He like his hero Saleem Sinai has been ‘handcuffed to history’ in a special sense. He was born in June 1947 and two months after, the British left India.

Midnight’s Children portrays the delirious joy of the people which accompanies the formal dissolution of the empire and birth of Indian nation-state at the precise hour of the midnight in 1947 when Mountbatten hands over power to Nehru, the first Prime Minister. Nehru’s famous midnight speech coined in the finest English language sounds metaphoric and ironic.

‘. . . years ago we made a tryst with destiny. . . . A moment comes, which comes but rarely when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance . . .’

the sub-text of this metaphoric speech turns out to be a text of collaboration with the English educated nationalist elite. The leaders of the new state will, no doubt reproduce the colonial method of control and exploitation. It becomes the story of a new nation, 'insufficiently imagined.' Chances of forging a new nationalist discourse are simply lost sight of, as the subsequent happenings will prove. The Raj leaves behind hollow men like Ahmed Sinai. Methwold's transfer of property to indigenous elite like Ahmed Sinai, who ape an Oxford drawl and who are secretly pleased when they lose pigmentation due to skin-disease, because it makes them resemble the Europeans, is an eloquent testimony to the nature of independence. This tendency still persists with our academicians and professionals. Colonial institutions still have a surprising spell over our mind. It is resolved that Methwold Estate is to be preserved and retained. Saleem describes the estate thus, 'Methwold's Estate: four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents- large durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats...houses which their owner, William Methwold has named majestically after the palaces of Europe' (MC 94).

This allegorical statement by the narrator suggests the passing on of the colonial mantle to the Indian nationalist elite which not only inherited power from the colonial masters but also love for the exotic as opposed to the indigenous. In the new dispensation progress means back-pedaling, rise of fanaticism and the cracking up of Indian independence. 'India had been divided anew. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers or mountains or any natural features of the terrain: they were instead walls of words. language divided us' (MC 189). In the same process the subcontinent was divided. The departing imperialist did a parting kick by dividing the subcontinent on religious lines and installing a class of people who would carry Macaulay's legacy- brown in skin and English in character. Eloquent Nehru and Ahmed Sinai belong to this class. *Midnight's Children* thus constitutes a critique of nationalist rhetoric which makes a linear downward journey from 1947 to 77, the year of the declaration of national Emergency which means the

curtailment of democratic rights of the people. The episode of the emergency and Mrs. Gandhi is described as an allegory which is an indictment of the state controlled media. The media projects the dictator as god and Mrs. Gandhi as Devi, the mother Goddess in her terrible aspect with a entre-parting hair. The fascist slogan 'Indira is India' (MC 427) is relayed over the media. The Nehruvian dream of secular democratic nation comes a full circle and post-emergency period sees the dethronement of the fascist god, end of one party rule and installation of a Janata Coalition government which, henceforth, becomes the shape of Indian politics. Democracy demands a plural society as opposed to unitary one.

However, despite the sense of despair, the journey from wholeness to fragments, the novel ends on a note of hope, rather political one; that is the intensification of the struggle of polarized political forces in opposition in Congress model of nationalism. As the narrative progresses, the disintegration becomes quicker and quicker, Saleem mentions cracks in his body. 'My poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, has started coming apart at the seams. In short I am literally disintegrating slowly for the moment. . . . I shall eventually crumble into six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous and oblivious dust' (MC 37). With his final words the disintegrating Saleem prophesies his fate and articulates the post-colonial condition of the generation of midnight's children.

'Yes, they will trample me underfoot. . . . Reducing me to specks of voiceless dust . . . because it is the privilege and curse of the midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times' (63). At the end, Saleem's body cracks into as many parts as there are Indians and there are as many stories to tell. Saleem has told his story, may be imperfect and unreliable but nevertheless his own.' Stubbornly and against all odds, victim transforms himself into protagonist, simply through the telling of his own story (Rege 200).

The crisis of the Unitary nation state opens up space for thousand contending claims and it seems that the 'Crisis of the once dominant

nationalism opened up space for new discursive models' (Rege 201). Thus there is a tension between the narrator and the narrative. Saleem, the narrator may sound pessimistic but the feeling of the book remains affirmative in its abundance, multiplicity and urbanism. At the impressionable age, Rushdie felt deep attachment for the urban city of his birth, the metropolitan city of Bombay for its spirit of abundance, secularism, cosmopolitanism and urban culture.

This epic novel was conceived in a dream about the large Indian city of Bombay, an industrial city, a city of film, and also of a young man's dream. For a long time the author had cherished a desire of writing a big and voluminous book about Bombay where he was born in June 1947. The city was in his dream because of its uniqueness, its films, cosmopolitanism and urbanity. He left Bombay for England in his teens for higher education as James Joyce left Dublin for Paris. Bombay was to Rushdie as Dublin was to Joyce. In both cases, the relationship of the artist with the city of his birth remains problematised. For a migrant writer, the concepts like home and nation are imaginary constructs. The city as a metaphor defines the authorial self and in a way informs the novel. In his collection of Essays *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie observes 'to be a Bombayite and afterwards a Londoner was also to fall in love with the metropolis' (IH 404). The metropolis embodies hybridity, impurity, intermingling...culture, ideas, politics, movies, songs' (IH 394). Post-colonial subject can find no better paradigm than the city to define his self. In the colonial times, the culture of the city was considered alien and non-pure. In the novels of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and others, an ideal village was considered as a true signifier of Indianness and Indian values. In Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) the hero rejects the metropolitan Indian as un-Indian.

Bombay being an industrial city had no meaning for a Brahmin like Raja Rao. Indian fiction has travelled a long way from 1960s, and in Rushdie's 1980s novel the metropolitan and industrial city of Bombay appears to be a true signifier of Indianness. Politically Indian nation state prefers the Nehruvian dream of secular and democratic modern Industrial India to "the rural handicraft-loving sometime medieval figure of Gandhi"

(Attenborough's Gandhi 104). If the villages are considered to be the site for Indian values and if true Indianness is supposed to be constituted by Brahminical hierarchy and the purity of race and caste, modern nation has no future. Modern city is the site for plurality and multiplicity, and hence, the modern Indian villages must go the city way in respect of culture which is not unitary and plural. In its cosmopolitan nature, the city Bombay represents an India which through the ages, has been the confluence of many nations and races, East and West. In the post-colonial situation, the terms like 'pure country' and 'corrupt city' do not exist. Post-coloniality and hybridity go together. The reading of *Midnight's Children*, a post colonial text, in the context of other cultural production may be meaningful. We know Rushdie's focus is not the realistic portrayal of the events of post-colonial history but rather a third world consciousness of history, truth and nation shaped through myth, fantasy, dream and orality, the tools that constitute an umbrella term 'magic realism.' Bombay cinema has all along remained a site for fantasy, hallucination, dream and wish-fulfilment for the Indians irrespective of class affiliations.

The narrative of *Midnight's Children* parodies Bombay cinema's fantasy operations. Stock narrative situations like mistaken exchange at birth and stock cinema figures like good 'ayah' Mary Pereira recall Bombay film. The most frequently discussed cinematic element of *Midnight's Children* is the exchange of the infants Shiva and Saleem at birth. Rushdie himself in his essay "Midnight's Children and Shame" makes a significant comment on this particular cinematic convention.

' . . . This melodramatic device . . . was a genuine kind of Bombay Talkie, B-movie notion and I thought that a book which grew out of the movie city ought to contain such notions. These are children not so much of their parents but children of time, children of history' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children and Shame* 4). Other cinematic operations are that of natural mothers who are perfect and stepmothers who are evil. Virtuous male protagonists are contrasted with evil counterparts and so on. Shiva, Saleem's alter-ego combines the role of rebel-hero with the villain of Bombay film. In 70s and 80s, the reach of Bombay cinema

and its influence on Indian mind can easily be imagined. By sheer volume of production and star-charisma, Bombay film dominates the dream of the millions even in the anti-Hindi southern states. Thus Bombay film industry becomes 'an important agency for Hindi-speaking cultural hegemony in post-independence India' (Natarajan 167). Benedict Anderson's thesis about the fictional component of nation, the role of print in helping people imagine themselves as nationals along with others they have not seen, in powerfully pertinent to a consideration of cinema (with imagined communities). Thus the Bombay film, with its apparatus of myth and fantasy provides a site for mythic unity in the fact of fragmentation of the body politic in the contemporary India.

On the realistic level, such conventions suggest the plurality of post-colonial identities. Saleem represents, the multiple and complex identities of the post-colonial Indian because he is born of British father and Hindu mother, exchanged at birth by Christian nurse and brought up by Muslim businessman as his son. This comic-epic novel is a blend of literary genres and is coined in a mood of irony, satire and fantasy but the author has serious purpose in mind. The narrative is devised in a mood of playfulness, non-seriousness, trivialization as post-modern fiction mostly are. Rushdie's act of juxtaposing myth and contemporary post-colonial Indian history serves a model of intertextuality which inform among other texts, Sashi Tharoor's work *The Great Indian Novel*. But in the case of Rushdie, the classic myth only explains the contemporary situation. Tharoor trivializes the epical heroes in a mood of hilarity. Juxtaposition of trivial and serious, elitism and mass culture of Bombay film, centrality and marginality of positions and *vice versa*, purity and hybridity of racial and national identities and post-coloniality of history are the major themes and issues which the epic novel *Midnight's Children* *successfully addresses*.

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