



Cultural Dislocation and Fractured Identity as Reflected in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT

Ahmed Salman Rushdie, Bombay-born and England-bred, has emerged during the last several decades as an extremely important voice in the field of postcolonial and world literary studies. Since the publication in 1980 of his second novel, Midnight's Children, Rushdie's works have made a dramatic mark on the field, influencing countless other Indian and migrant writers and sparking an extensive body of critical and theoretical writings based on his ideas.

Rushdie's Midnight's Children teems with the overflowing life of India, packed to the brim with larger-than-life characters, pop-culture references, identity issues and cultural dislocation that have bearing on his own life—what is the migrant? How can a person survive between cultures? What do those grand ideas of home, culture, or nation even mean? Writing about the East from London or New York, Rushdie easily admits the ambiguity of his cultural and national affiliations, embracing the dislocation and in-betweenness of his identity as a migrant. Midnight's Children's major protagonist, Saleem Sinai also—discovers that his identity is not so easily established, defined, or isolated. Instead, Saleem who migrate and those who stay in India learn that they can be more than one thing.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction to the Novelist:- Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 in Bombay to a wealthy Muslim family. His father Anis Ahmed Rushdie was a Cambridge-educated businessman and his mother Negin was a teacher. His family spoke Urdu, but he learned English at an early age in school and was encouraged to speak it at home, as well. As a child growing up in India, Salman was enchanted by books and films and the way they could transport him to new worlds.

At the age of fourteen, Salman was sent to be educated in England, first attending the Rugby School. Rushdie's time at Rugby was marked by alienation from his peers. He then read history at Kings College, Cambridge University. While he was abroad, his family reluctantly moved to Pakistan, faced with the pressure of being Muslim in India while that nation was at war with Pakistan. After graduating in 1968, he moved to Pakistan and briefly worked in television advertising before moving back to England permanently to focus on his writing career.

An important moment in Rushdie's youth that molded him into the writer he is as an adult was the loss of his faith in Islam. Cundy states that this loss, "and the resulting god shaped hole in his own identity, is the source of much of the religious debate in his novels.¹ In an article defending himself against accusations of heresy, Rushdie asserts, "I believe in no god, and have done so since I was a young adolescent....To put it as simply as possible: *I am not a Muslim*" (IH, 405). Despite Rushdie's self-proclaimed atheism, his works explore questions of faith and the interplay of the many different religions present in India.

To date, Rushdie has published eleven novels and one book of short stories. With the exception of the controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, his books have been very well received among readers both in the East and the West. *Midnight's Children* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1980, the 1993 Booker of Bookers, and the 2008 Best of Bookers awards, thus twice being named the best of all the past Booker Prize-winning novels. Rushdie has been awarded countless other literary prizes, including the Whitbread Prize for Best Novel (twice) and the Crossword Book Award in India, and he has been given six honorary doctorates from various European and American universities. Salman Rushdie is also an Honorary Professor in the Humanities at MIT and the Distinguished Writer in Residence at Emory University. In 2007, Rushdie was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for services to literature.

Area and Scope of the Research Topic: A Review:-

The writers of the previous century have done extensive research in and into the diasporic field from external to internal, from geographical to psychological and from virtual to real. They have left no field unravished for literary enjoyment. Even in the era of global township,

the home has become more significant than it used to be. Authors like Rushdie have no home but imaginary homelands. Writers like him have left their homelands not once but several times and still breathing the same oxygen. Imagination makes virtual home. Rushdie began to decolonize English from the English and his programme is still in furtherance by him as well as from others. Like Salman Rushdie, the protagonist Saleem Sinai wanders among three countries i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but is unable to find a proper place to live in.

Problem that is Investigated:-

In Rushdie's books especially *Midnight's Children* many characters face the problems of identity and cultural dislocation. There are for example characters of illegitimate parentage or characters who do not know who their parents are. In *Midnight's Children* the two main characters Saleem and Shiva, who are both born at the stroke of the midnight when India gained independence, are swapped after their birth by a nurse Mary Pereira who wants to impress a Marxist rebel Joseph D'Costa she is in love with. This was Saleem, who is born to poor parents gets, thanks to the intervention of Mary Pereira, to grow up in a rich family and therefore gains a new destiny and new prospects in life. The two boys share some common characteristics (such as a big nose and knees or the minute of their birth) but in most respects they are complete opposites. As a child Shiva is a leader of the children gang where many boys are older than him, Saleem gets often bullied by other children and when Evie Burns ostracizes him from their crowd for trying to interfere with her thoughts, he has to be avenged by his sister. Shiva is ambitious, ruthless and he makes excellent career when, as a son of a beggar, he becomes prime minister's Indira Gandhi's favourite general. Saleem, on the other hand, is indecisive, never really figures out what to use his magical gift for (he rather lets others manipulate him) and the whole way through the book he is losing something. Saleem loses his magical gift, his parents, the love of his sister, his memory and finally his wife Parvati. He is a fatalistic kind of person who makes no attempt to control his life actively, he just takes the disasters as they come.

There are many characters in Rushdie's books who completely lose the notion of their selves. The narrator of *Midnight's Children* Saleem suffers a shock and a complete amnesia after the city he lives in is bombed and most of his family dies there. He forgets everything about his previous life and he also loses his human skills and manners. By that time he has already lost his magical gift of telepathy and has gained a superhuman sense of smell instead so is he sent to a special army unit which uses dogs for searching for rebel units in the mountains and where Saleem gains a status of one of these dogs. He becomes a man dog. So not only does he lose his self, he also loses his humanity and becomes an animal.

Midnight's Children is a narrative of displacement and rootlessness

but that is caused by relocation. Many of its characters are migrants drifting from shore to shore in search of some "imaginary homelands" and obviously, the author identifies himself with his migrant personage.

As Pramod K. Nayar opines: Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost—due—to their exile—is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. (Nayar 191)

In the process of searching the homeland, Rushdie as well as his characters lost their roots, routes and identity. All *Midnight's Children*, Saleem, Shiva, Padma, Parvati face a calamity of identity, disintegration of disposition, geographical as well as cultural dislocation. As Rushdie, clarifies:

When the Indian who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. (IH 11)

Cultural displacement has forced the immigrant writers to accept the provisional nature of all truth and certainties. It is almost impossible for migrants to be unable to call to mind his native place and nativity emotionally. Consequently, this displacement constitutes a double identity that is at once singular, plural and partial. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie echoes:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other time we fall between two stools. But however, ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy.

Study of the Novel *Midnight's Children* in the Present Research Point of View:-

Midnight's Children is a political novel in which an attempt is made to delineate Indian political life and the political subject matter is presented through the consciousness of Saleem Sinai, who presides over the entire novel. Saleem Sinai born with 1001 other Indian children in the hour of midnight, 15 August 1947- the moment India is formally granted independence from the British rule. The novel is about the protagonist, the Indian independence and the contemporary India. The novel begins with the birth of the protagonist Saleem Sinai and then switches back to the story of his grandfather Aadam Aziz who is a qualified doctor in Kashmir.

Saleem Sinai is essentially rooted to a historical context. His personal life, such as birth (on the midnight of August 15, 1947), marriage to Parvati—the witch and the birth of his son Ganesh (on June 25, 1975), are all aspects of history. The theme of cultural dislocation and identity centrally operate at many levels in his consciousness. It ranges from his emotional to his dreaming self. His quest is for a release from the shackles of history to which he is chained, into a 'Timeless World' and ultimate silence. David W. Price comments:

"Saleem offers us his autobiography, but his story is also the history of twentieth-century India; every personal event in the life of Saleem and his family is inextricably linked to the historical and political events that unfold in India."²

There can be no doubt that Salman Rushdie, irrespective of background, is a cosmopolitan, an international writer. He belongs to both East and the West, and the two profoundly different cultures have undeniably conditioned his identity and his writing. Rushdie has invariably stressed that imbibing Western and Eastern literary traditions should by no means be regarded as infidelity towards one's own cultural heritage but as a broadening of horizons and bridging of gaps. He has expressed his conviction that Indian English literature which is, for historical reasons, a cross-cultural phenomenon and can only gain in stature, scope and self-confidence by accepting its national as well as international identity. Catherine Cundy remarks:

"Rushdie, like Bhabha and other theorists of cultural identity, abjures the apparent confusion and 'homelessness' implicit in such a characterization in favour of the idea of hybridity as a positive category. In place of negative connotations of displacement and dislocation which would seem to be the inevitable result of his removal from Bombay

and his family, Rushdie asks us in both *Shame* and his non-fictional writing to accept that he has gained as well as lost something' in translation."³

Rushdie has touched the same chord in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem's quest for identity is a matter of his evolving consciousness in an Indian ethos. This quest is at various levels, geographical, historical, and psychological and finally culminates in spiritual identification with the Indian consciousness. His relationship with the Indian psyche is realized in the manner of its richly variegated geography and traditions:

"The world as discovered from a broken-down clock tower: at first I was no more than a tourist, a child keeping through the miraculous peepholes of a private 'Dilli-dekho' machine;... after which, to balance south against north, I hopped down to Madurai's Meenakshi temple and nestled amongst the woolly, mystical perceptions of a chanting priest." (MC,p.173).

His identity alternates in the realms of timeless fantasy and time-bound history.

"... I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift; 'I can find out any damned thing! I triumphed. There isn't a thing I cannot know!' (MC,p.174).

In Rushdie's fiction, bits of real history are mentioned but it is made to appear as the integral part of the narrator's life. Saleem is the unprejudiced and unbiased observer of the political turmoil of India and Pakistan. He has judged and evaluated from a humanitarian ground as opposed to a nationalistic, religious or cultural point of view.

The up rootedness from the native cultural traditions and values, the loss of indigenous language, man's position as a mere outcast together with multiple injuries and lacerations of the human psyche, accounts for the identity dilemma in the novel. In an interview with Salman Rushdie, Edward Said says: "The whole notion of crossing over or moving from one identity to another is extremely important to me, being I am as we all are, a sort of hybrid."⁴ Alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile or political exile are perhaps all related to migratory movements having been governed by different reasons at different times of history. The migrant find himself displaced from his roots and his antecedents. He leaves his national and regional identity and accepts different culture and tries to adapt himself. His outlook starts changing. A man is related to his culture and his work which governs his identity construction. He is caught between two cultures and is often engaged in a process of self-recovery or self-preservation.

Saleem has no stable identity. His life is in fragments and is subjected to series of personal mutilations. When he was in school, his geography teacher pulled his hair so hard that a tuft of it came out. In a rift between his friends and him, he loses the 'top third of his middle finger'. During the India-Pakistan war of 1965, he is hit on his head and loses his memory completely and does not remember anything.

The division of Pakistan into Bangladesh in 1971 is a catastrophe on the psyche of the sub-continent. It was once again the quest for roots, renewing the original nature, moods, attitudes and mental instability towards the subcontinent that is realized in Saleem's psyche. The symbolic relegation measures the bestiality of the 1971 war. It was the war when the army of West Pakistan fought with the army of East Pakistan, resulting in an additional dimension of inhumanity and cruelty.

Saleem perhaps is born with an identity crisis. The pivotal act of the story, the baby-swapping of the two central characters emphasizes the both upper and lower class as the backgrounds for the heritage. When Saleem is injured in an accident and his rare blood group is not matching with his parents', the doctor asks whether the child is adopted or not. Later Saleem's Christian ayah and midwife Mary Pereira discloses that Saleem is not the real son of Amina Sinai and Ahmed Sinai but an illegitimate son of Vanita, wife of an accordion player Wee Willie Winkie and an Englishman, William Methwold. At birth, she exchanged him for another child named Shiva born at the same time to Amina Sinai at the adjoining room. The baby-swapping done by Mary Pereira was to please her lover Joseph, who was a staunch commu-

nist. Saleem is destined to have many mothers and many fathers. The night after Amina Sinai gave birth to her child, she dreamt of Nadir, her ex-husband that he came and made love to her due to which she is pregnant. The childhood ayah Mary Pereira can also be considered as mother for giving him new life. Saleem says "I have had more mothers than most mothers have children" (MC,p.243).

Conclusion:-

Salman Rushdie argues for hybridity of culture, asserting that in today's postcolonial, postmodern world, no one can or should try to retain a singular identity. In fact, he affirms, living between East and West or embracing the hybrid mixture of India and abandoning communalism is a positive thing, one which bring newness in the world. Immigrants do not have to feel compelled to return home or to resist being influence by their new locations. In the same way, those living in India today do not have to support divisive communalist movements or the essentializing efforts of the nation's leaders. The cultural displacement and its consequences are reflected in Rushdie's creative writings. He says-

" I can't avoid the fact that my life has been constructed in a series of such displacements- of which only the last decision to stay in England was my own choice. You have a Kashmiri family that comes to Delhi, then goes to Bombay, then to Pakistan and meanwhile I end up in London-there is a lot of dislocations there."5

Summing up the topic ,it has been observed that Salman Rushdie, being the victim of displacement and dislocations, mentions the theme of identity crises very intelligently in his major works. The fractured identity that he observed during his dislocations he also very actively presented in his *Midnight's Children*. Salman Rushdie's parents belong to Kashmir, India. Then they sifted to Delhi and then to Bombay. After then Rushdie was sent to England for study and then he came to Pakistan and worked in an advertising company. But Rushdie has a zeal for writing and again shifted to England. In this way , we come to the point that much before Salman Rushdie's birth the very trend of shifting or migrating from one place to another continued right after his birth, childhood and in his young age as well. This shifting mode effected his life very deep which he mentioned in his creative writings especially in *Midnight's Children*. Identity crises ,his fractured memories about his homeland ,cultural discriminations, cultural dislocations, cultural displacement and problem of uprootedness have been the main things that Rushdie very strongly raised because he himself has been the victim of these problems. And that's it what I want to point out that in *Midnight's Children* Rushdie depicts the cultural dislocation and his fractured identity through specific characters like Saleem Sinai, Shiva and Parvati.

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