

Postcolonial Subversion of History through Magical Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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تمويه ما بعد الاستعمار للتاريخ من خلال الواقعية السحرية في رواية "أطفال

منتصف الليل" للكاتب سلمان رشدي

م. وسن علي حسن

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الخلاصة:

لم تكن الرواية الإنجليزية الهندية مجرد تقليد أو امتداد للأدب الإنجليزي حول العالم، بل هو نوع مستقل في حد ذاته. يعد سلمان رشدي واحدًا من أكثر كتاب الأدب الإنجليزي الهندي تأثيرًا، حيث قام بتوسيع هذا النوع الأدبي من الناحية المفهومية والأسلوبية. وقد حقق شعبية وشهرة كبيرة بنشر روايته "أطفال منتصف الليل" (1981) والتي تعتبر من روائعه الأدبية، حيث يتم ربط هذه الرواية وبشكل متكرر بالعديد من الأنواع الأدبية الخيالية مثل الواقعية السحرية، والسرد ما بعد الاستعمار، والنصوص المعاصرة. وتعتبر هذه الرواية إحدى أبرز الروايات التي تم تحليلها ومناقشتها أدبيا في القرن العشرين. وقد نال موضوع الواقعية السحرية اهتمام نقاد ما بعد الاستعمار بشكل خاص حيث اعتمده لدراسة العلاقة بين الذات الفردية والمجتمع التاريخي. تقدم هذه الدراسة فهماً واضحاً للواقعية السحرية ضمن مفهوم ادب ما بعد الاستعمار والذي اعتمده رشدي في رواية "أطفال منتصف الليل" ليجعلها من أبرز أعمال ادب ما بعد الاستعمار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الواقعية السحرية، ادب ما بعد الاستعمار، أمريكا اللاتينية، الرواية الإنجليزية الهندية، ادب ما بعد الحداثة.

Abstract:

Indian English novel has never been just a carryover of English literature over the world; rather, it is an independent genre in and of itself. Salman Rushdie is one of the most influential writers of Indian English literature who has expanded this literary genre both conceptually and stylistically. He has achieved considerable popularity with the publication of his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) which is considered to be his masterpiece. This novel is frequently linked to several fictional work genres such as magical reality, postcolonial narrative, and contemporary texts. It is among the books of the 20th century that have been examined and discussed the most. Postcolonial critiques have been particularly interested in the adoption of magical realism and its investigation of the relationship between one's individual self and historical society. This paper provides a clear understanding of magical realism and the postcolonial perspective in which Rushdie approaches it in *Midnight's Children* to establish the work as a postcolonial literary work.

Keywords: Magical realism, post-colonialism, Latin America, Indian English fiction, and postmodernism.

1. Introduction

Magical realism is a type of art that features realistic components inside a fantastical environment. The phrase was first used by German art critic Franz Roh to refer to paintings that showed how reality had been transformed. Arturo Uslar-Pietri, a Venezuelan, subsequently employed it to characterize the writing of other Latin American authors. Combining magical or extraordinary happenings into realistic narratives while raising doubts about their likelihood is known as magical realism. This combination of fact and fiction aims to highlight the act of creation while also raising questions about the nature of existence. Imagining what one experiences to be extraordinary is a characteristic of magical realism authors, who help readers reimagine society as dynamic and multifaceted (Carter 3-4).

In magical realism, the actual world reappears before our very sights glistening with the brilliance of a fresh day, as stated by Roh (16-17). Countries in Latin America endeavoured to create and convey an awareness that was different from that of Europe in the 1940s. The development of storytelling is a crucial component in creating the realism of the 20th century, as noted by Catherine Belsey. This method of literary realism is pertinent to magical realism because it portrays envisioned, magical, or actual components as though they were genuine. Comprehending how the story is put together to give the magical situations of the fiction an authentic setting is essential to understand and appreciate magical realism books (Carter 6-7). In magical realist texts, historical background is typically usually overt or subtly presented. While it is impossible to characterize magical realism as exclusively Latin American, its popularity has aided in the spread of this genre of literature throughout the world. Because of their aesthetic-political undertones, magical realist authors have gained recognition in the United States, Canada, Africa, India, and other countries. Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have attempted to write magical realism in Indian English literature by deciphering its core for a postcolonial understanding of existence. It is true that some regions and nations have grown to be known for creating magical realist literature. It has generally been observed that magical realist novels frequently take place in countryside settings (Echevarria and Pupo-Walker 74). A large number of Colombian authors like Garcia Marquez's works are set in the made-up town of Macondo, which is located on the remote Caribbean coast of his native country. Small communities and rural locations are also the settings for the magical realist situations written by African-American author like Toni Morrison. However, a few authors who are driven by political motivations have placed their magical realist stories in big cities where political and social instability is prevalent. Rushdie, aware of this, chooses to put his novels in several of the biggest cities in the world including New York, London, and Bombay. It is also evident that a large portion of magical realism has its roots in postcolonial nations struggling to overcome the legacy of their former colonial overlords. It is possible to write magical realist novels in both India and Latin America using this type of postcolonial perspective (Echevarria and Pupo-Walker 75).

2. The Employment of Magical Realism in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Salman Rushdie is a well-known writer noted for his masterful use of magical realism in his novels. Rushdie was born in India in 1947, and his childhood and ethnic origins profoundly affected his literary style. His works frequently address issues of identity, history, and cultural struggle while adding aspects of magical realism. It should be noted that Rushdie has a prominent position among the writers of magical realism in modern literature. His use of political criticism, magical themes, and allegory is well-known in his writings. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is his second novel. He won the 1981 Booker Prize for this book. Additionally, in honor of the prize's 25th and 40th anniversaries, respectively, it was awarded the Booker of Bookers (1993) and the Best of the Booker (2008), special rewards determined by public vote. The novel is an allegorical work that tells the chronicle of contemporary Indian history through the experiences of 1,001 children born in the very first hour of Indian independence from the United Kingdom on August 15, 1947. This book discusses the division of British India and the country's liberation from British rule. The whole plot is brought to life by a variety of characters endowed with supernatural powers. One of these characters is the narrator, Saleem Sinai, who deliberately relates his narrative to Padma, his wife, and those who view it. His ancestor's historical experiences are intertwined with Indian history and his personal tale. Saleem was born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the same day India proclaimed independence. On the surface, the novel is the narrative of Saleem Sinai, but on a deeper level, it is the story of his nation with Saleem serving as a literary symbol of independence (Ananth 80). Saleem hints that when his body is destroyed, he will dissolve into "six hundred and thirty million" (Rushdie 31)

fragments, the same as the whole population of India. His tale is written for his kid, who shares his father's extraordinary abilities and is bound to the past.

A key component of magical realism is the integration of fantasy and reality. W. B. Faris indicates that "magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (169). The section dealing with Saleem's grandpa, who lives in Kashmir, is a good example of combining magical and realistic components. In the spring of 1915, Saleem's grandpa Aadam Aziz fell to the ground while praying, and "three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies," (Rushdie 4) and his tears also transformed into solid diamonds. It is obvious that Rushdie has employed magical realist themes by combining fantasy and folktales, flipping time, and fusing the fantastical with the real. His magical realism stems less from common human beliefs, conventions, and illusions and more from the psychological and inner conflicts, moments of weakness, as well as the unstable storyteller's style of narration.

Another manifestation of magical realism in the story is the character Tai, the boatman, particularly with his assertion that he is from times long ago. He claims to be so ancient that he has even "watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die" (Rushdie 10). He even mentions that he "saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir" (Rushdie 10). It is apparent that Tai's incredibly long life span is shown by Rushdie because he intends Tai to represent ancient, pre-colonial India. In order to highlight how rich India's history and cultural legacy are, Tai is depicted as though he is from a bygone era. By using magical realism into his writing, Rushdie is able to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality by incorporating fantastical aspects into his stories. Furthermore, Tai is a symbol or depiction of India's timeless history and culture because of his ancient traits. Rushdie highlights how profoundly rooted Indian culture is and how closely it is tied to the nation's heritage by including a figure from antiquity. Using this approach, Rushdie is also able to investigate the idea of historical continuity and the ways in which the past continues to impact modern society.

The most significant example of magical realism is represented by telepathic powers which are possessed by the main character, Saleem Sinai, and other kids born in the year of India's freedom. This magical element is crucial to the narrative, allowing the characters to interact through thinking. The telepathic abilities of the characters represent their togetherness and common identity, capturing the diversity of India in the years after independence. This mystical component gives daily life a supernatural touch while reflecting political shifts. The narrative examines the conflict between personal and group identity, and the loss of authority corresponds with more significant political changes. In order to depict the complexity of post-colonial India, the telepathic connection combines the fanciful with the real as a potent narrative technique (Ananth 80).

Apart from that and as a distinctive feature, Saleem was born with an abnormally huge and flexible nose, which he can move at will. Saleem's gift "of having an incredible sense of smell, allowing him to determine emotions and thoughts, stems from his grandfather Adam, who has possessed the same large nose and magic gift" (Hossain 71). This physical characteristic serves as both a symbol and a magical aspect in the plot. It should be pointed out that the big and flexible nose is a symbol of uniqueness and a distinct sign of identification among the Midnight's Children. Aside from its physical distinction, the nose is inextricably related to Saleem's telepathic skills, acting as a pathway for his supernatural abilities. In a literal sense, the nose becomes a symbol for recognizing the nuances of the heterogeneous Indian country, and its hybridity represents Saleem's mixed origin. Saleem uses his nose as a narrative device throughout the book, which gives the tale depth and advances its examination of identity, magical realism, and the complexities of post-colonial India.

It is crucial to consider that other characters in the novel also have magical or supernatural traits, even if Saleem is a major character with powerful supernatural components. Beyond Saleem's telepathic skills, the group of kids known as the Midnight's Children, born at the precise time of India's independence, share a multitude of unusual abilities. Shiva of the Knees, who possesses incredible knee strength, is one of the instances. "So among the midnight children were infants with powers of transmutation, flight, prophecy and wizardry... but two of us were born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem and Shiva, Shiva and Saleem, nose and knees and knees and nose... to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war" (Rushdie 200). His magical power stems from his exceptional knee strength. During India's Emergency Era, Shiva, who

has amazing knee strength, joins a political protest against the government's repressive policies. Shiva continuously bows down and stands in the midst of the demonstration, attracting observers with his knee power. This display of physical skill and resistance represents opposition to tyrannical power. The episode exemplifies the novel's use of magical realism to intertwine the fanciful with political and social realities, emphasizing the interdependence of personal and historical tales.

Amina, Saleem's mother, is shown later in the book as being afraid of having a child with cauliflower for a head rather than a brain (Rushdie 329). Another odd character can be seen in the novel named Durga, a washerwoman with an enormous endless supply of milky breasts. "She was a woman whose biceps bulged; whose preternatural breasts unleashed a torrent of milk capable of nourishing regiments; and who, it was rumoured darkly (although I suspect the rumour of being started by herself) had two wombs" (Rushdie 441). These kinds of characters and situations occur in the book and give it a dreamlike aspect since real-life and fantastical elements are mixed.

It is evident that Rushdie uses magical realism in this novel to create a potent literary device that blurs the lines between fiction and reality. He offers an unparalleled storytelling experience by mixing the story with mystical aspects and the astonishing skills held by the Midnight's Children. The work explores into the complexity of post-colonial India by fusing the fanciful with historical and political reality. It does this by providing a deep and imaginative investigation of identity, nationhood, and the connections between personal and historical tales. In addition to adding layers of symbolism and metaphor, magical realism improves the novel's ability to portray the complexities of a society in transition, making it a powerful and expressive piece of writing.

3. Magical Realism and Postcolonial Resistance in *Midnight's Children*

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* should be reinterpreted in light of the relationship between postcolonialism and magical realism. Rushdie's novel is an allegorical account of present Indian history told through the lives of 1,001 children born on August 15, 1947, the first hour of Indian independence from the United Kingdom. The plot explores India's separation from the British and its division into two countries. It is renowned for its masterful use of magical realism, which has helped it become the quintessential postcolonial work. It offers a thoughtful assessment of Indian political society.

Rushdie's literary style is commonly recognized as 'magical realism,' and through it he addresses themes of struggle between deportation and banishing, as well as a fractured personality. Being an author from a colonial-era country, the concept of 'country' has always been at the heart of both his fictional and non-fiction works. The traditional understanding of a nation as the "same population living in the same place" is not the same as the postcolonial sense of a "nation." India maintains its plurality of languages, customs, and community histories because Indians are diverse individuals living in one nation (Merivale 329-346).

Postcolonial writers can create an alternate reality and subvert realistic narratives with magical realism. The idea is emphasized by Linda Hutcheon who claims that there exists a connection between postcolonialism and the postmodern style of magical realism since both address the repressive influence of colonial history concerning the past (35). Eva Aldea asserts the idea indicating that the relationship between the text and the historical, social, and economic context in which it is seen to have originated is, in fact, emphasized in postcolonial readings of magical realism (38). Thus, authors like Rushdie, have blended unrealistic print with their literary work while discussing historical events and facts about colonialism.

In *Midnight's Children*, the tale of the rise of India from British invasion to liberation is told. The story is told by numerous personalities who have magical abilities and takes place throughout history. It is a metaphor of India both before and after its partition and the declaration of independence, which occurred on August 15, 1947, at night (Ananth 80). Saleem Sinai, the story's narrator, is endowed with clairvoyance among other magical abilities in addition to a gigantic nose. There are three books in the novel. The book narrates the tale of Saleem's household as well as the pre-independence and pre-partition events in India. Saleem was born on August 15, 1947, at exactly midnight. He learns that every child born in India between one and twelve in the morning on the same day is endowed with extraordinary skills. Saleem attempts to call those kids together using these abilities. The gathering, also known as the Midnight Children's Conference, bears many similarities to the problems India encountered when it first became a sovereign nation including divisions in politics, language, culture, and religion. Using his unique telepathic abilities,

Saleem makes an effort to connect hundreds of children who live far apart while also trying to understand the significance of their skills. Those born closest to midnight in particular have more potent gifts than the other youngsters. Among these kids are Shiva and Parvati, also referred to him as "Parvati-the-witch," who plays significant parts in Saleem's tale.

In the meantime, Saleem's extended family travels through multiple emigration and experiences the multiple conflicts that rage throughout the subcontinent. He also experiences amnesia during this time, but his recollection returns when he visits the Sundarban forest, a place of quasi-mythological exile. He can establish a connection with his boyhood pals in this way. After that, Saleem becomes embroiled in the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi's "cleansing" of the Jama Masjid slum. Saleem has been detained for a while. The Emergency denotes kids being aware of midnight's diminishing power. After that, all he can do is write an account that includes his background as well as the history of his fledgling country with what little life he can still find. It is a history written for his kid, who is enchained and gifted with magical abilities similar to those of his dad.

Rushdie primarily employs magical realism in the text through Saleem and the other 1001 kids' telepathic talents, which allow them to read the thoughts of anyone around them. In a magical realist novel, it might be witnessed a fight between two opposing systems, with one attempting to create a fictitious universe from the other. The reader's attention is divided between two worlds: imagination and reality. In this novel, the surreal is balanced with the reality. The 1001 children indicate Rushdie's estimation of the Indian birth rate in addition to the fiction of the similarly numbered Arabian Nights. Furthermore, Rushdie's remarks make it possible to view the telepathic talent as a magical symbol of the actual reality of modern Indian society, which leaves an emotional mark on each person. Here, it can be learned that Rushdie incorporates myth, tradition, and folklore together with temporal displacement and magical realistic components to blend the fantastical and reality (Ananth 81).

In their essay "Magic Realism in Midnight's Children," Manzoor and Walinir emphasize the idea that the story's magical realism feature of blending the fantastic and the every day feels particularly Indian because the people amidst today's social and political crises share the strength of legendary heroes. The notion is also demonstrated through another character, Mian Abdullah, a political figure before freedom who was committed to opposing the division of society based on religion and who possesses the peculiar quality of continuously whistling. His whistling fluctuates in pitch and has an impact on others in his immediate vicinity. This lends an air of weirdness to the situations he finds himself in. One of the murderers cracks and shatters his eyeballs trying to kill him. Abdullah's whistling had previously caused the room's glass panes to collapse (1-3).

Rushdie writes about identity, both personal and national. The newly formed nation of India and Saleem are reflective of each other. On August 15, 1947, at the stroke of midnight, both of them and 1001 other children were born. Saleem obtains another capability after losing the first one, as his enormous and amazing nose improves his ability to distinguish scents well beyond what is normally expected. He becomes capable of sensing intents and feelings. These concepts give rise to a fantasy that is difficult to summarize due to its complexity. The story continues to explore the relationships between order, reality, and fantasy in a subtle and ongoing manner. Saleem, the storyteller, frequently compares his life to that of India. India is the country of his birth, growth, progress, and devastation. More significantly, though, one of his main character traits has been an inability to recognize the direction in which things are heading. The characters appear to be aimlessly flipping through historical documents, happening by happenstance onto significant events in India's evolution. Thus, during the 1919 Amritsar, a murderous act Saleem's father purchases one of Methwold's villas; Saleem is born at the same time as India; and nearly every significant event in his life, including the eventual demise of the children of midnight and India at the time of the enactment of emergency, occurs in tandem with events taking place in the new nation. Saleem's grandfather is therefore on his knees following a powerful sneeze. India and Saleem strive to define their own identities while dealing with uncertainty in their genealogy.

When Saleem's grandpa struggles to recognize himself after 1947 because of the conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, it is evident that those involved in the narrative have lost their sense of self. All of Saleem's "cracks" are related to the "crack" in the political system because he feels like he is falling apart. Another sort of magic in the book is the transformation of metaphors into actual happenings. Saleem's father strikes him in the ear after the boy tells his family about his unique ability to hear voices.

His "dumb fissures" translate into actual fractures. Both non-empirical and empirical referents are evoked by one another. Therefore, magical realism in this book refers to using different forms of metaphorical magic to more accurately depict "reality." Naturally, after it was published, this work had a big impact on how Indian writers wrote in English. Rushdie appears to be an author who aspires to revive the magical realism literary tradition in English, which dates back to Cervantes, Sterne, Milan Kundera, and Márquez.

Rushdie's story fits into the dichotomy model of colonizer versus colonized, which defines postcolonial literature, therefore *Midnight's Children* is considered a postcolonial novel. Since post-colonialism is still taught in English research, colonialism-focused critics also support Rushdie's portrayal as the epitome of a postcolonial novelist. In postcolonial texts, protagonists or narrators are frequently faced with identity issues, problems arising from juggling two different worlds, and the influence of other cultures. Writing post-colonially involves revising and rereading historical texts. In this context, Ursula Kluwick gives his opinion describing the relationship between the characters of the novel and the historical background saying, "*Midnight's Children* is most explicit in its use of historical information, but Rushdie's other novels are also rich in allusions to history. All of his texts are set in distinct historical periods, and engage intensively with historical developments and events" (43).

Rushdie hopes that by challenging the colonial assumptions in *Midnight's Children*, India and other conquered nations will be able to gain liberated identities through the created 'Other.' The first sentence of the novel begins with Saleem's speech when he says: "I was born in the town of Bombay...once upon a time," (Rushdie 3). The first portion of the statement depicts socioeconomic realism in the nineteenth century, while the second section reflects a typical fairy tale to foreshadow the upcoming fantasy. These two strategies are necessary for Saleem to fulfil his goal of forging an important identity in an uncontrolled society. The concept of magical realism shares similarities with Rushdie's perspective on the "unchanging two-ness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil" (Rushdie 99-100). One might see Saleem's quest for the entire as an attempt to tie together his identity, which is a primary goal of postcolonialism. It can be comprehend that the author's attempt to convey that his theme of writing is identity, both national and personal.

Saleem critiques the colonial dilemma of identity fragmentation stemming from the infiltration of foreign culture into the native's body through his magical realism bodily fracture. As demonstrated previously, Saleem consistently draws parallels between his life and the nation's. Saleem endeavours to comprehend the historical context of his nation, make sense of its current independence, and reconcile his own postcolonial identity with that of India.

It is important to highlight that Rushdie, like Saleem, is an outcome of postcolonial India in this instance. He was raised in India after being born in Bombay in 1947, only two months before the country gained its freedom. He lived his adolescent years in India and England. This transition between his native country and England could be the cause of his writing's strong Anglicization. Nonetheless, his writing attempts to address identity-related topics that demolish Western notions of cultural domination over Eastern ones. He attempts to make a name for himself with this. His goal is to become a well-known Anglo-Indian postcolonial novelist.

Alongside the novel's use of magical realism to subvert conventional realism, there is an opportunity to challenge imperialist paradigms. As a position on politics, post-colonialism offers the necessary room to oppose Western realism. The novel's rich use of analogies and symbols supports a politicized opposition to the flaws of Western paradigms, such as its historical narrative of orders, which is both inaccurate and disparaging from a postcolonial standpoint. For instance, the peculiar relationship between Saleem and India interprets Saleem's existence as a miniature version of the country and offers a counterbalance to the great narrative that its Western occupiers wrote about India's past (Manzoor and Walinir 1).

Rushdie uses a combination of magical realism and particular postcolonial literary devices like diversity, disintegration, and terminology to challenge Western colonial conceptions of culture and identity. Furthermore, *Midnight's Children* has a postcolonial component that goes beyond a simple historical analysis. Rushdie explores the complexities of diaspora, cultural hybridity, and the pursuit of a postcolonial identity. The characters' historical-connected magical skills serve as a metaphor for the intricate relationship that exists between individual stories and the history of the country. The book asserts

the value of varied voices in forming a nation's identity narrative, challenging conventional and European-focused interpretations of history. Thus, it is considered to be one of Rushdie's attempts to retake India.

Using this viewpoint, readers continue to find the novel to be a foundational work as they negotiate the complex landscapes of postcolonial identity because of its mingling of the mystical and the real, which serves as a compelling medium for studying the influence of history on individuals and society. Thus, one might conclude that Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* effectively connects postcolonialism and magical realism.

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie has had a tremendous influence on the direction of Indian writing in English, and has attained a prominent place in the literary world as well as a respectable place in the souls of his fans. His novel *Midnight's Children* is a truly life-altering book. It is a typical example of a post-colonial book that incorporates elements of magic realism. By purposefully using magic realism, the novelist highlights the remarkable and unusual aspects of the Indian subcontinent, elevating the work to the status of post-colonial literature. Rushdie's use of magical realism enhances the readability and adds a mythical element to *Midnight's Children*. The purpose of fantasy is to transcend reality. The author is able to express the unthinkable with the help of magical realism. Distinct subjects and aspects of magical realism, such as displacement, immigration, and multicultural motifs. The term disintegration appears symbolically in a number of the content's instances. This novel's elements of pity and dread, existence, sketch, sensuality, and resurrection all combine to create an unparalleled beauty. It is worth observing how beautiful terminology is used in this way.

Rushdie uses magical realism as a useful tool to identify post-colonial concerns. Thus, the work illustrates Rushdie's endeavour to create and transmit a true picture of Indian post-colonialism and Indians as a monolithic people and place by fusing historical occurrences, mystical tales, and fictitious narratives. India's plurality and variety, working to dispel the country's colonial past.

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